

Quilombola women and presence in higher education

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Abstract

The university, although potentially transformative, also imposes Eurocentric standards that marginalize quilombola perspectives. In this sense, this article aims to explore, through personal narratives, the categories of quilombola conquest and re-existence within the university context, interpreted in light of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Methodologically, the study was developed from the production and interpretation of narratives from four quilombola students at the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT). We identified cases of academic success that enrich our understanding of their experiences and perceptions in the face of structural challenges. The implementation of the Quilombola Student Inclusion Program at UFMT illustrates a significant advancement in terms of inclusion and representation. Quilombola women not only resist but also assert themselves as agents of change and cultural resistance, positively influencing their communities. Therefore, this study highlights the impact of affirmative action policies in promoting racial equality and democratizing access to and retention in higher education.

Keywords: Quilombola Women. Education. Access. Retention.

Mulheres quilombolas e presenças no ensino superior

Resumo

A universidade, embora potencialmente transformadora, também impõe padrões eurocêntricos que marginalizam perspectivas quilombolas. Nesse sentido, esse artigo tem como objetivo explorar, através dos relatos, as categorias de conquista e re-existência quilombola no contexto universitário, interpretadas à luz da fenomenologia Merleau-Pontyana. Metodologicamente, o estudo foi desenvolvido a partir da produção e interpretação de relatos de quatro

estudantes quilombolas da Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso (UFMT). Constatamos casos de sucesso acadêmico que enriquecem o conhecimento sobre suas experiências e percepções diante dos desafios estruturais. A implementação do Programa de Inclusão de Estudantes Quilombolas na UFMT ilustra um avanço significativo em termos de inclusão e representatividade. As mulheres quilombolas não apenas resistem, mas também se afirmam como agentes de mudança e resistência cultural, influenciando positivamente as suas comunidades. Portanto, o estudo destaca o impacto das políticas de ações afirmativas na promoção da igualdade racial e na democratização do acesso e permanência no ensino superior.

Palavras-chaves: Mulher Quilombola. Educação. Acesso. Permanência.

Mujeres quilombolas y presencia en la educación superior

Resumen

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La universidad, si bien es potencialmente transformadora, también impone estándares eurocéntricos que marginan las perspectivas quilombolas. En este sentido, este artículo tiene como objetivo explorar, a través de los relatos, las categorías de conquista y reexistencia quilombola en el contexto universitario, interpretadas a la luz de la fenomenología Merleau-Pontyana. Metodológicamente, el estudio se desarrolló a partir de la producción e interpretación de informes de cuatro estudiantes quilombolas de la Universidad Federal de Mato Grosso (UFMT). Encontramos casos de éxito académico que enriquecen el conocimiento sobre sus experiencias y percepciones frente a desafíos estructurales. La implementación del Programa de Inclusión Estudiantil Quilombola en la UFMT representa un avance significativo en términos de inclusión y representatividad. Las mujeres quilombolas no solo resisten, sino que también se afirman como agentes de cambio y resistencia cultural, influyendo positivamente en sus comunidades. Por lo tanto, el estudio destaca el impacto de las políticas de acción afirmativa en la promoción de la igualdad racial y la democratización del acceso y la permanencia en la educación superior.

Palabras clave: Mujer Quilombola. Educación. Acceso. Permanência.

Introduction

Brazilian Black women face an unfavorable context that reveals the depth of structural inequalities, affecting their experiences and social interactions, and obstructing their opportunities. The university, despite its potential for transformation, can impose Eurocentric standards of knowledge that marginalize and devalue quilombola perspectives.

In 2017, the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT) implemented the Quilombola Student Inclusion Program (PROINQ), a result of the quilombola social movement seeking to guarantee access to higher education. Despite resistance, this process led to the establishment of a specific policy for quilombolas. Consequently, additional vacancies were created in undergraduate courses across the institution's four campuses for a period of ten years. Since the implementation of this affirmative action policy, there has been a growing representation of quilombola women. Thus, the positioning of Black women's bodies outside historically stereotyped social places manifests as a form of social revolution.

Thus, the objective of this article is to explore, through narratives, the categories of quilombola conquest and re-existence within the university context. Based on this study, which addresses a highly relevant topic central to academic and social discussions in various parts of the world, the present article stands out as a significant contribution to the field of pluriversal education. The experiences described here represent cases of academic success that produce and share knowledge related to the lives and worldviews of quilombola women. Furthermore, the inclusion of people historically treated as unequal in.

