

Women from Favelas and (The Other) Popular Feminism

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Abstract: This article aims to introduce and expand on the concept of popular feminism in Latin America based on the case of women from the favelas who are recognized for their social and political activism. To this end, we will start from feminist and decolonial epistemologies that enable us to recognize the resistances generally made invisible by the coloniality of gender and often ignored by hegemonic feminism. Methodologically, this study is based on qualitative research in which interviews were conducted with 110 women in 105 favelas throughout Rio de Janeiro. We rely mainly on their answers to the question about whether or not they consider themselves to be feminists and why. As such, we propose an expanded definition of popular feminism that is characterized by the specific subjectivity of these women, their networking, a radical commitment to the favela, and a differentiated temporality of action in the city.

Keywords: Woman; Favela; Activism; Popular feminism.

Mulheres de favelas e o (outro) feminismo popular

Resumo: Neste artigo, temos como objetivo apresentar e ampliar o conceito de feminismo popular na América Latina a partir do caso das mulheres de favelas que são reconhecidas pelo seu ativismo social e político. Para tal, partiremos das epistemologias feministas e decoloniais que nos permitem perceber as resistências geralmente invisibilizadas pela colonialidade do gênero e muitas vezes ignoradas pelo feminismo hegemônico. Metodologicamente, este estudo se alicerça em uma pesquisa qualitativa na qual foram realizadas entrevistas com 110 mulheres em 105 favelas do Rio de Janeiro. Apoiamo-nos, principalmente, nas respostas à questão sobre se considerarem feministas ou não e o motivo. Assim, propomos uma definição ampliada do feminismo popular que se caracteriza pela subjetividade específica dessas mulheres, sua articulação em rede, um compromisso radical pela favela e uma temporalidade de ação diferenciada na cidade.

Palavras-chave: mulher; favela; ativismo; feminismo popular.

Mujeres de favelas y (otros) feminismo popular

Resumen: El presente artículo tiene por objeto presentar y ampliar el concepto de feminismo popular en América Latina a partir del caso de las mujeres de las favelas que son reconocidas por su activismo social y político. Para ello, nos basamos en las epistemologías feminista y decolonial que nos permiten percibir las resistencias generalmente invisibilizadas por la colonialidad de género y a menudo ignoradas por el feminismo hegemónico. Metodológicamente, este estudio se basa en una investigación cualitativa en la que se entrevistaron 110 mujeres en 105 favelas de Rio de Janeiro. Nos basamos principalmente en las respuestas a la pregunta de si se consideran o no feministas y por qué. Así, proponemos una amplia definición del feminismo popular que se caracteriza por la subjetividad específica de estas mujeres, su trabajo en red, su compromiso radical con la favela y su temporalidad diferenciada de acción en la ciudad.

Palabras clave: Mujer; Favela; Activismo; Feminismo popular.

Introduction

Feminism is experiencing a moment of strong interest all over the world, including Brazil, and is generally defined as both a social movement and a field of theoretical analysis. Despite its diversity, both from the point of view of the women who identify themselves as feminists and the different theoretical perspectives that stem from them, feminism, in its academic version, continues to be influenced and marked by the coloniality of feminist reason (Yuderkys Espinosa MIÑOSO, 2019). In other words: the phenomena of interest to feminist researchers, as well as the epistemological stances and methodologies used, continue to be heavily inspired and shaped by the hegemonic feminist movement that, not always, allows for the apprehension of forms of political action that affect the distribution of power between the sexes. In this sense, looking at the history of feminism in Brazil, we refer to the reflections and arguments of the feminist Constância Lima Duarte (2019, p. 26) concerning feminism, when she says that:

In my view, it should be taken in a broader sense, as every gesture or action that results in protest against the oppression and discrimination of women, or that demands the expansion of their civil and political rights, by individual or group initiative.

As an introduction to the collective book *Pensamento feminista hoje: perspectivas decoloniais* (Feminist thinking today: decolonial perspectives), Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda (2020, p. 27) points out that “popular feminisms,” particularly those of women of African descent, indigenous women, and women from the urban peripheries, continue to be little studied, although the women who embody them have become, in some cases, true political figures.

In the 1970s, several observers, including the political scientist Sonia E. Alvarez (1990), highlighted the protagonism of women from the periphery of Brazilian cities in the struggle not only against the dictatorship, but also for a better redistribution of resources in their neighborhoods. In the 1990s, and also more recently, the struggle of mothers whose children disappeared or were summarily executed by the state is also an example of women’s leadership – a struggle undertaken by Black women and residents of the favelas or peripheral regions, for the most part.

