Young Black Women's Experiences and Resistance to Structural Violence: An Intersectional Feminist Participatory Study in a Brazilian Marginalized Community

Camila Costa Cardeal

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School of Social Work
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Ottawa

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Abstract

This thesis explores how young Black women living in a marginalized Brazilian community name, experience, interpret, and respond to violence. It explores how feminist participatory research based on arts-based interventions can contribute to the production of alternative discourses that give centre to these young women's voices. Scholarship on youth and violence has often framed young people, particularly Black youth, through lenses of crime, risk, and victimhood. This study seeks to shift attention toward systems that produce unequal and violent social relations.

Drawing on intersectional feminism and the concept of structural violence, the study adopts a Participatory Action Research approach with five young women aged 15 to 17 in Vargem das Flores, Minas Gerais. Data were collected through focus groups, interviews, and an arts-based photographic project.

Findings show that structural violence is a recurrent phenomenon embedded in everyday life. It operates across interconnected dimensions, including space, time, relationships, institutions, and embodied experiences, assuming different forms while being sustained by shared logics of domination. At the same time, the young women's narratives reveal critical awareness, agency, and diverse forms of resistance.

By centring young women's voices, this thesis contributes to making visible forms of violence that are often normalized and overlooked, while also demonstrating how power relations intersect and are co-constitutive. The arts-based intervention illustrates how alternative discourses can be created, enabling young women to articulate their own self-definitions. These findings highlight the importance of approaches that move beyond masculine and individual problem-oriented frameworks, opening possibilities for more just, transformative and complex understandings of youth and violence.

Keywords: young Black women, structural violence, intersectional feminism, PAR, marginalized community, Brazil

Résumé

Cette thèse examine comment les jeunes femmes noires vivant dans une communauté marginalisée du Brésil nomment, vivent, interprètent et réagissent face à la violence, et explore comment la recherche féministe participative fondée sur des interventions artistiques peut contribuer à la production de discours alternatifs qui mettent leurs voix au premier plan. La littérature scientifique sur la jeunesse et la violence a souvent présenté les jeunes, en particulier les jeunes Noirs, sous l'angle de la criminalité, du risque et de la victimisation ; cette étude vise à recentrer l'attention sur les systèmes qui engendrent des relations sociales inégales et violentes.

S'appuyant sur le féminisme intersectionnel et le concept de violence structurelle, l'étude adopte une approche de recherche-action participative auprès de cinq jeunes femmes âgées de 15 à 17 ans à Vargem das Flores, dans l'État du Minas Gerais. Les données ont été recueillies par le biais de groupes de discussion, d'entrevues et d'un projet photographique artistique.

Les résultats montrent que la violence structurelle est un phénomène récurrent ancré dans la vie quotidienne. Elle opère à travers des dimensions interconnectées, notamment l'espace, le temps, les relations, les institutions et les expériences incarnées, prenant différentes formes tout en étant soutenue par des logiques communes de domination. Parallèlement, les récits des jeunes femmes révèlent une conscience critique, une capacité d'agir et diverses formes de résistance.

En mettant au centre les voix des jeunes femmes, cette thèse contribue à rendre visibles des formes de violence souvent normalisées et négligées, tout en démontrant comment les relations de pouvoir s'entrecroisent et se constituent mutuellement. L'intervention artistique illustre comment des discours alternatifs peuvent être créés, permettant aux jeunes femmes d'articuler leurs propres définitions d'elles-mêmes. Ces résultats soulignent l'importance d'approches qui vont au-delà des cadres axés sur les problèmes masculins et individuels, ouvrant la voie à des compréhensions plus justes, transformatrices et complexes de la jeunesse et de la violence.

Mots-clés : jeunes femmes noires, violence structurelle, féminisme intersectionnel, PAR, communauté marginalisée, Brésil

Resumo

Esta tese explora como jovens mulheres negras que vivem em uma comunidade marginalizada no Brasil nomeiam, vivenciam, interpretam e respondem à violência. Também analisa como a pesquisa participativa feminista, baseada em intervenções artísticas, pode contribuir para a produção de discursos alternativos que coloquem suas vozes no centro. Os estudos sobre juventude e violência costumam enquadrar jovens, especialmente jovens negros, sob as lentes do crime, do risco e da vitimização; este estudo busca direcionar a atenção para os sistemas que produzem relações sociais desiguais e violentas.

Com base no feminismo interseccional e no conceito de violência estrutural, o estudo adota uma abordagem de Pesquisa-Ação Participativa com cinco jovens mulheres de 15 a 17 anos em Vargem das Flores, Minas Gerais. Os dados foram coletados por meio de grupos focais, entrevistas e um projeto fotográfico baseado em artes.

Os resultados mostram que a violência estrutural é um fenômeno recorrente incorporado à vida cotidiana. Ela opera em dimensões interconectadas, incluindo espaço, tempo, relações, instituições e experiências corporais, assumindo diferentes formas enquanto é sustentada por lógicas compartilhadas de dominação. Ao mesmo tempo, as narrativas das jovens revelam consciência crítica, agência e diversas formas de resistência.

Ao centrar as vozes das jovens, esta tese contribui para tornar visíveis formas de violência que são frequentemente normalizadas e ignoradas, ao mesmo tempo em que demonstra como as relações de poder se cruzam e se constituem mutuamente. A intervenção baseada nas artes ilustra como discursos alternativos podem ser criados, permitindo que as jovens articulem suas próprias autodefinições. Essas descobertas destacam a importância de abordagens que vão além de estruturas orientadas para problemas individuais e focadas nas experiências masculinas, abrindo possibilidades para compreensões mais justas, transformadoras e complexas da juventude e da violência.

Palavras-chave: jovens negras, violência estrutural, feminismo interseccional, PAR, comunidade marginalizada, Brasil

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INTRODUCTION

Violence in Brazil is both pervasive and unequal. While often framed through statistics of crime, violence is not a series of isolated events or individual acts. It is embedded within broader social arrangements marked by deep and persistent inequalities where race, gender, class, and age shape not only exposure to harm, but also access to protection, resources, and recognition. In this context, I start from the understanding that violence can function both as a product and as a mechanism of inequality, shaping everyday life in ways that are often normalized, rendered invisible, or unequally recognized. Understanding violence in Brazil, therefore, requires shifting the analytical focus from individuals to the structural conditions that produce and sustain these patterns.

1. Setting the Scene

The scale of lethal violence in Brazil plays a central role in shaping how violence is understood and represented. Brazil is one of the countries with the highest homicide rates, placing it among the most violent contexts worldwide (UNODC, 2023). According to the Brazilian Public Security Yearbook, in 2024, the country recorded 44,127 intentional violent deaths, corresponding to a rate of 20.8 per 100,000 inhabitants — the lowest since 2012, yet still alarmingly high (FBSP, 2025). Importantly, this trend does not extend to all groups. Among teenagers aged 12 to 17, intentional violent deaths increased by 4.2%, with police interventions accounting for nearly one in five of these deaths (FBSP, 2025). The profile of victims reveals persistent and structured inequalities: 91.1% of those killed were men; 79% were *negros* (Black and *pardos*);[1] and nearly half (48.5%) were young people aged up to 29 (FBSP, 2025). Firearms were used in 73.8% of these deaths (FBSP, 2025).

A different but equally concerning pattern emerges when examining violence against women. In contrast to the overall decline in lethal violence against men, multiple forms of gender-based violence have soared (FBSP, 2025). In 2024, 3,700 women were killed under violent circumstances, of whom 1,492 were victims of feminicide — the highest number

[1] In Brazil, the term *negros* is used in official statistics to refer to both *pretos* (Black) and *pardos* (anyone who identifies as a mix of two or more racial or ethnic groups, including white, Black, and Indigenous), based on self-identified racial and skin colour classifications. This categorization reflects how racial inequality is produced and measured in the Brazilian context, where both groups experience similar patterns of disadvantage. In this thesis, *negros* is translated as Black to reflect this shared structural position.

recorded since the legal category was introduced in 2015 (FBSP, 2025).[2] This means that at least four women were killed each day because they were women.

The profile of feminicide victims reveals clear patterns: most were Black women (63.6%), and the majority were between 18 and 44 years old (70.5%) (FBSP, 2025). Notably, cases involving teenagers aged 12 to 17 increased by 30.7%, indicating a shift toward younger victims (FBSP, 2025). These crimes overwhelmingly occur within the domestic sphere: 64.3% of women were killed at home, and in 79.8% of cases, the perpetrator was a current or former intimate partner (FBSP, 2025). In 97% of cases, perpetrators were men, highlighting the central role of men as the primary agents of lethal violence (FBSP, 2025).

Beyond lethal outcomes, violence is deeply embedded in women's everyday lives. In 2024, nearly 260,000 cases of bodily injury in the context of domestic violence were recorded — equivalent to at least 29 women assaulted every hour (FBSP, 2025). Police received over one million calls related to domestic violence, averaging two calls per minute (FBSP, 2025).

Sexual violence further exacerbates the already dire situation of violence against women in the country. In 2024, Brazil recorded 87,545 victims of rape and rape of a vulnerable person — the highest number since 2011 (FBSP, 2025).[3] The victims' profile ratifies structural inequalities: 87.7% were female, 61.3% were aged between 0 and 13, and 55.6% were Black (FBSP, 2025). Sexual violence occurs predominantly within private spaces, with 65.7% of cases taking place in the victim's residence and 45.5% perpetrated by family members (FBSP, 2025).

At the same time, it is essential to also situate violence within the broader context of inequality that shapes Brazilian society. In Latin America and the Caribbean, Brazil stands among the most unequal countries, alongside Colombia (World Bank, 2024). Within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), it ranks as the second most unequal country in terms of income distribution: in 2022, the income of the top 20% was approximately 11 times higher than that of the bottom 20%, and the top 10% earned 32.2 times more than the lowest decile (IBGE, 2025b). Brazil also presents the highest proportion of working poor among OECD countries, underscoring how inequality shapes everyday living conditions (IBGE, 2025b).

[2] Established by Law No. 13,104/2015, feminicide refers to the killing of a woman in the context of domestic violence or due to contempt or discrimination based on her condition as a woman. It is not simply a crime against life, but a gender-motivated crime, often understood as a form of hate crime (FBSP, 2025).

[3] Brazilian law defines rape as the practice of sexual acts, including both vaginal penetration and other libidinous acts, through violence or serious threat. The category of rape of a vulnerable person refers primarily to victims under 14 years of age or those unable to consent due to illness, intellectual disability, or other conditions (FBSP, 2025).