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social, and cultural lives. Therefore, affirmative actions have been fundamental in promoting racial equality and strengthening the democratization of access to formal education.

The activism of the Black Movement and the country's democratization process were crucial for the advancement of affirmative action policies, especially racial quota. However, the Quota Law has not addressed the specificities of quilombola education, which are directly linked to the cultural particularities of how these communities live and organize socially, necessitating a specific and differentiated education (Freitas; Portela; Feres Júnior; Sá; Lima, 2019; Gomes, 2011).

The significant survey conducted by the Multidisciplinary Study Group on Affirmative Action (GEMAA), which analyzed affirmative action policies for quilombolas in undergraduate courses at public universities in 2019, highlights that most affirmative actions for quilombolas in public universities came into effect after the implementation of Law 12.711/12. This law, known as the Quota Law, regulates admission to federal universities and federal technical education institutions at the secondary level.

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Quotas are reserved and subdivided – half for public school students with a gross family income equal to or less than one and a half minimum wages per capita and half for public school students with a family income higher than one and a half minimum wages. In these cases, a minimum percentage corresponding to the sum of Black, mixed-race, and Indigenous people in the state, according to the latest demographic census by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), is considered.

Research also indicates that affirmative action policies for quilombolas in public universities do not constitute a national policy, as they are concentrated in only a few states. The Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT) stands out as one of the few cases in the literature where local quilombolas were invited to discuss and develop a quota policy model that directly benefited them (Freitas; Portela; Feres Júnior; Sá; Lima, 2019).

In terms of structure, besides the introduction, the article is organized as follows: initially, we briefly discuss the research methods used; next, we introduce the collaborators. In the subsequent section, we present the results of the narrative interpretations and, finally, we offer some concluding remarks.

Between plots and tracks: initial configurations

The theoretical foundations of this study are based on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology (2006), which emphasizes that science is built upon the lived world: "Everything I know about the world, even through science, I know from my own perspective or from an experience of the world without which the symbols of science would not mean anything" (p. 3). The original research for this dissertation, guided by the appreciation of the subjectivity and experiences of Black quilombola women in higher education, allowed for the amplification and empowerment of their voices. The procedures employed for producing the narratives included the use of forms to identify the students and conducting interviews.

For Merleau-Ponty (2006), the body is considered our primary means of accessing the world, emphasizing the importance of perception as an embodied experience, where the body plays a crucial role in constructing meaning and interpreting the world. This process is seen not only as sensory but also as an activity that integrates emotional and social dimensions. Black corporeality, historically marked by stereotypes and oppression, influences these experiences, shaping their interactions and perceptions of the world. Therefore, by exploring these subjective and embodied nuances, we are not only enriching our academic understanding but also engaging in an act of empathy and social responsibility. This aligns with Merleau-Ponty's proposition to integrate the full complexity of human experience into academic research.

By exploring the narratives of Black quilombola women, we perceive a living and dynamic experience, intertwined with social structures and enriched by the narrative and interpretation of the intersections of different dimensions that shape the lived world. The narratives configured as achievements emerge with prominence in their stories, overcoming adversities and reaching significant academic goals. These include entering and remaining in the university, completing undergraduate courses, and producing knowledge that values the culture and issues of quilombola communities. Furthermore, immersing ourselves in these experiences allows us to witness the strength and resilience of these women who defy social expectations and transform their realities through education.

The narratives we interpret as quilombola re-existence can be understood as a dynamic process that goes beyond facing challenges by actively reshaping reality. They redefine societal limits through mechanisms that ensure their material and symbolic existences within the university space. Additionally, they create educational opportunities and configure a narrative that highlights the persistence and perseverance of quilombola women.

This text describes and interprets the narratives of four self-identified Black quilombola women who volunteered to participate in the research. They entered the university in 2017 and 2018 via PROINQ and are aged between 27 and 48 years, distributed across different fields of knowledge, namely: Social Communication, Human Sciences, and Health Sciences. During their university experience, they carve out their place as subjects of enunciation and knowledge expression. This achievement is solidified by emphasizing their quilombola belonging.

The research received approval from the Research Ethics Committee (CEP), with the Certificate of Presentation for Ethical Consideration (CAAE) number 65305822.2.0000.5690. The students were contacted via institutional email, with an invitation to participate and a Free and Informed Consent (CLE) document, containing the research guidelines, content of the questionnaire, and interview questions. Respecting ethical parameters, we opted to use pseudonyms for the identification of the participants. The choice of names, made by them, was based on the representativeness and symbolism that each name carries, being names of anonymous or public Black women who uniquely marked the participants' experiences.

