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Homelessness and Women: where one encounters violence

Mulheres e a vida na rua: onde as violências se encontram

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Abstract: The article reflects on the challenges related to the lives of homeless women. Based on document analysis and literature review, the work begins with reflections on the issue of homelessness, emphasising structural inequalities. Considering the established asymmetries in the relationships of gender, race and class that are expressed in the socio-historical conditions that determine the process of *homelessness*, we are guided by a decolonial and intersectional framework. Our results indicate that the dimensions of gender, race and class determine both the process of *homelessness* and the way in which women experience the streets.

Keywords: Homeless women. Homeless people. Violence.

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Resumo: O artigo tem como objetivo refletir sobre os desafios relacionados à (sobre)vivência de mulheres em situação de rua. A partir de análise documental e revisão bibliográfica, partimos de reflexões sobre a questão da situação de rua, enfatizando as desigualdades estruturais. Considerando as assimetrias estabelecidas nas relações de gênero, raça e classe que se expressam nas condições sócio-históricas que determinam o processo de rualização, nos norteamos pelo referencial decolonial e interseccional. Nossos resultados apontam que as dimensões de gênero, raça e classe determinam o processo de rualização e a forma como as mulheres vivenciam as ruas.

Palavras-chave: Mulheres em situação de rua. População em situação de rua. Violências.

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1 Introduction

The increase in the homeless population (PSR) in Brazilian cities highlights a scene of extreme inequality and social injustice that reveals the results of economic and social policies that have fragmented and weakened individuals and their social relations. The streets are fertile ground for these expressions, where invisibility takes the place of the existing. At a time of intense social and health crises, ever more people have been forced onto the streets, subjecting themselves to bad weather, violence and the absence of the minimum of social protections and citizenship.

Through document analysis and literature review, we will discuss how these intersectional issues make women vulnerable to violent situations and rights violations. It is important that we incorporate the decolonial perspective into the discussion, as it frames the colonial, patriarchal, racist, and sexist debate.

Historically considered a predominantly male phenomenon, there are gaps in the academic literature when considering the feminisation of the street. Statistical data is not always able to show us the complexity of the process of homelessness, especially when we focus on the gender dimension and given the comparatively low incidence of homeless women. Despite being less represented in quantitative terms, there has, however, been an increase in homelessness among women. Homeless women are more prone to mental illness, physical, sexual, and psychological violence, and, particularly, a lack of work opportunities. (PRATES; PRATES; MACHADO, 2011). Against a background of inequality, homeless women figure in this process of extreme exclusion.

2 Development

2.1 The urban desert: considerations on the phenomenon of *homelessness*

The origin of the issue of *street living*, or *homelessness*¹, is controversial. According to Stoffels (1977) and Ault (2005), it is a phenomenon that dates to antiquity, being genetically linked to the disintegration of archaic society, the strengthening of private property, slavery,

¹ The expression *homelessness* is the most common translation, in English, of the term “situação de rua”, therefore, despite its broad use globally, “[...] the term ‘homelessness’ in English does not always have an equivalent in other languages. ‘Homelessness’ suggests as much a lack of a physical dwelling as a loss of a sense of meaning in the social environment” (UNITED NATIONS, 2015, p. 3, author’s translation).

and the division of labour. Greve and Currie (1991), dealing with homelessness in Britain, also point to a distant origin. For them, there have always been, for a variety of reasons, homeless people, and, despite socio-historical changes both in the determinants that lead to homelessness and in the patterns of the phenomenon, poverty has persisted as a critical element of this process.

A considerable part of the literature places the emergence of homelessness in the context of the first phase of modern capital, that of primitive accumulation, with forced migration from the countryside and the urbanisation process of pre-industrial societies (OURIQUES, 2016). According to Burzstin, “Living in [the middle of] the street is not a new problem. If not as old as the very existence of the streets, of urban life, it dates back, at least, to the rebirth of cities, at the beginning of capitalism” (BURZSTIN, 2003, p. 19).

