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‘Este momento para juntos dialogar’

Gender politics and social reproduction in Cuban series *Cuando una mujer*

Rebecca Ogden

Introduction

Queues are perhaps the most quintessential sights in Cuban towns and cities, scattered at bus stops and snaking out of food shops, banks and *bodegas* (where state-distributed rations are collected). Women often make up a large part of these queues, generally spending hours each day collecting the basic goods that will feed their families and maintain their homes. In recent years, in what has been called a ‘second Special Period’, goods have become scarcer and more expensive, and queues have become longer. This most recent experience of extreme austerity was putting huge pressure on households long before the Covid-19 global shutdown curtailed the essential flow of hard currency via the international tourism sector, further impacted the flow of remittances, put added strain on the national health system and increased the prices of commodities. The term ‘Special Period’ was first used in reference to the decades of economic crisis and recovery that began in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Bloc sent Cuba into economic paralysis and set off a chain of complex and long-lasting social, political and ideological repercussions. Among these was the rapid regeneration of the tourism industry, bringing with it challenges to revolutionary legitimacy in the resurfacing of stark social inequalities, sex tourism, black markets and migration. This most recent period of austerity, crisis and introspection is the summative consequence of a strangulating set of geopolitical forces, primarily the tightening of the US embargo by Trump’s administration.

Austerity has directly impacted a range of personal decisions taken by Cubans, including whether or not to have children, leave the island or stay, and whether to seek alternative forms of employment. It is hard to overstate

the true impact of austerity on the everyday lives of Cubans. In particular, the resulting pressures on the daily provision and care for families, home management and sourcing of scarce basic goods and fuel have fallen disproportionately on Cuban women (Pertierra 2020: 146; Maqueira and Torres 2021). Before Covid hit, researchers were already drawing attention to what they saw as a gendered ‘crisis of social reproduction’ (Maqueira and Torres 2021). Low birth rates coupled with an ageing population and increased levels of migration have also warped and intensified care labour. In 2024, the situation is even starker. Simple tasks such as grocery shopping, which have generally tended to be the domain of Cuban women (Torres et al. 2020; Pertierra 2008), have become increasingly time-consuming, energy-depleting and expensive as scarcities continue (Cursino 2022; Frank and Acosta 2022). Deliberating which costs of goods and services might be sacrificed over others for the well-being of the household demands constant attention and caution (Ruiz et al. 2022).

Popular television, including the series *Cuando una mujer*, represents an important space for the visibilization and mediation of daily pressures felt especially by women. The series dramatizes, through vignettes played by actors, a variety of storylines including domestic violence, conflicts within blended families, and tensions between the demands of paid work and the care of children and elderly relatives. Importantly, the series is associated with the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas, the governmental body which oversees and shapes policy relating to ‘women’s issues’. In many respects, the social issues depicted are broadly relevant to a consideration of gender and media in various contexts. However, *Cuando una mujer* screens a particular set of gendered politics, including an intensification of care labour directly following recent geopolitical and economic shifts – gendered politics that must, as such, be viewed through the lens of the national. Moreover, as Cuban television is rarely broadcast outside the island, and since free-to-view television is produced exclusively by governmental broadcasters, series such as *Cuando una mujer* should be considered an important cultural mediator of national debates surrounding gender, revolutionary ideology and social change more broadly. This chapter draws on examples from the series between 2015 and 2020, and brings in insights from interviews with a scriptwriter from the series in order to interrogate how national television aimed at Cuban women is an important frame through which to expose the gendered exacerbation of social reproduction and the roots of this shift in entrenched notions of *machismo* and heteronormativity. The chapter also considers the wider media context in which this series is embedded: the contrasting treatment of these same issues in ‘mainstream’ Cuban television, such as in the news interest broadcast *Cuba dice* as well as the strong

pushback by feminist television critics within Cuba that such depictions have provoked.

