Black women victimization by domestic violence in Brazil

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Introduction

Domestic violence against women remains hitherto a prevailing social, economic, and political problem that affects the generality of social groups: women of all class status, ethnicities, races, countries and religions are to be found among those who are impacted by its direct consequences. Measuring the scope and magnitude women are victimized in domestic sphere presents methodological challenges such as encouraging women to disclose abuse. Although, WTO’s population-based survey (2006) found that between 10% and 69% of women report being physically assaulted by an intimate male partner at some moment in their lives.

The few available researches and recent crimes extensively broadcasted suggest that domestic violence against women is widespread also in Brazil. According to PNAD 2009 (IBGE, 2009), 43.1% of the women interviewed reported to have been physically assaulted, 25.9% of which (about 280 thousand) claimed the aggressions were perpetrated by intimate partner or ex-partner. An opinion research carried out by Perseu Abramo Fundation (2010) found that 40% of women have experienced violence committed by a man, whether known or unknown.

In the 1970s, amid demands for democratization and political amnesty in the country, domestic violence against women has been included in the agenda of feminist movements and women’s movements (Bandearia, 2009; Blay, 2003). Opposed to the acquittal of men who had murdered their partner and claimed "honor killing", social movements confronted the impunity systematically assured by courts in cases of domestic violence against women. Since then, the topic appears as “one of the catalysts of the feminism national identity” (Heilborn; Sorj, 1999, p. 210).

In the last years, specific Public Policies targeting at combating domestic violence against women have been implemented. After at least three decades of feminist organized mobilization, the Brazilian government finally absorbed the demands for opposing the problem. Remarkable in this sense was the sanction of the Maria da Penha law, in 2006, which categorizes domestic violence as a type of Human Rights violation. Thus, an innovative approach has been incorporated, as the new legal device assures that women’s physical, sexual, and psychological integrity are to be protected by the State even inside domestic and familiar sphere. Mechanisms promoting women’s right to a life free from violence include now rigorous punishment for the perpetrators of domestic violence against women, assistance and protection to victimized women, and a network of specialized courts.

In addition to traditional law enforcement and judicial mechanisms that society adopts to combat crime, the law also incorporated an educational purpose. It was influenced by an understanding of feminist movements that, to counter a phenomenon of high incidence and widely accepted by society, it

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would be necessary to make explicit and promote the counter-hegemony concepts in which it is anchored. Recently, Maria da Penha law has been described by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) as one of the three most advanced laws of its type in the world among the 90 countries that have similar legislation.

Domestic violence’s legal definition – incorporated in this paper – includes, since 2006, “any action or omission based on gender that causes the woman's death, injury, physical, sexual or psychological suffering and moral or patrimonial damage” (Brasil, 2006, art. 5) and that occurs in the scope of the domestic unit, of the family, or within any intimate relationship, regardless of cohabitation. In this work, the focus will be on spouse and partner abuse.

**Theorizing domestic violence against women**

From the 1980s onwards, Brazilian universities have incorporated domestic violence against women as a subject of scientific research (Santos; Izumino, 2005, p. 1). What was then a new field of study flourished under the influence of Women’s Studies being developed by the time at the American universities (Azerêdo, 1994, p. 215), and sponsored by feminist and women movement’s indignation with recent middle-class women murderer by their partners, which were further acquitted in court. If academics efforts to examine factors and dynamics that organize gender-based hierarchies and violence are palpable, their intersection with the structures that organize racial discrimination and racism remains poorly explored.

Brazilian scholars and government instances that deal with gender and, more specifically, with violence against women have lately come across demands on considering the diversity of women’s experience facing domestic violence. As black feminists have long been emphasizing, one’s location within the net woven by the multiple axes of social hierarchies does matter. To the topic concerned, women’s location within social hierarchies is undoubtedly relevant to victimization by assault committed by intimate partner or family member, as well as to the possibilities to oppose violence.

Feminist scholarship has thus frequently mentioned the race-class-gender articulation. Nonetheless, scant attempts to understand if or how race plays a role in domestic violence against women are to count. In an effort to map the academic publication in Brazil related to violence against women released between 1980 and 2006, Kátia Braga and Débora Diniz (2006, p. 19) identified 2.135 references, including books, articles, theses, dissertations etc. However, the authors point that only 1% of such bibliography takes race into account – which seems particularly reduced when the role of race in social relations in Brazil is considered. This scarcity means that important aspects of social interaction and violence persist yet unknown.

That said, invoking some theories on domestic violence against women is, indeed, indispensable for the purposes of this paper.

A first point we would like to highlight is that the studies on the topic must adopt a contextual approach. The perspectives that fail to recognize its polysemic dimension and the existence of variation in its content and use (Suárez; Bandeira, 1995, p. 356) reduces the possibility to undertake reflections on how domestic violence against women entangle with cultural constructions that give it a particular sense in different contexts. Far from adhering to
extremely relativist ideas which culminate in blaming the woman for the violence suffered, the purpose is to discard the existence of one universal and univocal understanding and to encourage research of how gender relations asymmetries intersect with those based on race, religion, class, origin, and so on. Further, it is necessary to comprehend how such intersectionalities work on different groups of women and how they impact their victimization by domestic violence.

In the case of black women, it would mean to investigate how racial hierarchies built throughout Brazilian history lay at the very core of the violence they suffer in domestic sphere. New light is shed on the issue, and different questions may rise. Which are the current representations of black women within Brazilian society and how they take part in sexual and affective choices? Do they participate in the production and legitimation domestic violence against those women? As the group of lowest status in Brazilian society, are they more vulnerable to domestic violence? Are inter-racial relations of affection reliable signs of racial integration – as suggested by some sociologist? In an inter-racial and mixed society as is Brazil, does race (or color) play a role in relationship developed in domestic sphere?

