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EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF WORK, RACE, AND AGING IN THE LIVES OF ELDERLY BLACK WOMEN

ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersectional challenges faced by elderly Black women living in peripheral communities in northeastern Brazil. These women several obstacles stemming from their race, gender, age and socioeconomic status. How do elderly Black women perceive the effects of racism, sexism, and ageism on their lived experiences, particularly in relation to health, social interactions, and labor market participation? Objective: To analyze their perceptions of the aging process, focusing on the invisible scars left on their bodies and lives by systemic inequalities. This qualitative study employs thematic analysis to explore the lived experiences of Brazilian Black elderly women living in a peripheral community. Twenty voluntaries, aged 60 to 84, participated in the study. Data collection included narrative interviews based on the Oral History method. The data revealed three main themes: "Stories of Struggle and Overcoming", "Symbols of Resistance" and "Work and Economic Contributions". These narratives highlighted the impact of structural racism and ageism on the women's self-perception, well-being, and identity. While the women often faced marginalization and discrimination, their stories also reflected immense strength and a commitment to passing on resilience to future generations. the study shows the importance of addressing the needs of elderly Black women through public policies aimed at education, health and social inclusion. Their experiences shows a critical idea into the broader struggles of marginalized communities in Brazil, emphasizing the need for systemic change to promote equality and justice.

Keywords

Intersectionality; Black women; Aging; Racism; Labor market.

1. Introduction

“Ending racism and all related forms of discrimination is vital. And it will help build a better world for all of us”. (Michelle Bachelet, un high commissioner for human rights, February 2021)

In light of Brazil's emerging social issues and historical debts, being an elderly Black woman in peripheral communities means confronting daily obstacles that significantly impact physical and mental health, as well as relationships with various social groups (Brandileone, 2021; Pagano, 2014).

Racism and other forms of prejudice have created a segregating system that marginalizes Black, northeastern (xenophobia) and elderly women, pushing them away from social and professional circles (Macinko et al., 2012). This exclusion affects their access to the labor market and consequently, their overall health and well-being, as emphasized by the World Health Organization (OMS, 2021).

Within this context, the discussion of society's treatment of Black female bodies is striking. While sexualized and objectified in youth, Black women become undesirable and undervalued in old age. The aging process and societal rejection leave lasting psychological scars, which diminish their autonomy, self-confidence, and social relationships. As a result, these women are more vulnerable to various forms of violence, harassment, and precarious work conditions (Barbosa et al., 2019; Domingues, 2007).

The intersectional perspective reveals how social, historical, political, and cultural aspects are shaped by the triad of racism, capitalism, and patriarchy, which creates unequal zones for certain subjects. Kilomba (2019) highlights the symbolic position occupied by the body of a Black woman, often tied to discourses of hatred, exclusion from prominent spaces, servitude, and, frequently, indifference—all of which are intertwined with the oppressive system of racism (Kilomba, 2019).

This echoes the powerful words of Angela Davis, who once said, “I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept.” The systemic inequalities addressed here speak to the urgency of confronting these systems of oppression.

Within this context, the discussion of society's treatment of Black female bodies is striking. While sexualized and objectified in youth, Black women become undesirable and undervalued in old age. The aging process and societal rejection leave lasting psychological scars, which diminish their autonomy, self-confidence, and social relationships. As a result, these women are more vulnerable to various forms of violence, harassment, and precarious work conditions (Heringer, 2002; James-Conterelli et al., 2023; Krok-Schoen et al., 2023; Macinko et al., 2012). Given that aging affects both individuals and their social ties, the experiences of these women resonate across generations.

Although there are various ways of experiencing aging, little is known about the aging process and its meanings for Black women, especially those living in northeastern Brazil. Studies suggest that Black women face a range of social challenges, including sexism, racism, and ageism (Lewis et al., 2017; Ng et al., 2023). These conditions can act as barriers not only to aging well but also to their inclusion in the labor market and social integration within their communities.

This study aims to shed light on how Black elderly women's participation in the labor market impacts their broader social and familial relationships. By amplifying their voices, the research seeks to explore the intersections of oppression, reevaluate their past and present social and work relationships, and examine how the "invisible scars" of aging can be reinterpreted as symbols of resistance. These experiences, embedded in the fabric of their lives, are essential for empowering new generations and fostering a more equitable society.

