

Racial and gender inequality in Latin America: Afro-descendent women respond¹



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In Latin American and the Caribbean, colonial states subdued large indigenous populations and imported slave labour from Africa, resulting in multi-ethnic and multi-racial societies. After independence, Latin American states traditionally feared racial and ethnic divisions that hampered their quest for identity and nationhood. Rather than excluding these subaltern populations, as in the US (where non-white populations were much smaller), they were to be assimilated by a process of *mestizaje* or “race mixture”, which was seen as both biological and cultural. White immigration was stimulated, along with the teaching of Spanish or Portuguese as the dominant (and often only) language, and conversion to Catholicism. The drive to assimilate racially or ethnically distinct populations in order to forge a unified and homogeneous image persists today in the region. This helps explain the reluctance on the part of Latin American states to recognise race or ethnic discrimination (Safa, 1998). Hence the importance of the 2000 Santiago declaration,² in which Latin American states explicitly recognised Afro-descendent populations as victims of racism who had been denied rights to equal participation in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their nations (Cimarronas, 2001; Turner, 2002).

Santiago and the build-up to the Third UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerances, held in Durban, South Africa in September 2001, engendered considerable activity in the Latin American and Caribbean region, particularly in Brazil. Afro-descendents had remained somewhat invisible in many Latin American countries, dominated by a *mestizo* hegemony (as in Mexico or Peru), or regarded as largely white (as in Argentina or Costa Rica). Indigenous populations had organised earlier and received considerable international support, especially in their quest for land. But in contrast to the indigenous communities, Afro-descendents were less differentiated from the general population, and less recognised as having

a distinctive culture. Many features of Afro-descendent culture, such as their speech or the high percentage of female-headed households, were seen simply as deviations from European norms.

The invisibility of racial differences in Latin American and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean is facilitated by the fluid nature of racial classification in the region. Racial categories are socially constructed and based largely on social status and phenotype, where factors such as skin colour, hair and facial features figure prominently. Although indigenous and Afro-descendent populations in Latin America and the Caribbean have both been portrayed as inferior, biologically as well as culturally, and are found principally in the lower socio-economic strata, individuals could modify their racial category through *blanqueamiento* or whitening. *Blanqueamiento* in Latin America is achieved primarily through upward mobility and intermarriage with whites, who enjoy the highest racial status. This bias toward whiteness is a major component of *mestizaje* that Afro-descendent groups have attempted to combat, because it continued to demean their own culture and physical features. Their adoption of the term Afro-descendent to cover all non-white persons eliminates the invidious distinction between blacks and “mulattoes” (persons of mixed race), whereby the latter were considered closer to the white norm. Although the term “Afro-descendent” has its critics (as will be discussed later), it will be used in this paper interchangeably with “black” and other terms such as “Afro-Latinos”.

This article addresses the efforts of Afro-descendent solidarity groups to combat *blanqueamiento*, focusing on three areas: 1) developing racial consciousness to overcome the feelings of inferiority induced by slavery and *blanqueamiento*; 2) promoting the well-being and upward mobility of the Afro-descendent population, which often suffers from social exclusion in employment, housing and public services such as health and education; and 3) pressuring the state to address these grievances and give the Afro-descendent population greater cultural recognition.

My article focuses on the social mobilisation of Afro-descendent women in Latin America and the Caribbean, a topic which has received little attention in the literature thus far. It is likely that a gender perspective will gain prominence in the literature on social exclusion as Afro-descendent women become organised and make their voices heard. The increasing public presence of Afro-descendent women in the region has been influenced by the growth of the feminist movement in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the emergence of black women professionals and their organisations into NGOs. Afro-descendent

women accuse the mainstream feminist movement of neglecting their concerns and, like the state, adopting a culturally homogenous view of women that fails to do justice to their cause. Afro-descendent women have also had to negotiate a place within the larger black movement, traditionally led by men.