Further, including race as a variable in domestic violence against women invokes the issue of protection and assistance to victimized women. Is the relationship of white and non-white women with the police and with the justice system the same? Which representations do such institutions raise on different groups? Most of these questions are yet to be addressed, we suppose, because there is a deeply rooted assumption that, in facing violence, all women share the same unprivileged gender status. However, the domestic sphere is not crossed by gender-based hierarchies only. As much as different groups of women are thought to fulfill diverse social roles and Brazilian imaginary attributes them different “feminilities” and gender status, it is urgent that scholar research and theorizing devotes to understand how race – along with other axes of hierarchy – shape domestic relations and violence.

Some authors have tried to face these challenges, as we will show subsequently. Yet, most of the writings on the issue remain marginal to the field of studies concerned. In general, they take the form of articles, are discontinuous, refer to a specific region of the country, or consist of scattered paragraphs in works that are dedicated to issues others them domestic violence against women.

Without considering deeply the intersection of race and gender, Rita Laura Segato underscores that gender- and race-based violence exists structurally, and are reproduced, therefore, with some automatism and invisibility. Even though less evident – and sometimes barely noticeable – moral and psychological violence are not to be underestimated as mere complements to physical violence. Actually, according to Segato, their role is to constantly renew subordination and permanently to hide the very existence of the subordination (Segato, 2003, p. 113-114).

Moral and psychological violence – not physical – occupy the central role in this scheme of interpretation: in a diffuse, ubiquitous and almost imperceptible way, dispensing with aggressions or rude acts, they build “the system of status as a natural organization of social life.” (Segato, 2003, p. 113-114). The moral and psychological violence are therefore the “cement that supports hierarchical system” (p. 114). They answer for the existence of “automatic sexism” and “automatic racism” that, due to its silent and regular
action, cannot be easily caught. Segato supposes that “only at the other end of the line, at the distant and macroscopic pole of statistics, the social result of indisputable microscopic and routinely performed gestures of discrimination and moral damage becomes visible.” (p. 117, 119).

Segato’s conceptions of “automatic sexism” and “automatic racism” are valuable tools when the researcher undertakes the trying task of unmasking racism which is most of the time veiled and subtle – characteristics of race-based discrimination in Brazilian society. As we discuss in a latter moment in this paper, racism in Brazil is naturalized and often internalized by the black population. Moreover, it only occasionally takes the form of an open conflict.

In the case of domestic violence against black women, it means that racism may play a role even though the victimized woman’s race would never be mentioned by aggressors, or that she would not mention racial offenses when denouncing the aggressor or in field research. Statistics would be then a consistent and important means to apprehend the racial dimension of violence.

In Brazil, a reliable national research on domestic violence against women with record of interviewees’ race/color is yet to do. Only sparse regional data are available. In an attempt to figure out how partner’s abuse impacts different racial groups of women in northeastern Brazilian, Nazaré Costa (et all., 2009) administered the Index of Spouse Abuse to 386 heterosexual women. It is important to mention that the survey contained no specific question aiming at capturing racial offenses. Rather, the researcher controlled sociodemographic variables as occupation, educational level, and religious practice and found that black women related superior levels of both non-physical and physical abuse. Whether the same difference is to observe in the other regions of the country is yet unknown.

With regards to those Brazilian mainstream authors whose works addresses specifically the domestic violence against women, Heleieth Saffioti is the only one to include the racial aspects of violence in her theory. She believes that masculine domination, capitalism and racism are, indeed, different contradiction. However – she supposes –, they are connected to one another. They are three substructures that are articulated with one another in such a way that they organize together a new structure, of a particular nature, presided over by a different logic from those that rules each substructure individually. To illustrate this scheme, the author refers to a loose knot, wherein each of the three threads has a mobility of its own, but in which they operate according to a peculiar dynamic of the node (Saffioti, 2009).

This interpretative scheme put forward by Saffioti ensures adequate flexibility for analytical apprehension of diversified historical and social contexts – the substructures are not understood to be work according to a rigid and uniform operation. Instead, each social and historical context would present a peculiar operation of masculine domination, capitalism and racism together. Nonetheless, the author underscores that one single power structure unifies the orders of gender, race/ethnicity and class (p. 26).

Saffioti’s epistemological concerns and argumentation are similar to those of Patricia Hill Collins. For both authors, being a black woman is not the result of the sum of two distinct realities, but rather something of a peculiar nature, whose complexity cannot be grasped by typical binarism that defines the canons of Social Science. In order to formulate analytical categories that would proportionate a more precise understanding, Collins and Kimberlé
Crenshaw conceive a connection between different power axes. Invoking the ideas of these two American Black Feminists, though briefly, may contribute to the built of an enriching theoretical-methodological frame of analysis.

Collins (2000, p. 23) suggests the existence of a matrix of domination, by which different oppressions intersect. The model confronts mainstream paradigm in devising gender, race and class – mainly, but there may be others – as distinct systems of oppression that participate in a unique structure of domination. Thus, Collins not only abandons the model of “sum” of oppressions, but also believes that each system of oppression relies on the others to work.

On her turn, Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality”. The concept, according to her, seeks to capture the consequences of the interaction between two or more forms of subordination. It addresses the manner in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other discriminatory systems create inequalities that structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, classes and the like (Center for Women’s Global Leadership, 2001, p. 1).

Resorting to the intersectionalities model also encourages problematizing the generalization behind the label “women”, present in Brazilian mainstream academic feminism. Regarding the issue, Crenshaw (2000, p. 174) states that the intersection of gender with several other identities reinforces the particular vulnerability of different groups of women. This is because the peculiar experiences of women belonging to specific ethnic or racial groups remain still obscured when the broader categories of race and gender are considered separately.

As most of the thought on race and gender, the few existing writings concerning violence against black women produced in Brazil have been relegated to black intellectual women who are active in black feminism – as if race would not be a dimension of white women’s life. An exception is an article published by Mireya Suárez (1998), to whom non-white women “would face higher risks of suffering violence, as they are situated on the weaker side of two hierarchies, gender and race.” (p. 109). There would be another further disadvantage for black women: to be located in significant proportion “in the social group most deprived of basic resources and citizenship rights.” (p. 109).

Further, the author understands that abusers are motivated by individual impulses. However, a component of opportunity is present and should not be ignored. White and black women are exposed to different levels of risks and have different levels of power to oppose it. As a result, better or worse opportunities for the abusers arise from different places occupied by women within social hierarchy (p. 110).

