

**BLACK FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS IN RIO: CHALLENGES OF COVID-19**

MULHERES EMPREENDEDORAS PRETAS NO RIO: DESAFIOS DA COVID-19

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<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4521-7399>**Abstract**

This study identify the perception that black female social entrepreneurs with a college education face invisible processes in the city of Rio de Janeiro in relation to the challenges of entrepreneurship by necessity in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis as well as its effects on their businesses. Within this methodological context we have performed a qualitative study of 10 entrepreneurs in the initial phase of their businesses who have participated in governmental and private support and training programs. The results indicate that these women are fighting to break down the barriers which make them invisible.

**Keywords:** Black female entrepreneurs. COVID-19. Rio de Janeiro.**Resumo**

Este estudo identificou a percepção das mulheres empreendedoras sociais pretas, com ensino superior, no município do Rio de Janeiro em relação aos desafios no sistema de empreendedorismo por necessidade, em meio à crise da Covid-19, sob a ótica dos impactos gerados nesses negócios. Foi realizado um estudo qualitativo com 10 mulheres, em fase inicial de seus negócios, e que participaram em sua totalidade de programas de apoio e capacitação. Os resultados mostraram que esses sujeitos compartilham de desafios por estarem em posição de vulnerabilidade e na base de uma pirâmide social. Porém, essas mulheres lutam pela quebra de barreiras invisíveis.

**Palavras-chave:** Mulheres empreendedoras pretas. COVID-19. Rio de Janeiro.

## Introduction

The disparities and inequalities of gender and race in the job market, faced by women around the world are without a doubt some of the greatest challenges that we face in this century (RGE, 2019). All over the world as well as in Brazil, our colonial inheritance has left indelible marks on the trajectory of black individuals, due to the historical and cultural construct of slavery through which their phenotype and cultural traits were treated as inferior compared to white people (FANON, 2008; REZENDE, MAFRA, PEREIRA, 2018). When we are speaking of women, they, independent of the issue of race, have more and more participation in the economy and a growing importance as the providers and sustainers of homes, and often have to resort to entrepreneurship as the only option to sustain themselves and others (RGE, 2019).

In the midst of this scenario, the stimulus of entrepreneurial practices by necessity and the creation of new businesses have in many cases been demonstrated as a solution for these individuals. This is a clear response to the precariousness of the Brazilian job market which impedes individuals from being self-employed (VALE, 2015; FRIEDMAN, 1986). *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor* (GEM, 2017) surveys reveal that the search for entrepreneurship in Brazil is the greatest among the twenty largest economies in the world (G20).

Within this country, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE – 2019), there are 24 million female entrepreneurs in the country with 2/3 of them working informally, which is the seventh largest proportion of women starting out as entrepreneurs in the world. In the case of black women, they represent 28% of the Brazilian population, which corresponds to 60 million people (IBGE, 2018), and 60% of these women have college degrees (ID\_BR, 2020). However, they are at the bottom of the society pyramid when we address the systemic effects of racism (ID\_BR, 2020). According to a study by the Institute of Economic and Applied Research (IPEA - 2018), this public has a rate of social vulnerability which is 50% greater than that of white women.

For the other hand it's interesting to notice that within the context of the COVID actual pandemic black female entrepreneurs in Brazil have in order of 60% a college degree and are entrepreneurs due to necessity, with 45% already working in this manner before the crisis and 15% beginning their business during the pandemic. In regional terms, 72% of these women are located in the Southeast region of Brazil concentrated in the Rio-São Paulo (ID\_BR, 2020).

In general terms, outside of the racial issue, the female public is also greater than the male public when we are talking about new endeavors, according to data from *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor*, GEM (2017). The proportion of “New Entrepreneurs” – those who have had a business for less than 3.5 years – is greater among the women: 15.4% as opposed to 12.6% of the men. The study states that members of the female gender are mainly driven by the need to have another source of income or acquiring financial independence, which suggests that they are seeking emancipation (GEM, 2017). A report released this year by the Brazilian Support Service for Small and Micro-Companies (SEBRAE, 2020) points out that in 2017 and 2018, the proportion of entrepreneurial women who are “heads of households” went from 38% to 45% and 28% of these women are single women in Brazil (ID\_BR, 2020). Entrepreneurial activity has come to provide these entrepreneurs with a leading role in terms of earning power at home (RME, 2019).

However, the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened issues regarding gender and the job market in the world, and Brazil is no different (ID\_BR, 2020; NASSIF, ARMANDO & LA FALCE, 2020). In this country, the unemployment rate rose 20% during the first half of 2020, in relation to the same period during the previous year (IBGE, 2020). And the Continual National Household Survey

(PNADC) has shown that 7 million women in Brazil abandoned the job market during the last half of March when the country's lockdown began (IBGE, 2020).

A study conducted by the Female Entrepreneurial Network and the Locomotive Institute involving 1,165 female entrepreneurs during the pandemic, states that the crisis has led to the interruption of 39% of the businesses led by them. Another 47% continue to operate but have suffered financial effects. The issue appears more serious when we realize that 21% of these women are the only providers at home (RME, 2020). These numbers do not distinguish the percentage of black women, but when we talk about this group during the pandemic, the numbers may be even worse, as indicated by a survey conducted by the Brazilian Identity Institute which showed that 79% of black female entrepreneurs say that they have no financial reserve at the moment (ID\_BR, 2020).