These inequalities are deeply racialized. Black populations represent over 70% of those living in poverty, despite accounting for 56.8% of the total population (IBGE, 2025b). Over the past decade, the average household income per capita of Black populations has remained at approximately half that of white populations (IBGE, 2025b). Within this context, Black women are disproportionately represented among those experiencing poverty. Poverty also affects younger populations more intensely, particularly children aged 0 to 14, indicating that inequality is experienced early in life and across generations (IBGE, 2025b).

The labour market further reflects and reproduces these structural disparities. In 2024, the overall employment rate was 58.6%, but significant gender gaps persist: 68.8% of men were employed compared to 49.1% of women (IBGE, 2025b). Young people also face structural disadvantages, with an employment rate of 53.8% among those aged 14 to 29, substantially lower than that of adults aged 30 to 49 (IBGE, 2025b). These inequalities extend to wages. In 2024, white workers earned, on average, 65.9% more than Black workers, while men earned 27.2% more than women (IBGE, 2025b). Overall, Black workers' average income was only 60.3% of white workers', and women's income was 78.6% of men's (IBGE, 2025b).

Informality constitutes another dimension of inequality in Brazil. A significant share of the workforce is employed in informal jobs without access to welfare rights. This condition disproportionately affects Black workers: in 2024, 45.6% of Black workers were in informal employment, compared to 34.0% of white workers (IBGE, 2025b). These patterns reflect historically rooted inequalities and contribute to the persistence of precarious living conditions.

Educational inequalities reinforce these unequal dynamics. In 2024, 44.3% of individuals aged 25 or older had not completed compulsory basic education, and only 20.4% had completed higher education (IBGE, 2025b). Among young people aged 18 to 29, income disparities are pronounced: those in the lowest income group had, on average, 10.6 years of schooling, compared to 13.5 years among those in the highest income group, with substantial differences in completion rates (IBGE, 2025b).

While women tend to have higher school attendance rates than men, and white students have higher rates than Black students, an intersectional perspective reveals that gender advantages do not override racial inequalities. White women consistently present the highest levels of educational attainment, followed by white men, Black women, and Black men (IBGE, 2025b). Gendered dynamics also shape school trajectories: among women, pregnancy, domestic work, and care responsibilities are central reasons for leaving school, while among men, the primary reason is the need to work (IBGE, 2025b).

These patterns of violence and inequality reveal a social order structured by unequal power relations that disproportionately affect one group to the detriment of others. The same groups of people who are most affected by interpersonal violence are also the ones most affected by social inequality. Therefore, violence in Brazil cannot be only understood as a series of isolated events, nor as the outcome of individual behaviour. Instead, it is embedded in and produced through broader systems that organize social life and shape who is more exposed to harm, under what conditions, and with what consequences. The convergence of racial, gendered, generational, and class-based inequalities not only structures access to resources, protection, and opportunities, but also defines whose lives are valued, whose sufferings are recognized, and whose experiences are made invisible.

In this context, violence operates both as a product and as a mechanism of inequality. It reinforces existing hierarchies while also being shaped by them, circulating across public and private spheres and institutions, and permeating everyday life in ways that are often normalized or left unnamed. As the data presented demonstrate, certain groups are consistently positioned at the intersection of multiple forms of disadvantage, experiencing heightened exposure to harm and structural constraints. I situate this study within these intersecting conditions.

2. Thesis Focus and Objectives

Young people occupy a particularly complex and contradictory position. As data suggest, although young people are disproportionately exposed to violence, they are also frequently framed within dominant discourses as the source of social disorder, risk, and deviance. Such representations obscure structural conditions that shape their lives and experiences, shifting attention away from the systems that produce inequality and harm. At the same time, young women remain largely marginalized within discussions on youth and violence. When they are included, their experiences are often reduced to issues of sexuality, vulnerability, or risk, overlooking the broader social, relational, and structural dimensions of violence that shape their everyday lives.

This thesis focuses on young Black women living in a peripheral urban area of Brazil. Positioned at the intersection of multiple inequality systems, their experiences provide a critical vantage point from which to examine how they live, interpret, and negotiate violence in everyday life. Rather than approaching them as passive victims of structural conditions, this study recognizes young women as active individuals who make sense of their experiences, navigate constraints, and articulate forms of resistance, aspiration, and critique. By

foregrounding their perspectives, this research seeks to move beyond dominant and often reductive narratives, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of violence as it is experienced and contested in everyday life.

In this light, this thesis is structured around two central research questions: 1. What do young Black women understand as violence, and how do they experience, interpret, and respond to it in their everyday lives? and 2. How can feminist participatory research, grounded in art-based interventions, contribute to producing alternative discourses that centre young women's perspectives, values, and worldviews while advancing social justice?

More broadly, this study aims not only to document experiences of violence, but to rethink how violence is defined, recognized, and politicized. Rather than treating violence only as discrete events, it explores its everyday, subtle, and often normalized forms, centring young women's interpretations of what harms and constrains them. In doing so, it also examines how young women define and represent themselves, and how they wish society to see them, as a way of challenging dominant and disempowering narratives that have historically framed Black youth in narrow and negative terms.

3. Thesis Chapters Overview

This thesis is organized as follows. Chapter One maps how the relationship between youth and violence has been constructed in the literature, highlighting how dominant frameworks have centred crime and deviance, contributing to positioning marginalized youth, especially Black youth, as a social problem while obscuring structural conditions that shape their lives. It also discusses how scholarship on youth and violence has predominantly focused on young men as the primary perpetrators and victims of violence, leaving young women's experiences underexplored. Chapter Two presents the theoretical framework guiding the analysis of young women's experiences, drawing on structural violence and intersectional feminism to examine how systems of power mutually produce and sustain inequality through violence. By looking at violence through these lenses, the thesis contributes to a broader understanding of the phenomenon, making visible forms of harm, inequality, and resistance that often remain outside dominant crime-centred approaches. Chapter Three outlines the methodological approach, detailing the use of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and how the study centres young women's voices and lived experiences as sources of knowledge.

In the following chapters, I present the empirical findings. These chapters explore different and interconnected aspects of young women's lives through which structural violence is experienced, interpreted, and challenged. They show how violence operates as a relational,

pervasive phenomenon that spans multiple spheres, takes different forms, and is sustained by shared logics of domination.

Chapter Four examines the territorial dimension, focusing on young women's experiences of living in an urban periphery and highlighting how spatial inequalities shape access to resources, mobility, and safety. Chapter Five turns to the domestic sphere, analysing how time, care, and responsibility are organized through gendered and racialized expectations, and how these dynamics constrain and are negotiated in everyday life. Chapter Six focuses on young women's relationships with men, examining how interpersonal violence reinforces broader structures of inequality through sexual harassment, coercion, and unequal power relations across public and private spaces. It also examines how young women interpret these experiences as expressions of gendered power and develop strategies of protection and resistance.

In Chapter Seven, I look at the school as a central institution in young women's lives, showing how structural violence is reproduced and legitimized through educational practices that silence young women's voices and reproduce relations of subordination, while also identifying more horizontal and respectful relationships with some teachers and community actors. Chapter Eight turns to the body as a key site where violence is inscribed and experienced, analysing how racism, gender norms, and social control shape young women's experiences as Black, female, and peripheral individuals, and how these dynamics impact mental health, belonging, and friendship with other young women. Across these chapters, the analysis shows how structural violence is not confined to any single domain, but operates through interconnected mechanisms that organize space, time, relationships, institutions, and subjectivities.

Chapter Nine presents the action component of the study, focusing on the arts-based intervention through photography. I examine how the PAR process creates conditions to challenge dominant representations, re-signify their bodies and identities, and articulate their aspirations, including their recommendations for change. Chapter Ten brings these findings together, reflecting on what young women's experiences reveal about structural violence and the organization of power relations, the thesis contributions, and its implications for policy and practice, as well as outlining directions for future research. I conclude by synthesizing the main contributions and reaffirming the importance of centring young women's voices in efforts to address structural violence, arguing that listening to those most affected by inequality is essential not only for understanding violence, but also for imagining more just social futures.

CHAPTER ONE: YOUTH, VIOLENCE, AND THE MAKING OF A SOCIAL PROBLEM

In this chapter, I examine the literature on youth and violence, aiming to interrogate how this relationship has been constructed and understood. I argue that prevailing approaches tend to frame youth in marginalized contexts through narrow and criminal lenses, contributing to the production of youth as a social problem to be managed.

The first section demonstrates how this scholarship is largely centred on the experiences of young Black men, particularly in relation to lethal violence, incarceration, and involvement in drug dealing. Given the disproportionate exposure of these young men to homicide and state violence, research has focused on these phenomena. However, this emphasis has also contributed to an analytical focus on juvenile delinquency, gang involvement, and violent interactions, shaping youth as primarily associated with crime and risk. My aim, therefore, is to show that the centrality of young men's experiences has led scholarship to produce a totalizing portrayal of youth in peripheral contexts.

The second section shifts the focus from representations of youth to the broader logics that sustain these portrayals. Drawing on literature on criminalization, militarization, and religious moral regulation, I examine how peripheral territories and their residents are governed through overlapping frameworks of control. This section highlights the structural conditions and discourses that contribute to understanding youth as deviant. In doing so, this section shifts the problem from individuals to broader systems that produce inequality and harm— yet the focus remains on the experiences of young men.

In the third section, I then turn to the literature on young women and violence, showing that, although less visible, their experiences are also framed through limiting and problem-oriented lenses. Here, scholarship tends to centre on sexual violence and reproductive behaviour. As with young Black men, young Black women are often constructed through narratives of deviance, not through crime, but through sexuality, positioning them as individuals to be controlled and disciplined.

The fourth section challenges these dominant perspectives by foregrounding scholarship on youth agency. It highlights how young people are not passive in contexts marked by violence; they develop strategies of resistance, care, and adaptation, while cultivating aspirations and social relationships that exceed narratives of risk and deviance. This literature shows that violence, while pervasive, does not fully determine young people's lives. The chapter concludes by bringing these discussions together to introduce the research questions and objectives that guide this thesis.

1. The Centrality of Young Black Men's Experiences

The literature on youth and violence in Latin America often adopts a neutral and universal language, referring to "youth" as a homogeneous social category. In practice, however, this scholarship focuses primarily on the experiences of young men, especially young Black men living in marginalized urban territories. This focus is not incidental. It reflects the unequal distribution of lethal violence, incarceration, and involvement in criminal dynamics, but it also shapes how marginalized youth come to be understood in academic and public discourses. As I argue in this section, by framing discussions about youth and violence primarily through men's experiences of mortality, crime, and punishment, the literature may contribute to the construction of peripheral youth as a social problem, thereby legitimizing regimes of control that affect entire communities.