When it comes to violence against black women, Brazilian black feminists have notably preferred to highlight the structural aspects within which it takes root, as well as those factors and dynamics which differ from what mainstream feminism most concerns about. As we see it, given the marginality black feminism is reduced to, the need to focus overriding and neglected issues is a possible explanation for the incipiency of the formulations about violence against black women. In general, it is mentioned as compounded by other violence resulting from racism and social exclusion, and the emphasis is placed on discussions of those aspects, such as poverty in which many of those women live in or police violence against poor black communities.
Innovating in comparison to traditional approaches to domestic violence against women, black feminist authors indicate issues not contemplated by universalizing perspectives: Benilda Brito (1997, 2004) and Jurema Werneck (2010) point a peculiar history of black women in Brazil, with implications for their victimization; they also emphasize effects of racism on self-esteem of black women, and resonate the argument of Suárez by underscoring they reduce resources to oppose violence. Werneck also addresses the subordinated inclusion of black women within capitalist economy, what certainly impact their suffering and opposing to violence.

The understanding that domestic violence against black women represents a new “chemistry” – and not only the sum of multiple-based violence – is elaborated in different levels in Werneck’s (2010) and Oliveira’s (2004) writings. Oliveira suggests that gender and racial violence mutually enhance one another. In our interpretation, “enhance” means that there is a complexity beyond a simple sum. On her turn, Werneck presents her argument more explicitly: according to her, violence against black women is unique because it arises from the entanglement of racism, patriarchalism and capitalism. The author conceives violence within a structural configuration that forges an exponential process of violence and vulnerability and claims that reference to the whole system of subordination is necessary to analytical apprehension of violence against black women.

This overview of current development of research on domestic violence against black women in Brazilian universities allows that it be considered rudimentary. Although the contributions of black feminist indeed point to new aspects to be taken into consideration, it is evident that deeper pondering and reliable data are still required. Moreover, that the discussions on the issue have persisted restricted almost exclusively to this group of authors is symptomatic of Brazilian feminist studies’ resistance to incorporate race as an analytical category. Field research has continually tended to focus on class, rather than race (Caldwell, 2007, p. 18) – which, alone, is not sufficient to understand the differences among dissimilar groups of women. If violence against women is to be addressed consistently, it is essential that empirical research and theorizing advance.

Race and racism in Brazil

“Race Relations” is probably the most traditional field of Social Sciences in Brazil. Since the 1930’s, Brazilian and foreign intellectuals – chiefly from the U. S. – have become interested in race-based social dynamics that organize both daily life and outline Brazilian society structurally. As one might expect, the topic has inspired the most diversified and constantly disputing anthropological and sociological approaches (Guimarães, 2004, p. 18). A brief review of some ideas may subsidize the intents of this paper.

Unlike in the U. S. and South Africa, Brazil, as others Latin American societies, has never developed a bipolar racial classification or precise laws of racial-group membership (Harris, 1956; Azevedo, 1963; Telles, 2004; Guimarães, 2012). Color-based classification, as existing in pre-modern Europe, has definitely suffered some sort of reinterpretation under the influence of modern pseudoscientific racial theory. Nonetheless, “color”, rather than “race”, remained as the key system of social classification: physical attributes
such as hair texture, shape of the nose and lips and color of the skin work as indicators of membership to a color group.

In the last years Brazilian society, a fresh debate has arouse from the discussion about affirmative actions, one that brought the word “race” into Brazilian vocabulary to reflect on its own social relations. Thus, when referring to Brazilian social context in this paper, we use the words “race” and “color” interchangeably.

In addition, this classification is most of the time contextual, circumstantial and manipulable (Azevedo, 1963). Edward Telles (2004, p. 80) refers to a relational system of racial classification, where it is left to individual perception to decide who is white or whiter than others. Lívio Sansone (1996) identifies three major systems of racial classification and incalculable subsystems invoked in daily life. According to him, the terminology of color, as the strategies to handle race relations, vary depending on the context (work, leisure, family) or the time of the day or week, as well as on the type of conversation (about whom an with whom speaking), age, educational level and income. (Sansone, 1996: 174).

Characteristics of fluidity, ambiguity and complexity that define Brazilian system of racial classification, along with comparisons which had U. S.’s and South Africa’s racism as parameters, lured national and foreign intellectuals and researchers into denying the existence of racism in Brazil. In 1950, UNESCO even patronized a study of race relations in the country, aiming at serving as a role model to the rest of the world (see Maio, 1999). The idea that Brazil would be a singular and well-succeeded case of racial integration, or a “racial paradise”, was then widespread. As sustained by Gilberto Freyre, instead of the political democracy currently adopted in England – Brazil lived under a dictatorship at the time he formulated such impression –, throughout its history, the country would have built a more appreciable model of democracy, which was a social and racial one.

UNESCO’s efforts on deciphering the racial paradise, however, revolutionized Brazilian race relations studies, as what they found was a society where, in spite of egalitarian mythological self-representation, color prejudice and racial discrimination were constant determiners of disparities in the lives of whites and blacks, with onus to the last group. As Oracy Nogueira puts it, “for the first time, the statements of Social Scientists is, frankly, to meet and strengthen what, based on their own experience, Brazilians of color, in general, have proclaimed.” (Nogueira, 1955, p. 415).

Further, scholars who took part in UNESCO’s project followed focusing race, prejudice and discrimination in their own studies. The Paulista School of Sociology, as it was named, thought that racial prejudice existing in Brazil survived as a vestige of remaining old social structures (Guimarães, 2004, p. 20). The main exponent of this idea, Florestan Fernandes – a harsh critic of the ideas of racial democracy –, reasoned that, as the status system would gradually be replaced by a system based on classes, it would vanish. Color prejudice and racial discrimination would not be thus compatible with a further level of capitalist development.

