

04

CUBAN

ENTREPRENEURSHIP WITH THE FACES OF BLACK WOMEN

EMPRESARIOS CUBANOS CON ROSTROS DE MUJERES NEGRAS

Susel Abad-Fis¹

E-mail: suselabad@nauta.cu

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6025-5636>

Lilian Patricia Rodríguez-Sintes¹

E-mail: particiasintes@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9431-2571>

¹ Universidad de Holguín "Oscar Lucero Moya" Cuba.

Suggested citation (APA, 7th edition)

Abad-Fis, S., & Rodríguez-Sintes, L. (2023). Cuban entrepreneurship with the faces of black women. *Revista Transdisciplinaria de Estudios Sociales y Tecnológicos*, 3(2), 31-38.

Fecha de presentación: febrero, 2023

Fecha de aceptación: abril, 2023

Fecha de publicación: mayo, 2023

ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors analyze how women's entrepreneurship constitutes a horizon for women's economic autonomy. The objective is to reveal the experiences of three black women as entrepreneurs; however, the main obstacles to women's insertion in the economic sphere are discussed. Thus, in order to carry out this work, methods such as the analysis and assessment of specialized literature, interviews and personal communications are used, which justify the need to study this topic, since patriarchy, male chauvinism and racism are presented as strong barriers to the incorporation of black women into the business world. The promotion of support networks among women entrepreneurs, and institutional and civil society support are important to their full economic development.

Keywords:

Entrepreneurship, black women, race, gender.

RESUMEN

En el presente artículo las autoras analizan como los emprendimientos femeninos constituyen un horizonte para la autonomía económica de las mujeres. El objetivo es revelar las experiencias de tres mujeres negras como emprendedoras; sin embargo, se plantea cuáles son los principales obstáculos para la inserción femenina en el ámbito económico. De manera, que para la realización de este trabajo se utilizan métodos como el análisis y crítica de literatura especializada, la entrevista, comunicaciones personales, los que justifican la necesidad de estudiar este tema, pues el patriarcado, el machismo y el racismo se presentan como fuertes barreras para la incorporación de las mujeres negras al mundo empresarial. El fomento de redes de ayuda entre las mujeres emprendedoras, y el apoyo institucional y de la sociedad civil son claves para su pleno desenvolvimiento económico.

Palabras clave:

Emprendimiento, mujeres negras, raza, género.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the phenomenon of entrepreneurship has contributed to the economic growth of society, as well as having a great outcome on new jobs generation. However, when talking about entrepreneurship, gender equity cannot be left aside, despite the increasing presence of women in the workplace; there are still many obstacles, among them, those cemented by patriarchy. This has determined that the man is the provider and the woman assumes the responsibility of the home, often distorting the female capacity in the economic, political and academic fields.

Cuba is not exempt from this reality; official data from 2018 placed the so-called gender gap in labor participation in Cuba at around 27 percent. According to the National Office of Statistics and Information (ONEI), while the male economic activity rate was 76.9 percent, the female rate scarcely reached just 49.5 percent, a situation is even more unequal in rural areas (Terrero & Trinquete, 2022).

The guarantees of a set of rights and the design of economic, political and social actions, starting with the revolutionary triumph of 1959 have contributed to the improvement of women. Although, current research and statistics show that stereotypical and macho attitudes and conceptions that maintain that men are better at negotiating and making decisions than women still persist. (Centro de Estudios de la Mujer y Centro de Estudios de Población y Desarrollo, 2018).

Similarly, it is recommended that organizations and institutions incorporate statistical calculations that take into account intersections such as gender, age and skin color. This last variable still represents an excluding factor for female empowerment. According to Zabala (2020), black and mestizo women face certain disadvantages in accessing management positions, as well as poor representation in higher income jobs and relevant political decision-making spaces.

In this order of ideas, the limited market supply for Afro women's hair stands out, which has generated actions by black women in favor of the reconstruction of aesthetics that bet on the inclusion and visibility of other ways of wearing hair (Banguero, 2015); however, the construction of exclusive products for the use of Afro natural hair in women visualizes one of the many ways to fight to promote empowerment and resistance to hegemonic models of beauty.

