Afro-Brazilian Women’s Organizations and Their Influence:

Leadership from the Grassroots

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Abstract

Afro-Brazilian women’s organizations have played a pioneering role in development for all communities of African descent in Brazil, but often this role has not been analyzed by the literature. This paper explores the ability of Afro-Brazilian women’s organizations to serve as bridge builders with diverse partners and form unexpected and often-unlikely partnerships that lead to successful development innovations and comprehensive policies for black communities. The unique positioning of Afro-Brazilian women’s organizations at the intersection of race and gender has taught groups how to negotiate influential programs and policies in international forums and the private sector.
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Introduction: A Vibrant History Made Invisible

This paper explores how Afro-Brazilian women’s organizations have played a pioneering role within the black community in Brazil, and analyzes how organizations have maximized opportunities and experiences in order to achieve this position. In many ways the paper attempts to fill a gap in the literature on the role of black women’s organizations as agents for comprehensive grassroots development in black communities. The successes of black women’s organizations have broad reaching impacts, but are often written about exclusively in terms of their impact for black women (see Bornstein, 1999). Unfortunately, when many authors analyze black non-governmental organizations, the contributions of black women’s groups are not included. An example of this marginalization is illustrated in one of the earlier works on the social impact of Afro-Brazilian nongovernmental organizations, published in 1998. In this article the absence of specific information on black women’s organizations is apparent. In a list of noteworthy black institutions, the article makes only a generic reference to “black women’s groups,” while the other five institutions are mentioned specifically by name.¹

This phenomenon is not unusual. In the rare cases where black women’s organizations are mentioned in the literature there is often a decision to lump the organizations together

¹ The author mentions four non-women led organizations: “Olodum, UNEGRO, Pastorais Negras [Catholic Church ministries for black populations], CECUP, and Ilê Ayiê” by name, while the only reference to the
– therefore not recognizing the names or contributions of any particular group. This technique contributes to the lack of recognition of the achievements of these important black non-governmental organization actors.

Part of the issue is that there is little available research on development in Afro-Brazilian communities as a whole. In many ways the study of Afro-Brazilian non-governmental organizations is a new field. There is a body of literature on Afro-Brazilian culture in general, but there are few formal pieces on the role of black grassroots institutions, and even less information on their role in socio-economic development (Morrison, 2001). Although, this factor in and of itself does not explain the absence of information on the developmental role of Afro-Brazilian women’s groups. Black women’s institutions are often simultaneously marginalized from the literature on black and women-led organizations. In the publication mentioned earlier on the social impact of non-governmental organizations, there is a section on feminist groups; not surprisingly black women’s organizations are not mentioned.

The marginalization of black women’s development work limits understanding of how these organizations have played a fundamental and pioneering role in moving development programs and policies forward in Brazil. The role of black women’s groups in promoting comprehensive development for the Afro-Brazilian community is more evident now than ever before, but the successes of these groups continue to be marginalized or limited to the exclusive niche of black women’s development. This role of black women’s non-governmental organizations is a generic reference to women’s groups, or “Grupos de Mulheres” (Sodré, 1998).
pattern of modern day marginalization of the role of black women’s organizations appears to be part of a long-standing trend.

Due to the research gap on Afro-Brazilian women’s organizations we cannot always fully comprehend the richness of the historic contributions of this movement, but we do know that black women have organized to promote development policies and social inclusion for more than half a century. As early as 1931, black women through mechanisms like the *Frente negrinhas*, “campaigned against sexual discrimination and discrimination” (Vieira, 1995). This movement of “assertive working class women” had an influence over the black movement as a whole (Vieira, 1995). In 1950, the first national council for black women was established, known as the *I Conselho Nacional da Mulher Negra* (Lemos, 1994). This council promoted voting rights and advocated for policies and programs within black communities. These cases provide us with concrete evidence that black women’s organizations have had a long history of organizing in Brazil. I hope that future researchers document the history and influence of these organizations, in order to enrich our understanding of their precise role in Afro-Brazilian development.

**Development Excellence**

More recently black women’s organizations have had a tremendous leadership role shaping national agendas and development programs. The head and founding member of Geledés, Sueli Carneiro, is a leader of the national Council of Economic and Social Development (*Conselho de Desenvolvimento Econômico e Social*), her delegate, Jurema Werneck, is a leader of a black women’s organization – Criola. This council established
in 2003 includes the president of Brazil and ten members of the national government. These women are in prominent positions in relation to all non-governmental organizations, and have expanded their niche beyond the sphere of leadership positions in black women’s organizations. As the only representatives of Afro-Brazilian organizations participating in the council they will represent the diverse interests of the black community. The influence of the organizing efforts of black women is noticeable on other formal political levels as well.

