

BRAZIL

ICTs and black women's empowerment: Unmasking domination in several layers



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Introduction

In the Yoruba¹ language, *Yalodê* is the word used to refer to women who represent and speak in the name of other women, who emerge as political leaders and agents of transformation, who are emblematic in the development of their community, in the defence of rights, in the maintenance of cultural and religious traditions, and in challenging the status quo by fighting against the stratified powers of the dominant order – male-centred, Euro-centred, based on the capitalist exploitation of peoples and nature.² This was the word chosen to give a local name to the Women-gov project³ in Brazil, so it can be instantly understood and easily pronounced by its participants and their communities. The *Yalodê* is a warrior, and anyone can immediately associate the concept to the group of women who are engaged in this initiative: strong, determined, prepared women, ready to raise questions, point out concerns, propose alternatives, lead processes, and commit to the urgently needed changes in our societies.

The primary question that the Women-gov project addresses is: How can digital technologies be suitably employed to create participatory governance models that enable socially and economically marginalised women in local contexts to gain centre stage? To this end, the partnering organisations are working in each place with women's collectives/organisations at the grassroots level, exploring the possibilities offered by digital technologies to

facilitate women's political mobilisation, their active engagement with governance structures, and their collective articulation and negotiation of interests. In Brazil, Nupef is working with the non-governmental organisation Criola⁴ in the implementation of the Yalodês project. The Yalodês are a group of women leaders from different communities of Rio de Janeiro and other municipalities in the Baixada Fluminense⁵ region of Brazil, who have been participating in Criola's initiatives for the strengthening of capacities and political articulation.

At the very first meeting between the Nupef team and participants in the Yalodês project, it became clear that a lot of attention should be paid to language when working with this group: we were questioned/corrected twice during the meeting due to words that were used. When explaining the objectives of the project, talking about the strengthening of women's political participation and increasing poor and marginalised women's influence over the wider decision-making processes which affect their lives, we were questioned: "Why marginalised?" A bit later, when discussing how the strategic use of ICTs may enhance the informational, associational and communicative power of women's collectives, we were (correctly) reminded: "Here, you're talking to *black women collectives*."

Language, besides being deeply linked with identity, can be a powerful means of exercising social control. It can give people a strong sense of belonging or of being excluded. This is brilliantly put in Jurema Werneck's⁶ article "De Ialodês e Feministas", where she affirms that "the capacity of giving names to things refers to a situation of power. So, it's about the possibility of ordering the world according to one's own, singular basis, be it from individual perspectives or from the perspective of collectives, of entire populations. It is thus

1 An African language which is an important part of the origins of Brazilian culture.

2 For a deeper analysis of the concept and history of the *Yalodê*, see: Werneck, J. (2005) De Ialodês e Feministas - Reflexões sobre a ação política das mulheres negras na América Latina e Caribe, *Nouvelles Questions Feministes - Revue Internationale Francophone*, 24(2).

3 Women-gov is a feminist action-research project that aims at enhancing marginalised women's active citizenship and their engagement with local governance, across three sites in India, Brazil and South Africa. The partnering organisations are IT for Change in India, Instituto Nupef in Brazil and the New Women's Movement in South Africa. www.gender-is-citizenship.net/women-and-governance

4 Criola is an NGO founded and run by black women. Its mission is "to empower black women, adolescents and girls to stand up against racism, sexism and lesbophobia, and to undertake actions aimed at the improvement of the living conditions of the black population."

5 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baixada_Fluminense

6 Jurema Werneck is one of the founders and coordinators of Criola, the NGO which is Nupef's partner in the Women-gov project in Brazil.

a position of privilege.”⁷ It became clear to us from the very beginning of this project that language, the power of words, and the strength of these women’s voices would be one of the pillars of this collective construction.

The Afro-Brazilian identity is fundamental in this project. The need to differentiate feminism from black feminism has emerged from our observation and praxis – and is one of the most important learnings for our research team. Black feminist movements have been stressing for years that patriarchy and sexism cannot be dissociated from class oppression, capitalism, colonialism and racism – if diversity and inequality are not addressed in feminist political action, there is a risk that feminism itself might fall into the trap of repeating the homogenising, reductionist approaches that deepen invisibilities. It is important not to forget that hegemonic consensuses are intimately bound to silence, to the disregard of differences, to the masking of conflicts.

It is in this scenario that the concept of the Yalodê emerges.