For all of the above reasons, the article aims to reveal the experiences of three black women as entrepreneurs.

DEVELOPMENT

In colonial society, the social restrictions implemented by normativity with respect to marriage, family and sexuality

were weakened, especially due to the existence of a system of social stratification that worked against social normativity. In this sense, the position, in the system of social stratification, of black slaves and free black and mulatto women -the majority of the Cuban population from approximately 1817 to the mid-19th century- led many of them, faced with the adversities of their daily lives, in a sort of dialectic of social control, to try to take control of their lives through prostitution (Ricardo & Pino, 2016).

This does not mean that prostitution was the only way for free black and mulatto women. Considering that since the end of the eighteenth century they... "were constantly moving around the city, actively contributing to its economy and dynamically participating in its social life. They constituted the majority of saleswomen, handicrafts workers, midwives, servants, caregivers and teachers of first letters. Some were business owners or moneylenders.

In turn, the racial division of labor has historically imprisoned Afro-descendant women in the most subordinate positions in the labor force, far below white/mestizo women. In other words, when the debate on female participation in the labor market was beginning to take place with greater expressiveness in the public arena, starting in the second half of the 20th century, women of African descent had been incorporated into the labor force in Latin American and Caribbean countries for centuries, even though in a situation of extreme precariousness (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, 2018).

The Third World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Durban (South Africa) in 2001, was an important landmark in the process of formal recognition by States of the harmful effects of racism and discrimination based on skin color and ethnic origin on individuals and societies. Governments agreed on their commitment to fight against discrimination, applying a gender focus to public policies aimed at eradicating it, reflecting the complex web of oppressive structures that generate a lack of power resources and low levels of autonomy in the lives of Afro-descendant women.

Although heterogeneous, the conditions of violence and violation of rights that historically and structurally mark the lives of Afro-descendant women in Latin American and Caribbean countries are, as symbolic and concrete content, the starting point for highlighting the differentiated nature of their gender, ethno-racial and class condition. From the inequality and structural exclusion that mark this belonging, and from the historical resistance that these have engendered, they define their pattern of struggle for their rights and their search for economic, physical and decision-making autonomy (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, 2018).

Preceding studies have shown the existence of social vulnerabilities in residential communities, some of which are racialized. The most disadvantaged individuals and families may be concentrated in marginal neighborhoods, or they may reside in neighborhoods with a more favorable socio-cultural situation. The complexity of the network of groups that reveal the growing inequality in society also requires reviewing studies already published by other authors and continuing to develop research (Ricardo et al, 2022).

The term “race” can be defined as a social construction based on the ascription of individuals to groups defined fundamentally but not only according to their phenotype, the result of a historical experience that cannot be understood outside the field of social relations of domination, that gains meaning fundamentally in relation to space and that is articulated through its interaction with other axes of social differentiation (Vives & Sité, 2010).

The meaning of race cannot be interpreted independently of other axes of social differentiation such as gender/sex, socio-economic class, sexual orientation or legal status. The combined intersection of these axes of oppression penalizes women of African descent, discriminates against them and subordinates them to racist, classist and patriarchal power. This racial, economic and gender exploitation is structural, historical and strongly institutionalized throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

The double discrimination that results from the combination of gender and race causes a feeling of having to constantly demonstrate personal and professional worth that takes place in different ways. At other times they must make a great effort to show other qualities that do not fit racist stereotypes about black people, such as perseverance, constancy, personal sacrifice, etc. (Vives & Sité, 2010).

Linking the fight against racism with the search for autonomy of Afro-descendant women leads us to think that, for them, autonomy represents the possibility of survival in a racialized and classist world, where opportunities for growth and development are scarce and biased and, in some cases, practically nonexistent. Considering the major challenges faced by certain groups of women, especially Afro-descendant women, in terms of redistribution, recognition and representation, it is understood that the achievement of autonomy is not a matter of equal women.

As a political concept, women’s autonomy refers to *“the capacity of people to make free and informed decisions about their lives, so that they can be and do according to their own aspirations and desires in the historical context that makes them possible”* (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, 2011). This is, therefore, a fundamental factor in guaranteeing the exercise of human rights in a context of full equality.

