

Race and Women

Eroisis Gonzales Suárez
Civic activist
Havana, Cuba



Racism has played a profound role in our social order since colonial times. Yet, there is also this: it is more accepted by those who are judged, excluded and marginalized by it. According to the view held by a white minority, blacks are forced to accept that they are not equal to them when it comes to working in certain spheres. Moreover, they also must accept that they are inferior, hence the negative impact of that racist practice. One way or another, blacks feel dependent on white people, who are admired, and also envied.

It's true that whites usually have more resources than blacks, and also generally make better use of their educational level or specific culture. They also embody the European and American models that we see in the media, which are irresistible for those who are excluded. In our society, African descendants are always associated with crime, perversion and disorder. Their extreme marginality condemns them to high levels of alcoholism and violence, which the State uses to justify its use of violent, controlling policies.

A little background is needed to understand what has been happening, psychologically, as a result of how dark-skinned people are treated in Cuba. The blacks who were brought to our continent against their will, always felt uselessly furious, hurt and mistreated. They were forced to leave their lives, families, lands and even their ethnic traditions and religious beliefs. As if that weren't enough, they were treated like beasts, and forced to live in a totally inhuman manner. Black slaves were forced to hide their most basic feelings and desires, and live dual lives, hiding their true selves, which brought about acculturation and, eventually, a painful process of transculturation.

The historical realities of these men and women of diverse origins and races, and unequal conditions and social roles, will have a tremendous affect on the way blacks, particularly black women, are represented in the media. The image and context that we've historically inherited are of exclusion, and don't allow for a realistic view of the problem. This

is particularly noteworthy in the case of the black woman, because she has had to personally endure racism as a historic social ideology. Also, it has been seen in personal relationships, in people's life philosophy and even in the conception of our own culture. Many are the obstacles and challenges black Cuban women have had to face: machismo, racism and discrimination based on sexual orientation among them.

Black women have had to confront a machista and patriarchal society that has forced them to play a marginal, excluded role—a very depressing scene. Generally, things are so bad that they receive the lowest salaries, work in the least productive places, suffer the highest rate of unemployment, and have the lowest level of education. If they achieve any status at all, it is rarely in the realm of political leadership. They live in constant fear of gender-based violence because they are perceived as the queens of sexual pleasure, parties and domesticity.

Much of this inequality is the result of an inherited social framework that we have not yet overcome. Other structures are reproduced and generate crisis conditions and economic reforms. Another factor in this problem is that there are few studies examining how racism and machismo have brought about their disastrous situation. Generally speaking, if there is any talk of women, it is of white women: when racism is the topic, it is about men.

Regardless, black people want a social transformation. The solution to this is not simple because black women in Cuba have a strong tendency to reproduce their inherited roles. We need to recreate black women in a new, positive image, if we are to encounter racist political practices, and value their here-

tofore ignored and disappeared contributions to our history. It is important for them that their non-racial values be acknowledged. This will allow them to foment a political solidarity that will help them become subjects able to socially transform according to their own vision.

The category 'black women' has been a diverse one, and includes factors such as class, race and even migration. Yet, essentializing criteria have not been applied to them, which are important for understanding their lives, position and trajectory. This represents a challenge in the anti-racist struggle, and causes one to profoundly question if the category 'black women' is a monolithic one. Cuban black women must begin to assume an identity as 'black women,' and then as African descendants. This should be a priority in the struggle against racism and its effects on women: to have their own aesthetic is fundamental in this issue of identity.

The negritude of women has been homogenized. An undifferentiated 'black woman' was created according to historical context, and skin color as a relevant indicator. This has as much to do with politics (because one's pigment is a social and political construction that is racialized and, of course, undervalued) as anything else, and is in and of itself an essentializing biological classification that needs to be deconstructed.

'Black women' is only an initial identity, as an expression of self-esteem. The subsequent 'African descendant' identity is the next step in the political battle. Society itself must reveal its racism towards black women, because it constitutes the greatest obstacle of all in being able to overcome our social problems.