

SOCIAL MARKERS OF INEQUALITIES: THE INVISIBILITY OF DOMESTIC WORK AND THE STRUCTURING OF GENDER AND RACE INEQUALITIES



<https://doi.org/10.56238/arev7n2-178>

Submitted on: 01/14/2025

Publication date: 02/14/2025

Maria da Luz Alves Ferreira¹.

ABSTRACT

In Brazil, considering reports from the Continuous National Household Sample Survey (Continuous PNAD) (2022) and the Institute for Applied Economic Research (Ipea) (2022), paid domestic work is predominantly performed by women, covering approximately 5.9 million workers, which is equivalent to 16.8% of the female workforce. Among them, 61% are black women. Historically, domestic workers have faced various forms of exclusion, such as low wages, precarious employment relationships, and racial and gender discrimination. By addressing this theme, we emphasize the subjectivity inherent to social phenomena, adopting a dialectical and historical perspective on the relationship between individual and society, within a specific historical context. Through the review and bibliographic studies, in which categories such as race, gender and domestic work intersect, it was possible to understand the domestic worker not only as a reflection of the social conditions in which he is inserted, but as an active agent in the construction and transformation of this reality. Thus, this research seeks to contribute to the critique of the hegemonic ideology that perpetuates the subordination of these professionals and keeps them in a status of precarious citizenship, without full recognition of their rights.

Keywords: Domestic Work. Race. Gender. Social Inequalities.

¹ Dr. in Human Sciences (Sociology and Politics) (2007), from UFMG. Master's degree in Sociology from the University of Brasília (2000). Bachelor in Social Sciences from the State University of Montes Claros/MG (1989). Degree in Sociology from the same University (1990). Professor at the Department of Politics and Social Sciences. Professor in the Social Sciences Course and in the Graduate Program in Social Development at the State University of Montes Claros/MG.

INTRODUCTION

In several countries, domestic work is a predominant occupation performed by women. It is a universe of workers with diverse characteristics, which are not limited only to the demographic and sociocultural profile, but also encompass the particularities of each country or region, as well as the different tasks that these professionals perform. Among the functions performed are cleaning, care for children, the elderly or people with special needs, home surveillance, cooking, gardening, among others. The International Labor Organization (ILO) points out that, despite variations in tasks and the type of employer, the main definition of domestic work lies in the fact that it takes place in a private and home environment (INTERNATIONAL LABOR ORGANIZATION, 2010).

In general, individuals involved in this work face various types of discrimination. Servile inheritance is one of the historical marks attributed to this activity, related to the low social recognition of domestic chores. In addition, the subordinate character of domestic work is widely associated with the female figure, and this division of tasks is widely naturalized in various parts of the world (INTERNATIONAL LABOR ORGANIZATION, 2010).

In the Brazilian context, the association of domestic work with servility and subordination is marked by the legacy of slavery, which affected both the native peoples and, mainly, the black African population. From abolition to the period of formation of the labor market in the country, many of the characteristics of historical servility have been maintained, even if reinterpreted by discourses and practices. The issue becomes even more complex and aggravated by the deep social and economic inequalities that characterize the reality of Brazil.

Certainly, domestic work in Brazil has historically been marked by deep inequalities of gender and race. Since colonial times, black women have played a central role in this type of occupation, initially in conditions of slavery and, later, in regimes that reproduced relations of subordination and exploitation. This historical heritage still echoes in contemporary domestic work relations.

Although domestic work was formalized by Constitutional Amendment No. 72 of 2013 and regulated by Complementary Law No. 150 of 2015, significant disparities still persist in relation to the work performed by men and women. Men, who represent a minority in the sector, tend to occupy positions associated with specific functions, such as

aspirants or drivers, often with better working conditions and remuneration. In contrast, women, mostly black, perform manual and domestic activities, with lower wages.

These inequalities reflect what sociologist Crenshaw (1998) called intersectionality – an interaction of multiple axes of oppression, such as race, gender, and class, that marginalize certain social groups. In Brazil, these dynamics are aggravated by the precariousness of domestic work, which often occurs in informal conditions, without protection.

Domestic work is often treated by authors in the human social sciences as a reflection of the sexual and racial division of labor. For Saffioti (2004), for example, this division reflects and reproduces regions of power that place black women in positions of extreme vulnerability. Gonzalez pointed out that domestic work, specifically attributed to black women, is intrinsically linked to structural racism and colonial heritage.

In addition, feminist economist Federici (2019) argues that domestic work, because it is not paid or valued, sustains capitalist economies by reducing the costs of reproduction.

Domestic work in Brazil continues to be one of the greatest symbols of the country's structural inequalities. Despite legislative advances, it is necessary to strengthen the inspection of working conditions, promote the economic valorization of these activities and reinforce the social stigmas associated with them. Only through intersectoral public policies will it be possible to build a more just and equitable society.

This article aims to analyze the incidence and implications of race in domestic work in Brazil², highlighting its historical connection with a culture of servitude and class and gender subordination. Methodologically, the research, which is based on a bibliographic and documentary approach, uses some secondary data and adopts a critical theoretical-methodological perspective. The analysis focuses on race as an expression of the coloniality of power, understood not only as a remnant of colonialism, but as a phenomenon linked to the formation of the global capitalist system — here called the modern-colonial world-system — whose characteristics continue to shape the social, political, and economic structures of peripheral countries, such as those of Latin America and Brazil.

² This text is part of the work plan "Social Markers of Inequalities: Domestic Work in Question", of the Productivity and Technological Development Scholarship funded by the Foundation for Research Support of the State of Minas Gerais – FAPEMIG, to which we thank for the financial support.

In times of democratic setbacks and social rights both in Brazil and in the world, it is essential to deepen, in a critical way, the discussion on the role of race in the construction and maintenance of capitalist social relations of class domination and exploitation. This represents an effort of resistance and continuity of the progressive struggle. Highlighting the particularities of the reality experienced by Brazilian domestic workers follows this line of resistance.

The article aims to address the meaning of racial domination and discrimination as a reflection of the coloniality of power, within the formation of the modern-colonial world-system and how the racial issue influences the production and reproduction of domestic labor relations in Brazil, showing the continuity of this dynamic until the present day.

