

v. 18 n. 31 São Paulo Dec. 2021



international journal
on human rights

issue **31**

VOICES OF WOMEN FROM THE *FAVELAS*

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- *Stories from everyday life during the Covid-19 pandemic in Rio de Janeiro* •

ABSTRACT

This essay intends to make readers listen to the voices of women from the Maré favela complex located in Rio de Janeiro. We cross-referenced data from “Mapa social do corona”, a bulletin produced by Observatório de Favelas with reports on the everyday life of the local population. Using the “quotation mark method”, this study records testimonials in which the polyphony of voices reflects the challenges people in the favelas face due to the global crisis generated by Covid-19. Such reports derive from observations of women watching from their windows, women who went out to work every day, female shopkeepers in their small businesses and women who engaged in the fight against hunger by leading campaigns to distribute food baskets, among other actions and events that are considered marginal, but that speak volumes about the dynamics of resistance and existence of the favelas.

KEYWORDS

Pandemic | Women | Daily life | *Favelas* | Maré



“Pontes de tábuas” (Wooden plank bridges) – Museu da Maré archives

1 • Introduction

In a region of mangrove forests, swamps and memories of stilt houses (wooden houses raised on stilts over a body of water), the Maré *favela* emerged in 1940 in Rio de Janeiro and developed over the waters of Guanabara Bay. Nowadays, it is a group of 16 *favelas* in a completely urban and cosmopolitan area. The main arteries of the city – Linhas Amarela, Vermelha and Avenida Brasil – run through it. Although it appeared on the official map of Rio in 1947, its occupation began earlier, in 1940, in Morro do Timbau, followed by Baixa do Sapateiro (1947), Conjunto Marcílio Dias (1948), Parque Maré (1953), Parque Roquete Pinto (1955), Parque Rubens

Vaz (1951), Parque União (1961), Nova Holanda (1962), Praia de Ramos (1962), Conjunto Esperança (1982), Vila do João (1982), Vila do Pinheiro (1989), Conjunto Pinheiro (1989), Conjunto Bento Ribeiro Dantas or “Fogo Cruzado” (1992), Nova Maré (1996), and Salsa e Merengue (2000).

Gathering experiences from the Northeast of Brazil and Angola, rappers, samba, faith healers, the elderly, from pig raising to fishing, youth who are into funk and those who are into gospel, the fashion of funk dances in *favelas*, social movements that started even before public lighting existed, the presence of civil society institutions, art and education warehouses next door to drug-dealing spots, national and international interests, song lyrics and memories of photography and museums, the Maré *favela* still communicates with the bodies of water that converge until they flow into the sea. “The population there seems to have really learned from the tides,¹ observing their constant movement, their constant mutation. And the residents of Maré still preserve the wisdom of the unstable balance of the old sailors of the stilt houses”.²

However, even with “the wisdom of the unstable balance”, as mentioned by Drauzio Varella, the dribbling, the swing and the peculiar corporality that was born on the margins, driven by creativity, resistance and existence, how did the residents of the Maré respond to the global imbalance that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused and is still causing?

Here, we can highlight the fact that most black people from the *favelas* are exposed to a greater risk of infection due to the dynamics of their daily lives and work, as they are the workers of the so-called essential services (in areas such as public transportation, street cleaning, hospital services, and in positions such as housekeepers, doorkeepers, delivery people, car hailing app drivers etc.). To this one must add the conditions of the mass transportation system that connects Maré to their places of work and the inequalities in access to health. Medical equipment is not evenly distributed throughout the city and is especially lacking in low-income neighbourhoods. This creates barriers to both the residents’ first visit to a basic health clinic and possibility of receiving intensive care in equipped beds.

As the question guiding this essay is complex and encompasses multiple factors, the purpose of this study is to work with the “quotation mark method” – that is, to portray a social field through stories told in the first person. In this method, individual narratives are understood as being interconnected in an extensive network that contemplates a collective body.