An important point regarding homelessness is that, even though it is not a contemporary issue, it must be seen as a socio-historical phenomenon which has acquired new nuances with the development and transformations of capitalism, intensifying in equal measure as this has evolved. Thus, despite being an old phenomenon, it has changed and has tended to increase with the consolidation and transformations of capitalism.

Reis and Dutra (2013) postulate that this phenomenon is explained by the organisation of the current globalised capitalist society under the effects of financialisation. In this sense, this phenomenon can be understood as an expression of the social question, that is, it is related to the contradictory way in which the relations of production and reproduction are regulated by capitalism.

The structural issue is, in fact, an important dimension to be considered in relation to homelessness. According to Nunes (2013), “[...] the process of homelessness, as an expression of the social issue, appears in combined processes of changes in the world of work and the deepening of social inequalities” (NUNES, 2013, p. 26). It is a multifaceted theme, which generally displays the issues of homelessness or extreme poverty as the main determinants. Issues related to political, economic, and cultural problems can not only cause the phenomenon, but also intensify it.

Ferro (2012) points to two main areas of public policy aimed at the homeless population. Firstly, the criminalisation and state repression of homeless people, evidenced by daily actions of the confiscation of belongings, compulsory housing, and the removal of these people from their places of residence, actions that are often carried out with violence. Secondly, we have the omission of this issue from the agenda of most governments. The State has, historically, left gaps that have been occupied by philanthropic or charitable organisations, actions not linked to the consolidation of social rights.

Allowing for these difficulties, it is important to highlight some important achievements. After the enactment of Decree 7053/2009 (BRASIL, 2009), the homeless population started to enjoy the protection of the National Policy for the Homeless Population². Furthermore,

² In Brazil, the definition of the homeless population is contained in Decree 7053/2009, according to which the “Homeless population is considered to be a heterogeneous population suffering extreme poverty, broken or weakened family ties and lacking regular conventional housing, and which uses public places and degraded areas for housing and sustenance, either temporarily or permanently, as well as shelter units for temporary overnight stays or as temporary housing” (BRASIL, 2009).

the creation of policies such as the Consultórios na Rua (Street Advice Centres) and the Pop Centres, as well as the inclusion of homeless population in the SUS and SUAS policies, are important advances.

Currently, the issue of homelessness in Brazil starts from a situational perspective, which leads us to create an associational framework of movement, transition, dynamics, and process.

The term 'homelessness process' is based on a contrary conception, in that it recognises it as a social process, a condition shaped by multiple conditioning factors, in a *continuum*, which is why preventive processes and intervention with those who are recently homeless seem to be fundamental for achieving greater effectiveness in terms of public policies." (PRATES; PRATES; MACHADO, 2011, p. 194, authors' italics).

Following this line of thought, we consider the existence of homeless people as emblematic of social inequality. It is a global, complex, multidimensional and multidetermined phenomenon, with several variables, especially when considering the heterogeneity of this group and the multiplicity of their needs. In this sense, there are several interrelated determinants, including gender, race, age group, regional origin, issues related to health, educational level, etc.

If we consider that all homeless people suffer violence as a regular dimension of their lives, then, when we relate this fact to women, the issue becomes even more complex. On the street, women are constantly exposed to all forms of violence, in a cycle of violations that mark their lives both before and during their time on the street.

2.2 Being a woman on the street: pain and resilience

According to an estimate published by Natalino (2020), in March 2020 there were 221,869 homeless people in the country. The number may be greater and tend to increase as the social and health crisis in the country also increases. Data collection tools, such as the Cadastro Único (CadÚnico) (Single Registration), while not providing a reliable quantity, do provide important elements for the analysis of the sociodemographic profile. In March 2021, 160,097 homeless people were enrolled in the CadÚnico³.

The homeless population is largely composed of black, adult, men with low levels of education (BRASIL, 2008). Despite this male predominance, the number of female individuals is significant. Approximately 14% of homeless people enrolled on CadÚnico are women, which represents a contingent of more than twenty thousand people. The racial dimension of homelessness is evidenced by the high number of blacks and mixed-race (68%). When we cross-reference the data in relation to sex and colour, an even higher rate results, with more than 70% of homeless women being black.