In a recent literature review, Haydée Caruso, Juliana Ferreira da Silva, and Yacine Guellati (2020) identify three main themes in international and Brazilian studies on youth and violence: first, empirical research on homicides, incarceration, and drug dealing; second, analyses of the relationship between youth and the state, particularly the police; and third, discussions of subjectivity and the centrality of violence in young people's social interactions. I begin with the first of these themes, showing how the emphasis on lethal violence and crime is important for exposing the genocide of Black youth, while at the same time contributing to the consolidation of a problem-centred view of marginalized youth.

One of the most prominent themes in the literature on youth and violence focuses on homicides, incarceration, and drug dealing (Caruso et al., 2020). This emphasis is grounded in an undeniable social reality: lethal violence and imprisonment are disproportionately concentrated among young Black men living in poor and peripheral urban areas. As I showed in the thesis introduction, data from the most recent Yearbook of the Brazilian Forum on Public Safety (FBSP) show that, among victims of intentional violent deaths, 91.1% were men, 79% were Black, 48.5% were under 29 years old, and 73.8% were killed by firearms. In addition, 14% of all intentional violent deaths were committed by police officers. The Brazilian prison system reflects a similar profile, consisting predominantly of young Black men (FBSP, 2025).

This pattern is not unique to Brazil. Across Latin America, discussions of youth and violence similarly centre on lethal violence affecting young people, with intentional homicide remaining the leading cause of death among youth in the region (Pimenta, 2023). However, as Melissa de Mattos Pimenta (2023) also emphasizes, this phenomenon is concentrated among a specific social group: young, male, Black or mixed-race individuals, with low levels of education, living in large urban centres, particularly in favelas and peripheral neighbourhoods.

Risks intensify in contexts marked by widespread access to firearms, the consolidation of organized crime, and young men's involvement in gangs or illegal activities such as drug dealing (Pimenta, 2023). In this context, discussions about youth and violence tend to become associated with youth delinquency (Caruso et al., 2020).

This scholarship has been fundamental in exposing the genocide of Black youth, the racial selectivity of state violence and the criminal justice system, and the systematic neglect of these lives (Gomes & Laborne, 2018; Sinhoretto et al., 2014). At the same time, however, Caruso et al. (2020) point out that Brazilian studies on youth and violence often remain silent on race as a structuring dimension of these phenomena, treating it as a sociodemographic characteristic rather than as an organizing logic. Nilma Lino Gomes and Ana Amélia de Paula Laborne (2018) interrogate this limitation. Drawing on Black youth social movements, they argue that racism must be recognized not as one factor among others, but as the primary cause underlying Black youth mortality in Brazil.

This distinction is important. As Gomes and Laborne (2018) argue, public debate has increasingly acknowledged the alarming rates of Black youth mortality and has sought explanations in urban violence, poverty, drug dealing, social vulnerability, and the absence of democratic public safety policies. Yet, when racism is displaced from the centre of the analysis, these explanations risk obscuring the structural logic that organizes such conditions. In this sense, the denunciation of Black youth mortality does not automatically produce a racial analysis of violence. On the contrary, it may leave intact a framework in which young Black men appear as the visible face of violence. At the same time, racism is not identified as the underlying factor that makes these deaths possible, tolerable, and justifiable. In the authors' words:

> The extermination of black youth is shrouded in a perverse cause that permeates all the others discussed here, namely, the racism that has persisted in our society since colonial times. This perversity hides in its supposed invisibility, since one of the tricks of racism in Brazil is to hide. Sometimes it hides behind the issue of class, sometimes behind the state, sometimes behind vulnerability, sometimes behind poverty. It is a structural, structuring, and ambiguous racism. Its main characteristic is its ability to assert itself through its own denial. (Gomes & Laborne, 2018, p. 12)

As Gomes and Laborne (2018) demonstrate, racism's capacity to conceal allows other explanatory factors to take centre stage, while the historical and structural devaluation of Black lives remains unaddressed. When racism is not recognized as the root of multiple social problems, proposed solutions inevitably fail to confront their structural foundation, the real

problem (Gomes & Laborne, 2018). In this context, young Black men come to embody the figure of fear. They are perceived as dangerous, blamed for crime and violence, and positioned as legitimate targets of punitive state action. As the authors argue, young Black bodies carry "the characteristics of a race still seen as inferior, violent, dangerous" (Gomes & Laborne, 2018, p. 21). Within this racist social imaginary, they become primary suspects, rendering police violence, rights violations, and lethal force socially tolerable.

Gomes and Laborne (2018) further argue that the deaths of young Black people must be situated within broader historical processes of domination, including whitening policies and ideologies of miscegenation that have shaped post-abolition Brazil. The country's enduring myth of racial democracy remains embedded in everyday social relations, contributing to the minimization of the cruelty of Black youth mortality. This phenomenon is statistically evident and publicly denounced, yet structurally normalized. There is, therefore, an urgent need to expose how racism operates behind the arguments about youth and violence, as it is often relegated to a secondary place in analyses conducted by the state, academia, and other sectors of society (Gomes & Laborne, 2018, p. 23).

This problem-oriented framing is further reinforced by another prominent theme in the literature: analyses of the role of violence in young people's subjectivities and social interactions. Caruso et al. (2020) identify this as a recurring theme, highlighting how violence is often understood as central to the social lives and identity formation of youth living in peripheral territories, frequently described through notions such as "delinquent" or "violent sociability." These studies incorporate analyses of drug dealing and gang dynamics, emphasizing how violence permeates the everyday lives of young men (Caruso et al., 2020).

Although women also experience violence in these contexts, men face a significantly higher risk of lethal victimization in gang disputes and conflicts linked to illicit drug markets (Pimenta, 2023). Drug dealing is predominantly carried out by men, who occupy the central roles in illegal market operations. Even when women participate in these activities, their positions tend to be subordinated within patriarchal hierarchies, with limited access to power in comparison to men, including in cases where they control drug-selling points (Pimenta, 2023).

This difference in men's and women's participation and involvement has analytical consequences. It helps explain why youth violence is frequently narrated through male experiences, yet it also contributes to the consolidation of a masculinized image of peripheral youth. When violence is interpreted primarily through the lens of male sociability and gang dynamics, young women's experiences, whether as targets of violence, as participants in

constrained roles, or as individuals navigating these environments, tend to be marginalized, rendered secondary or silenced.

Studies on violent sociability examine how violence is embedded in young men's social interactions and identity formation. Alba Zaluar (2014), for example, highlights the relationship between drug dealing and the construction of a "warrior ethos" among poor youth in Rio de Janeiro's favelas. This ethos centrers on the valorization of force, virility, the ostentation of weapons and consumer goods, and a readiness for confrontation and territorial defence as expressions of masculinity. In this context, violence becomes a symbolic marker of power and respect (Zaluar, 2014). Similarly, Diogo Lyra (2013) shows how violence plays a role in resolving gang disputes, establishing hierarchies, and maintaining group belonging in peripheral contexts.

These analyses are often situated within broader discussions of gender and power. Pimenta (2023) argues that in patriarchal societies, prestige, authority, and power are socially reserved for men. In the Latin American context, this dynamic is often articulated through a "macho" culture, characterized by aggressive, obstinate, and violent forms of masculinity (Pimenta, 2023). These traits are historically rooted in processes of colonization and exploitation that valorized "bravery, fearlessness, and never conceding defeat" (Pimenta, 2023, p. 141). Violence, in this sense, becomes a means of performing masculinity through control over territories, markets, and people, and through adherence to codes of honour grounded in confrontation and strength (Pimenta, 2023).

While these contributions are important for demonstrating how violence acquires social meaning and often operates as a form of men's domination, they also have broader representational effects. By framing violence as central to young men's identities, interactions, and social worlds, this literature may contribute to the consolidation of a figure of marginalized youth as inherently violent, fearless, cruel, and dangerous. In a context where Black bodies are historically constructed as the embodiment of fear, such representations further reinforce racialized stigmas and intensify perceptions of danger (Gomes & Laborne, 2018). As a result, marginalized young men may come to be perceived less as individuals affected by structural inequalities and more as threats to the social order.

If youth are predominantly understood through delinquency, violence, and risk-taking, then the actors deemed capable of managing these "problems" are those associated with control, surveillance, and repression. As a result, the relationship between marginalized youth and society becomes mediated by policing. It is this connection between young people and police that I examine in the following section, alongside how processes of criminalization,

militarization, and religious moral regimes contribute to consolidating peripheral territories as spaces where danger resides.

2. The Governance of Peripheral Territories: Criminalization, Militarization, and Religious Moral Regulation

In this section, I examine how multiple coexisting logics shape life in peripheral territories and produce and reinforce social and moral hierarchies. I begin by exploring how the criminalization of poverty justifies the treatment of entire communities as spaces requiring constant containment, control, and repression, grounded in the assumption that young people in these territories are inherently predisposed to deviance. This is evident in the ways policing practices and youth-focused public policies operate in these communities.

I then analyse how a militarized logic becomes normalized through the simultaneous presence of armed groups and police forces, producing a framework in which violence, including the killing of perceived "enemies," is tolerated and justified. Finally, I examine how religious logics intersect with state and criminal dynamics, contributing to a moral order that divides social life along binaries such as good and evil.

As mentioned earlier, another central theme in the literature on youth and violence concerns the relationship between young people and the state, particularly the police (Caruso et al., 2020). Research in Brazil documents patterns of excessive use of force, police corruption, and discriminatory practices directed at young people from poor and peripheral neighbourhoods (Caruso et al., 2020). These studies expose important dimensions of state violence, and they also point to a broader process: the contribution of security institutions in producing and legitimizing the criminalization of racialized youth and territories (Pimenta, 2023).

The framing of youth as delinquent and prone to violence informs how institutions interpret, approach, and intervene in peripheral territories. This is evident in the persistence of negative, problem-oriented representations of marginalized youth in institutional responses (Caruso et al., 2020). Despite efforts within youth studies to challenge discourses that construct a causal relationship between poverty and violence, young people living in poor communities continue to be viewed as intrinsically connected to criminality (Anunciação et al., 2020; Caruso et al., 2020; Cavalcanti, 2017; Fernandes, 2014; Leite & Machado da Silva, 2013; Motta, 2016). This representation extends beyond individuals to encompass entire territories. Peripheral and marginalized neighbourhoods are constructed as racialized and stigmatized spaces, inherently dangerous, disorderly, and threatening to social order.

