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Homosexuality Takes a Step Out of the Closet

By Dalia Acosta

Even as other countries are legalising same-sex civil unions and adoptions by homosexuals, homosexuality becomes a subject of public debate in Cuba only now.

The daily *Juventud Rebelde*—the second highest circulation newspaper in this Caribbean island nation of 11.2 million—recently surprised readers by publishing the story of a couple's regrets after rejecting their gay son.

The story is a common one in Cuba: the father told the son he would rather see him dead than gay. "He left. I don't know where he went. We haven't seen him for almost a year," the father said.

Although the last discriminatory provisions targeting homosexuals were removed from Cuba's penal code when this was reformed in 1997, homophobia remains widespread. "Machismo" is a predominant feature of mainstream culture.

The article came on the heels of the publication of a study, "Homosexuality in Cuba: The Price of Being Different," by the university magazine *Alma Mater* in June.

Homosexuality has been a taboo subject for the government-controlled media under the socialist regime of Fidel Castro. It is only mentioned in articles on HIV/AIDS or other health issues, and never before had a report that presented homosexuality as just another sexual orientation been published.

"Normal?... They've gone crazy," 17-year-old Félix González remarked, when asked about the *Juventud Rebelde* article. But he added that in his school "everyone read the report."

Armando López, a craftsman who decided to divorce his wife years ago

and come out of the closet, said, "I hope that what we are seeing is a real opening, and that this isn't just an isolated episode. The discussion on homosexuality should not be a temporary thing but the result of a policy."

Although there have been isolated cases of symbolic commitment ceremonies between people of the same sex, there are no known organisations of gays or lesbians in Cuba, and no movements that defends the rights of homosexuals, who mainly choose to remain in the closet. No one in Cuba is demanding the legalisation of same-sex marriages or the right to adopt or undergo assisted fertilisation in the case of lesbians, which is reserved for heterosexual couples.

Mariela Castro, director of the governmental National Centre for Sex Education and one of the few government functionaries openly supportive of the rights of gays and lesbians, said Cuba's homosexual community should take advantage of the emerging climate of tolerance.

More explicit policies are needed to crack down on "any expression of discrimination based on sexual orientation," she said.

Most of the studies on homosexuality are in the context of the national programme on prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and aimed at understanding sexual behaviour and modifying high-risk behaviour. As many as 4,699 cases of HIV/AIDS have been reported in Cuba since 1986. Around 78 percent of those living with HIV in the country are men, most of whom have had sex with other men.

Source: Inter Press Service, 21 August 2003, <<http://www.ips.org>>