

Afro-brazilian women and their path to higher education: reflection on women's voices in southern Bahia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the difficulties that Afro-Brazilian women have experienced after gaining admission into the State University of Santa Cruz in southern Bahia. Using the voices of the women whose agency helped them to become university students the article discusses the lack of academic and financial support available to them as they work toward their undergraduate degrees. In 2001, responding to pressure from community activists, including black scholars, black women feminists, and student organizations within several universities, the federal government of Brazil under President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995 – 2003) approved laws to remedy racial and socioeconomic inequality. Thus, the affirmative action policy set quotas to expand access to Brazil's public services and universities for black men and women, indigenous peoples, and people with disabilities.

Keywords: Black women. Higher education. Affirmative action.

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INTRODUCTION

Growing up as an Afro-descendant woman in Bahia, Brazil, I knew that my education and career opportunities were limited. This motivated me to emigrate from Brazil and seek opportunities elsewhere. After living and studying in Holland, I later earned both my undergraduate and graduate degrees from universities in the United States. My graduate studies allowed me to return to my native Brazil to examine the status of Afro-descendant women. Had they secured more education and employment opportunities since I had left Brazil in 1996?

Remnants of Brazil's history of racial inequalities and the subjugation of Afro-Brazilian women remained, as most black women are still over represented in the domestic sector.² Additional studies have demonstrated that Afro-Brazilians women still hold the largest single job category of domestic servant, 32.5 % compared to 12.7 % of white women (PNAD, 1990).

However, advocacy for equality in education that stemmed from Afro-descendant communities prompted the enactment of Affirmative Action laws. Women joined with national leaders to shift the trajectory of black women and their educational experiences.

As Brazil returned to democracy in the mid 1980s, the black and feminist movements increased their demands, and in 2001 President Fernando Henrique Cardoso created a national affirmative action program introducing quotas to expand access to blacks, indigenous, women, and the disabled to public services and universities. Afro-descendent women, if compared to men, face unequal access to power and resources. They are subject to discrimination on the basis of their race, gender, and class. Black women are found in the lowest rank of Brazilian society compared to all race and gender groups (TELLES, 2004). According to the Brazilian Institute of Research and Economics (IPEA)³ study in 2000, black women earn less than 60 % of any other group.

This paper presents evidence of the inequalities faced by Afro-Brazilian women in higher education at the state university - Universidade Estadual de Santa

² Maria Aparecida Silva Bento, "A Mulher Negra no Mercado de Trabalho (Women in the Labor Market)," *Estudos Feministas* 95 (1995): 482. Edward E. Telles, *Race in Another America* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004) and Kimberly F. Jones-de Oliveira, "The Politics of Culture or the Culture of Politics: Afro-Brazilian Mobilization, 1920-1968," *Journal of Third World Studies*, 20 (2003): 103-120, accessed March 29, 2009, from University of Kansas Library.

³ Instituto de Pesquisa e Econômica Aplicada.

Cruz (UESC) - in Bahia, Brazil. UESC first approved the affirmative action program in 2006 and implemented it in 2008 after seeing results in two other universities (one federal and one state) in the state of Bahia. In Brazil, public institutions of higher education are more prominent compared to private higher education establishments. The high status of public universities is due to low ratios of students to professors and to the limited numbers of academic spaces available for each field of study. Admission to public universities is also based on *vestibular*, a highly competitive entrance exam. Currently, the university offers 33 undergraduate and 38 graduate fields of study.

The quota system implemented at the state university in southern Bahia had two criteria: racial identification and social class for students who attended their last four years of primary schooling and finished their secondary schooling in public institutions. Fifty percent out of 1310 places were reserved for assignment according to these criteria: seventy-five percent for students who self-identified as blacks and twenty-five percent for students of lower social classes. This affirmative action policy has been in effect for ten years and there are annual evaluations, with an evaluation projected to 2016 in order to define the criteria and decide whether the policy will continue or expire.

Through qualitative research, I interviewed thirty-nine students. I conducted semi-structured interviews with two groups: one group covered by affirmative action policy and one group was not. The open-ended format of my interview questions allowed students to respond in their own words and to express their ideas on the affirmative action program candidly. The interviews were conducted in the Portuguese language, recorded with a digital voice recorder, and transcribed. My research activities took place in typical university settings: classrooms, dorms, and the cafeteria.

I argue that affirmative action policies implemented in higher education were significant enough to give access to Afro-Brazilian women; however academic and financial support are needed in order for them to attain their undergraduate degrees.