Key questions guide this exploration: How have these women's experiences in the labor market shaped their perceptions of aging? What scars—both visible and invisible—do they carry, and how do these marks influence their identity and resilience? Thus, the objective of this research is to analyze the perceptions of aging among elderly Black women in the Dendê community, focusing on the impacts of systemic exclusion and their transformation of these experiences into acts of resistance.

2. Methodological Approach

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of Black elderly women residing in Brazilian peripheral communities, with a focus on understanding how social constructs such as aging, racism, and sexism intersect with their life trajectories. Qualitative research is particularly suited for this inquiry because it allows for an in-depth examination of subjective experiences and meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The thematic analysis employed here is guided by the methodologies of Bardin's content analysis (2011) and Braun and Clarke's thematic approach (2006), creating a balanced structure between systematic rigor and interpretive flexibility.

Non-participant observation was crucial in providing contextual insights that complemented the narrative interviews. By observing the participants' lived environments, the researchers were able to validate and enrich the data collected from the interviews, offering a more holistic view of the participants' realities (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994).

Bardin's content analysis, known for its methodological thoroughness, was integrated into the study to ensure systematic coding and categorization of the data. This method facilitates the reduction of raw data into meaningful themes through a transparent and replicable process (Bardin, 2011). On the other hand, Braun and Clarke's thematic approach provides the interpretative layer needed to uncover the deeper social, emotional, and cultural meanings within the participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The integration of these two approaches enables a comprehensive exploration of the data, capturing both explicit content and underlying meanings.

To ensure the rigor and credibility of this qualitative study, strategies such as triangulation, member checking, and reflective notes were employed. Triangulation was achieved through the collaboration of three researchers who independently analyzed the data, providing multiple perspectives and reducing researcher bias (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Additionally, member checking was implemented by sharing preliminary findings with participants to confirm that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences.

2.1 Study type

This cross-sectional qualitative study, conducted between February and March 2024, delves into the historical and social contexts of Black elderly women's lived experiences. Narrative interviews were used to collect data, drawing on the tradition of narrative inquiry to give voice to participants' personal stories and the social meanings embedded within them (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Additionally, a semiotic analysis was integrated to explore the symbolic dimensions of their narratives, providing insight into how the women use signs and symbols to express their experiences of aging, discrimination, and resilience (CRESWELL, 2010).

The semiotic approach enabled a nuanced understanding of the participants' language, gestures, and other forms of expression, adding a deeper layer of analysis to the data. These symbolic elements often reveal cultural and social underpinnings that would otherwise remain unarticulated (Chandler, 2004). As the study centers on marginalized voices, it was conducted by a team of female researchers to ensure a culturally sensitive approach, fostering trust and authenticity in the data collection process (Hanson et al., 2005).

The semiotic analysis focused on identifying symbols and signs within the participants' narratives, revealing deeper meanings connected to their lived experiences. This approach helped to interpret how these symbols reflected broader societal structures, such as racism and sexism, and their impact on the aging process. The integration of semiotic analysis with thematic exploration provided a comprehensive understanding of both explicit and implicit meanings (Creswell, 2010).

2.2 Selection of Volunteers

Twenty Black elderly women from the Dendê community were selected for this study, based on the inclusion criteria of being over 60 years old, self-identifying as Black or Brown, and residing in the community for over ten years. The purposive sampling method was employed to ensure that the participants represented the specific demographic under study, aligning with the study's focus on marginalized and underrepresented groups in qualitative research (Patton, 2014).

The sample size was determined by data saturation, where the inclusion of additional participants no longer generated new themes (Guest, 2006; Malterud et al., 2016). The recruitment process was facilitated by a local community leader, who played a key role in discussing the feasibility of data collection and ensuring the cultural appropriateness of the research approach.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

The narrative interviews were designed to elicit rich, detailed accounts of the women's perceptions of aging, racism, and sexism, with the goal of understanding how these intersecting factors shaped their life stories. The central guiding question—"What is the life story of (name of volunteer), a Black elderly woman living in a peripheral community, and how do you perceive the aging process and the scars left on your body over time?"—was open-ended to allow participants to share their experiences in their own terms, while non-participant observation complemented the interviews by providing insights into the social and physical contexts of their lives (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994).