These women, like so many others in Latin America, do not always define themselves as feminists, since: (1) the label can be viewed pejoratively and (2) their political mobilizations do not have as their stated or main objective the struggle against gender oppression. For Maxine Molyneux (1985), for example, it is from this second point that one can distinguish women in movement from a strictly feminist movement. Surrounded by uncertainty, a generation of feminist researchers studying women’s movements in Latin America (Lynn STEPHEN, 1997; Jennifer SCHIRMER, 1993; ALVAREZ, 1990; Yvonne CORCORAN-NANTES, 1993; Graciela DI MARCO, 2017) have demonstrated that the formation of a gender and political consciousness about injustices can take on different manifestations and not happen in a fully conscious way. Moreover, it will not always manifest itself in the intended places, hence the need for critical reflexivity vis-à-vis the dominant epistemologies and methodologies in the social sciences. In this regard, we highlight the important contributions of Black feminists and decolonial feminism, which critique the invisibility of colonized women and the categories of analysis inherited from colonial modernity that are so necessary to our understanding of feminism. Without them, what we perceive as “feminism” is limited to the values, experiences, and political stances of hegemonic feminists, whose position in the geopolitics of knowledge allows them to impose a definition that is more conformed to their reality and, therefore, does not correspond to the reality of women’s diversity (Chandra Talpade MOHANTY, 1984).

The reflections presented here are based on the experiences of women who engage in daily struggles in the favelas and peripheral areas of Rio de Janeiro. We are talking about the commonly called “community leaders” whose public recognition has been building since the 1980s, gaining momentum and visibility in the 1990s and extending to the present day. Although the understanding of the city takes place in an integral way, the socio-spatial approach makes explicit the deepening of the expropriation and dispossession processes in these places that bear their own marks that define them, bring them closer, but also distinguish them from other spaces in the city.

This study is based on research that aims to reflect on who women publicly recognized for their social and political actions in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro are and what they do. A mapping carried out with these women and composed of 110 interviews demonstrates that they are active in health, education, culture, environment, public safety, and wherever else they can make themselves heard. They promote community mobilization, articulate public policies, participate in spaces of social control, social movements, collectives, networks, advocating for their places of residence, defending rights, mobilizing resources, among many other actions.

Based on their activity and participation, we propose the idea that they carry out a form of “popular feminism” through their social and political activism. To this end, we asked the interviewees to answer whether or not they considered themselves to be feminists and why. Sixty-six percent of them answered “yes” to this question, even though the vast majority was not active in openly feminist networks, groups, or organizations. In this paper, we analyze these results in light

of three main considerations: (1) the conceptual and cultural issues of translation at the root of whether or not they identify with feminism; (2) the forms of female activism encountered; and (3) their own justifications for their adherence or non-adherence to feminism. In conclusion, we offer theoretical references to better define this “popular feminism” based on these considerations.

Definition and self-definition: why talk of popular feminism?

In a text from 1985, the feminist Maxine Molyneux distinguishes what she sees as two different forms of political subjectivity among women who participate in social movements. On the one hand, there are those who participate for practical gains in everyday life, what she calls “practical gender interests.” On the other hand, there are those who develop an awareness of gender injustice through their participation in a movement and who construct political goals along these lines, which the author calls “strategic gender interests.” Although she considers the politicization of practical gender interests to be at the root of feminism, these two types of political consciousness and the actions that flow from them are, for her, distinct, in the sense that: “These practical interests do not in themselves challenge the prevailing forms of gender subordination, even though they arise directly out of them” (MOLYNEUX, 1985, p. 233). To this end, practical gender interests emerge from women’s position in the sexual division of labor, but also, and more importantly, from their class; working class women have by necessity a wider and more pressing range of practical interests related to their daily survival which are not common to all women (MOLYNEUX, 1985, p. 234).

Following this view, Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes (1993, p. 154), looking at urban social movements in the favelas of São Paulo, states:

Through their struggles around practical gender interests women who have a similar socio-economic experience in Brazilian society develop greater solidarity and awareness in relation to strategic gender interests.

However, their priority remains their specific interests, in the sense that it was on this basis that they initially created and asserted their role in their community and in other political movements or networks that they later joined (CORCORAN-NANTES, 1993, p. 154). Although feminist movements are associated with the strategic championing of gender, its practical advocacy is likely to be carried more directly by women’s movements, with a strict distinction between the two. However, as Nathalie Lebon (2010) points out, this dichotomous division between practical interests and strategic gender interests – and then between feminist movements, respectively – is far from clear in practice. While Corcoran-Nantes (1993, p. 155) states that it is of little importance that women in the movements in question define themselves as feminists, it is necessary to recognize their contribution to the emancipation of women and the struggle against gender-based power relations, whether they act consciously from a practical or strategic point of view, or even unconsciously. In this sense, as Buarque de Hollanda (2020) and Myra Marx Ferree (2006) have argued, by not considering “practical” actions, we run the risk of excluding women of certain classes, races, cultures, and geopolitical positions from the definition of feminism. We also run the risk of limiting the understanding of the daily struggle of women in the periphery to a simple question of the sexual division of labor as does Helen I. Safa (1990), although different social relations affect lived experiences, the process of political awareness, and the direction of political action.