Gender in the Cuban Revolution

The revolutionary state's interventionist approach to gender policy has often been positively interpreted, per the title of Michelle Chase's book, as the 'revolution within a revolution': women have been 'crucial actors' (Chase 2015: 2) in shaping the trajectory of the Cuban Revolution and shoring up its legitimacy through moments of crisis, as well as often leading the charge in pushing through transformative changes to the private realm. The first mass organization that encompassed women's interests was the *Federación de Mujeres Cubanas* (FMC), established in 1960. Activist initiatives by the FMC during their first decade capitalized on traditionally 'feminine' domestic skills such as sewing classes, while also rallying Cuban women to participate in revolutionary politics through volunteerism in mass mobilizations such as the 1961 Literacy Campaign and agricultural aid brigades (Martínez 2018). Hope Bastian Martinez (2018: 117) writes that the following decade represented a new 'reproductive bargain' for Cuban women, as their access to family planning methods improved and sexual values became more liberal. FMC representatives would host community meetings to teach attendees to make homemade contraceptive rings, based on the rationale that state provision of contraception would further enable women to be active participants in politics and the workplace (Andaya 2014: 44). Advances in reproductive freedoms were accompanied by other political imperatives to advance gender egalitarianism, including through the ostensibly radical 1975 Family Code (which dictated an equal division of the domestic load between married couples¹) and the introduction of paid maternity leave. Bastian Martinez (2018) notes that the 1970s were especially notable for these advances, with more women entering the workforce, and balancing work with participation in mass organizations and the maintenance of their families and homes. Various practical state initiatives advocated for by the FMC, such as those which streamlined domestic duties and childcare (especially for state workers), were geared towards facilitating this balance.

One outcome of the FMC's advocacy for 'women's issues' was a mutual dependence of women and state (Martínez 2018). The FMC has historically intervened in policy by making recommendations. It has done so by publishing and circulating reports containing analyses of cultural factors hampering the liberation of Cuban women at work, home and in political contexts, broaching, for example, the long-standing issue of employment



retention. Yet scholars observe that the progressive work of the FMC is tempered by underlying notions of conventional masculine and feminine roles. As Anna Cristina Pertierra (2008) argues, the aims and actions of the FMC do not challenge the traditional divisions of men's and women's spheres in the *casa* vs. the *calle*: the fact that FMC participants are organized according to neighbourhood blocks demonstrates, according to Pertierra, an assumption of women's social participation at the immediate local context of their homes. This 'philosophy [. . .]' is testament to the fact that the purpose of the FMC is to organize women for revolutionary progress, but its objective has never been to actively reform or challenge women's control of domestic space' (Pertierra 2008: 750). Indeed, the majority of policies cited above, advocated by the FMC to improve the quality of life and pursue liberation for working Cuban women – especially mothers – reveal an enduring expectation to balance employment with a heavier share of domestic responsibilities such as childcare.

Moreover, any positive advances in the protection of women's rights and their lived experiences through policy were compromised by the dramatic collapse of the Cuban economy following the fall of the Soviet Bloc in 1989. The subsequent economic crisis was devastating for Cuba's social fabric, and this was felt especially keenly by women. Dwindling petrol supplies and extensive daily *apagones* (power cuts) made the realization of basic household tasks incredibly challenging; the hours spent shopping for and preparing food, and collecting children from school and childcare, multiplied as queuing and travelling on foot dominated women's lives during the crisis. During this protracted period of political and economic crisis, and others that have followed since, such collapses in infrastructure, as well as the male-skewed migration which has resulted in increasingly matrifocal households, have re-centred the home as women's primary domain (Pertierra 2008; Hormilla 2011) and intensified women's charge of domestic responsibilities. For many scholars and observers, then, the optimism of revolutionary gender politics has not been successful in transforming gendered codes and identities which have conflated household management and care of the family with Cuban womanhood.

This contradiction has intensified in the context of recent changes. Contemporary policy adjustments, including those outlined in the 2021 Programa Nacional para el adelanto de las Mujeres, have attempted to protect women's rights and address some of the barriers to women's full social, political and professional participation further compromised through the austerity of recent years (Gaceta Oficial de La República de Cuba 2021). At the same time, these policies have sought to incentivize motherhood in order to boost population levels as Cuban birth rates continue to fall, and sought to

protect the heteronormative family model as the 'base cell' of Cuban society (Bengelsdorf 1997). For example, there have been modifications to maternity leave allowances, which allow other family members to receive leave pay while mothers return to work; state provision of childcare is also designed to increase economic productivity and reduce the burden of the 'second shift'. Other challenges facing women in Cuba today, such as domestic violence and early marriage, are at the centre of recent proposed revisions to the Family Code. Such revisions have been debated at town-hall-style meetings all over Cuba since the beginning of 2022. In other words, public conversation around gender issues is increasing, and the FMC continues to assume a prominent role in protecting and intervening in those issues and the broader interests of women in domestic, professional and political contexts.