Yalodês, voice and action

According to Werneck, “The leadership and responsibility of women in dealing with transcendental religious issues, and cultural and political issues, is a very old reality that precedes the history of colonialism in Africa.” Among the several possible manifestations of the exercise of women’s political leadership is the *lalodê* (the Brazilian word for the term *ìyálòdè* in the Yoruba language). Werneck points out that the *lalodês* have been “confronting the notions of centre and periphery” for centuries – through promoting and being part of “initiatives that have in common the recognition of women’s leadership, women’s presence in public activities, as well as the political role of women.” She explains:

lalodê also refers to the woman who represents women, some kinds of emblematic women, the one who speaks on behalf of others and participates in the spaces of power. [...] The ialodês, on the other hand, have been affirming their presence and relevance in the 21st century through bodily and oral narratives, transmitted from mouth to ears, to attentive eyes, in the different spaces where the tradition is inherited and actualised. In the Brazilian case, this is seen in any black community, where women, undertaking

roles of leadership or collective responsibility, develop actions of affirmation of a future for all of the subordinated group. This happens through the struggles for improvements in the material conditions of life, as well as in the development of behaviours and activities that aim to affirm the pertinence and actuality of immaterial life. Thus, not only in the Afro-Brazilian religious communities, where they have a fundamental role in the propagation of *axé*,⁸ but also outside sacred spaces, the ialodê is actualised, necessary and celebrated.⁹

In this context we understood that the most pressing need in terms of empowering and enhancing black women’s collective participation in local governance is to strengthen and amplify these women’s voices, especially aiming for greater recognition of these leaders as legitimate political actors, improving the quality of their impact on local governance structures and processes. Here, the amplification of voices must be understood in two ways: first, as the re-signification and affirmation of the black women’s voice and place in the local institutional ecosystem, which we may help to achieve by supporting them in different practices for discursive and symbolic production. The affirmation of their voices affects the way the Yalodês understand and situate themselves in democratic processes, helping to establish more articulate and sustainable dialogues with state and non-state actors involved in governance processes.

Secondly, this amplification can be understood in a more concrete way: as the amplification of the reach of these voices, by having them heard in a wider spectrum of political spaces, through processes that involve identity and difference, or what Lister refers to as “a politics of recognition and respect”.¹⁰ As Gaventa and Jones observe, “Citizens’ voices derived from identities that are not recognised, nor indeed respected, are not likely to be heard.”¹¹ Among the Yalodês there is consensus about the need for more symmetry in their relations with the local powers – even in spaces that were conceived to be “participatory”, where more deliberative and inclusionary forms of policy making and

7 Werneck (2005) Op. cit. The references to Jurema’s work in this report are freely translated from Portuguese by Graciela Selaimen. Please note also that Jurema uses the spelling “lalodê” instead of “Yalodê”, which is why both versions are used in this report.

8 “Axé means strength, in an existential sense. This means that axé is the basis of existence, what puts it in movement. Axé may also be understood as the power of engendering and realisation. Without axé, existence would not exist.”

9 Werneck (2005) Op. cit.

10 Lister, R. (2002) A politics of recognition and respect: Involving people with experience of poverty in decision making that affects their lives, *Social Policy and Society*, 1(1), p. 37-46.

11 Gaventa, J. and Jones, E. (2002) *Concepts of Citizenship: A Review*, IDS, Brighton UK.

democratic governance are supposed to take place. Our hypothesis is that the empowerment of their voices makes it easier to establish the institutional linkages necessary to guarantee their rights and entitlements, grounded “in a conception of rights which, in a development context, strengthens the status of citizens from that of beneficiaries of development to its rightful and legitimate claimants.”¹²

Spaces for participation

Among the wider community of women who responded to the project’s initial survey,¹³ it is evident that a huge gap exists between their recognition of their rights (including the right to assembly and participation) and the actualisation of practices for the affirmation and defence of those rights. Although the huge majority think that women should participate in community decision-making processes (98.2% of respondents affirmed this), their practice of participation is still very much linked to supporting political parties and candidates during election campaigns. This participation is mostly informed by husbands or family members (40.0%) or depends on the information given by neighbours and friends (46.7%). In this sense, the role of the Yalodês is significant in terms of the possibility of altering structures of power so that information flows towards and from the periphery, in building a “new geography”. In the words of Aminata Diaw, “The transition to democracy is a narrative of the exclusion of women. What is needed is a new geography to give women space. This new space which women seek is one where there is negotiation between those with power and those without.”¹⁴

For this negotiation, an empowered, consistent voice, able to reaffirm black women’s identity and assure its inclusion in a multiplicity of spaces, is crucial. This means not only occupying existing spaces within the present architecture of power and governance, but also creating spaces for articulating new, more inclusive meanings. The survey results show us that this is a most pressing need, as in the communities visited, political spaces exclusively for women are non-existent and/or widely unknown by the population: 40.8% of the respondents said that there are no spaces for the defence of

women’s rights in their community, and 28.6% said that they do not know of any. When it comes to the affirmation and defence of women’s rights, the most frequently mentioned spaces are local residents’ associations (44.7%) and religious groups (24.5%) – which are the spaces where most of the Yalodês carry out their work.