The three pillars of women’s autonomy - economic, physical and decision-making - must be understood as a whole, in an interrelated manner, given that they are multi-dimensional in nature, i.e., economic autonomy is strengthened as women gain more physical or decision-making autonomy, and vice versa. Thus, for example, by overcoming the limits of power of choice over their sexual and reproductive lives, such as subordination in the field of labor, women are closer to a life free of violence and to fuller participation in politics (ECLAC, 2012).

The reproduction in the labor sphere of historical patterns of discrimination originating in the colonial-slavery period in Latin America continues to be a reality, even when all national regulations in the region enshrine formal equality among all citizens, regardless of their sex, skin color, ethnic origin or other traits.

It is worth mentioning the approach proposed by Quijano (2000), on the long-lasting effects deployed by colonialism and its central hierarchical construction, “race”, on the social organization of labor. The author states that the categories “black”, white, Indian, among others, that is, the new historical identities produced on the basis of the idea of race have been associated with the nature of roles and places in the new global structure of labor control founded from the colonial period, so that both elements, race and division of labor, were structurally associated and mutually reinforcing.

This is reflected to this day in the region and, in fact, in the global scenario of the division of labor, where racialized populations continue, in general, to occupy positions of lesser prestige and greater precariousness. Moreover, the intersection between the racial division of labor, founded on the basis of colonization, and the sexual division of labor has implied the naturalization of the presence of Afro-descendant women in the lowest positions and roles in the labor market.

The need for women to achieve recognition in the economic sphere is difficult because of the barriers imposed by society. However, in recent years, several studies have provided abundant evidence on the contribution of new ventures to economic growth, job creation and innovation. Adopting the definition of entrepreneurship as *“any attempt to create a new business, including self-employment, a new venture or the expansion of an existing business, a process that can be launched by one or several individuals, independently or within a going concern”* (Reynolds, Camp, Bygrave, Autio & Hay, 1999, as cited in Messina, 2018).

In relation to the previous idea, entrepreneurship is understood as a way to achieve women’s economic empowerment. This is due to the possibility of creating a means of employment through one’s own efforts. In Cuba, entrepreneurship is associated with the non-state sector,

and although *“in the state sector there is almost parity in employment between women and men, in the non-state sector, at the time of 2020, they were only around 30 per cent”* (Terrero & Trinquete, 2022).

In Cuba, based on the postulates and principles recognized in different legal instruments, derived from the celebration in 1995 of the IV UN Conference on Women, in Beijing, China led to the approval of the National Program for the Advancement of Women (2021). In its action plan, women's economic empowerment is the first area of special attention.

Thus, it is fact that in Cuba there are conditions and a legal-legal framework to encourage, support and monitor the progress or setbacks that in labor matters, both state and non-state, allow the insertion of women in the economic sphere of the country. As well as, the new economic measures that bet on the diversification of the forms of ownership, by formalizing the existence of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), among many other financial mechanisms and economic incentive, which also need gender perspectives; it has been shown that the lower presence of women in this sector is due, above all, to the starting conditions necessary for a private enterprise.

Consequently, this has been the propitious framework for the entrepreneurship of the projects of two black Cuban women. Emphasis is placed on black women because their opportunities in white hegemonic westernized societies would be extremely complex to access a labor and economic world led by men. In addition, the exclusion and discrimination that characterize these societies as a result of centuries of slavery and racism. Cuba has not been unaffected by this phenomenon, but there have been many advances in the development of an inclusive model, based on equality, social justice and the emancipation of women.

Qué Negra! Project by Erlys Pennycook Ramos in Ciego de Avila, and Beyond Roots by Adriana Heredia in Havana seek the reevaluation of black beauty. Therefore, one of the most important purposes of these women is to promote products for the natural hair of afro, frizzy and curly people based on natural products. Because the hegemonic model of beauty has only allowed the establishment of a valid and accepted type of beauty in society, under strict parameters that have forced black women to search for ways and means to meet this ideal of beauty, such as straightening, extensions, bleaching and surgical interventions.

