

Original Article

Racism and social participation in the university: experiences of black female students in health-related programs

Racismo e participação social na universidade: experiências de estudantes negras em cursos de saúde

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Abstract

Educational indicators from Brazil show a sensible increase in the participation of black women in higher education; however, when it comes to courses considered to be of high prestige, they are even more at a disadvantage. This tendency is expressed in their everyday lives, demanding from these female students an additional effort to overcome racism. This research aimed to understand the impacts of racism on the social participation of black female undergraduate students in the university and the ways of facing it. This is a qualitative study, carried out at a public university in the state of Alagoas, which adheres only to the social quota system. The data production has occurred through a focus group with six black female undergraduate students, from three distinct health undergraduate courses by the university, who self-declared blacks. The data produced were analyzed using the thematic analysis technique, being presented and discussed from three categories: Difficulties related to access and stay at the university; Expressions of racism in university everyday life; and Strategies to fight against racism. Difficulties in the entry and trajectory of these black women in higher education were perceived, which were crossed by the markers of gender, race, and class. The need for affirmative policies in the university context is reinforced and theoretical deepening and reflection on the theme is suggested.

Keywords: Women, Racism, Education, Higher.

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Resumo

Indicadores educacionais do Brasil mostram uma sensível elevação da participação de mulheres negras no Ensino Superior. Porém, quando se trata de cursos considerados de alto prestígio, elas se encontram ainda mais em desvantagem. Essa tendência se expressa em seu cotidiano, demandando dessas estudantes um esforço adicional para superar o racismo. A pesquisa objetivou compreender os impactos do racismo na participação social de estudantes negras na universidade e as suas formas de enfrentamento. Trata-se de um estudo qualitativo, realizado em uma universidade pública do estado de Alagoas, adepta apenas do sistema de cotas sociais. A produção de dados ocorreu por meio de grupo focal com seis estudantes negras de três cursos da área da saúde da universidade, que se autodeclararam negras/pretas ou negras/pardas. Os dados produzidos foram analisados por meio da técnica de análise temática, sendo apresentados e discutidos com base em três categorias: dificuldades relacionadas ao acesso e permanência na universidade; expressões do racismo no cotidiano universitário; e estratégias de enfrentamento ao racismo. Revelaram-se dificuldades em seu ingresso e trajetória no Ensino Superior, sendo atravessadas pelos marcadores de gênero, raça e classe. Reforça-se a necessidade das ações afirmativas no contexto universitário; sugere-se o aprofundamento teórico e a reflexão acerca do tema.

Palavras-chave: Mulheres, Racismo, Educação Superior.

Introduction

The historical paths taken by higher education in Brazil are crossed by socioeconomic contexts, making it notorious that, since its first formulations, it was a space destined for a few, aiming to privilege social elites (Carneiro & Bridi, 2020). From a late start, in Colonia Brazil, the first experiences of Higher Education in the country emerged, taught by religion, under the direction of the Jesuits, limited to courses in philosophy and theology, placed at the service of the metropolis. According to Rodrigues (2011, p. 45), “[...] only with the arrival of the Portuguese imperial family, there were the first courses in engineering, medicine, law, and agronomy created”. This initiative aimed to train state bureaucrats and production specialists, initiating the training of self-employed professionals, children of farmers who were part of the power elite (Roubião, 2013).

This system left free and poor whites on the sidelines - because they did not have the resources to pay professors when the State did not -, free blacks, enslaved and mestizos, supported by the discourse that blacks are an inferior race, prone to vice, to crime and enemies of progress (Roubião, 2013). Therefore, investment in education would be a waste. Separated from the educational environment, and expressive mass of blacks was subjected to manual and precarious work, staying away from basic education and, consequently, from higher education (Christillino, 2015).

The end of the enslavement of blacks in Brazil¹ did not mean the guarantee of policies that would socially integrate them into the new regime of work organization and education. All institutions and entities were exempt from any responsibility for the maintenance and security of the freed ones (Fernandes, 1965). To this day, marks of this system persist, since there are few blacks in universities.

In the early 1990s, the Black Movements, together with other Social Movements, came together to put pressure on the government to solve the problems that affected them. Among the actions and claims, the fight for the implementation of affirmative public policies stands out, aiming at the access of black students and public-school graduates to higher education.

