

**Venceremos Brigade / Brigada Venceremos Solidarity Project**  
**Individual UPR submission – CUBA – March 2023**

**Founded:**

1969

**Purpose:**

In 1969, a coalition of young people formed the Venceremos ("We Shall Overcome") Brigade, as a means of showing solidarity with the Cuban Revolution by working side by side with Cuban workers and challenging U.S. policies towards Cuba, including the economic blockade and our government's ban on travel to the island. The first Brigades participated in sugar harvests and subsequent Brigades have done agricultural, construction, and light manufacturing work in many parts of the island.

Over the last five and half decades, the VB has given nearly 10,000 people from the U.S. the opportunity for a life-changing experience. While the trip has evolved over time, the Venceremos Brigade has always kept its format of work, educational activities, and travel. In addition, we remain committed to organizing the most diverse contingents possible; Brigadistas are an intergenerational, multi-racial, multicultural, gender-expansive/-inclusive collective of volunteers committed to changing US policy toward Cuba and strengthening the relationships between the Cuban Revolution and movements for justice in the US.

While in Cuba, the Venceremos Brigade is hosted by the Cuban Institute for Friendship with the People (ICAP). Every year, our friends at ICAP develop a program for our visit to Cuba. Our Cuban hosts work very hard to ensure that Brigadistas can seize the opportunity of their visit to Cuba—seeing and learning as much as possible, and hearing from as many voices as possible—so that we return to the US with a wealth of knowledge and a dynamic perspective, enabling us to educate people about Cuba, replacing myths with realities.

The program typically includes:

- Meetings with members of Cuba's mass organizations, governmental organs, and civil society, such as the Federation of Cuban Women, the Union of Communist Youth, Municipal, Regional and National Assemblies, and others.
- Visits to Cuban social and economic institutions, such as health clinics, senior centers, orphanages, schools, and others, as well as meetings with people representing different sectors of Cuban society (farmers, doctors/nurses, social workers, educators, students, etc.).
- Cultural activities and visits, such as museum visits, musical and dance performances, special events with other solidarity groups, and others.

**Introduction:**

The following submission in relation to Cuba is made by the Venceremos Brigade (VB). The submission addresses various aspects of Cuba's situation relevant to this 4th cycle of the Universal Periodic Review. This submission reflects the first-hand experiences and interactions that members of the Venceremos Brigade have directly with the Cuban people. This report focuses on political rights, the rights of children, women, and the LGBTQ community in Cuba, as well as the rights to healthcare, education, and culture. Our accumulated years of experience with diverse groups and individuals in Cuba have made us confident in Cuba's protection of human rights *in general and particularly with these specific groups*.

**Socialism + Elections:** Socialism in Cuba is alive and constantly transforming to become a more inclusive project from the bottom to the top, led directly by the Cuban people. Earlier this week, Cubans elected their National Assembly, with over 70% of the eligible population voting. When a delegation of US American youth went to observe the November elections, they remarked on the absence of electoral campaigns and the fact that participation in elections is not determined by money. Cuba's electoral system follows a grassroots model where neighbors nominate trustworthy members of the community to municipal leadership based on their reputation, and these delegates in turn help select provincial and national representatives. While Cuba's electoral system is different than that of Western liberal democracies, it is truly democratic in the sense of government by, of, and for the people, as demonstrated by very high turnout in elections and extremely diverse governing bodies (among the top countries in the world when it comes to women in government, for example). As a result the Cuban government implements policy as the people see fit to meet the needs and wants of the Cubans.

**Family Code:** Cuba's democratic system was put on display in the recent process to draft, revise, and finally approve and begin implementing the new Cuban Constitution and Family Code. Over the course of three and a half years, tens of thousands of meetings were facilitated to review and debate these documents with the broadest possible participation of the Cuban people, and over 400,000 proposals were offered by ordinary Cubans through local organs of power, mass organizations, and other community groups, many of which were incorporated into the final versions. Both the Constitution and the new Family Code passed country-wide referenda with overwhelming majorities of the eligible voter population participating. The referendum on the Family Code was voted on by 74% of eligible voters and passed with 67% voting in favor. This kind of investment of time and resources to ensure that the voices of all members of the society were heard and taken into consideration illustrates Cuba's people-centered approach to governance.

The Cuban Family Code is of particular interest as it redefines family as anyone you have responsibility over, regardless of blood relation, type of partnership, or other restrictions rooted in the heteronormative gender binary. Upon review of several family laws and policies around the world, it becomes clear that Cuba's is one of the most dynamic and inclusive, expanding the rights of children, elders, women, and the LGBTQ community.