The aspiration to achieve European standards of beauty goes to the point of raping and mutilating their own bodies, with chemical products to straighten their hair, which are harmful not only to their scalps but also to their health.

It should be noted then that one of the problems faced by black and mestizo women when it comes to beauty and styling products is because the hegemonic model of beauty imposes an ideal of a harmonious body under strict measures, straight and blonde hair, light-colored eyes and white skin; parameters that exclude other types of being beautiful, defining them as wild, exotic, ugly. Thus, black aesthetics have been denied and replaced by the predominant European beauty canons in many societies, even in a mestizo culture like ours.

The issue of beauty has been framed by dominant models where beauty and ugliness are defined. These ideals are social constructions influenced by ethnic-racial, gender and class categories. Therefore, the categories: ethnicity, social class and gender are used to standardize the relationships between individuals. These categories constitute socio-cultural constructs that have turned class, race-ethnicity and gender differences into hierarchies of power that justify the subordinate position of non-whites and women.

Expressions such as: “she is black, but she is pretty”, “she is black, but a classy black”, “they are all black with good hair”, label the physical appearance and show how through the centuries, black people are perceived in society as an inferior being, based on his physical appearance.

Skin, nose and hair form the axes of discrimination and distinction of “black types”.

These gaps in self-esteem have left sequels that, in order to fit into society, the Afro-descendant American, Latino and Caribbean people have tried to fill by making decisions that bring them somehow closer to the Caucasian beauty.

A light-skinned Afro-descendant with straight hair is not so black.

When the first black freedmen began to look for work, the plantation owners preferred those who were “groomed”, whose hair was properly straightened with caustic soda or hot comb.

For housework, uncovered hair could offend the ladies of the householders who saw how those exotic hairs together with hips and voluptuous shapes were deeply provocative.

With the hair tied up and tied back, the possibilities for work were better.

Since then, the unthinkable has been done to “lacquer the defect as much as possible” or, as it is commonly said, “to advance the race”.

Of the aforementioned axes of discrimination, only one is completely modifiable and economically accessible with immediate effect: the hair.

These examples of shame of the race, despite the time are still in force in modern society, infecting young girls and teenagers who receive the “baptism of 15 years” with a lacing cream at best, and at worst, with an uncurling potassium-based solution.

The systematic and unavoidable pain of these treatments every 45 days or more, leads to the repulsion of the hair and what it represents from a very early age. In the same way, there is another part of the population that in recent years has begun to abandon these centuries-old practices to adopt a natural look, and to fight against aversive racism, where hair plays a fundamental role as it identifies and distinguishes. There is an evident desire to return to the roots and to be accepted in all social environments such as workplaces, schools and common areas.

This “awakening” is taking place across the country, in small and large communities. Unlike the meaning it had in the sixties, when afro hair played a political role in the struggles for civil rights and apartheid in the U.S. and South Africa, today it represents the freedom of black aesthetic expression, the struggle for acceptance in society as a right without negotiating its structure.

Today it represents the freedom of black aesthetic expression, the struggle for acceptance in society as a right without the negotiation of its structure.

It is the empowerment of black beauty.

The difficulties in this process accompanied by barriers and prejudices are varied, because the knowledge base for grooming and hair care has been lost.

Many women stop before the transition period, the most difficult and cumbersome, because they do not know how to continue this process without being victims of the disapproval of their environment.

With these premises in the city of Ciego de Avila, in 2018, The Qué Negra! Project is born.

Erllys, Bachelor in English and Adriana, economist and Master in Business Administration by personal interests to create of a space to highlight the aesthetics and Afro identity, due to the problems to find products and hair accessories, which allowed self-identification with the Afro-descent were the motivations to undertake their project, for A. Heredia entrepreneurship means: *“entrepreneurship is nothing more than the action of identifying a need in the market or an opportunity and providing a solution to it through the development of a business activity that can be for profit or not. And I think that is precisely what we have done with Beyond Roots; we identified the lack of such spaces in the country and based on that we decided to do something about it. And I also consider that it has been a form of female empowerment since we function as a collaborative platform where different enterprises*

converge, mostly led by women”. (A. Heredia, personal communication, May 24, 2021).