³ Data referring to the Cadastro Único is tabulated in the TABCAD tool. Available at: https://cecad.cidadania.gov.br/tab_cad.php. Accessed on: April 24, 2021.

According to Silva (2009), an important dimension of homelessness is “[...] prejudice as a mark of the degree of dignity and moral value attributed by society to people affected by the phenomenon” (SILVA, 2009, p. 95). For Silva, negative discrimination has affected homeless people throughout history and in all societies. The process is permeated by the criminalisation of the phenomenon in multiple ways – the homeless being called beggars, vagrants, lazy, thieves, or a dangerous class. The stigmatisation of homelessness and the people who experience it stem from a moralistic bias that contrasts those with homes and homeless people, with the racial dimension as a strong determinant for homelessness.

The effects of slavery on black people in Brazil still leave many marks and this is evidenced by the greater number of homeless blacks or mixed-race individuals. This process is linked to the social, economic, cultural, and political formation of Brazil, in which the development of productive forces is closely linked “[...] to the generalisation of free labour in a society in which slavery leaves deep marks” (IAMAMOTO; CARVALHO, 2006, p. 125).

In this way, the inheritance of slavery has imprinted itself on the social question, as is the case of homelessness. Here we witness the criminalisation of poverty, linked to its normalisation, and based on racism, which is both structural and structuring. The marks of colonialism continue to operate in the Brazilian reality, above all, as a form of rationality which has racism and the idea of race as its main supporting pillars (ALMEIDA, 2018), and the construction of subjectivities inherent to colonial processes (FANON, 2008).

So, homelessness is viewed as natural precisely because it is experienced by an expressive majority of black bodies. The street is not racialised by chance. In important issues, such as income distribution, access to the labour market, housing conditions, education, violence and political representation, the black population is greatly disadvantaged (INSTITUTO BRASILEIRO DE GEOGRAFIA E ESTATÍSTICA, 2019). This engenders exclusion, in a process in which factors interreact in a multi-determined way. In the case of the homeless population, by linking the issues of race, gender, and class, we produce a broth of intense social exclusion that culminate in discrimination, stigmatisation, and violence.

The street is an extremely dynamic space, in which the relationship between public and private is established and is substantiated by the appropriation of this place according to the individual's needs. These people, who live with daily oppression, may see the street as the only way out of their problems. According to Costa (2005), many individuals and their families migrate to large cities in search of better opportunities and face difficulties in securing housing, food, and survival in general, leaving them with street space as an alternative to secure work and income.

Among the reasons for higher rates of homelessness in urban perimeters, especially in large cities, is a greater circulation of capital in these spaces. Access to income through work, even if informal and insecure, such as working with recyclables, street selling or odd jobs, for example, is one of the main drivers for homelessness in these locations.

Belcher and DeForge (2012) say that one of the reasons for the existence of homeless people is the fact that the phenomenon is, to some extent, socially acceptable. Society partly ignores this group and partly excludes it. Many services aimed at the homeless focus on basic needs and on subsistence. There is, in a way, a dehumanising dimension, which

condenses in the lack of guarantee of rights for homeless people that are common to individuals in society in general.

The phenomenon of homelessness must be analysed as an expression of the social question, considering the whole process. It should not be reduced to only the economic dimension of production relations but encompass the entire reproduction of social relations involved in homelessness such as, for example, violence, rights violations, prejudice and discrimination, problems arising from the abuse or harmful use of alcohol and other drugs, and mental health problems.

When women experience homelessness, exposure to multiple forms of violence becomes much more explicit. Almost always black, individuals experience oppression every day and are challenged to develop resistance strategies amid adversity. Under the aegis of the tyranny of male domination, which controls the demarking of women's space, the violence against these black and poor individuals exposes the deepest marks of inequality in Brazilian society exacerbated by issues of race, social class, and sexuality.

The intersectional perspective leads us to conclude that the reality of the streets is different for men and women. As victims of social invisibility coupled with multiple social determinations linked to their life trajectories, homeless women present a society of stigmatisation, discrimination and prejudice that manifest themselves in a state of injustice and violence (SILVA, 2009). We can, therefore, state that structural oppressions are interconnected in a matrix of domination that influences all levels of social relations and permeates individual and collective planes in visible and permeable structures.