The ills caused by COVID-19 have been intense in the state of Rio de Janeiro, which has already been suffering a grave political and economic crisis in recent years. During the period from March to July 2020, there was an increase of 14.5% in unemployment in the region (IBGE, 2020). The city of Rio de Janeiro presents marked social inequality in terms of living conditions, income and demographic structure, which place the low-income population in a position of greater vulnerability and aggravates the control and prevention of disease (SANTOS, 2020). This new reality, including the economic crisis and the reduction in the number of formal jobs has brought with it new demands and needs and doubts about the living conditions in Brazil and in the state of Rio de Janeiro, which as a developing country, presents various basic problems such as access to education, better working conditions, social equality and health. The maintenance of these individuals as members of a work force implies a discussion of not only issues of opportunity, but also above what is needed for survival (RIBEIRO, 2015).

Therefore, the option of entrepreneurship by necessity has become a path for many of these women who have been excluded by the economic system and formal production. In this manner, the discourse about entrepreneurship and its epistemological colonial essence, represents one of the faces of power and domination, which from this perspective could be considered systematic, because it mobilizes instructional, ideological and discursive resources to influence activities, organizations and individuals (COSTA; BARROS; MARTINS, 2012).

Given this, the objective of this study is to identify the perceptions of black female social entrepreneurs with higher education in relation to the challenges of the entrepreneurship by necessity system in the city of Rio de Janeiro, during the impacts on their businesses caused by the COVID-19 crisis. We will show a qualitative study of a descriptive and exploratory nature which includes interviews with 10 black female social entrepreneurs, who are initiating their businesses in the city of Rio de Janeiro, and will observe through a decolonial theoretical lens the discriminatory and hegemonic processes of invisibilization suffered during this process.

## **Theoretical References**

### **The scenario of female entrepreneurship by necessity in Brazil**

Brazil has a total of 24 million women working as entrepreneurs in the country which constitutes the seventh largest proportion of women among initial female entrepreneurs around the world. A large portion of them open their own businesses to overcome unemployment or increase income and more than 2/3 of them work informally (SEBRAE, 2019). Besides the difficulty of access to credit for their businesses, even with a lower rate of default than men, female entrepreneurs face other social and economic barriers, such as for example, the challenge of being an entrepreneur, administrating their home and being a mother at the same time (SEBRAE, 2019). They have ended up accumulating various social roles, and in this way, reflect on their domestic space as a new work environment, which is relevant to the studies of Female Geographies, which frame the problems which face mothers' intellectual work,

especially adverse space-temporal conditions such as being confined at home during the pandemic (OLIVEIRA, 2020; LOUREIRO; COSTA; FREITAS, 2012).

This is the participation of a women in a sector which was not developed for the opening of space for the female gender. The entrepreneurial sector has been constituted over many years, according to Oliveira (2017) in an environment with diverse racist and male chauvinist contours, with entrepreneurial activity being a challenge experienced in quite a specific way by black women.

Studies point out that black women are still on a level of ‘social inferiority’ when compared with data related to white men, black men and even white women. Data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, IBGE (2016) show that the unemployment rate among whites was 9.5%, against 14.5% among blacks and 14% for people of mixed race, leaving blacks in search of entrepreneurial roles to sustain themselves and their families. In salary terms, the average earnings of whites correspond to R\$ 2,814 per month and blacks R\$ 1,588, indicating that whites have salaries which are 29% greater than the average, and blacks have salaries which are 27% less than the average.

According to Oliveira (2017), the history of domination of white men in relation to black people has had undeniable affects, which also affect black female entrepreneurship in Brazil. What emerges is a society that has dived into post-modernism of an elitist, racist, xenophobic and chauvinistic nature, and these tendencies have not been overcome by the broad development of humanity, just softened.

Silva (2018), affirms that, as occurs in all aspects of modern life, economic relationships do not constitute an autonomous reality within a social context, given that the way in which social actors attach significance to objects and practices should be understood based on interactions experienced within a given context, understanding their cultural, political and social dimensions. That being so, it is understood that the act of being an entrepreneur is more challenging and consists of an act of greater resilience for these women, given that discriminatory processes create mechanisms within which these invisible barriers are more difficult to break.

### **Entrepreneurship by necessity during extreme crises**

Brazil is the country with the second most deaths due to COVID-19 in 2020. On August 8, it reached a total of 100 thousand deaths, with a third of these lives lost just in July. In the month of March 2021, Brazil recorded for the first time more than three thousand deaths by Covid in a single day (G1, 2021). Rio de Janeiro has registered an average of 518 new cases a day on August of 2020, a curve which has turned into a plateau (ELPAÍS, 2020).