It should be noted that both work together so that their accessories, natural cosmetic products for hair have a national reach. In addition, a large number of followers on social networks such as Facebook. In the case of Beyond Roots (A. Heredia, personal communication, May 24, 2021) reaches in three years 20000 people. This fact shows that the advice, workshops, videos to learn how to treat, wash, care and define afro hair have the repercussion expected by the creators. Masks, creams, gels based on all-natural products are the main recommendations for all the girls who decide to wear their natural hair. It is important to clarify that the target audience is people with afro hair, but it is valid for all hair types. But undoubtedly the most demanded products of the cosmetic line are the styling cream Qué Negra! and the XIV Energizing Serum. The first product is a moisturizing cream with a repairing function that defines curls and adds shine; the energizing serum combats alopecia, stimulates growth and seals in capillary hydration. Both are very attractive for their complete natural composition, of national manufacture and distribution in several provinces of the country.

Erllys self-taught herself in the world of cosmetics and in an enterprising way decided to reach out to young women with afro hair with her products, one of the first steps to recover the pride and identity of blackness. Her experience as a financial agent for a multinational company in Italy contributed to her project, which represents her fulfillment and satisfaction as a cosmetic formulator.

Both undertook a difficult task because in our country the tendency to wear straight hair prevails in most black and mixed-race women. Mockery and social prejudices act as insurmountable barriers, in many occasions for women to accept their natural hair and decide to wear it with distinction and pride in any social scenario. This fact is a major challenge, since the target public often offers resistance to a change that is incomprehensible due to cultural stereotypes. In addition, the scarcity of inputs for the development and manufacture of Afro-Cuban style sweaters, earrings, turbans, handbags, etc., which are another of Beyond Roots' offerings.

However, the sustainability, growth and acceptance of their personal ventures, the result of a problem understood by them, and which they set out to solve with knowledge and with a visible capacity for leadership and independence, has made them successful. As well as, the collaboration with institutions and projects with related objectives such as “Casa de África, the Office of the Historian of the City, Hamel's Alley” in the case of Beyond Roots (A. Heredia, personal communication, May 24, 2021). And Qué Negra! counted in its beginnings with institutional support from

the TV Avileña and Ciego de Avila Cultural Center. (E. Pennycook, personal communication, May 26, 2021).

Future prospects: creation of new products and reaching as many people as possible. The current scenario due to the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic has not stopped their work to continue adding more fans every day, including the authors of this work. The distribution and commercialization in each territory where there is a representative of Qué Negra! is limited at the moment. However, the demand is increasing, including for use in beauty salons that also appropriate this cosmetic line to provide their care and styling services.

Ana Nidia Cutiño Arencibia in Havana has also found her independence in her undertaking Amándome, which she defines as: *“a line of Natural Cosmetics, aimed at everyone, without distinction of sex, every day we innovate, because we want to reach all types of audiences, all skin types, all types of hair. We have never focused on any particular community, for us the important thing is that everyone, regardless of their age, their race, their hair type, mainly love and show it; in fact that's how we always present our brand”*. (A. N. Cutiño, Personal communication, June 20, 2022)

Amándome since 2019 bets on natural cosmetics, in the face of the shortage of industrial beauty products and skin and hair care for Cuban women. That is why its main objective *“is to encourage people to take care of themselves, to pamper themselves and mainly to love themselves and to show it by using our products”*. (A. N. Cutiño, personal communication, June 20, 2022)

Some obstacles such as lack of information about natural cosmetics have not prevented Amándome from sustainability, growth and acceptance. A team made up of women has taken their products to other provinces of the country. Such is the case of the collaboration with Ashé Santiago, being Yenys Sánchez the representative in the province of Santiago de Cuba of Ana Cutiño's cosmetic line. Natural oils, styling and skin care creams have achieved recognition in a short time.

These women demonstrate their strength and independence in the economic sphere. They claim a space that has been relegated to them, in spite of the advances in labor matters for women. Amándome, as a distinctive element of its activity, seeks a care routine for women, so that they can love themselves knowing they are beautiful.