The approach taken by Cornwall¹⁵ in her examination of the kinds of “spaces” in which participation may occur focuses on the need to understand these spaces in the contexts in which they are created. In particular, as Gaventa notes:

[Cornwall] argues for distinguishing, amongst other factors, between “invited spaces” created from above through donor or governmental intervention, and spaces which are chosen, taken and demanded through collective action from below. Whatever their origins, however, no new spaces for participation are neutral, but are shaped by the power relations which both permeate and surround them. While attention has been paid to what spaces and mechanisms exist for public participation, more attention, she argues, must be paid to who is creating these spaces and why, who fills them, and how the new spaces carry within them “tracks and traces” of previous social relationships, resources and knowledge. What prevents long-established patterns of power from being reproduced? Who speaks, for whom, and who is heard?¹⁶

The reflection on spaces of political participation must be contextualised within the political traditions of each place – by which the concept of “participation” has multiple nuances and meanings. In Brazil, new social policy models were initiated with the promulgation of the 1988 constitution, which has created spaces for direct civil society-state interaction in the form of local councils and public hearings. “Local councils serve as spaces for deliberation and debate in the design and monitoring of social services. In the area of health alone, there are more than 5,000 health councils, almost one for each of 5,507 municipalities, providing a large-scale case study of attempts to institutionalise direct forms of citizen participation.”¹⁷ It is clear for many authors researching the functioning of

12 Cornwall, A. (2000), cited in Gaventa and Jones (2002) Op. cit.

13 This survey was answered by 152 women from four different sites: one *favela* in Rio de Janeiro and three communities from the periphery of the Baixada Fluminense municipalities. The participation of these women in the survey was facilitated by the Yalodês, who invited and mobilised women to come to their centres or, in some situations, took the research team to the women’s houses. The survey was conducted in July 2012.

14 Cited in Taylor, V. (2000) *Marketisation of Governance: Critical Feminist Perspectives from the South*, SADEP/DAWN.

15 Cornwall, A., Gideon, J. and Wilson, K. (2008) Introduction: Reclaiming Feminism: Gender and Neoliberalism, *IDS Bulletin*, 39, p. 1-9.

16 Gaventa, J. (2006) Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis, *IDS Bulletin*, 37, p. 23-33.

17 Coelho, V. S. P., de Andrade, I. A. L. and Montoya, M. C. (2002) Deliberative fora and the democratisation of social policies in Brazil, *IDS Bulletin*, 33, p. 1-16.

the councils that the spaces alone do not guarantee voice. “Despite their Constitutional guarantee, there is still the question of whether the most marginalised groups are able to articulate their voice in these arenas, and a question of the alliances and institutional arrangements which help them to do so.”¹⁸ In these “invited spaces” for participation, not everyone feels invited – or at least not everyone sees meaning in going to meetings where they observe in silence the decisions being made. As Coelho, Andrade and Montoya propose, for the improvement of citizens’ participation (both women and men) in the councils, “broader approaches are needed, which recognise the diversity and identities of local actors and the ways in which they can be pre-empted from claiming rights by forces of social and economic exclusion.”¹⁹ It is also important to recognise that in Brazil, politics is a territory of the elites. Until 1930, political bosses and landowners imposed their voting choices on workers. Today, the practice of vote buying is widespread and common. Votes and voices have been a bargaining chip since the inception of our republic.

Action steps

This analysis leads us to the reflection on how crucial it is to invest in initiatives that are built upon dynamics inspired by what Freire proposed as a “pedagogy of the oppressed”, which consists of two stages:

- (1) The oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation, and (2) in the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation.”²⁰

The Yalodês have made it clear to our team how eager they are for information, skills and strategic thinking in order to understand and reclaim the political language, to communicate better with local governance institutions, and to raise their voices to gain greater visibility and legitimacy, especially among the local governance players. Many of the project participants are feeling reassured, through the project implementation, of the legitimate political influence they hold as religious and spiritual leaders; they are slowly perceiving the possibility of acting as role models, of harnessing community knowledge while engaging their communities in the externalisation of issues through information authorship and alternative representations. ■

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Herder and Herder, New York.