The ID\_BR survey (2020) points out that COVID-19 emphasizes historic inequalities, leading to the collapse of regions which have poorer structure. A more specific report conducted by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Database of the Ministry of Health indicates that the number of deaths of people who declared themselves to be white shows that they had considerably greater access to ICU beds or mechanical ventilation which represented eight out of every ten deaths. Among those who identified themselves as black, brown or yellow, it was less than six in ten (SRAG, 2020). This is a result that cannot be taken out of the context of the polarization and denial by authorities which have undermined the control of the epidemic (ELPAÍS, 2020).

In this sense, Lemos (2005) and Carmona, Daí & Mello (2020) argue that, in talking about this subject in a developing country with countless inequalities and social problems which are under the influence of an intense economic and political crisis, entrepreneurship by necessity, shows itself to be closer to our reality and the motivation of most Brazilian micro-entrepreneurs, among them small social entrepreneurs. In this way, professionals are self-motivated to be entrepreneurs to maintain themselves in the job market

due to financial difficulties or for clear issues of survival, because they cannot find viable living and income solutions.

Within the context of the pandemic, the ID\_BR Institute survey, which consisted of a convenient non-probabilistic sample of black female entrepreneurs in Brazil, identified that 60% of these women have a college degree and are entrepreneurs due to necessity, with 45% already working in this manner before the crisis and 15% beginning their business during the pandemic. In regional terms, 72% of these women are located in the Southeast region of Brazil concentrated in the Rio-São Paulo (ID\_BR, 2020).

Vale, Corrêa and Reis (2014) highlight the impact of unemployment in this country. In total, 12% of individuals state that they have sought out entrepreneurship as a way to “flee” unemployment. The “desire to generate work and be useful” was cited by 15% of the entrepreneurs. This suggests possible discriminatory and excluding processes involving these individuals.

However, studies about conditioning factors and entrepreneurship in Brazil indicate that the leading motivation is “opportunity” together with “necessity”, which can be equally important and related, independent of social classes and network structures (VALE, 2015; NIKOU, BRÄNNBACK, CARSRUD, & BRUSHM, 2019). As Friedman (1986) emphasizes, entrepreneurship “is a function of environmental stimulus, opportunity and necessity.” Within this context, entrepreneurial motivations can, in truth, be open to dialogue, be multiple and occasionally interactions or reinforcement will occur during given periods among them (VAN EWIIK & BELGHITI-MAHUT, 2019).

In the case of Rio de Janeiro, the challenges that entrepreneurs face in the business environment are not unlike the rest of the country, but they do present other peculiarities. A survey conducted there by the Brazilian Micro- and Small Business Support Service, Sebrae (2017) showed that almost 40% of entrepreneurs said that they do not have any day to day problems with their businesses, and at first this appears to be counterintuitive. However, this is explained by the lack of a relationship between entrepreneurs in the city and their local support ecosystem. Just 43% of entrepreneurs looked for guidance and assistance from governmental bodies such as Sebrae and Sistema S, which are the best known by the population. Sistema S, created by the federal Constitution of 1988 is composed of nine governmental organizations whose main objectives are promoting free professional training for Brazilian workers as well as access to leisure and culture. (Sebrae, 2017).

One of the aspects which also is critical in the environment of Rio de Janeiro is the polarity between formal and informal entrepreneurs. Just 8% of the informal entrepreneurs have college degrees, as opposed to 38% of the formal entrepreneurs. In other words, the issue of basic education becomes more important in this process. Along with this, informal companies have less access to financial resources and infrastructure and operate in an uncertain environment, which affects the entrepreneurial development of the entire city (Sebrae, 2017).

For the informal entrepreneurs, access to capital is something which is much more latent, reaching a total of just 73% of these entrepreneurs. As a result, this leads to a high failure rate among companies in the city. Among the capitals in the Southeast, Rio has the lowest survival rate for companies which have been open for two years (Sebrae, 2013). Thus, it is understood that Rio de Janeiro has great potential and competitive advantages compared to other metropolises in Brazil, but it also has the great challenge of overcoming these indices.

### **Black women and social entrepreneurs by necessity as subjects of colonial oppression**

Entrepreneurship appeared in the middle of the capitalist world with the advent of the industrial revolution. As Marx (1996) points out, salaries began to organize hierarchies which divided less favored

groups, beginning with gender and also racial hierarchies. Within this context, invisibility and dehumanization are the first primary expressions of coloniality in an individual (SANTOS, 2019). It materializes under the guise of constraints to the extent that they destroy meaning and promote complete dehumanization, presenting “a sequence of fundamental existential characteristics and symbolic realities. Colonial power relationships can leave indelible marks not only in terms of authority, sexuality and economics, but also the general understanding of the individual.” (MALDONADO-TORRES, 2008).

However, this “modern” domination is a global mode of articulation of abyssal and non-abyssal exclusions. This is what Santos (2019) contextualizes as the “Sociology of Absences”. What the author sees as a “cartography of the abyssal line” which identifies the ways and means through which non-existence, radical invisibility and irrelevance are produced in sequence. As a result, through this sociology the modes of colonialism are understood as a form of power, being and knowledge which functions together with capitalism producing abyssal exclusions (SANTOS, 2019). Hypermodernity does not communicate with emancipation without limits, but rather the aggravation of poverty and inequality in various fields (QUIJANO, 1993).