Therefore, women’s voices – primarily those of black women – will be the source of our analysis, as these women appeared at the bottom of social inequality maps and indicators in Brazil before and during the pandemic.³ Nonetheless, even when faced with the genocidal policy implemented by the State at its different levels of government, they are the ones who organize acts of resistance capable of transforming chaotic scenarios into breaths of creativity and foster collective actions of community-based solidarity.

2 • Black women's resistance in the *favelas*

The biweekly “Mapa social do corona” bulletins indicate that women from low-income classes and *favelas* are among the main groups directly and indirectly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. This was “not only due to the infection and lethality of the disease itself, but also to the worsening of gender oppression in households, expressed by the increase in the number of aggressions women have suffered at home.”⁴

The aggravation of inequalities that affect women in this context has impacted public defenders' work to provide legal assistance to the female population during the pandemic, the organization of actions/events and collectives focused on women's safety, the pressure for public policies to protect women and a series of actions specifically aimed at this issue.

In spite of all the attention from civil society, during a visit to a police station for research purposes, a police officer told me: “This Maria da Penha Act is very popular now”. This phrase exposes the violent mismatch between sectors that should be engaged in the safety and well-being of women.

This essay walks along the streets and alleys and opens itself up to the dimension of everyday life during the pandemic, which is expressed in the daily practices of the women from the *favela*, the new ways of socializing, the relationship with the streets and the sense of community. Chronicler and intellectual João do Rio believes that there is an “enchanted soul of the streets”.⁵ Our goal is thus to reflect, through the stories told by the voices of women from *favelas*, ways of re-enchanting these streets in such difficult times. And before this (re)enchantment is interpreted as something ludic and ephemeral, it should be noted that its roots maintain a concrete, poetic relationship with elements of survival in different spheres of existence, from work to resistance.

Dona Nalva: The pandemic was a problem for a lot of people who weren't used to living in a state of crisis. Sure, a lot of new things and challenges appeared, but people from the favelas already have experience in living with difficulties and having to get by.

Q: And how did you get by?

Dona Nalva: How did I get by? (laughs) I did what I always do. Doing my odd jobs, with help from neighbours, my retirement pension. The neighbour's daughter has just helped me use these things on the internet so I could register. There are a lot of difficult things they make old people do [...].

Q: Online.

Dona Nalva: *That's right. And who isn't online? See how good the knowledge of young people is? I value their knowledge. They're the ones who sometimes don't value ours.*

Dona Nalva's account brings to mind an interesting image of the usual resistance of people from the *favela*, as well as their capacity to create internal forms of solidarity to deal with the challenges of the so-called “new normal”, especially those related to the digital world. As bell hooks points out,⁶ we can see from the images, which are complex spaces of both repression and resistance, that civil society's forms of struggle and organizing have been more effective than the inefficient and vexatious actions of the government in the context of a global health crisis.

3 • Strategies and pathways to community survival

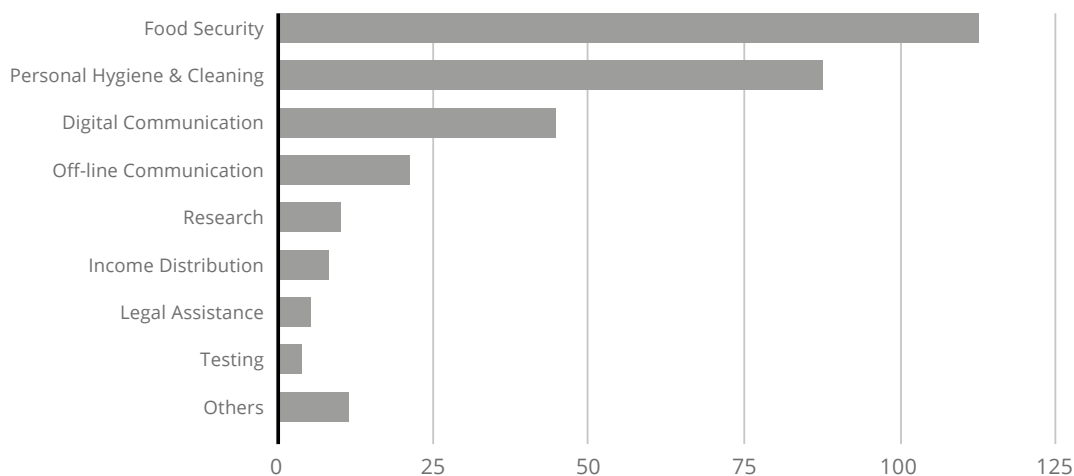
It is very interesting to note how despite structural inequalities and limited access to public affairs, people who live in *favelas*, especially the women, build alternatives for survival that culminate in actions that contribute to women's emancipation, leadership and autonomy:

