


TRAJETÓRIAS DE MULHERES NEGRAS NO ENSINO SUPERIOR: BARREIRAS, CONQUISTAS E CAMINHOS PARA AVANÇO**TRAJECTORIES OF BLACK WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION: BARRIERS, ACHIEVEMENTS AND WAYS FORWARD****TRAYECTORIAS DE LAS MUJERES NEGRAS EN LA ENSEÑANZA SUPERIOR: OBSTÁCULOS, LOGROS Y VÍAS DE PROGRESO**

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RESUMO

Este artigo realiza um mapeamento e análise das trajetórias de mulheres negras no ensino superior brasileiro a partir de uma perspectiva interseccional de raça, gênero, classe e regionalidade. A partir de uma revisão narrativa de literatura, foram examinados estudos acadêmicos, relatórios institucionais e dados estatísticos coletados em bases como SciELO, Portal de Periódicos CAPES, Ipea, IBGE e ENAP. Os resultados evidenciam barreiras estruturais (desigualdade de acesso e permanência), institucionais (sub-representação no corpo docente, baixa efetividade de cotas em concursos) e simbólicas (racismo velado, epistemicídio, misoginoir, tokenismo), que impactam inclusive a saúde mental dessas estudantes e docentes. Paralelamente, identificam-se estratégias de resistência — como a escrevivência, o aquilombamento epistêmico e as pedagogias antirracistas — que promovem a produção de saberes contra-hegemônicos, diversificam currículos e fortalecem redes de apoio. O estudo destaca conquistas recentes: expansão das matrículas após a Lei 12.711/2012, ingresso de primeiras gerações de doutoras negras em áreas antes inacessíveis e efeitos multiplicadores de representatividade que elevam autoestima discente e pluralizam a ciência. Por fim, são discutidas práticas e políticas imprescindíveis para consolidar avanços: ampliação de ações afirmativas no ingresso, permanência e carreira docente; inclusão plena das Leis 10.639/2003 e 11.645/2008; reconhecimento institucional do trabalho de mentoria e extensão; e fortalecimento de coletivos de mulheres negras como espaços de produção intelectual. Conclui-se que a presença dessas mulheres movimenta estruturas acadêmicas historicamente excludentes, mas a igualdade substantiva depende da articulação entre políticas públicas robustas e a continuidade de práticas insurgentes lideradas por intelectuais negras.

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Palavras-chave: Mulheres negras. Ensino superior. Feminismo negro. Aquilombamento epistêmico.

ABSTRACT

This article maps and analyzes the trajectories of black women in Brazilian higher education from an intersectional perspective of race, gender, class and regionality. Based on a narrative literature review, it examines academic studies, institutional reports and statistical data collected from databases such as SciELO, the CAPES Journal Portal, Ipea, IBGE and ENAP. The results show structural barriers (unequal access and permanence), institutional barriers (under-representation in the teaching staff, low effectiveness of quotas in competitive examinations) and symbolic barriers (veiled racism, epistemicide, misogyny, tokenism), which also impact on the mental health of these students and teachers. At the same time, strategies of resistance are identified - such as writing for a living, epistemic aquilombamento and anti-racist pedagogies - which promote the production of counter-hegemonic knowledge, diversify curricula and strengthen support networks. The study highlights recent achievements: the expansion of enrolment following Law 12.711/2012, the entry of the first generation of black female doctors in previously inaccessible areas and the multiplier effects of representation that raise student self-esteem and pluralize science. Finally, practices and policies that are essential for consolidating progress are discussed: expanding affirmative action in admission, tenure and teaching careers; full inclusion of Laws 10.639/2003 and 11.645/2008; institutional recognition of mentoring and extension work; and strengthening black women's collectives as spaces for intellectual production. The conclusion is that the presence of these women moves historically exclusionary academic structures, but substantive equality depends on the articulation between robust public policies and the continuity of insurgent practices led by black intellectuals.

Keywords: Black women. Higher education. Black feminism. Epistemic aquilombamento.

RESUMEN

Este artículo mapea y analiza las trayectorias de las mujeres negras en la educación superior brasileña desde una perspectiva interseccional de raza, género, clase y regionalidad. A partir de una revisión narrativa de la literatura, se examinaron estudios académicos, informes institucionales y datos estadísticos recogidos de bases de datos como SciELO, Portal de Periódicos CAPES, Ipea, IBGE y ENAP. Los resultados muestran barreras estructurales (desigualdad de acceso y permanencia), institucionales (subrepresentación en el cuerpo docente, baja efectividad de las cuotas en los concursos) y simbólicas (racismo velado, epistemicidio, misoginia, tokenismo), que impactan incluso en la salud mental de esos estudiantes y profesores. Al mismo tiempo, se identifican estrategias de resistencia -como la escritura, el aquilombamento epistémico y las pedagogías antirracistas- que promueven la producción de conocimiento contrahegemónico, diversifican los currículos y fortalecen las redes de apoyo. El estudio destaca logros recientes: la ampliación de las matrículas tras la Ley 12.711/2012, la entrada de la primera generación de doctoras negras en áreas antes inaccesibles y los efectos multiplicadores de la representatividad que elevan la autoestima de los estudiantes y pluralizan la ciencia. Finalmente, se discuten prácticas y políticas esenciales para la consolidación de los avances: la ampliación de las acciones afirmativas en el ingreso, la permanencia y la carrera docente; la plena inclusión de las Leyes 10.639/2003 y 11.645/2008; el reconocimiento institucional del trabajo de tutoría y extensión; y el fortalecimiento de los colectivos de mujeres negras como espacios de producción intelectual. La conclusión es que la presencia de estas mujeres mueve estructuras académicas históricamente excluyentes, pero la igualdad sustantiva depende de la articulación de políticas públicas robustas y de la continuidad de prácticas insurgentes lideradas por intelectuales negras.



Palabras clave: Mujeres negras. Educación superior. Feminismo negro. Aquilombamento epistémico.



INTRODUCTION

The presence of black women in Brazilian higher education is marked by a trajectory of struggles and achievements that exposes the intersections between race, gender, class, and regionality. Historically, black women have been marginalized in universities, often restricted to subordinate roles, having, since the nineteenth century, a presence in higher education institutions predominantly as cleaning or service workers, not as students or teachers; only in recent times have some started to occupy classrooms as students and teachers, even so far below their proportion in the Brazilian population (Santos, 2020). This is a situation that reflects structural and institutional barriers rooted in racism and sexism in Brazilian society. As Crisóstomo and Reigota (2010) point out, the condition of black women university professors has traditionally been a condition of exclusion, revealing a history of "neo-racism" in the country's universities.

