

**GENDER, WORK AND DIVERSITY: professional trajectories of
Brazilian black businesswomen**

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Introdução

In this paper I propose a reflection on the intersection between gender, race and diversity through the career trajectories of Brazilian black businesswomen. The empirical research was carried out between 2006 and 2011 in São Paulo, Brazil. I have opted to investigate the so-called corporate world, understood as the one composed of transnational corporations and the largest private national companies.

Problema de Pesquisa e Objetivo

The research problem is structured from the following questions: What changes happened in the career trajectories of Brazilian black businesswomen from the end of the 1970s to the beginning of the 21st century? How do these changes reflect the socioeconomic transformations that occurred in Brazilian society during that period? What consequences do these transformations have on Brazilian black businesswomen's racial and gender identities?

Fundamentação Teórica

The article is based on a discussion about the issues of race and gender. Concerning the gender issue, I understand gender as a kind of social identity that is constantly experienced and negotiated by social individuals. With regard to the racial issue, my starting point is that despite the fact that race does not exist as biologists have demonstrated, the idea of race remains an important one to comprehend the dynamics of social relations, as many social scientists argued.

Metodologia

The research methodological approach was socio-anthropological, so a qualitative one. It consisted of a double investigation strategy. Concerning the first generation of Brazilian black businesswomen, I have gathered the life histories of 5 such individuals. As for the second generation of Brazilian black businesswomen, I took hold of the so-called multi-sited ethnography.

Análise dos Resultados

Comparing the end of the 1970s to the early 21st century it's possible to note a change in the construction of career trajectories of Brazilian black businesswomen, which shows the path from individual strategies to collective action. This change reflects the greatest politicization of debates on race and on gender in the Brazilian public sphere in the late 20th century. So that the second generation of Brazilian black businesswomen could build more positively affirmed black identities.

Conclusão

As within wider Brazilian society, the corporate world in Brazil is far from being free of racial tensions. The representatives of the second generation of Brazilian black businesswomen are just starting to build their careers and it is too early to have a final conclusion about the role of gender and race in it. Anyway, the discussion that I made in the article shows that there is still a long way to go in Brazil until you may eliminate racial and gender inequalities in the corporate world.

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GENDER, WORK AND DIVERSITY: professional trajectories of Brazilian black businesswomen

Introduction

In this paper I propose a reflection on the intersection between gender, race and diversity through the career trajectories of Brazilian black businesswomen. The empirical research was carried out between 2006 and 2011 in São Paulo, Brazil's most important business city. I have opted to investigate the so-called corporate world, understood as the one composed of transnational corporations and the largest private national companies. Therefore, the study does not cover public administration, the Small and Medium Enterprises, or black entrepreneurs.

The paper is divided into four parts. In the next section the research problem will be presented. Then some information about the theoretical discussion as well as the methodological approach will be provided. So, the main results of the research will be discussed. Lastly, some final words will be displayed. However, the conclusion will remain open.

Research problem

Let me start with two pieces of information. The first one is that according to a social, racial and gender profile mapping carried out in 2010 by *Instituto Ethos* (2010), black people, who represent 51,1% of the Brazilian population, are represented in only 13,2% of the managerial positions and 5,3% of the Chief Executive Officer posts in the 500 largest companies acting in Brazil. Taking more specifically the situation of black women, inequality is even more striking. They are represented in 2,1% of the managerial positions and 0,5% of the Chief Executive Officer posts. This means that there are only 6 black women among the 119 women in CEO positions or between 1,162 directors (blacks and non-blacks of both sexes).

The second one is that in August of 2006, the Human Rights and Minorities Commission of the Chamber of Deputies, held a meeting with representatives of the black movement, the Public Ministry of Labour (PML), and the Brazilian Federation of Banks in order to discuss the inclusion of blacks into the labour market of the financial system. This meeting resulted from the establishment, by PML, of public civil examinations against the private banks by request of the black movement (CDHM, 2007; Lopes, 2007 e 2011). In response to this social pressure, many banking organizations have implemented trainee programs towards the inclusion of young blacks.