In this perspective, only around 2000, the affirmative action policy, created in the United States of America in the 1960s, arrived in Brazil, aiming to reduce and alleviate social and economic inequalities between whites and blacks. The implementation of this policy for blacks was strengthened through the so-called Quota Law, nº 12,711/2012, enacted on August 29, 2012 (Brasil, 2012). The vote involved an extensive debate, with different perspectives. However, the favorable decision established a reservation of places at Federal Institutions of Higher Education (FIHE) for low-income, black, brown, and indigenous students and those from public schools (Jesus & Gomes, 2014; Paixão et al., 2010).

Although the aforementioned Law represents a significant advance for the black population in access to Higher Education, much still needs to be done to truly achieve racial equality in Brazil, given the late implementation of compensatory policies (Paixão et al., 2010).

In this historical dynamic, it is necessary to show that the racial issue is structural. Almeida (2018, p. 15) points out that structural racism “[...] is an element that integrates the economic and political organization of society [...]”. Racism provides the meaning, logic, and technology for the forms of inequality and violence that shape contemporary social life”. One of its faces is institutional racism, predetermining which individuals will be “perceived” by institutions and their services and which should be made visible, racializing access to the labor market and depriving some of the access to education and positions of social prestige (Almeida & Alves, 2011; Almeida, 2018).

In this sense, institutional racism is one of the mechanisms through which structural racism is reproduced and manifests its power to maintain white privileges to the detriment of black existence. This “[...] institutional conception of racism treats power as a central element of domination [...]” (Almeida, 2018, p. 31). Although it is less obvious, because of its subtlety, it is no less destructive to human life.

Carneiro (2011) demonstrates the social inferiority established by racism in the black population in general and, particularly, black women. Skin color and/or phenotype becomes a central obstacle for these individuals to enter and remain in institutions, including those belonging to the public and private educational reality in Brazil. This happens above all in Higher Education to maintain and condition the structure and

¹ The last country in the Americas to formally abolish the slavery process of the black population, therefore it is important to say that the “liberation” of black people happened before international pressure, specifically by the English which pressured and legitimized a negative image of Brazil due to the continuity of slavery (Ribeiro, 2019).

performance of the State, its institutions, and public policies, producing and reproducing a racial hierarchy in which black men and women must be kept at the base of this pyramid (Amorim et al., 2020; Góis, 2008).

Within this reference, if we refer to black women, they are the ones who are most disadvantaged, due to their race and gender condition, in accessing courses considered of greater social prestige, as identified by Queiroz & Santos (2016).

Black women have traditionally been assigned activities of lower social value. Slaves for a few centuries, even after being freed, could not fully alter their status in the world of work. The post-abolition period kept for them very precarious conditions of survival and work. With little or no education and very low pay, they developed earning activities in family homes and on the streets, often being the object of police harassment (Góis, 2008, p. 749).

In this context, black women have become a great power in discussions of social injustices in Brazil. These began to (re)unite and discuss how the association of these social markers and mechanisms of power permeate macro and micro dimensions of life in society. They question the social status of women, their subordination – which, at different times, brings in common the articulation of the oppressions of race, gender, and class (linked to the exclusion mechanisms of racism, machismo, and poverty). Thus, the historical importance of the struggles of the Black and Women's Movements across the country is reinforced, moving more representative by giving visibility to the demands of black women (Collins, 2000; Henning, 2015; Leite Junior et al., 2021).

In this sense, the struggle of black women has been articulating the emergence of feminist and anti-racist political actions. According to Gonzalez (1984) and Akotirene (2018), the importance of an intersectional reading is reaffirmed, fostering the debate around inequalities based on racial issues that are also questioned by the issue of gender and class. Based on these authors, the non-recognition of the existence of social differentiations based on these intersections may obscure the specific vulnerabilities of black women, especially when it comes to guaranteeing their rights.

In this way, the notions from which gender, race, and class markers (which may also intersect with other social markers) are understood and manipulated in the colonialist/capitalist society in which we live directly influence women's access and social participation. Black women in Higher Education, imposing barriers to their academic performance and permanence in university.