Women are oppressed by a society that makes them invisible and marginalised and concurrently they suffer physical and psychological violence, including from other homeless people. Violence against women by men who are also homeless makes it clear how gender oppression is manifested in all social spaces. When reflecting on homeless black women, we seek to understand this reality through the concrete/material analysis of social relations in line with the aspects that permeate the reality of these people. It challenges us to reflect on the persistent contradictions and material and symbolic inequalities of the oppression that affect these women, how they deal with multiple forms of violence and what tactics they use to survive.

3 Homelessness as a space of contradiction: intersectional crossings

By following pathways in contexts of exclusion, that is, in contexts of the deprivation of rights, individuals are also excluded from being, from participating, from creating, from their own identity. In this sense,

Exclusionary processes produce an unfair distribution of resources and unequal access to necessities and rights to; create the necessary conditions so that all populations have and can go beyond basic needs; enable participatory and cohesive social systems; value diversity; guarantee peace and human rights; and sustain environmental systems (POPAY et al., 2008, p. 36, our translation).

Despite their complex and precarious insertion into this reality, these people, nevertheless, resist the process of social exclusion. Resistance permeates the organisational and political

struggle, such as that carried out by the National Movement of the Homeless Population (SCHUCK; GESSER; BEIRAS, 2020). Surviving in these conditions is also resisting.

The heterogeneity of possible social constructions of homelessness serves as an element in understanding the methods and alternative methods by which this population survives and resists. From this perspective, the street can have at least two meanings: that of being a shelter for those who, with no alternative, sleep there, whether under a shop awning, in a doorway, or under a viaduct, or it can be a way of life, for those who are habituated to life on the street and who have established a complex network of relationships within it. Different situations can be identified regarding living in this space:

[...] living on the street – circumstantially; being on the street – recently; being from the street – permanently. [...] These situations can be arranged in a continuum, with the time spent on the street as a reference point; as time increases, the status of “resident” becomes stable. What differentiates these situations is the greater or lesser degree of insertion in the street world (VIEIRA; BEZERRA; ROSA, 1992, p. 93-94).

So, it is necessary to focus on the different dimensions of homeless living, starting from the fact that the street space behaves as a means of analysis, where the relationships within it, substantiated by the individuals who use it, become the central element for understanding.

Such dimensions are expressed through homeless women by way of a triple discrimination, because the stereotypes generated by sexism, racism, and their social condition place them at the extremes of subordination. The boundaries delineated by colonialism (QUIJANO, 2005; CARDOSO, 2014; ALMEIDA, 2018) and racism (GONZALEZ, 1982; WERNECK, 2011) cut across these women, who express multiple aspects of a society marked by oppression, patriarchy, and inequality. We must include white women along with these black women, who are equally poor, and who are also subject to the same oppressive conditions. So, we are anchoring our reflections in these afro-diasporic references (GONZALEZ, 1982; DAVIS, 2016) and in decolonial studies (QUIJANO, 2005; LUGONES, 2014; MALDONADO-TORRES, 2016), that delineate a sociability established both in the contradictions between their absences and violence, and by the presences that are established by the resistance that affects the processes of subjectivation and socialisation.

Curriel (2020) points out that several systems of domination engendered by racist patriarchal power had been identified by racialised, Afro-descendant, and indigenous feminists before the concept of *coloniality* was coined. However, the reflection proposed here is not an epistemological review, but an awareness of the violence and oppression of colonising processes. As a category of analysis, gender coloniality places women as unilateral victims of the power system. So, we rely heavily on the work of Maria Lugones, for whom:

In using the term coloniality, my intention is to name not only a classification of people in terms of power and gender coloniality, but also the process of the active reduction of people, the dehumanisation that makes them fit for classification, the process of subjectification and the attempt to make the colonised less than human beings (LUGONES, 2014, p.939).