These ventures enable Afro-descendent women to appropriate their aesthetics, which have been excluded in society. The construction of products for the use of Afro natural hair in women promotes empowerment and resistance to hegemonic models of beauty. These entrepreneurs have been in charge of listening to the needs of Afro women regarding their hair and, from there, seek ways to

materialize the satisfaction of these needs through natural and economical products allowing the recognition, acceptance and reaffirmation of the beauty of Afro women, proposing diversity and the value of this type of aesthetics as other ways of perceiving beauty.

CONCLUSIONS

In a world where success is associated with masculinity, the results of these female entrepreneurs demonstrate the creativity and independence of these three women. Their aspirations to continue advancing and growing personally and professionally are the best ways to strengthen every day the inclusion of women in the economic life of the country.

The aesthetics of Afro women have been immersed in a dominant and racist society that has made the inclusion of the different impossible. Making people believe that there is only one way to be beautiful, if they follow the parameters of beauty that impose the characteristics of a prototype of a woman that does not represent all women in society. In addition to this, there is the historical component, where Afro women have been subjected to a series of discriminations that have allowed the construction of stereotypes about being an Afro woman. These stereotypes have had an impact on the representation of the aesthetics of Afro women, from aspects such as hair.

These women have not only proposed to make visible and strengthen Afro esthetics, but with their enterprises they have managed to make affordable several products to enhance Afro esthetics. Generally, beauty industries are dedicated to the manufacture of products for mestizo women and with high costs, which has meant that Afro women who are not represented in these spaces, choose to use products that do not match their physical characteristics or have to buy outside the country, which is even more expensive.

There is still much to be done for women to gain greater representation and visibility in economic matters. The support of Cuban state institutions has been very important. However, there are many challenges for the enterprises to become spaces of economic, political, ethical and legal empowerment for women, where there is no lack of cooperation, solidarity and support networks among women entrepreneurs themselves.

REFERENCES

- Banguero Lerma, K. (2015): *Estéticas e identidades de la mujer afro en la ciudad de Cali*. Universidad del Valle.
- Centro de Estudios de la Mujer y Centro de Estudios de Población y Desarrollo. ENIG. (2018). *Encuesta Nacional sobre Igualdad de Género ENIG-2016. Informe de Resultados*. Editorial de la Mujer.

- Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe. (2011). *El salto de la autonomía. De los márgenes al centro*. Informe anual 2011 del Observatorio de Igualdad de Género de América Latina y el Caribe. CEPAL. <http://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/3931/1/S2011102.pdf>
- Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe. (2012). *El Estado frente a la autonomía de las mujeres*. CEPAL. https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/27974/1/S1200259_es.pdf
- Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe. (2018). *Mujeres afrodescendientes en América Latina y el Caribe: deudas de igualdad*. CEPAL. https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/43746/4/S1800190_es.pdf
- Messina, M. (2018). *Manual didáctico Emprendedurismo*. Universidad de la República.
- Quijano, A. (2000). *Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo en América Latina*. A colonialidade do saber: eurocentrismo e ciências sociais. Perspectivas latinoamericanas. CLACSO.
- Ricardo, E., & Pino, Y. (2016). *Análisis transdisciplinar de la igualdad de género desde lo socioeconómico, educativo, jurídico y axiológico*. Revista de Ciencias Sociales, 68, 56-86.
- Ricardo-Ochoa, E., Acosta-Mir, A., & Gelabert-Veliz, D. D. (2022). *Estudio social multidisciplinario de una comunidad cubana*. Revista Transdisciplinaria de Estudios Sociales y Tecnológicos, 2(3), 23-31.
- Terrero, A., & Trinquete, D. E. (2022). *Emprendimientos femeninos: Negocios con carga extra*. <http://www.cuba-debate.cu/especiales/2022/04/15/emprendimientos-femeninos-negocios-con-carga-extra/amp/>
- Vives, L., & Sité, S. (2010). *Negra española, negra extranjera: dos historias de una discriminación*. Revista de Estudios de Juventud, 89, 163-186.
- Zabala Argüelles, M. C. (2020). *Desigualdades por color de la piel e interseccionalidad. Análisis del contexto cubano 2008-2018*. Publicaciones Acuario, Centro Félix Varela.