Carlos Hasenbalg and Nelson do Valle Silva represent the next generation of race relations studies in Brazil, arisen in the 1970s. Contradicting expectations of Paulista School, Hasenbalg (1979) notes that racism works as a mechanism of reproduction of racial inequalities within class society. Through
In statistical analysis, the author realizes that race operates as a variable in determining positions in relations of production and distribution, since non-whites accumulated disadvantages that prevented their social mobility. Racism is thus understood as not only compatible with capitalism, but actually as imbricated with capitalist system.

Silva (1980), on his turn, makes use of Weberian ideas of class definition and status groups, postulating that – in a brief overview – to each class position should correspond a certain level of prestige or acquired status. Nevertheless, Silva proposes that other factors such as race or color interfere in or change the social assessment.

Working further on joint projects in the 1980s and 1990s, Hasenbalg and Silva advanced in the building of sophisticated mathematical models with the aim to establish racism and racial discrimination, and developed researches targeting special areas, such as education and labor market, and that seek to discover micromechanics of discrimination (Guimarães, 2004, p. 27). By presenting new hypothesis and concepts, the authors inspired a whole new spectrum of researches, which have been, since then, undertaken. Mainly in the 1990s, “scholarship on race proliferated in a wide variety of disciplines and made much broader research inquiries than it had in previous decades.” (Telles, 2004, p. 55).

Antônio Sérgio A. Guimarães (2004, p. 28-29), currently one of the most prominent researchers of race relations studies in Brazil, strives to elucidate present challenges faced by the field. He observes that the substantial progresses in empirical research on the topic, however, have lacked a theoretical body that would be capable of, at the same time: (1) to comprehend the specificities of Brazilian racial relations, (2) to explain how racial inequalities are reproduced; (3) to provide a more precise definition of racism.

If inequalities between color groups within Brazilian society are measurable, clearly non-casual and systematic, how come public opinion and some past and present academic approaches to race relations deny or ignore the existence of racism and racial discrimination in Brazil?

Most probably, it is partially due to an ideology of miscegenation which was – and still is – part of national self-imagery. When the Republic was proclaimed, Brazil had a significant contingent of non-white population. The country was not an attractive destination to European immigration that took place in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century. Neither could Brazil deny the social and economic centrality achieved by part of the Brazilian population of mixed race origins, who self-declared white. As a solution, the nation relinquished harder conceptions of pseudo-scientific racism and adhered to the idea of a gradual whitening of Brazilian population. Immigration should be stimulated; miscegenation was regarded as both necessary and virtuous (Guimarães, 2012, p. 25). It was claimed that, through miscegenation, slowly, but continuously, Brazilian population would assimilate somatic, mental, psychological and cultural that were characteristics of the whites (Guimarães, 2004, p. 11).

Although of a mixed genotype, Brazilian population was expected to physically whiten, and thus indigenous, mestizos and black population – whose presence was thought to put at risk the future of the nation – was expected to disappear (Munanga, 2009, p. 10). This process was considered by Segato (2010) as one of “ethnocidal mestizage”: as a project of homogenization that
would lead to a national unity, it should erase the lineages that constitute the nation, and, more specifically, expropriate non-white’s memory by force. Still about whitening, Lia Caldwell (2007, p. 31) proposes that this ideology rejects “pure” blacks, while accepting conditionally mulattoes and mestiços. While partially accepted, the mixed-race population would not hold any intrinsic value, but was considered as an “intermediate step” in the process of whitening.

By praising miscegenation, Brazil emerges in its own national imagery as exempt from racism and racial discrimination, since “it is widely believed that miscegenation and racism are contradictory.” (Goldstein, 2003, p. 62). Contesting such a comprehension, Donna Goldstein alleges: “yet it is precisely their superficially uncomplicated coexistence that is part of Brazil’s uniqueness.” (p. 62).

So far as the ideology of miscegenation has a clear direction, the whitening of the nation, whitening consists in a centerpiece of Brazilian racial ideology. While forged by (white) elites in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth, it has, according to Iray Carone:

undergone important changes in function and meaning in the social imaginary. If in the times of pre- and post-abolition it seemed to meet the needs, desires, concerns and fears of white elites, today it has other connotations – it is a speech that attributes to the blacks the desire to whiten or to achieve privileges of whiteness based on their envy, imitation, or lack of a positive ethnic identity. (Carone, 2009, p. 16).

By exposing miscegenation and whitening ideologies, the historical and social frameworks of Brazilian color continuum are set. Since miscegenation is valued as a means to achieve whiteness, color has to be the reference, rather than race. Given the high level of miscegenation, individual classification has to be relational, provisional and require the existence of a wide range of options. Simultaneously, as blackness is avoided, numerous intermediary categories of color are in use: to the extent that it is possible, the intention is to flee from the darker end of the continuum, which is racially stigmatized. In spite of ambiguity and fluidity, nonetheless, it is the white/black dualism that the color categories are ultimately referred to (Teixeira, 1987).

We have previously mentioned Brazilian self-image as one that depicts appreciation of miscegenation and, consequently, racism and racial discrimination as non-existence. Whites and non-whites in spite refer to a supposed low self-esteem on the part of the black population, unless when a case of flagrant discrimination is mentioned. These cases, however, are thought to be exceptional and alien to Brazilian society. Racism would exist only in countries like the U. S. and South Africa, not in Brazil.

As a consequence, especially after the strengthening of laws criminalizing racism and racial discrimination, the subjects barely arise within serious conversations, but to have their existence denied. There seems to be a cultural censorship around racial issues – as Sheriff (2001) puts it —, and, simultaneously, practices of discrimination related to the structures of racism are present in everyday experience (Goldstein, 2003, p. 105). Referring to race and racism, Goldstein signs that “their existence and significance are often conveyed through indirect forms of communication – black-humored jokes and coded silences – [so] they are much more difficult to describe and challenge.” (p. 105).
As should be evident by now, race is here understood as a social, rather than biological, category. In this paper, we share the assumptions of Segato, who considers race as a sign: its significance is obtained from the historical context in which it operates. In Brazil, immediately after the reading of gender, social interactions rely on binary classifications of who is socially included or excluded. Among the indicators of inclusion or exclusion, color is a key sign of exclusion (Segato, 2005, p. 4-6), a sign that refers to a locus in history that is polarized between defeated – non-whites – and winners – whites (Segato, 2010, p. 40). In her own words, “the reality that we call race is a cognitive selection of physical traits that become transformed into diacritic ones, in order to mark population groups and to assign them a destiny as part of the social hierarchy.” (p. 31).