These women are an expression of resistance, presence and power and assume a leading role in a context permeated with conflicts, insecurity, and uncertainties, under conditions of

social subordination. We, therefore, understand this issue from a feminist and decolonial perspective that recognises the continuation of power relations inherited from the imposition of colonial modernity in Brazil, that is, based on the capitalist, colonial-racist and gender driven system.

We set out the confluence of oppressions that these, and other people who cohabit the spaces of the streets, live with, and that negatively amplify the living conditions of women. We bring together the dimensions of gender, race and class that lead us to the notion of intersectionality explored by Kimberlé Crenshaw (2002), although its first expressions stem from *black feminism* and the abolitionist movements of the 19th century with the prominence of the American Sojourner Truth. This conceptualisation seeks to involve the “[...] structural and dynamic consequences of the interaction between two or more axes of subordination” (CRENSHAW, 2002, p. 177). Here, intersectionality presupposes a non-hierarchical relationship between different categories, such as “[...] any ethnic, generational, sexually oriented, geographically-derived oppression, among others that can be identified in the singularities of the subjects’ experiences of social life” (PIMENTEL, 2020, p. 29).

Following some theories of black feminism (GONZALES, 1982; CARNEIRO, 2002; WERNECK, 2010; AKOTIRENE, 2019), we can affirm how structural oppressions are interconnected in a matrix of domination that influences all levels of social relations, permeates individual planes, and is reconfigured in violence against these women based on its multidimensionality (BAIRROS, 2020).

The hierarchy of power impacts more negatively on black women, whose “[...] oppression based on socially constructed gender differences, racism and patriarchy, which accentuates the belief in the domination produced based on notions of inferiority and superiority” (BAIRROS, 2020, p. 212). The experience of homeless women brings together all forms of overt oppression, plus the risk to exposed female bodies. The street is not a place to live or build femininity, because private spaces are the best guarantee of safety and integrity for women. The violence suffered in the private space of the home challenges women to confront it, and thus risk their lives on the street, where they often try to become invisible, which helps to avoid violence. The (in)visibility of their lives is developed through everyday practices, which is a setting of dispute and reflection.

For women, the lived experiences that put them in this position add to the gender and power inequalities that are determined by social markers (SAFFIOTI, 2009). From the point of view of their racial identity, Jurema Werneck (2000) points out that black women are neither completely the same, nor completely different. Social inequality points to a historical inheritance. Poverty has a colour in Brazil (CARNEIRO, 2011, p. 57). The street also has colour.

The issue of the street and gender is highly complex and demands the development of targeted public policies that include the necessary specificity. For homeless people the experience of surviving differs substantially from that of the domiciled population. Life on the streets is related to the immediacy of survival, which makes long-term planning difficult. The search for basic survival needs (food, money, blankets, a place to sleep, etc.) becomes urgent in street life. It is a form of survival that, in the case of women, brings even more difficult elements, such as avoiding physical and sexual violence, for example, but this does

not mean that women are passive victims in this process. Their survival tactics denote clarity regarding the sexist and patriarchal situation in which they find themselves, even down to the strategic planning of daily survival.

Homeless women are denied the right to motherhood. The punishment of homeless black and female body sets a barbaric scene. Forced sterilisation (MELLO, 2018) and the denial of motherhood by the State, through the compulsory removing children from their mothers – without them being given alternatives through public and social policies – are common cases. In April 2021, the Ministry of Health published an ordinance, with a eugenic taint, for the implanting of subdermal contraceptives (Etonogestrel) in vulnerable women of childbearing age. In addition to homeless women, those with HIV/AIDS, sex workers, incarcerated women and women undergoing treatment for tuberculosis are also part of the target group of these regulations (BRASIL, 2021).

Escorel (1999) points to an overlap of situations of exclusion within the same social group. Here, it is a set of variables susceptible to discrimination, stigmatisation, exclusion, and social disadvantages of all kinds that, added or interrelated, engender such a significant process that it is able to characterise the context of sociability in which this group is inserted. Thus, the movement of history and its multiple dimensions determine the process of homelessness for women, placing them at the margin, where they are not able to enjoy material and immaterial social production.

