

Gender and Race: Taboo Subjects for the Citizenry in Cuba

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With every day that passes, gender discrimination is getting worse in the largest of the Antilles. Women in this situation, particularly black women, are very much affected. There are two grave issues: sexual discrimination and racial discrimination. It is such that black women are excluded from places to which they have a right, simply because of who they are, women of color.

In the beginning, when the current government took power, there were laws created and dispositions pronounced that put all Cubans on the same level as far as the society and education were concerned, although the same did not happen in the economic sphere. Just as black organizations were eliminated, so too, the conditions that relegated black women to paid domestic work and prostitution. First, different educational institutions opened their doors for those who lived in rural areas and with them, those who lived in the cities, too. No racial criteria played any role in these decisions at the time. Thus, Cuban women of African descent ably integrated themselves into the activities and currents that the “new” society made available to

those women who had previously been deprived of benefits and were victimized by old racist ideologies.

The psychosocial results of all this did not take long to reveal themselves. Some considered it charity that in some way or another they deserved. Others saw it with a hopeful attitude, judging it a step on the road to progressively achieving equality. But with no public debate about it, the results were counterproductive and paradoxical.

At some moment in the recent past, the authorities saw themselves obliged to seek what we might call ‘integration by decree,’ by means of which the goal was to integrate women, blacks and young people into the country’s governing infrastructure. The actual truth is in the data; black women are less integrated into any basic level of society than anyone else. It is not only the government’s deafness that has precluded complete integration; differing opinions in a society that strongly connects racism and *machismo* is also to blame.

Unlike white women, black women do not enjoy the same possibility of being hired as managers or employees in companies



where they would reap economic advantages or are required to deal with the public. The latter is even more unthinkable if the “public” is foreign. Nevertheless, a combination of exoticism and eroticism has come together to cause a revalorization of black women as merchandise. Today, they are worth a few Euros.

The relevant space for black women in Cuba is in sports, particularly those sports that require endurance and physical capacity. This reproduces a playful racism that also affects integration in the larger society.

The media (print media, radio and television) absolutely love to represent racism and racist attitudes. There are barely any important roles for black women and when there are, they play someone marginalized, a prostitute or an ugly duckling. Unlike with the African American ideal in the United States, in Cuba “black is not beautiful.” Any beauty a Cuban black woman might have is judged according to her Caucasian-like features.

A general survey of this situation becomes an evaluation of the marginalization of and discrimination against black women. Highly cultured dance forms like ballet are thought to purify one’s race from childhood. Black girls are not admitted to

these types of schools. Only those who limit the extent to which they reveal their African features are admitted.

The geography of cities is also impacted by marginalization. The country’s poorest neighborhoods are the black neighborhoods, areas where poor health and desperation compete for dominance in the tiny living quarters that Cuba’s black families inhabit.

Having said all this, is there any cause for hope? I notice that there is hope.

Cuban black women are showing solid signs of their need to rescue their rightful place next to white women and men, without using their race as a deciding factor. It is a huge task because this effort has an additional more difficult obstacle; for black women be seen as white women are and achieve with them equality with men. This requires imaginative and intelligent appeals; intelligent appeals chock full of hope and sustained effort.

But black women also need to feel pride in their skin color, because without self-respect there can be no self-emancipation. This task falls upon both black men and women in Cuba. The only true road to solving the challenge before black women is for them to develop self-respect and re-evaluate their past, their culture and their legacy. Religiosity may help a great deal because women can find self-worth and abilities in their ancestors’ religions that the monotheistic ones did not offer; a role beyond that of procreation.

Achieving all this depends on us black Cuban women. Governmental campaigns tend to be paternalistic and bureaucratizing about a task, both horizontal and cultural, in which creative community is essential. That is what I’m betting on by publicly breaking the taboo.