In the course of this research, the category “black women” encompasses those who classify or are socially classified as black (pretas or negras), brown (pardas), mulatas etc. That is, all of those who understand themselves or are socially understood as marked by diacritic signs of afro-descent. In sum, “black women” refers to those women to whom race is significant in establishing social relations and, therefore, in constituting personal identity. After all, white women are not racialized. As proposed by Carone, “a white person is just and only representative of himself/herself, an individual in the full sense of the word. Color and race are not part of that individuality. A black person, in contrast, represents a racialized collective – color and race are himself/herself.” (Carone, 2009, p. 16).

When taking into consideration bibliography on domestic violence formulated in Brazil, we pointed that the racial aspects of violence against women have been foremost ignored. On revising racial relations literature, the paucity of gender perspective is as well striking – in spite of the ideologies of whitening and miscegenation, along with actual miscegenation process, being obviously gendered.

Addressing respectively literature on race and gender, Caldwell observes that

the gendered implications of Brazilian racial practices have received minimal attention. As a result, most analyses of race in Brazil have failed to recognize the differential impact of racism on the lives of Afro-Brazilian men and women. Scholarly inattention to the intersection of race and gender has also resulted in a lack of discussion about how differences among Brazilian women are constituted in and through processes of racialization (Caldwell, 2007, p. 13).

Recently, a few anthropologists have foregrounded their field research on gender and race intersection (Giacomini, 1988; Corrêa, 1996; Burdick, 1998; Goldstein, 2003; Caldwell, 2007; Sheriff, 2001; Moutinho, 2004). But, their efforts alone could not be expect to cover a whole range of social interaction: in spite of their important contributions, many aspects of the gendered dimensions of Brazilian racial practices are still to be given thought.

With this research, we try to contribute, though minimally, to reduce this gap, by adopting an intersectional approaching.

In our analysis, race and gender are considered to be mutually constituting dimensions of identity and social life. Thus, they are thought as not separable and cannot be addressed separately. This approach will allow us to explore how race and gender together lay at the core of domestic violence that victimizes black women. Further, it will make possible to understand aspects of
violence against women and of racism and racial discrimination that have not been appreciated yet.

To start, we understand that outlining the participation of the race and gender intersection in domestic interactions may elucidate later consideration on domestic violence against black women. By drawing the social framework in which violence is resorted to, we expect to make possible a better comprehension of its meanings when victimizing black women.

Afterwards, we will explore some dynamics and aspects of domestic violence against women that emerge when gender is considered as racialized and race is thought as gendered.

**Gender and race intersection within domestic interactions**

As aforesaid, the operation of race within domestic sphere has remained so far barely visible for Social Sciences. In Brazil, Women’s Studies and Scholar foregrounding race relations have either failed to address the racial dimension of gender or ignored gender-based asymmetries, foremost those found in domestic sphere. We would like to point and to examine some taken-for-granted suppositions that contribute for scarcity of researches and theorizing on the issue.

Romanticized ideas of sexual and affective relations, along with perspectives that put forward the separation of private and public dimensions, have fostered an idea that the domestic sphere is exempt from social hierarchies and power asymmetries. While feminism has long been pointing to gender-based discriminations and violence that pervade “private” life, observing the impact of race on them has been most relegated to black feminists only.

At the same time, rates of intermarriage between whites and non-whites have commonly been used by sociologists to gauge structural assimilation of racial groups (Telles, 2004, p. 173). Reading between the lines, the argument here is that espousing would represent social recognition of racial equality status. However, while this measurement may be adequate to the analysis of societies that adopt bipolar racial classification, it should be regarded with reservation when applied to those where miscegenation has been historically encouraged. Instead of taking-for-granted assumptions that, if high levels of miscegenation are to be found, then racism is milder or inexistent, it is necessary to investigate how social representations of whites (women and men) and non-whites (women and men) manipulate sexual and affective impulses and impact social relationship towards miscegenation.

Of special interest for this analysis are the ongoing representations about black women in Brazilian society. Far from being harmless components of the national imagery, these social representations have real consequences in the level of collective and individual experience, and must therefore be taken into account.

Sônia Giacomini (1988) endeavors to perceive how historically-built social representation of black and white women diverge. With this aim, the author recovers social representations of femininity active in Brazilian Colonial period. As they were held within domestic space, we estimate that they present valuable contributions for the intents of this work.

Giacomini claims that white women were in general supposed to marry white men and constitute families, which means they were understood to
perpetuate the white family both materially – through procreation – and ideologically. These assumptions presupposed the control of these senhoras’ sexuality, and they were hence expected to stick to rigid religious and moral rules.

Conversely, to their white masters, black female slaves appeared as free from religious or moral ties, and the social roles they were supposed to accomplish excluded procreation – it was more profitable to purchase new slave them reproducing them (Giacomini, 1988). Rather, black women were appropriated as sexual objects, which included, beyond attending upon their master’s sexual desire, the promotion of sexual initiation to young white males. Further, they also had to deal with their senhora’s jealousy that frequently culminated in their being physically punished and mutilated.

Giacomini (1988, p. 66) argues that the exaltation of mulata’s sexuality in national imagery aims at sweeten sexual appropriation and attacks of masters on female slaves, and, at the same time, providing a justification for them. Resonating this understand, we propose that such version of colonial social relations naturalize and underestimate social hierarchies and power asymmetries, besides violence. As an intrinsic sexual overexcitement and sex appeal is attributed to the mulata, the actual direction of power is inverted: she is a seductress, and the helpless master could but surrender to her attractiveness and beauty.

A second representation of the black women is identified by Giacomini: the mãe preta (literally, the “black mother”), which refers to the desexualized slave who was held responsible for emotional and material care within colonial domestic space. Next, the ama de leite completes the possibilities of representations for black women. The amas de leite were hired by their owners in order to supply white child with milk, often in their own children’s sake.