In recent years through more participation of women in the job market, scientific studies of the phenomenon of female entrepreneurship have been increasing in the Brazilian Academy (FRANCO, 2014), however, according to Cassol, Silveira and Hoelgebaum (2007), the discoveries in this field are still incipient and superficial (HOLMQUIST & SUNDIN, 2020). Today there is a certain relevance to black entrepreneurship, given that the number of these entrepreneurs has passed the number of white entrepreneurs (TEIXEIRA, 2017). However, according to Teixeira (2017), even though the number of black entrepreneurs is greater in Brazil today, they have faced many specific challenges to perform their activities, and even 130 years after the abolition of slavery, there are no programs to facilitate their entrance into Brazilian society, leaving Afro-Brazilians trapped in “institutional racism” (FERREIRA, 2018; SIQUEIRA, NUNES & MORAIS, 2018).

According to Lugones (2014), these obstacles are even more specific when we consider black female entrepreneurs. They end up suffering a duality of difficulties, because in addition to belonging to the black population they belong to the female population, which has also been historically excluded from the sector. In this way, we can observe the intersectionality of this phenomenon (FERREIRA, 2018). Intersection Theory (AKOTIRENE, 2018) is used to analyze patriarchal and colonial power relationships and discrimination which can generate inequalities and invisibility. That being so, intersectionality, including aspects related to race, class and gender, produce oppression and disempowerment (CRENSHAW 2002; TEIXEIRA, OLIVEIRA & MESQUITA, 2019). In the case of black female entrepreneurs, the semantic consequence of this coloniality of gender is being colonized as an empty category, because legitimation (authority, voice, meaning and visibility) only occurs through the other (MARLOW, 2020; RIBEIRO, 2019; LUGONES, 2014; BEAUVOIR, 1980), and that in the case of these women it can lead to the phenomenon of “social whitening” (CARONE, 2012).

Brazil itself is just a country that presents countless difficulties for entrepreneurs as a whole, such as a lack of training, the bureaucracy of opening a business, and excessive taxation, and this scenario affects everyone, but is graver for these minority groups. Souza (2019) argues that it is precisely because the entrepreneurial sector was developed specifically for men that female entrepreneurs have very particular difficulties which require the development of consistent entrepreneurial competencies so that women can increase their chances of success.

However, black women today represent half the business leaders in the country (SEBRAE, 2019). In addition to the difficulty of access to credit for their businesses, even with a lower rate of default than men, these entrepreneurs still face other social and economic barriers, as an example of the challenge of understanding and administrating a home and being a mother at the same time (SEBRAE, 2019). They

end up accumulating various social roles, and in this way, reflect on their domestic space as a new place of work is relevant to the studies of Feminist Geographies, which depict the challenges that women face in terms of intellectual work, especially in adverse space-time conditions, specifically like the current confinement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (OLIVEIRA, 2020; LOUREIRO; COSTA; FREITAS, 2012).

## Methodology

From the methodological point of view we have decided on a qualitative approach based on a work of a descriptive and exploratory nature, given that this methodological path is appropriate for the dynamics of social complex phenomena, with characteristics that have to do with interrelated events, and still have few available elements and the potential to open new avenues of research (STAKE, 2008).

To Creswell (2010, p. 26), “this is a medium to explore and understand the significance that individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem.” To accomplish this, the greatest emphasis should be given to the issues and data that emerge after the interviews, always taking into consideration that these meanings are various and multiple. The logic of this movement is precisely seeking the complexity of various points of view (CRESWELL, 2010).

It should be reinforced that exploratory research is designed to promote greater familiarity with the studied phenomenon, in order to make it more explicit or to construct assumptions (GIL, 2007). Thus, within these precepts, this study involved bibliographic research and semi-structured interviews with 10 black female social entrepreneurs from the city of Rio de Janeiro with college degrees who participated in the city’s support and training program between 2019 and 2020, as we can identify in Table I. The names of the interviewees have been maintained anonymous.

Semi-structured interviews combine open and closed questions in which the interviewee has the liberty to discourse about the proposed subject. The researcher follows the previously designed script, but this is done within an environment which is conducted as an informal conversation. The script questions lead to the following steps: (1) researching the sociodemographic data of the interviewees, (2) questioning referring to life and career trajectories, as well as questions to identify the entrepreneur’s motivation (due to necessity and/or opportunity), (3) an analysis of the challenges faced during the pandemic and discriminatory processes (types of support, training, financing and strategy used by these women); and (4) inquiries about the future of post-pandemic business (how the subject views the breaking of these invisible barriers).

The data collection process began on April 15, 2020, a month after the implementation of social isolation by the governmental authorities of Brazil and extended until the end of July 2020. The interviews were conducted remotely respecting social isolation policies using digital platforms and virtual rooms via Google Meet, Zoom and Skype. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and a half.