Afro-descendent women are clearly not the only contemporary group to challenge the state in Latin America, as the social movements led by indigenous, women and human rights advocates demonstrate (see Safa, 2005). Neo-liberal policies designed to minimise the reach of the state in the name of free trade and a market economy contributed in the 1980s and 1990s to increasing inequality and poverty in the region. Growing inequality increased the urgency of Afro-descendent and indigenous groups to legitimate their claims to resources from the state and to recognition of their cultural autonomy.

Afro-descendent women's organisations are now found in virtually every country in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, but this article cannot cover them all. Instead, I shall focus on Brazil, where the movement is most advanced, and on the Atlantic coast of Central America, where people of African descent are in a clear minority in *mestizo*³ societies. Statistical data by race and gender is still lacking in all areas, even in Brazil, which is the best documented. This lack of data is also a reflection of the state's unwillingness to deal with black people and their problems, which remain largely invisible. Nevertheless, Afro-descendent groups are beginning to challenge the old *mestizaje* paradigm based on *blanqueamiento* or whitening, as will become apparent in the following analysis.

Development of racial and gender consciousness

The viability of Afro-descendent women's NGOs varies widely in the region, as does their degree of gender consciousness. But even the most fragile Afro-descendent women's NGO focuses on dignity and cultural identity, often manifest in an interest in Afro-descendent histories, cultures and languages long ignored in their countries, both on the popular and the academic levels. This focus on racial consciousness is what distinguishes black women's NGOs from the mainstream white and *mestizo* organisations. The recognition of black identity is often phrased in terms of human rights, which is now understood, particularly by feminists, to encompass not only equality under the law, but the right to be different, and to have this difference recognised socially (Jelin, 1996: 178–9). In the hands of black feminists, such a conception of human rights takes on added racial significance.

Development of racial consciousness has long been a goal of the Afro-Brazilian movement, which dates back to the 1930s. However, despite the proliferation of Afro-Brazilian organisations and their emphasis on black pride, they have not yet achieved mass support among the Afro-descendent population, which increasingly is socially differentiated (Hasenbalg and Silva, 1999). Black consciousness is also in opposition to dominant Brazilian values of harmony and lack of racial confrontation, while black movements are manipulated by the state as a means of containing potential collective political protest. For example, the Brazilian state's promotion of black cultural representation does not necessarily translate into political mobilisation (Hanchard, 1994). As Wade (1993) and others have shown, there is a fear among Afro-descendents that to separate themselves out as a group may imply lack of allegiance to the nation, to which most are fiercely loyal. Thus, nationalism takes precedence over racial consciousness (Walker, 2002).

The very definition of who is black is a problem, and has led to severe undercounts, as in the Costa Rican census of 2000, and the Colombian census of 1993. Part of the undercount is due to Afro-descendents' reluctance to identify themselves as black because of the negative stereotypes long associated with blackness. The "mulatto escape hatch", as Degler termed it (1971), helped lighter-skinned Afro-descendents escape some of the oppression associated with being black, by convincing white society that they were more like whites than blacks. In Brazil, since 1940, there has been a noticeable move in the national census away from the black to the mulatto or *pardo* category (Lovell and Wood, 1998). However, Lovell and Wood have shown that nationwide, blacks and mulattoes face similar disadvantages (compared to whites) on critical issues such as life expectancy, school enrolment, and occupational distribution. Nevertheless, upwardly mobile blacks may reclassify themselves from darker- to lighter-skinned racial categories on the basis of their social class. This is one reason why almost all Afro-descendent organisations, both those of mixed genders and those with women-only memberships, have focused on raising black consciousness and propagating black culture (Morrison, 2002: 19).