The author further points to the continuation of these images in contemporary Brazil. National data on occupation allows the observation of black women’s most frequent professions: they are abundantly and disproportionately employed as nannies and domestic workers – and, as recent research has indicated, as prostitutes. Moreover, Giacomini claims that also the sexualized imagery of mulata has perpetuated. As Goldstein (2003, p. 113) states, in the Colonial past as contemporary, there is a notable fixity of mulata’s exaltation as an erotic Other.

Nonetheless, Caldwell (2007) remarks that the social representations of sexual “hot” mulata – as those of white and black women – continue largely unexamined or critically addressed. According to her:

Because the mulata is so much a product of a national ideology about both race and sexuality, it forms a particular set of images that is much more protected and even exalted as a positive reading of national identity, and not one that is criticized as an overly exoticized or overly sexualized image of black women (Caldwell, 2007, p. 57).

Similarly, the author claims that dominant constructions of gender have been influenced by the understanding that only white women can be suitable marriage partners. White women would also be the reference to idealized constructions of womanhood and feminine beauty (Caldwell, 2007, p. 50-51). Observing how whiteness plays a role in defining what is standard in womanhood, Caldwell underscores the existence of “hierarchical constructions of female gender identity” (Caldwell, 2007, p. 51), which entails, besides the
existence of a white referential, subaltern forms of femininity for the non-whites. In her words:

Skin color serves as the primary determinant of whether Afro-Brazilian women’s social identities are classified in terms of sensuality or associated with physical labor. Since dominant constructions of female gender identity are closely tied to hegemonic views that blackness should be avoided and diluted, Afro-Brazilian women of mixed racial ancestry or with more European physical features are typically considered to be more attractive. In contrast, women of visible African ancestry are typically constructed as non-sexualized, and at times asexual, laborers. (Caldwell, 2007, p. 51).

As highlighted by Sueli Carneiro (2003), black women are not related to classical representations of womanhood. Black women have never been regarded as fragile; throughout Brazil’s history, in contrast to white women, they have been active in labor market – not necessarily as an option –; and they have never been considered muses or beauty standards. Contrarily to images of what a “real” woman is, most time, black women are referred to as being dirty, smelly and ugly.

Differences in womanhood for different groups of women are supported when marriage market in Brazil is brought to discussion. Quantitative sociological studies demonstrate the existence of a surplus of women in marriage market (Berquó, 1988). When color is considered, a surplus of women is registered in the white group only. However, Elza Berquó identifies a tendency of the white women constituting the surplus in the white group to espouse the brown (pardos) and black (pretos) men that exceeds the amount of women in their color group. According to her, white women are successfully competing with brown (pardas) and black (pretas) women in marriage market (p. 79). Due to diverse social valorization of white and black womanhood, black women (pretas) are those to have their opportunities of affective relationship reduced. Obviously, we are not holding that marriage has an intrinsic (positive) value. Rather, we would like to underline that marriage rates within Brazilian society are in accordance with social representation about black women.

The precedent data and analysis make possible for us to understand how social representations have impacted the identity and social experience of black women in Brazil. Collins’ (2000, p. 5) concept of “controlling images” may enlighten this argument: she observes that discursive constructions are necessarily related to material conditions. In her view, social representations of black women are linked to structural forms of inequality: both material conditions and imagery work together in the production and reproduction of gender, race and class domination.

To the extent that social representations like mulata and mãe preta are in accordance with social position of black women in contemporary Brazil, it is plausible to argue that these images indeed control their social experience, replicating racial and gender (as well as class) domination. If, as social actress, black women indeed have the possibility to accept, reject and manipulate these images, it is though undisputable that this manipulation is restricted within narrow borders. Or, in Caldwell’s (2007, p. 112) words, “racial subjectivity is not just a matter of individual choice or preference (…).” As we have strived to demonstrate, social representations have shaped black women’s possibilities (at least within) labor market and affective market.
But how are these social representations actually lived? How do they impact the lives of real women? How real black women try to tackle them? Somewhat, our intent is, after having started with macroscopic perspective, to promote an incursion in the level of subjective experience. Attaining our concerns to the scope of this work, we will seek to understand how the intersection of race and gender is experienced by black women in their domestic (sexual and affective) relations.

Referring to gendered aspects of race in a rereading of Virginia Bicudo’s thesis, Tânia Mara C. Almeida’s (2010) provides rare and insightful analysis. Bicudo wrote in the 1940 about color groups in the city of São Paulo. She identified the tendency of black men to marry lighter-skinned women. Black women, on the contrary, tended to spouse men with the same color as them or darker, in order to avoid discrimination from the husband’s family. On exploring such dynamics, Almeida relates the existence of veiled discrimination: “the subaltern men, in order to identify, ally themselves imaginarily with the dominants, and ascend in the social hierarchy, imitated with afro-descent women the power relationship to which they were submitted.” (Almeida, 2010, p. 422).

Further, the author recovers another found in Bicudos’ field research: black poor women related a higher level of sympathy towards white men than to black men. Almeida hypothesizes that black and brown men would discriminate black women violently, since these women would represent for them that part of themselves that they abhorred. Nonetheless, it was with these women that black men would establish most of their social relations, and it was their inferiorization that made possible their climb in the scale of power. For the white men, on the contrary, black poor women would represent a far less threatening alterity, since socially distant, as the possibilities of affective and social relationship were remote. White men’s attitudes to black poor women could be then amenable (p. 423).

These perceptions are confirmed in John Burdick’s (1998) ethnography. He relates the following:

A black man married to a white woman excused himself to return home. His drinking buddies started harass him, “Ah, man you should have married a black woman! Then you wouldn’t have to go running off like a slave!”… A dark black female friend [commented], “That is the truth. They treat their darker wives like dirty.” (Burdick, 1998, p. 29).