These two pieces of information signal the presence of two distinct subjects. Initially what I consider *a first generation of Brazilian black businesswomen*. I use this term to refer to middle-aged black professionals, with an average of 50, who had initiated their career trajectories at the end of the 1970s, in a historical context in which companies acting in Brazil were not concerned about diversity management.

Then, following that is what I consider *a second generation of Brazilian black businesswomen*. This group is made up of young black women who arrived in the labour market in the early 21st century at a time in which gender and racial issues had become a cause of fierce political dispute in Brazil. As a result, companies started to "recycle" discourses on gender and on race relating them to diversity management.

Actually, because of their age and recent entrance into the business world, the representatives of this second generation are not in managerial positions yet, but are taking part in trainee programs as potential managers. Consequently, when talking about them I am referring more precisely to a *second generation of Brazilian black businesswomen* with developing careers.

This scenario leads to the following research questions:

- 1) What changes happened in the career trajectories of Brazilian black businesswomen from the end of the 1970s to the beginning of the 21st century?
- 2) How do these changes reflect the socioeconomic transformations that occurred in Brazilian society during that period?
- 3) What consequences do these transformations have on Brazilian black businesswomen's racial and gender identities?

Before answering these questions, I present below some clarification on the theoretical discussion and on the methodological approach and research strategies.

Theoretical discussion

In her classic article, Scott (1988) says that gender concerns the ways each society elaborates its meaning concerning sexual differences, and structures the relations between men and women. Thus, these differences are not given in essence but are being constructed and reconstructed. When opened the field of gender studies in the 1970's, several authors denounced the universality of male domination. They argue that every society, whatever its familiar organization model and its economic base, was structured from male supremacy (Rosaldo, Lamphere and Bamberger, 1974). This perspective is questioned by socioanthropological contemporaneous debates.

The intention is to overcome the static way that some analysts see gender relations. Bourdieu (2005), for example, insisted on the idea of male domination. On the one hand, for the construction of his argument, he criticises the presupposed biological determination, when advocating that what really happens is a searching for legitimacy in a relationship domain, inscribing in nature what is, in reality, a naturalized social construction. His effort aims to unveil the historical mechanisms of producing inequalities, being partly specific agents, such as the family, the school, the Church and the State. On the other hand, at his approach everything goes as if there were only efforts to maintain, and not also to transform the domination mechanisms. Locked to gender *habitus* which are inculcated through socialization processes, women, and even men, would not be able to redefine the hegemonic gender relations. The sociologist writes, therefore, back to the advances of the feminist movement, above all since the 1970s, as well as to the theoretical production of intellectual feminists (Fournier, 2002). This is an approach that is unable to explain certain social phenomena.

An alternative for it is provided by Moore (1994 e 2000). She maintains that gender identity is not something passive, acquired all at once by socialization; and supports the idea that there is a more complex relation between gender identity and gender discourses, that is between gender while constructed in operations of significance, and gender as it is constantly experienced, negotiated, and renegotiated by social individuals. She highlights that society itself has a multiplicity of gender discourses, both contradictory and conflicting, that operate in different

social contexts. Although hierarchically ordered, these gender discourses are liable to a historical change. In this way it would be possible to not only understand the hierarchical nature of gender relations produced in each social context, but also the transformation efforts within the pattern of these relations.

Another key issue in contemporary debates in this field concerns the deconstruction of the idea of gender as something related to a unified identity, based on the category of “women”. If a person is a woman, it certainly is not all that this person is, because gender identity establishes intersections with other social localizations such as class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. In this way, talking about women in the plural, would be more adequate than thinking about this identity from the pretense of homogeneity (Butler, 2011). Avtar Brah (1991), in turn, asked how gender difference is linked to differences and antagonisms organized around other markers such as race and class. For her, it is essential to think about these interconnections not from metanarratives, or universalizing explanations, but as relations historically contingent and specific to certain contexts.

