

WOMEN'S TERRITORIALITY: RESISTING IN THE FAVELA OF ROCINHA, RIO DE JANEIRO
TERRITORIALIDADE FEMININA: RESISTÊNCIA NA FAVELA DA ROCINHA, RIO DE JANEIRO
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ARTICLE SUBMITTED ON AUGUST 15, 2022

How to quote this text: Sobreiro, F., 2022. Women's Territoriality: Resisting in the Favela of Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro. VIRUS, 25, December. [online]. Available at: <http://www.nomads.usp.br/virus/papers/v25/633/633en.php>. Accessed dd Month yyyy.

Abstract

This essay analyzes the everyday life of women living in Favela da Rocinha, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, discussing the possibilities of action and resistance while facing everyday processes of oppression. The subject of the study is women's territoriality, i.e., the influence of women who, despite violence and the planned absence of the State, are able to shape the stigmatized territory of the favela and to resist the oppression that the residents of the informal city face. This article analyzes women's actions that reconfigure the territory of the favela, through sociopolitical practices of resistance and community participation at Favela of Rocinha. The adopted methodology brings a perspective against the patriarchal cultural hegemony, articulating concepts of the feminist theory with participant observation in meetings of local grassroots organizations and interviews with women that are protagonists in the political community life of Rocinha. As a result, this research offers contribution from a gender perspective to the elaboration of urbanism strategies in favelas, that consider the issues of women in these territories.

Keywords: Urbanism, Gender, Feminist Theory, Community Participation, Sociopolitical Practices of Resistance

1 Introduction

Studying history and urbanism from a female perspective is gaining more importance given that the presence of women in the formation of the city determines a particular perspective in the urban space. This research came from questioning the construction of contemporary cities with their urbanism still based on patriarchal premises, and how this reveals gender inequalities. If women are systematically excluded from institutions of power, ignored in decisions that concern them, in addition to having their body-territory (Cruz Hernández, 2017) invaded, the city becomes the social setting where women publicly wage their struggle (Agrest, 1996). It is essential to think about a counter-hegemonic urbanism, criticizing the androcentric arguments that limit the city, and placing women at the center of discussions to form equal cities. The proposed issue is the study of women's territoriality: the conceptualization of this term and how it defines the influence of women's political and social participation in their surroundings. The reference case was Favela of Rocinha in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in the period during, and after the *Growth Acceleration Program – Urbanization of Precarious Settlements* (Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento PAC-UAP), from 2007 to the present day.

When analyzing the favelas in Brazil, it is impossible to leave out the notion of race since, according to *Brazilian Geography and Statistics Institute* (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística/IBGE) data from 2010 (Agência Brasil, 2015), black people make up 76% of the poorest in the country. Still, according to the 2010 IBGE census, it becomes clear that in Rio de Janeiro women are heads of the household in more than 50% of households located in precarious settlements. In Favela da Rocinha, this number is of 46,49% and it contrasts with the average income, which presents a difference of BRL\$200.00 more for men when compared to women (Coutinho; Sobreiro, 2021). It is not by chance that this favela was chosen for analysis in this research. Women played an essential role as social and political activists from the beginning of the formation of the settlement. The female struggle for the creation of kindergartens and schools stands out, as well as the leadership in the first residents' association (*Pro-Improvements Union of Rocinha Residents*- União Pró- Melhorias dos Residentes da Rocinha) leading movements for improvements in the neighborhood (Coutinho; Sobreiro, 2021).

The following methodological steps were adopted to carry out this research: first, the concepts of feminist literature were articulated with the understanding of territory and city, always focusing on the reality of the favela. Simultaneously, data were collected in the field and on the internet¹ about NGOs and grassroots organizations operating in Rocinha today, focusing on women's experiences and the role of women in local leadership positions. Then, four protagonists were selected to conduct semi-structured interviews, two of which are herein presented. This article² is organized into three sections, in addition to this

¹ It is worthy to recall that the COVID-19 pandemic was a limiting factor for ethnographic research in the field. For this reason, the monitoring of discussions via social networks of NGOs and grassroots organizations, lives and interviews were carried out remotely, as well as part of the interviews with community leaders.