At the same time, when black women break these barriers and access the academic space, this feat represents much more than an individual advance – it is a political and symbolic act of occupying a public space previously restricted to people with specific social markers (mostly white men), with the potential to transform power structures and expand plurality in the production of knowledge (Azevedo; Sacramento, 2022).

Based on this, this article seeks to analyze the trajectory of black women in Brazilian higher education, articulating an intersectional perspective. Discuss:

1. the structural, institutional and symbolic barriers faced for access, permanence and ascension in the university;
2. the strategies of resistance, writings and insurgent practices employed by these women in their trajectories of overcoming;
3. the achievements, impacts, and contributions of these black women in academia and society in general, and
4. the transformative practices and policies implemented or necessary – including affirmative action, anti-racist pedagogies and "epistemological quilombagens".

The analysis is based on updated data and theoretical contributions from authors such as Lélia Gonzalez, Sueli Carneiro, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Conceição Evaristo, among others, as well as on recent studies on the subject (Oliveira, 2020; Azevedo and Sacramento, 2022; Santos, 2022; Santos, 2020; Silva, 2023; Santos et al., 2024, etc.).

The intention is to promote an intersectional discussion on the challenges and advances of black women in Brazilian higher education, culminating in considerations about paths to a more equitable and diverse university.

METHODOLOGY

This study is configured as a narrative review of the literature, whose main objective is to analyze and discuss the panorama of the insertion and experiences of black women in Brazilian higher education. To this end, a careful selection of academic publications and gray literature was carried out, seeking to build a comprehensive dialogue on the subject.

The first stage of data collection consisted of a survey of scientific production in recognized databases, such as SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online) and the CAPES Journal Portal. Descriptors such as "black women" AND ("higher education" OR "university" OR "higher education") were used. The pre-selection of articles, course completion papers, dissertations, and theses considered the relevance and centrality of the discussion for the proposed theme, prioritizing studies that addressed the trajectories, challenges, and strategies of black women in the Brazilian university context.

In a second stage, complementary and fundamental for the robustness of the analysis, the gray literature was used. Reports, research, statistical data and publications from research institutions and government agencies of notorious relevance in the debate on racial and gender inequalities in education were consulted. Of particular note here are the materials produced by the Institute of Applied Economic Research (Ipea), the National School of Public Administration (Enap), the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), as well as other non-governmental organizations and observatories dedicated to racial and educational issues. The search for these materials was carried out directly on the portals of these institutions and through references in academic studies.

The final selection of bibliographic material, both academic and gray, was guided by the pertinence and contribution of each document to the construction of a cohesive narrative about the presence of black women in higher education. Priority was given to documents that presented recent quantitative and qualitative data, in-depth analyses of the social markers of difference (race, gender, class), and discussions on public and institutional policies.

Finally, the analysis of the selected documentary corpus was carried out from a narrative and interpretative approach. We sought to identify and discuss the convergences and divergences between the findings, the main obstacles faced by black women (such as structural and institutional racism, sexism, and socioeconomic barriers), affirmative action policies and their impacts, as well as the strategies of resistance and the contributions of these women to the transformation of the academic environment and the production of knowledge.

STRUCTURAL, INSTITUTIONAL AND SYMBOLIC BARRIERS

Black women face multiple obstacles to entering and progressing in higher education, resulting from the intertwining of racial, gender, socioeconomic and regional inequalities. From a structural point of view, the inequality of access to higher education between blacks and whites remains significant. According to data from the Institute of Applied Economic Research (Ipea), only 18% of black young people aged 18 to 24 were enrolled in higher education in 2020, in contrast to 36% of white young people in the same age group (Silva, 2020). A disparity that reflects not a difference in capacity, but historical inequalities in access to quality basic education, income distribution and opportunities. Most black women who reach university are the first generation of their families in higher education, many from low-income families and parents with low education (Santos et al., 2024). Class and race barriers, therefore, add up: structural racism limited the educational opportunities of the black population for decades (or centuries), while sexism restricted the expectations and incentives for women, especially black women, to pursue academic careers.

Even after overcoming the admission funnel, institutional and daily barriers to the permanence and progression of black women in academia persist. In the university environment, they often face the loneliness of being the only (or one of the very few) black people in their course or department. Reports from black university professors indicate that they often suffer questions of belonging: their presence challenges racial stereotypes that are so ingrained that colleagues and students, when they see them, initially "do not see them in this position" of intellectual authority, but rather associate them with images of subordination – as "a peripheral and subalternized black woman", as narrated by a professor interviewed by Santos and colleagues (2024). Only when people realize that they are university professors, "the discourse changes".

This constant need to assert their legitimacy points to symbolic barriers: stereotypes and prejudices that deny black women the place of subject of knowledge. The historical naturalization of servile roles for black women has contributed to making racism and sexism invisible in the academic space – such processes exist, but they are often hidden under an appearance of cordiality in social relations (Santos, 2020). This corresponds to what scholars call veiled institutional racism (Ribeiro, 2024), in which there are no formal laws excluding black women, but organizational cultures and unwritten practices persist that hinder their full inclusion.

From a quantitative point of view, the underrepresentation of black women in higher education is manifest in both the student body and the faculty. Although the proportion of

black students (sum of blacks and browns) has grown significantly in the last decade – almost quadrupling between 2010 and 2019 and reaching 38.15% of those enrolled thanks to quota policies – this percentage is still below the representativeness of this group in the total population (about 56% of Brazilians declare themselves black) (GIFE, 2025). In other words, black men and women continue to be underrepresented in university classrooms.

In addition, among those who manage to enter, many face difficulties in staying and completing their training, given differences in previous educational trajectory and economic conditions (such as the need to work, lack of financial support, etc.). With regard to the teaching staff, the racial imbalance is even more pronounced. Recent data indicate that only about 20% of higher education professors in Brazil are black (black or brown) (Amorim, 2025). The overwhelming majority of university professors, especially in more prestigious institutions and courses, are white men, followed by white women, with very little participation of black women. In 2019, black and brown professors at federal universities corresponded to only 16.2%, although this number grew slightly compared to 2012 (13.2%) (Moreira, 2025; Tenente, 2025). In other words, less than one in five university professors is black, and the fraction specifically of black female professors is even smaller (lower than that of black male professors). A study carried out in five federal universities in the Midwest Region (Oliveira, 2020) illustrates this disparity: at the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT), one of the universities with the highest inclusion, 25% of professors were self-declared black in 2019, while at the Federal University of Grande Dourados (UFGD), this number was only 1% – virtually a total absence of black professors in the staff of this institution. Table 1 summarizes some comparative indicators of the participation of blacks in higher education.