The need for a uniform standard and generic term has recently led to the adoption of the term "Afro-descendent", coined by Brazilian leaders of the black movement, which would signify a change of emphasis from phenotype to descent in the Latin American definition of race. The compound word "Afro-descendent" also focuses on the African heritage among the great majority of blacks who are racially mixed, and thus avoids the whitening bias inherent in

earlier notions of *mestizaje*. However, the term also has its critics, because it brings Latin American racial constructs closer to those of the US, by adopting a bipolar dichotomy between Afro-descendants and whites, which many Latin American activists strongly reject. Despite the need for greater black solidarity, most Latin American activists fear the racial oppositions existing in the US. Although adopted by some academics outside of Brazil, the term Afro-descendant is still sparsely used in popular discourse.

The competition Afro-descendant NGOs face for funding and government support from other groups, including the women's movement and indigenous NGOs, helps explain why black NGOs feel they need to maintain a solid front in dealing with the state and donor organisations. It is clear there are tensions between indigenous groups and Afro-descendants, particularly in Colombia and in ethnically charged areas like the Nicaraguan Atlantic coast. This is aggravated when, as in these cases, the two groups have disputing claims to land and other resources. But government actions have also served to reinforce these tensions, as the failure to fully implement Law 70 in Colombia and the Autonomy Law in Nicaragua show.⁴ The indigenous movement, which is older, better organised, and better funded internationally, is often given priority.⁵

Given their precarious base, some of the male-led Afro-descendant NGOs have also been hostile to the formation of separate women's organisations. Many of the leaders of the existing black women's NGOs started out in gender-mixed organisations. In order to understand the experience Afro-descendant women have had in working within the wider black movement and within the feminist movement, the Inter-American Development Bank (for whom this research was originally conducted) distributed questionnaires to a select group of black women's NGOs with whom they worked. Afro-descendant women in Colombia and Central America spoke most clearly about opposition from men within the wider black movement. They still seem to be reluctant to challenge men on ethnic issues, which speaks to the vulnerability of the black movement in both regions. The relationship between consciousness of inequality by gender, and by race and ethnicity, still needs to be explored, as it is a problem in indigenous communities as well.

Among the Garifuna of Honduras, there is clear rivalry and tension between the two major organisations, OFRANEH, a grassroots support organisation led by women, and ODECO, a non-governmental organisation led by a man, but largely staffed by women and serving a largely female constituency. As Eva Thorne (2004) demonstrates, both have been actively pressuring the Honduran

government to recognise the land rights of the Garifuna population along the Atlantic coast, which is now under threat from tourism development and *mestizo* colonisation. By 2001, 39 collective titles to land had been granted, totaling 32 000 hectares, but this land is limited to the residential centres, and does not include the agricultural land and fishing rights on which the Garifuna traditionally depended for a livelihood. In 2004 a new law was passed, allowing foreigners to buy Honduran coastal land, which further threatens Garifuna land. ODECO advocates a developmentalist approach working within the Honduran state, while OFRANEH is more separatist and focuses on indigenous identity. OFRANEH feels development will destroy Garifuna culture (Brondo, n.d.). When our research team met with ODECO staff and visited their community projects, there was no mention of OFRANEH.

The split within the Garifuna community in Honduras, and their distance from other Afro-descendent groups such as the Afro-Creoles with whom they share much of the Atlantic coast, has seriously weakened Afro-descendent solidarity in Central America. In 1995, they formed a joint organisation, called CABO (Central American Black Organisation), but their mutual disdain is evident. The Garifuna claim to have “autochthonous” status, based on their arrival in Honduras before the formation of the Honduran state (England, 1999). They also claim never to have assimilated into European culture, and to be the only Afro-descendent group to retain their language (which is dying out as a result of pressure from the Honduran state to teach only Spanish in schools, and also because of migration). In contrast, the Afro-Creoles pride themselves on their British heritage, which they brought with them from Jamaica and other West Indian islands. As Protestants and English speakers brought to Central America to build a railroad and work on banana plantations (Gordon, 1998), they gained a higher status than the Garifuna, whom they treated with disrespect. Afro-Creoles are urbanised and wage-earning, with much higher levels of education, especially among women. But like the Garifuna, their ethnic standing has diminished with mass male migration to the US, and today the remaining populations are largely dependent on remittances, sent principally from the US.