This construction shapes public policies, legitimizes policing practices, and sustains broader regimes of exclusion. Fernando Lannes Fernandes's (2014) work is relevant to the nexus of representation, territorial stigmatization, and state control. Examining the sociopolitical and symbolic marginalization of favela residents in Rio de Janeiro, Fernandes argues that the criminalization of poverty functions as a key mechanism through which exclusion and violent state intervention are justified.

In contexts marked by state abandonment and institutional fragility, predominantly inhabited by poor and Black populations, the absence of consistent public policies generates a process of "decivilization" (Fernandes, 2014). The erosion of public life characterizes this process, the weakening of rights, and the normalization of violence and punitive control. Rather than being recognized as citizens entitled to protection, favela residents are governed as populations to be monitored, contained, and managed.

Fernandes (2014) identifies interrelated dynamics within this process. First, the social production of fear sustains prejudice and reinforces the stigmatization of poor and Black youth as inherently dangerous. Second, cultural expressions such as funk music, slang, and styles of dress are criminalized and transformed into markers of deviance and threats to urban order. Third, spatial confinement and territorial control restrict the right to the city, reinforcing segregationist logics through the proliferation of fortified urban spaces and gated communities. Finally, a permanent state of exception emerges, in which rights are informally suspended, and police violence becomes an everyday practice.

In this context, young men's involvement in illicit activities must be situated within broader conditions of marginalization. Participation in drug markets or gangs may operate not only as an expression of masculinity, but also as a means of seeking recognition, status, and access to consumption in contexts marked by social invisibility and limited opportunities (Fernandes, 2014). However, public and political responses tend to reduce these complex dynamics to the figure of the "young favela drug dealer," portrayed as cruel, monstrous, and capable of extreme brutality. This individualized representation obscures the broader economic, political, and institutional networks in which these young men occupy the most precarious positions (Fernandes, 2014). They are often the most visible and disposable link in extensive and sophisticated criminal organizations that involve financial flows, political arrangements, and institutional complicities far beyond peripheral territories.

The predominant state response is thus punitive and militarized. Policies disproportionately target young, poor, and Black favela residents, sustaining the violent logics of the "war on drugs." However, targeting the most vulnerable actors at the street level does

little to dismantle the broader structures of illicit economies, while reproducing discriminatory and often lethal forms of policing (Fernandes, 2014).

This is not to deny that gang conflicts, drug dealing disputes, and armed violence generate harm, fear, and insecurity within these communities. Residents often experience daily life as unpredictable and tense, described as "a life under siege" (Machado da Silva & Leite, 2008) or a "minefield" (Menezes, 2015) — a confined existence in which confrontations can erupt at any moment. The issue is not whether violence causes suffering, but how the problem is framed and addressed. When responses focus on controlling or eliminating young men from these territories, they displace attention from structural inequalities.

These processes produce a structural deficit of citizenship (Fernandes, 2014). Favela residents are deprived of material guarantees and are symbolically denied full belonging within the urban project. Social and spatial inequality translates into systematic human rights violations, reinforced by the view that these territories and their residents constitute problems to be contained rather than citizens entitled to rights. In doing so, they contribute to the consolidation of stigma in the public imagination, where these spaces are framed as requiring security intervention and control rather than protection and the guarantee of rights (Machado da Silva & Menezes, 2019).

These dynamics become visible in policing practices and state-led interventions. Studies with young people not involved in criminal activities show that everyday interactions with police and participation in state programs are structured by the presumption of deviance (Anunciação et al., 2020; Cavalcanti, 2017; Motta, 2016). Diana Anunciação, Leny Trad, and Tiago Ferreira (2020), for instance, examine the experiences and perceptions of Black youth regarding police stops and institutional racism in socially vulnerable neighbourhoods of Salvador, Recife, and Fortaleza, northeastern Brazilian capitals. Drawing on qualitative data with Black youth aged 15 to 29 living in urban peripheries, the authors demonstrate how police suspicion is structured through the intersection of race, territory, class, and age.

Their findings reveal that the social construction of the "suspect" is not random but patterned. Phenotype, particularly skin colour, emerges as a central marker of suspicion (Anunciação et al., 2020). However, suspicion is also deeply territorialized. Living in favelas or peripheral neighbourhoods significantly increases the likelihood of being stopped, suggesting that policing practices operate differently by location. In this sense, territory does not function independently of race and class; rather, it intensifies and legitimizes racialized surveillance in specific urban areas.

At the same time, this dynamic is not confined to peripheral territories. As Fátima Cecchetto and Simone Monteiro (2006) point out, young Black men in Brazil are disproportionately and excessively subjected to surveillance in public spaces more broadly. Posture, gestures, clothing, and environment are read as signs of potential threat, reinforcing racialized patterns of suspicion that limit Black youth's right to the city and to equal participation in consumer spaces (Cecchetto & Monteiro, 2006). Thus, while territory influences policing practices, the Black body itself becomes a mobile site of suspicion.

Anunciação et al. (2020) systematize these embodied and contextual markers in their analysis of police suspicion. The authors identify five interrelated criteria guiding police suspicion: phenotype, including skin colour and facial features such as a broad nose and tightly coiled hair; territorial belonging and socioeconomic status, such as residing in favelas or impoverished neighbourhoods; appearance, including the use of certain clothing, tattoos, or scars; attitudes and behaviours, such as ways of walking, speaking, or reacting to police presence; and contextual characteristics, such as being in poorly lit areas, proximity to drug-selling locations, time of day, or objects carried at the moment of the stop.

Anunciação et al. (2020) show that across the three Brazilian cities studied, most young people reported frequent and recurring police stops, often marked by violence and discretionary judgment. Darker-skinned youth experienced more intense forms of targeting, and young men were identified as primary victims of police aggression. Police were widely perceived not as a source of protection, but as agents of fear, insecurity, and abuse. Young people described feeling treated as "inferior" and "dangerous," with race, age, and place of residence converging to make them vulnerable to state violence.

Anunciação et al. (2020) argue that these policing practices reflect structural racism embedded within Brazilian institutions. In the absence of effective oversight and accountability mechanisms, such practices become normalized, contributing to the reproduction of racial inequality and the routinization of state violence. This normalization is historically rooted. The long-standing context of police brutality and human rights violations in Brazil has fostered deep mistrust among poor and racialized communities toward the military police (Rodrigues et al., 2024). Rather than being perceived as agents of protection, police officers are frequently seen as perpetrators of violence, generating pervasive fear and resentment (Rodrigues et al., 2024).

This logic of suspicion and criminalization does not operate exclusively at the level of street-level policing. When young residents of peripheral territories are consistently viewed as potential offenders, interventions targeting them tend to be closely coordinated with public

safety institutions. Because these youth are viewed simultaneously as vulnerable and as potential criminals, public policies oscillate between ambiguous practices of protection and control, reinforcing the association between poverty, race, youth, and violence.

Luana Motta (2016) examines this dynamic in her ethnographic study of a Centro de Referência da Juventude (CRJ) (Youth Reference Centre), located in Cidade de Deus (City of God), Rio de Janeiro. She shows how the concept of social risk operates with a dual meaning: it refers both to residents' vulnerability and to the threat represented by violence perceived in poor communities. When these dimensions overlap, marginalized youth are framed at once as individuals in need of protection and as dangers to be contained.

Although the CRJ was designed as a social policy initiative offering courses and cultural and sports activities for youth aged 15 to 29 in marginalized territories, Motta (2016) demonstrates that the program reveals a convergence between social policy and public safety. Nearly half of the courses were taught by military police officers. Their presence illustrates how assistance and discipline become intertwined. Acting as moral educators, police instructors promoted values such as discipline, respect, and citizenship, while reproducing narratives that linked poverty to family breakdown, lack of opportunity, and an alleged predisposition toward criminality (Motta, 2016).

Furthermore, in this context, young people may also be encouraged to interpret their own lives through these frameworks, internalizing explanations that position them as at risk and predisposed to deviance. In this sense, the effects of criminalization extend beyond institutional practices, shaping how youth might come to understand themselves and their place in the social order.

Poor young people are thus viewed as individuals who need correction, education, and rehabilitation. Those who fail to meet the program's expectations become legitimate targets of repression. Expressions such as "there's no fixing this one" or "it's already in their blood to go down that path [of crime]" (Motta, 2016, p. 96) reveal how some discourses can function as mechanisms that justify the use of force against those who do not align with normative expectations embedded in public policies. Social protection initiatives therefore operate within a framework that places the blame on individuals: if opportunities are offered but not seized, repression becomes justified (Motta, 2016).

This articulation between social policy and logics of control is also evident in other violence-reduction initiatives implemented in marginalized neighbourhoods. Roxana Pessoa Cavalcanti (2017), for example, examines how these dynamics unfold within the Pacto pela Vida (PPV) (Pact for Life), launched in 2007 in Recife, Brazil, by analysing young people's

perceptions of the program alongside institutional narratives. Drawing on extensive ethnographic research, including field observations, open and semi-structured interviews with 120 young people aged 16 to 29 in two low-income communities, focus groups, and conversations with community activists, members of the military and civil police, representatives of the public safety system, and policymakers, Cavalcanti builds her analysis on the perspectives of 185 participants. As in the case analysed by Motta (2016), Cavalcanti demonstrates that discourses of violence prevention often sustain a direct association between poverty and criminality, while sidelining structural demands voiced by residents.

Although the PPV formally included objectives such as strengthening violence prevention through community-based initiatives, supporting victims, and developing intelligence-based strategies, its implementation increasingly centred on arrests and performance indicators. It intensified police operations (Cavalcanti, 2017). In practice, this emphasis expanded repression, aggravated prison overcrowding, and deepened tensions between police and youth.

Moreover, Cavalcanti (2017) identifies a clear dissonance between official discourse and youth lived experiences. While state and police actors portrayed the PPV as a successful and innovative policy, young residents described an escalation of police stops, abuses of authority, and racial discrimination. At the same time, young people emphasized the continued precariousness of access to education, health care, transportation, and housing — issues the program left unaddressed. Rather than strengthening trust or improving young people's sense of safety, the program reinforced perceptions that state presence was primarily repressive rather than protective. As a result, many described living under an informal curfew shaped not only by criminal violence but also by fear of being treated as criminals by the police (Cavalcanti, 2017).