The nature and impact of such interventions through mass media and popular culture in particular have not been the focus of scholarship. Interrogation into these dynamics is especially pressing given that the new Programa Nacional para el Adelanto de las Mujeres en Cuba outlines the need to 'expand and improve the presence of these topics in television, radio, written press and social networks, as well as evaluate their treatment from a gender perspective in the media, in cultural/ educational institutions, entities and communities' (Gaceta Oficial de La República de Cuba 2021: 252), and designates responsibility for this task to state bodies, the Ministry of Culture, the Instituto Cubano de Radio y Televisión (ICRT) and the FMC. Moreover, the expansion and strengthening of conservative interest groups in Cuba, such as those related to the church, implicate a more contested terrain of gendered politics than in previous decades of the Revolution.

Gender, television and the state in Cuba

Just as there is a firm interrelatedness between the FMC, the state and women's issues, the Cuban state is especially involved in national cultural industries, including television. For these reasons, and despite rich criticism of media and gender representation within Cuba, it is somewhat surprising that there is a lack of scholarly focus on gender in Cuban television (Anna Cristina Pertierra's scholarship in this field being a notable exception). For instance, Cuban critics writing for the websites of primary state-run television channels highlight that television since the years of the Revolution has gone beyond an emphasis on feminine aesthetics and instead brought to the fore 'the intelligence, talent and desire to become more than peasants, workers and housewives, making [women] protagonists through the social model since January 1959, and taking them out of their usual spaces to allow

them to learn within the country and abroad' (Pérez 2021). Cuban television has long been an important cultural mode and mediator of social values, including gender. Early development of Latin American television may have been initially characterized by excessive dependence on US investment, production structures and commercial models, but post-1959, the new revolutionary state's monopoly of television via the creation of Televisora Nacional, in 1960, and the subsequent creation of the Cuban Institute of Radio and Television (ICRT), a ministerial body with official oversight of radio and television stations across Cuba,² demonstrated the possibility of a national, state-owned model. Revolutionary investments in the consolidation of national cultural and media infrastructure therefore have mirrored other contexts where television has represented a crucial platform and tool for nation-building and modernization (Pertierra and Turner 2013: 42; Rivero 2015).

Recent scholarship on television in Cuba has focused disproportionately on the networks of circulation and consumption of the *paquete semanal*, a once weekly, now daily, curation of digital content transferred by data copying from distributors' (or *paqueteros*') hard drives to customers' memory sticks (Cearns 2020b; Henken 2017; Pertierra 2012). Customers may choose to purchase – at an affordable rate – a vast range of very recently aired, big-budget international TV programmes and subtitled Hollywood movies in addition to broader content like magazine articles, horoscopes, music videos, video games and classified adverts (Cearns 2020a). As ubiquitous as the *paquete* now is, and as unusual and transformative as it has been to media consumption, particularly in terms of Cubans' access to foreign media before the staggered roll-out of the internet on the island, its dominance as an object of scholarly focus has obscured the extent to which free-to-air broadcast television remains an important source of news, entertainment and even higher education³ for most Cubans. In 2021, 98,280 hours of national television were broadcast into Cuban homes (Oficina Nacional de Estadística e Información 2022: 13). While in other contexts, the transmedial configuration of television altered the ways in which configurations of gender and nationality are understood, state television in Cuba remains an important way of understanding the construction of national communities. As a result, nationally and regionally produced programmes, which only tend to be broadcast and seen on the island, are a key way to consider how values and norms, including collective understandings of gender, are screened and understood in the national context.

Discussion of state-produced media and cultural industries requires some nuance, particularly in relation to considering how government actors intervene in the construction of value systems. A common and long-standing

interpretation of the relationship between the Cuban state and civil society is one of repressive, censored expression and ideological control. However, it is also true that for decades the government has dedicated relatively high investment and patronage to the arts and cultural industries, while consistently seeking to increase public engagement in the arts through subsidization, for instance. Moreover, as scholars such as Par Kumaraswami (2016) and Antoni Kapcia (2020) have argued, cultural criticism has been a defining characteristic of Cuban cultural policy and practice since 1959. Extensive evidence of Cubans' mass participation in culture (as producers, consumers and critics), and the cultural policy that underpins this participation, complicates common perceptions of the Cuban state as censorial and a top-down force of political, ideological and moral value-creation through culture.