England (1999) argues that what is emerging among the Garifuna is a new ethnic identity as a Garifuna nation, tied by common language, culture and history, but not bound by any territorial state. Both Garifuna and Afro-Creoles have settled in New York City and to a lesser extent Miami and other coastal cities, reflecting their expertise as seamen, which opened opportunities

to emigrate (on cruise ships, and so on). But to press their land claims, the Garifuna must continue to legitimate their status as an autochthonous people tied to territorially bounded communities. Outside of this space, as England (1999) shows, their “authenticity and often the rights that go with it become questioned”.

Participation in the wider women’s movement undoubtedly contributed to raising the gender consciousness of Afro-descendent women. However, most of the black women’s NGOs we met with are very critical of the wider women’s movement, because of its racial and class biases. As in the US, black women had difficulty convincing white middle-class feminists that their demands might be different (Caldwell, 2001). Feminists in Latin American and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean were reluctant to acknowledge diversity because of the need to maintain a united front to counter fierce male opposition. But constant pressure from Afro-descendent feminists, who came armed with data demonstrating racial as well as gender exclusion, convinced many feminist organisations to change and to help make visible the critical situation of black women, especially in Brazil. By the time of the Durban conference in 2001, two major national feminist networks – the *Articulacao de Mulheres Brasileiras* (AMB) (Alliance of Brazilian Women) and the *Rede Nacional Femenista da Saúde, Direitos Reprodutivos e Sexuais* (National Feminist Network for Health, Reproductive Rights and Sexuality) – had assumed a racial perspective on gender and published demographic data on Afro-descendent women for the conference (Lebon, 2006). One was a general report on Afro-descendent women published by the AMB entitled *Mulheres Negras: Um retrato da discriminacao racial no Brasil* (*Black Women: A Portrait of Racial Discrimination in Brazil*) and the other a special issue of the *Jornal da Rede* or *Women’s Health Network* (March 2001) dedicated entirely to black women’s health issues. Fatima Oliveira, a doctor who was elected Executive Secretary of the Women’s Health Network in 2003, maintains the special issue was the only document on the health of the black population distributed in Durban (2003: 65).

Promoting the welfare and social mobility of the Afro-descendent population

Afro-descendent women have taken a leadership position in the struggle for cultural autonomy, just as they have long stood at the forefront of material survival. In most Latin American and Caribbean countries, Afro-descendent

women have a high labour force participation rate that is partly the result of the high percentage of female heads of household. I have argued elsewhere that Afro-descendent women do not share in the myth of the male breadwinner, which persuaded many white and *mestiza* women to rely on their husbands as economic providers (Safa, 1995). The racial and class barriers faced by most Afro-descendent men reduce their capacity to be adequate breadwinners, and this is aggravated by decades of large-scale male emigration, particularly in areas like the Afro-Creole and Garifuna communities. At the same time, many Afro-descendent women have succeeded in significantly raising their educational levels, particularly in Brazil and to some extent in Colombia, while the Afro-Creole women in Nicaragua and Costa Rica have long enjoyed higher educational status than their neighbours on the Atlantic coast. Only Garifuna women are still plagued by low levels of schooling and poor access to jobs, and also maintain higher fertility levels than their Afro-descendent sisters. The degree to which these factors help explain the level of gender and racial consciousness in these distinct Afro-descendent populations remains to be explored.

Considerable gains in promoting gender equality have been achieved in countries such as Costa Rica and Brazil, where the women's movement is strong. In fact, it would appear that in Brazil, gender inequality has been more comprehensively addressed than racial inequality. Overall gender gaps in years of schooling and illiteracy have been done away with, but the educational differential between blacks and whites has remained virtually unchanged since the 1920s (Henriques, 2001). This raises the issue of the degree to which the achievements of the women's movement in terms of education, jobs and political power have been limited largely to white or *mestiza* women. Once more, it is not certain to what extent we are dealing with a racial or/and class issue, where these benefits have gone largely to white or *mestiza* middle- and upper-class women, and have not reached the poor, many of whom are black (see Guimaraes, 2000: 51; Lovell, 1999).