² This article presents results obtained during the research of the Master Degree's thesis entitled "Women on the Move: territoriality, community participation and resistance practices in Favela da Rocinha, in the city of Rio de Janeiro (2007-2021)".

introduction and final considerations. The first presents the approach of feminist theory, mainly based on bell hooks. The second introduces, based on the concepts of territory and territoriality, the idea of women's territoriality – this section explores how women's actions modify the territory, focusing on the importance of bringing women closer to social practices that structure the urban space. In the third section, the protagonists of this study are presented, who, by sharing their stories, demonstrate the favela women's territory-shaping power.

2 The Feminist Theory Basis

The theoretical-methodological contribution used in this research was a conjunction between black feminist thought and intersectionality, which guided the discussion of the multiple exclusions suffered by favela women. In addition, two categories of analysis guided the choice of protagonists: sociopolitical practices of resistance and community participation. Regarding the analysis of sociopolitical practices of female resistance in political processes within the favela, women stand out in leadership positions in organizations in Rocinha. Community participation processes, on the other hand, are those in which favela residents organize themselves to make up for the government's absence within the territory. They are the defense and organization mechanisms used to, despite the risks and social vulnerability to which favela bodies are subjected, create an environment in which people can live and prosper.

The first waves of the feminist movement were closely linked to a universalizing vision of women, which only gave space to white women while alienating other races. According to Sueli Carneiro (2003, p. 273, our translation), “the consequence of this was the inability to recognize the differences and inequalities present in the female universe, despite their biological identity”. However, it is important to emphasize that black feminists were already part of the movement and already saw their struggle through the prism of racism since the first wave. Black feminism, a counter-hegemonic movement in its essence, emerged with American female philosophers in the context of the second wave of feminism. It was a response to a feminist practice that was focused on change only at a personal level. Black movement activists such as Audre Lorde and Angela Davis participated in the production of thought that sought to encourage women to develop a comprehensive understanding of women's political reality. Black American feminists criticized the theoretical model that ignored that patriarchy, racism, and class struggle were intertwined in the same oppressive system. From this thought, the importance of creating political paradigms that emphasized a collective transformation that was extended beyond the individual was highlighted (hooks, 1984, 1989, 1995).

In addition to black feminism, the idea of intersectionality, systematized by North American author Kimberlé Crenshaw, also emerges as a methodology that discusses the causes and effects of overlapping discrimination against black women. Considering the concepts of overinclusion and under inclusion, Crenshaw shows how dangerous intersectional invisibility becomes when both the gender's lens and the perspective of race alone are not enough to discuss certain discriminatory situations (Assis, 2019). Overinclusion is framed as a situation in which the gender marker is seen as the only possible way to interpret the female condition, leaving other social markers aside. Under inclusion occurs when some women have their issues made invisible because they are not problematic compared to the hegemonic group (Crenshaw, 2002 cited in Assis, 2019, p. 21). Thus, the idea of intersectionality adds to the understanding of feminism. It is important to look not only at gender issues, but at multiple exclusion factors, such as race and social class, with the intention of building coping strategies for the ostensive discrimination in cities.

'Talking Back' is an expression coined by black feminist author bell hooks (1989). It is the title of a book that brings together a series of essays that discuss women's position within a society that insists on silencing them. The expression in Portuguese – original language of this article – fails to demonstrate the challenging aspect of the term chosen by hooks: the phrasal verb “talk back” suggests a breach of hierarchy, a provocation from someone who knows they're not allowed to demonstrate their opinion to an authority, but who does so despite any punishment. With a narrative that feels more like a conversation, hooks makes clear her intention to denaturalize power regimes and induce self-reflection in the reader, in relation to their participation in the collective struggle against the system. Although bell hooks' studies are always personal, permeated by the stories of her own trajectory, the author uses the concept of talking back as a metaphor for someone that transforms from object to subject. Our being resides in words and becomes effective in language and communication. The subject defines themselves, imposing limits to affirm their own existence through the voice (hooks, 1995). Women from Rio de Janeiro's favelas learn to communicate through the same path that bell hooks followed throughout her life: recognizing the

power that comes from speaking, from placing yourself in society, and daring to talk back and scream for your rights. The power to discover yourself politically and actively seek justice.