Table 1 – Indicators on the black population and the white population in higher education.

Indicator (Year)	Black Population (Blacks and Browns)	White population
Youth 18–24 years old attending college (2020)	18% – higher education rate among blacks	36% – rate among whites in the same age group
Students enrolled in higher education (2019)	38.1% of the total number of students declare themselves black (after expansion via quotas)	– (56% in the general population)
Higher education teachers (2019)	~16% of the total number of professors declare themselves black (black or brown)	~84% (estimated) declare themselves white (mostly men)

Source: Ipea (Silva, 2020), Higher Education Census (Brazil, 2020).

These are numbers that show persistent inequalities. It should be noted that even recent public policies for the inclusion of blacks in the teaching career have had limited reach. Law No. 12,990/2014, which reserves 20% of vacancies in federal public exams for black candidates, resulted in a derisory impact on public exams for university professors: between 2014 and 2019, only 0.53% of professors appointed in public universities through competitive examinations were black or brown (Brasil, 2014; ENAP, 2021). This tiny result – far below the 20% target – demonstrates how institutional mechanisms can dilute the effectiveness of quotas (for example, by opening few vacancies per public notice or spreading vacancies by units, which reduces the application of the reserve).

In addition, the phenomenon of tokenism and hypervisibility are also latent challenges faced by Black women who manage to enter higher education, generating additional pressures that can inhibit their authenticity and creativity (Do Nascimento, 2025). Representativeness often becomes a burden when the individual is seen as a symbol rather than valued for their competence. Such a situation implies constant pressure for results and the expectation that their actions represent an entire group, leading to emotional and professional overload (Costanzi; Mesquita, 2021). Hypervisibility, in turn, accentuates the risks of exposure to criticism and marginalization in contexts with a non-inclusive institutional culture.

There is even the "misogynoir" barrier (Kwarteng, 2022), which refers to the specific intersection of misogyny and racism directed at black women, comprising symbolic and material violence that they face in academia. Gender and race stereotypes, such as hypersexualization or the association of black women with roles of subservience, negatively affect their intellectual credibility and their university experience. The accessible language used by black intellectuals, for example, can be distorted and used as a pretext to detract from the depth of the academic work produced by them, in an evident manifestation of racialized and sexist judgment.

Added to this scenario is moral and sexual harassment, which constitute a serious violation of rights that disproportionately impacts black women in the university environment. There are reports from students at the University of São Paulo (USP), to cite one, indicating that one perceives "the experience of being put in the place of the Other, of looking in all directions and not seeing anyone who looks like you [...] as an experience of violence" (Vedovato, 2024). The culture of silence and the lack of safe and effective channels for reporting and welcoming institutions aggravate the problem, often resulting in revictimization and impunity for aggressors. A significant portion of federal universities do



not even have institutional policies to combat harassment, and, when they exist, they rarely adequately address gender and race.

Finally, although no less relevant, there is the geographical factor: the barriers are accentuated in students from peripheral locations or regions such as the Northeast, historically marginalized contexts. A research by Dyane Reis (2020) presents interviews with black women from the Northeast who came out of quota policies in higher education: Maria Felipa³, whose mother is illiterate, saw school as "the only possibility" and a strategy to avoid working in the fields; Beatriz Nascimento, an only child who "married before the age of 20 and separated 4 months later", having suffered from depression, but having "turned around", he recognizes the importance of some teachers as motivators in his trajectory; and Rute de Souza, a young black woman with light skin who initially declared herself yellow due to the difficulty of racial identification, had her history marked by maternal absence, entering the undergraduate program in Social Work, but "falling in love" as she met him, having her experiences at the Academic Center and in the internship at Student Assistance as "defining her permanence at the University". Although, after graduating, she was unable to work in the area, working in a call center at the time of the interview.

The author also advocates that "any public policy, any academic work on equity, from now on, should point out the challenges imposed and the consequences that the pandemic has brought to Brazilian education" (Reis, 2020), based on the observation of difficulties for many students, such as access to the internet and precarious study conditions, especially the 70.2% of undergraduates of Federal Institutions of Higher Education (IFES) with a per capita family income of up to 1.5 minimum wages.

The barriers, whether structural, institutional, or symbolic, it is noticeable, include both inequitable selection processes and unwelcoming academic environments, in which black people, especially women, rarely find peers, mentors, or references who share their origin and experience. But there are strategies to circumvent or mitigate such barriers, as we will see below.

STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE, WRITINGS AND INSURGENT PRACTICES

In the face of such numerous obstacles, black women who enter and remain in higher education do so by resorting to various strategies of resistance – individual and collective – often innovative and insurgent in relation to the dominant academic culture. One of these strategies is what the writer Conceição Evaristo called writing, that is, narrating and writing the black experience itself as a way of affirming identity and producing

³ Codenames associated with figures who contributed to black Brazilian history were used (Reis, 2020).

knowledge (Evaristo, 2020). Writing is part of the core of the writing of black experiences, valuing the experience of black women as a legitimate source of knowledge and resistance (Pereira; Pear tree; Pocahy, 2021). Throughout their academic trajectories, black women have recorded and analyzed their experiences, producing autobiographical narratives and autoethnographic research that expose institutional racism and ways of overcoming it. This practice, in addition to being therapeutic and empowering for those who write, fulfills a political role of making visible realities previously ignored by academia and of building a theoretical framework from the perspective of black women.

For many, the family and the community of origin were the first pillars of resistance that made it possible to enter the university. It is common for these women to credit their families – even with low education – with the incentive to continue studying and seek higher education, seen as a path to social ascension. In Oliveira and Vasconcelos' (2024) research with black Geography students, all of them pointed to strong family support as a decisive factor for them to persist in education, often in the midst of adverse circumstances (fathers and mothers who, despite not having had access to university, dreamed of a different future for their daughters).

In addition to the family nucleus, community support networks and black social movements play a fundamental role. Initiatives such as community pre-university preparatory courses exclusively for blacks – such as the pioneering Steve Biko Institute, founded in Bahia in 1992 (Santos, 2021) – and collectives of black students at universities offer guidance, cultural repertoire, and emotional support. These spaces function as contemporary quilombos, where black women mutually strengthen each other and build a sense of belonging.