The decades from 1960 to 2000 saw impressive educational gains for all in Brazil, especially in São Paulo, the industrial centre, and especially after the return to democratic rule in the late 1970s. In an interesting intersectional analysis of São Paulo census data⁶ over this 40-year period, Lovell (2006) shows that working women of both races consistently achieve higher levels of education than men, but Afro-Brazilian women continue to lag behind white women:

By 2000, only 6 per cent of employed Afro-Brazilian women and 4 per cent of employed Afro-Brazilian men had completed 12 or more years of schooling, compared to 23 per cent and 18 per cent respectively for employed white women and men (Lovell, 2006: 69).

Increased educational levels contributed to gains in the clerical and service sector among both Afro-Brazilian and white women, but by 2000, one in three Afro-Brazilian women continued to work as domestic servants, and were much less likely than white women to be employed in the highest paying administrative and professional occupations (Lovell, 2006: 73). Nevertheless, occupational segregation is stronger by sex than by race, with the better-paid jobs in manufacturing and administration going predominantly to men of both races (Lovell, 2006: 75).

Wage inequality is even greater. In 2000, women workers throughout Brazil earned only 64 per cent of men's wages (Lovell, 2006: 75). In São Paulo, the gender wage gap is narrowing, especially among Afro-Brazilians, but the racial wage gap has remained constant, primarily because of educational and occupational differences (Lovell, 2006: 75). However, the gender and racial wage gaps increase with higher educational and occupational levels, showing that better schooling and jobs cannot eliminate these gaps.

Lovell concludes that despite major changes in Brazil's socioeconomic base since 1960, workplace discrimination is increasing. Educational and occupational differences do explain some of the racial wage gap among men, but less so among women. Employers discriminate against women of both races, and in view of their higher educational qualifications, white women are the most discriminated against of all groups (Lovell, 2006: 82). Yet Afro-Brazilian women are the most disadvantaged.

Affirmative action policies instituted in 2001 to increase Afro-Brazilian access to education and jobs will not reduce these racial wage differences, Lovell (2006: 83) concludes, unless wage discrimination by gender and race is eliminated. The growing Afro-descendent middle class took the initiative in pushing for these affirmative action measures in an attempt to bridge this racial divide. The highly educated Afro-descendent women who head some of the most active black women's NGOs in São Paulo are fully aware of this racial and gender divide, and are determined to fight against it. They know from experience that higher educational and occupational qualifications are not sufficient to compete on an equal basis for posts and wages, and thereby acquire a keen and acute perception of racial and gender discrimination, which

is less available to their poorer sisters, who remain locked in the struggle for everyday survival (Damasceno, 1999).

On the Atlantic coast of Central America, higher educational levels among the Afro-Creole population also failed to protect them from encroachment by *mestizos* entering from the highlands. *Mestizos* now occupy 72 per cent of the land on the Nicaraguan Atlantic coast, which was once dominated by Afro-Creoles (Gordon, 1998). But continuing migration abroad has reduced their numbers and left the remaining population largely dependent on remittances. The Afro-Creole population along the Atlantic coast of Costa Rica is making more progress, however, because they receive more state support than in Nicaragua (Putnam, 2002). A 1990 study of the Afro-Creole population of Limon by McIlwaine (1997) suggests that the women are faring better than men, and are more competitive than *mestiza* women. Afro-Creole women have higher educational levels than *mestizas*, and earn more. Afro-Creole women are also more likely to be employed in professional jobs such as nursing and teaching. Incomes within Afro-Creole households are higher, due to higher labour force participation by Afro-Creole women, and to remittances, especially from abroad (mainly the US), which constituted 70 per cent of non-earned income (McIlwaine, 1997: 7). As McIlwaine points out, paid employment has long been at the core of Afro-Creole women's identity, whereas *mestiza* women are more closely identified with the domestic domain, and face greater objections by males to their working. Here we see again the consequences of different gender ideologies for Afro-descendent and *mestiza* women. However, Afro-Creole women remain virtually excluded from key decision-making positions occupied by *mestizo* men, even in health and education, arenas in which women predominate professionally.