**Table I - Profile of 10 Interviewed Social Entrepreneurs**

Interviewee	Education	Work Segment	Company Type	Age	Marital Status	Children
I1	Administrator	Afro Fashion Accessories	MEI	31	Single	0
I2	Anthropology	Social (Digital)	MEI	37	Married	2

I3	International Relations	Education Platform	Simple	25	Single	0
I4	Tourism	Afro Child Fashion	MEI	34	Separated	1
I5	Tourism Technical Specialist	Cakes and Candy	MEI	29	Married	1
I6	Design Student	Candy/Communication and Design	MEI	28	Separated	1
I7	Social Communication	Afro Fashion	MEI	23	Single	0
I8	Administration Student	Afro Fashion	Informal	36	Married	2
I9	Cinema	Afro Fashion	Informal	34	Married	1
I10	Marketing Student	Education	Informal	25	Single	0

Source: Information produced by field research (2020).

The construction of the categories occurred through an emergent process after the data collection. For this study we decided to use content analysis (BARDIN, 1977), where a group of communication techniques seeks to obtain the content of the messages and quantitative and/or qualitative indicators through systematic procedures which permit the inference of knowledge related to production/reception conditions and the inferred variables of these messages (BARDIN, 1977). In this way, the emergent categories of this study can be found in Table II.

**Table II - Analysis Categories**

Categories	Subjects
Entrepreneurship by necessity	- Unemployment - Discriminatory processes and social exclusion
Challenges of the pandemic – extreme situations experienced by entrepreneurs	- Roles played by women - Training, networking and financial planning
Organization processes, collective front facing the System’s challenges	- Breaking of invisible barriers - Collective resistance

Source: The Authors (2020).

In the next topic of this work, the results will be presented in three sections of analysis, which follow the order of appearance of the emergent categories. The first category shows the main inductive motives and challenges encountered in the practice of entrepreneurship by necessity, even before the pandemic. In the second category, we intend to analyze the perceptions of these groups in the middle of the pandemic and the difficulties encountered in this path, and finally, the third step presents actions initiated and promoted by these subjects as a form of survival, breaking invisible barriers, and resistance.

## Analysis of the body of research

### Entrepreneurship by necessity



In this category, what became evident was the totality of the affirmations of the interviewees about the entrepreneurial motivation and entrepreneurship by necessity. It is also important to note that all of the interviewees began their businesses before the pandemic. One aspect that emerged in the field during all of the interviews was the issue of unemployment. All of them said that they turned to entrepreneurship because they had given up looking for opportunities in the private market due to the economic situation and the lack of job opportunities, according to the definition of Vale (2015), Ribeiro (2015) and the GEM (2017) and IBGE (2020) studies, as shown in the interview with I6:

Initially it was due to necessity. In addition to being fired, I got separated as well. I did not know what to do. I did not know anything about Autocad but I learned to use the programs on my own and how to make designs with the system. I offered my services to other companies and began to work as a consultant. I was originally self-employed, but after 6 months of giving receipts I had to open my own company (I6).

In parallel, we also perceived a more dialogue-like motivation in a few interviews, as pointed out by Vale (2015) and Friedman (1986) and the ID\_BR survey (2020). In other words, she sustained herself out of “necessity”, but the business models have personal aspects linked to representativeness and historical roots. They also view this knowledge as an opportunity to be an entrepreneur, as we can see from the excerpt below:

In truth, I began to work as an entrepreneur because I couldn't find brands of infant clothes which represented the afro-culture of my son. Even though I was an entrepreneur by necessity, I envisioned an opportunity as well (I4).

In general terms, the body of research is in line with the Sebrae (2017) data about the increase in the number of small and micro- companies in Brazil, mainly due to the economic crisis which began in Brazil in 2016 which helped increase the country's unemployment, reaching a historic record of 14 million people looking for work who could not find it. This scenario affects the fact that during the past decade there has been an increase of 1.1 million new businesses in the country, which may signify the need for more inclusive policies within this segment.

In addition to the crisis established in the country, when we analyze this scenario in view of the current challenges aggravated by Pandemic, it is clear in the speech of these women that these businesses have become even more important for the subsistence of these families (ID\_BR, 2020), yet more evidence of the need for policies directed at facing this crisis.

We have also identified vestiges of some type of discrimination (invisibility/subalternization) in eight of the respondents, in terms of penetrating the entrepreneurial system, discriminatory processes and social exclusion. These challenges in the context of gender and race are expressed in bodies which are required to fit into a social profile of acceptance and legitimation, which corroborates the vision of de Oliveira (2017), Souza (2019) and Lugones (2014).

When I decided to become an entrepreneur, I was harassed by the mentors and professionals of the training program I participated in because of the way I dressed and did my hair. I was told: “I think you should begin to use some more casual clothes and think of straightening your hair. Unfortunately, this is the way people have opportunities to grow in this area.” If I'd listened to them, I wouldn't be here today (I10).

When I contact people, they initially don't believe very much in me, because I'm a young woman. My father, who is also my partner, has conducted the first meetings with our clients. He says: ‘you can see that what she says makes sense. ´To achieve things, we have to ´dance to the music´ (I3).

It is evident from I3's interview that for her to be legitimated in this system she has to use the “body” of a white man, the figure of the colonizer, to be successful in her interactions. Santos (2019) and the

Southern Epistemologies call these abyssal exclusions. It is a process of psychological aggression but one which is felt by the body, because it is not dissociated from the soul. Therefore, modern domination is a global articulation of abyssal and non-abyssal exclusions.

