

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to demarcate the trajectory of the struggle of Brazilian black women within the national Feminist Movement. A trajectory that results from the need to question the classical feminist perspective based on a universalist conception of woman whose paradigm is the white western woman, fact that clouds the perception of the multiple intra and inter gender contradictions that raciality includes. These contradictions make it mandatory for black women to affirm their role as a new political subject bearer of a new agenda resulting from a specific identity in which gender, race and class variables are articulated. New and more complex challenges should be faced so that gender and race equity can be achieved in our society.

Blackening feminism#

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Blackening feminism is the expression we have been using to name the black women's trajectory within the Brazilian feminist movement. With it we try to show, on the one hand, the white and western identity of the classical feminist formulation and, on the other hand, to reveal the theoretical insufficiency and political practice to integrate the different expressions of the feminine built in multiracial and pluricultural societies. With these initiatives, it was possible to outline a specific agenda that simultaneously fought gender and intra-gender inequalities; we have affirmed and made viable a black feminist perspective which arises from the specific condition of being a black and generally poor woman. Lastly we have outlined the part this perspective plays in the anti-racist struggle in Brazil.

By politicizing gender inequalities, feminism transforms women into new political subjects. This condition makes these subjects adopt new perspectives and diverse outlooks that cause underlying personal processes in the struggle of each group in particular. That is to say, groups of indigenous women and groups of black women, for instance, have specific demands that essentially cannot be exclusively dealt with under the rubric of gender if the specificities which define being a woman in the former or in the latter are not taken into account.

These specific viewpoints have been slowly demanding equally diverse practices that broaden the conception and the feminist protagonism in the Brazilian society, respecting specificities. This is what determines the fact that fighting racism should be a political priority to black women; Lélia Gonzalez has already emphasized this proposition saying “awareness about oppression is raised, above all, through race.” # (in Bairros, 2000: 56).

A fortiori, this urgent need to articulate racism with broader women’s issues has historical justifications for the racial “variable” produced subaltern genders both regarding a stigmatized feminine identity (of black women) and subaltern masculinities (of black men) with inferior prestige than that of the feminine gender of the racially dominant group (of white women).

Before this double underestimation, it is valid to state that racism lowers gender *status*. By doing so, it establishes intra-gender equality as the first step of social equality, having as social accomplishment standards those achieved by the racially dominant genders. For this reason, for black women to achieve the same level of inequalities which exist between white men and women would mean to experience extraordinary social mobility once black men, in most social indicators, are below white women.

In this sense, racism also exacerbates genders by means of privileges which come from the exploitation and exclusion of subaltern genders. It establishes standards for the hegemonic genders that would be unattainable in an

equalitarian competition. The abusive recurrence, the inflation of blond women, or the “blondization” on Brazilian television is an example of this disparity.

The diversification of the conceptions and political practices that the women of the subaltern groups introduce in feminism results from a dialectical process that promotes the affirmation of women in general as new political subjects but also demands the recognition of the diversity and existing inequalities among these very same women.

Lélia Gonzalez offers precious syntheses which can guide the discussion: the first one is related to the contradictions that historically marked the trajectory of black women within the Brazilian Feminist Movement and the second one refers to the fundamental criticism that the political action of black women introduced in feminism and that has been significantly altering their perceptions, behaviors and social institutions. According to González, the Brazilian feminism conceptions: “suffered from two difficulties for black women: on the one hand, the euro centrist character of Brazilian feminism, omitting the centrality of the racial issue in the gender hierarchies present in society, and universalizing the values of a particular culture (western) for all women, without considering that the domination, violence and exploitation processes on which the interaction between whites and non-whites are based is another articulating axis of the racial democracy myth and whitening ideals. On the other hand, it also reveals a distance from the reality lived by black women denying “a whole history made of resistance and fights in which these women have been protagonists thanks to the dynamics of a cultural and ancestral memory” – that has nothing to do with the euro centrism of this type of feminism (Lélia Gonzalez *in* Bairros, 2000: 57).

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The awareness that gender identity does not naturally develop into *intra-gender racial solidarity* led black women to face, within the feminist movement, the contradictions and inequalities that racism and racial discrimination produce among women, especially between black and white women in Brazil. The same thing can be said about intra-group racial solidarity that led black women to demand that the gender dimension were considered a structuring element of racial inequalities in the Brazilian Black Movements agenda.

These evaluations have been promoting the engagement of black women in the general struggles of the popular movements and in those of the Black Movements and Women's Movements on national and international level, trying to make sure they include black women's specific agenda. Such a process has resulted, since mid 80's, in the creation of several organizations of black women who are today nationally spread, in specific forums of programmatic discussions and national organizational instances of black women in the country who investigate fundamental themes of the feminist agenda in the light of the effect of racism and racial discrimination.