By prioritizing quantitative targets and law enforcement metrics over structural transformation, the PPV failed to respond to the concrete needs and claims of the communities it sought to protect (Cavalcanti, 2017). These dynamics reflect a wider pattern in youth-oriented interventions implemented in marginalized territories. It would be incomplete not to mention the Homicide Control Program – Fica Vivo! (Stay Alive!) in which I used to work and similarly reproduces dynamics that oscillate between protection and repression.

Created in 2003 in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil, Fica Vivo! was designed to prevent and reduce homicides among young people aged 12 to 24 living in territories with high concentrations of lethal violence (for a detailed analysis of the program, see Márcia Alves and Enrique Arias, 2012). Within its Social Protection axis, the program promotes sports, cultural,

and artistic workshops; develops local, itinerant, and institutional projects; and provides individual counselling for teenagers and young adults. It also articulates referrals through the broader social protection network, seeking to connect youth to education, health, and social services. At the same time, the program includes a Strategic Intervention axis that promotes interinstitutional coordination within the justice system to prevent and reduce violent conflicts and rivalries by targeting young drug dealers and promoting rapid law enforcement responses in the program's areas of operation.

Thus, youth programs often embody two sides of the same coin: social protection initiatives operate alongside, and in coordination with, criminal justice institutions. Care and repression, assistance and surveillance, prevention and repression coexist within the same institutional framework. This ambivalence reveals how public policies directed at marginalized youth are based on a stigmatizing assumption of danger. Even when framed in the language of prevention, protection, and social inclusion, these interventions continue to position young people as potential offenders — individuals to be monitored, corrected, and contained.

These dynamics also mark an important shift in how violence is understood and addressed in peripheral territories. Over the past decades, policies aimed at reducing homicide rates have increasingly relied on expanding police presence and strengthening security interventions in these areas. In this context, violence is framed primarily through the lens of organized crime, and responses are structured around a logic of confrontation. This shift contributes to the consolidation of a militarized approach in these areas, treating peripheral territories as spaces of permanent threat requiring continuous surveillance and control. While these interventions are often justified in response to high levels of lethal violence affecting young men, they also narrow the understanding of violence itself. By privileging organized crime-related violence as the central problem, other forms of violence, including violence against women and feminicide, which have increased in recent decades, are frequently sidelined or rendered less visible. This selective framing obscures other forms of violence that are also present in these territories.

In the context of criminalization and control, militarization intensifies these existing logics. As Marit Ursin (2020) demonstrates, militarization reflects the normalization of a war-like approach to govern peripheral communities, in which both state actors and armed groups operate through logics of confrontation, surveillance, and enemy-making.

Examining everyday life in an urban peripheral community in Salvador, Brazil, Ursin (2020) shows how militarized practices and discourses are produced both by the presence of drug dealing and by the state's response, which relies on force-based interventions in public

spaces. Drawing on qualitative research with 40 young people (16 young women and 24 young men) aged 12 to 25, she demonstrates that even those not involved in illegal activities are permeated by militarized rationalities. In this sense, militarization extends beyond confrontation, shaping everyday life and reinforcing violence as a normalized mode of governance and social control (Ursin, 2020).

Life in these territories is marked by constant fear of gunfire and by the simultaneous presence of armed dealers and police. Even home is not a safe space, given the threat of invasions and police operations (Ursin, 2020). Children and youth thus grow up internalizing codes of vigilance, suspicion, and confrontation. Media coverage contributes to this process by portraying favela residents, particularly Black youth, as dangerous, while simultaneously depicting drug dealers as the de facto rulers of these territories. These dual representations reinforce the construction of peripheral spaces as sites of permanent threat and war zones, and legitimize violent state interventions. Entire groups come to be framed as internal enemies; individuals are framed as "animals" or "monsters," rendering violence against them socially acceptable (Ursin, 2020).

Ursin (2020) further shows that these discourses are often reproduced by young people themselves, who may come to perceive violent deaths of those associated with crime as deserved or inevitable. As Motta (2016) also suggests, interventions that frame youth as both vulnerable and potential offenders contribute to the internalization of these narratives, shaping not only behaviour but also how young people interpret their own life trajectories. In this context, young people may come to understand involvement in crime as the result of individual failure, a lack of discipline or the "wrong choices," rather than as an outcome shaped by structural conditions. This internalization reinforces a moral logic in which death becomes explainable, and at times justifiable. This normalization creates a rhetoric of enemy elimination, a central feature of militarized governance. The logic of eliminating the "enemy" becomes diffuse: highly visible in police operations and drug-related conflicts but also embedded in everyday interpretations of justice and survival (Ursin, 2020).

Militarization also permeates gender relations. Young women report objectification, sexual harassment, and intimidation, both by police officers and by young men involved in illegal activities (Ursin, 2020). Young men, in turn, are subjected to surveillance and harassment that reinforce hypermasculine norms and constant monitoring (Ursin, 2020). While the effects differ, both young women and young men are disciplined through militarized rationalities that regulate their bodies and movements.

At the same time, young people develop strategies to navigate these conditions. Those not involved in illegal dynamics often regulate their movements, avoid certain social ties, and restrict circulation in areas perceived as dangerous to minimize the risk of being caught in armed confrontations (Ursin, 2020). As Cavalcanti (2017) also shows, many describe experiencing an informal curfew, shaped not only by criminal violence but also by fear of police intervention. These strategies aim not to transform the militarized order, but to survive within it.

Thus, militarization is expressed not only through armed confrontation, but through everyday practices and discourses that normalize repression, violence, and death in territories marked by inequality (Ursin, 2020). In these contexts, both the state and drug dealing appear as unpredictable and potentially lethal forces, and at times as equally legitimate. As Fernandes (2014) also observes, a state of exception becomes normalized. Militarization therefore constitutes a broader rationality that shapes subjectivities, moral judgments, and territorial governance, while diverting attention from the structural conditions that produce inequality and harm.

If criminalization frames youth through suspicion and deviance, and militarization normalizes a logic of war and a discourse of taking down the enemy, these dynamics do not exhaust the normative frameworks through which life in peripheral territories is organized. Ana Beraldo (2022) further complicates this picture by examining how violence is also shaped through the interplay of three normative regimes: crime, state, and religion.

Drawing on extensive ethnographic research in a favela in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, Beraldo (2022) argues that these regimes operate relationally. The logic of crime, associated with drug dealing networks, operates through its own normative framework, in which the use of violence is mobilized to enforce internal rules and sanction those who violate them. The logic of the state, in turn, extends beyond policing practices. Beraldo expands the understanding of state presence to include social assistance services along with police repression. State violence tends to target those perceived as undermining order or failing to embody the ideal of the "good citizen." As discussed earlier in relation to the CRJ (Motta, 2016), these interventions often frame youth as vulnerable and potential offenders, legitimizing corrective and coercive state action toward those who fail to conform to normative expectations. Yet the state's legitimacy is often contested because its repressive and unequal interventions sometimes reinforce criminal authority (Beraldo, 2022).

Religion, particularly Evangelical churches, introduces another powerful normative framework. Unlike Catholic institutions, which have historically struggled to establish strong

normative authority in peripheral territories due to their institutional distance, hierarchical structure, and limited adaptation to local realities, Evangelical churches have expanded significantly among poorer populations (Beraldo, 2022). Their proximity to everyday life, flexibility, and ability to engage with local moral worlds have enabled them to function as influential normative actors in these contexts (Beraldo, 2022).

Beraldo (2022) shows how evangelical discourse often frames social life as a moral and spiritual battle between good and evil, in which crime, drugs, and alcohol are associated with the influence of the "devil." However, rather than existing in opposition, religion and crime are often interconnected (Beraldo, 2022). Conversion, for example, may offer individuals involved in criminal networks one of the few viable pathways to disengage and remain alive, and testimonies of transformation become powerful symbols of the church's moral authority (Beraldo, 2022).

Thus, the relationship between these regimes is not defined by confrontation, but by permeability. As Beraldo (2022) shows, experiences in the "world of crime" and the "world of the church" do not necessarily exclude one another; transitions between them are common and socially understandable. This coexistence is possible because the conflict is framed less as a dispute between individuals and more as a spiritual struggle between divine and evil forces (Beraldo, 2022). In this context, religious legitimacy can be mobilized as a resource, and maintaining respectful relations with religious institutions becomes a strategic dimension of territorial governance.

This dynamic is also visible in youth state programs such as Fica Vivo!, where activities frequently take place within church spaces, reflecting relationships of dialogue, coexistence, and mutual recognition between state initiatives, crime, and religious actors (Beraldo, 2022). Moreover, as Beraldo (2022) notes, Evangelical churches are often frequented by young people who are still involved in criminal dynamics, further illustrating the fluid boundaries between these normative spheres.

Central to these three regimes is the notion of *respect*, a shared moral category that operates as a classificatory device. Respectability becomes a mechanism for evaluating individuals, distinguishing those considered "worthy of respect" from those who are not (Beraldo, 2022). Through this normative triangle, crime, state, and religion interact in patterns of tension, overlap, and coordination. Their interplay shapes everyday life in favelas and influences who is protected and who becomes more vulnerable to violence. Beraldo's (2022) analysis thus demonstrates that violence in peripheral territories cannot be reduced to state

repression or criminal activity alone. Rather, it is structured through intersecting normative regimes that define belonging, moral worth, and the value attributed to life.

The logics of criminalization, militarization, and respectability operate as disciplinary structures, shaping subjectivities, defining acceptable behaviours and sanctioning deviations. They determine not only who is feared and punished, but also who is respected and protected. These normative frameworks affect all young people, but unevenly, and these regimes are not gender neutral. They produce and reinforce gendered expectations and hierarchies. While young men are more visibly targeted through criminalization and lethal violence, young women are often overlooked, and their experiences are shaped by restrictions on their mobility, objectification, and restricted access to public space.

Militarization, for example, contributes to forms of hypermasculinity associated with control, confrontation, and the need to assert respect, which expose young women to harassment, objectification, and intimidation (Ursin, 2020). At the same time, the moral logics of respectability and religious regulation further discipline young women's behaviour, sexuality, and social positioning. In this context, these regimes also govern young women in distinct but connected ways.

These dynamics point to another limitation in approaches to youth and violence. Even when structural dimensions are acknowledged, analyses continue to centre young men's experiences, while young women's experiences remain marginal or are reduced to specific forms of victimization. In the next section, I explore the prevailing themes in the literature on young women and violence, arguing that the focus on sexual experiences reveals moral regulations of young women's bodies while also limiting the way marginalized young women are socially seen.