This phenomenon has been conceptualized as "epistemic aquilombamento" – the creation of spaces for the production of knowledge inspired by the solidarity of historical quilombos (Martins; Moisés, 2023). The idea of "acquiescing" means coming together collectively to resist and exist in hostile colonial (literal or symbolic) environments. For example, black authors report that joint academic writing itself is a form of aquilombamento: when writing in co-authorship, they "aquilomba" themselves through writing, constructing knowledge in a collective and horizontal way, in contrast to the dominant individualist and Eurocentric logic (Aragão; Mendes, 2024; De Azevedo; De Jagun, 2024).

In everyday academic life, black women develop resilient tactics to confront institutional racism and sexism. A tactic often mentioned is that of competent hypervigilance: aware that they will be questioned more, they seek to be doubly prepared, mastering the content and qualifications so as not to leave gaps for disqualification.

However, in addition to individual merit, women learn to use their own identity as a driving force. Reports by black teachers based on research by Santos and colleagues (2024) indicate that the awareness of having to "fight to appropriate a space that is always saying it does not belong to them" makes them extremely persevering. This continuous struggle for legitimacy ends up forging in them a capacity for exceptional resilience, as well as a sense of mission: many feel that they need to "become a reference, a figure of representativeness for students", since the number of black teachers is so small. That is, they take on the responsibility of opening paths for the next generations, acting as models and mentors for black students.

This stance can be understood in the light of sociologist Patricia Hill Collins' concept of the position of "outsider within" (Collins, 2016; Menezes, 2023), in which black women academics, despite being internal to the institution, maintain a critical outside look at it. In fact, the research by Santos and colleagues describes this presence (or absence) of black women in the university as that of "*outsiders*", people on the margins – based on the concept explored by Audre Lorde (2019) – within these spaces. Paradoxically, it is precisely this marginal position that allows them to see the contradictions of the academic environment and propose innovative alternatives.

One of the most powerful forms of resistance by black women in academia has been the production of counter-hegemonic knowledge, supported by black feminist theories and intersectional methodologies, based on the construct of intersectionality coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991). Authors such as Lélia Gonzalez and Sueli Carneiro, since the 1980s, have laid the foundations for understanding the reality of black women through an intersectional approach – simultaneously analyzing the effects of racism, patriarchy, and class inequalities (Lorde et al., 2019). Today, black students and researchers appropriate and expand this theoretical framework. It is common to explicitly use intersectionality as a theoretical-methodological tool, in order to "understand racism from a gender perspective and gender from a racial perspective" (Santos, 2020), questioning the processes of formation of social classes and all intertwined hierarchies. This is an approach that allows us to highlight how the experiences of black women cannot be understood by isolating only race or only gender – which connects with Du Bois' (2021) idea of "double consciousness" (the perception of oneself through two distinct and often conflicting looks) – since they simultaneously experience both oppressions in an intertwined way.

Black feminism uses intersectionality as one of the essential analytical categories for understanding the trajectories of black women. Angela Davis (2016), in her work *Women, Race and Class* (1981), points out the inseparability of structural oppressions. For Davis,

true understanding of discrimination requires an intersectional look, which is crucial to understanding the various forms of violence and exclusion experienced by black women in the academic and professional spheres.

In the classroom and teaching practice, black women have been implementing true insurgent and anti-racist pedagogies. The confrontation with a curriculum that does not reflect histories, cultures, and realities, and that often reproduces stereotypes and distorted views about the black population, is a form of symbolic violence that affects the process of identification, academic engagement, and intellectual self-esteem of black students (Pereira; Pear tree; Pocahy, 2021). Epistemicide (the destruction of knowledge not assimilated by Western culture, as described by Boaventura de Souza Santos, 1997) not only deprives them of access to references that could strengthen their identities and instrumentalize their struggles, but also impoverishes the production of university knowledge itself, which remains limited and biased.

An ethnographic research by Wellington Santos carried out with black university professors observed that these professors have deliberately acted to break with Eurocentric curricula, introducing plural content and perspectives in their disciplines (Santos, 2022). Even when they teach in scientific areas or fields where race and gender are not traditionally debated, they find ways to insert the racial debate into classes, often making it central, even if it was not originally included in the course curriculum. Such a subversive practice – of infusing the agenda of race and gender regardless of the theme – serves two purposes:

1. on the one hand, to welcome black students (who finally see themselves contemplated in the content and have their experiences legitimized in the academic debate);
2. on the other hand, to sensitize white students and the academic community in general to diversity issues, dismantling prejudices.

Black teachers often adapt their teaching methodologies to value the knowledge of minority groups, in an attitude of liberating education that recalls the proposals of bell hooks and Paulo Freire (Soares; Costa, 2019). They bring to the classroom memories, cultural elements and modes of learning connected to the distinct social realities from which they come, breaking with the "conceptual clichés" that traditionally guide Eurocentric higher education. By questioning the traditional curriculum, including black authors in bibliographies, producing critical articles, and promoting debates on racism and sexism even outside specific disciplines, these professors end up redesigning the academic space.

A clear social engagement is observed in their practice: they actively guide and support black students in their urgent demands, serve as mentors, and stimulate the formation of organic intellectuals committed to social transformation (Santos, 2022). Such insurgent practices demonstrate the agency of these women in resignifying the university from the inside out – "making the epistemological debate more plural" and the environment more welcoming to diversity.

It is important to note that this resistance of black women does not occur in isolation, but feeds on collective exchanges and the tradition of struggle of black women's movements. Many professors and researchers bring in their baggage the participation in black organizations, in terreiros of religions of African origin, progressive religious pastorals and quilombola movements. These other formative spaces were crucial in shaping her consciousness and practice. Black university professors are influenced by these community and political experiences, which enriches their worldview and directly impacts their discourse and teaching practice within the university (Santos, 2022; Santos; De Oliveira Dias, 2019). In other words, they insert values and epistemologies from outside the academy into the academy, fruits of social organization and black resistance over time – building continuity with previous generations of black intellectuals engaged in the anti-racist struggle. This process represents, in fact, an epistemological insurgency: it questions who produces valid knowledge and broadens the horizons of what is considered academic knowledge.

