

Struggling with racism. Female Afro-Colombian students' challenges in higher education

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Abstract

This article examines the experiences of female Afro-Colombian students in higher education in Colombia. Focusing on a public university and drawing an intersectional approach that centers on gender and race, and that includes Segato's (2006) typology of racism, the analysis of the data shows that female Afro-Colombian students witness different types of racism through which they are hypersexualized and exoticized. University's structures play a role in reproducing some forms of racism due to its negligence to acknowledge the existence of racism on the campus. Despite their disadvantages, female Afro-Colombian students are not passive nor victims and have developed responses against racism which include reasserting their racial identity.

Keywords: Afro-Colombian students, higher education, racism, women, Colombia

Das Problem mit Rassismus. Herausforderungen für afro-kolumbianische Studentinnen in Hochschulen

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht die Erfahrungen afrokolumbianischer Studentinnen an Hochschulen in Kolumbien. Mit dem Schwerpunkt auf einer öffentlichen Universität und einem intersektionalen Ansatz, der Geschlecht und Ethnie fokussiert und die Rassismustypologie von Segato (2006) einbezieht, zeigt die Analyse der Daten, dass afro-kolumbianische Studentinnen verschiedene Formen von Rassismus erleben, durch die sie hypersexualisiert und exotisiert werden. Die Strukturen der Universität sind bei der Reproduktion einiger Formen von Rassismus relevant, da sie es versäumen, die Existenz von Rassismus auf dem Campus anzuerkennen. Trotz ihrer Benachteiligung sind afro-kolumbianische Studentinnen weder passiv noch Opfer, sondern haben Antworten auf den Rassismus entwickelt, zu denen auch die Bekräftigung ihrer ethnischen Identität gehört.

Schlagwörter: afrokolumbianische Studentinnen, Hochschulbildung, Rassismus, Frauen, Kolumbien

1. Introduction

In recent years, Colombian universities have attempted to make university campuses more inclusive and diverse in terms of race and sexual identity influenced by the 1991 Constitution, which acknowledges the country as multicultural and the rights of racial-ethnic minorities¹.

1 Racial-ethnic minority groups are Afro-Descendants, Indigenous, Raizal (Afro-Caribbean groups from the archipelago of San Andrés, Providencia, and Santa Catalina, and from).

Despite programs like affirmative action or intercultural initiatives that seek to create racial and culturally diverse and inclusive campuses, racial-ethnic minority students face racism and discrimination from peers, professors, and structural and/or institutional racism reproduced in university programs such as the campaign against gender-based violence. What types of racism do these students experience? How do they respond to it? How do university's structures contribute to reproducing racism and/or discrimination? This article explores these questions by looking at the experiences of female Afro-Colombian students in one of Colombia's public universities.

Afro-Colombians have gained scholarly attention since the 1991 Constitution guaranteed them rights and recognition (Escallón 2018; Cárdenas et al. 2022). However, studies focus on their territorial rights or identity politics (Hougaard 2022; Wade 2000). With some exceptions (e.g., Viáfara López/Urrea Giraldo 2006; Viáfara López et al. 2010), the experience of Afro-Colombians in higher education is relatively unexplored. Existing studies observe that the intersection of race, gender, and class explains Afro-Colombians' disadvantages and low achievement in higher education as many come from low socio-economic backgrounds (Viáfara López/Urrea Giraldo 2006; Viáfara López et al. 2010). Campaz Camacho and Suarez Sanabria (2019) add that these disadvantages are structural, a product of Afro-Colombians' marginalization and exclusion from society since the colonial period. The intersection of various categories is at the heart of understanding Afro-Colombians' disadvantages in higher education. In this article, we use an intersectional approach to grasp the experiences of female Afro-Colombian students in the context of higher education.

Based on structured interviews with female Afro-Colombian students enrolled in bachelor programs and university administrators working at the welfare office (*Bienestar Universitario*), we show that, despite efforts to create an inclusive and ethnic-racially diverse university campus, female Afro-Colombians experience racism, hypersexualization, and exoticization by other students and professors due to their race and gender. Although many women are sexualized in Colombia, Afro-women's bodies are additionally affected by the sexualization of race. Women with dark skin tone color are racialized as Black or Afro. This not only positions them at the bottom of racial hierarchies, but also it constructs their bodies as sexually available to non-Blacks and as objects to project male sexual desires. Despite the negative experiences, these students develop responses and become aware of their racial identity.

To analyze their experiences in higher education, we propose a conceptual-analytical framework that draws on an intersectional approach, that also relies on Segato's (2006) typology of racism to examine how female students' identity as Afro-Colombian intersects with categories of race and gender. As scholars argue (Zapata Galindo et al. 2014; Brah 2013), there is not one definition of intersectionality, yet there is an agreement that entails how multiple categories of difference (e.g., race, gender, class, sexuality) intersect in specific historical contexts, shaping the experiences of populations. In this article, we show how the intersection of race and gender of female Afro-Colombian students in higher education creates multiple forms of racism and sexualization due to their racial identity.

The article is structured as follows: the next section reviews the literature on Afro-Colombians and the intersectionality approach in higher education. The third section discusses the conceptual-analytical framework of intersectionality, methods, and data collection. The fourth section presents the analysis of the data, and the final section presents conclusions.