COLONIALITY OF POWER, RACISM AND DOMESTIC WORK

Currently, the debate on racial prejudice and discrimination in Brazil, especially with regard to its implications for the social, political and economic formation of the country, acquires several perspectives. Some approaches deny these implications, while others reproduce superficial views, which often contribute more to the perpetuation of discriminatory patterns than to their overcoming.

By understanding capitalist society as a society divided into classes, it is possible to consider the dominations of gender and race as derivative phenomena, which are based on this fundamental characteristic of capitalist social relations. Thus, the exploitation of labor power by the bourgeois class over the working class takes different forms, depending on the time and space in which these social relations manifest themselves.

In the peripheral contexts of the world, such as Latin America, Africa and Asia, the exploitation of the labor force began with the domination of the native peoples of these continents. In Latin America, the enslavement of Africans in the colonial and imperial period was also a determining factor. From that moment on, the colonialities of power were configured, with hierarchies and patterns of domination and subordination reproducing themselves between peripheral countries and the central countries of the world economy, as well as between races, ethnicities, peoples, genders and social classes, and even within the territories of the States themselves.

Dussel (2005, p. 27) states that "[...] empirically, there was never World History until 1492 (as the date of the beginning of the operation of the world-system)." The imperialist conception of modernity, in which Europe, its states, armies, economies and philosophies,

are the center of world history, sustains the idea that all other cultures occupy a peripheral position. Quijano (2005, p. 116) explains that "[...] The foundational myth of the Eurocentric version of modernity is the idea of the state of nature as the starting point of the civilizational course whose culmination is European or Western civilization." This evolutionist and dualistic perspective associated with the racial classification of the world's population generated a vision that unites ethnocentrism, colonial capitalism and the idea of race as a criterion of social classification.

Coloniality is therefore understood as a process that goes beyond formal colonialism and does not disappear with independence or decolonization. This distinction allows us to understand the continuity of the forms of domination, even after the end of the colonial administrations. Quijano (2005, p. 107) argues that "[...] the ongoing globalization is, first and foremost, the culmination of a process that began with the constitution of America and colonial/modern, Eurocentric capitalism as a new pattern of world power," and that the racial classification of the world's population remains a central element in this process.

Quijano (2005) points out that there is a pattern of world power that is constituted from several axes, the main one being that of social classification. The axis of social classification deals with distributing the subjects in certain roles within the social organization chart of work, and this classification occurs, especially, through the sieve of race and sex.

In this context, race and sex are constituted as structural elements of Eurocentric colonial domination, subjugating and subordinating black men, black women, indigenous and ethnic minorities, corporalities and subjects not framed in the hegemonic profile of modern society.

It is based on the imposition of a racial/ethnic classification of the world's population as a cornerstone of this patrimony of power, and operates in each of the planes, scopes and dimensions, material and subjective, of daily existence and the social scale. (QUIJANO, 2007, p. 93).

For Quijano (2005), racial differences are treated as methods of human hierarchization and social division of labor, and not by chance, like gender, is allocated within the logic of coloniality, being an important axis of its structuring.

Within the logic of modernity, race did not come only to characterize phenotypic differences, but to promote the classification and hierarchization of one people over another, to justify the superiority of individuals based on color and ethnicity, and not by

chance, to legitimize the subordination of the colonized people considered inferior. Based on a theoretical foundation, which according to Quijano (2005) is crucial for its validation, Europe creates the idea of race within a concept of segregation, and therefore, race becomes the first fundamental criterion of social organization:

The subsequent constitution of Europe as a new identity after America and the expansion of European colonialism to the rest of the world led to the elaboration of the Eurocentric perspective of knowledge and with it to the theoretical elaboration of the idea of race as a naturalization of these colonial relations of domination between Europeans and non-Europeans. Historically, this meant a new way of legitimizing the already old ideas and practices of superiority/inferiority relations between dominant and dominated. Since then, it has proved to be the most effective and durable instrument of universal social domination, since another equally universal, although older, intersex or gender instrument has come to depend on it: the conquered and dominated peoples have been placed in a natural situation of inferiority, and consequently so have their phenotypic traits, as well as their mental and cultural discoveries. In this way, race became the first fundamental criterion for the distribution of the world population in the levels, places and roles in the power structure of the new society. In other words, in the basic mode of universal social classification of the world's population. (QUIJANO, 2005, p. 118)

The concept of race is the basis of the hegemonic power of colonialism, which legitimizes forms of domination and reaffirms Eurocentrism in the face of colonized peoples. The Americas and the world began to be classified by race and no longer by geographical aspects. A new pattern of power is imposed that is naturalized and determines new identities, hierarchies and social roles. (QUIJANO, 2005).

The fiction that was created around the difference of race, in which the white was privileged to the detriment of the black, brought damage that was difficult to repair. The damage that occurred in the imagination and subjectivities of individuals was as perverse as the physical horrors they suffered during slavery.

It is not by chance that decolonial studies point to race as part of the fictitious structure of domination proposed by colonialism and instrumentalized by the colonality of power, in which it was intended to privilege whites, characterizing it as a way of hierarchizing and exploiting subjects, in compliance with the European logic of modernity.

In the case of Latin America, unpaid domestic work was historically associated with colonized races, such as indigenous, black, and mestizo, while salaried work was attributed to whites, the colonizing race. Latin America's subordinate position in the world system reflects a paradox: although the continent was fundamental in the formation of the world-system, it remained subordinate to the center of capitalism. Quijano (2005, p. 123) explains that "[...] the colonial rulers of the newly independent states [...] could be nothing

but junior partners of the European bourgeoisie." The region's structural dependence is reinforced by the lack of its own market and a wage class relevant to the local system.

This dependence is also manifested in the late industrialization of Latin America in the 1930s, when the strategy of import substitution was adopted by the ruling classes. Quijano (2005, p. 123) observes that "[...] industrialization through import substitution is, in Latin America, a revealing case of the implications of the coloniality of power", since this strategy aimed only to meet the consumption of local elites, without restructuring the economy in order to include the masses.

The persistence of a structure of multiple dominations and subordinations in Latin America makes it difficult to build a democratic national state. As Quijano (2005, p. 125) points out, "[...] the coloniality of power established on the idea of race must be admitted as a basic factor in the national question and the nation-state." The adoption of the Eurocentric perspective by the dominant groups in the region helped to consolidate the European model of the nation-state, ignoring preexisting colonial relations.