Alessandra: *We did all sorts of things. Because this thing about social distancing didn't work for us. My boss said I didn't have to go to work, but I needed to pay the bills and a lot of people started ordering my packed lunches, which I used to make on weekends. Then my niece came here, and we strongly invested in it.*

While on the one hand, we can observe processes of subordination and the consolidation of stigmatizing representations of the lower social classes, which are mainly composed of black women living in *favelas*, on the other hand, we see power being produced. This power is visible because it organizes everyday actions that affect the entire black community of the *favelas*.

The fact that Alessandra and her family work in the food industry confirms what data obtained by “Mapa” indicate: 80.7% of the actions are centred on food security. The high percentage of actions on food security reveals that it is vital for the maintenance of fundamental rights. Actions targeting cleaning and personal hygiene come in second place. They include the donation and distribution of items such as soap and hand sanitizers and, in some cases, access to safe water for cleaning and disinfecting public spaces. Solidarity actions that focus on cleaning and personal hygiene items, exclusively or combined with other actions, amount to 62.9% of the total.⁷

Graph 1 – Types of solidarity actions in the city of Rio de Janeiro



Graph extracted from “Mapa social do corona” - Bulletin No. 11

Denise: Favela streets were even busier. Many people on the streets helping other people, distributing food baskets. Many people sitting in front of their homes talking more and chatting more on social media. Even those who lived close to one another and were already in touch seem to have gotten closer.

It is interesting to reflect on the communication networks in *favelas*, such as community radio and loudspeaker services. Leci Brandão⁸ sings about them in one of her songs while portraying the character of Zé do Caroço, a community leader from a *favela* that used local means of communication as a tool for political emancipation. All this work on communications that was already being done in Maré by the local initiatives of either NGOs or residents associations intensified during the pandemic. This communication movement now has greater visibility, mainly due to the commitment of the youth, their inventiveness and their ability to transcend the so-called official media.

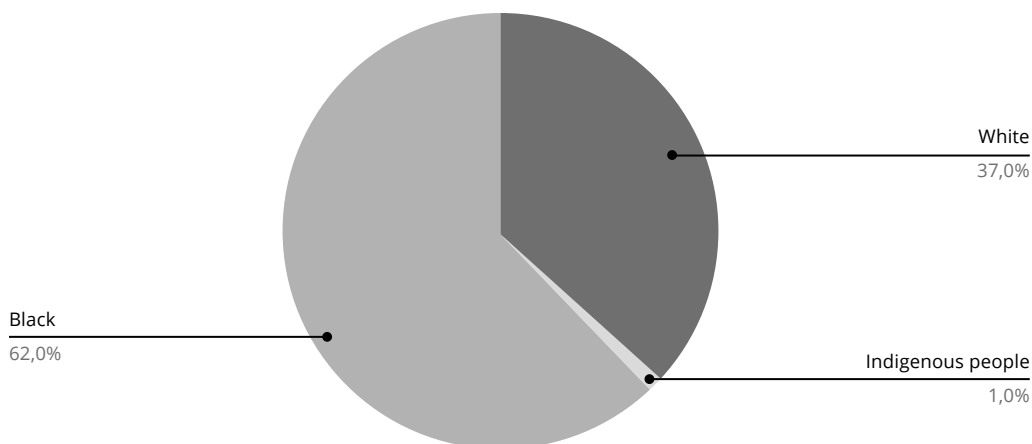
Talking about official communication channels during the pandemic is a challenge that involves the spheres of government due to a perverse strategy of omission, discontinuity of data and fake news on the pandemic observed in Brazil. The backdrop of this strategy was the dissemination of misinformation linked to a wave of scientific denialism. Therefore, solidarity actions aimed at communication were more committed to raising awareness and delivering consistent information to the population to counter the misinformation spread mainly by the government itself. The major confusion and inconsistencies in the information provided by the mass media led the residents of the Maré to produce their own