The thematic analysis was carried out in three stages, following Bardin's (2011) framework: pre-analysis, material exploration, and treatment of results. This involved the full transcription, textualization, and transcreation of the interviews (Meihy, 2005), ensuring that the narratives were faithfully represented while also allowing for the coding and interpretation of key themes. The data were independently analyzed by three researchers to ensure intercoder reliability, and thematic maps were developed to visualize the relationships between identified themes. This collaborative approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the complexities within the data, ensuring that the analysis captured both commonalities and individual variations in the participants' experiences (Bardin, 2016; Meihy, 2005). The final themes were derived through a collaborative process among the three researchers, ensuring consistency and depth in the interpretation.

2.4 Ethical and Legal Aspects of the Research

The study followed all ethical guidelines set out in Resolution No. 466/2012, ensuring the protection and dignity of all participants. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to data collection, and all identifying information was anonymized to protect their privacy. The research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (COÉTICA) of UNIFOR (Approval No. 6.589.670), which ensured that the study adhered to ethical standards in human research.

3. Results and Discussion

The study included 20 Black women, aged 60 to 84 years. The majority had completed high school education (67.7%), but less than 5% had attained higher education. Most participants did not reside with a partner (60.4%).

Based on the results, several important discussion points emerged regarding the intersection of generation, gender, and race. Although this study is exploratory in nature, aimed at investigating a phenomenon that has been underexplored by the scientific community, the interviews undeniably revealed complex experiences related to the realities of the participating women.

Therefore, key topics for reflection will be presented, from which the findings of the interviews will be discussed alongside relevant references from the field. Through the analysis, three main categories emerged: Stories of Struggle and Overcoming and Symbols of Resistance and Work and Economic Contributions. These themes reflect the experiences and perceptions of elderly Black women regarding their encounters with discrimination, health, and the labor market.

3.1 Stories of Struggle and Overcoming

This theme highlights the personal challenges faced by individuals and the ways they persevere through adversity. The narratives provided in the interviews reflect a common struggle with aging, physical health, socioeconomic conditions and discrimination. Overcoming these obstacles often involves emotional resilience, reliance on faith, and social support.

The archetype of the Strong Black Woman is a culturally idealized notion that assumes these women present a facade of self-confidence, self-sacrifice, and psychological, emotional, and physical strength (Ribeiro, 2018).

The narratives highlighted both pain and processes of overcoming. Consider the accounts of W1, 64 years old, domestic worker, and W2, 70 years old, retired laundress:

"I have always had difficulties in my life, my mother was always poor, and I had to work from a young age... I never learned to read or write, but today I am happy because my daughter has a formal job and knows how to read" (W1). "

"I am not ashamed of my body or my gray hair, but I know that we women suffer a lot at work, at home, and even when we go out on the street. Everything is harder for women" (W2).

There is a recognized need to develop approaches, methods, educational strategies and technologies that can assist society at all levels in promoting the development of a just and equitable society (Klaic et al., 2022).

Unfortunately, there is a lack of public policies aimed at the care of Black women and the elderly population in vulnerable social situations, particularly in the Northeast region, where environmental and cultural challenges present greater complexity for comprehensive family health care.

A story of overcoming obstacles can be found in the testimony of W14, a 71-year-old retiree:

“It doesn’t matter how many times they tell me I can’t or that I’m not wanted... I’ve faced so many ‘no’s’ in my life that I’ve learned to turn them into ‘yes’, ‘I want and I can’. I’m a woman, I’m Black, I’m elderly, but above all, I’m strong and determined. There’s nothing I can’t achieve with my strength and my faith.”

The stories of struggle and resilience from Black, elderly, Northeastern, and marginalized women are powerful testimonies of resilience and strength in the face of adversity.

These women encounter a series of challenges due to the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination, including racism, ageism, regionalism, and sexism. Yet, through their determination and courage, they emerge as inspiring examples of how it is possible to overcome even the most difficult circumstances (Soares Filho et al., 2022; Szwarcwald et al., 2016).

Thus, the narratives bring visibility to the harmful effects of living systematically under structural racism on the self-images of women, particularly the elderly and those in vulnerable situations (Gaudenzi et al., 2023). Woman 15 (69 years) recalls her struggles with abusive employers who referred to her with derogatory racial terms and forced her to give up her children. She notes,

I worked as a housemaid. My only time to study was at night... my employer didn’t accept my children, so I had to give them away. Later, I got pregnant again and was forced to give that child away too.