Participant Profiles

Benedita, Glória Maria, Maria, and Tereza de Benguela emerge as unique and multifaceted figures, each bringing their own experiences, challenges, and motivations. However, they share common points that connect them: they are quilombolas, mothers, and entrants into higher education through a specific program, striving for emancipation through education with the intention of returning academic knowledge to benefit their communities. Despite these points of convergence, they are not a homogeneous group.

Benedita, 48 years old, carries with her a rich tapestry of experiences, challenges, and motivations intertwined with her socio-familial history. She mentions having served as the president of her community's association. The daughter of an interracial union, she grew up in a large family with eight children. Her parents were always politically active in the rural context, instilling values of engagement and community participation. Benedita started working at the age of 15 and is the second among her siblings to pursue higher education.

Some of her siblings completed high school through the Education of Youth and Adults (EJA) program, while others only studied up to the fourth grade. She mentions that her mother was afraid of them leaving home to study because they would have to live with relatives or friends. In the two meetings we had, she emphasized her community's history of struggle and resistance in maintaining and preserving their territory. Every day, she commutes to the university in pursuit of her education, serving as an inspiration for her daughter, who recently entered higher education. The lack of schools in her territory is a significant issue that negatively impacts her community.

Glória Maria, 27 years old, is the daughter of a couple with eight children, supported by family farming. As a mother of a 9-year-old girl, her journey is characterized by the pursuit of knowledge and personal growth, reflecting her desire to achieve emancipation through education. In 2017, she left her community and moved with her daughter, becoming the first in her family to enter higher education. Recently, a sister and a sister-in-law also enrolled in university through PROINQ. The importance of education stands out even more when compared to her parents' situation, as they did not have access to schooling. Glória Maria began her education in a makeshift, mud-walled school in her community and faced great difficulties commuting long distances during high school. She graduated in July 2023.

Maria, 40 years old, has been a widow for six years and is the mother of three boys aged 23, 14, and 9. She lives with her parents, and the family's income comes from the pension received due to her husband's death, supplemented by the occasional sale of produce from their farm. Maria's community was founded by her great-grandfather, who escaped from a farm where he was enslaved, and it is now composed of 112 people. The community was

recognized as a quilombola in 2012 but is still in the process of obtaining land title. There is no school within the community, forcing the children to travel to the city to study. Maria is the second person in her family to achieve higher education, making this achievement even more significant considering the twenty years she spent away from studies due to her husband's prohibition on studying and working outside the home. She commutes daily from her community to Cuiabá to attend university.

Tereza de Benguela left her community to attend high school in Cuiabá, a change that had significant implications for her future. At 30 years old, Tereza has a partner and a 9-year-old daughter. Her community was recognized in 2005 by the Fundação Cultural Palmares as a traditional territory, with its occupation tracing back to the common descent of people enslaved on plantations. Currently, the community consists of eleven families. The lack of schools in her community requires children to travel to the city for education. Tereza acknowledges the poor quality of education and lack of infrastructure during her time studying in the community.

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Examining the age range of quilombola women, between 27 and 48 years, and their entry into higher education reveals a non-conventional, often "late" entry. This phenomenon, viewed through an intersectional lens, highlights obstacles that delay their access to higher education. The generational marker is not an isolated factor but is interconnected with other aspects of identity such as race, gender, and social class. There are many ways in which racial inequality manifests in access to rights and opportunities, and education is one of them.

Even when families adopt a positive stance toward schooling, quilombola women face significant barriers. These barriers are often attributed to the lack of infrastructure in schools, insufficient public social resources and services for families, lack of support and funding for rural investment, insecurity in land regularization, limited formal education, and inadequate health care, housing, and transportation conditions.

Therefore, for these women, being at the university expresses the rejection of the barriers imposed by social structures that perpetuate discrimination. This subversion of expectations contributes to the redefinition of concepts of academic success and enriches the diversity of perspectives and trajectories

within the university environment. In this sense, these women not only achieve an academic position but also actively challenge the systems that seek to keep them on the margins.

(Re)recognizing them for themselves: voices of quilombola women

The agency of quilombola women is strengthened in the fight for the recognition of their ways of life, territories, and collective rights. It is necessary to give voice to the various narratives present in different contexts. In this way, this moment becomes opportune to highlight the capacity of the Black body to free itself from social constructs.