By appealing in our argument to popular feminism, we mainly want to highlight the coexistence of various forms of feminism, as well as its fundamental importance in the lives of favela and/or peripheral women. The “popular feminism” that we want to define here in light of its political experiences does not seek to designate a “social movement” (Érik NEVEU, 2011) in the more traditional sense of the term, nor even a “new social movement” as described by Alain Touraine (1978). In this respect, it differs from popular feminism as defined by Elizabeth Maier (2010), for whom it corresponds to the alliance between middle-class (and generally white) feminists and women from the popular spaces of Latin American cities during the 1970s and 1980s. Essentially, Maier (2010, p. 34-35) explains the emergence of this movement in two ways: first, by the need to extend the feminist movement to the less privileged classes in order to gain greater popular support (women from these classes represent a large proportion of the total population in many Latin American countries); second, by the strong concern with class issues (hence the use of the adjective popular), such as those related to the redistribution of resources and the provision of public services in urban peripheries, which experienced strong growth during these decades. The significant professionalization of this movement gave rise in the 1990s to what Alvarez (1999) has called the phenomenon of professionalization of the feminist movement and its “NGOization”.

Argentine feminist Graciela Di Marco (2017) reaches very similar conclusions, arguing that popular feminism emerges from the demands of women struggling within working-class social movements. However, she proposes a name change when these women ally with other women’s movements and various social players (i.e., not just “women”) around specific issues. A whole is then formed (what she calls the “people”) that is not unified by their ideological approach, but

part of the constitution of “social agents” of those left behind. Using the example of the movement for the legalization of abortion in Argentina, she explains:

The new historical moment of the early 2000s generated a relation of equivalence, which resulted in the emergence of the feminist people, articulating diverse struggles to expand women's rights and to consolidate a pluralistic democracy. Working-class feminism is a central component of the feminist people (DI MARCO, 2017, p. 136).

While popular feminism has been marked by strategic or practical class and gender interests, other women's movements, particularly mothers' movements, have been oriented not primarily on the basis of class but on the denunciation of injustices committed by the state, although in some cases the two go hand in hand (Sarah A. RADCLIFFE, 1993). The CoMadres movement in El Salvador, CONAVIGUA in Guatemala, Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, and the Mothers of Acari in Rio de Janeiro are just a few examples of this type of mobilization in the context of a dictatorship (and post-dictatorship in the case of Brazil) marked by forced disappearances and summary executions. In general, state violence is further denounced for directly impairing the ability of mothers to perform their socially assigned role, whether in the provision of care or financial resources for the support of their families. This raises the question of whether these movements can be called “feminist,” despite their initial reluctance to call themselves such and, more importantly, the apparent contradiction between what many white, hegemonic feminists see as an essentialist appeal to motherhood.

Although the anchoring in motherhood has sometimes been criticized by feminists who have tried to deconstruct the perpetual association between women and their so-called “natural” role as mothers, it is interesting to note that, for the aforementioned mothers' movements, it allowed them to strategically legitimize their voice in the public space and open a space for women's demands, since they were neither represented in the spheres of power nor heard (Sara Eleanor HOWE, 2006). To put it another way, they managed to achieve goals in terms of making “women's” issues visible, opening up spaces to be heard, reinforcing the role of mothers, and raising women's political awareness, themes that are perfectly aligned with “feminism.” Moreover, they go far beyond the “essentialist” appeal to motherhood as a way of legitimizing women's voices in order to make it a political issue, corresponding to a process of politicizing motherhood (DI MARCO, 2010, p. 161).

Thus, whether we talk about popular feminism or “feminist people,” as Di Marco calls it, social class, motherhood, and the sexual division of labor are central elements that, combined with racial and indigenous issues, are unavoidable when it comes to the working class and the variety of women's struggles. It is therefore necessary to adopt a perspective that takes into account one of the fundamental legacies of colonial modernity: racism (Aníbal QUIJANO, 2007).

Black women's active participation in various community initiatives and social movements is not recent, whether in the Black or Black women's movement, human rights movements, or urban movements in the periphery (Kia Lilly CALDWELL, 2010). Through different forms of political engagement and commitments, they developed not only an awareness of class and gender injustice, as was the case with the popular feminism described above, but also racialized feminism (CALDWELL, 2010; Lélia GONZALEZ, 2008; Keisha-Khan PERRY, 2016).

Based on the research referenced here we intend to broaden the concept of popular feminism by including the racial and spatial issue. We will try to problematize and define this particular form of feminism that shares many characteristics with popular feminism, but also differs from it due to its particular urban context and the position of women who play different roles in the social relations imposed by colonial modernity.

Favelas: spaces of existence and resistance

The plurality and diversity of daily life in the favelas immersed in its contradictions and conflicts go back a long way. The perception of marginality towards these places accompanies their history, dating from the end of the nineteenth century and spreading through the turn of the twentieth century (Janice PERLMAN, 1977; Lícia VALLADARES, 1978), being constructed in the social imaginary through a relationship between two distinct cities: the favela and the asphalt, or the favela and the rest of the city. The former is associated with the representation of disorder, fear, and the dwelling place of the “dangerous class” (VALLADARES, 1978). The asphalt is considered a dignified place to live.