This demonstrates why Souza (2019) and Lugones (2014) state that this legitimation will always be difficult for women, because it requires these women to wear a protective mask in a certain way to hide their subjectivities, because the entrepreneurial sector is led by white males. Thus, as seen in the testimony of I3, these entrepreneurs need to develop skills consistent with these values, if they "masculinize" in speech and in the body, creating stereotypes to increase their chances of success, as said by Carone (2012), these subjects suffer a process of "social whitening". Other interviews which corroborate this perspective can be seen below:

Once I participated in an investment roundtable in which the room had 25 men, 2 women and 1 black man. Suddenly, a man began to talk about rules for the submission of social entrepreneurial projects and it became obvious that he didn't know anything about the area. I felt cornered, because this man was the CEO of a venture capital firm. If I said that the man was wrong, I would limit my chances of receiving investment. I felt at a disadvantage the entire time (I8).

Leading a startup team as a woman is very difficult. If we speak in a more incisive form, we're witches. If we are kinder, they do not take us seriously. When a male voice enters everyone stops to listen. We even put our knowledge in check: "Am I being silly?" The first challenge is internal with your peers (I10).

The interviews above reinforce issues relative to the intersectionality of the phenomenon (female, black, and entrepreneurial subjects), the marginalization of this subject and structural prejudice based on a system of values and symbolisms (FERREIRA, 2018). According to the authors Oliveira (2017), Silva (2018) and Teixeira (2017), being a poor black female entrepreneur from the periphery and cross-referencing these markers of difference, they act directly on her and her place in the world, given that she is all of this at the same time, including a woman, situated at the bottom of a social pyramid whose weight she has to support, while the top is occupied by those who do not have any burden to carry, such as: very successful heterosexual white male entrepreneurs and investors, as seen in the case of I8's testimony, that she showed discomfort when being in an entrepreneurial encounter where she felt excluded, subjugated and without representation. She clearly demonstrates that her speech and presence were silenced, because what was at stake was accepting rules imposed to obtain funding. What manifests itself as a veiled way to "silence" the other (FERREIRA, 2018; AKOTIRENE, 2018; CRENSHAW 2002; TEIXEIRA, OLIVEIRA & MESQUITA, 2019). These are unquestionable models of a cultural tradition inherited from modernity, which reinforces data from the IBGE (2020) and GEM (2017) about the segment.

Therefore, the junction between decolonial thinking and the potential of "being from the periphery", places in check the various perspectives of coloniality of power, knowledge and one's own being (SANTOS, 2019; QUIJANO, 1993; MALDONADO-TORRES, 2008). This category in summary reinforces what Oliveira (2017) states, namely that colonial history has left indelible marks which directly affect the scenario of black female entrepreneurship in Brazil. The entrepreneurial system is a mirror of Brazilian society: elitist, racist, xenophobic, homophobic and male chauvinist.

### **Challenges of the pandemic – extreme situations experienced by the entrepreneurs**

In the report of all of the study's interviewees it became clear that the pandemic was considered a great "parting of the waters" in the personal and professional lives of these subjects. In March 2020, when social isolation was decreed in Brazil, these women had to reinvent their business models, which in many cases, operated using a presential dialoguing model and transforming them into digital models, bringing

with them financial, intellectual and relational challenges. Therefore, this category is based on the analysis of this group's perceptions in relation to the challenges that arose in the middle of the pandemic and the difficulties met during this journey. From all of the interviews emerged the subject of the various roles performed by women, which became more evident in the reports of mothers, which suggests that they face a greater challenge as stated by Oliveira (2020) and Loureiro & Costa & Freitas (2012).

I live with my husband. We divide the tasks, but taking care of the children is entirely under my care. So, how can I manage to concentrate and think of strategies for sales, studying and networking, if I need to take care of two small children who aren't in school? Social isolation has affected many more female entrepreneurs who are mothers (I2).

We can observe the appearance of other social problems, one of which was related by another interviewee and can be seen below:

I got separated in the middle of the pandemic. In reality, I already didn't have much help from him, because I am the provider at home, but anyway it was always support. I had to stay calm, because I felt emotionally out of equilibrium and continued to invest my efforts into the business. It's not easy to perform so many roles (I4).

In their reports, I2 and I4 displayed the reality of Brazilian women and corroborated the data released by ID\_BR (2020) and Sebrae (2020) which point to the growth of entrepreneurship by necessity, of entrepreneurial women who are "heads of households" in Brazil and "single mothers", who have to deal with greater challenges and responsibilities. In this manner, entrepreneurial activity is often the only source of income and survival for these families.

In terms of the subject concerning training, networking, and financial planning, there are countless contexts that illustrate the difficulties experienced by these women. However, the greatest impact felt was a change in the paradigm between physical business models, or in other words, those starting with sales made in person to digital models realized via on-line platforms, e-commerce and social networks. The majority of the interviewees show that they had financial and intellectual difficulties in promoting these changes, as can be seen in the interview below:

I wasn't prepared to act with a business solely through e-commerce. What gave me financial stability were the fairs and events. I spent at least three months trying to absorb and understand whether the "new normal" was the strategy that I would create. I drastically reduced the number of clients, and with this my income fell in half, so the bills didn't stop coming. In the help that the government gave pro micro-entrepreneurs, not all of them had access to financing. I know that it's wrong, but I had no problems with the priority on establishing financial reserves. I had no one to talk to and I felt very alone and abandoned. I decided to create daily content on Instagram, placing photos of products, and making lives to stimulate sales. We try to remain calm and think positively, but the perspectives are not good (I1).