Entering the university represented a significant achievement for these Black quilombola women, as illustrated by the account of Tereza de Benguela:

I finished high school in 2013, and then I tried FIES, but it was too expensive, I couldn't afford it, so I started taking online courses, you know! My daughter was little when I took the entrance exam; I registered on the very last day. One day, I passed by the university and said, "One day, I will study here, I like this place, I don't know how." When I saw the results, it was pure joy; I screamed, I was so happy, it was God giving me the opportunity [...] because it was something that seemed impossible to me, I would never be able to study here at the federal university if it was through the Enem exam (Tereza de Benguela, 2023).

Tereza's account highlights her determination and willingness to seek opportunities in higher education, even though the realization of this desire seemed distant at the time. The achievement of entering university holds profound significance, representing a subjective interpretation of an opportunity she initially considered unattainable. Therefore, the relevance of affirmative action policies for quilombolas becomes evident, as they have enabled many quilombola women to access higher education.

Benedita (2023) states, "[...] It was a novelty, at the same time joyful, to be able to attend a federal university which is difficult to access," demonstrating the emotional duality of her achievement. This account reveals how her

perception of the university is influenced not only by the academic achievement itself but also by the awareness of the structural barriers she faced. This emphasizes the importance of recognizing the emotional and social dimensions involved in the university experience.

Similarly, a connection can be established with the account of Glória Maria, which highlights the barriers faced by many quilombola women in their educational journey:

Until my fourth year, I studied in my community, and it was run by the local government. After I finished the fourth grade, they closed all the schools in the community. They consolidated four communities into just one school location. So, I had to start traveling from my community to study. And it was the same for high school. [...] It was just a makeshift hut made of wattle and daub, covered with babassu palm leaves. From the fifth grade until my senior year of high school, I studied in that school. If it rained, we had to run inside the bus, but the roads would become terrible to drive on, slippery, and the bus would get stuck. Despite these difficulties, thank God I managed to finish high school and get into college, thank God (Glória Maria, 2023).

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In that moment, Glória Maria reflects on her educational journey, highlighting the challenges she faced and how, through perseverance and determination, she managed to overcome them and enter college, demonstrating her resolve.

The school was already talking, encouraging us to study, to focus more, because soon there would be opportunities for us to enter college. So, when I finished high school, I felt like I was outside the school because I wasn't studying, you know! But I was always there, kind of finding out what was happening, participating in any community meetings that were held at the school. That's how we learned about the Program (Glória Maria, 2023).

In the first excerpt, Glória Maria describes her educational journey, which affects not only her education but also access to future opportunities. Her active participation in seeking educational information and her engagement in the community school also demonstrate her resistance to educational exclusion.

Family support is evident in the narratives and serves as a driver of their university journey:

Because it was difficult, right? It's really tough. When you have a child, it's doubly tough. My daughter was 4 years old when I started, she was still so little, right! And it was at night. She wasn't in daycare, I took care of her during the day, often arrived tired. I had to leave her with my mother. So, there was all of that. But my mother always supported me, didn't let me give up. Because she would say: 'Look, my daughter, life is made of opportunities.' So if God opened this door for you, you go all the way. Through thick and thin, you go all the way. And that's why I'm here, all the way to the end (Tereza de Benguela, 2023).

[...]

My mother has always been an active advocate (Benedita, 2023).

[...]

I did it just to encourage my son to do it too. Because then seeing me apply, he also applied. Now when they feel discouraged and say, 'You see? Even mom at this age is going to study.' Because the little ones always struggle to wake up early to study and feel lazy. Then I say, do you want to live hoeing, living in the hot sun, then he goes, no, I don't want this life for me. My mother was the first one who supported me, it was her dream, if she could see, she wouldn't stop. She always says. She's 60. But she would enter college, wanted to have a career. She always encouraged us to study. So much so that my other uncles, their children didn't study. And my father and mother always thought about us studying. And I stopped because I got married (Maria, 2023).

Moms, in particular, are highlighted as figures who provide guidance, encouragement, and examples to be followed. Additionally, the accounts show women actively supporting the education of their children. Another recurring aspect in the narratives, which we can characterize as achievements, is how being at the university serves as an example, stimulating and paving the way for others in their communities:

How does the community see me as a quilombola woman attending the federal university of Mato Grosso? It's like being an example showing that we can, that they too can, that all of us there can indeed enter a university. This sense of belonging, which

seemed so distant, so difficult to attain a college degree, today for our young people coming up it's an example. I'm setting an example that they too can, that they can indeed have a university education [...]. As a quilombola woman, at 48 years old, graduating is a very emotional experience for me, an honor. Because we saw that it was only for a few who had this opportunity to graduate, right! God willing, yes, I will be graduating by the end of this year. It's a victory in the journey of our lives' (Benedita, 2023).