Even if its existence has been historically rejected due to its negative image, synonymous with insecurity and violence, it is an integral part of the city. This homogenizing view and a discourse focused almost exclusively on absences corroborate the constructed image of non-recognition of favela residents as active and operative agents, inserted in the time and space of the city – therefore, citizens who have rights, highlighting the “contemporary bias of superseding readings of the ‘favelas in themselves’ as a contribution to the understanding of the ‘favelas for themselves in the city’” (Jorge Luiz BARBOSA; Jailson Souza e SILVA, 2013).

This perception affirms the place of the favela as a component of the city defined by physical and symbolic boundaries. They configure areas of separation and contact for “socio-spatial practices that are drawn on the landscape, that mark and individualize places and forms of belonging and that express territorialities and forms of appropriation of the urban” (Fernando Lannes FERNANDES, 2009, p. 160). For historian Brodwyn Fischer (2014, p. 1), favelas are an integral part of the city: “No city could exist without the other; the relationship between them defines the Latin American urban form.” The diversities, singularities, and recognition of the differences that exist in each popular community recognize and expose the complexity of Brazilian society’s urbanization. In this sense, as Suzana Pasternak (2008, p. 76) states, “to speak of favela is to speak of the great city of Brazil since the turn of the twentieth century,” whose polysemy of the term spreads throughout the cities, including in the neighborhoods of its traditional and peripheral suburbs, symbolically marking characteristics that historically singularize them. Finally, these spaces also suffer from the criminalization of residents and reinforce the stigmatization surrounding the favelas, producing a process of fragmentation and urban segregation increasingly accentuated in the city, demarcating at the symbolic level the production of a marginalization that identifies them as non-citizens (Márcia LEITE, 2013).

This study affirms that, despite being considered as such by the “normal city,” these popular spaces are permeated by another sociability, whose vocation for the development of sociocultural organizations and the construction of strategies to face the demands is strongly rooted in the life of the favela. In their own way, informal “authorities” with local ties validated by public recognition emerge on this scene – they are the female community leaders publicly identified by their social and political activism. Almost always Black and poor, they carry in their bodies multiple expressions of a society marked by gender, class, race, and spatial oppression, but they converge in the desire for collective transformation of their living and working places. They are committed to community and popular struggles, inventing and reinventing another way of conducting politics with local agendas, but with a city project capable of producing effects on the conditions of social inequality so accentuated and expressed in the symbolic dichotomy of the city.

For another epistemology of popular feminism

To enable us to discuss another epistemology of popular feminism, we refer in essence to the feminization of power (Denise FONSECA et al., 2008; Nilza NUNES, 2018) as a movement that has been building and consolidating in the favelas and peripheries since the 1990s, strengthening the voice of a political subject that transcends gender coloniality and has been resisting a category of analysis that places women as unilateral victims of the power system. In this way, we rely heavily on the work of María Lugones (2014, p. 939), for whom:

By using the term coloniality, my intention is to name not only a classification of peoples in terms of coloniality of power and gender, but also the process of actively reducing people, the dehumanization that makes them fit for classification, the process of subjectification and the bid to make the colonized less than human beings.

These women are an expression of resistance, presence, and power and assume a leading role in a context pervaded by conflicts, insecurity, and uncertainty. Their narratives are loaded with historicity, permeated by difficulties, limits, and exclusions, but also marked by displacements, struggles, and achievements. They are mostly Black – and when not Black they are equally poor –, which leads us to recognize their condition of social subalternity from a feminist and decolonial perspective that recognizes the continuation of power relations inherited from the imposition of colonial modernity in Brazil. This is based on the capitalist, colonial-racist, and gender system. These expressions are synergistic to the social activists in the favelas and, beyond these dimensions, are associated with poverty and socio-spatial segregation, complexifying the framework of inequalities and oppression to which these women are subjected.

In the last 30 years, their testimonies point to the agenda of recognizing Black women in all these specificities, valuing their own expressions in the struggle to resist oppression, disqualification and the subalternization of Black women in Brazil, reaffirming the synchronicity between these two political subjects – Black women and women leaders in the favelas.

It is because of these similarities that the contributions coming from Black feminists (GONZALEZ, 2008; Sueli CARNEIRO, 2003; Jurema WERNECK, 2016; Djamila RIBEIRO, 2017; Carla AKOTIRENE, 2019 etc.) add to the theoretical construct of what we call *Favela Women*. As such, we conceptualize this woman as one who possesses a political commitment that does not always place her in a condition of conducting politics in institutional or party molds. On the contrary, these women walk new paths of grassroots politics, occupying spaces of social participation, either in civil society movements, or through rights councils, or even in their community organizations. This circulation influences the expansion of a social and political consciousness that interferes in their educational formation and that has been consolidating with the expansion of access to higher education, where they go on to graduate and post-graduate courses in the humanities and social sciences.