communication channels. While in the field, we observed an increase in the dissemination of local newsletters prepared by civil society organizations, such as the bulletin that serves as the basis for this essay, as well as online newsletters such as “Maré de Notícias”. Residents also mentioned the community radio station and affirmed they paid more attention to it during the pandemic. We also noticed, especially among the youth, a desire to participate in the production of content for mass media. The number of communication collectives in the *favelas* of the city of Rio de Janeiro has grown. One interesting fact was the increase in the production of podcasts and the number of people listening to them.

The analysis of age groups and ethnic-racial composition indicates that more young and black people are playing a leading role in the diverse strategies for combating Covid-19 deployed by civil society. Most people involved in the universe researched in “Mapa social do corona” were in the age group of 30 to 39 years, followed by the group of 20 to 29 years. These two groups correspond to 44% and 24%, respectively. A crucial fact that caught our eye is the ethnic composition of the actors and agents involved. Most are black people, who make up 62% of the people surveyed. Such proportions reveal the central characteristic of grassroots actions and initiatives in the periphery and unequivocally reveal the ethnic profile of low-income territories in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

In contrast, white people participate in 37% of the actions, and indigenous people in only 1% of the total. It is essential to take into consideration that the black population suffers the most from limitations on access to health services and other rights in the urban context and therefore, they are also the most affected by the lethality of Covid-19 in Brazil, as data recently collected by the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz) and other research institutions demonstrate.

Graph 2 – Ethnic-racial profile of the people that developed actions to combat the pandemic



Graph extracted from “Mapa social do corona” - Bulletin No. 10

Another important fact that intersects with our sample is the gender of the interviewees. According to “Mapa”, women represent 57% and men, 43%. The strength of women’s initiatives is also proving to be an important local feature in Maré. The community vision that female leaders have forged throughout the historical process is also currently being felt in the *favela* territory. One only has to note that in the field work we carried out in the Maré, all our informants were women.

As we have already mentioned, women from low-income spaces and *favelas* are the main groups directly and indirectly affected by the surge of coronavirus due to not only the infectiousness and the deadliness of Covid-19, but also the worsening of gender oppression in households, as seen in the increase in physical and symbolic abuse that women face at home. With regards to this, the number of cases of public defenders providing legal assistance to women is growing significantly, as is the number of collectives working specifically in this area.

Also, according to “Mapa” bulletins, there are a few actions focused on LGBTQI+ people (2.9%), which are powerful initiatives developed by the leaders themselves and that have impacted public policies in the Maré. Other examples of actions and events aimed at the transgender population are Casa Nem, a facility located in the Lapa district, and actions led by Conexão G group, whose primary focus is to assist the LGBTQI+ population living in *favelas* and on the outskirts of the city. There are also a few actions geared toward indigenous peoples living in the territory of Rio de Janeiro (1.4%) or school communities (1.4%).

Márcia: We know the colour of the people who have died the most because of this pandemic. The mainstream media doesn't show the numbers, but people who are here observing know about the difficulty in using health services, they know who has money to isolate themselves and if they need health services or medicines, they'll be able to [buy them]. Here, we worry about surviving and having food to eat. Imagine a family with no money for bread having to buy medicine. People from the favela help each other, and share not only the little they have, but also the anguish, which is what they have the most of.

It should be emphasized that the people interviewed for this essay are local residents, and not necessarily leaders or people involved in organizations in the Maré. We also interviewed a few people involved in the political debate, such as the activist who preferred to identify herself as Márcia (a pseudonym). Acting on the causes of the homeless population, she brings to the debate images and keywords such as medicines, health care, deaths and racial debate.