Often, these women end up moving between two worlds – the institutional academic and the community/popular – and acting as bridges between them, democratizing academic knowledge and bringing academic legitimacy to traditional or marginalized knowledge.

As Wellington Santos (2022) concludes in his thesis on academic black feminism, by engaging in gender and race issues and integrating them into their classes, black teachers are carrying out "commendable, inspiring, powerful, and necessary" work that challenges the foundations of current knowledge production.

The confluence of all these barriers – institutional racism, misogynoir, socioeconomic inequalities, epistemicide – has a devastating impact on the mental health of black female university students. The analysis of Race, Gender, and Mental Health in Federal Universities by the Multidisciplinary Study Group on Affirmative Action (linked to the State University of Rio de Janeiro – UERJ) indicates a high prevalence of anxiety, depression, discouragement, sleep disorders, and feelings of helplessness among this group (Freitas et al., 2020). In 2018, 67% of black and brown undergraduates at federal universities reported



suffering from anxiety, and 42% felt discouraged or unwilling to do things. Financial difficulties and the overload of student work are also pointed out as important risk factors.

This social phenomenon of the entry and rise of black women in academia demonstrates that the pioneering spirit achieved can also bring other challenges. In a research carried out by Lima (2020) on the narratives of the first generation of graduates in higher education, reveals the significant psychosocial impacts associated with educational mobility, especially with regard to the personal exhaustion experienced by these individuals. By analyzing the trajectories of students from lower classes, the author highlights how the process of academic ascension can generate internal and emotional conflicts, resulting in a sense of alienation between the university environment and its sociocultural roots.

Thus, in the face of an initially hostile environment, black women activate a plurality of resistance strategies – from family and community support, through the construction of collectives and writings, to the creative subversion of the curriculum and pedagogy – to not only survive in academia, but transform it from within. The next section will discuss the fruits of these struggles in terms of achievements and contributions achieved, both for black women themselves and for the university and society in general.

ACHIEVEMENTS, IMPACTS, AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF BLACK WOMEN IN ACADEMIA

In the last two decades, Brazilian higher education has experienced an important inflection thanks to the greater inclusion of black students and professors, especially black women. Although challenges remain, it is essential to recognize the historical achievements achieved by these women and the positive impacts of their presence in academia. As the phrase attributed to Angela Davis states: "when the black woman moves, the entire structure of society moves with her" (Santos, 2018). In fact, the growing – albeit slow – insertion of black women in the university environment has provoked far-reaching structural and epistemological transformations.

One of the main achievements concerns the significant increase in black women's access to higher education after the adoption of affirmative action policies. The Quota Law (Law No. 12,711/2012) and programs such as Prouni democratized admission to public and private universities, favoring black and low-income candidates. As a result, the number of black students in Brazilian universities increased by almost 400% between 2010 and 2019, reaching approximately 38% of the total number of students (GIFE, 2025). This breakthrough represented the realization of the college dream for thousands of young black women, many of whom became the first in their families to enter college. This is a



significant generational change: for the first time in history, we saw a significant volume of black women completing degrees, specializations and proceeding to master's and doctoral degrees. A social phenomenon of "collective achievement that breaks an intergenerational cycle" (Aguiar, 2021). This is also reflected in the composition of some careers that were previously practically inaccessible to this group. For example, in the area of Geography (as documented by Azevedo and Sacramento, 2022) and even in fields with low female representation such as Physics (Silva, 2023), we see the emergence of new black researchers building unprecedented academic trajectories in their fields.

The presence of qualified black women in graduate studies and teaching staff is beginning to produce changes in the country's academic and scientific culture. Studies published on the trajectories of black professors have been growing, and all indicate that, even in the face of challenging circumstances, the presence of these women "moves the institutional structure" of universities (Santos et al., 2024). In other words, the mere existence of black professors and black researchers in spaces that were previously exclusively white and male is already in itself a factor in destabilizing old patterns. His presence opens breaches in the "masculine, white, supposedly universal ideal" that for so long defined the standard of academic excellence. When a black woman rises to prominent positions – whether obtaining a doctorate, becoming a permanent professor, research group coordinator or occupying administrative positions – this inspires changes in perception: black students start to see themselves in these positions, white colleagues confront their prejudices (conscious or unconscious) about competence, and the institution is urged to rethink practices to welcome diversity.

An important effect of the greater participation of black women in academia is the diversification of knowledge production. These women bring research questions, theoretical and methodological approaches, and bibliographic references that previously had little space in the university. Many new research focuses have taken shape, particularly in the Humanities, Social Sciences and the Arts, but also in applied areas, from the perspective of black researchers. For example, as described by Santos and colleagues (2024), studies on ethnic-racial relations in education, health of the black population, quilombola territoriality, representation in the media, social technologies in the peripheries, among others, were driven by the work of black intellectuals.

In addition, even in fields that are traditionally neutral regarding these agendas, the presence of black women tends to enrich scientific debates. Many black professors, when working in their areas, incorporate intersectional perspectives and critical questions, contributing to breaking the single Eurocentric and androcentric view of the sciences



(Batista; Rauen, 2017; Santos et al., 2024). It is an epistemological pluralization that has far-reaching impacts: new paradigms and theories can emerge when the previously absent perspective is included. As Patricia Hill Collins argues in *Black Feminist Thought* (2019), Black intellectuals operate as "forgers of knowledge" from a unique position in the social structure, questioning truths taken as universal and proposing alternatives based on their collective experiences. In the Brazilian context, we can affirm that black professors and researchers are contributing to a "quilombagem" (or "aquilombamento") of academic knowledge, freeing it from the shackles of a monocultural vision.

The insertion of black women in higher education also generates direct impacts on the academic and student community. Black students report that having a black teacher or black guidance counselor in their trajectory makes a huge difference in terms of self-esteem, sense of belonging, and expectations of success (Aguiar, 2021). These teachers act as mentors and role models who inspire students to persist and aim for higher flights. When a black student sees a black doctor in front, she starts to believe that that space can belong to her; It is the realization of what once seemed impossible. It is not by chance that interviews with black university professors show that they are concerned with being a positive influence: they feel urged to "become a reference, a figure of representativeness for younger black students" (Santos et al., 2024). This multiplier effect is essential to break the cycle of exclusion. And even non-black students benefit: living with different professors prepares them for a multicultural society and fights stereotypes, contributing to the formation of more conscious professionals and less prejudiced citizens.