The dimension of maternity is also intrinsically imbricated in the construction of the political subject. The care for the collective refers to the sense of a female that is maternal and whose subjectivity appears at the root of the motivation to do community work, building differentiated paths from the courage that forges it and is transformed into the desire to defend dignity and social justice. However, the relationship with care does not pass through social welfare as an end in itself, but through acceptance as a starting point for emancipatory practices. Bearing in mind the criticisms of many feminists about the dangers of essentializing the relationship between women and motherhood, we realize that motherhood is the catalyst for an ethics of care that transcends the family to apply to the community in many of the women encountered, without assuming that this is natural for them. On the contrary, this “care ethic” is historically, socially constructed, and emerges in an often violent context (Patricia Hill COLLINS, 2009, p. 187-215), where favela residents are regularly abandoned by public authorities and criminalized in the urban space, creating a heavy responsibility for mothers. With their own agenda, they take care of children, young people, women, the elderly, and so many others. They are concerned with the quality of daily life in the favela. They are capable of mediating local conflicts, of dialoguing from a place of power with state agencies, which hardly know anything about the favela territories. This subject, with consciousness “of herself” and “for the other”, acts based on horizontal solidarity. Her territory of identity allegiance and political action is a living and real community, marked by tensions, frustrated hopes, but also permeated by a degree of resistance that maintains projects for the future.

It is necessary and urgent to break with the “coloniality of power” (QUIJANO, 2005), whose domination, centered on the issue of race and the division of labor, is structurally associated and mutually reinforcing. Accordingly, it is necessary to rise up against the colonial matrix of power that controls economics, authority, gender, sexuality, knowledge, and subjectivity. Examining the tensions, representations, and practices of women inserted in these contexts of exercise, whose agencies consolidate them as references at a local level, allows us to assert that there is an ongoing feminization of power in the favelas. We consider that this geopolitical space demarcated by a sociability that is established in the contradictions between its absences and violence is also permeated by presences that are established by resistance, solidarity, and neighborhood ties. It is in this space that we recognize the existence of a form of popular feminism, specific to the reality of these women, but no less important to be made visible and valued, since they strongly contribute to the empowerment of women, the reduction of gender inequalities, and to the questioning of the social relations at the origin of the inequalities and violence experienced.

Methodology

This work was based on qualitative research, since it is a set of material and interpretive practices that involve a variety of empirical contents, including field notes, interviews, and observations, among others. This methodology also makes it possible to understand the social subjects, their actions, and their perceptions within their own frame of reference.

The choice of the women leaders studied in the field research was made spontaneously, respecting the procedures approved by the research ethics committee. To do so, we selected these women based on the Snowball sampling methodology (Leo A. GOODMAN, 2011). The reflections presented here are based on 110 interviewees who are registered in a database in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). There was no resistance to participating in the research; on the contrary, there is a public and expressed recognition of its importance and legitimacy.

The active search for female leaders in the favelas was based on contacts, approaches, referrals, and participation in places that these women frequent (civil society forums, community networks, collectives, among others) and where they have been publicly recognized as leaders in their communities for at least a year. This recognition of their socio-political action was the main selection criterion. There was no delimitation for the locus of the study, considering that this process led us to collaborators from all regions of Rio de Janeiro city. There was also no spatial selection previously defined, since the invitation to participate in this study was made spontaneously, albeit attempting to ensure that as many favelas as possible were represented.

The interviews were conducted through a semi-structured questionnaire composed of 33 questions that address aspects related to the trajectory of women as community leaders, as well as the motivations that drove them, their main connections, work fronts and if they consider themselves feminists and why. Based on these answers and cross-referenced with the activities they carry out, their areas of participation, political links and their activism in defense of their neighborhoods, we reflect on the popular feminism that we discuss in this article.

Situated knowledge is the epistemological proposal of localization and consideration of the contextuality of knowledge, within the framework of its production. It corresponds to an incorporation of knowledge, starting from the option for responsibility in the production of knowledge and its socio-historical localization (João OLIVEIRA; Lígia AMANCIO, 2006, p. 601).

From this perspective, the pertinence of placing the situated point of view based on listening to the narratives of these women and recognizing the potency of their voices and experiences is one of the ways to combat this patriarchal oppression, here posed in the gender perspective, but amplified in its intersectional dimension.

This conception of an (other) popular feminism is a reflection that starts mainly from the answers to the question whether they consider themselves feminists and why. It also relies on a dialogue-driven conceptualization that is underpinned by arguments and testimonies agreed upon with women activists in the favelas. It not only stems from an eminently empirical observation, but also from reflections made with the women when interviewed, considering their perceptions, expectations, and world views. In this sense, the popular feminism described here is consolidated based on narratives that transcend the theoretical perspective, because it reverberates senses and meanings of an episteme sustained in the experience that values the popular knowledge of those who carry in their bodies multiple expressions of a society marked by the coloniality of gender.

