

The Black Women's Movement in Brazil



Eduardo Simoes/Foto F4

When speaking about the situation of women in Brazil, it is necessary to define whether one is speaking of white women, black women or indigenous women. Each one lives a different reality, with distinct challenges and achievements.

Alzira Rufino, founding member of The Black Women's Collective of Baixanda Santista in Brazil, spoke in London at the Fighting Sexism: North and South conference organised by War on Want. Alzira speaks to us too in these following pages.

Violence against women is a world-wide phenomenon and is found in all cultures, races and social classes. In Brazil, violence against women is particularly serious because Brazilian society is very conservative in relation to women, and maintains patronising attitudes and behaviour towards black women especially.

Approximately 30 percent of Brazilian families are headed by women who, alone, support their children and other relatives. This reality is particularly true for black women who are in the lowest position in the income scale and are undervalued and discriminated against in relation to white women.

For centuries in Latin America, black and indigenous women have suffered from belonging to a crushed ethnic group. They are brutally exploited by colonisation, deprived of their

culture and beliefs, and subjected to a racial ideology that classifies them as primitive and inferior according to white cultural and racial standards.

Yet, Brazilian women are repudiating the social, economic and cultural disadvantages that they have been subjected to. They are denouncing the violence done to their human rights by sexism and racism. Women are also denouncing the material and spiritual evils caused by economic elites who keep the world in a state of war and in permanent



Black and indigenous women in Brazil have found their voice.

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disequilibrium. Like in other South American countries, the women's struggle and the struggle against racism in Brazil are also struggles against poverty, which increases women's vulnerability to all kinds of violence.

Although slow, the mobilisation of Brazilian women has been able to positively affect the country's politics. In recent years, women have been elected to decision-making positions. In 1988, 107 cities were headed by women mayors. In 1992 in the following election, this number rose to 171 and included three state capitals. In the 1994 elections, women made further advances. There were two women candidates for the vice-presidency of the Republic, 10 contenders for the position of State Governor and 12 for the Senate. The biggest revelation came with the results of the Senate elections: 40 women, two of whom are black and belonged to the Workers Party,

won. One of the elected black senators is a former domestic servant, one among the Brazilian black women that make up almost 80 percent of Brazil's domestic servants. Most black women work as househelps because they are excluded from so-called female professions. The black women's victory means that historic obstacles that have kept the approximately 32.4 million black women at the lowest level of education and professional achievement could be overcome.

The problem of access to the different levels of education needs to be analyzed if the position of black women in Brazil's employment market is to be understood. Attempts to make such an analysis is however hindered by the limited data available on Brazilian women. These data do not take into account the differences among white, black and indigenous women in Brazil so there exists no statistical

analysis concerning black and indigenous women.

Nevertheless, the 1982 census showed that in contrast to 78 percent of white women completing elementary education, only 22 percent of black women achieved this level. Of this number, only one percent entered the university. What is sad though is that despite higher education, many black women still end up as servants, unable to find other types of work.

If only for the fact that half the female population in Brazil are black and indigenous women, the political and economic progress of black and indigenous women could represent a democratic revolution. One cannot claim to embrace democracy for as long as black and indigenous women are excluded from power.

In this context, the organizations of black and indigenous women play a very important role. They are the mouthpiece that speaks of the reality of the excluded millions. Black and indigenous women's organisations are putting pressure on government, bringing awareness to society, making black and indigenous women qualified for decision-making positions in politics and the economy. Even now, many female leaders in Brazil's politics are products of the women's movement. The feminist experience they gained there contributed greatly to their assertiveness and visibility in Brazil's political arena.

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