The decentralization of the gender category as seen in this debate does not absolutely imply denying the possibility of a coalition between women. However, it obliges an analytical vigilance, avoiding the anticipation of this solidarity, taken as a prior given (Butler, 2011). In the field of organizational studies, Ely and Mayerson (1999), and Alvesson and Billing (2009) have brought attention to this, when affirming that organizations are not simply typified by gender; they are also crossed by class, ethnicity and sexuality.

With regard to race, my starting point in this article is the assumption that race does not exist as biologists have demonstrated or over 50 years (Jacquard, 1988; Cavalli-Sforza e Cavalli-Sforza, 2002). However, despite this, many people still think and act as if it does exist. So that, the idea of race remains an important one to comprehend the dynamics of social relations, as many social scientists argued (Guillaumin, 1986; Bantom, 2000; Guimarães, 2002 e 2003; Munanga, 2004a; Fassin, 2006; Fassim, 2006).

So, in this article I understand race as a social and political construction, an instrument of domination and exclusion (Guimarães, 2002 e 2005; Munanga, 2004a). In that way, thinking about race is taking into account the discussions that take place in the public sphere; the disputes fought in the political arena (Fassin, 2010).

In the Brazilian case, the political disputes around the issue of race fought in the last 20 years show a break with the discourse of racial democracy, which had been hegemonic in the country since its inception in the 1930s (Munanga, 2004b; Guimarães, 2006 e 2008). Clearly, this transformation did not happen from one moment to the other. It is the result of at least two factors developed some years ago. On the one hand, studies and research conducted by social scientists since the late 1960s that demonstrated adequately enough the existence of racial inequality in Brazil (Hasembaig, 1979; Hasembaig e Silva, 1992; Bastide e Fernandes, 2008; Fernandes, 2008). On the other hand, the efforts accumulated by The Brazilian black movement that since the 1930s, using different discourses and distinct political strategies, had been denouncing the presence of racism in this country (Pahim; 1993; Andrews, 1998; Barcelos, 1999; Santos, 2007).

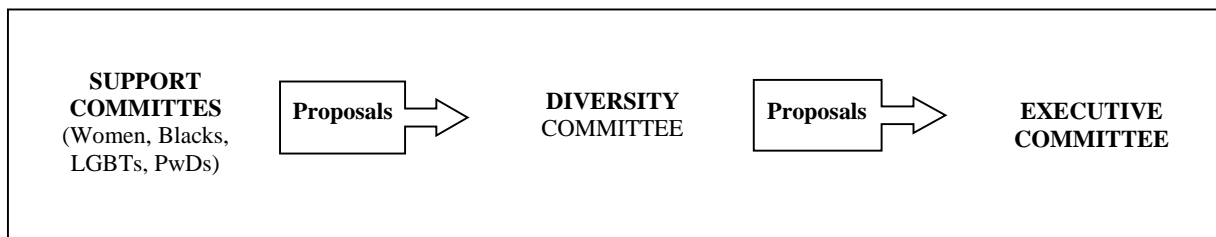
All this must be taken into account in order to understand the professional trajectories of Brazilian black businesswomen.

Methodological approach

The research methodological approach was socio-anthropological, so a qualitative one (Olivier de Sardan, 2008). It consisted of a double investigation strategy. Concerning the *first generation of Brazilian black businesswomen*, I have gathered the life histories (Kofes, 1994; Becker, 1999; Bertaux, 2006) of 5 such individuals. In this case, I haven't privileged a specific sector of economic activity. This is basically for two reasons: a) these women may have built their career trajectories through companies in different segments; b) choosing a sector of the economy would heighten the difficulties in finding Brazilian black businesswomen to be interviewed.