Result

Of the 110 women interviewed, 73 claimed to be feminists and 37 did not. Among the latter, 9 of them gave as their main reason for not considering themselves feminists the fact that they thought they were “too radical.” This radicalism has been repeatedly associated with feminists who reveal their breasts in public places as a form of protest. Two other women stated that they did not “need” feminism because of their religion. In both cases, these women declared themselves Catholic. Three other women simply stated that they did not agree with feminist ideas. Two of them stated that they did not share the values of feminism and one rejected the idea of equality between men and women. Four women we met did not declare themselves feminists because they did not know what feminism was.

Many women who did not identify themselves as feminists mentioned that they did not give women’s emancipation priority over other struggles. In this sense, they appealed rather to a kind of “humanism,” saying that they did not want to give the cause of women any more priority than other groups that, in their opinion, equally deserved their attention: *I fight for people (men, women, children) not just women* (Eugenia Del Carmen Quilodran Briones, from Turano). From a slightly different perspective, four other women stated that the feminist struggle was simply not a priority, without disagreeing with its values. Finally, the most recurring response from women who did not identify as feminists was that the feminist movement is “too exclusive.” They all identified as Black, and stated that they did not feel represented or included in the feminist movement: *I don’t feel represented within the feminist movement, despite Black feminism* (Sara Ferreira Martins dos Santos, from Pavuna).

The women who claimed to be feminists, for their part, gave as their justification the fact that they feel they share the values of feminism: *[I believe in] the need to empower women, especially because of the abusive relationships and lack of opportunities they suffer, for equal rights and women’s empowerment* (Dejanira Augusto de Souza da Silva, from Jardim Batam). Thus, their feminism is situated in the sharing of an ideology and general political goals related, above all, to gender equality, the importance of women’s empowerment, the end of violence against women and femicide. Many women also call themselves feminists based on their activism, that is, their practice. From this perspective, their activism encompasses work that is considered feminist, without being reduced to it: *[I am feminist] because of my place as a Black woman, I am at the base, if we move, everything moves* (Amanda Pinheiro de Oliveira, from Rocinha). Therefore, they are feminists because they consider that their activism helps women in particular. Furthermore, some interviewees said that they became feminists through their activism, while in the previous category – those who said they shared feminist values – more women said that their feminist values preceded their political practice (although it is important to mention here that both are possible, but the format of the interview did not allow the women to elaborate much on the question). We noted that, for a significant number of them, it is through their struggles that they become aware of the injustices suffered by women, especially Black and favela women:

I fight for equality and respect for women. I fight for a fairer country and for an end to harassment, femicide, and other violence that happens to women, especially Black women who live in the favela. Violence such as aggression and racism. And a country that recognizes women and treats us equally, without putting us down because we are women (Kézia Yasmin Bandeira dos Santos, da Pavuna).

Finally, this category also includes women who are simply active in openly feminist groups, especially in the Black feminist movement.

Of the women who identified themselves as feminists, 13 stated that they became feminists because of their lived or perceived experience of gender inequalities or gender-based violence, such as domestic and sexual violence. Consequently, they associate their own experiences with

those of other women. In this case, therefore, it is the sharing of experiences and their direct association with other women's experiences that explain their identification with feminism:

Since I was a little girl I have always questioned some of our society's standards because I don't identify with them. After freeing myself from abusive relationships inside and outside the home I was able to create a basis for sharing knowledge with other women. I also use my social networks to talk a little about women's issues and also to connect with women who inspire me (Michele Paula da Silva, da Rocinha).

Discussion

We are both straight white women (one Brazilian, the other Canadian) who, despite our political and intellectual involvement in the favelas, have never lived there. As feminists, we analyze social reality from the perspective of a critical analysis of gender relations. However, through our political engagements and our work with women in positions of subordination in colonial modernity, we understand that gender is not a homogeneous, fixed, or universal category of analysis (LUGONES, 2014). While gender is a power relation that produces not only inequalities (between genders) but also categories (men and women, for example) based on symbolic and material hierarchies (Elsa DORLIN, 2008, p. 54; Joan W. SCOTT, 1986, p. 1067), it is also intrinsically linked to the production of race and class, two social phenomena induced and necessary to the coloniality of power.

It is from this situated point of view (Sandra HARDING, 2003) that we asked the women in the favelas if they were "feminists". But we could also have asked: "Are you anti-capitalist" or "Are you anti-racist"? Why this apparent "prioritization" of gender, when we know that class, race (articulated in the coloniality of power), and spatiality (favela) are intrinsic to their experiences as favela women? Quite simply, because we want this approach to be part of a critique of the coloniality of knowledge, which, as Catherine Walsh (2012) has already argued, reproduces ideas and practices according to the extraction of specific subaltern experiences, without considering them as holders and producers of knowledge about these experiences and about social reality more broadly. In line with this idea, we consider the women we meet here as producers of both feminist practices and knowledge, which effectively situate and allow us to expand our understanding of feminism as emancipatory political practice and knowledge. As Claudia de Lima Costa (2012, p. 44) states, "both feminists and feminist theories are appropriated only as signifiers of resistance and not as producers of other knowledge".