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. (hooks, 1989, p. 9).

3 Territory, Territoriality, and Women's Territoriality

(...) if the territory is built in the struggle, in the clash in face of a threat – which, in the extreme, is the threat of existence itself, in it is necessary to resist – it is also built in the struggle to maintain, to preserve the life you have.” (Haesbaert, 2020, p. 87, our translation).

For Brazilian Geographer Rogério Haesbaert, discussing about territory is always linked to the idea of power. This idea can be given in a more explicit sense, of domination and political power, or an implicit sense, of appropriation of space. The territorial issue is closely associated with the production of space, with the nuances of a territory that is configured around these power relations. Regarding territoriality, Haesbaert (2020) points out that this concept goes beyond the symbolic-cultural dimension of a territory, beyond its physical space. The author also presents an immaterial dimension that is carried by different generations of a group of people and leaves marks on their civilization.

In Western society, the system (imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy) can repress certain bodies within the city, even more so when considering the factor of race, class, sexual orientation, and other characteristics that form political minorities. Women's resistance taken to the political level is revealed in figures who do not withdraw from the socioeconomic problems of the favela, talking back to criticize the greatest violence against the body-territory (Cruz Hernández, 2017) in the favela: the absence of the State, deliberately planned by political elites. There is an immaterial dimension of the territory that is created and modified by the network of favela women. The feeling of belonging is added to the sense of political duty towards the place to which one belongs. It is the identity united to the territory, but not limited to it; the identity that one carries with oneself – for better or for worse – and which dictates a woman's daily struggle against the system. Woman's territoriality is the layer of care, resistance and community that surrounds the territory.

4 The Territory-shaping Power of Favela's Women

The protagonists who are part of this research, although each in their own way, carry in themselves the identity of many other women in Rocinha: women from the favela who live subordinated by a system that does not guarantee their rights. Our protagonists are political subjects, even if some do not see themselves that way. The lives of each of them are intertwined with historical struggles and a permanent desire to improve their territory, a restlessness for change that transforms the unfair reality of the favela's daily life. In this reality, thinking about a counter-hegemonic urbanism is not just a choice, but a demonstration of resistance.

4.1 Michele, the Communicator

Michele Silva arrived to Rocinha when she was only 3 years old and lived there until 2020. Since a little girl, she attended the community radio station, at first just watching the broadcasters and later advertising jobs, courses, and other opportunities that she thought were interesting for the favela residents. That's how she discovered not only her love for communication, but also the desire to tell stories that build Rocinha's identity. Together with her two brothers, she founded the Fala Roça newspaper and, based on a cash prize they received from a youth agency (Agência de Redes para Juventude), they were able to distribute the first printed edition to the residents of Rocinha. The newspaper became bimonthly and everyone who worked making the content was a volunteer, meeting on Saturdays to pick news stories and write them. Today, they are no longer a collective and have become an information association, with five salaried employees and a network of photographers, designers, and other independent professionals. The editorial line revolves around memory: the published stories are timeless. They are focused on building the identity of people living in the favela and bringing representation, so that Rocinha residents see themselves differently. The idea of Fala Roça is to tell the stories that shape people.

We don't need to report the violence that goes on in 'Cidade Alerta'³, because everything violent happens in there, journalists in bulletproof vests arrive to talk about it. (Silva, 2022, our translation).

Editors try not to report stories of violence, as these already fill traditional media newspapers and strengthen the stigma surrounding the favela. Michelle points out that:

(...) the woman who raised you, the things that formed your character when you were a child, that is what will form your identity. (Silva, 2022, our translation)

The editorial line of the Fala Roça newspaper, chosen not by chance by Michele and her founding companions, exemplifies the importance of policies of recognition of cultural differences proposed by Nancy Fraser (2006). Cultural injustices – although in Rocinha it is difficult to separate what would be a sociocultural injustice from what is rooted in the economic-political structure – reinforce the poor reputation of favela residents not only in the formal city but can weaken the self-esteem of favela people themselves. The lack of representation in the mainstream media affects the image that many favela residents have of themselves and their ability to see a different future. Women in particular, under the shadow of sexism, are reduced to taking care of the family, without ever knowing its political power.