In the broader social sphere, the contributions of black women academics reverberate outside the university walls. Many of them continue to work in extension projects and community initiatives, bringing knowledge to benefit vulnerable populations, preparing public policy proposals and influencing debates in the media and culture. Intellectuals such as Lélia Gonzalez (a pioneer in the 1980s) paved the way by articulating academic knowledge with militancy, and this tradition continues today with so many black professors and researchers who are also activists and formulators of anti-racist and feminist agendas (Lorde et al., 2019). It is no exaggeration to say that there is a renewal in the Brazilian intellectual field underway: what was previously produced almost exclusively by the vision of elite white men, gradually relies more on the vigorous contribution of black women from the most varied regional and class origins, producing a science and culture more connected with the majority of the Brazilian population.

It is also worth mentioning the transformation of identities that accompany these achievements. If in the past highly educated black women could feel the need to



symbolically "whiten" themselves in order to be accepted (denying their origin or avoiding racial themes, for example), today there is an opposite trend: there is pride in affirming oneself as an academic black woman and in bringing one's own identity to the center of professional activity. According to Gomes (1999 apud Azevedo; Sacramento, 2022) already pointed out, "being a black woman in Brazil is an accumulation of struggles, indignation, and advances", a constant conflict between the denial and the affirmation of her origins. Many current black professors seek to resolve this conflict on the side of affirmation – they make a point of affirming their roots and incorporating their ancestral knowledge into their work, which enriches the university, making it more democratic in cultural terms. As an example, it is not uncommon for graduation ceremonies to be more inclusive (Macedo, 2025), to have tributes or references to Afro-Brazilian culture (Sperotto, 2025), something unthinkable decades ago. Even in the exact sciences, where black female participation is a minority, those who break the glass ceiling have become spokespersons for inclusion, denouncing structural racism in these areas and proposing strategies to attract more black girls to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) (Faustin et al., 2022).

Of course, these achievements did not come without personal costs. Many pioneering black women in academia report having experienced ambiguous feelings when reaching prominent positions: on the one hand, the joy of individual achievement; on the other hand, loneliness and responsibility for being the only one in that space, carrying with it the expectations of representing "all" a collectivity (Azevedo; Sacramento, 2022). There is in them the constant reminder of the "sacrifices that her family made so that she could be there" and the awareness that they obtained opportunities denied to their fellow human beings. Such feelings show that individual victories are always connected to a larger collective project – the rise of one black woman is symbolically the rise of many, hence the expression "the victory of one is the victory of all" (title of Santos' work, 2020). This sense of collectivity marks the work of these women: their academic contributions generally have a clear social meaning, aimed not only at the abstract advancement of knowledge, but at the improvement of living conditions and social justice.

We can say, finally, that black women have been gradually breaking through the "glass ceiling" and "invisible walls" of academia; and in doing so they are transforming both themselves and the institution. They diversify content, innovate in approaches, and make the university more relevant to the country's real challenges. Their achievements – of entering, becoming a tenured professor, occupying a teaching position, leading research – generate multiplying impacts that benefit generations and strengthen the construction of a more plural and equitable society.



However, for these individual and collective victories to be consolidated and expanded, it is necessary to have consistent institutional support and policies, as we will discuss below.

PRACTICES AND POLICIES AS PATHS FOR ADVANCEMENT: AFFIRMATIVE ACTIONS, ANTI-RACIST PEDAGOGIES AND EPISTEMIC AQUILOMBAMENTOS

The advancement of the participation of black women in Brazilian higher education would not be possible without a set of transformative practices and policies implemented especially from the 2000s onwards. In the face of centuries of exclusion, affirmative measures have become essential to accelerate inclusion and correct historical inequalities. As we have already mentioned, there is a quota policy in public universities, established by Law 12.711/2012 (which reserved part of the vacancies for students from public schools, blacks, indigenous people and other minorities) and there are programs such as Prouni (which grants scholarships in private universities) and Fies (student financing). The fruits of these affirmative actions are visible in the quantitative leap in the number of black students enrolled and in the change in profile within the campuses, as already demonstrated by data presented above.

However, the challenges of permanence still require complementary policies: ensuring scholarships, university residences, university restaurants, and other student assistance mechanisms are essential for low-income black students to be able to complete their courses. These resources were decisive in the trajectory of many students – for example, at the Regional University of Cariri (CE), benefits such as paid scholarships, housing, and university restaurants guaranteed the permanence of black students, mitigating economic difficulties (Oliveira; Vasconcelos, 2024). Comprehensive affirmative actions, contemplating not only the access but also the maintenance of students in the university, are essential for the success of inclusion.

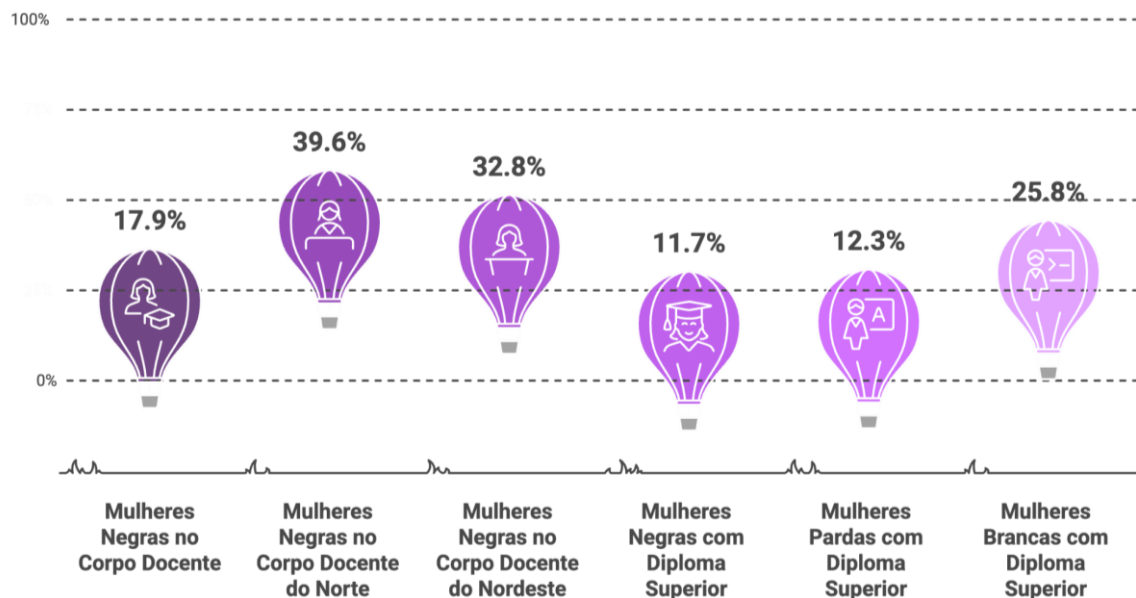
With regard to the teaching career, initiatives to promote diversity are beginning to gain space, although in a timid way. In addition to the aforementioned Law 12.990/2014 (quotas in federal public exams), some universities have adopted affirmative actions in graduate studies – that is, vacancy reservations and incentives for black, indigenous and other underrepresented groups to enter master's and doctoral programs. This measure is strategic: training more black masters and doctors means more qualified candidates for future teaching positions. Recent data indicate that there is still a long way to go: in 2020, only 2.7% of graduate students in Brazil were black and 12.7% brown (adding up to ~15.4%