1. Women in higher education

Brazil's higher educational institutions appeared in the early nineteenth century. According to Cunha (2000) the implementation of public universities came

late compared to other Latin American countries. The Portuguese did not invest in higher education, prior to the surrender of the royal family during the Napoleonic war in 1808, for they feared an uprising of the educated populace. Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo were the first southern states to construct the publicly funded institutions, as noted by Schwartzman, “Until 1889, there were only 24 higher education schools; between 1889 and 1918, 56 new, mostly private, higher education schools were established” (2004, p. 2). The federal universities that exist today in all state capitals are natural passage points for the local elites and blacks represent only 2.5 percent of the student population.

After Brazil returned to democracy, the university as an elite institution faced challenges to expand access to the racially underprivileged and poor segment of society. For example, Petruccelli (2004, p. 25) finds that only 5.8 million of the 85 million persons over 25 years old completed an undergraduate degree; and the racial representation is as follows: 83% are white, while black, mulatto, Asian, and indigenous represent 17.6% of the remaining students.

Although the focus of this paper is on higher education, it is important to note that low quality schools, higher repetitions, and higher dropout rates characterize primary and secondary public schools in Brazil. For these reasons, middle and upper class Brazilians usually enroll their children in private primary and secondary schools. Therefore, “high initial income inequality led to low levels of investment in human capital, particularly among the poor, which exacerbated income inequality” (BIRDSALL, SABOT, 1996, p. 11).

The education of Brazil’s lower classes was “a project postponed until quite recently.”⁴ However, scholars note that this delay in the Brazilian educational public system is not due to policy implementation, but instead reflects inadequate funding for public education by politicians and officials who reserve subsidies for private interests. Thus, this situation results in public schools being ill equipped, understaffed, and attended largely by underprivileged poor and black students.

Education is known to be the best way to gain social and economic mobility (HASENBALG, 1999; TELLES, 2004). In addition, education is highly correlated to income in Brazil, and higher education is the key to middle-class status. The current policies to make higher education available and democracy will reduce educational

⁴ National Report on Education. 48th Sessions of the International Conference on Education. Geneva – Switzerland. November 25th to 28th, 2009 (downloaded from www.mec.gov.br).

disparities and hopefully decrease inequality in Brazilian society. Although education is not the only way to address inequality, it is a major factor toward upward mobility in the workplace since an individual's level of education often determines access to promotions and higher paying jobs.

Not only were Afro-descendants denied access to education, but also their history and their realities were told under the prism of Eurocentric views. Fortunately in 2003 the government approved the Law 10.639, which adds the history and culture of Afro-Brazilians into the curriculum (CAMARGO, 2005, p. 43).

2. Perspectives on affirmative action: narratives of female students

Using Brazilian women's personal narratives as a basis for discussion, I explore how affirmative action policies are contributing to closing the racial and socioeconomic gap of Afro-descendant women in southern Bahia, Brazil. Although women students are the focal point, this analysis situates them within a broader national debate over affirmative action in higher education by providing views of women students from all racial backgrounds.

Female participants were asked to self-identify by race. The sample included eight white students, 13 black students, 15 brown students, one indigenous student, one yellow student, and one student who identified as both black and white. In other words, the study includes 39 female students.

Although most students agreed that affirmative action provided opportunities to disadvantaged students, there was a consensus among lower and middle to upper class students regarding the quality of Brazil's public schools and the need to help underrepresented blacks and poor whites. As noted by a white student who is in the quota system:

This affirmative action is a way to help students who were denied the resources of private education. The university is finding a way to extend access to those resources. However, it is important to note that this measure is palliative because reforms should be made to the base. Investments in public school are needed. Brazil's government needs to reform public education to help students succeed.⁵

⁵ Interview by the author, June 10, 2010.

This narrative highlights the deficiency of Brazil's primary and secondary public schools in providing a good quality education to lower class students. The narrator relates private education to higher education, reinforcing a point that scholars make that higher education is for middle and upper class students (SCHWARTZMAN, 2004, p. 5). Students are also aware that the quota program is a temporary measure. Even though all black students participating in the quota system agreed that affirmative action policy enables them to attain higher education, the only black student who attends private high school stated the following:

I am in favor of the quota system for students from public schools. However, I do not agree [with racial quotas] racial prejudice means we should have quotas for blacks. It is also necessary to think that most blacks attend public school, therefore they will benefit from it because blacks were subjugated through history. In conclusion, blacks should benefit from quotas because they are from public schools and not because of their racial identity.⁶

The views of the black student from the private school seem to express the ideology of racial democracy, which acknowledges racial difference "through history" yet does not want to take extra structural steps to narrow the gaps of social inequality for blacks of the lower classes.