Afro-Creole men have been largely confined to manual unionised jobs in the ports and on the railways, which are now closing down and/or being automated. Both men and women have been severely impacted by government budget cuts and now face large-scale unemployment. As in Nicaragua, this has contributed to massive emigration, estimated in the early 1990s at 30 per cent, primarily of men (McIlwaine, 1997: 12)

Epsy Campbell, an Afro-Creole woman from Costa Rica, has long been active in the struggle for gender and racial equality. She is the former President of the Network of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Women, and was elected in 2002 as a congresswoman. In 2005 Epsy was elected president of her party, the PAC (Partido Accion Ciudadana) and also ran a close race for the

Vice-Presidency of the country in 2006. She has called for affirmative action policies to end the poverty and social exclusion of Afro-descendants, especially women. She decries the absence of women in the formal political realm, noting that there are less than 40 Afro-descendent women at national-level politics in all of Latin America, and 26 of those are in Brazil (www.thedialogue.org/jac/eng/events/Afro-LatinAmericanWomen'sLeadershipEpsyCampbell.htm). She urges Afro-descendent women to become more active as elected officials and in political parties, despite the patriarchal political structures in Latin America. In her own party, the PAC, 50/50 gender equity is observed in all of its structures, but there are still only two Afro-descendent women leaders in the party.

Afro-descendent women are certainly more politically active in Brazil, which aids them in pressuring the state to redress racial and gender inequities, as we shall see in the next section.

Pressuring the state to redress inequities

The state, as Eva Thorne (2000) and others have noted, not only responds to race and ethnic-based movements, but shapes them. This is particularly true in Latin America and the Caribbean, where all states, newly independent in the 19th and 20th centuries, shared a goal of biological and cultural *mestizaje* designed to forge a homogeneous and unified nation out of a multi-ethnic and multi-racial society. *Mestizaje* was designed to blur racial differences through a process of physical and cultural racial mixing, in which, however, *blanqueamiento* or “whitening” remained the goal. The failure to recognise distinct racial and ethnic groups as citizens of the nation with equal rights led to the social exclusion of indigenous and Afro-descendent groups. Their needs were not met, and their access to educational and occupational resources and other basic services was very limited. Most Latin American and Caribbean states still have not established separate categories for Afro-descendants and indigenous peoples in the national census, making it difficult to measure racial and ethnic inequalities. Lack of adequate statistical data makes these groups invisible, and continues to hamper policies designed to address their poverty and neglect.

Latin American governments justify their denial of racial differences on scientific grounds, arguing that since race is no longer valid as a biological category, it should no longer be measured or differentiated through the census (Guimaraes, 1999: 144). This contributed to the replacement of the word “race”

by “ethnicity” in scientific texts and government documents during the last 50 years, starting in the post-war period, while skin colour categories remained. Latin American governments argue that the denial of race implies rejection of racism, and in turn the possibility of racial discrimination. However, such a stance ignores the importance of the social construction of race, which is still used to differentiate and discriminate against the Afro-descendent population. In fact, several scholars contend that cultural or class criteria (which deem white European culture and civilisation as supreme) have come to replace biological phenotype as the primary basis of discrimination in Latin America (Guimaraes, 2001; de la Cadena, 2001). To quote de la Cadena (2001: 16), “culture has been racialized”.