Obviously, this means, as many women pointed out during the interviews (as did a large number of feminists around the world and in Brazil), that we understand that emancipation cannot be limited to the category "woman" as constructed within colonial modernity. In other words, the question we asked is, "Do you consider yourself a feminist?", but what the answers highlight is the existence of a "consciousness" or "another thinking" (Walter MIGNOLO, 2012; WALSH, 2012). In this non-hegemonic "other thinking," gender cannot be isolated in either the practice or critical reflection of the women encountered. Moreover, the women who claimed not to be feminists mostly did not reject the values generally attributed to feminism, such as gender equality, but emphasized in large numbers that they wanted to help everyone, not just women.

The other two categories of responses most often cited as non-feminist were directly related to the pejorative image of the movement in popular culture and certain mass media (especially the image of feminists showing their breasts) or the feeling of exclusion from the movement, which is directly echoed in the criticism of Black, indigenous, poor, or urban fringe feminists in Brazilian history (GONZALEZ, 2008; CARNEIRO, 2003). In any case, this does not mean that they do not have a "consciousness of gender injustice" and that this consciousness is not transformed into specific political actions (and vice-versa). Based on these statements, we consider that the meaning of what it is to be feminist can be construed in a pejorative way.

Thus, the concrete advances of feminists in Brazil have brought their share of backlash (Susan FALUDI, 1991), that is, of antifeminism (Maria das Dores Campos MACHADO, 2018). As an example, what came to be known as "gender ideology" became the target of attacks by conservative groups that spread and devalued the practical advances of the feminist movement and its allies in terms of equality, empowerment, and emancipation from a gender perspective (Toni REIS; Edla EGGERT, 2017; Bruna Soares de AGUIAR; Matheus Ribeiro PEREIRA, 2019). The demonstrations against philosopher Judith Butler coming to Brazil in 2017, the moral panic around sex education in Brazilian schools during the 2018 federal elections (and before), and the withdrawal of books on homosexuality from the Rio de Janeiro Book Biennial in 2019 are just a few examples. While we can only offer extrapolations here as an explanation, it is possible that the anti-"gender ideology" propaganda (carried out in the media, but also in Christian religious spaces) has convinced many women to dissociate (or not associate) themselves with feminism, or that the label has become too onerous for some of them to openly bear.

Correlating this reflection with the answers coming from the interviewees, four women stated that they did not know what feminism is, while other women asked for a definition after the interview. This corroborates the fact that feminism is not always clear and intelligible to some women. In this sense, the lack of clarity and understanding about the principles of what feminism or being a feminist is prevents self-definition on the part of these women. This phenomenon also supports the idea that the formation of political subjectivity – in this case, feminist subjectivity – can be conscious, unconscious, or both (SCHIRMER, 1993; CORCORAN-NANTES, 1993). Finally, this political subjectivity is marked not only by individuals' own perceptions and trajectories, but also by their position in social relations, which in turn can make cultural and conceptual translation, importation, and sometimes imposition of certain terms, such as "feminism," difficult, especially considering the non-universality of gender.

The interviewees' understanding of what feminism means is not based on a fixed definition. As such, being a feminist for the women from the favelas translates into a perspective of their daily lives, which is traversed by their place in the coloniality of power: race, class, gender, and spatiality. Accordingly, they share what we consider to be a main characteristic of popular feminism described by Maier (2010), Di Marco (2017), and Lebon (2014). But, this popular feminism of favela women has specificities due to the following considerations:

1 – There is a strong relationship between the conscious and unconscious aspects of political subjectivity, and thus they are not advocates of specific causes, but are rather multicausal.

2 – It develops in women's everyday lives and in their role as leaders. In this sense, their popular feminism is marked by networking, establishing community initiatives (often not directly related to gender issues) and coordinating social projects.

It is a feminism that, for the most part, develops through practice (activism), whose central focus is not gender equality, but which is expressed by sharing values considered feminist, such as empowerment and equality. With a lot of autonomy it thrives on diversity. In the favela, there are all sorts of differences in affiliations and projects. Regardless of the different actions where their practices are consolidated, they seek to respect the other, accepting and/or valuing knowledge and choices. That is why they work with human rights, culture, education, violence against women, the right to the city, and with the LGBT population, among many other issues. The most important forms of activism are: leadership, popular education, and collective work, privileging political coordination in networks that are built inside and outside the favela, unlike the previously mentioned women's movements. The women in the favelas are not silent. They build solidarity networks that bring them together and make them bearers of knowledge with its own language that connects them to other equally "silenced" women, but, in this social and political activism, they design ways to make grassroots movements.

3 – A radical commitment to the favela remains.