In Brazil, the national economy was sustained for centuries by slavery, which shaped hierarchical and subordinate social relations. Barbosa (2008, p. 39) states that "[...] The country went far beyond a simple space for generating surpluses for the metropolises. Here, slavery extended to rural areas, mines, cities, workshops, ranches and a vast set of economic activities". This historical context bequeathed a social and economic invisibility to the black population, which still persists, affecting both the formerly enslaved and free and freed blacks, as well as indigenous people and other traditional populations. Barbosa (2008, p. 62) observes that "[...] the free men, who were neither slaves nor slave owners, were [...] poor, true pariahs of this society".

The social relations of class and race in Brazil are still deeply influenced by these historical structures. Bernardino-Costa (2013, p. 47) analyzes that "the places and social roles of white men and women, as well as black and indigenous men and women were fixed", a mark of social hierarchy that is perpetuated to this day.

The idea of the myth of racial democracy and the valorization of miscegenation helped to hide the existence of a structured racial hierarchy, which masks the inequalities and forms of racial domination that still persist in Brazil. This discourse has been functional to the development of domestic and international capitalism, as Bernardino-Costa (2013, p. 48) observes, when he says that "[...] racism, patriarchal relations, class oppression and other possible axes of power and discrimination create inequalities".

This historical heritage is particularly relevant to paid domestic work, an occupation that, as Negro and Gomes (2006) observe, involves a significant portion of invisible workers. Bernardino-Costa (2013) analyzes that the coloniality of power manifests itself in the dimensions of race, sex and social class, in an interrelated and non-hierarchical way, in the conditions of domestic work in Brazil.

INFLECTIONS: RACE AND DOMESTIC WORK

According to data released by the Continuous National Household Sample Survey (PNAD-C), carried out by the IBGE in 2018, women occupied 93% of domestic jobs in Brazil, and among them, 67% identified themselves as black. The proportion of black women in paid domestic work was 17.4%, while for non-black women this percentage was 10.1%. In the same period, the number of black women in the category of domestic workers exceeded by 10% the presence of this group in the Economically Active Population. Among domestic workers, black women represented 67%, while in the national average, their presence was 57% (INSTITUTO BRASILEIRO DE GEOGRAFIA E ESTATÍSTICA, 2020).

These statistics show the intersection between gender and race in paid domestic work in Brazil, and this phenomenon is also crossed by social class issues. According to Melo's analysis:

[...] An observation based on the experience of Brazilian homes, memories of our childhoods, the stereotype of nannies and cooks was of black and mulatto women. This finding suggests that in Brazil black women went directly from the slave quarters to domestic work. As Gonzalez (1982, p. 98) pointed out, when black women do not work as maids, we find them providing low-paid services in supermarkets, schools or hospitals, under the generic name of "cleaning maids". (MELO, 1998, p. 8)

Data from the 1872 Population Census, analyzed by Barbosa (2008), indicate that, in that period, 70.1% of the enslaved population worked in agriculture, while 23.4% was employed in services, with 15.2% specifically in domestic services. These functions included activities such as gardeners, maids, wet nurses, seamstresses, handmaids, pages, and cooks, as well as responsibilities such as taking care of the masters' children, transmitting errands, and serving at the table.

The employment of domestic servants became a symbol of social status in Brazil, reinforcing the idea that the elites depended on servants both to meet daily needs and to demonstrate privileges. Graham emphasizes this aspect when he states that:

[...] a lifestyle that, in all its variants, depended on servants not only to meet the needs of daily existence, but also to display a social position of privilege. (GRAHAM, 1992, p. 20).

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, in the context of accelerated urbanization and the abolition of slavery, Telles (2011) analyzed police records that indicate a significant presence of black women in these records, suggesting that:

[...] The expansion of the labor market did not mean significant gains: the weight of patriarchal slave relations and their habitual disregard for manual labor traditionally performed by slaves, relegated those subsistence agents and their unqualified occupations to low wages and particularly oppressive working conditions: foundations of subsistence erased in the context of the construction of the economic and political hegemony of the coffee bourgeoisie. (TELLES, 2011, p. 125).

The permanence of the slave heritage contributed to the social devaluation of domestic work, historically associated with women and servility. Barbosa (2008) points out that, in the 1872 Population Census, 129,816 enslaved women and 45,561 men performed domestic services. This history reinforced a racial division of domestic work, as highlighted by Engel and Pereira:

"[...] It presupposes the existence of a racial division of reproductive labor among women. [...] based on such a solid reference, the racial division of labor plays relevant functions both in the perpetuation of the sexual division and in the racial segregation of labor." (ENGEL; PEREIRA, 2015, p. 14, 19).

The regulation of labor rights for domestic workers occurred in a gradual and discriminatory manner throughout the twentieth century. The Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT), of 1940, did not contemplate this category. Only in 1972, with Law No. 5,859, was the right to registration in the portfolio and social security guaranteed. However, only with Complementary Law No. 150/2015 was a fixed working day and rights such as overtime and mandatory payment of FGTS established (BRASIL, 2015).

Despite these advances, in 2018, only 30% of domestic workers had a formal contract, and in states in the North and Northeast, this percentage was even lower (INSTITUTO BRASILEIRO DE GEOGRAFIA E ESTATÍSTICA, 2020). This reality shows that the struggle for the full realization of the labor and social security rights of this category is still ongoing, reflecting structural challenges related to dignity, citizenship and democracy in Brazil.

DOMESTIC WORK AND THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY IN BRAZIL: FORMS OF RESISTANCE

The historical narrative of slavery often portrays the black population in positions of subservience – under the yoke of the trunk, subject to physical punishment, working in the big house or on the sugar cane plantations. These images of submission, widely disseminated in textbooks that educate children, young people and adults in Brazil, were strongly influenced by Gilberto Freyre's *Casa-grande & senzala* (2013), which helped shape the way the slavery period is traditionally understood.