As for the *second generation of Brazilian black businesswomen*, I took hold of the so-called multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1998). I carried out participant observation in a transnational corporation of the financial sector which has a diversity program considered as a reference in Brazil. Such a program includes distinct support groups (women, blacks, people with disabilities, and gays/lesbians), besides a diversity committee composed of members representing these groups, the Department of Human Resources and the business areas. The Figure 1 shows the insertion of both support groups and diversity committee into the company's diversity policies.

Figure 1 – The functioning of the support groups in reporting back to the Diversity and Executive Committees.



At the end of the ethnographic fieldwork, I conducted comprehensive interviews (Kauffman, 2007) with members of both the women's support group and the black support group as well as with a diversity manager and with the director of human resources.

In order to understand the social inscription of this program, I also interviewed human resources managers of other companies and representatives of distinct agents who brought up the entrepreneurial diversity issue to the Brazilian public sphere: international organizations, the State, the black movement, Unions, business associations, and consulting firms specialized in human resources and/or diversity management.

To make the research feasible I concentrated this part on the banking segment. This choice was basically directed by the following reason: in the context of contemporary capitalism companies within the financial sector, because of their growing profits, have been the main targets of pressures for inclusion, made by Brazilian social movements working on the human rights agenda. This is due to the fact that a victory within this economic segment could spread, via organizational mimicry (DiMaggio and Powell, 2012), to companies in other sectors of the economy, which would see in the diversity initiatives of the organizations of this segment, best practices to be imitated.

Results

The *first generation of Brazilian black businesswomen* is formed by women who have built their careers in an unfavorable societal context. With regard to the issue of race, there was no form of support for any case of prejudice or racial discrimination. Brazil was living in a military dictatorship established in 1964. Thus, there were restrictions on mobilization within civil society. The modern black movement was only beginning to emerge within the country with the formation of the Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU) in 1978. From the State side, there was no public policy, neither to punish acts of racial discrimination in more concrete form, nor to eliminate racial inequalities (Pahim, 1993; Barcelos, 1999; Santos, 2007).

In addition, the MNU was inspired by Marxist ideology. Consequently, the black movement and this first generation of black businesswomen followed quite separate paths (Pahim, 1993; Andrews, 1998; Hanchard, 2001). The black businesswomen avoided bonds with the militancy very strongly. The movement, in its turn, undervalued these individuals, attributing to them the blemish of "*black bourgeois*".

Brazilian black businesswomen of this generation experienced situations of prejudice and racial discrimination in the corporate world. However, this does not mean that they are passive victims of racism, condemned to stagnation in the organizational game. They developed strategies to achieve their goals. These strategies were characterized by solitary and defensive behaviours. They tried to safeguard themselves from seeing further situations of prejudice and racial discrimination as experienced throughout their careers. Moreover, they avoided conflicts to solve situations that they could not fail to see coming. So, the *first generation of Brazilian black businesswomen* consists of a set of individual trajectories.

With regard to the issue of gender, all the representatives of the *first generation of Brazilian black businesswomen* that I interviewed highlighted the difficulties that women found in the labour market in the late 1970s. They noticed inequalities in pay in the development of their career in comparison to their male colleagues, and reported situations of moral and/or sexual harassment experienced, in addition to other forms of symbolic violence. They also indicated their condition of exception in the corporate world when they reached managerial positions, since they did not see many women, or any black women, in similar positions.

Moreover, the gender barriers that they found were not only related to the workplace. They also reported obstacles within their private lives. Only one of my interviewees continued to be married after her career advancement. Most of them divorced and one only married when she was in her 50s. She had no children, although she had cultivated that dream. All of them reported difficulties in achieving a stable marriage and / or organized family life. This was in part due to both sexism and racism.

Concerning the sexism question they pointed out, for example, that the men of their generation have not accepted staying at home waiting for their wives to come back from work because these wives had professional commitments going beyond their formal working hours. They also stressed husband's difficulties in dealing with wives who were earning higher wages than themselves.