black), in contrast to 82.7% of whites – a mirror of the disparity we also see in the faculty (GIFE, 2025).

However, there are positive signs of change. Since 2014, several graduate programs have implemented quotas or extra points for black candidates and the first generation of quota students in graduate school is already starting to complete their courses (Felipe; Santana, 2024). In addition, some federal universities have approved resolutions allocating percentages of vacancies for substitute professors or young professors to black candidates, in a kind of voluntary "teaching quota" at the institutional level.

The data in Infographic 1 reveal a significant underrepresentation of black women in the female faculty of federal institutions of higher education: they occupy only 17.9% of these positions at the national level (2022). However, the North (39.6%) and Northeast (32.8%) regions have higher proportions, which may be related to factors such as the greater presence of the black population and regional inclusion policies, suggesting that the territory also influences the possibilities of academic insertion of these women.

Infographic 1 – Indicators on the black and white population in higher education between 2000 and 2022.



Source: Women's Socioeconomic Annual Report (RASEAM) 2025.

Another vital front for transformation is the incorporation of anti-racist pedagogies and training in ethnic-racial relations into the curricula. Laws 10.639/2003 (Brasil, 2003) and 11.645/2008 (Brasil, 2008), which made the teaching of Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous History and Culture mandatory in basic education, indirectly pressure universities (especially teacher training courses) to include content on race relations. This has



repercussions on the training of new teachers, preparing them to deal with diversity and combat racism in the classroom.

In addition, several university extension projects promote courses, seminars and teaching materials on anti-racist education, usually with a strong role for black educators. Internally, universities have created centers and observatories dedicated to the promotion of racial and gender equity, organizing awareness campaigns against racism, receiving complaints of discrimination and offering psychopedagogical support to students who are victims of prejudice. While such initiatives vary widely from institution to institution, their proliferation in recent years indicates a growing recognition that the university needs to reform itself in order to be truly inclusive.

Within the scope of these initiatives, it is worth returning to the concept of "epistemic *aquilombamento*". This concept refers to the idea of reproducing, in the field of knowledge, the logic of quilombos: spaces of black autonomy, solidarity, and collective construction on the margins of the oppressive system. Epistemologically, *aquilombarse* means creating networks of black intellectuals who dialogue, produce their own theories and methodologies, validated by their communities, breaking with the exclusive dependence on references from the Global North. We see examples of this in collectives and research groups led by black women who are dedicated to topics such as black feminism, health of the black population, black women's literature, among others – often developing original concepts based on lived experiences (Lima; Silva; Souza, 2024). We have examples in CRIOLA (founded in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro) and ODARA – Black Women's Institute (created in 2010), which work to defend the rights of black women by combating racism, sexism and lesbophobia through research and social actions (Figueiredo, 2018). Initiatives such as the Mjiba Collective focus on the promotion of black female literature to expand its recognition and value the production of these writers as a form of resistance, while the Das Pretas collective in Vitória (ES) also contributes to this scene, training and strengthening black women through cultural initiatives, lectures and meetings that affirm Afro aesthetics and promote black consciousness, uniting research, art and activism (Dos Santos Reis; Araújo, 2021; Gomes; Carneiro, 2018).

The collective writing of black women, as already mentioned, is a form of *aquilombamento* of knowledge – against the colonality of knowledge, a concept of Aníbal Quijano (Reis, 2022). The presence of black teachers allows certain previously excluded knowledge to enter the university classroom: pedagogical practices inspired by African traditions, references to black philosophers and scientists in the disciplines, participatory research methodologies in peripheral communities, etc. Santos (2022) highlights that black

teachers build a teaching practice that goes beyond the teaching technique – they engage in a "construction of knowledge that values the vision of other subjects" and openly criticizes the Eurocentric curriculum, inserting black intellectuals in the syllabus and producing critical knowledge in articles and congresses. These actions have the effect of decolonizing academic production, subtly but surely.

However, for these transformations to be effective and sustainable, it is essential that they be institutionalized and expanded. Affirmative action policies must be constantly improved, with the aim of ensuring their long-term effectiveness, in addition to being widely defended against possible setbacks. This includes resistance to political demonstrations and campaigns that, as occurred in the period of the previous government (2018-2022), seek to delegitimize the policy of racial quotas, which is an essential instrument for the promotion of social justice and racial equity in the Brazilian educational context.

In this sense, studies such as the one by ENAP (2021) highlight the importance of adjustments in the regulation of quotas, especially in competitions for teachers, in order to avoid loopholes that could compromise their effects. Other suggested measures include awareness and racial literacy training for board members, managers, and the entire university community, in order to combat discriminatory practices and unconscious biases in everyday life (whether in the evaluation of candidates, in the distribution of resources, or in classroom interaction). Additionally, securing funding and recognition for research on race relations (which often suffers from academic bias) is crucial to consolidate this paradigm shift. Organizations such as the Brazilian Association of Black Researchers (ABPN) and events such as National Congresses of Black Researchers have functioned as quilombo-spaces for the exchange of experiences and strengthening agendas, and should continue to be supported.

Finally, transformative practices also go through a change in academic culture: it is necessary to recognize and value the contribution of black women in the university beyond traditional metrics. Often, these professionals informally assume mentoring and psychosocial support for black students, lead extension actions in communities, and work on diversity committees – fundamental tasks for inclusion, but little valued in the criteria for career progression. Incorporating this dimension of work into academic evaluation would be a transformative step, in line with the idea of a socially referenced university.

Table 2 – Examples of barriers and impediments, achievements and impacts, and practices, policies and strategies of resistance on black women in higher education.