However, beyond the vision disseminated by this reference, which perpetuates the image of blacks as servile and which is still maintained in the Brazilian social imaginary, it is essential to recognize the various forms of resistance – both individual and collective – that marked the trajectory of the enslaved population. As Gorender (2016, p. 141) points out:

The form of individual resistance within the reach of any slave, from the fearless to the frightened, was the 'soft body' at work. Here, as I have already seen, it was a question of the generalized and elementary opposition to the regime of exploitation. Saving energy at work was also a necessity for physical survival. Occasional lashes were less damaging than exhaustion in the long days of compulsory activity. Collective resistance manifested itself in varying degrees of differentiated cultural identity of the landlord class, and more generally, of the European culture of the whites . . . Slaves conquered spaces for cultural creations in the form of religiosity, songbooks, dances, legends and symbolism. Together, these creations reinforced their community cohesion.

The work of Gorender (2016) points out that resistance was not restricted to escapes and the formation of quilombos, but also included less visible forms, such as the silent refusal of exploitation through subtle strategies of everyday life. In this way, the idea of a passive and conformed enslaved subject is dismantled.

This perspective is reinforced by Souza (2008), who discusses the existence of a continuum of resistance expressed in cultural, behavioral, linguistic and religious practices. Through these manifestations, black women, in particular, found ways to position themselves in history, even in the face of the adversities that marked their trajectory.

However, despite these strategies of resistance, Souza (2017) argues that the optimistic interpretation disseminated by Freyre prevailed, consolidating the idea of a Brazil where racial coexistence took place in a peaceful and harmonious way. This discourse obscured the abandonment of the black population in the post-abolition period, keeping it in a condition of vulnerability under the justification of a supposed social integration.

It is based on this understanding that Souza (2017, p. 66) introduces the notion of the Brazilian rabble, a class composed mostly of blacks and mestizos who have gone from the condition of a "condemned race" to that of a "condemned class". For the author, this marginalization demonstrates how slavery left deep marks on the Brazilian social structure, perpetuating inequalities in a systemic and intergenerational way.

Understanding this heritage implies recognizing that contemporary inequalities are not only remnants of the slave past, but also the result of the absence of effective public policies that would reverse this situation. In this context, Souza (2009) identifies domestic work as one of the occupations that historically make up this rabble, being one of the few opportunities for survival for many black women.

Pereira (2011) reinforces this analysis by highlighting that domestic work has always been linked to strategies of black resistance, since, after the formal abolition of slavery, many black women found in this occupation a means to achieve progressive financial independence. While black men were relegated to precarious jobs or marginality, women, when acting as washerwomen, delicatessens or maids, became the main breadwinner of their families.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, as Saffioti (1978) points out, many newly freed black women continued to work in the homes of white families in exchange for housing and food, without any kind of legal protection. The justification for this exploitation was the idea that these workers were part of the family, thus denying them recognition as professionals.

Domestic work in Brazil bears the deep marks of the slave structure that shaped society and labor relations. Slavery not only institutionalized the exploitation of black labor, but also consolidated a social division of labor that is still manifested today in the precariousness and devaluation of domestic work. As Florestan Fernandes (1974, p. 115) points out, "the end of formal slavery did not represent a significant change in the economic and social structure, as blacks continued to be relegated to less valued occupations, without access to social mobility".

Domestic work, as it is intrinsically linked to the role of women in social reproduction, has also suffered the impacts of this historical exclusion. As Collins (2000, p. 43) argues, "control over black women's domestic work was one of the main mechanisms used to reinforce racial and gender hierarchy in modern society." This perspective reveals how the exploitation of black female labor was not only perpetuated after abolition, but was

reconfigured within the capitalist system as a cheap and invisible form of social reproduction.

The colonial heritage is also reflected in the informality and absence of rights for many domestic workers. According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2021), approximately 72% of domestic workers in Brazil are black and more than 60% do not have a formal contract. This scenario reinforces structural inequality, as it prevents the social ascension of these women and maintains the vulnerability of their working conditions.

Gonzalez (1984, p. 87) argues that:

(...) the myth of racial democracy in Brazil has served to mask the perpetuation of inequalities, especially with regard to black women, who continue to occupy the most precarious positions in the labor market"

This perspective demystifies the idea that the abolition of slavery represented a break with the oppressive structures of the past, demonstrating how these relationships were maintained and adapted over time.

In view of this scenario, analyzing domestic work in Brazil today means confronting the permanence of unequal structures that date back to the colonial period. As Bernardino-Costa (2007) argues, the colonality of power is still manifested in racial and gender hierarchies, devaluing work associated with black women and perpetuating their condition of subordination.

The popular imagination, fed by centuries of reproduction of these inequalities, reinforces the idea that domestic workers should be submissive and grateful, just as the enslaved were represented in the past. According to an article in Carta Capital (2014):

[The bosses] expect employees without agency, without protagonism, without voice, without will and without opinion. (After all, of course, a maid who gives an opinion where she was not called is also abused.) They expect to be eternally grateful to receive leftovers. In this logic in which, as Marcel Mauss would say, giving is power, a maid who asks for more money to wash the dirty toilet or demands her rights guaranteed in the Constitution, can only be abused.

This conception persists, as Jessé Souza highlights in a lecture recorded by Medeiros (2018), when he states that in Brazil "we reproduce under modern masks the same hatred and contempt for the popular classes that was previously devoted to the slave. All resistance and confidence were removed from the slave, exactly as we do today with the popular classes." Thus, it can be seen that the logic of domination and exploitation

of black bodies not only survived the formal abolition of slavery, but was resignified within the structures of work and the contemporary economy.

However, this colonial heritage does not remain unchallenged. Despite the permanence of inequalities, there are resistance movements that work in the field of domestic work. The enactment of PEC 72/2013 and, subsequently, of Complementary Law No. 150/2015, represent attempts to confront the precariousness of this activity, signaling advances in the fight against exploitation and for the valorization of these workers (Quijano, 2005).

The concept of intersectionality, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, p. 140), is also essential to understand how racial and gender oppression are intertwined in domestic work. Domestic workers not only face job insecurity, but also racism and sexism, which restrict their opportunities and limit their participation in spaces of power and decision-making.