Concerning the racism question, they pointed to the difficulties of Brazilian black women with graduate degrees finding partners to marry. On the one hand, because of the racist ideology, white men of their generation had not seen them as desirable wives. Perhaps as desirable women

for an affair, but not desirable for marriage. On the other hand, due to the absorption of racist ideology, black men of their generation who had higher education sought to marry white women, although less educated. Black men with less education, in turn, because of the sexist culture of the time, have not supported their professional success as businesswomen.

Finally, it is also worth mentioning that at the institutional level, there were not public policies at this time from the Brazilian state to combat sexism and gender inequalities in the workplace.

Briefly, with regard to the issue of gender, the *second generation of Brazilian black businesswomen* is formed by individuals coming into the business world in the early 21st century, in a rather more favorable societal context.

Concerning the issue of race, they rely on a sustaining apparatus to provide them a support in case of prejudice and racial discrimination. Since the (re)democratization of the country, started in 1985 and marked by the strengthening of civil society, the Brazilian black movement has gone through a process of institutionalization and professionalization (D'Adesky, 2001; Telles, 2003; Santos, 2007).

The early 1990s witnessed the beginning of "black" NGOs articulated in transnational advocacy networks in which there was an intense production and circulation of antiracist ideologies (Agudelo, 2006). The discursive archive of these ideologies (heterogeneous, fragmented and conflicting) includes post-socialist elaborations. These "black" NGOs have been fighting against racial democracy discourse that was hegemonic in Brazil since 1930 as well as requiring an approach to the Brazilian State in the sense of not only punishing racist behaviors in a more concrete form, but also adopting affirmative action policies (Munanga, 1996; Guimarães, 2008).

In the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, whose administration started in 1995, and especially after Lula da Silva's election in 2003, the Brazilian State has been responding positively to these demands. The Office for the Promotion of Racial Equality Policies was created and in a climate of tension and fierce disputes many universities have adopted affirmative action policies towards the inclusion of blacks (Souza, 1997; Telles, 2003; Carvalho, 2005; Santos, 2007).

The companies needed to respond to these changes in a societal context. Seeking an answer, they found diversity management in the archive of managerial technologies that is part of the new transnational business culture. This management tool has represented a solution that allowed them to translate the pressures of the black movement into a business language, thus reducing the potential conflict of racial relations.

As a result of this translation, it is possible to notice the disappearance of political disputes that mark both the origin of diversity management in the U.S. – in the context of the civil rights movement and its questioning of male, white, protestant and Anglo-Saxon supremacy – and its reception in Brazil, mediated by the demands of civil society after (re)democratization (Barbosa, 2002; Alves e Galeão-Silva, 2004).

The diversity is presented in an equation that involves: a) increasing creativity of working teams because of the personal experiences brought into them by individuals with different backgrounds; b) expanding the company's skill to respond to the demands of different market segments and therefore the creation of a competitive advantage; c) improving business

performance, ultimately (Cox and Blake, 1991; Thomas and Ely, 1996; Fleury, 2000; Hanashiro, 2007). That is, the business discourse on diversity is marked by pragmatic and triumphal logic. It seeks to neutralize the disruptive potential of the multicultural movement in an attempt to turn it into something palatable to business interests.

Actually, the development of the *second generation of Brazilian black businesswomen* reflects a moment in which the racial issue becomes a fierce object of political dispute in Brazil (Carvalho, 2005; Santos, 2007; Guimarães, 2008). The young women who comprise this generation are entering into the corporate world through trainee programs run for blacks, and created on diversity program frameworks.

This movement occurs in an economic context marked by reengineering and downsizing processes, especially in the banking industry (Rodrigues, 2004; Gussi, 2005). So that, the fact that many of these young women are being hired even before concluding their graduation is quite revealing of the strengthening of the black movement. The *second generation of Brazilian black businesswomen* is then the result of the encounter between the demands of "black" NGOs and the translation of these demands by enterprises. So, this generation is not a set of individual trajectories, but rather the fruit of collective action.