Benedita's journey is marked by the emotion of being an example for her community, emphasizing that her victory represents overcoming and inspiration for local youth. It's not just about receiving a diploma, but a personal achievement, growth, and self-awareness that manifest physically. When someone perceives themselves in this process, there is an awareness of constructing knowledge, skills, and identity, reflected in feelings of achievement, pride, and confidence. Benedita highlights the sense of belonging to the university, now perceived as closer, breaking away from the previous idea of distance and inaccessibility.

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Now there's also a niece who went through the Program, to study law here, [...] there are people in my family who also entered university through the program in the last few editions. [...] so they can feel that it's their right, they do have this right... they will come seeking this right, but the education is weak, but we're there fighting as much as we can for our community so that these young people can study, have a university, I will go after and have gone after, from our community more young people are coming (Benedita, 2023).

[...]

Because my community is really formed, like... there are three people, but most are private. Here in my community it's just me, and now my boy who will enter. So much so that the younger girls, not only from my community but from others there, started to show more interest. They started asking how to get in, how I did it. It served to bring out the desire, because many wanted to do it but thought they didn't have the opportunity, or that they were too old, so much so that my father even returned to studying, but he's studying in EJA, right! He's doing it and many now want to enter, so they've already tried, risked more to take the ENEM, to register again, try somehow to get into college (Maria, 2023).

The above accounts highlight an important aspect of educational dynamics: the generational, familial, and community impact of their academic achievements. These achievements reflect the overcoming of significant barriers they faced throughout their experiences.

And today, in the process where I am, as someone who is already graduating, who already knows many paths, knows where to tread, it's knowing that it's our space too. Understanding that it's our space, that we have to take care of it! Today I also feel like a counselor for people who are entering. Real support for them [...] so I feel pleasure to be in this place, where I can help (Glória Maria, 2023).

Despite their particularities, their experiences in university have generated social transformation in their communities. Their achievements inspire the collective to pursue the educational system and provide valuable guidance and support for those seeking the same path. In the interview, Glória Maria also declares:

I believe my education will be very beneficial for the community, for the people themselves. And that's my intention, to make sure the post there works, to serve the population (Glória Maria, 2023).

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From this narrative, we understand that their intention is clear: they do not see themselves disconnected from their origins. For Glória Maria, the academic education acquired is not an end in itself, but a tool to promote development and well-being in her community.

The education as a means to promote social change and tangible improvements in people's lives is also evident in the narratives of Benedita, Maria, and Tereza de Benguela. This intentionality can be understood as an act of re-existence, as it challenges social stereotypes.

Because my project is about inclusive communication on the self-guided trail in the Park, so that the community can feel a sense of belonging (Benedita, 2023).

[...]

My undergraduate thesis topic is about quilombola culture. Quilombola culture related to my community (Maria, 2023).

[...]

After I finish, I plan to do a project on agroecology in the community (Tereza de Benguela, 2023).

The quilombola women are aware of the importance of their presence in university. They demonstrate how they intend to direct their learning and acquired knowledge to address specific issues in their communities. The positive affirmation of themselves has been important in their experiences, strengthening the process of re-existence in staying in university.

I am a quilombola woman, soon to be a quilombola professional, with great pride, very grateful for everything I've seen, everything I've experienced, everything I've learned. Because the learning university provided me is priceless, I am also an intelligent woman. Despite not showing it much, yes, I am quilombola, I am intelligent, I am strong! I have never been ashamed to introduce myself. To speak of my reference, where I came from, where I am, where I will return, because as soon as I get a job in my community after graduating, I will return. And I see myself, I am a quilombola woman, I am happy to be quilombola, I am grateful to be quilombola, I am a resilient woman, yes, I am a strong woman, who seeks strength, especially in my difficulties, and I look ahead to my bright path, full of good things, and yes, I am proud of myself, proud of my life that I have passed, of the difficulties I have faced both on the farm and here at university, and I have overcome them all. I am grateful for every moment I have lived (Glória Maria, 2023).

[...]

Today, I am very proud to be quilombola, I self-declare because I know many quilombolas who do not self-declare as quilombola, and that is a pride (Tereza de Benguela, 2023).

[...]

So, I see a lot of desire. Desire to take this course. And this journey is about your desire (Benedita, 2023).