To break with this legacy of slavery, it is essential that effective public policies be adopted that guarantee full rights to domestic workers. As Angela Davis (2016, p. 240) states, (...) the struggle for the valorization of domestic work necessarily involves overcoming racial inequalities and rebuilding a society that recognizes the importance of reproductive and social work". The formalization of the sector, the expansion of access to education and the implementation of affirmative policies are essential steps to transform this reality.

In this context, it becomes essential to question: how does resistance manifest itself in domestic work? In what ways do domestic workers confront relations of exploitation and the vestiges of colonial hierarchies?

Before presenting the results of this research, we will address the category of resistance as a central element in the experience of domestic workers, analyzing the intersections between gender, race and class that cross this field of study.

DOMESTIC WORK, INTERSECTIONALITY, AND THE DYNAMICS OF RACIAL AND GENDER OPPRESSION

When analyzing the relations between gender, race, and class, it is essential to understand how these categories mutually constitute each other, in interaction with other social markers, such as ethnicity and age. Instead of understanding them as mere sums of different forms of oppression, we must conceive of these relations as complex networks

that configure different experiences. This means that our perception of gender is intrinsically linked to how we understand race and class relations, and vice versa.

To illustrate this perspective, Saffioti (2015) proposed the metaphor of the "knot", emphasizing that oppression cannot be reduced to a simple addition of factors such as racism, gender, and social class. As the author explains:

A person is not discriminated against because they are a woman, a worker and black. In fact, a woman is not doubly discriminated against, because, in addition to being a woman, she is also a salaried worker. Or, still, it is not triply discriminated. It is not a question of variables, but of determinations, of qualities, which make the situation of these women much more complex. (Saffioti, 2015, p. 115).

Within this logic, Federici (2017) demonstrates, based on an in-depth historical analysis, that capitalism is sustained by a symbiotic relationship between wage labor and slavery. She highlights how capitalist accumulation depends on both the exploitation and destruction of the workforce, highlighting that women were particularly affected in this process: "tension for which women paid the highest price, with their bodies, their work and their lives" (Federici, 2017, p. 37).

In the context of capitalism, Federici (2017, p. 31) argues that femininity was shaped as a work-function, in order to hide the exploitation of labor power under a supposed biological designation: "which hides the production of labor power under the guise of a biological destiny." In this way, the responsibility for reproductive work – having children, taking care of the home and the family – has historically been attributed to women, resulting in the naturalization of the feminine attachment to domestic activities.

Federici (2017) also emphasizes that the colonial phenomenon is central to understanding this association. For the author, the analysis of capitalist accumulation needs to connect "the fate of women in Europe to that of European colonial subjects, and providing a new understanding of women's place in capitalism and in the process of globalization" (p. 29).

In the nineteenth century, the image of the family was consolidated based on the idea that women should dedicate themselves exclusively to unpaid domestic work. However, in the current scenario, there is a growing female insertion in the labor market. In Brazil, this process intensified from the 1970s onwards, made possible, in large part, by the existence of domestic workers. As Saffioti (2013, p. 133) points out: "women of the dominant class could never dominate the men of their class, they could, on the other hand,

concretely and freely dispose of the labor force of men and women of the dominated class" (p. 133).

Thus, it can be seen that, although there has been a greater participation of women in the labor market, the patriarchal structure that attributes to them the responsibility for the home has not been overcome. What is observed is a redistribution of this work among women of different social positions, reaffirming the relationship between sexual division of labor and hierarchies of class and race. Thus, domestic work, historically assigned to women, remains in force, only taking on new forms and being resignified within the social and racial division of labor.

Bell hooks (2018) reinforces this analysis by arguing that, despite advances in terms of rights and positions occupied by women, this has not eradicated gender discrimination. The author points out that winning jobs did not mean liberation for working-class women, since low wages do not guarantee economic autonomy. For hooks (2018, p. 87), class inequality continues to be a determining factor, as "much of the class power that elite groups of women have in our society, especially those who are wealthy, is achieved to the detriment of the freedom of other women".

When problematizing the relations between gender, race, and class, it is essential to address the centrality of work, because, as Angela Davis (2019) argues, this aspect is structuring of social processes. Women's access to more prestigious and well-paid jobs occurs in a context of unequal mobility. Historically, domestic work has been one of the main indicators of this inequality, as it represents "the historical and ideological relegation of women to the domestic sphere; embodies the historical and ideological relegation of women's work to the private sphere, because capitalist economies do not recognize the reproductive work that enables productive work" (Davis, 2019, p. 26).

In addition, when discussing these social markers, it is essential to recognize the persistence of the coloniality of power, a concept developed by Quijano (2005), who points out how the colonial legacy still structures contemporary social and economic dynamics. In the Brazilian case, these legacies are manifested in the way black women, in particular, experience the labor market, being mostly inserted in positions of low pay and prestige. In this way, it is understood that the articulation between gender, race and class is not only historically intertwined, but also continues to structure inequalities in the present.

Intersectionality, a concept developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, p. 140), reveals how different forms of oppression overlap, creating specific experiences of marginalization

for certain social groups. In the case of domestic work, the intersection between race, gender, and class evidences the maintenance of historical structures of exploitation that affect, above all, black women. According to bell hooks (1981, p. 94), "racism and sexism operate interdependently to sustain the oppression of black women in the labor market."

Domestic work is historically associated with the feminization of poverty, reinforcing structural inequalities. As Collins (2000, p. 42) states, "black women face unique barriers in the labor market, where their identity is used to justify their exploitation." In Brazil, this dynamic is manifested through the slave heritage that relegated black women to domestic service, perpetuating a cycle of devaluation and low pay. Data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2021) indicate that more than 70% of domestic workers are black, and the vast majority work without a formal contract, without access to basic benefits and social security rights.

Patriarchal and racist domination shapes social perceptions of domestic work, making it invisible and devoid of status. Saffioti (2004, p. 112) points out that "the naturalization of domestic work as a feminine and black function is one of the pillars of the reproduction of class and race inequality in Brazilian society". This invisibility is reflected in the way the State and civil society deal with this profession, promoting the maintenance of a logic of exploitation that spans centuries.

Another crucial point of intersectionality applied to domestic work is the impact of this configuration on the social mobility of black women. As Angela Davis (2016, p. 243) argues, "the concentration of black women in domestic work reflects not only a limited economic choice, but a structural mechanism that restricts their access to other spheres of paid and valued work." Structural racism and sexism, therefore, combine to keep black women in occupations that reinforce their subordinate position in society.