Studies such as those by Alcântara & Silva Junior (2020), Gonçalves (2018), Malpighi et al. (2020), and Queiroz & Santos (2016) are unanimous in affirming that, although black women's access to university has increased as a result of affirmative policies, the challenges faced by them in the daily routine of university relationships are still great. These researches reveal that, in addition to black women being under-represented in Higher Education, they also suffer from racist and sexist practices as a result of the social representations constructed about women in general and black women in particular.

Thus, there are still many questions to be investigated about the social participation of black women in the university to reveal the forms of production and reproduction of racist mechanisms in the academic environment and their

impacts on these women's daily university life. This study, specifically, was conducted by the following questions: What are the difficulties faced by black women in accessing Higher Education at a public university in Alagoas? Are there experiences of racism in the university trajectory of these women? What support and resistance do they mobilize in confronting racism in everyday university life?

In this scenario, the main objective was to understand the impacts of racism on the social participation of black students at university and their ways of coping, taking into account the reality of a university in the state of Alagoas – Brazil.

Methodological Procedures

Based on the understanding that Brazilian society is marked by unequal and hierarchical relationships, we seek to qualitatively address here, through field research, the reality of black undergraduate students at a public university in the state of Alagoas.

For data production, we used the focus group method, a qualitative research technique that collects information through group interactions. The technique was chosen because it provides a space for discussion capable of going beyond the limits of the responses of a single respondent, revealing both the meanings assumed by people in the topic under discussion and how they negotiate these meanings, generating diversity within the group (Flick, 2009).

The search for possible students took place in three ways: first, visits in the classrooms of all courses to present the study, answer doubts, and contact the researcher (e-mail); second, the invitation was reinforced by sending an e-mail to all groups to receive data from possible interested parties; third, after surveying the interested students and in possession of their contact information, telephone contact was made to confirm their participation and schedule the focus group.

The research inclusion criteria were students enrolled at the institution, from the second to the last year of bachelor's and technological courses, who were recognized as women and who self-declared black or black/brown, aged 18 or over and who agreed to participate, signing the Informed Consent Form (ICF). We excluded those who met the inclusion criteria, but who took time off from the university at the time of data production.

The data production was in June 2019 and the focus group lasted 1 hour and 30 minutes, consisting of six black students - all enrolled in the bachelor's degree - and two researchers, who were divided between coordinator and secretary of the group. For the better recording of information, we recorded the focus group in audio.

To guide the discussion, the group was guided by a script with questions previously prepared by the researchers, triggering the group interaction. A form for data collection was also applied, which allowed drawing a profile of the students, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Characterization of students.

| Participant | Age | Period | Quota students | People with higher education in the family | High school |
|-------------|-----|-----------------|----------------|--|-------------|
| Student 1 | 20 | 5 ^o | No | 1 | Public |
| Student 2 | 23 | 8 ^o | Yes | 1 | Public |
| Student 3 | 20 | 7 ^o | No | 2 | Private |
| Student 4 | 32 | 10 ^o | Yes | 0 | Public |
| Student 5 | 26 | 5 ^o | Yes | 0 | Public |
| Student 6 | 21 | 7 ^o | No | 1 | Private |

Source: Prepared by the authors based on research data.

To answer the research problem and objectives, the recorded audio was transcribed in full and analyzed using the thematic analysis technique, according to the perspective of Content Analysis proposed by Bardin (2011). The process followed the following steps: exhaustive reading of the material to identify the central ideas; interpretation of the meanings of such ideas; grouping them into categories; comparison between the different cores of meaning found in the categories; classification of the nuclei of meaning in broader axes in which the discussions revolved; and writing the interpretative summaries of each theme. The choice for the thematic analysis was due to the recognition of the technique's effectiveness when intending to examine opinions, attitudes, and beliefs, through qualitative data.

In the process of analysis and construction of the categories, we considered the individual and collective experiences of the students. We discussed and confronted the data produced critically and reflectively, with theoretical references that address the central questions of the research, understanding that the position/choice of these students implies tensions with a series of social normalizations imposed on issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality.

The study was approved by the Ethics and Human Research Committee of the university, with CAAE n. 11470919.8.0000.5011, and followed the recommendations of Resolution CNS 510/16, which regulates research with human beings in the human and social sciences and followed the instructions of Resolution CNS 466/12, which presents ethical standards for researching with human beings.