With regard to the issue of gender, the *second generation of Brazilian black businesswomen* also found a more favorable scenario than the first one, especially because of complaints by NGOs and the greater surveillance of the Brazilian state in relation to moral and/or sexual harassment and gender inequalities in the labor market. However, the young black women who I talked to pointed out the persistence of racist and sexist ideology as a concrete barrier they encountered both in the workplace and in their emotional relationships.

Meanwhile, this more positive picture should not make critical eyes relax. The company experience in which I carried out the participant observation reveals how much the racial issue is still a source of tension in the Brazilian society. A brief comparison explains this point. Looking at two support groups which are part of the diversity program of this company (for women and for blacks) we can see that the autonomy of the blacks' group is quite inferior to that of the women's group.

The women who created the latter were white professionals placed in top or intermediary positions. They themselves select who will coordinate the group and what will be the agenda and action strategies. Moreover, the diversity program previews the nomination of a sponsor for each group, someone who is in a top position, being responsible for gathering the collective demands and taking them to the diversity committee. However, the members of the women's group opted not to appeal to this resource. Given the place they occupied in the organizational structure, they had a wide network (Brunstein and Jaime, 2009).

Now, in the case of the blacks' group the dynamics is different though. Despite it formally relying on a leader, this person, actually, has only a figurative role. The coordination stays, in fact, under the responsibility of a diversity manager. It didn't happen in its first formation. The professional who founded the group had an intermediary post within the company. Nevertheless, he left the organization, unsatisfied with the direction and rhythm of the diversity program. Currently the collective is almost wholly formed by young members who participate in the trainee program. Anxious about an opportunity in the corporate world, they practically don't formulate any demands.

Moreover, while the fieldwork was carried out, there was a manoeuvre which deposed the then group leader, the only member that at that time had a managerial position. For the vacated post a professional who until that moment hadn't taken part in this experience was put forward. She was subordinated to the white executive who is the group's sponsor. It all happened in a forged election, being that the former leader wasn't communicated with, so he couldn't evaluate the possibility to apply for the election.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the women who represent the *second generation of Brazilian black businesswomen* found a much more favorable societal context to build their careers in the corporate world than those who compose the *first generation*.

Consequently, we can return to the research questions and answer them as follows:

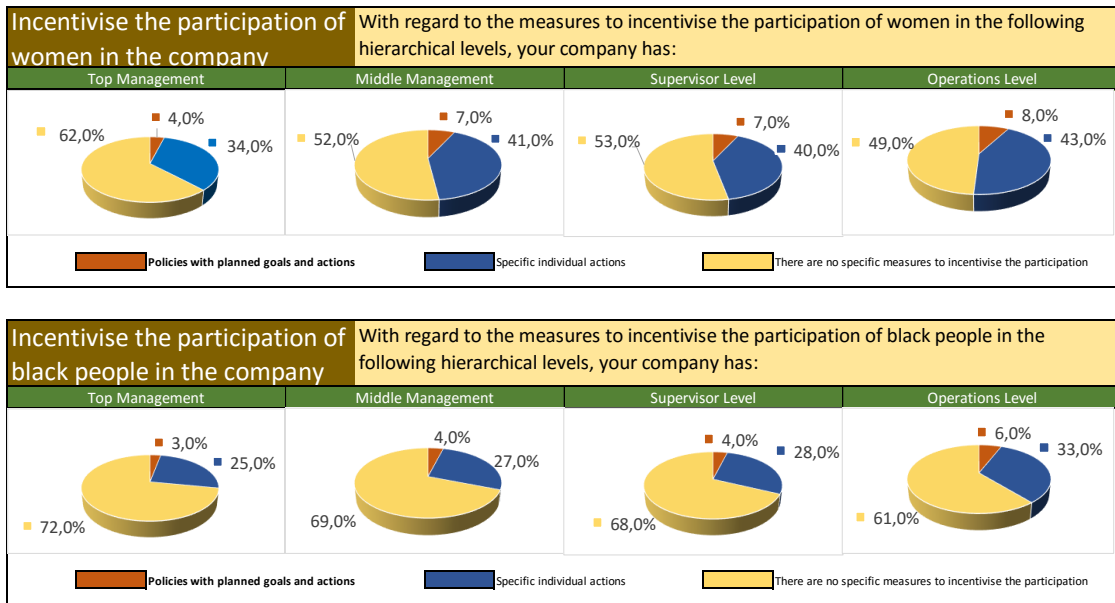
- 1) Comparing the end of the 1970s to the early 21st century it is possible to note a great change in the construction of career trajectories of Brazilian black businesswomen, which shows the path from individual strategies to collective action;
- 2) This change reflects an important transformation in the societal context, in respect to the greatest politicization of debates on the racial issue fought in the Brazilian public sphere in the late 20th century.
- 3) This greatest politicization of the debates over the racial issue fought in the Brazilian public sphere in the late 20th century represented a societal context that was more suitable, so that the *second generation of black Brazilian businesswomen* could build more positively affirmed black identities.