Responses by brown students alternated between positive and negative views. One quota participant stated: *"I am against because there is no academic support for the student to excel or to catch up with students who were better prepared."*⁷

In this narrative, the student highlights the inability of the university to provide ways for them to improve the rudimentary knowledge they received from public school. Along the same lines, however, a brown law student argued: *"Affirmative action is a discriminatory process that has historical roots. The public schools' inability to prepare students led the government to come up with this palliative measure."*⁸

The students who attended private high school see the racial criterion as discriminatory. This view was unique for both blacks and browns students from middle and upper classes. In other words, since they belong to middle and upper classes they enjoy the same privileges as whites do and do not need to identify as

⁶ Interview by the author, June 16, 2010.

⁷ Interview by the author, June 10, 2010.

⁸ Interview by the author, June 16, 2010.

black to benefit from the quota system, as revealed by Telles, 2004, Oliveira, 2003, Sheriff 2001, and Hasenbalg 1999.

By contrast, blacks and browns from different social backgrounds made statements similar to this one: "I am satisfied with affirmative action because I have been trying for four consecutive years and right after affirmative action I was able to enter the university."⁹

This statement above is from a nursing school student. Another law student from a private high school noted:

Affirmative action is a complicated issue; I think this is the way the government wants to address inequalities. However, this needs to have a set date to end. Although some say that affirmative action policy is inadequate because it lowers the quality of higher education, it is important to note that public school students would not have a chance to enter universities. Some argue that basic schools need to improve. That is true; however, it could take thirty years, what about the students of today?¹⁰

As we see, the student emphasizes the affirmative action debate about the quality of public schools and agrees with the claim that affirmative action lowers the quality of higher education. However, the same student pointed to the need to accommodate students to higher education in contemporary Brazil.

Another brown law student added:

I am in favor of affirmative action. However, I believe it needs to be a palliative measure for the short term. What is really needed is improvement in basic education. I realize we cannot debate this while the vast majority of the population is excluded. Thus, I favor the quota system because I see today that the university should not favor a dominant minority that have access to private schooling and better educational opportunities, which do not reflect the reality of the majority of the Brazilian population.¹¹

A white student in the quota system stated:

The affirmative action implemented at this institution is valid because we started to see courses, which were not strictly for whites but also for the middle and upper classes. Thus, the affirmative action diversified elitist field of study, such as law, medicine, and engineering, which are offered during the day. The students from lower social classes are usually enrolled in those courses that are offered in the evening. These courses are not perceived as prestigious as the majors offered during the day. Furthermore, the entry process is rigorous. Students coming from public schools take the same entry exam, vestibular. However, the selection is only among public high school

⁹ Interview by the author, June 14, 2010.

¹⁰ Interview by the author, June 16, 2010.

¹¹ Interview by the author, June 16, 2010.

students. They are not competing with students who went to private high school, went overseas for an education, or have studied English. For instance, in the field of medicine students are only allowed to take English as a foreign language. As the president mentions, this a temporary measure.¹²

This student highlights general benefits of the affirmative action. First, the policy provides students of all racial and social backgrounds increased access to the most prestigious professional schools in fields such as law, medicine, and engineering. Second, she acknowledges that the entrance exam is difficult but adds that the quota system allows students from public schools to compete among themselves rather than with private schools students. Last, she explains that the affirmative action policy is a temporary measure and cites the president.

Another black law student participating in the quota system mentioned:

I think affirmative action is a valid measure, but should be implemented for a short time and not as the only measure. The government also needs to improve education in all segments, basic, middle, and high. It is also important to have affirmative action [racial quota system] because blacks, who are the majority of public school students, would not otherwise have the chance to attend universities. However, the government needs to provide subsidies to help blacks financially because it is not easy to stay at the university. The government also needs to expand universities because in a region like ours, which provides just fifty places for a law degree, this is not enough for the population.¹³

A black chemistry student who entered through the quota system added:

I am satisfied with affirmative action because I was able to enter the university. Also because of the fact that I am competing with students from public schools as opposed to private schools. I felt we were at the same level and so the competition is fair. Not to mention that an [primary and secondary] education at private schools is much better than public school education.¹⁴

A black student attending higher education classes through the quota system said: *"I am satisfied with affirmative action because it expands access to higher education for larger numbers of students coming from public schools."*¹⁵

This is also the view of a geography student. Another black student in the program stated:

I am satisfied with affirmative action program because it facilitates my entrance into the university. Otherwise, I would have to compete with students

¹² Interview by the author, June 17, 2010.