That is not to suggest that Cuban governmental institutions' arbitration of the arts, media and culture more broadly has not been excessively heavy-handed, especially towards individual artists and during moments of ideological crisis and foreign scrutiny. Recent events, such as police crackdowns on protests following the fiercely contested Decree 349 in 2018 (which designates the state as the arbiter of 'true' art) and related to the San Isidro artists' movement, have especially laid bare these dynamics. In particular, critics have paid warranted attention to the ways in which the revolutionary government has placed demands on Cuban artists and cultural producers, with those demands frequently blurring the lines between artistic quality, professional training, and ideological alignment to the Revolution (Loss 2021; Fusco 2015).

The need to understand the complex relationship between culture, ideology and the state in the Cuban context is further underscored by governmental efforts to intervene in the representation of women in media and screen culture. During the 2012 sessions of the Asamblea Nacional, or Cuban parliament, the head of the Instituto Cubano de Cine, Radio y Televisión (ICRT), Danilo Sirio López, condemned music videos and similar content on national radio and television platforms that denigrate or contain offensive lyrics about women, and said that the ICRT would block harmful content from broadcast. This move was welcomed by Cuban cultural critics and scholars (Hernández Hormilla 2013), who similarly emphasized the need for national culture to uphold positive images of women according to an egalitarian gender stance. However, criticism from feminist television critics in particular has since shown that television remains a contested territory for gender politics. For example, in 2014, journalist Helen Hernández Hormilla published an open letter titled 'Mi cuerpo me pertenece: Reflexiones en torno al tratamiento mediático de la baja natalidad en Cuba', 'My body belongs to

me: Reflections on the media treatment of Cuba's low birthrate', criticizing a public interest piece on Cubavision's popular magazine show *Cuba dice*, which addressed the problem of Cuba's low birth rates. Hernandez Hormilla argued that the broadcast unhelpfully situated fertility as a crisis of women's social standing or choice, disregarding 'issues such as the economic crisis, the housing situation, multiple generations forced to live together, external migration, among other factors' (Hernández Hormilla 2014: no page). The letter was republished in various journalistic outlets and generated dialogue among critics and cultural thinkers about the representation of gender on television. Moreover, in March 2020, the ICRT attracted fierce social media criticism, both on the island and beyond, for cutting a gay kiss scene from its screening of the 2018 film *Love Simon (Yo soy Simón)*. Such examples draw attention to the active conversation that surrounds media images of gender and sexuality, demonstrating the limits of government institutions to address gender inequalities and discrimination through the censure of images, particularly as concerns about crude or sexualized images of women eclipse other problematizations of more conservative, heteronormative ideals.

Visibilizing gendered dynamics: *Cuando una mujer*

Cuando una mujer is a popular television series which is a joint project of the FMC, the ICRT and CENESEX (Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual, a prestigious and progressive sexual health and education centre led by Mariela Castro). It is produced by the channel Cubavision and was broadcast every Wednesday (after the *telenovela* or soap opera) to a large national audience. Despite originally being planned to run for fifty episodes, the series began in 1998 and was broadcast weekly until mid-2020. Episodes are just twelve minutes long, and engage three different narrative techniques. Its host, Tamara Castellanos, a well-known actress, sets an intimate tone by introducing each episode's theme with her trademark line: 'gracias por compartir este momento para juntos, dialogar' (Thank you for sharing this moment to talk together). Such themes always draw on particular pressures or social issues, especially those faced by women: divorce, raising children, blended families, juvenile delinquency, work conflicts and work-life balance. These pressures are played out through a dramatized vignette interpreted by actors and using stylistic aspects typical of melodramatic productions, followed by vox pop interviews with the general public to elaborate on the implications of how to deal with the problem; finally, Tamara Castellanos speaks again to the audience with words of advice by way of conclusion (Figure 8.1).





Figure 8.1 Tamara Castellanos speaks to the audience at the beginning and end of *Cuando una mujer*. *Cuando una mujer* Televisión Cubana. 