Their activism goes through several fronts, but with a defense and advocacy for their place of belonging. Hence, we add to the definition of popular feminism a spatial issue, which overlaps with the racial and class issues. It is a kind of political activism that seeks to affirm the favela as a place of existence and resistance and that produces a local knowledge, permeated by multiple diversities that traverse the daily lives of its residents. Consequently, there is a project for the city and for the country, but with a radical choice for territory. With their own agenda and praxis, in most cases institutionalized through community organizations, *favela women* permanently promote the desire for the transformation of their community. As they focus on the favela, they also focus on the complexity of life in the spaces of poverty, and for this reason, they are in dialogue with much capillarity and transversality about the issues that emanate from their condition as women in a context of subalternity. The scant presence of the government in the favelas provokes these women to access the city, the state, Brazil, and, oftentimes, the world. They learn and apprehend what life outside the favela has to offer. But they return and share this new knowledge in a movement of negotiation between local demands, collective needs, and requirements beyond the popular spaces. The knowledges are not bigger or smaller, they are different, but they connect in them, and transform themselves to become "other knowledge", of "border thinking". (WALSH, 2012; MIGNOLO, 2012; Gloria ANZALDÚA, 1987)

4 - It occurs according to a differentiated temporality in relation to the situation of their favela in the city, which characterizes it as a negotiated agenda.

Their agendas transcend the local and access the city, the state, the country, and often the world. They participate and act together, systematically seeking to expand their range of action and to strengthen their network, circulating their political agenda, which is built in a collective dimension on their own territorialities and in favor of their civic consciousness and that of the other favela residents where they live. In these reflections, we are dealing with a power that breaks the boundaries demarcated by colonialism and racism. We are talking about women who carry in their bodies multiple expressions of a society marked by various oppressions created and maintained in the coloniality of power and gender. After all, we are talking about a permanent negotiation between the temporality of the favela and that of the rest of the city. While in the

favela, daily life is often interrupted by the lack of political support, basic infrastructure, mobility, and safety (by the violence of the state or other violent players such as drug dealers or militias), in the rest of the city the prevailing logics of production and the speed of flows create a very different temporality of action. By networking inside and outside the favelas, this negotiation becomes a fundamental characteristic of popular feminism from the perspective of women from the favelas, while this is not necessarily the case for people who come from outside.

Final considerations

Considering that the vast majority of the women interviewed responded that they are feminists, we can define what has come to be a popular feminism to the extent that most of them do not act directly in a place or from a perspective that is explicitly feminist, as was the case with other women's movements in Latin America, which did not always profess to be openly feminist. This is part of a desire to "show that what does not exist is in fact actively produced as non-existent, that is, as a non-credible alternative to what is supposed to exist"¹ (Boaventura de Sousa SANTOS, 2011, p. 34). Associated, in this sense, with the "decolonial" current in the social sciences, Santos (2011, p. 30) proposes to decentralize the production of knowledge that produces a "blindness, [that] when it is the result of theory, makes practice invisible or sub-theorized,"² which is particularly common in the South, where the colonization process has actively participated in the disqualification of (henceforth) subalternized practices and knowledge. Simply put, any exercise in theorizing is an act of power, including the one we are seeking to perform here. However, in using the term popular feminism, we run two risks: placing a diversity of women who do not necessarily recognize each other in a single category; and prioritizing the struggle against gender inequalities and the social relations on which they are based. Without ignoring these potential gaps, we continue to believe that it is important to recognize the contribution of these women to the struggle against gender-based power relations (even if this is not always their main or only goal) and to our integration, as feminists, of their insights, experiences, and theories. This is an unresolved but productive tension, as it requires epistemological and methodological humility (Uma NARAYAN, 1993) as well as participation in the visibility of a historically marginalized point of view.

When it is evident that there is a process of feminization of power underway in popular spaces, and with it, a diversity of experiences led by women that have a direct impact on the ways of life in the favelas, we recognize their importance in the exercise of their political praxis. It develops a negotiated power, since multiple spaces of participation and interaction with the authorities are produced, an initiative promoted by local players. Historically immersed in perverse power relations, the women to whom we refer here follow, through possible paths, a social construction based on recognition, solidarity, the appreciation of the other, and the understanding of a society that lacks comprehension of the social meanings that reflect its past and present history. The (other) popular feminism proposed here considers all these variables and correlations, moving from its feminist practices to its sense of feminism, a construction that also refers to a negotiated power, because such reflections are the product of a theoretical construction agreed with those who put it into practice.

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1 Original text: "montrer que ce qui n'existe pas est en fait activement produit comme non existant, c'est-à-dire comme une alternative non crédible à ce qui est supposé exister."

2 Original text: "L'aveuglement, quand il est le fait de la théorie, rend la pratique invisible ou sous-théorisée."

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Nilza Rogéria de Andrade Nunes: She contributed to the conception of the article and focused more on data collection. In preparing the paper, she participated actively and equally in the introduction, epistemology, discussion, and conclusion.

Anne-Marie Veillette: She contributed to the conception of the article and focused more on the analytical and theoretical content. She participated in the data collection, but her main contribution was in the review of the literature and results, and she participated actively and equally in writing the introduction, epistemology, discussion, and conclusion.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

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BACKGROUND

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