

CUBA: WOMEN PUT ON THE MASONIC APRON

By Patricia Grogg

HAVANA: *More than 30 women have become pioneers of female Freemasonry in socialist Cuba, founding two lodges under the auspices of the Women's Grand Lodge of Chile, which will provide them with support and advice until they can function independently.*

"We want them to do things in their own way, according to their customs," Monica Morós told IPS. She is the grand chancellor of the Chilean lodge, which sent a delegation of over 40 women Masons to Havana to initiate the Cuban women and set up the Venus and Victoria lodges.

Cuban Masonry follows the Ancient Landmarks, the set of principles, customs and traditions that enshrine the obligations of this society, including Masonic secrecy, and selected membership of adult men who respect morality. But the sponsorship of the Chilean lodge frees the Cuban women from the rules of the male Grand Lodge of Cuba, which could not accept women among its members without risking the loss of its regular status and recognition by the other grand lodges with which it maintains fraternal relations. In any case, the precept that excludes women "was superseded many years ago," said Miriam Silva, the public relations officer of the Chilean lodge and a member, with Morós, of the delegation headed by Most Serene Grand Master Oriana Valdés.

The necessary rites took place on Apr. 2 in a locale lent by a Baptist Church, in the absence of a building of its own for the Venus Lodge, in Havana. The Victoria Lodge will be located in the city of Pinar del Río in western Cuba.

The Chilean women initiated 24 Cuban Master Masons and eight Apprentices. "They are ready to get to work. They are enthusiastic, and all they lack is a functioning institution, with their own place to work, which will give them stability," Silva said. Digna Gisela Medina, Worshipful Master of the Venus Lodge, said that some 60 Cuban women want to be initiated into Freemasonry, and the group will now focus on creating a third lodge, possibly at Caibarién, on the north coast, which will allow them to form the Women's Grand Lodge of Cuba. The group of new Masons includes doctors, teachers, technicians of various specialties, musicians, singers, psychologists, homemakers and university students. The youngest is 18 and the eldest is over 60. "We're ready to grow," said Medina, who led the organizational work prior to the creation of the two lodges. "Being Masons

has given us greater expectations as human beings, our thinking is becoming more developed, which makes us more capable of understanding reality and dealing with it. It's a challenge," said 46-year-old Medina, a doctor specializing in head and neck surgery at the Calixto Garcia Teaching Hospital, in the Cuban capital. Medina and the other Cuban women who spoke with IPS see no contradiction at all between Freemasonry and the social and political order they live in. "On the contrary, now I feel better prepared to help other people as equals, in solidarity, and to contribute to all aspects of the life of my country," said Maritza Perez, a 42-year-old doctor.

Silva ruled out any traces of "feminism" among women Masons. "We believe in equality and universality of work for both sexes, but as women we undoubtedly have to make up for centuries of backwardness," she said. "We welcome all organizations that work to benefit women. Masonry can help women to develop, to understand themselves better, as well as their role in society and in civilian life in general," said the public relations officer and former Grand Master of the women's Grand Lodge of Chile.

José Manuel Collera, Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Cuba from 2000 to 2003, said he was a strong supporter of the role of women in Freemasonry. "There is no doctrinal, philosophical, esoteric or initiatory reason to prevent a woman from becoming a Mason. Everything Masons do can be done by women as well as men," he said.

In his view, women's Freemasonry is an unstoppable force in the world today, matching women's position in modern society. "Excluding women has caused the order to lose its appeal in the modern world, because women are the most important element in society," he said.

Masonry is self-described as a progressive, philanthropic institution made up of free-thinking persons of good character who seek self-improvement. People of different religious creeds and atheists coexist within it, as do Masons of different political and philosophical persuasions.

The political polarization that marked the first few years of the Cuban Revolution, headed by Fidel Castro, led to the weakening of Freemasonry in Cuba, in particular because of the exodus of many of its members. But after that, Masonry began to grow again. Today it has some 30,000 members and 316 lodges. Collera said that Masonry in Cuba, which dates back to 1859, is "of the people" because the majority of those who fought for the island's independence from Spain were Masons, including national hero José Martí.