Results and Discussion

From the analysis, we organized the results and discussion into the following thematic categories: 3.1. Difficulties related to accessing and staying at university; 3.2. Expressions of racism in everyday university life and 3.3. Strategies to fight racism. These are presented in detail below.

Difficulties related to accessing and staying at university

Eight years after the enactment of the Quotas Law in Brazil, there are still many difficulties in accessing higher education for black women. According to

Marcondes et al. (2013), this quota policy, from the 2000s onwards, provided a more accentuated growth in the access of Afro-descendants to universities. However, in addition to their access, we identified that one of the main challenges faced by students is their permanence.

Public education is crossed by great challenges. Part of them is due to lack of investment, which results in educational weaknesses that hinder access to higher education for young people from this educational network. Data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics - *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* IBGE show that 79.2% of young people who attended the private school system entered Higher Education in 2017, against only 28.2% of young people from the public system (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística 2018). Among the students participating in the research, four attended high school in the public-school system (Table 1) and they reported having challenges to “follow up” with the other students.

In the monitoring of other colleagues for having studied in private schools and having taken courses, right? So, my biggest difficulty was this. It was to get here and follow everyone (Student 4).

I have difficulty with the public school I studied all my life. Some subjects were deficient, and then arriving here with a deficiency in chemistry ... we study biochemistry for a whole year... it's awesome (Student 5).

Thus, they report the need to “go after”, if there is this lack, to follow the contents of graduate training, which requires a greater individual effort in other colleagues, as reported in the survey by Queiroz & Santos (2016). However, this need does not necessarily occur for individual reasons of lack of capacity, but due to the history of social, economic, and cultural deprivation that placed these students in a disadvantaged position in more favored groups in society, in addition to a project neoliberal approach to the weakening of public devices, with education being a major target, as stated by Lusa et al. (2019). Despite this context, researches showed that black students, coming from affirmative actions, overcome the adversities of their context and present performance equal or superior to other colleagues (Cavalcanti et al., 2019).

The economic issue also directly affects participation in activities that are part of academic life.

[...] the course is integral. So, it demands a lot of time and a lot of money to be able to eat and spend all day here, and other extracurricular activities also demand money, demand time and this was one of the difficulties I encountered (Student 6).

Most of the students live in places far from the university, in the outskirts of the city, or other cities in the state. In addition to the financial issue, there is the need to establish residence – often without family members – in the capital. In an attempt to reduce costs, they start to deal with the distance from the family, weakening their support networks.

My biggest difficulties are because I am from the countryside and need to leave my family to live here... Both for the affective issue and the financial issue as well (Student 1).

I'm from the countryside and I came to live here. I started when I was about seventeen [...]. So, like, it's already quite a barrier, because you, seventeen, live in a capital, leave the countryside, come to live alone, start to take care of yourself, reconcile studies with taking care of the house and everything (Student 3).

[...] we see many black people, like me, who, despite not having financial conditions, cannot get the scholarship for reasons that we simply cannot explain, right? Last year I mentioned to my close friends that I was thinking about taking a break from the course so I could work, because my family, my parents were separating, so I was going through financial difficulties and I couldn't get the scholarship at all. I just didn't stop because I got a PET scholarship (Student 6).

The examples demonstrate how student permanence policies are fundamental strategies to reduce dropout rates and ensure course completion. It so happens that resources are often insufficient if we take into account the number of socially vulnerable students who enter university every year. Furthermore, these policies work differently at state and federal universities. In the state ones, the programs are proposed and regulated by the state government; therefore, strategies can be completely different in each state. At the federal level, although there are local proposals, student permanence is based on the National Student Assistance Program – *Programa Nacional de Assistência Estudantil* PNAES.

Furthermore, the marks of financial fragility are added to the challenges of being alone in a new territory, having to deal with the demands that are imposed, and the absence of a closer affective network. Also, the permanence policies would be essential for greater autonomy for students in the construction of new networks of affective support and sociability.

The students' speeches also draw attention to a possible lack of transparency and organization of existing policies, especially the so-called permanence scholarship, causing many to feel abandoned by the institution.

And this issue of selection that is made for scholarship holders, it's not something we know how it's done. So, it affects a lot and discourages students from staying in college, because they try an opportunity, get frustrated, and fail. You create expectations of how you could keep this money and end up not getting it and seeing other people who you know have much better financial conditions than you and enjoy this money, like... it is, randomly the criteria for accessing the scholarships permanence (Student 3).