In order to avoid any ideas that black men are “naturally” violent, at this point we should remember that discrimination against black women results from gender and race intersection operating in a structural level. Being at the lowest positions determined by both gender and race (as well as by class) hierarchies, black women, as a group, are socially placed at the lowest social position within Brazilian society. Therefore, in their social interactions, reports on black women being discriminated against by other black women and men are not to be considered events of a special nature. In a racist society which largely fails to recognize its racism, a high level of racism internalization by black population should not be surprising.

Telles (2004: p. 178) analyzes Brazilian official statistics on the marriage market and shows that whites are 2.6 times as likely to spouse whites as non-whites, even when the size of each population is controlled. Nonetheless, the author finds that the browns (pardos/pardas) are evidently preferred over black
(pretos/pretas) in marriage (p. 183). Next, he indicates that, in the marriage of blacks (pretos/pretas) and non-blacks (pardos/pardas and brancos/brancos) darker spouses tend to have more years of schooling than their lighter partners – which, he claims, would indicate an exchange of race for status (p. 191).

As Berquo, Telles attains his attention to the situation of black women (pretas) in marriage market: in spite of the status exchange to affect both black women and men, a male deficit is to be found, whose burden is transferred to black women. Moreover, he underscores that black women have a greater likelihood of remaining single throughout their lives or having late marriages (p. 191).

In one of her interviews, Caldwell (2007) apprehends how it is perceived by a young black woman, Adriana:

ADRIANA: (...) It is a racist society in general, you know. They could find me very, very beautiful, but they would never try to have a relationship with me. They wouldn't take me seriously; they would try to get me laid and that's it. (Caldwell, 2007, p. 125).

Social experiences of other kinds are also reported. As black women are associated with sexuality, Laura Moutinho (2004) realizes, in her study of inter-racial couples, that black women in their daily lives have to deal with the association of their skin’s color with prostitution and to specific sexual practices (p. 348). One of her informers, on the other hand, a black woman married to a white doctor, avoided to be seen with him in certain situations, because she thought their inter-racial marriage could harm his career.

Four major aspects emerge from the aforementioned situations. The first is a strong devaluation of black women, mainly of pretas, in what concerns heterosexual relations of affection and intimacy – at least concerning those demanding long-lasting commitment. Secondly, we identify differences in how brown (pardas) and black women (pretas) are discriminated against. Thirdly, black women tend to be regarded as reduced to sexuality. Fourthly, black women do recognize discrimination against themselves; however, they might fell most of time unable to point someone as responsible, as intersection of race and gender operates generally in a diffuse form.

**Domestic violence against black women**

By considering how race impacts black women’s relations of intimacy and affection, it was possible to identify that they are pervaded by racial discrimination. Our intention now is to explore how their lower status of womanhood impacts their victimization by domestic violence.

In addition, we agree with Teixeira (1987), who claims that racial categories tend to be recovered to in conflict situation, exploding in manifestations of racism. Capturing racial offenses that are uttered in the context of domestic violence may be thus a way to capture the existence of racial discrimination where it would remain, otherwise, diffuse.

Before we start, we would like to highlight that field research used in the following analysis are still ongoing and that, to the present moment, women who was interviewed participate mostly of lower social extracts. That is important to remark, because consistent divergence has been reported in research target at black people belonging to higher social extracts (see FIGUEIREDO, 2002). In the course of field research, it is expected that women of diversified social
segments be interviewed – and, thus, possible difference will be better envisioned.

Adopting a perspective that focus in the intersection of gender and race, the following questions arise: If black women appear in general as the last option for long-standing relationship, how men that dispose to “accept” them regard their different locations within social hierarchies? Is this difference merely accepted or indeed pursued? How does this difference work in dynamics of domestic violence? Would men understand the resource against black women as more acceptable?

On the other hand, how does domestic violence impact black women? Since racial and gender dimensions of their existence cannot be dissociated, are they aware of their dual participation? Do they talk about it? Or maybe the question would be: how would they talk about it? In order to oppose social representation related to ugliness and to avoid loneliness, are black women more prone to remain more in violent relationship, in comparison to white women?

Evidently, we do not intent to provide answers to all these questions. Rather, our purpose is to point to new possibilities of research that arise from the exercise of adopting intersection of race and gender as starting point to study violence against women. Addressing some of these issues, we will now present some results of the still ongoing field research.

In the precedent section, we have made use of some ethnographical studies, what confirms that it is adequate to grasp traces of racism in a society that claims to be a racial democracy (Goldstein, 2003). Unfortunately, the research of racial dimension of domestic violence cannot make use of this valuable method. Instead, it is necessary to rely on reports of informants which are normally embarrassed to talk about race and about violence. This is then the first result of interviews with black women victimized by domestic violence.

The majority of the women interviewed appeared to have incorporated the recent social discourse reproving violence against women in order to deal with violence and to reject it. Nonetheless, when asked about whether they think it could have a racial motivation or if they have been offended because of their race, most of them were emphatic in denying it. When asked if race was an issue within their relationships, a negative answer was also put forward. Contradictorily, some of the women related that some jokes about their physical attributes, related to race, indeed were present in their relationship. It was though said between laughs and not expanded, in spite of further efforts from the interviewer, because women alleged they were “only jokes”. This very much in accordance with Goldstein’s perceptions:

> the structures of racism are present in everyday experiences. Because their existence and significance are often conveyed through indirect forms of communication – black-humored jokes and coded silences – they are much more difficult to describe and challenge. (…). (p. 106).

Also, some interviewed women also found it easier to report cases of racial offenses within the scope of other black women of their knowledge, instead of in their own relationships. Unfortunately, whenever it happened, the woman referred to was not available to be herself interviewed.

We would like to attain our attention now to what we think may be some reason for this difficulty in disclosure. Firstly, the psychological and social costs and implications of assuming to be a target of racial discrimination must be
taken into consideration. Commonsense in Brazil, meanwhile refusing the existence of racism, tends to regard those who alleges suffering racial discrimination and racism as being victimists – their own low self-esteem would account for the whole problem. When expressions of racism and racial discrimination occurs in the scope of a close relationship, one’s psychological and social costs of admitting his/herself to be a target of racism could be even higher.