3. Young Women and Violence: The Centrality of Sexual Violence

If, in the case of young men, alarming homicide and incarceration statistics have influenced research agendas directing attention toward delinquency, a similar dynamic can be observed in studies concerning young women. High rates of sexual violence have drawn academic attention to young women's bodies, sexuality, and reproductive lives. While these patterns reflect forms of harm, they have also narrowed the analytical focus through which young women are understood.

Data reveal the scale and severity of gender-based violence. A study conducted by Plan International Brazil (2021) with young women aged 14 to 19 shows how experiences of insecurity are widespread: 57% reported feeling afraid when walking in the street, 94% had

witnessed violence, and 32% had experienced harassment at school (Plan International Brazil, 2021). National data further reinforce this scenario. According to the Brazilian Public Security Forum (FBSP, 2025), 87,545 rape victims were officially registered in Brazil in 2024. Of these, 87.7% were female, 55.6% were Black, and 77.7% were under 17.

These figures are critical for exposing the magnitude of sexual violence. However, much like homicide statistics in relation to young men, they also shape how the problem is framed. Academic literature addressing young women in marginalized contexts has largely developed within public health frameworks, focusing on teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and the consequences of sexual violence (Teixeira & Taquette, 2010). These studies are important for exposing gender-based inequalities, however, they consolidate sexuality and reproductive risk as the primary lenses for analysing young women's experiences.

Inequalities in sexual and reproductive health are, for example, illustrated in the study conducted by Alessandra Sampaio Chacham and Juliana Gonzaga Jayme (2016), which examines how class and gender norms shape young women's sexual autonomy in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. Based on a representative sample of 292 middle-class young women and 365 young women living in favelas, aged 15 to 24, the study combines questionnaires and focus groups organized by age, residence, marital status, and motherhood experience.

The comparison reveals stark socioeconomic disparities. While middle-class participants largely lived in households earning above 20 minimum wages and had broad access to higher education, more than half of the favela residents lived on up to two minimum wages, were predominantly Black, frequently resided in female-headed households, and had limited access to higher education.

Regarding sexual and reproductive trajectories, although age at sexual initiation and condom use during first sexual intercourse were similar across groups, reproductive trajectories diverged significantly. Young women living in favelas exhibited pregnancy rates thirteen times higher than middle-class young women, with 80% of pregnancies occurring before age 20, alongside higher rates of early common-law union or marriage (Chacham & Jayme, 2016).

Patterns of condom discontinuation within stable relationships were observed in both groups. However, among middle-class young women, this transition typically occurred alongside medical guidance and substitution with other contraceptive methods. Among low-income young women, the shift often occurred without professional support, grounded in trust in the partner or limited access to services, thereby increasing exposure to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (Chacham & Jayme, 2016). Controlling or

violent partner behaviour further reduced young women's ability to negotiate condom use, a dynamic present in both groups but more prevalent among favela residents (Chacham & Jayme, 2016). This difference fits within the broader social context discussed earlier. In territories marked by militarization and the normalization of violent forms of authority, gender relations might be shaped by expectations of male dominance, control, and assertion of power.

Chacham and Jayme (2016) also highlight the persistence of gender norms in participants' narratives. Among young women from favelas, motherhood was more frequently idealized as a marker of adulthood and femininity, whereas middle-class participants more often rejected this expectation. Nevertheless, both groups reproduced discourses reinforcing female sexual submission, including condemnation of women with multiple sexual partners and the belief that women value love more than sex.

These findings demonstrate how gender inequality and socioeconomic vulnerability intersect to constrain young women's sexual and reproductive autonomy. Low-income and young Black women are disproportionately exposed to reproductive risks, gender-based violence, and limited institutional support (Chacham & Jayme, 2016). Extending the intersectional dimension of this discussion, Amber Hill et al. (2024) examine the relationship between racial discrimination and sexual violence victimization among teenagers in the United States. Their study demonstrates that experiences of racism are significantly associated with increased vulnerability to sexual violence.

The authors aim to validate the Perceptions of Racism in Children and Youth (PRaCY) scale among teenagers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, by analysing correlations between perceived racial discrimination and sexual victimization. The data derive from two community-based clinical trials evaluating gender-transformative sexual violence prevention programs — Manhood 2.0 and Sisterhood 2.0. Researchers recruited participants aged 13 to 19 through community organizations between 2015 and 2019.

Hill et al. (2024) find that lifetime experiences of racial discrimination were widespread across participants, though manifested differently by gender. Young women more frequently reported experiences such as being perceived as threatening, treated disrespectfully, or subjected to racialized insults based on skin colour, language, accent, or cultural background. Young men, by contrast, reported significantly higher rates of unfair treatment by police, a pattern consistent with the literature discussed earlier, which demonstrates how policing practices and state violence disproportionately target young Black men (Anunciação et al., 2020; Cavalcanti, 2017). These patterns reveal differentiated forms of racialized control and surveillance.

The study confirms a statistically significant association between experiences of racial discrimination and a greater likelihood of sexual violence victimization across genders (Hill et al., 2024). Nonetheless, sexual victimization remains strongly gendered, with higher prevalence among young women. By empirically linking racism to sexual victimization, Hill et al. (2024) deepen the understanding of sexual violence as not only gendered but also racialized.

Moving beyond victimization frameworks, Camila Fernandes's ethnographic research (2023), conducted in two favelas in Rio de Janeiro, examines the figure of the *novinha* as a complex social category that intertwines age, behaviour, gender, territory, race, and sexuality.[4] Rather than focusing on sexual violence as an event, Fernandes explores how young girls' sexuality is constructed, interpreted, and morally regulated within racialized and classed imaginaries.

The term novinha is commonly used in Brazil, particularly in the Southeast region, to refer to girls and young women, including children and teenagers. It frequently appears in funk music and popular media, carrying connotations of youthfulness and desirability (Fernandes, 2023). In everyday discourse, the label acquires ambivalent and often accusatory meanings.

Novinhas are typically described as bold, rebellious, unruly, and "sassy." They are criticized for wearing short clothes, interpreted as exhibitionist in public spaces, and portrayed as sexually experienced despite their young age. Surrounding them are recurring narratives of fear — fear that they might become pregnant, disrupt family arrangements, or "steal" men who are already in relationships (Fernandes, 2023). Their sexual assertiveness is frequently framed as provocative, even toward older men such as stepfathers, neighbours, or family relatives. In this narrative, their bodies are constructed as dangerous and capable of disturbing domestic order and social respectability.

Fernandes (2023) argues that this perception fuels a moral panic. On the one hand, novinhas are seen as dangerously seductive; on the other, as sexually uncontrolled and irresponsible. They become figures of social anxiety as girls who must be disciplined, restrained, and corrected to preserve moral order.

This figure is far from neutral; it is deeply racialized and classed. The moral panic surrounding the novinha is disproportionately projected onto poor and Black girls, whose

[4] In a free translation, "novinhas" can be understood as "jailbaits," a term used to refer to girls who are under the age of consent but are perceived as sexually attractive and are often viewed as older than their actual age based on how they act and dress.

bodies are inscribed within colonial and racialized imaginaries that associate Blackness with sexual excess and deviance (Fernandes, 2023). Fernandes identifies explicit processes of racialization, including metaphors such as “hot blood,” used to attribute uncontrollable sexual desire and an alleged incapacity to prevent pregnancy to poor Black girls.

Anxiety about pregnancy operates not only at the moral level, but also at the economic level. The fear that these girls might become mothers is tied to concerns about public resource allocation: if they were to rely on public healthcare or social assistance, they are perceived as illegitimately consuming resources that should be reserved for women deemed more “deserving” (Fernandes, 2023). They are accused of “taking” places in public daycare centres from women who “did everything right” and “at the right time.” In this sense, regulation of sexuality becomes intertwined with disputes over citizenship, legitimacy, and access to care.

Fernandes (2023) further shows how novinhas' conduct is interpreted as an inherent trait — as if certain behaviours, styles of speech, and bodily expressions were natural attributes of these girls, echoing how young men are similarly constructed as inherently prone to criminality. This essentialization shifts responsibility from structural conditions to individuals, creating conditions in which young women may be held responsible for violations they experience and resulting in victim-blame discourses. Accusations directed at novinhas thus reflect broader anxieties about gender, race, class, and age. Their sexuality becomes framed as provocative, excessive, and socially destabilizing.

Through this analysis, Fernandes (2023) demonstrates that young women in marginalized territories are not only positioned as vulnerable to sexual violence, but also as morally suspect individuals whose bodies require surveillance and control. Sexuality, in this sense, functions simultaneously as a site of victimization and of social regulation.

These studies reveal the depth of classed, gendered and racialized inequalities affecting young women in marginalized contexts. Sexual violence, reproductive vulnerability, and restricted sexual autonomy are realities disproportionately impacting poor and young Black women. At the same time, the prominence of sexuality, whether framed through victimization, reproductive risk, or moral regulation, consolidates a narrow analytical lens through which young women are frequently understood.

This dynamic mirrors the processes discussed earlier in relation to young men. If young men are constructed as deviant through their presumed proximity to crime and violence, young women are constructed as deviant through their sexuality — as excessively sexual, provocative, irresponsible, or incapable of self-regulation. In both cases, deviance is individualized and embodied, while the structures that produce these dynamics remain hidden. This highlights

how research agendas and dominant frameworks may reduce complex lives to a single dimension, obscuring the broader conditions that shape young people's experiences.

The study by Plan International Brazil (2021) highlights broader dimensions shaping young women's lives, including poverty, unequal access to education and health services, racial inequality, and gendered expectations around domestic work and care. Among participants, 54.2% identified as Black, and most lived in households earning up to two minimum wages (approximately CAD$580 per month), reflecting significant socioeconomic precarity, as Chacham and Jayme (2016) also found. At the same time, nearly half had never attended a gynecological consultation, pointing to limited access to health services (Plan International Brazil, 2021). In this context, young women are often held responsible for reproductive outcomes, such as early pregnancy, despite facing structural barriers that constrain their access to information, care, and resources necessary to exercise autonomy over their bodies.

In addition, 19% had been forced to interrupt their studies, and 18% were engaged in paid work — with young Black women disproportionately represented among those working (Plan International Brazil, 2021). Young women reported performing twice as much domestic work as young men, a burden that 84% stated had worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, 84% reported not feeling represented in political or institutional spaces (Plan International Brazil, 2021). These findings highlight that young women's lives cannot be reduced to sexuality or reproductive risk. Overlapping systems of inequality shape access to education, health, work, and political participation.