Group or category	Examples	References
	Inequality of access	Silva (2020) – Ipea



Structural, institutional and symbolic barriers	Faculty underrepresentation	Moreira (2025); Oliveira (2020)
	Veiled institutional racism and microaggressions that question belonging and authority	Ribeiro (2024); Santos (2020)
	Misogynoir and harassment	Kwarteng (2022); Vedovato (2024)
	Tokenism / hypervisibility	Costanzi and Mesquita (2021); From Birth (2025)
	Low effectiveness of quotas in competitive examinations (Law 12.990)	ENAP (2021); Brazil (2014)
Achievements and impacts	Expanded access (growth in enrollment of black people)	GIFE (2025); Aguiar (2021)
	First generations of black PhDs/professors (in areas such as Physics and Geography)	Silva (2023); Azevedo and Sacramento (2022)
	Diversification of knowledge (health of the black population, black feminism, etc.).	Santos et al. (2024); Collins (2019)
	Model effect: black professors act as mentors, raising self-esteem and student permanence.	Aguiar (2021); Santos et al. (2024)
	Symbolic transformations: inclusion of Afro-Brazilian references in graduations and curricula.	Macedo (2025); Sperotto (2022)
Practices, policies, and strategies of resistance	Affirmative actions for admission: Law 12.711/2012 (quotas), Prouni and quotas in graduate studies.	Brazil (2012); Felipe and Santana (2024)
	Quotas in public tenders (Law 12.990/2014) and internal resolutions of "teaching quota".	Brazil (2014); Lieutenant (2022)
	Residence policies: aid grants, university residences, university restaurants.	Oliveira and Vasconcelos (2024)
	Anti-racist pedagogies and inclusion of Afro-Brazilian History/Culture (Laws 10.639/2003; 11.645/2008).	Brazil (2003); Brazil (2008); Soares e Costa (2019)
	Epistemic Aquilombamento: collectives of black researchers, co-authored.	Martins and Moisés (2023); De Azevedo and De Jagun (2024)

We realize: the trajectory of black women in higher education demonstrates that the right public policies, combined with the agency and creativity of these women, can "move structures" previously considered immutable (Santos, 2024). Affirmative action opened



doors; anti-racist pedagogies and insurgent practices are changing classrooms; and epistemic aquilombamento initiatives foreshadow a more democratic academic future with regard to the production of knowledge.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The trajectory of black women in Brazilian higher education, as analyzed in this work, reflects a continuous movement of rupture and reconstruction. Breaking the old exclusionary patterns – racism, sexism, academic elitism – and rebuilding new paradigms based on diversity, justice and plurality of knowledge. We start from a historical context in which black women were systematically excluded from teaching and research spaces, relegated to subordinate positions. We mapped the multiple barriers that still hinder their access, permanence and ascension in the university, from socioeconomic inequalities to sophisticated mechanisms of institutional and symbolic discrimination. But we also show that, despite these barriers, black women have been resignifying academia through their strategies of resistance and existence: writing down their experiences, collectively acquiescing to each other, transgressing curricula and affirming new discourses.

Lélia Gonzalez, Sueli Carneiro, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Conceição Evaristo are some of the central references in this analysis, demonstrating the importance of an intersectional approach to understanding this trajectory. Race, gender, class, locality, and other social markers work together, producing specific challenges – but also specific identities and forces. If being a black woman in Brazil implies an "accumulation of struggles, indignation and advances", according to Nilma L. Gomes (1995), in the university context it is no different: each individual achievement represents a battle won against racism and patriarchy, and each collective advance (such as the implementation of quotas or the opening of a new space for racial discussion) is the result of indignation transformed into action.

Fortunately, recent years have witnessed concrete advances. The adoption of affirmative policies of access and permanence resulted in more black women graduating and some rising to positions of professors and researchers. Although less than ideal, this mobilization has already moved the structures of universities, opening gaps so that new generations do not face such an arid terrain. The achievements of these women have a ripple effect: they change individual lives, serve as a beacon for other black women, and modify the very production of knowledge in the country. The presence of black women as teachers and researchers is in itself a form of resistance and confrontation with white supremacy in science, which has historically monopolized knowledge and spaces of power.



This presence subverts expectations, confronts stereotypes, and enriches the academic debate with perspectives that were previously ignored.

At the same time, it is necessary to be clear that full equality is still far away. Glaring numerical inequalities persist, especially at the top of the academic career. Few black women have reached full professorships or management positions in universities – something that requires attention in the coming decades. Qualitative challenges also persist: recreational racism, daily microaggressions, tokenism, excessive demands on black teachers or students (so that they can prove themselves competent at all times) and the risk of isolation. Political and economic crises can also threaten the continuity of inclusion policies; In recent years, there have even been heated debates and attempts to reverse quota policies – which makes it vital to publicly and properly defend these actions based on their positive results.

Black women's stories of resistance and success in academia should serve not as conformism but as inspiration to deepen change. Universities need to definitively incorporate the commitment to racial and gender diversity into their mission, which means consolidating affirmative action, expanding support programs, and creating institutionally anti-racist environments. It also means promoting black intellectual production, including it in curricula, citing and debating black authors (national and foreign) in all areas of knowledge. It means recognizing and valuing the community and engaged dimension that many black women bring to university life, breaking the dichotomy between "academic excellence" and "social relevance" – because, as the experience of these women shows, excellence and inclusion can and should go together.

Future research can delve into the artifices — institutional, community and subjective — mobilized by black women to access higher education, enter teaching and consolidate trajectories in academic research. Such strategies, often made invisible in quantitative studies, reveal insurgent paths of social and intellectual mobility. In addition, it is necessary to take a closer look at the distinctions between the experiences of black and brown women, considering that the category "black women" encompasses racial, social, and regional heterogeneities that have a different impact on the paths of access, permanence, and recognition in the academic space. Investigations that disaggregate these markers can contribute to policies that are more sensitive to intraracial inequalities and foster more effective and contextualized affirmative action.

When black women – who find themselves at the intersection of oppression – manage to climb the steps of education and career, the whole society benefits from more egalitarian structures and new knowledge. Paraphrasing a central idea of bell hooks (2013),



"education can be an act of freedom": thanks to the tenacity of black women, Brazilian higher education becomes, every day, a space a little freer from the shackles of prejudice and richer in humanity. May it continue like this, until the day when the fact that a black woman fully occupies the place that has always been rightfully hers is no longer news or an object of study.

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