The show's central dramatizations draw on and replicate the significant success and popularity of nationally produced *telenovelas* in Cuba. Hit telenovela *Tú*, for instance, is the television debut of the renowned Cuban cineasta Lester Hamlet (*Fábula*, *Casa Vieja*, *Ya no es antes*) and *Calendario*, a popular drama set in a high school, are recent examples of programmes with broad appeal across generations and sources of lively audience engagement and debate. In its central vignettes, *Cuando una mujer* mirrors the aesthetic of these popular broadcasts, using close-ups, 'stock' characterization and dramatic piano music to articulate conflict or foreshadowing, for example. Homegrown television programmemes in Cuba are often made on a low budget; the industry has been dramatically affected by shortages of materials and equipment in recent decades. Yet, the programme is an interesting example of how material shortages are negotiated with creative workarounds and simple processes: rather than using multiple angles, which takes time and requires different cameras, scenes appear to be shot using one camera, with single shots for entire scenes or a combination of single shots with 'dirty shots' (when the second character's head is viewed from behind during an exchange). Lack of clarity in the sound of some scenes suggests a single boom microphone is used between speaking characters rather than personal mics, which would result in a cleaner sound. Yet, simple production values are effective in the communication of the storylines. A few props in the form of a notepad and a Jose Marti bust on a desk identify an office manager as such; a

sweeping clock face transition between scenes quickly conveys the passage of time. In working around the challenge of shortages of equipment, and despite their somewhat dated narrative techniques, domestic productions such as *Cuando una mujer* are significant in their success in facing international imports down in the fierce competition for viewing figures.

According to regular series scriptwriter Annia Medrano Carmona, the difference between *Cuando una mujer* and other Cuban programmes is its specific orientation towards women and their everyday situations (personal communication 2022). Medrano Carmona, one of a number of women involved in the production of the series, describes the programme as feminist, elaborating that ‘it does show situations that may affect men, for whom the proposed solutions also are helpful’ (ibid). Stories are drawn directly from the lives of real Cuban women. In an email interview, Medrano Carmona revealed that the ideas for the show were taken from her *cotidianidad*, or her everyday life. In observing the lives of her neighbours, family and friends, she seeks to find examples of common experiences from which a lesson or advice might be drawn. Regular contributors to the show’s scripts either send them to programme coordinators or are invited to submit ideas on a particular theme. The FMC has creative control in approving or soliciting specific themes to be featured in episodes.

The feminization of social issues in *Cuando una mujer*’s chosen storylines may be demonstrated through a few examples of Annia Medrano Carmona’s scriptwriting on the series. ‘Mi derecho’ (Medrano Carmona 2021b) centres on a woman who has recently completed a prison sentence following her prosecution for *jineterismo* (sex work involving tourists). Since international tourism returned as Cuba’s primary industry in the 1990s, the attendant resurgence of sex tourism has generated recurring public and political debates and hand-wringing, representing as it does a clear contradiction to the anti-imperialist moralistic impulse of revolutionary ideology, as well as efforts to empower women through revolutionary policy. *Jineterismo* is, as Megan Daigle (2015) observes, an activity in which moral meanings and values are strongly determined by intersecting factors of race, class and gender: dark-skinned Cuban women, for instance, are much more likely than light-skinned women to be stopped by police and to experience negative attention when interacting with tourists. The protagonist of ‘Mi derecho’ fights to overcome the prejudice and judgement she faces from her ex-partner and wider family to win back custody of her child and begin her life again. The extension of the main character’s ‘criminal’ behaviour into her present is morally negotiated through conversations with her friend. While the protagonist looks guilt-stricken and expresses the pain she continues to feel as a result of her past



actions, the friend argues that she can and should move on from her *jinetera* past – that the need to renew her relationship with her child should be viewed as more important than a consideration of others' harsh judgement. This episode, therefore, tackles universal themes such as gendered double standards, sexual mores and motherhood against a unique national context of *jineterismo* in Cuba, playing out gendered dynamics that have been the source of political introspection and complex moral negotiations for the last few decades. While this aspect of the protagonist's struggle may be common to other national contexts, the specific moral meanings that *jineterismo* brings to the fore and its rootedness in the geopolitical forces that revitalized sex tourism in Cuba demand that the programme be considered in its national frame.