Afro-descendent women’s NGOs in Brazil have been particularly effective in pointing out the importance of using racial classifications in public health and the diagnosis of disease. Illnesses commonly found in the Afro-Brazilian population include diabetes type-2, uterine myoma or tumour, hypertension or high blood pressure, and sickle-cell anaemia, found in the Afro-descendent population globally. Infant and maternal mortality rates are also much higher in this Afro-descendent population (Oliveira, 2003). Jurema Werneck (2003), director of Criola, an Afro-descendent women’s NGO in Rio, ties the high incidence of Aids/HIV among young black women to their poverty and vulnerability, although the incidence has declined with an effective national programme launched in 1988 by the Ministry of Health, whereby medication to control Aids/HIV is available free to whoever needs it.

It is clear that these health inequalities by race cannot be subsumed under class differences, as some illnesses may be genetically linked. Even hereditary predispositions, however, are aggravated by poverty and lack of access to adequate health resources.

Contrary to the state’s earlier thesis of racial democracy, racial inequalities are not diminishing with economic development and the improvement of educational and occupational opportunities among the Afro-descendent population. The fallacies inherent in racial democracy were made apparent by the rise of an educated black middle class, which nevertheless still suffers from discrimination in terms of jobs, wages, and access to state services. In fact, competition may be greater among people of higher status, as we have seen in the case of the wider wage gaps between Afro-Brazilian and white professional women.

The Brazilian state now has begun to question the principle of racial democracy and to give some support to affirmative action policies to benefit

the Afro-descendent population (Htun, 2004). The Durban World Conference on Racism, where 400 Brazilians, black, white, female and male, formed the official delegation, played a major role in addressing racism and its consequences.⁷ In 2002, President Cardoso issued a National Affirmative Action Programme charged with studying the feasibility of percentage goals for blacks, women and physically challenged people in public service. In that same year, Bahia's state university announced that 40 per cent of places in undergraduate and graduate programmes were to be reserved for Afro-Brazilians. Later, some other state universities followed suit.

Such policies have been seriously questioned on the grounds that they will only benefit the black middle class and may reinforce racial identities (Guimaraes, 2000), leading to the kinds of racial dichotomies that exist in the US. We also saw earlier that increasing educational and occupational qualifications for Afro-descendents will not solve the problem of inequality as long as discrimination continues in jobs and wages (Lovell, 2006). The scholarship aid given to Afro-descendent students is limited largely to tuition fees (exempting living expenses), partly because of the difficult financial situation in Brazil.

The 2002 electoral success of the Workers Party, with strong black support and the installation of the labour union leader Lula (Luis Ignacio da Silva) as President, suggests that class-based inter-racial solidarity may be more important than strictly racial consciousness, in terms of building political support.⁸ This is not a return to class-based racial democracy, but an acknowledgement of the demographic fact that most Afro-descendents are poor, as are a near majority of white Brazilians (Guimaraes, 2001). To underline the importance of class, Telles (1999) observes that race has never served as the basis for overt legal discrimination in Brazil, nor as the basis for marked residential segregation, but there are marked class residential differences nonetheless.

However, relying on class-based institutions like political parties and labour unions for access to political power may disadvantage Afro-descendent women. Although they have always been very active at the community and family level, with some now organised into NGOs, this has not translated into political power. Brazil in 2001 instituted a 30 per cent quota of women as candidates in political parties, but this has yet to be fully implemented (Lebon, 2001). Part of the problem is that Afro-descendent women organised into NGOs have been unable to mobilise mass grassroots support. This has been aggravated by the institutionalisation of the women's movement throughout Latin American

and the Caribbean in recent years. Institutionalised women's NGOs have turned away from their grassroots constituencies in favour of focusing their attention on the state and lobbying (Alvarez et al, 2003; Lebon, 1996). Afro-Brazilian women's NGOs are now heavily involved in policy issues, and formed one-third of the National Council of Women's Rights in Brazil in 2001. While this has led to some success in terms of pressuring the government to implement affirmative action policies, and to disaggregate race- and gender-based data on health, education, wages, and so on, lobbying places a heavy time burden on these NGOs, and also restricts their ability to communicate with the grassroots, who often feel neglected. This in turn weakens their political support base, which may be one reason why implementation of racial and gender legislation has lagged so markedly in the Latin American region.