These accounts also express an understanding of the Black body as a material, symbolic, and political existence, as outlined by Gomes (2017). The author elucidates that this self-perception implies that the experiences of Black individuals, shaped deeply by their corporeal identities and influenced by Blackness, result in the production of unique knowledges categorized as

emancipatory knowledges. The author emphasizes that these knowledges constitute important knowledge for challenging the regulation that impacts Black bodies and for driving social changes aimed at emancipation, as evidenced in Glória Maria's account:

I now feel privileged to have strength, to resist through all the difficulties imposed on my path. I have managed to come this far; today, I proudly say I am a ninth-semester university student. I feel a sense of accomplishment. It's like coming to show, not just to myself, but to society, that we can indeed. That we have the right. And that, just because we are quilombola, we shouldn't be belittled by others. We do need help, from our colleagues who are not quilombolas, but we also have determination, intelligence, and capability. So, I feel that. Today, I feel honored to be able to show everything I know, to pave a path of ideas that we can achieve more than people imagine and even more than we ourselves can dream, because it was something I once thought was impossible, especially for me (Glória Maria, 2023)

Glória Maria's narrative expresses recognition of her own resilience and persistence. Her self-esteem and self-confidence have been strengthened throughout her journey, as well as the validation of her personal efforts and knowledge as tools for achieving success. We perceive that she feels responsible for something greater than just her own educational trajectory. There is a positive affirmation of her experience, as she sees herself as an active agent in her own life and within her community. Moreover, she legitimizes quilombola individuals in their pursuit of higher education. These assertions represent a form of re-existence and a claim for equality of opportunities, in a context where barriers can be significant.

Tereza reinforces the idea that education is not just a personal achievement, but also an act of re-existence, an affirmation of identity, and a collective responsibility. She paves the way for future generations:

I didn't give up because, as I mentioned earlier, there are people coming after me, and if I stopped, I wouldn't open up a spot for someone else. So, I have to go all the way for the Program to see that we really want to graduate. If I stop halfway, it shows a lack of interest... both to myself and to the Program. So, that was very important. I never gave up because other people need it too,

other quilombolas also need to graduate. So, we had to go all the way to make room for them too, to show interest, and always look ahead, knowing that this is a unique opportunity (Tereza de Benguela, 2023).

In exploring this passage, we can infer that the student expresses a positive outlook on the future. It is evident that she recognizes education as a possibility for collective growth.

Merleau-Ponty (2006) emphasizes the importance of the body in our experience of the world. In the voices of the contributors, we can identify how their journeys are experienced bodily. We can associate the way their bodies are directly involved in the barriers they face, whether in the struggle to overcome difficulties in accessing education or in the sense of accomplishment they experience in their bodies as they progress through their university lives. For the author, our actions are always intentional and directed toward a purpose.

However, the intentions demonstrated by the Black quilombola women in our study go beyond the personal realm, as they seek to positively impact their communities. This reveals that education transcends the cognitive aspect and becomes an experience that profoundly affects these women's entire existence.

Based on what the author suggests, Maria's arrival at the university illustrates this perspective, as she shares a particularly challenging period in her life:

It was during a time when I was going through a difficult moment; my husband had just passed away. It was a time that really affected me psychologically because I started occupying my mind, feeling depressed. And then I started studying and getting involved with things, reading—you travel through reading' (Maria, 2023).

Maria goes on to explain how her university experience has brought about changes, especially in raising her children, in light of oppressive structures against women:

[...] in raising my children, today I tell them differently from what I was told. You can be whatever you want to be; you just need to want it. This issue of sexism, this racial issue. Because I only have

sons. So, encouraging them not to be sexist, because whether we like it or not, we see a lot of prejudice against women. And that is also an issue for us as mothers, to open our children's eyes. Because women also have the right to go wherever they want; they can be whatever they want to be. A woman wasn't made just to... Because in the old days, in our community, even my husband had this view that a woman was born to be a mother and a housewife, nothing more. But today, no, women are gaining the world. The most a woman could aspire to be back then, what they thought, was a teacher, a nurse. Today, no, we see women working in all areas (Maria, 2023).

Maria demonstrates a critical awareness of gender issues and the role she plays as a mother in promoting equality. Education is a powerful tool in transforming gender norms and combating sexism. In this context, Maria recognizes the intersectionality of gender and race, as a Black quilombola woman, she understands the challenges women in her community face regarding racial prejudice and gender issues. In her accounts, Maria exemplifies how her husband did not allow her to study and work, confining her to the domestic sphere.