Similarly, gendered politics produced by broader geopolitical dynamics and situated firmly in their Cuban context are visibilized in another episode titled *Contra la pared* (Medrano Carmona 2021a). In this example, the intensification of the burdens of domestic responsibilities during recent decades of austerity in Cuba is integral to the storyline. Thanks to an inflexible boss, the vignette's protagonist struggles to combine the demands of her job with her caring responsibilities towards a child with additional needs and her elderly mother. Under these pressures, she decides to resign from work. The happy conclusion to the story comes when her work colleagues defend her to her manager, citing Article 59 of Ley 116 or Código de Trabajo, which should ensure her the flexibility to access fulfilling work alongside caring commitments (Figure 8.2). This article, titled 'Protección de la trabajadora', requires that 'The employer must create and uphold working conditions for women, considering their participation in the workplace and *their social role as mothers*, my emphasis' (my emphasis) ('Ley No. 116, Código de Trabajo' 2020).

As the wording of Article 59 further demonstrates, the protection of women's rights to participate fully in the workforce is couched within the expectation that they also fulfil domestic and caring duties: all roles can and should be harmoniously balanced. Just as the majority of FMC initiatives have not set out to disrupt the interdependence of Cuban womanhood with the 'social function' of motherhood, *Cuando una mujer* does not actively challenge women's control of domestic duties, even as these have become harder to manage through periods of extreme national privation. As such, the visibilization of women's intensified negotiations of austerity and its attendant pressures on family life does not constitute a radical tearing down of gender norms. In fact, the opposite may be argued. Paul Julian Smith (2019), citing Milly Buonanno (2017), argues that female antiheroes' increasing presence





Figure 8.2 Colleagues cite the constitution in ‘Contra la pared’. *Cuando una mujer* Televisión Cubana.

in contemporary television may overturn gendered stereotypes that associate ‘innocence, goodness, nurturance and social conformity’ with femininity; criminal women in prison series, for instance, are liminal figures with the potential to rupture social norms. In *Cuando una mujer*, the resolution of its narratives first assigns value to Cuban women’s proactive juggling of domestic and professional responsibilities, and second, confirms the state as the protector and facilitator of this juggle.

This celebration of Cuban women as ‘heroínas de lo cotidiano (everyday heroines)’ (as per another typical news interest story on International Women’s Day, 8th March), underscores the value attached to women’s active and simultaneous participation at the centre of their families, communities and workplaces. Journalistic coverage of the programme also speaks to this aspirational balancing of multiple roles. In a profile of Tamara Castellanos, the ICRT website describes her commitments to her parents, husband and son among her professional achievements to date (‘Tamara Castellanos’ 2014). In addition, the credits show a series of images of women engaged in professional and domestic tasks, cradling their pregnant bumps and embracing children; their uniforms identifying them, for instance, as members of the Cuban military (Figure 8.3). The lyrics of the theme music, written and performed for the series by well-known Cuban singer Geraldo Alfonso, speak to this vision of multifaceted femininity within Cuban revolutionary society:





Figure 8.3 Cuban women in everyday scenarios in the credits of *Cuando una mujer*. Cuando una mujer Televisión Cubana.



Mientras duerme la muñeca en el sillón
los varones van a mataperrear⁴
el almanaque, la familia y la tradición
la acostumbran a ocupar su lugar
Así comienza cada historia de mujer
La balanza se comienza a inclinar
Y a repartirse en pedazos de amante, de ama de casa, de ser buena
esposa y mamá

Pero cada mujer crecerá
cuando se hace valer, dónde está
(While the doll sleeps in the armchair
the men are going to roam outside
the calendar, family and tradition
they get her used to knowing her place
This is how every woman's story begins
The balance begins to tip
And to tear her into pieces as a lover, as a housewife, as a good wife and
mother

But every woman will grow
When she asserts herself, where does she end up?)