Resistance to this oppressive logic involves the need to implement public policies that guarantee the formalization of domestic work and its valorization. In addition, as Gonzalez (1984, p. 97) proposes, "it is essential to understand the role of racism in the conformation of social hierarchies so that it is possible to promote effective affirmative actions". Without this intersectional understanding, inequalities will persist, reinforcing the social exclusion of Black domestic workers.

Overcoming the exploitation of domestic work therefore involves the deconstruction of the narratives that legitimize its devaluation and the promotion of strategies that ensure

full rights for workers. Intersectionality, in this context, is not only an analytical tool, but a path to building public policies that effectively address racial and gender inequalities.

DOMESTIC WORK, SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOR AND THE PERPETUATION OF INEQUALITIES

The sexual division of labor has been one of the main mechanisms for maintaining social inequalities, being fundamental for the reproduction of gender and race hierarchies. In Brazil, this historical division has relegated to women the activities related to care and social reproduction, reinforcing the exploitation of domestic workers. As Saffioti (2004, p. 79) argues, "the sexual and racial division of labor not only perpetuates inequalities, but also reinforces patriarchal and capitalist structures that sustain the exploitation of certain social groups". This means that the position of black women in domestic work does not occur accidentally, but rather as part of a structured system that unequally distributes work and power.

The naturalization of domestic work as an inherent function of women, especially black women, sustains the precariousness of this activity. Federici (2019, p. 105) points out that "unpaid or poorly paid domestic work is one of the pillars of capitalism, as it allows the reproduction of the workforce at reduced costs". This devaluation has roots in the colonial system, where domestic service performed by enslaved black women was considered a natural obligation and not a job worthy of recognition and remuneration.

In addition, the relationship between class, gender, and race in domestic work is evident in the lack of access to labor and social rights. Data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2021) indicate that about 60% of domestic workers in Brazil still work informally, without basic guarantees such as retirement, unemployment insurance, and maternity leave. This perpetuates a cycle of poverty that restricts the possibilities of social ascension of these women, consolidating the racial division of labor.

Collins (2000, p. 58) reinforces that "the structure of the sexual division of labor operates in a way that prevents black women from reaching positions of power and influence, relegating them to occupations historically associated with servitude". This reality is a reflection of a system that imposes institutional barriers to the progress of black women, while allowing privileged groups to enjoy domestic services without recognizing their social and economic importance.

Occupational segregation also reinforces the subordination of domestic workers within society. Angela Davis (2016, p. 249) points out that "the elites' dependence on domestic work performed by racialized women demonstrates how class exploitation is intertwined with gender and racial oppressions." This phenomenon prevents these women from accessing well-paid formal jobs, perpetuating the marginalization of domestic workers and consolidating the legacy of slavery in the division of labor.

In this context, the formalization and valorization of domestic work become fundamental elements in the fight against gender and race exploitation. As Lélia Gonzalez (1984, p. 92) argues, "breaking with the subordination imposed on black women in the labor market requires structural changes that recognize the value of domestic work and guarantee its fair remuneration." Thus, public policies that expand domestic workers' access to education, professional qualification, and labor rights are essential to combat this inequality.

Overcoming the marginalization of domestic work therefore involves a critical review of labor relations based on the historical exploitation of black women. The sexual division of labor is not a natural phenomenon, but a social construction that can and should be deconstructed to ensure justice and equity for all workers.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article sought to analyze domestic work in Brazil from a historical and intersectional perspective, showing how this activity is directly linked to the dynamics of racial and gender exploitation. The research is based on the assumption that black women, who represent the majority of domestic workers in the country, face a structural precariousness that dates back to the slavery period and that still persists due to structural racism and the coloniality of power.

Since colonial Brazil, black women have been associated with compulsory domestic work. During slavery, they were in charge of cleaning, caring for the children of the white elite, cooking, and other domestic tasks that ensured the functioning of the manor houses. After abolition, the absence of public policies for the inclusion of the black population in the formal labor market led many formerly enslaved women to remain in these functions, now under new forms of exploitation, such as informal work, poorly paid and devoid of basic rights. This trajectory consolidated the image of black women as "naturally" destined to serve, perpetuating inequalities that persist to the present day.

The concept of coloniality of power, formulated by Aníbal Quijano, helps us to understand that racial oppression in Brazil is not restricted to the colonial past, but is reconfigured within contemporary capitalist structures. Racism continues to be a central criterion in the division of labor, relegating black women to the most precarious occupations, such as domestic service. This logic evidences the continuity of relations of domination and subordination, reinforcing the social segregation and lack of economic mobility of this group.

Another central concept addressed is intersectionality, proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which demonstrates how racism, sexism, and class exploitation overlap and intensify the oppression of black women. The intersectional analysis allows us to understand that inequalities in domestic work cannot be explained only by the economic dimension, but are crossed by social and historical constructions that associate blackness with servitude and subordination.

The survey also presents statistical data that reinforces this inequality. According to the IBGE (2021), about 72% of domestic workers in Brazil are black, and more than 60% of them still work informally, without access to fundamental labor rights. In addition, the remuneration of these professionals is significantly lower than that of other categories, reflecting the historical devaluation of domestic work. Even with the approval of laws such as Constitutional Amendment No. 72/2013 and Complementary Law No. 150/2015, which guarantee rights such as fixed working hours, FGTS and unemployment insurance, the precariousness of the sector is still a reality.

The article also highlights that the rise of white women in the labor market was largely made possible by the outsourcing of care, delegating to black women the responsibility for domestic and care work. This phenomenon reinforces the racial division of labor and shows that the struggle for gender equality needs to consider racial inequalities. Thus, there was no democratization of domestic work, but rather a redistribution of care functions among women of different social positions, keeping black women in a condition of exploitation and invisibility.

In addition to the precariousness of domestic work, we set out to analyze how the social imaginary and social discourses contribute to the naturalization of black female servitude. The myth of the "maid as part of the family", for example, is often used to justify the absence of rights and informality, while perpetuating the hierarchy between employers

and maids. This construction reinforces the idea that these workers should be submissive, grateful and available, masking the inequality of power present in the labor relationship.