The highest-ranking Afro-Brazilian cabinet member and the first Afro-Brazilian member of Congress\(^2\) is Benedita da Silva, an Afro-Brazilian woman who served as governor and vice-governor of the strategic State of Rio de Janeiro. She is a politician who enjoyed the strong support and buttressing of black women’s organizations early in her political career, and continues to collaborate with these organizations today. In the early 1990s, Benedita da Silva participated in important leadership exchanges with African descendent women in Brazil and the United States. These experiences led to the production of a book and video about her life. Benedita da Silva is in a position where she strives to improve the lives of all Afro-Brazilians and marginalized people throughout the country. She led the Brazilian government delegation to the 2001 United Nations Conference in Durban on Racism, and has advocated for comprehensive social and poverty alleviation programs at the regional and national level. Some journalists and researchers analyzing da Silva’s life have focused on the strong support she receives from her conservative evangelical church. However, there is less reporting on the role black women’s groups played early in her career by providing a strong lobby to secure her nomination as a legislative candidate.
within the workers party, *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (see Vieira, 1995). Black women’s organizations provided da Silva, a former *favela* leader, with the experiences, tools, and training to strengthen her resolve and promote a political agenda to improve the quality of life of Afro-Brazilians and marginalized people throughout the country.

**Development Excellence: The Organizations**

Geledés, a black women’s organization established in 1988 is credited with leading the most significant anti-racism campaign in Brazil (Bornstein, 1999; Vieira, 1995). This campaign led to tremendous improvements in the portrayal of African descendents on television. The impact of the program is summarized in David Bornstein’s article on social entrepreneurs in 1999, where he compares the influence of social entrepreneurs throughout the world; Geledés is the only Brazilian example in the piece. Bornstein writes:

> Ten years ago, in Brazil, it was almost impossible to find a strong and confident Afro-Brazilian character portrayed on any of the nation’s hugely popular TV soap operas or *Telenovelas*. Today, TV producers are much more careful not to promote damaging racial stereotypes, thanks to a battle waged by Geledés, one of the first Afro-Brazilian women’s organizations in Brazil.

Geledés is also one of the first Afro-Brazilian organizations to establish a partnership with a multinational corporation to launch an affirmative action program for youth in the City of São Paulo. This partnership was established with Bank Boston and is successfully training young Afro-Brazilian women and men to strive for academic excellence.

Bornstein’s also analyzes this program as an example of how Geledés has “spawned a

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2 Benedita da Silva became the first Afro-Brazilian member of Congress in 1987 (Vieira, 1995).
new generation of leaders in the black women’s movement in Brazil.” I would argue that this program is establishing leaders in an even broader manner than Bornstein notes. This innovative partnership with the private sector is, as many have argued, the first black non-governmental – multinational private sector collaboration of its kind in Latin America (discussions with Cidinha da Silva). Further, the program was established to improve the quality of life of young men and women, recognizing the importance of valuing all members of the black community. Geledés has therefore created a role for itself as a leading black non-governmental organization, with policy and programmatic influence.

Geledés is not the only black women’s organization to reach this level of prominence. Criola has also achieved many successes in the state where they are located, Rio de Janeiro, including innovative partnerships with the private sector. In 2000, Criola was recognized as an institutional “Woman of the Year,” by Claudia, the women’s publication with the largest circulation in Latin America. Criola was also one of the first Afro-Brazilian organizations to purchase their own office site for programmatic and administrative support. Criola has dynamic leadership; a founding member, Jurema Werneck, is one of the first black women trained as a medical doctor in the prestigious state university system. Her Ashoka fellowship for social entrepreneurship has provided the organization access to the consulting resources of McKinsey-Brazil as well as an individual advisor on expanding Criola’s economic development activities with low-income artisans. This pro-bono consultant worked with Criola to adapt and modify the project in accordance with artisan producers’ needs and the local market. This direct link
to a top private sector-consulting firm also provided Criola with greater access to other resources at the local and state level. In summary, these examples of leadership successes illustrate how Afro-Brazilian women’s organizations have created a space in development that is much larger than the limited niche role that they often occupy in the literature.