This vision portrays the Cuban woman as a doll (trapped indoors while the Cuban man occupies *la calle*): inert, but with the potential for growth. In particular, it is the notion that her different social roles break her into 'pieces' that is carried through to the narrative framework of each episode. A dance performance by the Danza Contemporanea de Cuba set to the same music similarly alludes to the different roles involved in Cuban womanhood: dancers pick up different cardboard 'outfits' as they move at a cartoonishly frantic pace between different professional and domestic cut-out scenes, also made from cardboard (Gerardo Alfonso Sabanas Blancas 2020). There is a sense here that to be a Cuban woman is to be fragmented, almost comically harried and broken into multiple pieces by their attempts to fulfil different duties. If 'suffering is a central motif to the life narratives of Cuban women' (Pertierra 2020: 146), that suffering is enacted most obviously in the daily negotiation of competing expectations, responsibilities and challenges, and made visible in cultural articulations like these. It is precisely the navigation of difficulties in relationships, households, workplace and the community that forms the central premise of *Cuando una mujer*; the series thus extends the foundational logic of *marianismo*, which conflates womanhood and suffering. While, as Pertierra (2020: 154) observes, this mythology is not exclusive to Cuba, the concept of *luchando* or overcoming adversity through dignified strength and inventiveness, recalls a revolutionary rhetoric specific to the national frame. In this way, *Cuando una mujer* renews long-standing models of womanhood and revolutionary struggle, as well as their overlaps. Moreover, as much as the visibilization of struggles which especially affect women creates a progressive, public space for expectations, prejudices and social norms to be challenged, *Cuando una mujer* perpetuates the idea that overcoming personal struggles leads positively to women's active participation in all aspects of Cuban society which stands alongside, and does not compromise, their unchanged responsibilities within the home.

Screening political value systems

As much as Cuban national television may be considered a significant lens to understand cultural, social and even moralized meanings attached to masculinity, femininity, sexuality and parenthood, and the persistent ways these concepts become enmeshed, it also remains a broad-reaching form of political meaning-making through the creative control of state actors such as the FMC. The stories are told as a prompt, either to direct viewers to sources of help, remind them of constitutional protection of their rights, or to offer general advice. Those involved in the show's creation stress that the

programme is not enforcing a particular standpoint. After short interventions from members of the general public sharing their related experiences and advice, episodes conclude with Castellanos' trademark line: 'we only suggest the path; you choose to take the first step'. This final slogan, devised by Castellanos, is, in her own words, reflective of the show's imperative to 'to teach, allow reflection, without imposing' ('Entrevista Tamara Castellanos' 2009).

However, the programme's political and didactic function is unambiguous. Castellanos contextualizes the episode 'Contra la pared' with an explanation of the work done by the FMC since the beginning of the Revolution to 'guarantee the insertion of women into the public sphere, relying on the legislative body that protects them. However . . . caring for dependents negatively impacts participation in the workplace' (Medrano Carmona 2021a). At the episode's conclusion, viewers are reminded, through the vox pop interviews and Castellanos' final words, of the protection of their rights within the Revolution. Similarly, another episode called 'Entre Amor y Deber', tackles the consequences of permissive child-rearing and offers an alternative path. The story, another written by Medrano Carmona, centres on the mother of a wayward teenager who is linked to a petty theft. That the youth is clearly the apple of his mother's eye is negatively presented as the basis for his lack of boundaries, his individualism and, eventually, criminal behaviour. The episode concludes with the mother calling the police to turn in her son. The choice of storyline reflects a common discussion in Cuba regarding the moral 'weaknesses' or 'inadecuacies' (Smith 2016) of younger generations, who are often considered more likely than their parents to be seduced by individualism, illicit activities, consumer culture and to disengage from politics and collective action. The episode addresses parents and urges them to consider the impact of permissive parenting on future generations of Cuban citizens. *Cuando una mujer* therefore extends a form of moral didacticism running throughout the Revolution that, as Kaptcia (2005) has shown, also underpins educational programmes valorizing self-sacrifice, hard work and collective duty among Cuban young people. The series frames the resolution of issues by underscoring the role of parents (mothers, in particular) in positively shaping the next generation of Cuban citizens.

The programme creators' intention to restore balance to gendered relations and shape family dynamics is clearly articulated through official documents, which list the *Cuando una mujer* among other government initiatives. For example, the government's published response to the UN's 1995 Beijing Platform for Action emphasizes the importance of the media to women's equality and emancipation: 'Radio and television programs for education and family orientation have increased with the aim of detailing,



motivating and persuading parents about the appropriate ways to conduct their children's education' (Gobierno de Cuba 2004: 11). This same document cites *Cuando una mujer* as a key example of this impulse, elaborating '[that the series] addresses guidance on relationships within families with an appropriate gender focus and also provides information and advice on issues of sexual and reproductive health and family planning' (Gobierno de Cuba 2004). *Cuando una mujer* reflects the continued drive of the revolutionary government, through the FMC, to nudge citizens towards positive behaviours, to impact intimate, romantic and familial relationships, and to shape cultural values around femininity and masculinity. The media and arts, and television in particular, are increasingly central to the management of these state-civic dynamics. In reminding viewers of the state's centrality as guarantor of the rights that allow women's participation in multiple social spheres, *Cuando una mujer* articulates the legitimacy of the Revolution from a gendered viewpoint, and emphasizes the need to examine television's mediation of gendered politics within its national context.