Barbara, a granddaughter of Dona Idalina, who is now deceased, told us about the famous *garrafadas*⁹ that her grandmother used to make to strengthen the immune system:

Many people used to knock on our door. Everybody wanted to boost their immunity, wanted a cure. My grandmother would say, 'It doesn't cure you. It helps you stay strong'. But people had a lot of faith because my grandmother made it.

The belief in healing is profoundly related to another fact in Dona Idalina's life and to many other wise old women in that territory: she was a griot¹⁰ from Maré, a lady who maintained a know-how based on a respectful and horizontal relationship with nature and who updated her knowledge through her commitment to transmit an immaterial heritage. Hence, the use of herbs, the wisdom of the prayers and the production of a world of enchantment.

The presence of the wise old women is a hallmark of Maré. The appropriation of the term that designates the vocation of the old storytellers from part of West Africa is not by chance. There is a desire to provoke the "ideas to postpone the end of the world", which Ailton Krenak talks so much about,¹¹ through the way of life of the wise old women of the *terreiros*,¹² *quilombola*¹² women and the women from villages and *favelas* and the way they relate to the world. These women constantly remind us of what we must not forget; women who inspire healing.

4 • Conclusion

The way small acts of daily resistance are woven within *favelas* shows the fundamental role of women in everyday life in contexts marked by inequalities and a history of state negligence, as is the case of many *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro. Through the voices of a few women who live in Maré, this text drew a small portrait of the survival experiences that were created and invented in the community in the context of the pandemic.

In a world decelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic and faced with a global crisis, there is a need to seek breathing spaces and places for (re)enchantment. I suspect that one of the keys to create such (re)enchantment lies in the hands of women, mainly the wise old women. For this reason and for the great legacy they have bequeathed us, I dedicate this article to the griots I have never met again in the field in Maré: Durvalina and Vitória. They are entangled in the affection of Tereza, Thais, Eliana and Angelica, women who have turned their existence into an eternal quest to write the names of these griots in history.

NOTES

- 1 • Translation note: *Maré* means “tide” in Portuguese.
- 2 • Drauzio Varella, *Maré: vida na favela* (Rio de Janeiro: Casa da Palavra, 2002).
- 3 • See “Mapa social do corona”, Observatório de Favelas da Maré (OF), Fundação Heinrich Böll Brasil, 2020, accessed December 15, 2021, <https://br.boell.org/pt-br/2020/10/27/mapa-social-do-corona>. Produced by the urban policies department of Observatório de Favelas da Maré (OF), with the support of Heinrich Böll Foundation in Brazil, “Mapa” is a biweekly publication that seeks to measure the unequal impacts of the pandemic in the city of Rio de Janeiro and identify an agenda of emergencies and significant practices for dealing with the current health crisis in order to influence the public debate and public policies in the city.
- 4 • “Mapa Social...”, no. 11, p. 18.
- 5 • João do Rio, *A alma encantadora das ruas* (Rio de Janeiro: Cidade Viva, 2010).
- 6 • bell hooks, *Yearning. Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990).
- 7 • “Mapa social...”, no. 11, p. 10.
- 8 • Singer and composer of samba music, activist strongly focussed on the conditions of black women and the *favela* population in Brazil and currently in her third term as state deputy for the state of São Paulo.
- 9 • Translation note: *garrafadas* are bottles of medicine made from herbal infusions.
- 10 • Term coined by a French colonizer to designate old storytellers, memorialists and genealogists who work to preserve the memory of their people in most of West Africa. Djibril Tamsir Niane, *Sundjata ou a Epopéia Mandinga*, translator: Oswaldo Boato (São Paulo: Ática, 1982); Isaac Bernat, *Encontros com o griot Sotigui Kouyaté*, 1st ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Pallas, 2013).
- 11 • Ailton Krenak, *Ideias para adiar o fim do mundo* (Rio de Janeiro: Companhia das Letras, 2019).
- 12 • Translation note: *terreiros* are places of worship of Afro-Brazilian religions.
- 13 • Translation note: Afro-Brazilian residents of a *quilombo*, a type of settlement first established by escaped slaves in Brazil.



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Received in November 2021.

Original in Portuguese. Translated by Naiade Rufino. Proofread by Karen Lang.



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