The women selected grew up in communities where access to education and opportunities was limited. Nevertheless, they persevered, overcoming barriers and challenges in their pursuit of knowledge and the improvement of their living conditions. Being an elderly woman from the Northeast and a resident of vulnerable communities becomes a continuous struggle against adversity, marked by resilience. These narratives demonstrate the strength required to confront life’s challenges, including health deterioration, socioeconomic struggles, and exclusion.

3.2 Symbols of Resistance

This theme explores how resistance manifests in everyday acts of survival and defiance against oppressive social structures, whether through small acts of autonomy, solidarity with others, or simply by continuing to live with dignity despite difficult circumstances.

You can connect these two topics by emphasizing the theme of resistance in both cases, despite different forms of adversity. Here's a suggestion:

Both Interviewee 15 and 19 embody resistance in their own ways. While Interviewee 15 demonstrates her resilience through maintaining independence despite the physical limitations of aging, saying, 'I do what I can, I sweep the house, I cook... I know my body is aging, but I feel good', Interviewee 19 resists the oppressive conditions of her work environment and racial discrimination: 'I couldn't take the abuse anymore... one employer would even yell, telling me to clean everything again, but I always kept calm and carried on.'

These narratives reflect the strength required to endure and resist different forms of marginalization, whether related to physical decline or societal mistreatment.

Symbols play a crucial role in the expression and mobilization of resistance movements globally. Throughout history, humans have employed symbols to represent collective ideas, values, and aspirations. By sharing their stories of struggle and resilience, these women not only inspire those facing similar circumstances but also impact society at large. Their narratives serve as powerful symbols of resistance, challenging deeply embedded structural inequalities and fostering a collective awareness for meaningful societal transformation (Marsiglia, 2013; Ribeiro, 2018).

In this same perspective, Cida Bento (2019) highlights and elaborates on the complexity of this issue:

"I believe it is essential to recognize and discuss these and other relations of domination in order to create conditions for the advancement toward a different type of society and new civilizational pacts. Relations of domination based on gender, race, class, and origin, among others, share significant similarities in how they are constructed and perpetuated through largely implicit pacts" (Cida Bento, 2029, p. 30).

Another significant factor revealed in the participants' interviews when asked about aging was the perception of prejudice directed towards elderly individuals. As reflected in the narrative of W3, 65 years old:

"As a Black, old woman, I am bothered, and it always hurt me... I fought against it my entire life, but I taught my children to be proud of who they are."

This sentiment was echoed in the account of W4, 80 years old, retired:

"I used to be beaten by my husband every week until the day I decided to change my life and leave him... I took my children and went to my sister's house... today, my daughter says she will never let any man hit her."

Ageism, also referred to as age discrimination or idadism, manifests when stigmatization and/or discriminatory practices are directed by society and its institutions toward certain age groups. (Barbosa et al., 2019).

A significant portion of the interviewed women perceive aging as a process marked by successive losses, aligning with the perspectives of First-Wave Psychological Theories of Aging. In this view, aging is predominantly understood as an intrapsychic and isolated phenomenon, disregarding its interaction with contextual and social factors.

Racism remains a persistent issue in Brazil, deeply rooted in the country's history, marked by slavery and some of the most brutal forms of social, religious, economic, gender, and age inequalities. Fostering a culture of empowerment for future generations is a vital strategy for strengthening Black girls and women (Triplett et al., 2023).

Despite all the challenges they have faced, these women continue to be sources of love, care, and support for their families and communities. Their presence is both comforting and inspiring, and their wisdom is invaluable.

"I know it's hard to live like this, but I try to be happy and pass that on to my grandchildren." (W10, 71 years old).

"I was never afraid to live and do what I wanted... I have been mistreated, but I never let my daughter know about it. I always showed strength so that she could be happy." (W20, 76 years old).

"I have gone through so much pain, but I know that my granddaughters will face different situations, not mine, and I teach them that." (W14, 79 years old).

While the narrative interviews provided insight into the experiences and life trajectories of these women, it is essential to acknowledge some limitations. Notably, the interviews were conducted within a specific social and cultural context of the participants, which may suggest that the experiences shared do not fully represent the diversity of the experiences of Black elderly women across all northeastern states of Brazil. Therefore, while these narratives are valuable, they should be supplemented with other contextualized analyses.