Final Words

As I stated earlier, all this must not relax the critical view. As within wider Brazilian society, the corporate world in Brazil is far from being free of racial tensions. The representatives of the *second generation of Brazilian black businesswomen* are just starting to build their careers and it is too early to have a final conclusion about the role of race in it.

Moreover, contrary to what one might imagine, taking into account the phenomenon of organizational mimicry and in view of the benchmark experience summarized here, this practice of diversity management has far from become widespread in other companies. This is evident from the data in Figure 2 regarding a survey conducted by the Ethos Institute (2010), a leading think tank originating in the Brazilian business world which guides the social responsibility and sustainability agenda for organizations operating within the country. This data shows that among the 500 largest companies operating in Brazil, the percentage of companies that claim to have policies with planned goals and actions to incentivise the participation of women and blacks in their different hierarchical levels is very low.

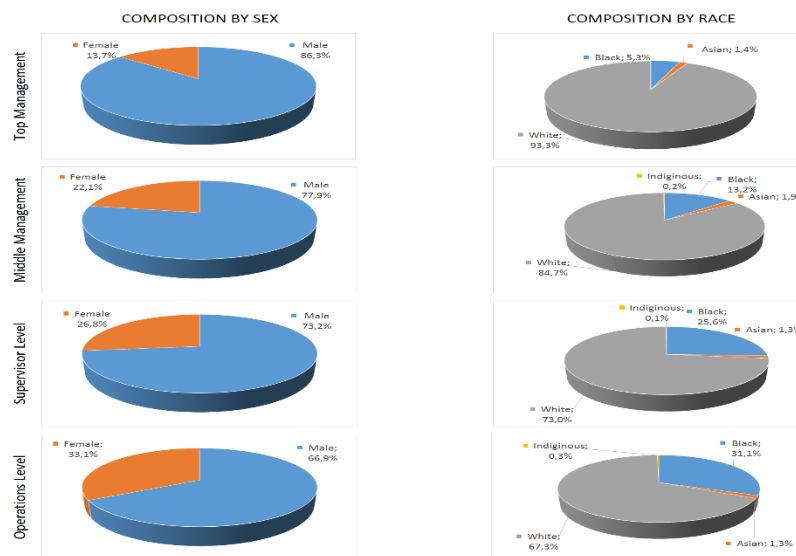
Figure 2 – Incentive the participation of women and black people in the company



Source: Instituto Ethos (2010)

The low percentage of companies operating in Brazil that claim to have policies with planned goals and actions to incentivize the participation of women and blacks in their different hierarchical levels calls for further attention, due to the gender and racial inequalities in the Brazilian corporate world. Such inequalities are quite clear when viewed in Figure 3, from the same survey conducted by the Ethos Institute.

Figure 3 – composition of the workforce by sex and by race among the 500 largest companies operating in Brazil



Source: Instituto Ethos (2010)

So, these data and the discussion that I made in this article show that there is still a long way to go in Brazil until you may eliminate racial and gender inequalities in the corporate world.

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