In I1's interview we may observe that the difficulties of access to credit and training are greater, despite their lower incidence of default, as pointed out by recent data from Sebrae (2019). The lack of education and financial planning also have proved to be aggravating factors. These social and economic barriers are, in fact, important obstacles to the development of these businesses. This corroborates what Souza (2019) sustains, which is that the entrepreneurial system was specifically developed for male individuals, creating social exclusion (SANTOS, 2019). That being so, black entrepreneurs need to develop consistent competencies and abilities to increase their chances of success, which often are not within their reach, because it requires a division of roles and time management that during Pandemic became insurmountable barriers (SEBRAE, 2019; OLIVEIRA, 2020; LOUREIRO; COSTA; FREITAS, 2012).

In the interview with I4 meanwhile, it was clear how the lack of training and networking interfere in returning to business and strategic planning at moments of crisis:

In the beginning I was very sad and concentrated on strategy. I spent two months just meeting demands which appeared, which were quite few, and then I resolved to unite the black female collectives, the afro-entrepreneurs. Look at what they're doing, thinking about new actions and continue business. And then I signed up for virtual fairs, like Encontro Preto, which is a fair held by a collective that I participate in. I'm also looking for training, trying the use this time to study a bit more about digital marketing, to improve my Instagram. I'm looking for online courses and networking (I4).

Despite the obstacles encountered by these women in social isolation, we observed individualistic and collective actions in most of the interviews. Even though they faced adversity, many collective groups of afro-entrepreneurs strengthened during this process, by offering financial, intellectual and relational support for the survival of these businesses.

### **Processes of collective organization in the face of the challenges of the system**

Another issue that emerged was representativeness and resistance to oppressive structures of power. Even being social businesses with different levels of maturity, these subjects seek peers, identify with other histories of afro-entrepreneurs, and seek training in collectives organized to develop their businesses, which became stronger within the context of the pandemic. These women know their “pains” and challenges, sharing their fight for more egalitarian conditions. This is what they display in the interviews of I4 and I9.

It was difficult to listen to a white man say during the project board's evaluation of social acceleration in which I participated that there is 'no difference between various baby brands, because clothes are clothes.' Most of the time that I am someplace talking about my brand, the white people always seem offended that I represent blacks taking a leading role and they understand it as a form of reverse racism. This is why, I can see with greater clarity the importance of my work in this segment. We need to encourage more black women to do the same (I4).

To talk about female entrepreneurs, we need to have women leading these programs. They have to be in the fight. It's no good if they're isolated too. There has to be something organized in the entire world, and this is precisely why we need governmental support. We need women in the government to break these barriers. If we don't it'll be hard to revert this (I9).

One fact has proved very relevant in the interviews with these women. They all termed themselves “black women” instead of “negro women” which suggests with greater exaltation this desire to break invisible barriers. Another important fact is that the business models of afro descendants also reveal concrete forms of market space and an affirmation of this segment. It is a form of manifestation of the “ecology of knowledge” which talks of the fights of the subaltern, invisible individuals who show their “pain” and suffering without any alteration, transforming them into a reason to go to battle as Santos (2019) states. It is a form of freedom from the structural racism proposed by Ferreira (2018).

Those interviewed in their totality, demonstrated active participation in collective movements, as a way to survive in the market as Santos (2019) suggests. The interview of I9 demonstrates that black women have been seeking more and more social space, challenging the reflections of prejudice as we can see below:

In 2017, I was working as an entrepreneur and also working. I was worn out by a crisis of depression and anxiety. I saw many things going wrong in that company. In 2018, I took an Afrolab course and that was what turned me around. After that I was invited to Feira Preta, the largest fair in Latin America, and decided to leave the company and work as an entrepreneur. I've opened other doors at work Today I am the ambassador of Pretas (an NGO in Vitória) in Feira Preta and FB. (I9).

We conclude by noting that these subjects, even though they feel the pain of all these challenges,

understand their role in society and do not place themselves as part of the “common oppressed”. The pandemic has reinforced these resistance processes. Resistance is an attempt to make them feel “oppressed with merit”, or in other words, oppression is still present, but there are routes to fight and break these invisible barriers. To them, common places don’t change anything; inclusion policies should be essentially active (LUGONES, 2014).

## Final Considerations

The fact that the ills caused by the current capitalist entrepreneurial system, the fruit of a larger legacy based on the notion of the coloniality of power, create barriers which are invisible and to a certain extent insurmountable for individuals on the margins of society, such as black female entrepreneurs with college educations. Before they are administrators, anthropologists or communications specialists, they are female and black, which places them on the margins of society.