Success Despite the Odds

The leading role of Afro-Brazilian women’s organizations is remarkable given the high level of societal marginalization of black women in Brazil. Black women face tremendous economic exclusion. According to a recent presentation on poverty alleviation by the Federação das Fundações Privadas do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (FUNPERJ) in 2002, black women are the poorest and most economically marginalized population in Brazil. Black women earn between 28 percent to 47 percent of what non-black men earn in the country (Costa, 2001). Nascimento and Larkin Nascimento (2000) report that “Afro-Brazilian women are left at the very bottom of the scale for income and job prestige.” And, “eighty percent of the employed black women are concentrated in manual occupations; more than half of these are domestic servants, and the rest are self-employed in domestic tasks… among the lowest-paid in the economy.” Given the social indicators for black women as a whole, the success of black women’s organizations is even more laudable. The organizations black women have established thrive despite the many challenges that they face. This next section of the paper will explore some of the techniques that organizations have used to beat the odds and become development leaders.
Broadening Perspectives: Establishing Organizations and Working with Partners

The positioning of black women at the intersection of race and gender has placed Afro-Brazilian women’s groups in a unique position of finding their own space, within both black and women’s organizations, and defining this space in relationship to others. This process has led to the creation of black women specific organizations that work on issues of social inclusion and development, and often do a very effective job of broadly benefiting the black community.

As I will illustrate in the examples below, black women first began negotiating these relationships within black organizations (Nascimento and Larkin Nascimento, 2000; Vieira, 1995). Once black women established their own institutions they were then able to make the calculation of how to interact with diverse strategic development partners. The two development partners I will focus on in the paper are collaborators at international forums, and perhaps the most unexpected partners of all, multinational corporations.
Black women establishing their own organizations

And there we began to meet and discuss our experiences as women, blacks, from the slums, from an area that is extremely violent. An area that was very poor and needed government action—we did not have alternatives. Because really what we did not have are public policies specifically for us. We just didn’t have them. We put everyone in the same bag, but we are different. We want respect for our differences.

-- Leader Nelma Oliveira Soares, founder of ACUM, an Afro-Brazilian Women’s Organization in Porto Alegre

Nascimento and Larkin Nascimento analyze that “it is a fact that many African Brazilian [women] did political work first within the black movement, where their specific concerns led them to organize independently.” Vieira observes in 1995, that within the black movement there have frequently been different priorities, and these priorities have led to the creation of a separate space for the work of black women. She refers to “conflicts of interest [that] surfaced between men and women in the movement.” These tensions within the black movement, provided female leaders with the experience they needed to interact with other diverse interests in the future. Interestingly, when black women came together to define their own space it created confidence to interact with other organizations and movements, because they knew which areas were negotiable or non-negotiable in a partnership. Defining their own space gave black women the possibility of effectively working with others.

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3 E aí a gente começou a se reunir e passar nossas experiências de mulher, negra, de periferia, num lugar extremamente violento, pobre, carente de ações do governo, que nos dessem alternativas. Por que na verdade, o que nos não temos são políticas publicas especificas para nos. Nos não temos. Nos colocam, todo mundo no mesmo saco, e nos somos diferentes. Nos queremos respeito as nossas diferenças. (www.acum.com.br)
**Partnership: working with partners**

Independent black women’s organizations provided the opportunity for developing “a new and richer encounter… between organized Black women’s groups and the feminist movement” (Nascimento and Larkin Nascimento, 2000). These encounters were unique opportunities for the leaders of black women’s organizations to dialogue with a completely new set of actors using a platform of gender, although as we will see later in the paper, a majority of the concrete results of the most important of these dialogues were in fact broader racial policies. Black women’s groups placed themselves and their inclusive agendas on the front burner of international meetings. This ability of Afro-Brazilian women’s organizations to establish a space to discuss racism with organizations that were exclusively committed to promoting gender, illustrates the role of Afro-Brazilian women in maximizing opportunities for promoting black community-based agendas. The Beijing meeting provides us with the best-documented example of the influence of Afro-Brazilian women’s organizations in setting comprehensive agendas.

“In 1995, African-Brazilian women [were a] visible part in the delegation to the United Nations Women’s Conference in Beijing” (Nascimento and Larkin Nascimento, 2000). Sueli Carneiro (2000), the founder of Geledés, explains how participating in United Nations conferences and preparatory meetings throughout the 1990s provided black women with the consciousness of how global economic processes effect the region and the necessity of working directly with the international civil society movement. The Mar del Plata preparatory document for the 1995 Beijing conference “represented a moment
to broaden the national and international debate about race” (Carneiro, 2000). The goals of the conference were clear for participating Afro-Brazilian women’s organizations, they “understood that racism ha[d] to be placed in a definitive manner as a form of violence…” (Carneiro, 2000). The document places race at the forefront of the discussion, and according to Sônia Correia, a leader and activist, the preparatory proceedings “finally incorporated race and ethnicity in a United Nations document” (Carneiro, 2000).