Yet not addressing specifically discrimination perpetuated by partners, Moutinho (2004) states that, the more distant the person who discriminated was, the easier for her informants to classify him/her as racist. Conversely, the closer informant was, the more they tended to soften their discourse. Besides, the author identifies a general tendency, on the part of those who related to be discriminated against, to underestimate the personal responsibility of those who discriminated, especially when they were close relatives. Instead, they pointed to a structural level of racial discrimination, which they described as being almost unconsciously assimilated. We suppose the same dynamics operates when domestic violence is concerned, restricting interviewee’s perception and exposure of racial discrimination.

A second reason why identification of racial dimensions of domestic violence can be so difficult to disclose is the high degree in which it is naturalized. If recent discussions on violence against women have reached commonsense and reversed its general acceptance, so far, race-based violence remains to a certain degree not problematized within commonsense. Regardless of black movement and black feminism efforts, to the extent to which social representations of black women persist central to the national imagery of a racial democracy, the existence of racism and social discrimination is still denied.

Another reason we identify is the most diffuse, jocose and indirect ways in which racism and racial discrimination are conveyed. About that issue, Segato’s (2005) above-mentioned conception of automatic racism and sexism seems useful. Within the scope of relations of affection, racism and sexism against black women, together, seem to operate silently but corrosively. Most undetectable, but omnipresent, they cannot prescind of reliable statistics – which Brazil has yet not produced.

At last, it is possible to propose that current repertoire of domestic violence fails to address its racial dimension. In other words, in a racist society that refuses to talk about race, it seems to be necessary to include explicitly and to underscore constantly the existence of different kinds of violence against different groups of women. Specifically, race-based hierarchies that intersect with gender should be understood and addressed as determining in the victimization of domestic violence. Otherwise, white women appear to be the reference, and only those kinds of violence which they are vulnerable to are understood as consisting in violence against women.

In spite of the barriers to disclose racism and racial discrimination within the context of domestic violence, a few women have, indeed, being able to talk about racial offences they have received in the context of intimacy and affection. One of the interviewees related how her husband, who had been aggressing her physically, sexually and psychologically, reacted when she talked to him about the divorce, as she had fallen in love with another men. She underscored that nothing had actually happened between her and this other
man, because she wanted to wait until they were separated. Nonetheless, she said that her husband told her that black women really are more promiscuous, that it was widely known and men commented on that. He made himself a fool, because he married her, despite of knowing that.

Another interviewee addressed more subtle, although not less effective, violence. Being a well-succeeded professional, she found it very hard to engage in serious relationships with men, as her partners either stated their desire to attain to a strictly sexual relationship or avoided demonstrations of intimacy when in public, as holding her hand, because they are ashamed to engage in a relationship with a black woman. Such experiences, she relates, have not been punctual; actually, they pervaded her relations with men throughout her life. Nonetheless, when the theoretical framework of domestic violence is considered, such possibilities are not taken into consideration in any way, contributing to reinforce their invisibleness and naturalization.

A further result of this research is the difference in the attitudes of black (pretas) and brown (pardas) women towards domestic violence. In the interviews carried out so far, black women (pretas) frequently relate concrete attempts of defending themselves from physical violence, meaning that they often retribute physical aggressions. Police, neighbors or relatives, when involved, were recurred to only when and where those attempts failed to prove effective in the protection of their physical integrity. Brown women (pardas), on the contrary, tended to take for granted the inferiority of their physical strength in comparison to their partners/aggressors. They also related more frequently to expect a spontaneous (not directly demanded) intervention from relatives and neighbors that would protect them from domestic violence. Only when it was clear for them that they would not act or that they could not avoid the violence from happening is that the decision of denunciating the aggression to police was taken – when it was taken.

In our view, the dissimilar attitudes towards domestic violence are undoubtedly connected to representations of different groups of women within Brazilian society, as well as to diverse understandings of womankind. Even if the mulatas do have a different (and lower) status of womanhood than that attributed to white women – to whom the status of true womanhood concerns –, the representations about them still incorporate notions of femininity such as fragility, delicateness, and need of protection. Nothing could be more distant to the imagery credited to black women (pretas), which are thought as being brutish, more close to nature then other groups of human beings and, therefore, physically strong. Throughout their socialization, we suppose, most black women realize that they will hardly be taken care for, and internalize the need to protect themselves – inclusive from domestic violence.

It is clear that different locations within society encompasses diverse attitudes towards life and, specifically, towards domestic violence. As historically and personally public policies and interpersonal relations are not as protective to black women (pretas) as it thought to be necessary to white women and even to brown women (pardas), black women (pretas) seem to account for their own integrity in a higher level than other groups of women. This attitude could be named autonomy, if the term was not for long engaged with the canons of white liberal feminism. Instead, we propose self-caring, a concept borrowed from Jurema Werneck’s considerations about black population health.
Next, we would like to examine the offenses related by women, when questioned about domestic violence. A difference between black (*pretas*) and brown women (*pardas*) is also remarkable: meanwhile black women (*pretas*) constantly refer to accusations of laziness, brown women (*pardas*) are often told to be promiscuous. Black women (*pretas*) also relate to be considered promiscuous, but, still, laziness is the offense they related most markedly.

The interviews expose thus how two categories, work and sexuality, tangle and define social expectations and representations of black (*pretas*) and brown women (*pardas*). While the first group is expected to work hard, the second is considered overexcited and not able to control sexual desire. Although the imagery of racial democracy and the characterization of racial discrimination as a crime have increasingly prevented the externalization of such representations, it is possible to realize that they still persist and guide the social action, and are even uttered in situations when the conflict emerges and the cultural censorship around racial issues is briefly suspended.

We have here presented the preliminary results of the field research carried out so far. The next steps of this research should be interview further black women of higher social extracts and black women who are aware of anti-racism movements and discourses that have been or were victimized by domestic violence. In addition, interviewees will be stimulated to talk about their experiences of affective relationship, without mentioning, at first contact, domestic violence. Their impressions on how race takes part in relationships, as well as racism and racial discrimination that emerge in their discourse, will later be confronted to what has been understood as moral and psychological violence, in order to observe whether they perceive both categories of violence as matching.

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