The difficulty in maintaining financially and feeling unprotected by the institutional support apparatus can contribute to a possible evasion and reinforce the idea that the university is an environment destined for a few. As identified below, black women who manage to remain on campus, through informal permanence strategies, experience

difficulties in sociability, in identifying with their peers, and end up feeling underrepresented.

And not to mention that in the classroom, in my classroom, I couldn't exactly say the number of black people because we don't know who declares themselves black, right? But it's a minimal amount. It's up to you to look and ask: where are the blacks? And you kind of already know, that's already an answer (Student 5).

A lot of racial identification is lacking even at the university, especially here. One thing we've always talked about, my friends and I, is that we didn't identify with the people who are here, we didn't identify with our professors... there's only one professor, who doesn't declare herself black, but society sees her as black (Student 6).

The lack of identification and representation is repeated in several other statements of the interviewees, permeating the constant feeling of not belonging to the university space. This reveals how challenging academic life becomes for black women, who are daily reminded that that space, structured by white-centric models, does not seem to fit them, a phenomenon also cited by Alcântara & Silva Junior (2020). However, this discomfort can mobilize the formation of small quilombos², from the collective organization of black people, creating spaces and moments to share their experiences, exchange affections and build a relationship of belonging and collectivity, in places with a white majority.

Thomas & Hollenshead (2001) point out that the experiences of black women at university are associated with isolation and social marginalization. However, this “non-place” in the academy can stimulate the development of a resistance unit and the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse. However, this is also a task with challenges, which can generate overload, and, in general, it is up to the already fragile subjects to solve it, without institutional support. About this, a student puts:

It's just that the students need to recognize themselves and be excited about the anti-racist fight. For some time, we wanted to create a black collective at the university. But it's disheartening to try to do anything like that here because the students don't have the time, they don't have the will, I think willpower is the right word, to get involved in the fight. But we start to think that these students themselves are unmotivated because sometimes they don't recognize themselves, or they don't see it as their struggle, or they are very tired because the university is also overwhelming (Student 6).

In this way, it is clear how the absence of possibilities of *aquilombamento* and student permanence policies that are more broadly focused on the demands of historically marginalized groups are a barrier to a full university experience. This weakness in universities distances us from the goal of achieving historical reparation and social justice

² “*Aquilombamento* has become a popular term among black groups engaged in the idea of resistance in black Brazilian culture. For these groups, 'quilombo' is an important social technology of resistance that promotes 'being together' to expand and enhance knowledge, culture, identity and ancestral histories. Loving oneself is, for blacks, a way of being in the world” (Batista, 2019, p. 399).

for these individuals. The precariousness of spaces designed to foster ethnic-racial discussion highlights the racism present in institutional relations and favors the invisibility of black women and men in the university, reinforcing the historically hegemonic white and elitist institutional model in Brazilian public universities.

Expressions of racism in university daily life

The academic environment sometimes proves to be a hostile and segregating place for black students. The experiences of prejudice and discrimination experienced by them are mostly manifested in a veiled way, through looks or modes of treatment, whether in the university corridors or in places where practical classes and internships take place.

Prejudice revealed, in a way that made me feel bad, I didn't experience it, but sometimes just the look, it doesn't have to be just words, right?, but a different look is enough because I like to use some things in my hair because I keep changing my hair (Student 4).

It hurt me a lot the fact that on the first day, I arrived there [internship location] with the braids and the professionals started to look at me strangely. Judging me by looks, they would look at me and start talking to each other. And... wow, I'm talking like that ... [crying] it seems pretty strong because I haven't mentioned it to anyone, for some people it might be something very minimal, just looking at you, but it affects us a lot (Student 3).

As they are socially defined through their phenotypic traits, the more these black women expose their blackness through clothing, hair, or other means related to physical appearance in spaces such as the gym, it seems that the greater will be the discrimination and subjection to situations of racism. This also applies to skin color: the greater the melanin pigment, the greater the exclusion and depreciation processes, with black people being more tolerable when their skin is lighter (Nascimento, 2015).