Conclusion

In conclusion, despite greater rhetorical support for racial and cultural pluralism, and the efforts of Afro-descendent organisations to press their claims for greater cultural recognition and for more state resources to address the needs of the Afro-descendent population, whitening and assimilation through *mestizaje* is still the clear preference of most Latin American and Caribbean states. As a recent analysis of the stalemate in the Zapatista's⁹ quest for autonomy argues, the neo-liberal state recognises a plurality of indigenous (and Afro-descendent) identities, so long as "those identities do not become the basis for collective organisation around substantive rights" (Stahler-Sholk, 2005: 37). The emphasis on individualism within the neoliberal economy erodes solidarity and eventually destroys the basis for collective action.

Latin American states undoubtedly remain concerned that the social mobilisation of Afro-descendent populations may promote internal dissent and fragmentation, but the Afro-Brazilian experiment suggests that this is not the case. It is possible for Afro-descendent groups to promote their own cultural identity and welfare, yet remain loyal to the larger nation-state, particularly if, as in Brazil, the state moves toward a more pluralistic framework. Where the state demands conformity to a rigid *mestizo* model of *blanqueamiento*, as in Nicaragua, then racial and ethnic minorities may become alienated and lose a sense of national allegiance.

Afro-descendent groups are not rejecting *mestizaje* per se, rather the bias toward *blanqueamiento* promoted in earlier Eurocentric versions. They wish to redefine *mestizaje* so as to have their own cultural identity valued on an equal

footing with that of whites or *mestizos*, which would require access to the resources and services which many of the latter enjoy at present. Reform would also replace racial democracy with racial pluralism, coupled with a recognition of the need for collective rights. Thus, social inclusion need not be based on homogenisation, but on an appreciation of the existing racial and ethnic diversity in Latin American and the Caribbean. The roles that women play in these Afro-descendent movements argue for a greater concern for gender and racial equality in the quest for greater social justice in the region.

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Footnotes

- 1 This is an updated and revised version of an article published as "Questioning *Mestizaje*: The Social Mobilization of Afrodescendent Women in Latin America" in Max Kirsch's edited book, *Inclusion and Exclusion in the Global Arena* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
- 2 Santiago was the site of the regional preparatory conference for the Third UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerances held in Durban, South Africa in September 2001.

- 3 *Mestizos* are persons of mixed indigenous and white racial descent, while the term mulatto refers to persons of mixed black and white descent.
- 4 For example, Law 70 in Colombia aims to guarantee ethnic rights for Afro-Colombians, but requires extensive documentation to obtain collective land rights in the historically isolated Chocó region. Gathering this documentation has been hampered by escalating violence on the part of paramilitary, government and guerilla forces (which drives peasants off the land) and increasing tensions with indigenous populations in the Chocó (Arocha, 1998). The Nicaraguan government failed to provide financial support to implement autonomy on the Atlantic coast, as stipulated in the Autonomy Law.
- 5 For more on Afro-descendent and indigenous movements, see Safa 2005.
- 6 Lovell's sample is limited to wage earners aged 18–64 in São Paulo and omits the self-employed and the unemployed, whose large number among Afro-descendents would have increased the degree of racial inequality even more dramatically.
- 7 Significant support in preparing for this conference and for Afro-Brazilians generally was provided by the Ford Foundation.
- 8 Lula was elected to a second term in October 2006, despite fierce class-based opposition.
- 9 In 1994, the Zapatista Army of Liberation (EZLN) began to protest encroachment by the Mexican government in the southern border state of Chiapas, which is heavily indigenous.

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