[Often] the people around me had very low self-esteem, they didn't think they were capable of doing much more. (Silva, 2022, our translation)

The poverty maintenance policy that is often part of governmental planning reflects a society based on a capitalist system of production of the urban space. In the years 2020 and 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Fala Roça newspaper worked with the organization *Rocinha Resists* (A Rocinha Resiste) in the distribution of basic food parcels, essential items, masks, and gel alcohol for families in Rocinha. According to the newspaper, 76% of people assisted by donations were women heads of households with more than one child and without income (Fala Roça, 2020). The category of domestic workers had an especially strong impact when monthly workers and hourly housekeepers were dismissed without pay. A comment by Michele to the newspaper highlights the importance of donations in the lives of these women:

What would become of the favela if it weren't for community movements to try to reduce the damage caused? And, not only because of the pandemic, but also because of the problems that arise when public authorities fail to do their job? (Fala Roça, 2020, our translation)

With her childhood involved in community mobilization and the desire to spread news about the favela, Michele is an example of a woman who practices sociopolitical resistance. In her role as a communicator, she plays an active part in reshaping the territory when she brings the power of information to people. Information is a very important tool for change in the fight for rights. Its democratic access not only helps with the recognition of the community's problems, but also with solidifying the identity of the territory and the feeling of belonging to it.

4.2 Cecília from Bahia, Brazil

After 22 years living in Rocinha, Cecília Lagos (pseudonym) decided to move. Not because she didn't like the neighborhood, but because of a health problem with her knees that made it difficult to go up and down the hill.

I still think there is solidarity in Rocinha, that's not what made me leave, whenever I can help, I'll be there. A new wave of women is emerging, who like to help, they help each other. (Lagos, 2022, our translation).

In 1989, she arrived in Rocinha with her husband, a daughter, and the dream of being able to buy a house. Little by little she bought and renovated her shack in Vila Verde (a neighborhood inside Rocinha), where she lived until she left Rocinha. Her life in community work began when she got to know ASPA - Ação Social Padre Anchieta (*Priest Anchieta Social Action*) and there she got not only a job as treasurer, but also school for her daughter and a community of women who wanted to help

³ Cidade Alerta, Portuguese for “Alert City” is a Brazilian TV show, notorious for being sensationalist and reporting news of violence.

each other. The first group she participated in was called Solidary Women Group and it started with a project that brought women together to discuss issues of their daily lives, initially about the rights of domestic workers. Many of the participants were mothers who needed to work, so they managed to get a small grant through ASPA to put someone in charge of looking after the children while the meetings took place. Talking back is an act allied with courage and often a woman plays the role of creating a comfortable space for another to find her own voice.

There are many women's discussion groups these days, but our issues had to come from the women of the favela. We invited people to talk about the issues, we ended up getting to domestic violence and we saw that we had to bring in a specialist in this area. We once took a group to talk about sexuality, and one woman was even able to open up about her abortion experience. When we had the money, we took the women to the theater, to picnics. I miss this job. (Lagos, 2022, our translation)

She carried on with ASPA in cutting and sewing classes, which gave a new capacity to previously unemployed women. The sale of products at fairs had the profits reverted to the seamstresses themselves and thus became a source of income. A few years later, Cecília was dismissed as treasurer. She felt the need to resume her studies to get a new job.

I felt inferior to people for not knowing things. I went back to school, finished elementary school in supplementary school, and then left for high school. I managed to graduate from college, in Social Work at PUC-Rio⁴. On the day of my graduation, a friend told me to take my CV to the PAC office, because the works were about to start. Then I took it, as I already had a No. Then I was accepted. (Lagos, 2022, our translation).