In addition to the looks, the students also reported how racism is also presented through playful language - the so-called “jokes”, “jokes in black” -, which does not always take the form of overt violence, that is, it is not directly associated with situations of open conflict. This dimension is defined and discussed by Moreira (2019) as recreational racism, a concept that concerns a cultural policy that uses racist humor to express hostility towards racial minorities. These “jokes”, in the context of the research, are made not only by students, in hallways and living spaces, but are also presented in the classroom, sometimes said by the professors.

Very subtle jokes. Of course, nowadays even in a softer way, but I believe that in the beginning, as soon as I entered university, even people close to me even though that a little joke is normal (Student 2).

I think it hurts more when a professor who is an authority, a mirror, gets into this middle of jokes. You are giving a “right” for students to also enter this environment. At least I've seen some professors in the classroom using slave ship as

an example to teach, like, what do you mean? To give an example of physics (Student 3).

The “jokes” mentioned go beyond the condition of black people in society and also refer to the issue of gender. The female presence in the scientific world is still marked by sexism. Racial discourses start to influence social markers of gender, correlating themselves. In line with Spivak (2010) and Akotirene (2018), these comments are ensured in a system of power that diminishes, makes invisible, and prevents the production of knowledge by groups considered to be subordinate.

In addition to being racist, also sexist in the classroom and what hurt the most was the fact that we comment, enter into debate, discuss that this should not happen, that this is wrong and other people say “no, it's just for you to know the deal with the person, laugh at the jokes he says that passes”. And some people agree to be able to pass the subject and not be affected by this professor (Student 3).

The silencing reinforces the idea that black women do not belong in the academic environment, subjugating their capacity and denying them rights already conquered. One student stated “*we are often ignored*” (Student 5). Such situations generate pressure for excellence, having to be more, striving more than others to gain recognition in the academic space, a feeling that was also reported by participants in the study by Queiroz & Santos (2016).

It's as if we had to make a double effort to draw attention, to stand out in something, that the professor praises, that he says you're going to participate in a project, a research group, opportunities. I've been through situations where the professor, before giving my grade, looked, he hadn't looked at anyone's. Then when it came to my turn, he checked it out, to see if it had been good. Then he shook his head like that and gave it back. So, I didn't understand, right? Why look at my grades? Just my grades? (Student 5).

It happens a lot, among professors, that they pay more attention to those who are white, to those who are male (Student 3).

[...] and when the professors see you with a pair... A black woman is in a pair with a man, pairing up with a white man, or a black man sometimes, a practice pair, the professor will always talk to the man. Guys, it's amazing how the professor will always talk to the man, and even patients underestimate you (Student 6).

In this sense, a myth of hierarchization of knowledge was built, the result of a racial classification that attributes to blacks a lack of intellectual capacity and performance. Thus, black women at all times have to prove that they are capable of performing different functions and occupying these spaces. Gonzalez (1984) states that there is a valued model of doing science in modernity and this model is white. Thus, whoever holds the social privilege has epistemic privilege.

Hooks (1995, p. 468) points out the fact that black women are culturally not linked to the act of thinking, of producing science; they are linked to the objectification and

sexualization of the body, which makes us “intrusive to colleagues with narrow perspectives”. In this way, there is a correlation between this non-place of black women in science, in the production of knowledge, with the culturally constructed aspects of her social role. As remnants of the slavery period, common sense, until the present day, imprisons and associates black women with housework, the services of the large house, and sexual services, as in the following report:

I once had to come with my nephew who is adopted, he is blond. At the time he was 3 years old, it was my first year of college and I came to take a photocopy here at the university. When I went through the lobby, one of the guards asked if it wasn't enough for us to occupy spaces that were not for us and to stay there, we needed to take care of professors' children (Student 1).

The reports demonstrate the difficult task that black women face overcoming the servile image attributed to them, historically, based on their color, gender, class, and sexuality, often regardless of the space they occupy, their work, or trajectory intellectual. Gonzalez (1984) already stated that it is no use being “educated”, or being “well dressed”, even so, they will be forced by the doorman to enter through the service door.

I tried for a long time not to want to believe that people treated someone differently because of color and social class. Because if you look at it, most of the black people at the university are lower class (Student 5).

