

CUBA: Black Women Rap Against Discrimination

By **Dalia Acosta**

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HAVANA, Aug 13 (IPS) - They are few in number, but women's loud chants of resistance against sexism, racism and discrimination against sexual minorities have left an indelible mark on the hip hop movement in Cuba, a little more than a decade old.

"Women's first challenge within hip hop was to confront a 'machista' patriarchal society, which gave them a role even within their marginalisation," poet and freelance researcher Carmen González, who is writing a book about what women rappers are saying on this Caribbean island, told IPS.

"Not every woman dares to get up on a stage and rap, because the social perception of hip hop is that it is a violent, male thing," said the expert. However, some have defied prejudice and have earned recognition within the movement.

"Because we don't have women producers, or leaders who make the decisions, the movement has a sexist feel to it," said Magia López of the Obsesión hip hop duo.

"We're basically just 'guests' invited to take part in projects planned and directed by men, so the space that is allocated to women has been constructed in a 'machista' manner," she said.

For the last three months, López has been head of the Cuban Rap Agency, which aims to stimulate the development here of hip hop, the confrontational cultural movement and musical genre born in the poor neighbourhoods of New York.

From her post, she hopes to increase the participation of women, whose voices "have given a different nuance to the general discourse" of hip hop made in Cuba.

According to Epsy Campbell Barr, former coordinator of the Afro-Latin American and Afro-Caribbean Women's Network (RMAA), and president of the Costa Rican Citizens' Action Party (PAC), undervaluing women in the region has gone hand in hand with racism, which has persistently and systematically denied the continent's black cultures.

Racism and patriarchy are deeply rooted ideologies in Latin American and Caribbean culture, and are found throughout the societies, from every angle, said Campbell at her presentation to the Second Meeting of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Women, held in San José de Costa Rica in 1996.

There are an estimated 150 million people of African descent in Latin America and the Caribbean, who make up 30 percent of the total population.

They are, to a great extent, the poorest people in the region, they have the worst socioeconomic indicators, and they have very little cultural recognition or access to

decision-making processes, says an April 2006 report by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

The situation is especially difficult for black women, who generally receive the lowest pay and have the worst jobs and highest unemployment rates. In addition, they have the lowest educational levels, are barely represented in political leadership, and often live with the threat of gender violence, the report says.

The last population census in Cuba, in 2002, found that 34.9 percent of the population defined itself as black or of mixed race. Afro-descendants occupy 33 percent of the seats in parliament.

However, according to a study by the governmental Anthropology Centre, blacks receive less money in remittances from abroad, have less access to emerging sectors of the economy, and live in the poorest neighbourhoods.

Some of these inequalities arise from inherited structures that have not been overcome, while others were reproduced and generated in the crisis and the economic reforms of the 1990s, the study said.

Meanwhile, González said that "nearly every country in the world has a hip hop movement, and it is black people who are doing it, because they're the worst off, even in Cuban society, which has made some social progress."

Rapping is at the core of the hip hop movement, which also finds expression in graffiti and breakdancing. A disc jockey provides an electronic mix of music, over which the rapper recites the lyrics.

Cuban women rappers are articulating "a very clear discourse on gender and race," said González, who is also editor of the magazine *Movimiento*, devoted to hip hop in Cuba, where it emerged in the early 1990s.

In her view, the problems of black women in Cuba have been neglected in studies of sexism and racism.

"When they talk about women, it's always about white women, and when they talk about racism, it's about how it affects men," she said.

"Rapping I'm a woman / not some bitch for you to bite / not some thing for your delight," go the words to a song by Las Krudas, a group with overtly lesbian identity, which has introduced lyrics about respect for diversity, and has equated sexism with the slavery imposed on their black women ancestors.

"If (women) rebel / they will be condemned / to family exile / to moral exile / outside their circle of friends / outside the land of good feelings / that you didn't get any more, / you made the decision / to go against the norm / you got a passion for the forbidden / or

you didn't repeat / what those who don't love you any more / once taught you," goes another song.

The women's lyrics include the prostitute, "forced to do what she doesn't want / because poverty and want's / got an ugly face / believe it or not," in the song "They call her a whore" by Magia López; and the woman who "isn't just / breasts and butt," because she also has a brain and feelings, say Las Krudas, and she is "resisting as a fatty, as a black woman, as a guerrilla."

Without any precedents in Cuban music and very few reference points, these young women "are starting out with a revolutionary, emancipating discourse" constructed "on the basis of themselves and their life stories," said González.

In Cuba, hardly anyone has heard of them, outside the circle of hip hop fans. "Society shuts its ears and doesn't want to listen, it shuts its eyes and doesn't want to see," she added.