Her work at PAC – Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento (*Growth Acceleration Program*) was in the role of relocating families out of the construction sites in the favelas. She says it wasn't a pretty job as seeing people having to leave their homes was tough, but she knew that if she did her best, she would be able to help many people. Her relationship with the territory of Rocinha resulted in a book discussing the participation of women in the construction of space in favelas. Together with a museologist, she presented a proposal to carry out a study on women from the favelas in Rocinha and Horto, in Rio de Janeiro. The project was awarded a grant from the Ministry of Culture, which was used in the research and production of the book. Cecília points out that, when writing about the history of Rocinha, she wanted to praise women who are not always in the media, behind-the-scenes figures who are equally as important in the formation of the territory. She sought to show that representation is extremely important in academic environment and that helping women raise their voice makes them feel part of the axis of change. Cecília's work demonstrates community participation and highlights one of the defense and organization mechanisms used by favela women to change the territory through mutual help and active work in the community.

4.3 Women from the favela, women from Rocinha

During the interviews, the intention was to obtain the personal stories of struggle through the testimony of the protagonists and although a single structured questionnaire was not carried out, the following question was asked to each of them: What does it mean to be a woman in the favela territory? Based on this question, each of the protagonists made different reflections, but per passed the idea of the female body-territory and the invasions they suffer as women from the favelas. Belonging to the favela territory is related to culture, to the way of life of women who occupy a place of segregation in the city. Michele reports that the image that others had of her could change depending on where she was:

I went through something complex: when I was younger, I was very fond of reading, I really liked reading, studying. There [in the favela] there are many people who do not identify with this attitude.

⁴ Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro).

I won a scholarship at a private school, and there I was the ‘favelada’⁵, while in the favela I was the preppy girl. (Silva, 2022, our translation).

In the case of women, the feeling of not belonging can also leave marks on the way they perceive themselves and their experience in a specific territory. The right to come and go is often repressed due to disrespect (both by the population and by the State) for favela residents. The social pressure that women suffer due to double or triple working hours is even more intense in a territory where one carries the burden of being half a citizen, like the favela. Cecilia tells a story of when she felt the stigma of being a resident of the favela, added to the weight of the patriarchal society:

I worked in an engineering company, and we were called to carry out a survey in the mountain region. The director said he would take people by car, one employee lived in Leblon, the other in Ipanema⁶. I said I lived in Rocinha. From that day on, he started treating me completely differently, giving me less work, because if I'm a woman from the favela, I'm a little less intelligent. (Lagos, 2022, our translation)

Favela residents are often unaware of their rights because they have been exposed to social exclusion factors for a long time. The denial of the right to the city and the fragility of the favela's rights place women living in favelas in situations of inequality in terms of income, housing, education, work, health, and security. Michele comments on the importance of becoming aware of her rights in her actions to change the territory:

I guess when I was little I had the blessing of ignorance. When you don't know much about your rights... for a long time I didn't know anything about sexism. It was on social media a lot and when it got into discussions, the insults were always gender-related, like bandit's lover. When I started to have access to what was right, the questions of what it was like to live in the favela, I was already an adult. What I did before, it was much more intuitive than with the notion of rights I was losing. (Silva, 2022, our translation).

Sexist violence is nuanced, varying from different treatment in the work environment to physical violence. Since 2006, the *Public Security Institute* (ISP-Instituto de Segurança Pública) has been collecting data on violence against women in the state of Rio de Janeiro, which are made available yearly in the Women's Dossier. In this state, the number of cases of domestic violence is worrying. The most recent data from 2019 show that 75.2% of the victims had an acquaintance with their aggressor (Dossiê Mulher, 2019). More than half of the 128.322 victims in 2019 were black women between the ages of 30 and 59. For the Rocinha area, data are available since 2014, which show a number of 2647 cases of victims of violence (between 2014 and 2019), more than half of which were assaulted by acquaintances, inside their residence.

Michele comments on the violence in Rocinha, remarking that the aggression sometimes came from the police themselves.

The police would stop me in the middle of Rocinha to search me. I thought: why can they touch my things? Questioning that caused turmoil. I started to not want to walk alone anymore, as censoring myself. I gave up things that I missed at the time because of that [violence]. (Silva, 2022, our translation).

Regarding the violence of drug trafficking, some of the interviewees expressed sadness at seeing the growing involvement of children and commented on the difficulty of raising children with high exposure to crime:

⁵ A person who comes from the favela. This word is often used dismissively by people outside the favela. Recently, there has been a movement to recover the positive meaning of the word.