The treatment received due to their color, associated with their class, exposes a very peculiar phenomenon in Brazil: the myth of racial democracy, whose greatest intellectual exponent was Gilberto Freyre (1933), with the work “Casa Grande & Senzala”. This belief, as discussed by Fernandes (2011), is inconsistent and favors the concealment of racial prejudice about the black population, feeding a discourse that propagates the existence of a harmonious and egalitarian relationship between whites and blacks. This does not correspond to the concrete situations that the black population experiences. Society pre-determines the possibilities and spaces of black women and education appears as a possibility of subversion, enabling them to occupy other spaces, considered as not belonging to her. It also makes it possible to enter the labor market, moving up to prestigious positions, and obtaining better financial conditions.

Thus, considering the intersectionality of gender, race, class, sexuality and the university as a possibility for social transformation highlights the importance of expanding the debate on the rise of black women and men, based on opportunities for access to higher education.

Strategies to fight racism

Recognizing the subjective and objective impacts of racism in the daily lives of students, they were asked about the personal strategies used to deal with racism in the university space, as well as what would be the best institutional measures to deal with the issue.

Regarding the personal strategies, most emphasize the affective support of the network of friends.

When you go to talk to your friends, they feel the same way, and they help each other, but each one is bleeding in their way (Student 6).

I braided my hair. I was even talking to my colleagues that I was worried because I had practice in the hospital and we had to wear a cap and it was not possible to tie and put the cap like that. The girls at the practice decided to attend without caps because they knew I wouldn't be able to put it on either. I was happy with the attitude of my friends (Student 3).

At university, amid discriminatory situations, they report that they need to have the strength and remain silent, keeping some situations to themselves. For Prestes & Paiva (2016), the symbolism of the word “force” that is projected on black women is enacted by them in their daily struggle.

[...] it was very sad for me that day, but I didn't get to comment to anyone. And as much as I could comment to any friend, and I would have their support, sometimes we need to guard ourselves in some situations. Be strong (Student 3).

Students need to build an identity centered on positive values, reorganizing their condition of black women in society in their imagination. Strength is required from them to deal with situations of suffering, reinforcing the social imagination that sees them as more resistant to feeling pain (Kreling et al., 2014). Behind this, another facet of racism is revealed that dehumanizes these people, considering that this racist idea deprives black women of crying, debating about what bothers them, and asking for help when they need it.

However, part of this need to “be strong” and silence in discriminatory situations and suffering may also be related to the fragility of student care, represented here in institutional support channels, such as the ombudsman and psycho-pedagogical support, among other devices that end up welcoming student demands in a fragmented way, leaving out essential aspects that permeate study difficulties, for example, racism.

We can go to the psychologist to talk about this, but most psychologists here at the university are there to keep you at the university, in a matter of study. Psychopedagogical support cannot meet our demand (Student 3).

But there are things in here, in the system, that don't work as they should. We are not assisted as we should. And I looked for support, I went to the ombudsman, filed a complaint and had no return (Student 1).

Also, the students point out the need for spaces on campus to feel represented, spaces that provide discussion and reflection on the issue of black people in the fields of politics and university education, as a way to combat racial prejudice and discrimination.

I think the university should seek to create, encourage more students to be part of these spaces of self-recognition and confrontation (Student 6).

I think the issue of seminars, organizing events, workshops, something that brings up the issue of black culture is very valid (Student 4).

As pointed out above about the *aquilombamento*, these spaces can be seen as an important care strategy, favoring self-assertion and acceptance of their identity as a black woman, as well as enabling the creation of collective strategies for the daily confrontation of racism.

This issue of acceptance is very valid. Because from the moment you accept yourself, you start to have a different view, those opinions that bombard you now don't have much effect (Student 4).

According to Hooks (2013), the classroom can be an empowering space to offer radical possibilities in the academy. This includes creating ways of rethinking education as the formation of ancestral values and knowledge and confronting racism through ethno-racial valuation and belonging strategies. For this, the students suggest institutional investments aimed at continuing education and professional training for different servers.

Where is the education of these professors? Where is continuing education? This is what they need to understand that what they are doing is discrimination (Student 3).

And the university also needs to try as much as possible for permanent education with professors and civil servants in general. Because it's not just the professors who have racist speeches, they're security guards, people from the general services, administration (Student 6).

They also report the lack of support in the preparation of research proposals that address racial and gender issues as the main focus. This avoids bringing to light the problems that expose institutional negligence with these issues, contributing to the maintenance of racism and highlighting, once again, the lack of preparation of educators on these themes.