¹³ Interview by the author, June 9, 2010.

¹⁴ Interview by the author, June 9, 2010.

¹⁵ Interview by the author, June 10, 2010.

who had better educational opportunities. Coming from public school, I won't be able to compete at the same level.¹⁶

Furthermore, all participants in the quota system mentioned the need to provide academic help so students can undo the effects of the rudimentary education they received in the public primary and secondary education system. A white student enrolled in chemistry noted:

In truth, this scholarship does not reserve a specific number of places for students. There is no information about the scholarship, you can specify whether you are indigenous or quilombola [descendant runaway of slaves] this is an option, and then you specifically inform whether you are coming from public or private school. There are just four students from public school in Chemistry, and then you start to see some distortions.¹⁷

This student stresses affirmative action's deficiency in informing students how to classify their racial or social class identities for participating in the program and points to the fact that in chemistry, the numbers of students who come from public schools are very low. She also highlights the difficulties of the faculty, the lack of academic help, and access to library material, and the financial hardships that students face, including no access to Internet. She asserted:

Professors are not prepared to help students from public schools. There are no support programs to help students succeed in areas where they are lagging exist. Library materials are not available to all students. Poor students do not have Internet access. Students face financial problems.¹⁸

In these narratives, students presented views that aligned mostly with the Brazilian national debate over affirmative action and other issues such as the need to improve primary and secondary public education, access to higher education for students who have graduated from public schools, the need for academic support, and most importantly, the need for financial help. Students covered and not covered by affirmative action quotas agreed that racial and socioeconomic inequality exists and agreed on the need for taking corrective measures. However, these students disagreed about criteria for implementing these measures.

¹⁶ Interview by the author, June 10, 2010.

¹⁷ Interview by the author, June 9, 2010.

¹⁸ Interview by the author, June 9, 2010.

CONCLUSION

When I first heard that Brazil had implemented an Affirmative Action policy, I wondered if a quota system would positively influence primary and secondary education in Brazil. As I began to examine Affirmative Action as part of my scholarly work, I could not ignore how Afro-descendants and poor Brazilians, relegated to primary and secondary public schools, must typically enter the workforce or institutes of higher education with an academic deficit. I wondered if Affirmative Action would bring national attention to Brazil's public schools that lack the necessary resources to prepare students to compete with more privileged students who attend private schools.

Some black student and some white student participants in my research did not favor the racial quotas for black Brazilians by asserting that the social class quota was sufficient to remedy social disadvantages Afro-Brazilians face. However, a majority of black student and a minority of white student participants identified the racial quota as the only means by which they could enter Brazil's universities. Subsequently, affirmative action in higher education fosters greater inclusion of blacks and lower class whites in educational institutions.

Affirmative action programs in higher educations are among several avenues through which black women can gain access to a better education and a higher socio-economic status in Brazilian society. However, the interviews provided windows into the experiences of Afro-descendant women by revealing that financial and academic support in higher education is needed to retain students, so they would be more likely to finish their degrees.

Furthermore, my findings indicate the need for regional assessment of affirmative action programs. Each region in Brazil is unique and poses different issues and problems. Therefore, evaluation and assessment of affirmative action programs must consider each region separately. For example, in the state of Bahia, where Afro-descendants are the majority (but not represented among the middle and upper classes), there is a need for measures such as scholarships and financial aid (TELLES, 2004, p. 267).

Based on students' responses in order for the affirmative action policy to be effective, financial help needed to be given to students, not only to enable them to study but also to survive. Most of the contemplated affirmative action participants

resided off-campus, which affected their transportation and food costs, not to mention their school supplies. Therefore, students need financial aid to succeed in school and finish their degrees so that they are better prepared to enter the labor market.

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RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é examinar as dificuldades que as mulheres afro-brasileiras experimentaram depois de ter acesso à Universidade Estadual de Santa Cruz (UESC), no sul da Bahia, e discutir, a partir de suas próprias vozes e reivindicações, a falta de apoio acadêmico e financeiro disponível para que essas mulheres pudessem concluir seus cursos de graduação. Em 2001, respondendo à pressão das comunidades ativistas, incluindo estudiosos negros, feministas negras e organizações estudantis dentro de várias universidades, o governo federal do Brasil, no governo do presidente Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995 - 2003), aprovou leis para remediar a desigualdade racial e socioeconômica. Assim as políticas de ação afirmativa definem cotas para ampliar o acesso aos serviços públicos e às universidades para homens e mulheres afrodescendentes, povos indígenas e pessoas com deficiência.

Palavras-chave: Mulher negra. Educação superior. Ação afirmativa

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