In this way, the article emphasizes that the struggle for the valorization of domestic work is also a struggle against structural racism and Brazil's colonial heritage. The legislative achievements represent important advances, but there is still a long way to go to ensure the effectiveness of labor rights and the recognition of the importance of this category for the economy and society as a whole.

The research shows that paid domestic work in Brazil cannot be understood only as an economic activity, but as a social phenomenon deeply rooted in the structure of racial and gender inequality in the country. The permanence of the black population in this sector reflects the continuity of the slavery logic, which associates blackness with servitude and excludes these women from opportunities for social mobility and professional advancement.

The concept of coloniality of power helps us to understand how racism operates in a structuring way in the organization of work. Occupational segregation, which confines black women to precarious positions, is not a mere historical remnant, but a reality that is perpetuated through institutional and cultural mechanisms. Informality, low pay and lack of access to rights are direct reflections of this system of domination.

Although there have been legislative advances in recent years, such as the formalization of the labor rights of domestic workers, the reality is still far from ideal. The persistence of informality and the resistance of many families to sign the contracts of these workers demonstrate that legislation alone is not enough to transform this reality. A greater effort is needed on the part of the State to monitor compliance with the laws and create incentives for the formalization of domestic work.

In addition, it is essential that society as a whole recognizes the importance of this work. The devaluation of domestic work is not only an economic issue, but a manifestation of structural racism that makes black women invisible and denies their full citizenship. This struggle must go beyond labor reforms, demanding profound cultural changes that break with the stigma of servitude and guarantee the social and economic recognition of these professionals.

The resistance of domestic workers has been an essential factor in transforming this scenario. Domestic workers' unions, for example, play a crucial role in the fight for rights and better working conditions. Black women's movements have also been instrumental in

denouncing the exploitation of domestic work and in demanding public policies that promote racial and gender equity.

Overcoming these inequalities requires the implementation of intersectional public policies, which take into account the particularities of black women in the labor market. Measures such as incentives for the formalization of domestic employment, expansion of access to education and professional qualification for these workers, in addition to the strengthening of labor inspections, are essential to ensure a structural transformation.

Finally, the article leads us to reflect on the need for a deeper debate on the role of race in the structuring of labor relations in Brazil. Domestic work is one of the main examples of how racism and sexism intertwine to keep certain populations in conditions of vulnerability. Therefore, the struggle for social justice and gender equity needs to consider the centrality of race for effective change to be achieved. Only in this way will it be possible to build a fairer society, in which domestic work is valued and black women have full access to their rights and opportunities.

REFERENCES

1. Barbosa, A. F. (2008). *A formação do mercado de trabalho no Brasil*. São Paulo: Editora Alameda.
2. Bernardino-Costa, J. (2007). *Sindicatos das trabalhadoras domésticas no Brasil: Teorias da descolonização e saberes subalternos* [Doctoral dissertation, Universidade de Brasília]. Repositório Institucional da UnB. Available at: <https://repositorio.unb.br/handle/10482/2711>
3. Bernardino-Costa, J. (2013). Colonialidade e interseccionalidade: O trabalho doméstico no Brasil e seus desafios para o Século XXI. In T. D. Silva & F. L. Goes (Eds.), *Igualdade racial no Brasil: Reflexões no ano internacional dos afrodescendentes* (pp. XX–XX). Brasília: Ipea.
4. Bourdieu, P. (1998). *A dominação masculina*. Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil.
5. Brasil. (1943). Decreto-lei nº 5.452, de 1º de maio de 1943. Aprova a Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho. Brasília, DF: Presidência da República. Available at: http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/decreto-lei/del5452.htm Retrieved on January 18, 2022.
6. Brasil. (2001). Lei nº 10.208, de 23 de março de 2001. Acresce dispositivos à Lei nº 5.859, de 11 de dezembro de 1972. Brasília, DF: Presidência da República. Available at: http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/leis/leis_2001/l10208.htm Retrieved on January 18, 2022.
7. Brasil. (2006). Lei nº 11.324, de 19 de julho de 2006. Altera dispositivos das Leis nº s 9.250, 8.212, 8.213, e 5.859. Brasília, DF: Presidência da República. Available at: http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2004-2006/2006/lei/l11324.htm Retrieved on January 18, 2022.
8. Brasil. (2015). Lei complementar nº 150, de 1º de junho de 2015. Dispõe sobre o contrato de trabalho doméstico. Brasília, DF: Presidência da República. Available at: http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/leis/lcp/lcp150.htm Retrieved on January 18, 2022.
9. Carta Capital. (2014). *Minha empregada é muito abusada*. Carta Capital. Available at: <https://www.cartacapital.com.br/sociedade/201cminha-empregada-e-muito-abusada201d-7617/>
10. Carvalho, M. G. (2019). *A dimensão subjetiva do trabalho doméstico remunerado: Uma análise sob a perspectiva da Psicologia Sócio-Histórica* [Master's thesis, Pontifícia Universidade Católica]. Repositório Institucional da PUC SP. Available at: <https://tede2.pucsp.br/handle/handle/22538>
11. Collins, P. H. (2016). *Black feminist thought*. New York: Routledge.
12. Crenshaw, K. (1998). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
13. Davis, A. (2016). *Mulheres, raça e classe*. São Paulo: Boitempo.
14. Davis, A. (2019). Mulheres, raças, classes: Desafios para o século XXI. In M. Maruani (Ed.), *Trabalho logo existo: Perspectivas feministas* (pp. 17–27). Rio de Janeiro: FGV.
15. Dieese. (2023). *Análise sobre o trabalho doméstico no Brasil*. São Paulo: DIEESE.
16. Dussel, H. (2005). Europa, modernidade e eurocentrismo. In E. Lander (Ed.), *A colonialidade do saber: Eurocentrismo e ciências sociais. Perspectivas latinoamericanas* (pp. XX–XX). Buenos Aires: CLACSO.