In this context, certain strategies for perseverance emerge, especially those related to self-respect in difficult circumstances:

I had some difficulties, but thank God I was very proactive in communicating. During the time between mandatory and elective subjects, I took courses that were more professionally oriented and related to some things I want to work on. So I went looking for them, charting my own path. Because when you enter college at an older age, you've already worked a lot, you have a different kind of knowledge than the young people coming in now, who have never worked and have always been supported by their parents to study. And I'm coming in with a different kind of knowledge than they have; I already know what I want. So you start seeing things, and you're the 'aunt,' right? Because I'm the 'aunt' of the group. Aunt here, aunt there. I have professors who are much younger than me (Benedita, 2023).

Benedita's very presence in the institution as a student challenges age-related expectations, which constitutes a direct act of re-existence against societal norms about who 'should' have access to higher education. She

mentions that her age and life experience were a differentiator, as she brings with her a unique set of knowledge and wisdom that has enhanced her university experience. These characteristics underpin her assertive choices, as she mentions directing her coursework toward her professional goals and personal interests. Additionally, she expresses the desire to use higher education as a means of revitalizing her knowledge.

[...] in the beginning, I felt a bit shy because I only saw young people in my class. This semester, I've seen people more my age, but when I first started, it was just young people. So, I felt embarrassed and shy. It was even harder to approach them, but they... they were quite welcoming too. Because sometimes I felt very... Even when it came time to present work, I already had a barrier with myself because I was Black. I grew up feeling diminished, you know? So, to get up there, present, speak, I was very shy about explaining things. Even now, I still feel some shyness, but I'm already able to explain a project, to speak more openly. I had a professor who would give us a text and have us read it, analyze it, and then critique it. So that forced us, in a way, to express ourselves; it really improved my knowledge. It gave me a new perspective on everything I experienced, which I thought was right, and now I don't agree with many things (Maria, 2023).

Maria's account highlights the intersections of age, racial identity, and discrimination, revealing the social and racial dynamics that often affect individuals in educational settings. Her words illustrate the impact of racism on her self-esteem and personal confidence, while also highlighting her process of overcoming and personal development. Maria mentions her growth in the ability to express her ideas, despite initial shyness, showing how education challenges and deconstructs beliefs. Her account, up to this point, points to a path of self-discovery throughout her university experience.

[...] I already started feeling... excluded, and I also didn't try to fit in where I didn't belong. I kept to myself, doing what I knew, trying to do my best, and I've been like that until now (Glória Maria, 2023).

Glória Maria's experience is characterized by a sense of exclusion, reflecting how Black bodies are often subjected to exclusionary treatment in various contexts, including educational ones. However, she demonstrates

resilience by choosing to maintain her identity and not compromise who she is to fit into the prevailing norms. This attitude can be seen as a strategy for self-preservation. However, this decision to 'keep to myself' also had emotional implications, such as isolation and loneliness, mentioned in other parts of the interview. This shows that the choices made in response to exclusion are not without emotional challenges.

Do you stop being quilombola because you left the community? No. You left the community to seek something better for yourself and your family. But you remain quilombola. Your roots are quilombola, you understand? Your ancestors... It's beautiful to achieve things through your own merit and with the help of political affirmations, of public policies (Tereza de Benguela, 2023).

Tereza de Benguela acknowledges that seeking a better life and accessing educational opportunities outside the community are legitimate and do not negate quilombola identity. In this journey, quilombola women are reaffirming their identities while pursuing education. The following excerpt shows how collective spaces are crucial for boosting the self-esteem, voice, and activism of racialized people:

But in the Black collective, I participated in discussion circles, I went to meetings they had. It's a place where I felt like, 'ah, this is where I need to be.' And many times, I couldn't go because of my schedule and the heavy course load, so I felt overwhelmed and couldn't participate in everything. But the few I did attend were good; it was a place where I felt welcomed, where I had a voice, where I was received warmly, and felt a sense of belonging (Glória Maria, 2023).

Moreover, various motivational forces drive these quilombola women to assert themselves in a challenging academic environment. These are journeys built on small, daily victories that will lead them to graduation.

I always tell my sister, and anyone who starts, that the embarrassment I felt, along with the desire to succeed, kept me from giving up. So I cried; I went through really tough times, and when I stopped crying or after sleeping, I would wake up with a little more drive. So I even tell them: 'Oh, you're tired, cry! Try to do something, but don't give up because giving up is not the best path.' So you learn

to rest—lie down, rest, sleep, cry, then the next day, you get up, and it's a new day, but don't give up, because in college, especially for us quilombolas, there are plenty of reasons to quit. We have to be strong, resist, and keep going (Glória Maria, 2023).