Nevertheless, these considerations do not diminish the study's impact. It is understood that the interviews can strengthen the identity and empowerment of Black women, as well as promote social changes toward equality and social justice.

3.3 Work and Economic Contributions

The theme of Work and Economic Contributions shows the difficult, often exploitative conditions faced by these women, but also reveals their resilience and determination to support their families. Their stories reflect the broader social inequalities of race, class, and gender, but also showcase their strength in overcoming these challenges.

Previous studies have been exposing the segregation and prejudice directed at Black women, revealing the structural aspects of Brazilian inequalities. We emphasize that the intersections of gender, race, and social class exacerbate the marginalization of Black women, hindering their access to human and social rights, such as equal opportunities in the labor market and equal pay for performing the same roles. Recognizing the interconnectedness of race, gender, class, and ageism as overlapping categories deepens the understanding of the multiple forms of oppression (Gaudenzi et al., 2023; Triplett et al., 2023).

Reflecting on the inclusion of Black people in the labor market, the author Cida Bento, in her book *The Pact of Whiteness* (2009), highlights several relevant aspects regarding racism, the labor market, and discrimination:

"In the statistics on labor market inequalities, one constant stands out: Black women occupy the bottom of the pyramid, receiving the lowest wages and holding the most subordinate positions. Domestic workers, in this context, attract significant attention from scholars and Black women's organizations due to the overwhelming presence of Black women in this role and the precarious nature of their working and living conditions."

The interviews reveal a consistent thread of exploitation, with many participants experiencing poor treatment, low pay, and excessive demands from their employers. An elderly Black (W6) faced not only economic struggles but also emotional hardships, including being forced to give up her children because they were not accepted by her employers. In her words: "I couldn't take the abuse anymore... they would yell at me, and I always kept calm, but it was too much" (W6).

However, another elderly Black woman (W15) interviewed seem to have shaped their memories and future expectations based on personal experiences, passing these lessons on to future generations. As illustrated by the account of W15, a 69-year-old housewife:

"I never let anyone belittle me! They used to call me 'neguinha,' 'monkey,' and even today they call me 'old!' But I stand up for myself and don't let anyone put me down. I teach my granddaughters the same! I tell them not to let anyone speak badly about their skin color or their hair."

These ideas recall her being referred to with racial slurs, such as 'negrinha,' by her employers, reflecting the intersecting layers of marginalization faced by Black women in domestic work. Despite these experiences, she maintained her dignity and kept working to support herself and her family.

Another woman (W11) reflects on her experience working as a domestic worker, highlighting the mistreatment she faced not from her employers, but from a colleague in the household. Despite having employers who treated her well, her coworker imposed harsh and dehumanizing behavior, including preventing her from accessing basic needs like water. As she recalls (W12, 60 years):

"We couldn't even drink water... She said if we crossed into the kitchen, she would throw a broomstick at us. She treated us terribly, but the bosses were always kind to us".

Another woman shared her experience of early work in domestic labor, reflecting on the challenges and sacrifices she had to make:

"I always worked. I worked in a family's home. [...] My only time to study was at night [...] but there was so much work, you get very tired, and at night you feel sleepy." (W8, 70 years)

Their narratives reveal systemic exploitation—manifested in long hours, poor treatment, and low pay—while also showcasing their unwavering determination to provide for their families and maintain their dignity. Despite facing severe discrimination and, in some cases, being forced to make heartbreaking sacrifices, such as giving up their children, these women demonstrated remarkable strength and perseverance.

4. Final Considerations

The analysis of the situation of Black women in the labor market, from an intersectional perspective, reveals a complex reality where the oppressions of gender, race and age intersect and mutually reinforce one another.

By sharing their experiences and hardships, these women challenge stereotypes, raise awareness, and inspire others to join the fight for justice and equality in Brazil. This study emphasizes the importance of amplifying the voices of these marginalized communities and recognizing their invaluable contributions to building a more just and inclusive world.

Public policies can be implemented to promote education and awareness on issues affecting Black, elderly, northeastern women living in vulnerable communities. This includes incorporating the history of the Black movement, gender studies, and the deconstruction of social stereotypes into educational frameworks.

For many of the women, labor—primarily in domestic work—was a site of both exploitation and empowerment. Despite enduring harsh working conditions and racial discrimination, the women consistently demonstrated resilience, maintaining their dignity and sense of self-worth in the face of adversity.

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