17. Engel, C., & Pereira, B. C. J. (2015). A organização social do trabalho doméstico e de cuidado: Considerações sobre gênero e raça. *Revista Punto Género*, (5).
18. Federici, S. (2017). *Calibã e a bruxa: Mulheres, corpo e acumulação primitiva*. São Paulo: Elefante.
19. Federici, S. (2019). *O Calibã e a bruxa: Mulheres, corpo e acumulação primitiva*. São Paulo: Elefante.
20. Freyre, G. (2013). *Casa-grande & senzala* (52nd ed.). São Paulo: Global.
21. Getirana, Y. (2019, October 16). *Colcha de retalhos* [Video]. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVIZxOHhnmw&t=2s>
22. Gonzalez, L. (1988). *Por um feminismo afro-latino-americano*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar.
23. Gonzalez, L. (2018). *Primavera para as rosas negras*. Diáspora Africana.
24. Gorender, J. (2016). *A escravidão reabilitada*. São Paulo: Expressão Popular.
25. Graham, S. L. (1992). *Proteção e obediência, criadas e seus patrões no Rio de Janeiro 1860-1910*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.
26. Hooks, B. (2018). *O feminismo é para todo mundo: Políticas arrebatadoras*. Rosa dos Ventos.
27. IBGE. (2020). *Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílio (PNAD) Notas Metodológicas*. Rio de Janeiro: IBGE.
28. IBGE. (2022). *Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios Contínua*. Rio de Janeiro: IBGE.
29. International Labor Organization (ILO). (2010). *Global wage report 2010/11: Wage policies in times of crisis*. Geneva: ILO/International Labour Office.
30. IPEA. (2021). *Desigualdade de gênero e trabalho doméstico no Brasil*. Brasília: IPEA.
31. IPEA. (2022). *Desigualdade regional e trabalho doméstico*. Brasília: IPEA.
32. Kilomba, G. (2019). *Memórias da plantação: Episódios de racismo cotidiano*. Rio de Janeiro: Cobogó.
33. Kofes, M. S. (1990). *Diferença e identidades nas armadilhas da igualdade e desigualdade: Interação e relação entre patroas em empregadas domésticas* [Doctoral dissertation, Universidade de São Paulo]. São Paulo.
34. Koutsoukos, S. S. M. (2007). *Amas na fotografia brasileira da segunda metade do século XIX 3/4*. Programa Cultura e Pensamento. Available at: <https://www.studium.iar.unicamp.br/africanidades/koutsoukos/3.htm> Retrieved on January 18, 2022.
35. Lara, S. H. (1998). *Escravidão, cidadania e história do Brasil*. *Projeto História*, 16, 25–38. Available at: <https://revistas.pucsp.br/index.php/revph/article/view/11185/8196> Retrieved on January 18, 2022.
36. Lei Complementar nº 150, de 1º de Junho de 2015. (2015). *Dispõe sobre o contrato de trabalho doméstico*. Presidência da República. Available at: http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/leis/lcp/lcp150.htm

37. Marini, R. M. (2005). Dialética da dependência. In R. Traspadini & J. P. Stédille (Eds.), Ruy Mauro Marini: Vida e obra (pp. XX–XX). São Paulo: Expressão Popular.
38. Martins, S. P. (2013). Manual do trabalho doméstico (12th ed.). São Paulo: Atlas.
39. Medeiros, L. (2018, March 2). Jessé de Souza: Identidade do brasileiro é fruto de três mentiras contadas pela elite. Centro de Estudos Estratégicos da Fiocruz. Available at: <https://cee.fiocruz.br/?q=jesse-de-souza-identidade-do-brasileiro-e-fruto-de-tres-mentiras-contadas-pela-elite>
40. Melo, H. P. (1998). O serviço doméstico remunerado no Brasil: De criadas a trabalhadoras. Rio de Janeiro: IPEA.
41. Michaelis. (2023). Resistência. In Michaelis Online. Available at: <https://michaelis.uol.com.br/moderno-portugues/busca/portugues-brasileiro/resistencia>
42. Negro, A. L., & Gomes, F. (2006). Além das senzalas e fábricas: Uma história social do trabalho. Tempo Social, 18(1).
43. OIT. (2021). Violência e assédio no trabalho doméstico. Genebra: OIT.
44. Pereira, B. P. (2011). De escravas a empregadas domésticas: A dimensão social e o “lugar” das mulheres negras no pós-abolição [Conference presentation]. 26º Simpósio Nacional de História - Anpuh: 50 anos, São Paulo, Brasil. Available at: http://www.snh2011.anpuh.org/resources/anais/14/1308183602_ARQUIVO_ArtigoANPUH-Bergman.pdf
45. Pinheiro, L., Lira, F., Rezende, M., & Fontoura, N. (2019). Os desafios do passado no trabalho doméstico do século XXI: Reflexões para o caso brasileiro a partir dos dados da PNAD contínua. Brasília: IPEA. Available at: http://repositorio.ipea.gov.br/bitstream/11058/9538/1/td_2528.pdf
46. Quijano, A. (2005). Colonialidade do poder, eurocentrismo e América Latina. In E. Landier (Ed.), A colonialidade do saber: Eurocentrismo e ciências sociais. Perspectivas latinoamericanas (pp. XX–XX). Buenos Aires: CLACSO.
47. Saffioti, H. (1978). Emprego doméstico e capitalismo. Petrópolis: Vozes.
48. Saffioti, H. (2004). Gênero, patriarcado e violência. São Paulo: Fundação Perseu Abramo.
49. Saffioti, H. (2013). A mulher na sociedade de classes: Mito e realidade (3rd ed.). São Paulo: Expressão Popular.
50. Saffioti, H. (2015). Gênero, patriarcado, violência. São Paulo: Fundação Perseu Abramo.
51. Souza, B. O. (2008). Aquilombar-se: Panorama histórico, identitário e político do Movimento Quilombola Brasileiro [Master's thesis, Universidade de Brasília]. Available at: https://repositorio.unb.br/bitstream/10482/2130/1/2008_BarbaraOliveiraSouza.pdf?origin=publication_detail
52. Souza, J. (2009). A ralé brasileira: Quem é e como vive. Belo Horizonte: Editora da UFMG.
53. Souza, J. (2017). A elite do atraso: Da escravidão à lava jato. Rio de Janeiro: Leya.
54. Telles, L. F. S. (2011). Libertas entre sobrados: Contratos de trabalho doméstico em São Paulo na derrocada da escravidão [Master's thesis, Universidade de São Paulo]. São Paulo.