It is evident from this narrative that the desire to succeed is a form of intentionality. Glória Maria not only cries but also wakes up determined to continue. This is not just a passive response to difficulties but an intentional expression of persistence—a force that motivates her to act. Her body acts according to her intention not to give up, and this action is directed toward the goal of completing her studies. Her resistance is manifested in her repeated use of the phrase “don't give up,” emphasizing the importance of continuing to move forward. She acknowledges the challenges that quilombola students face at the university but chooses to resist and encourages others not to be discouraged by adversity and to keep fighting. This perception is reinforced in Glória Maria's other accounts:

So, it is a privilege for us to gain entry, but it is still a point of resistance—we have to resist, right? Exist, resist, and persist! So we always have to be on this path of trying to do our best and bring more quilombola women, more people who will fight and resist. Despite all the difficulties, it's a place where we deserve to be! So it's our place too, and we want more to come (Glória Maria, 2023).

Glória Maria's perception of the university encapsulates the ongoing struggle that quilombola women face in the academic environment. By asserting that the university is their place, she claims their right to occupy this space and encourages others to do the same.

So I always said, I even told a colleague: don't give up, go to the end! Because as we go, others will follow, and for others to come, we have to finish (Tereza de Benguela, 2023).

Tereza's understanding emphasizes not only her own benefit but also the importance of paving the way for those who wish to follow in their footsteps.

Everything the Program announces... I inform the community. A call for applications opens... People, there's a course... This is happening. I pass it on to the community. I see it as a battle, a struggle, because college... It is just the beginning. And when you leave here, you will specialize in the field. Especially in my course, it offers a range of opportunities. And in whatever you choose, to be good at it, you have to keep getting qualified, taking more courses in the area. But it's that situation (Benedita, 2023).

Similarly, Benedita expresses her commitment to facilitating access to higher education for others. She views the pursuit of qualification as a necessary path to academic and professional success.

I believe I was able to share a bit of my experience, my joy in being quilombola, and my pride in representing my quilombola community and my family as the first person to graduate from my family, the first from the quilombo to graduate through the program as well. So, I shared my journey; it was a pleasure. Not everyone embraced my story or found it interesting, but I shared what I could. I carried the name of my community, honored it, and reached a level where many didn't believe I would. So, it is a privilege for us to gain entry, but it is still a point of resistance—we have to resist, right? Exist, resist, and persist. So we always have to be on this path of trying to do our best and bring more quilombolas, more quilombola women, more people who will fight and resist. Despite all the difficulties, it's a place where we deserve to be. So it's our place too, and we want more to come (Glória Maria, 2023).

Glória Maria highlights the contributions of quilombola women to transforming social reality. In breaking stereotypes, it's important to consider the approach outlined by Gomes (2017) on the tension between regulation and emancipation in the paradigm of Western modernity. This paradigm traditionally establishes a hierarchy between scientific knowledge, represented by the scientist in their office, and practical knowledge experienced in the world. Based on what the author suggests, we can infer that quilombola women challenge this dichotomy, enriching emancipatory knowledge with their experiences and wisdom.

(Almost) final considerations

The phenomenological methodology adopted in this study allowed for an understanding of the perceptions of Black quilombola women in and about the university context. Merleau-Ponty (2006) argues that the body is not merely a physical object but also a means of perception and interpretation. In this sense, the narratives of these women reveal not only the physical/material challenges of higher education, but also the subjective and social transformations that occur throughout this educational journey.

By illuminating the interactions between subjectivity, corporeality, and social dynamics, this study highlighted how Black quilombola women reconfigure meanings associated with the Black body in the academic environment. Through education, they not only overcome barriers individually but also strengthen their collective identities, connecting the quilombola community to the academic sphere. These achievements are thus seen not merely as individual accomplishments but as forms of cultural re-existence and female emancipation.

Therefore, the phenomenological interpretation emphasizes the importance of considering subjective experiences and bodily perceptions as essential elements in the construction of knowledge. This study not only broadens our academic understanding of the experiences of quilombola women but also encourages reflection on the importance of methodological approaches that value alternative perspectives.

We understand that capturing all the nuances of this journey is a challenging task, given the richness and uniqueness of each experience. All these readings and reinterpretations in the relation to the lived world described, constructed, and constituted is what brings the power to explore, through the narratives, the categories of conquest and quilombola re-existence affirmed at the beginning of this text. The journey of these women involves not only navigating university classrooms but also complex social contexts where quilombola identity is often in a state of tension and negotiation.

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