Conclusion

In the final months of 2024, Cuba's economic crisis reached drastic levels, pushing Cubans beyond the limits of their endurance and causing a migration 'stampede' (Carrillo 2024). This recent exodus has multiplied the pressure on female heads of households to provide care for and meet the needs of children and elderly dependents. Most describe it as the worst conditions they can remember, more extreme and less tolerable than the so-called Special Period of the 1990s. An energy crisis that has been building since 2023 has culminated in power cuts lasting up to twenty hours a day. In October 2024, President Miguel Díaz-Canel appeared on national television urging Cubans to voice their concerns about the situation with discipline and respect. Yet, during most long evenings without electricity, night after night, televisions in Cuban homes also stay dark.

The Cuban state has long sought to defend and further women's interests primarily through the activities of the FMC and, in particular, in increasing their reproductive freedoms, their participation in the workplace and in national and local political fora such as those organized at the neighbourhood level. Efforts to protect women's rights in these ways, and to confront persistent challenges to gender equality (such as violence and discrimination), are evident in recent initiatives such as the policy-focused Programa Nacional para el Adelanto de las Mujeres (PAM), as of 8 March 2021. The efforts are, in many senses, progressive and demonstrate that gender continues to be a central

concern within revolutionary policy-making. The screening of the everyday issues which challenge women's simultaneous, engaged fulfilment in different public and private roles in *Cuando una mujer* represents a new expression of gendered politics within the Cuban Revolution, and within its broader context of feminist television criticism on the island, is worthy of analysis.

As much as *Cuando una mujer* is significant for forging a space for public dialogue around issues and norms – explicitly conveying this intention through its combination of acted sequences with interviews with members of the general public – it also perpetuates the idea that women's active participation in all aspects of Cuban society runs parallel to their care dependents and duties within the home. Nor do its storylines lay bare the systemic and structural dynamics which multiply domestic burdens; female protagonists, and their audiences, are urged to find personal solutions to overcome this challenge, albeit with the kinds of institutional support and legal guarantees that the programme also showcases, which in turn galvanize the legitimacy of the FMC and, beyond it, the state.

In many respects, the social issues depicted are broadly relevant to a consideration of gender and media in various contexts. As a frame to consider the gendered exacerbation of social reproduction, in which extra pressure on households is often felt disproportionately by women, the programme speaks to wide-reaching feminist concerns (challenging entrenched notions of *machismo* and heteronormativity which structure the organization of homes, families and communities) but also to contexts which are uniquely Cuban. Extreme austerity and the resulting pressures on the daily provision and care for families in Cuba are the result of multipronged global forces, including the tightening of the US embargo and the crisis wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic. The gendered politics articulated in the programme must be understood within their national frame to appreciate the moral, social and political entanglements of women's experiences in Cuba, particularly since Cuban television is rarely broadcast outside the island, and since free-to-view television is produced exclusively by governmental broadcasters. However, amid severe shortages and recurring blackouts that disrupt popular culture's unifying force, the television screen falls short of capturing the full complexity of Cuban women's experiences.

Notes

- 1 This guideline rarely correlated to the lived reality of most Cuban households; the Family Code is generally interpreted as, to use Anna

Cristina Pertierra's phrasing, 'more a set of desirable objectives than enforceable laws' (2008: 749).

- 2 Pertierra's work on Cuban television underscores the longevity and importance of regional television productions.
- 3 Since 2000, the 'Universidad para todos' scheme has offered free televised classes in many academic disciplines at the higher educational level, in line with revolutionary goals to socialize the population through access to knowledge. There has been a break in programming in recent years.
- 4 A colloquial term in some countries of Latin America, to 'mataparrear' is to idle away time, usually in the street, and is generally used in reference to boys and young men.