Encouragement, a lot of encouragement for research like this because I don't remember having heard of research, other research on the Final Thesis like this. I only know of another one that wasn't a Final Thesis related to the issue of blackness and it wasn't even with people, it was about the curriculum. I had an idea and they said no, you won't talk about it because it has nothing to do with it, choose another topic for your Final Thesis (Student 6).

In addition to the issues already mentioned, they point to the need for the creation and greater effectiveness of policies for accessing and maintaining blacks at the university, as a way of coping with racism.

Concerning policies for the insertion of blacks in the university and maintenance. I think that's what's missing here because despite being a public university, it doesn't have racial quotas, it only has social quotas, which already contributes to having very few blacks here (Student 6).

Although the university is a space for manifestations of prejudice and discrimination, it also provides moments of self-identification that allow black students to retake their ethnic-racial identity as a source of pride. Prestes & Paiva (2016) present the idea of resilient existence, which is configured as an important form of resistance and facing the adversities encountered by black women in Brazil, the ability to reframe and overcome disintegrating experiences.

I arrived here at the university using the chemical product on my hair, a lot of chemistry, it was my option at that time, I wanted to follow a pattern, I ran away from my naturalness, from what would do me good. I started to see from the moment I entered university, I think I found myself here. And that was the wonderful thing. I arrived here when I was 27 years old, today I'm 32 years old, and if you find yourself, get out of that pattern that prevails, that charge that you have to experience. So, at the gym, I kind of broke free. I let myself be carried away by what I felt good, from things I experienced here, through disciplines that I participated in (Student 4).

The university presented as a white environment and, at times, hostile to those who do not fit the normalizing pattern, is also shown as a space of struggle and resistance played by black students. Such attitudes are not limited to copying strategies against racism but expand in the struggle and commitment to the search and implementation of the rights of black women so that they leave the silencing and invisibility and can be heard, demanding that the university assume its responsibility for the insertion and maintenance of this population in all its sectors.

Final Considerations

In the last decade, there has been a significant increase in the presence and visibility of black women in spaces that, for a long time, were considered unreachable. Concomitantly, there was the strengthening and greater publicity of black feminism in Brazil, with black intellectuals occupying academic spaces and places of social prestige.

Although to this day, universities remain as an elitist and segregating institution, they have also become spaces of transgression, potentiating the rise of the black community. Betting on education as a strategy to reframe situations of discrimination and think of new educational models are paths used by affirmative policies that aim to seek social justice for historically subordinated groups. These

aspects were emphasized in the speech and experiences of the students who participated in this study.

By analyzing the aspects related to racism, we found that all students experienced or witnessed some situation of prejudice or discrimination in the university environment added to sexism and classicism. This entire context reiterates the existing perpetuation mechanisms to maintain the university as a white, racist, and elitist space. These students are required to make multiple efforts, as black women, to get out of the social invisibility in which they were placed.

The results of this study show the importance of inserting affirmative policies of an ethnic-racial approach in universities, which will favor the expansion of black people's access to Higher Education, as well as their maintenance in the university trajectory, essential aspects in the struggle for historical repair with these individuals. The bet on expanding spaces for debates on the subject and continuing education for university employees are institutional strategies that can minimize the problem. However, the importance of strengthening the institutional and support channels that already exist in universities is highlighted, considering the racial criterion to reduce inequalities in the university environment.

Despite the wealth of information collected, we recognize the limitations of the study, in the sense that it was carried out with a group of students from only three of the ten courses at the institution. We questioned whether the fact that there were no volunteers from the other courses would be related to the absence of women who declare themselves black; insecurity in talking about the theme in the face of social and institutional mechanisms for the invisibility of black women; and/or little importance given by them to the research theme linked to the reproduction of the hegemonic discourse on the production of knowledge. We suggest new studies on the social participation of black women at the university level, possibly comparing them with research on the problem in courses from other areas or with educational institutions that adopt affirmative policies for university access and permanence with an ethnic-racial perspective.

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Ana Cristina de Oliveira Valério: Text writing, data collection, systematization, and analysis. Waldez Cavalcante Bezerra: Guidance, data analysis and text review. The other authors contributed to the discussions

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