**Rights of the LGBTQ Community:** The Family Code builds on years of progressive policy changes that have provided ever greater freedom and protection to historically marginalized groups. CENESEX, the Cuban National Center for Sex Education, a government sponsored

organization, states its mission is to contribute to “the development of a culture of [sexuality](#) that is full, pleasurable and responsible, as well as to promote the full exercise of sexual rights.” Through the sex education that CENESEX provides through Cuba’s comprehensive public education system, all Cubans are educated around HIV prevention as well as the issues of gender and sexuality, and today Cuba is recognized as the first country in the world to eliminate mother-to-child HIV transmission. This is evidence of major shifts in Cuban society and politics in favor of human rights. At the beginning of the AIDS epidemic Cuba quarantined their gay population as a prevention measure. However, as early as 2005 a draft bill was presented to the Cuban parliament pushing for a law that would provide [transgender](#) persons with free [sex reassignment surgery](#) and [hormone replacement therapy](#) in addition to granting them new legal identification documents with their changed gender. This law was passed in June 2008 making Cuba the most liberal country in Latin America on gender issues.

The new Family Code further codifies these changes and ensures that people of all genders have equal protections and rights, for example, formally legalizing same sex marriage and allowing same sex couples to adopt children. Under the new code, parental rights can be shared among extended and ‘non-traditional’, i.e. non-binary, family structures.

Rights of Children: In all our trips to Cuba we meet with children and youth in a variety of ways: members of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), similar to our block or tenant associations; meetings with Los Pioneros and the Union of Communist Youth (UJC), the mass organizations in and through which children and youth are represented and heard; casual meet ups with children/youth on the streets or in the countryside of Cuba. Invariably what we witness in all children and youth with whom we speak and/or meet is a sense of well being; a sense of purpose within their specific communities and the overall society at large; an understanding of the larger world of which Cuba is a member. This is evident in the way the children and/or youth speak, both informally and formally. Whether the child or youth speaks to individuals, or formally in front of large groups, they conduct themselves with pride, and they demonstrate knowledge of who they are and what they think is important for them, their families, and for Cuba.

The health and safety of children is of the utmost importance in Cuban society. Indeed, the rights of the child are fully respected and carried out. On a visit to school for children who had committed crimes, for example, we learned that there is *no* juvenile justice system in Cuba. Children under the age of 18 cannot be arrested. If they are caught breaking the law, their family members are contacted and social services and the CDR become involved. It is a family- and community-based approach to dealing with children whose actions are harmful to society. As we heard the presentation, members of the Venceremos Brigade wept—not for the Cuban children we were meeting, but for our own, back in the United States, who are often criminalized and traumatized through arrest, incarceration, being tried as adults, etc.

The new Family Code expands rights and protections for young people, for example, guaranteeing minors the right not to be the object of exclusion, violence, or parental neglect. It also outlaws child marriage and corporal punishment, stating that parents will have “responsibility” instead of “custody” of their children, and will be required to be “respectful of the

dignity and physical and mental integrity of children and adolescents.”

**Rights of Women:** The Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) was established in 1960. Today, it is recognized as both an NGO and a national mechanism for women, because while its membership includes the vast majority of Cuban women (85.2% of all eligible women over 14), it is not government supported or financed. The organization has a pyramidal structure in which there are local, municipal, provincial, and national levels of representation and leadership.

Some of the FMC’s most important achievements have been supporting the mass education of women, incorporating women into the workforce, and pushing for legislation and social reform for gender equality. During the great literacy campaign in 1960-1, over 100,000 volunteer “people’s teachers” reached out to 700,000 people, over half of whom were women, and contributed to Cuba having the second-highest national literacy rate in the world. Due to the labor shortage created by the mass exile from Cuba during the early years of the Revolution, the FMC also created several programs in both urban and rural areas, to train women to enter the workforce. In cities, one program taught sewing skills to rural women, who then returned home and taught others in their communities. In agricultural communities, locally-run night classes in literacy and farming were implemented.

In the realm of legal and social support for women, the FMC played a pivotal role in passing maternity leave laws in 1974 and the Family Code in 1975, which provided financial support for pregnant women and new mothers and ensured equal property and social rights for women in the home. The FMC participated fully in the updating of the Family Code passed in 2022, which recognizes the rights of surrogate mothers, recognizes women’s work in the household, codifies the right to assisted reproduction, strengthens domestic violence penalties, and promotes comprehensive policies to address gender based violence.