To conclude this section, it is important to emphasize that the logics of control discussed in this chapter, including criminalization, militarization, and moral regulation, do not produce total domination. Because they operate through everyday interactions and social relations, they also create spaces for negotiation, reinterpretation, and contestation. Young people navigate these conditions, sometimes conforming to and reproducing dominant expectations, but also resisting, challenging, and strategically adapting to protect themselves and expand their possibilities.

In this sense, while these logics and social inequalities shape and constrain young people's lives in the peripheries, they do not fully determine them. Beyond experiences of violence and control, young people cultivate relationships, aspirations, solidarities, and forms of collective life that exceed the frameworks through which the literature often understands them. It is to these dimensions, often overlooked in research on youth and violence, that I now turn.

4. Young People as Agents: Navigation, Strategies, and Resistance

This section shifts the analytical focus from youth as objects of criminalization, militarization, and moral regulation to youth as active agents navigating and contesting these conditions. While regimes of violence, surveillance, suspicion, and control structure young people's lives, they also cultivate networks of support, develop informed and strategic forms of navigation, and engage in practices that challenge dominant norms. Their everyday experiences reveal forms of knowledge, reflexivity, and agency that challenge portrayals of youth as passive victims or inherent deviants. Without denying the pervasive presence of violence, the studies discussed below foreground how young people interpret, negotiate, and respond to it. Violence may shape daily life in peripheral territories, but it does not exhaust young people's aspirations, relationships, or practices (Berents & ten Have, 2017; Rizzini & Limongi, 2016; Van Dijk et al., 2025).

Irene Rizzini and Natalia da Silva Limongi (2016), drawing on qualitative research with 14 young people (12 women and 2 men) between the ages of 18 and 26, living in a favela in Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, show that armed confrontations, shootings, and police incursions are recurrent features of everyday life. These findings resonate with Ursin's (2020) analysis of militarization, in which the coexistence of armed actors and the normalization of confrontation produce a pervasive sense of insecurity that extends across everyday spaces. In both studies, violence permeates all dimensions of life, such that even the home cannot be assumed to be a safe space. Violence restricts mobility, disrupts access to school and work, and renders public spaces such as libraries and sports facilities inaccessible when located in areas controlled by drug dealing (Rizzini & Limongi, 2016). In this sense, violence influences young people's opportunities and daily routines.

However, Rizzini and Limongi (2016) demonstrate that violence does not dissolve affective ties or future aspirations. Young people expressed a strong sense of belonging to their community and valued networks of solidarity and mutual support. They maintained aspirations for education, employment, and family life, often emphasizing personal effort and family encouragement as central motivators. At the same time, they identified structural barriers, financial constraints, limited access to education, and inadequate public policies that restricted these ambitions.

Rather than framing young people as inevitably on the verge of being co-opted into crime, Rizzini and Limongi (2016) challenge reductive narratives that equate young people from favelas with a predetermined trajectory of crime involvement. They show that they actively interpret, critique, and navigate violence while sustaining projects for alternative

futures. Listening to young people's voices is therefore essential to designing policies that respond to lived realities rather than stereotypes, address their actual needs, and guarantee their rights (Rizzini & Limongi, 2016).

While Rizzini and Limongi stress young people's agency, Helen Berents and Charlotte ten Have (2017) focus on everyday practices through which young people navigate insecurity. Based on ethnographic research in Altos de Cazucá (Colombia) and San Luis Potosí (Mexico), the authors introduce the concept of the *skilled navigator* to describe youth agency in contexts marked by violence. This skilled navigator is an individual who, drawing on knowledge and experience, moves through environments marked by violence and unpredictability, constructing everyday pathways guided by local expertise (Berents & ten Have, 2017).

Berents and ten Have (2017) show that young people anticipate violence but do not normalize it. Instead, they make continuous, small-scale adjustments to maintain daily life. Navigation includes sharing information within neighbourhood networks, altering routes to school, avoiding certain public interactions, refraining from eye contact with police officers, using fictitious names on social media, and changes in dress, particularly among young women, who adopted more conservative clothing. These strategies are not major ruptures but subtle and ongoing negotiations with risks and tensions (Berents & ten Have, 2017).

At the same time, navigation carries ambivalence. Avoidance practices can generate feelings of confinement and powerlessness. The recurrent practice of avoiding leaving home, for instance, transformed domestic space into a kind of prison, especially considering the perception that perpetrators circulated freely within the community (Berents & ten Have, 2017). However, resistance also takes more explicit forms: collective organization, rights-based empowerment, and refusal of self-censorship. By conceptualizing youth as skilled navigators, Berents and ten Have (2017) move beyond narratives that position them solely as victims or as inherently deviant actors. Communities marked by violence should not be essentialized as disorganized or violent (Berents & ten Have, 2017). Such interpretations are not only inaccurate but also limit an understanding of the social complexity and forms of everyday resistance that emerge in these contexts.

Annelieke Van Dijk, Mariëtte de Haan, and Micha de Winter (2025) extend this discussion by examining how young people construct longer-term trajectories within violent contexts. Through a longitudinal study of youth involved in community-based sports programmes in Salvador, Brazil, the authors explore how agency unfolds over time under structural constraints. The authors collected data over a six-year period through participant

observation and semi-structured interviews with six young people (four men and two women, aged 15 to 24).

Van Dijk et al. (2025) show how young people described their neighbourhood as a difficult place to grow up, where gang conflicts impose territorial boundaries and restrict mobility. They also describe militarized environments in which everyday life is organized through logics of vigilance and the constant anticipation of confrontation (Ursin, 2020). Navigating these contexts requires young people to know and respect local rules, avoid conflict, and restrain their impulses (Van Dijk et al., 2025). Like the young people studied by Berents and ten Have (2017), they adopt strategies of caution, including avoiding certain areas and nighttime circulation, carefully selecting friendships, and distancing themselves from criminal activities. While these strategies enhance safety, they are also experienced as forms of inaction in the face of injustice (Van Dijk et al., 2025). The authors describe this as a paradoxical form of agency: deliberate and rational yet conditioned by external constraints.

However, agency extends beyond survival. Van Dijk et al. (2025) show how engagement in religious groups and sports programmes provides alternative moral frameworks through which young people reinterpret their experiences and reorient their trajectories. Sporting practices, particularly martial arts such as karate, grounded in discipline, emotional control, dialogue, and respect for the opponent, offer a direct counterpoint to the logic of violence. In contrast to militarized rationalities structured around confrontation and the elimination of the "enemy," these practices emphasize balance, coexistence, and mutual recognition.

Within these spaces, young people also actively challenge criminalizing discourses. They reject stigmas that associate favela youth with inevitable trajectories of crime, asserting their capacity to build different futures (Van Dijk et al., 2025). One young woman, for example, contested stigmatizing narratives surrounding teenage motherhood by affirming her autonomy, responsibility, and competence: "I can do it" (Van Dijk et al., 2025, p. 11). This assertion challenges the representation of the novinha, which constructs young girls as irresponsible, sexually uncontrolled, and incapable of managing the consequences of their actions (Fernandes, 2023). In doing so, young people rework the meanings imposed upon them. They also reconfigure their life projects in response to structural obstacles, pursuing vocational training or alternative educational pathways when higher education is financially out of reach (Van Dijk et al., 2025).

Over time, forms of resistance shifted from collective aspirations to more individualized projects, particularly oriented toward securing better conditions for their

children. This shift does not signal retreat, but adaptation. As Van Dijk et al. (2025) argue, youth agency in violent contexts is dynamic: it operates within structural limitations while sustaining the belief that alternative futures remain possible. Believing in the possibility is significant because it directly challenges the deterministic narratives that portray young people from marginalized areas as inevitably destined for involvement with crime.

These findings also highlight important differences in how interventions engage with youth. As discussed in the previous section, many state-led programs remain entangled with logics of policing and control, limiting their capacity to move beyond frameworks that position young people as potential offenders (Cavalcanti, 2017; Motta, 2016). In contrast, community-based initiatives such as those examined by Van Dijk et al. (2025) demonstrate how approaches grounded in recognizing youth as individuals of rights, rather than objects of intervention, can more effectively support the construction of alternative trajectories.

Alice Sampson and Maria Rita Villela (2017), examining a community-based organization, show how such initiatives can mediate and transform violent social norms. Their study investigates the work of Luta pela Paz (LPP) (Fight for Peace) in the Complexo da Maré, Rio de Janeiro. They adopt a problem-solving approach, aiming to test and challenge the theoretical assumptions underlying the program. It draws on ethnographic data, monitoring reports, strategic plans, and interviews. 169 young people completed self-administered questionnaires, and 21 in-depth interviews were conducted with young participants, staff members, representatives of partner agencies, and the founder of LPP.

Sampson and Villela (2017) describe how LPP's model is structured around five pillars: boxing and martial arts, education, youth leadership, psychosocial support, and access to employment. These pillars are sustained by organizational values: Embracing, Solidarity, Champion, Inspiring, and Fearless, which translate into practices of welcoming everyone, fostering mutual support between staff and young people, striving for excellence in all activities, inspiring others, and standing up for peace, respectively.

In communities marked by armed conflict and restricted mobility, LPP stands out for enabling safe circulation across gang-controlled boundaries (Sampson & Villela, 2017). One of the organization's most significant impacts was allowing young people to move between territorially divided areas; LPP t-shirts served as an informal "safe pass." This was possible because of the organization's neutrality vis-à-vis both local gangs and state actors (Sampson & Villela, 2017). Unlike the forms of coexistence observed in religious institutions, where engagement may occur through shared moral frameworks (Beraldo, 2022), LPP's neutrality functions as a strategic, relational practice that creates protected spaces without reproducing

the logics of either side. In doing so, it facilitates the formation of social ties across fragmented territories and counters segregation patterns reinforced by militarized dynamics.

Beyond mobility, LPP also challenges dominant narratives about favela youth (Sampson & Villela, 2017). While institutions such as schools and the juvenile justice system often reproduce stigmatizing representations of young people as "difficult," lacking potential, or predisposed to criminality, as also observed by Motta (2016) in the context of the CRJ, LPP explicitly invests in youth protagonism. Through its youth leadership pillar, the organization assigns responsibility, recognizes achievements, and affirms young people's transformative potential, disrupting deficit-based, problem-oriented, and criminalizing discourses (Sampson & Villela, 2017).

Sporting practice plays a central normative role within this model. As Van Dijk et al. (2025) also suggest, engagement in martial arts is not limited to physical training; it also promotes discipline, emotional regulation, self-esteem, and non-violent conflict resolution. Sampson and Villela (2017) show that young people associate boxing with learning to manage anger and respond to conflict without resorting to violence. In this sense, sports operate as a counterpoint to militarized logics of confrontation, emphasizing respect and coexistence rather than the elimination of the "enemy." Citizenship classes further reinforce these principles by encouraging reflection on violence, difference, and coexistence grounded in respect and empathy (Sampson & Villela, 2017).