This study shows that these barriers still appear insurmountable when we are dealing with extreme crises such as the one we are living through today, COVID-19. Research indicates the need to recover stories that have been silenced up until now by the dynamic of modernity/rationality. With collective action, subjectivities which have been up until now repressed and knowledge which has had a subaltern status has gained status for the authors.

It is understood, therefore, that these black female entrepreneurs have shared various forms of discrimination, in issues related to gender (being a woman) and issues related to race. Those who have been oppressed, colonized and functionalized often need to abandon their subjectivity to reach a position of power. This is what we call the phenomenon of “social whitening”, as a form of protection related to the discrimination and profiling within the hegemonic standard. It is the negation of themselves, of their bodies and minds, as a form of social condition and survival to integrate themselves, to be accepted and to have mobility in this new world order (CARONE, 2012).

In some of the interviews we may perceive this understanding that to evolve and be legitimated by this system, one has to place “the other” ahead (LUGONES, 2014). Even though these groups assume this position, they also resist and seek to recover suppressed, silenced and marginalized knowledge, which is what appears in the interviews in a subtle fashion when the interviewees assume that their business models are intended to recover afro-descendance.

Among the largest challenges faced by black female entrepreneurs, even before the pandemic, is reconciling work with family and children. Social isolation has aggravated this situation even more; however, they indicate that they seek training and planning to be divided within their multi-task profiles, an inherent ability in women that should be treated as a differential. These women have sought support from afro-collective organized groups and NGOs with spaces for financial, editorial and educational support. This can be presented as a promising environment for resignifying black identity. These places express all of the inquietude and conflicts that characterize the construction of Brazilian black individual identity.

The situation of these women has been even more marginalized in terms of the financing. Out of ten entrepreneurs, six embark on this track due to necessity, with 15% of them initiating activities after the beginning of the pandemic. COVID-19 led to even more black female entrepreneurs by necessity even when they had college or graduate degrees (ID\_BR, 2020), which accentuates the need for greater financial, emotional and psychological support for these individuals. This should serve as a stimulus for institutions and society to construct mechanisms and public and private policies which will support the subsistence of these women for future redeployment in the job market and even incentives for their businesses.

Even with the support provided by the federal government, among entrepreneurs, 41% live off of their returns on production or the 30% of Emergency Aid (ID\_BR, 2020), which shows the instability of these businesses. Apparently, the emergency aid would not be enough to guarantee expenses, but as the restrictions of isolation and the lockdown lasted longer, the monthly value of R\$ 600 became indispensable for maintaining these women and their families.

However, instead of following a perspective of victimization, these women do not focus on their difficulties, understand the struggle on the collective level, in the terms of representativeness and resistance, and are always finding ways of surviving positively in this system. This positive effect valued in their interviews in a certain manner delegitimizes the mechanisms of oppression which inhabit the “sociology of emergencies” (SANTOS, 2019). That being so, they possess the capacity to separate the occurrences of suffering and the sentiment of injustice which lies behind it. This makes strengthened identity appear with the capacity to act politically on the exercise of “awareness” (SANTOS, 2019).

Black women have been seeking more and more social participation, challenging the reflections of prejudice. In conceiving of and strengthening afro-descendant businesses, they do not operate just as an object to fight social exclusion, but also as an important economic agent, generating jobs and income and contributing to the socioeconomic development of the country. Because a relevant fact that cannot be ignored is that black women, contingent on uniting black and brown women, move roughly R\$ 704 billion per year in Brazil, but yet they are pushed to the side of the market (Instituto Locomotiva, 2019).

In this manner, the subjects examined in this study and the support and training have gained a new importance in this scenario of encouraging the formation of new leaders. We see the need for the official organs of the state to formulate more inclusive methodologies in the promotion of female entrepreneurial activities, as well as making the business environment more attractive for those who already perform professional activities in an informal manner.

That being said, it also becomes relevant to elaborate public-private partnerships in order to confer more possibilities on directed education, training, and access to credit so that these female entrepreneurs can obtain the resources they need in an easier process. Affirmative action, redistribution policies and the recognition of overcoming exclusion due to age, gender and race are primordial in this context, in order to guarantee equality of opportunity.

As main contributions, this research shows a different look for these subjects as the base of the country's social and entrepreneurial pyramid (IBGE, 2019; ID\_BR, 2020), mainly in the context of a Pandemic, in which these women gain a significant social importance to stimulate and the resumption of the Brazilian economy. Thus, it is necessary to anticipate mitigating actions for a post-pandemic country, following the social developments of the dimensions highlighted in this research. This study contributes to the intention to unveil the nuances that surround this debate, especially with the subjectivity of the Brazilian entrepreneurial black woman as a backdrop. On this topic and its subsequent phenomena, there is still much to be explored. It is essential to foresee and plan this “new normal”.

In a general manner, even though some advances have been realized against this discrimination, these women often suffer with historical reflections and their participation in the entrepreneurial system itself. Above all, it is a true question of recognizing that black female entrepreneurs are as capable as white and black male entrepreneurs. However, there is an entire web of fabric that has been strung together during this history which has distanced these women from the job market, and has also constructed invisible and insurmountable barriers within the field of entrepreneurship.

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