In all of the 54 years since the founding of the Venceremos Brigade, our members have met with members of the FMC. We have repeatedly been told and seen that although “machismo” has not been eliminated, women are more empowered in Cuba than in many other places in the world. One of the most obvious indicators of Cuba’s progress in terms of women’s rights is their achievement of near gender parity in their National Assembly (or parliament): in 2021, 53% of Cuba’s national parliament was female. With this level of representation, consideration for the rights of women is constantly present in national legislative and policy debate.

### **Coronavirus 2019 and the Right to Healthcare:**

The Covid-19 pandemic impacted human life in every layer from physical, mental, and emotional health (including unknown long term effects) at the individual and community level to economic harm at the level of the whole society. The US exacerbated the impact on Cuba by keeping the sanctions implemented since 1962 in place during the pandemic and cruelly adding an additional 243 sanctions. The Cuban pharmaceutical industry resiliently created several successful vaccines while supporting the fight against the spread of Covid-19 worldwide through their medical brigades to many countries. Cuba’s response to the global pandemic demonstrates the way it invests in the sustainability of human life. The day that the most recent Venceremos Brigade left for Cuba (Dec 24, 2022), 262 people in the US died of Covid-19 while

out of Cuba's 11 million people only 30 tested positive. Cuba's healthcare system is based on the recognition of healthcare as a fundamental human right. It is free and accessible and people-centered in ways that can be shocking to visitors from the United States, where we have folks dying daily and afraid of getting impacted by Covid-19 and other illnesses because our healthcare system is designed for profit.

### **Arts and Culture:**

In Cuba, Arts and Culture are not just forms of entertainment, work, or industry; innovation and creativity are encouraged for all members of the society. In the book *Socialism and Man*, co-authored by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, Che writes that "for a long time man has been trying to free himself from alienation through culture and art..." In context, Che is describing the personal and even spiritual value of engaging in art and culture as a reprieve from paid labor. Cuba is not a capitalist country that centers paid work and economic productivity. Cuba is a country that seeks to draw out and cultivate the skills, talents, and interests of its people. The Arts are deeply valued in Cuba and are institutionally invested in. An example of this is the creation of the Aponte Commission permanently established in 2010 by the Cuban Union of Artists and Writers. The Aponte Commission is named after Jose Aponte who was a Cuban man of African origin that engaged in the struggle for the independence of Cuba in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Aponte Commission is a commission organized to prevent and address racism and discrimination in Cuba. Aponte Commissions can be found in every province of Cuba.

### **Conclusion:**

One of the experiences related to VB organizers was a conversation held between a North American member of our group and a young Cuban woman, who said: "If you want to be a millionaire, don't come to Cuba. We don't make those here. But, if you want to share the work and the results of that work, then you are welcome, and in the right place." The Venceremos Brigade believes that this comment is demonstrative of the ongoing development in Cuba of a way of seeing the world, of thinking, and of interacting with the world, that is *not* defined by profit, but rather by a sense of cooperative justice within the community and the world at large, and we believe this is a reflection of their attention to basic human rights. We believe that this is a concept that was addressed by the idea put forward by one of Cuba's historic leaders, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, when he said that the Cuban society is creating "the new man." In our daily work, side by side with Cubans, US American travelers often struggle with the concept of "emulation" that is valued and practiced in Cuba. Where people coming from a capitalist society are very familiar with the individualism and drive for profit that defines our way of life, Cubans consistently demonstrate another understanding: how do we help each other be the best that we can be so that everything we do we can also improve. This way of thinking does not, however, demand that Cubans be quiet about their frustrations. We have found that most Cubans feel totally free to express their feelings, opinions, and beliefs, whether they relate to the results of colonialism and imperialism, the US blockade, or the mistakes of the Cuban government itself. Indeed, each of us who has traveled to Cuba has had open conversations with Cubans who disagree with decisions of their government, including some who are entirely opposed to the revolutionary process that has been underway since 1959. In our collective experience, we have not met any Cuban who did not feel comfortable sharing their opinions, which suggests that what we often hear in US and Western media about the restrictions on

Cubans' freedom of speech (including political speech) is simply not true. Importantly, the ability of Cubans to express dislike or frustration with something is not a vote against their own sovereignty, but rather it is an expression of their defense against that which holds them back, and an expression of the building and strengthening of their own sovereignty.