Eight of the fifteen articles in the document are inclusive of the needs of Afro-Brazilian individuals, without specific regard to gender, and many of the other articles are highly relevant for the community as a whole. Further, the first two strategic articles specifically address racism (see box). The Beijing conference represented a moment when black women’s organizations valued the importance of their work as unique development actors and capitalized on their presence in this strategic space to promote a comprehensive agenda for Afro-Brazilian communities.
### Box: Mar del Plata Preparatory Document

Articles in the preparatory document related to race with their corresponding article numbers:

1. Racism is an ideology that supports the domination of a sector of the population over another, and is one of the fundamental limiting factors for sustainable development for non-white sectors of Latin-America and the Caribbean, which represent the majority of the continent.

Racism has been present even in the women’s movement, it is now an ideology that is part of our social structures. Considering the struggle and the participation of black women in the construction of our societies, we invite all women to make themselves part of the movement to end racism.

2. This political document of the NGO Forum is the recognition that our countries are comprised of multiracial and multicultural populations, which contribute to enrich our society. In this sense we require that we be present and our role as agents be respected when we are in spaces that decide our destinies…

3. We require that ethnicity and gender be incorporated in our governmental censuses, in order to obtain a real understanding of the numbers and socio-economic and political situation of the black population.

4. State agencies, like the Ministry of Health, must collect data about the ethnic groups that they serve, in order to obtain consistent information to diagnose diseases that most effect non-black communities, so that adequate public policies can be developed to address these needs.

5. Skin color is not used by international institutions to determine vulnerable, high-risk, or special groups. Therefore, we propose that black women be considered people who are members of a specific ethnic group with specific cultural uniqueness and value.

6. The State must revise educational policies, educational materials, curricula, and the educational structure, with the vision of eliminating racial stereotypes that effect the construction of a positive ethnic and racial identity for black populations, and that give visibility to our important contribution with regard to the construction of our societies.

7. The nation states must review all instruments, proceedings, accords, contracts and mechanisms that regulate the practice of international racism with the goal of providing visibility to these, and create commissions and working groups with the participation of black women, to guarantee that our perspectives and realities are included.

8. Black migratory communities must have the condition of establishing themselves in any space without being forcibly removed, respecting their identity, and providing them with appropriate conditions so that they can continue living with dignity.

(Carneiro, 2000)
The lessons-learned from Beijing continue to impact how Afro-Brazilian organizations interact with large forums. At the recent World Social Forum in Porto Alegre (2003), the larger black women’s groups limited their participation in the black community space (called quilombo, a reference to Afro-Brazilian maroon communities), established by the conference organizers, because they view their movement more broadly. The quilombo was a relatively closed indoor space specifically for black organizations that included cultural activities and debates between black leaders. Women leaders expressed their concern about marginalizing or ghettoizing the discussion of Afro-Brazilians to a specific physical space at the conference. Instead these leaders insisted that plenary sessions include information on race and gender, and they participated in sessions that appealed to a larger audience, these black women’s organizations came to the World Social Forum to interact with the universe of NGOs and that is precisely what they did. Several mentioned that they have established mechanisms for gathering with black women’s organizations or the black movement as a whole, therefore their time at the Social Forum needed to be maximized. As a result of their decision, black women’s organizations were the only Afro-Brazilian organizations that presented at plenary sessions, therefore they had greater visibility, access and influence on conference debates related to development.

In summary, we can see how interactions with international forums have expanded the horizons of Afro-Brazilian women’s organizations, “black women’s organizations developed an international perspective. This vision encouraged the diversification of political action on the part of black women, and the creation of new partnerships.” (Carneiro, 2000)
An Unlikely Partnership: Afro-Brazilian Women’s Organizations and the Private Sector