New utopias and new feminist agendas

The consequence of the growing protagonism of black women within the Brazilian Feminist Movement can be noticed in the significant perspective change that the new Feminist Political Platform adopts. This Platform devised in the Brazilian Women National Conference which took place on 6th and 7th July 2002 in Brasília repositions the feminist struggle in Brazil in this new millennium being managed (as it is feminine nature) collectively by women: black, indigenous, white, lesbian, northerner, urban, rural, members of unions, members of communities of ex slaves, young, senior citizens, bearers of special needs, from different religions and parties... who should critically consider the most urgent national and international issues, the persistent contemporary obstacles to the accomplishment of gender equality and the challenges and mechanisms for overcoming them, having the following principles as guidelines for the analyses and proposals:

- acknowledge the autonomy and auto determination of women's social movements.
- commit to the criticism of the unfair neoliberal model, predator and unsustainable from an economical, social, environmental and ethical viewpoint.
- recognize the economical, social, cultural and environmental rights of women.
- commit to the defense of the principles of equality and economical and social justice.

- recognize the universal right to education, health and social security.
- commit to the struggle for the right to land and housing.
- commit to the anti-racist struggle and the defense of the principles of racial-ethnic equality.
- commit to the struggle against all types of gender discrimination and the fight against violence, abuse, harassment and exploitation of women and girls.
- commit to the struggle against discrimination against lesbians and gays.
- commit to the struggle for whole health assistance to women and for the defense of sexual and reproductive rights.
- recognize women's right to have or not to have children and have quality access to conception and/or contraception.
- recognize the right to free sexual exercise of transvestites and transgender people.
- recognize the decriminalization of abortion as a citizenship right and a matter of public health and recognize that each person has the right to several family modalities and support the initiatives of legalized civil partnership (...) #

The North American feminist political scientist Nancy Fraser says that a broad concept of gender that includes the diversity of the feminine and historically built feminisms should have a corresponding "and broad concept of justice capable of equally embodying distribution and recognition."#

In this sense, as it has already been pointed out in the article previously quoted, the Political Platform resulting from the *Brazilian Women National Conference* represents the crowning of almost two decades of struggle for the recognition and inclusion of racism, racial discrimination and the gender and race inequalities that they generate. Such conception is one of the structural axes of the Brazilian women's struggle. The Platform, by including this principle, validates a pact of solidarity and co-responsibility between black and white women and among women in Brazil in the struggle for the overcoming of gender inequalities. It redefines the terms of true social justice in Brazil. As Guacira César de Oliveira, a member of the Brazilian Women's Articulation (AMB in the Portuguese abbreviation) and of the Organizing Committee of the

Conference states: “we reaffirm that the feminist and women’s movements want to radicalize democracy, making it clear that it will not exist while there is no equality; that there will not be equality without wealth distribution; and there is no distribution without the recognition of inequalities between men and women, between whites and blacks, between the urban and the rural who today structure poverty. They do not wish a mere inversion of roles, but a new civilizational landmark.”#

Moving ahead...

Reflecting on the contribution of black feminism in the anti-racist struggle is bringing out the implications of racism and sexism that have condemned black women to a perverse and cruel situation of social exclusion and marginalization. On the other hand, such situation originated very strong and remarkable manners of resistance and progress.

The effort for identity affirmation and social recognition represented for black women, devoid of social capital, a historical struggle that allowed and allows the actions of past and present women (mainly the former) to echo in such a way so as to overcome the barriers of exclusion. What for example has made it possible that the first Brazilian female novelist were a black woman despite all the social contingencies in which she emerged?

The effects of racism and sexism are so brutal that they end up causing reactions capable of covering all the losses already established in the domination relation.

The effervescent protagonism of black women guided at first by the desire of freedom and by the recovery of the humanity denied by slavery and later characterized by the emergencies of black women’s organizations and national black women’s articulations has been creating new possibilities and perspectives for black women and covering historical losses.

Summarizing, we can affirm that the political protagonism of black women has become a driving force to determine the changes in conceptions and the new feminist political outlook in Brazil. The political action of black women has been promoting:

- The recognition of the fallacious universalizing concept of woman;
- The recognition of intra-gender differences;
- The recognition of racism and racial discrimination as factors of production and reproduction of social inequalities faced by women in Brazil;
- The recognition of the privileges this ideology produces for the women of the hegemonic racial group;
- The recognition of the need for specific policies for black women for social opportunities equalization;
- The recognition of the racial dimension of poverty in Brazil and the consequent need for a racial perspective when addressing the problem of poverty feminization;
- The recognition of the symbolic violence and oppression that whiteness, as a privileged and hegemonic aesthetic standard, causes on non-white women.
- Besides, the introduction of these questions in the public discussion contributes to the broadening of concepts of democracy, equality and social justice, notions which should consider gender and race as unnegotiable parameters for the construction of a new world.

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