Surveys of homeless people indicate that the main determinants of homelessness are family conflict, abusive or harmful use of alcohol and other drugs, loss of housing, lack of income and violence. There is, in our view, an intersection between socio-family relationships and the pathway of exclusion and violence that leads to homelessness.

Based on the National Survey (CUNHA; RODRIGUES, 2009), we were able to understand how the racial dimension is a determinant for homelessness, from a structural point of view. When analysing the reasons that led these women to become homeless, we have a higher incidence of black women who point to unemployment and loss of housing as the main reason for having become homeless than white women, with 32% and 26% respectively.

Mayock, Parker and Sheridan (2015) point to a process of disengagement or rejection from the family environment. The failure to fit the parameters of the traditional family, based on patriarchal logic, is a determinant of the dimensions of female homelessness. The difficulties experienced by women on the street, such as in hygiene, lack of documentation, and prejudices that make up this process imply problems of self-esteem, relationship difficulties and “[...] collective experiences of depersonalisation, devaluation and stigmatisation” (MAYOCK; PARKER; SHERIDAN, 2015, p. 5).

The home is not just a place of protection and shelter. It is also a place of identity. Dovey (1985) makes an important distinction between home and house. The house is an object, part of the environment, fundamental in the development of human sociability. However, the home is a form of relationship between the individual and the environment, that is, the place of residence and where the persons who inhabit it interrelate.

Tipple and Speak argue that, when it comes to homelessness, a home is different from having an adequate roof. The notion of home is based on the perspective of “[...] a set of social and emotional requirements that go beyond the physical dimension of adequate shelter” (TIPPLE; SPEAK, 2009, p. 4, our translation). The loss of the roof may even be less important for some individuals in view of these requirements, as in, for example, the case of women who seek the streets to escape a context of domestic violence.

Sommerville (1992) points to the symbolic status of the home, which is expressed by: its physical characteristics; relationships with the environment and neighbourhood; the power of possession; a degree of territorial control (privacy); a degree of responsibility and a sense of belonging; the quality of domestic life, all situated in the complex context of social relations.

Homelessness arises, in this sense, from the absence of these elements, that is, the loss of symbolic social status, being treated as invisible or as another person’s problem, which implies a marginalisation and exclusion by society.

From this perspective, we understand before *homelessness* and during *homelessness* as adjacent moments. The entire process of social exclusion and violence that engenders homelessness is also experienced every day on the streets. Popay et al. (2008) states that “[...] exclusion consists of dynamic, multidimensional processes produced by unequal power relations” (POPAY et al., 2008, p. 36, our translation). The process has affects at different levels, from the micro-social to the macro-social (individual, household, group, community, national and global) and takes place in the economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions.

Establishing bonds is part of human existence, and for women, protection from everyday risks requires survival strategies. To live on the street it is necessary to develop networks of solidarity. In this way, women build their resistance and survival strategies. They often establish effective relationships, which, although these may be permeated by violence, still give them some greater security than the violence of the street itself. They build their life pathways and strategies, create codes, evoke the imagination, have encounters and disagreements, exist and resist.

4 Final considerations

The presence of a large population of homeless people on the streets in Brazilian cities is notorious. Their poverty and lives without even the minimum of social protections portray the challenges that exist in the unfair sociability of contradictory and asymmetric power relations and changes in the world of work. Homeless people transform the space they occupy and are transformed by it, in a process of adaptation, creation of new bonds and new forms of sociability. They turn arid urban spaces into a place for conviviality, adapting to the grey landscapes and hostile architecture of large urban centres.

Homelessness subjects women to life pathways of scars, losses, difficulties and above all, violence. But, for those who live on it, the street can also mean, beyond being a space of suffering, isolation and loneliness, a locus for the construction of spaces of affection and

solidarity. Ways of life and living are built with survival strategies and friendship bonds created.

Homeless women reflect the marks of a highly unequal sociability, accompanied by secular oppression rooted in the heart of Brazilian social formation. Expressions of the social issue incited by racism, patriarchy and inequality shape a scenario of exclusion, violence and (in)visibility for homeless women.

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