Geledés

One of the most surprising new partnerships from the activities of the 1990s is the Geledés strategic initiative with Bank Boston to establish one of the first affirmative action programs in Brazil. Geledés partnered with Bank Boston through contacts with local staff and an African-American manager of the bank, who was shocked by the limited number of Afro-Brazilian staff at the São Paulo office. As a result of rising interests within the company, Geledés negotiated a project called Geração XXI, which provides training to a group of Afro-Brazilian girls and boys and their families to encourage academic achievement and excellence. Geledés is in close contact with these families and is working on developing income-generating alternatives to enable family members to improve their quality of life. The participation of Afro-Brazilian males has remained high throughout the programs and these young men have greatly benefited from the project. Geledés’ Geração XXI is an integrated community development program that has had widespread benefits for the broader black community. Further, Geledés was one of the first Afro-Latin organizations to negotiate a partnership with a multinational corporation and continues to serve as a model for creative partnerships. Geledés continues to expand their partnerships with the private sector for mutually beneficial programs and activities.
Criola

Interestingly another Afro-Brazilian women’s organization, Criola, has taken a similar path of working with the private sector, only in this case the activities are in the State of Rio de Janeiro. Criola, founded in 1993, started out as a black women’s health project with strong research and advocacy components. Several years ago Criola began working in conjunction with McKinsey on income generating programs for Afro-Brazilian artisans. Several members of the beneficiary group are craftsmen, and these men also participate in project design and implementation. As an emerging income generation and private sector partnership the Criola model also looks well positioned to have a broad impact throughout the black community.

Others?

Are the successes of Geledés and Criola atypical? How common is it for black women’s organizations to work with the private sector? Surprisingly, this appears to be part of a broader movement in Brazil. A black women’s organization in São Paulo, Fala Preta!, has also recently established a relationship with private sector interests which may lead to a negotiated agreement. And, in the remote region of Aracaju, Sergipe, in the Brazilian northeast, Sociedade Afrosergipana (SACI) has also established nascent partnerships with national corporations. Although technically SACI is not a black women’s organization, it is an institution with a strong gender component, their slogan is “race, gender, and citizenship.” Further, SACI serves as the coordinating body of the Afro-Brazilian
women’s network in the Northeast and was the lead organizer of a black women’s conference in 2000.

In review, the leaders of black women’s organizations have significantly benefited from their exposure to broader movements and their interactions with others. Black women’s groups interact with a broad range of potential strategic partners. The quote below serves as an example of the diverse and complex relationships and spaces a specific black woman leader may negotiate and experience in a single day. This quote from Benedita da Silva’s biography illustrates the experiences of Afro-Brazilian women leaders and the organizations that they run.

We were struck by the graceful way Bené [Benedita da Silva] moves in and out of the most diverse circles imaginable. In a gathering of blacks or whites, men or women, rich or poor, Bené [Benedita da Silva] holds her ground with great dignity. In the Senate, she is mostly surrounded by rich, white men. Although she fights them tooth and nail on economic policies, she greets them with a broad smile. She moves with ease from an austere Evangelical church service in a white, middle-class suburb to a meeting of leaders in the black movement. (Benjamin and Mendonça, 1997)

**Conclusion**

Black women’s organizations have had opportunities to expand their horizons through diverse interactions and collaborations, and these experiences have solidified their national and international influence. Black women’s organizations have a strategic view of their participation in international forums and partnerships with the private sector. This viewpoint has strengthened the leadership ability of black women’s organizations for black communities in Brazil. By excluding the contributions of black women’s
organizations, or limiting the discussion of the success of black women’s organizations to an exclusive niche, researchers minimize the tremendous impact that black women have had on policies and programs for all black communities in the country.

I think that there are ways to discuss the tremendous strength of black women’s organizations without creating a gap between black women’s organizations and the black movement as a whole, this is what I have tried to accomplish in this paper. On some level the marginalization of the successes of Afro-Brazilian women’s organizations may be an attempt to retain unification within black organizations, by not differentiating between groups that are predominantly led by females or males. I insist that discussing the success of Afro-Brazilian women’s organizations is important for understanding how Afro-Brazilian organizations and communities take a leading role in their own development.

Additionally, valuing the important developmental contributions of black women’s organizations to the black community may provide additional opportunities for training and skills transfer between black women’s organizations and mixed gender or predominantly male organizations, which may not have benefited from these rich experiences. If a discussion about the role of black women’s organizations does not take place I am afraid that an insurmountable gap between the organizational capacity of black women’s organizations and the black movement as a whole may arise. Black women’s organizations fight for recognition of racial and gender oppression, and as a result they promote comprehensive policies which have significant benefits for all black individuals whether they are male or female. By analyzing the accomplishments of Afro-Brazilian
women’s organizations, this paper represents a step towards better appreciating the influence of grassroots African descendent institutions in Brazil.
References