⁶ Leblon and Ipanema are upper class neighborhoods in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

We were [Michele and the brothers] raised free, but always with the attentive protection of our parents. The concern with the boys was whether they would become criminals, but with the girls it was whether they would become teenage mothers. (Silva, 2022, our translation).

Nowadays there is a change in traffic. Today it is an industry, workers are transferred from one place to another. Drug dealers no longer know all the residents [of Rocinha]. It got more dangerous. (...) When I raised my children in Rocinha, I was concerned that my girls would get involved with drug dealers. I was very strict [she laughs]! Constant surveillance. If my daughters got into trouble; I ended up finding out. One day someone said: I saw your daughter at Beco do Rato. She was supposed to be at school, so I rushed to call the school to see what was going on! (Lagos, 2022, our translation).

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, attention of the Government was needed to the changing dynamics of public health, but also in the social scenario. Social isolation was decreed by the government of the state of Rio de Janeiro as a preventive measure for the spread of the disease on March 13, 2020. The ISP began to monitor and analyze data on domestic and family violence against women during the isolation period, with the intention of providing information for the confrontation and prevention of this issue and for the protection of victims. According to the ISP, in the period of social isolation (March 13 to December 31, 2020), there was a decrease compared to the same period in 2019 in the records of Civil Police occurrences. The number of calls to the tips hotline (Disque Denúncia) about violence against women also decreased by 20.3%. So, what does it mean to be a woman in the favela territory? This question does not have one single answer, but several possibilities that complement each other, ensuring that the female mark in the territory is one that encompasses collectivity and resistance. Being a woman from the favela means facing violence, but also feeling safe in the place where you live. It may seem contradictory; however, these are the fibers that make up the fabric of a complex territory, systematically left aside by the rest of the city. In the favela, it is possible to belong, but fear for safety: health, hunger, sexual abuse, in short, the body territory.

According to Cecília, being a woman from the favela is like 'killing one lion a day'. The social pressure faced to work and take care of the family, along with the violence, the weight of fragile rights, and the disdain of the State become a Homeric task, but one that these women carry out with firmness. Even with a brutal and difficult daily life, they talk back to denounce the prejudices that deprive them of exercising their citizenship. To be a woman in the favela is to have a network of community action, of people willing to help change their community, without neglecting the identity of the territory. Community participation has strong support, not only from the protagonists of this work, but from many other women who tirelessly seek to know and fight for their rights, in Rocinha and in other settlements in Rio de Janeiro. Feminine territoriality is effective in the marks and change left by women in the favela.

5 Final Considerations

This article sought to answer the following questions: is the woman who lives in the favela able to reshape the territory to improve the daily life of the place where she lives and acts socially? What are the ways in which this influence takes place, and how does violence, the absence of the State, and the marks of patriarchal society delimit it? The immaterial dimension of the territory created and modified by favela women is intimately connected with the feeling of belonging and fighting for favela rights. Woman's territoriality is the identity united to the territory in a relationship of resistance and community that characterizes the daily struggle of women against the system. The work of these women in the territory of Rocinha makes even more evident the need for an urbanism that considers the specificities of gender, questioning the hegemony of patriarchal thinking that rules contemporary cities. The marks of community participation left by women make the favela a place full of collectivity, belonging, and identity. According to bell hooks, black and minority feminism is intimately associated with this collectivity, which has the power to reconfigure the territory.

(...) insisting that feminist struggle can begin wherever an individual woman is, we create a movement that focuses on our collective experience, a movement that is continually mass-based. (hooks, 1984, p. 27).

Women's territoriality is the feeling that the favela women imprint on the territory that the favela is a place of prosperity and knowledge, despite all the negative characteristics that are insistently conveyed in the mainstream media. Being careful not to romanticize the favela, observing women's territoriality is noticing the nuances of the presence of a woman who thrives and resists beyond, who sees herself as an axis of change in the midst of absence, sometimes weakening, but never backing down.

Acknowledgment

This article results from a Master Degree's thesis, defended in April 2022. The author is grateful to CAPES and PUC-Rio for their financial support.

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