Importantly, LPP also destabilizes dominant gender norms. Young women occupy leadership roles as advisors and assistant trainers, challenging masculine monopolization of boxing spaces (Sampson & Villela, 2017). In a context where militarized rationalities reinforce hypermasculine ideals, the visible presence of female boxers disrupts established hierarchies. This not only reconfigures symbolic and practical understandings of gender but also expands the horizons of possibility for young women, enabling them to challenge socially imposed limitations and countering narratives that confine young women to passive or weak roles (Sampson & Villela, 2017).

In addition, the organization's emphasis on care and solidarity fosters relationships of trust that enable young people to share experiences related to violence, sexuality, drug use, and personal insecurities. In contexts where safe spaces for emotional expression are scarce, LPP functions as an institutional refuge, reinforcing well-being and strengthening young people's sense of belonging and confidence. Indeed, LPP's positive reputation contributes to young people's desire to remain in their communities (Sampson & Villela, 2017).

Sampson and Villela (2017) argue that LPP demonstrates how community-based organizations can interrupt violent norms in contexts of conflict. By combining neutrality, relational trust, structured discipline, and youth leadership, the organization mediates between structural constraints and individual agency. Rather than treating young people as problems to be controlled and managed, LPP positions them as capable actors within their communities, thereby countering criminalization and militarization logics that permeate their lives.

While Sampson and Villela (2017) highlight how community spaces can reshape youth trajectories, Jennifer Cobbina, Jody Miller and Rod Brunson (2008) shift the analytical focus back to young people's own practices of navigating risk, further reinforcing the centrality of agency in contexts marked by violence. At the same time, their study adds an important layer of complexity by showing that gender structures these strategies.

Cobbina et al. (2008) examine how gender, neighbourhood context, and cultural adaptations shape risk perception and management among Black teenagers living in socioeconomically disadvantaged urban communities in St. Louis, Missouri (USA). The study is based on interviews with 72 young people (33 girls and 39 boys, aged 12 to 19), purposively selected because they were considered at risk or involved in delinquent activities. Participants lived in neighbourhoods characterized by racial segregation, poverty, unemployment, and high crime rates.

Across both genders, young people described their communities as deteriorated and unsafe, with drug dealing and gang presence embedded in everyday life. Exposure to violence was extensive: nearly all participants had witnessed physical assaults; 70% of boys and 60% of girls had witnessed shootings; and almost half of the boys (48%) and one-third of the girls (34%) had seen someone killed (Cobbina et al., 2008). Direct victimization was also high. While boys reported higher rates of robbery (65% compared to 14% of girls), girls reported markedly high levels of sexual assault or coercion (54%) (Cobbina et al., 2008).

Despite shared exposure to violence, perceptions of risk and strategies of management diverged sharply along gender lines. Boys tended to describe neighbourhood life using first-person pronouns ("we," "I"), suggesting greater social embeddedness and identification with local peer networks (Cobbina et al., 2008). Their primary risks were associated with maintaining respect, navigating territorial disputes, avoiding police repression, and managing expectations tied to masculinity. In line with discussions on criminalization and racialized policing presented earlier, even when not involved in illegal activity, many boys reported that their mere presence as young Black men in public space rendered them suspect, exposing them to surveillance and potential violence (Cobbina et al., 2008).

Young women, by contrast, described neighbourhood dynamics with greater social distance (using more third-person pronouns, “they”), and identified predatory male behaviour as their primary threat (Cobbina et al., 2008). Sexual harassment, coercion, and assault, particularly in public spaces at night or in areas where groups of young men congregated, were central concerns. These findings resonate with Ursin’s (2020) analysis of how militarized environments regulate bodies and movements in gendered ways. Girls linked these dangers to concentrated male presence in public spaces and the hyper-sexualization of young women. Across both groups, men were consistently identified as the primary perpetrators of violence (Cobbina et al., 2008).

Risk management strategies were therefore gendered (Cobbina et al., 2008). Young men often relied on peer networks, circulated in groups, sometimes carried weapons, and remained within familiar territorial boundaries to reduce vulnerability. However, this collective male presence in public spaces paradoxically intensified girls’ perceptions of danger. Young women commonly avoided public spaces, especially after dark, and limited their mobility by staying indoors. Some sought protection in the company of trusted male peers or adults, though this strategy was ambivalent, given that many reported sexual assaults were perpetrated by men known to them (Cobbina et al., 2008). Remaining at home emerged as the primary strategy for minimizing young women’s exposure to harm, though it came at the cost of restricting participation in public life (Cobbina et al., 2008).

Perceptions of the police further illustrate the complexity of navigating safety in these contexts. Many young men viewed police presence as a direct threat associated with harassment and repression, reinforcing the dynamics of criminalization discussed earlier. Some young women, however, despite expressing distrust, reported feeling safer in the presence of police officers — not because institutions were perceived as legitimate or protective, but because police visibility could temporarily deter immediate threats of sexual violence (Cobbina et al., 2008). This ambivalence underscores the limits of simplified approaches to protection, revealing how the same institution may simultaneously produce insecurity for some and a relative sense of safety for others.

Cobbina et al. (2008) thus demonstrate that gender fundamentally shapes how young people interpret and navigate danger in violent urban contexts. Rather than portraying boys as inherently risk-seeking and girls as naturally risk-averse, the study reveals situated adaptations shaped by racialized policing and gendered vulnerability. These findings highlight the need to move beyond one-dimensional approaches to prevention and protection, as strategies that enhance safety for one group may simultaneously reproduce vulnerabilities for another.

If Cobbina et al. illuminate how gender structures everyday risk navigation, Sanne Weber et al. (2025) broaden this perspective by examining how young people construct ecologies of emotional support within violent contexts. Weber et al. (2025) investigate the mental health ecologies of Afro-Colombian youth in Quibdó, Colombia — a region historically marked by armed conflict, poverty, and state neglect. Methodologically, the study stands out for its creative and participatory approach. Through drawing workshops and focus groups with 17 young people aged 16 to 26 (six men and eleven women), recruited from a gang-controlled neighbourhood and a local university, participants were invited to visually map the people, spaces, and practices that supported them during emotional distress, as well as the resources they perceived as lacking. The process culminated in collective productions, murals, community gardens, and a theatre play, co-created as part of the study.

Weber et al. (2025) show that, at the microsystem level (institutions and groups that directly shape youth development, such as family, school, neighbourhood, and peers), family members, particularly mothers and siblings, emerged as primary sources of support, alongside friends, cultural activities, sports, and individual coping strategies. Yet these supports were fragile, often undermined by displacement, community violence, and economic precarity. Despite their institutional role, schools and universities were rarely perceived as protective environments and were often described as hostile or violent (Weber et al., 2025).

Nature and cultural expression played a significant role in youth coping practices. Rivers, mountains, music, dance, and drawing were described as spaces of refuge and emotional release (Weber et al., 2025). However, these spaces were not free from exclusion: some young women reported marginalization in male-dominated cultural environments, echoing the gendered dynamics of space and safety (Cobbina et al., 2008; Rizzini & Limongi, 2016; Ursin, 2020), and university students avoided certain neighbourhood spaces because of safety concerns. Across narratives, a recurring demand emerged for safe spaces, environments where young people could express vulnerability without fear (Weber et al., 2025). This resonates with initiatives such as the LPP, which intentionally create supportive spaces where young people can openly share and reflect on the experiences that affect and trouble them (Sampson & Villela, 2017).

At the mesosystem (the connections between different microsystems) and exosystem (which encompasses social contexts that indirectly affect young people) levels, Weber et al. (2025) highlight fragmentation and limited institutional support. Families often functioned in isolation, with weak connections to schools or broader services. Formal mental health resources were largely inaccessible due to cost, stigma, and fear. At the macrosystem level, structural

conditions, such as poverty, violence, and lack of opportunity, were understood by young people as affecting their suffering, bringing frustration, and constraining their futures. Young people explicitly linked hopelessness and crime to systemic exclusion rather than individual moral failure, challenging criminalizing discourses.

Weber et al. (2025) challenge both romanticized resilience and individualized interpretations of coping. While young people developed strategies of emotional regulation and mutual support, the authors argue that flourishing requires structural transformation. Young people expressed aspirations for peace, justice, and respect for human rights, suggesting that engagement in collective initiatives oriented toward these goals can strengthen the understanding that their suffering has structural, rather than individual roots (Weber et al., 2025). Safe spaces dedicated to artistic and sporting practices were valued as key promoters of solidarity, resilience, collective agency, and meaning-making, similar to other community-based initiatives that also emphasize the importance of relational and non-punitive spaces (Sampson & Villela, 2017; Van Dijk et al., 2025).

These studies demonstrate that violence, while pervasive, does not totalize or fully determine the lives of young people in marginalized contexts. Young people's everyday lives are not organized only around experiences of harm, crime, or victimization. They are also shaped by relationships, aspirations, responsibilities, and forms of care that reflect their priorities, needs, and commitments. Drawing on their own knowledge, lived experiences, and situated understandings of their environments, young people develop creative, relational, and collective strategies to navigate uncertainty, mitigate risk, and sustain meaningful lives.

At the same time, these dimensions remain largely absent or underdeveloped in dominant literature on youth and violence. Research agendas continue to privilege frameworks that reduce young people to categories such as victims, perpetrators, or individuals at risk, emphasizing death, vulnerability, and deviance. In doing so, they obscure young people's capacities as agents — as individuals who interpret, negotiate, and respond to their conditions, and who mobilize skills, relationships, and forms of knowledge to navigate their realities.

Recognizing young people as agents does not mean denying the structural conditions that constrain their lives. Rather, it requires holding together both dimensions: understanding how violence shapes possibilities, while also acknowledging how young people engage with, reinterpret, and transform these conditions. It is within this relationship between constraint and agency that a more nuanced and relational understanding of youth and violence can emerge.

5. Research Questions and Objectives

If the dominant literature on youth and violence frames youth primarily through delinquency, risk, and deviance, an alternative question emerges: what other analytical lenses allow us to understand youth and violence differently? As this chapter shows, dominant discourses and institutional practices tend to position marginalized youth as a social problem to be managed. However, the problem does not reside in youth themselves, but in the structures that shape their lives — including racism, patriarchy, sexism, classism, colonial legacies, and other forms of social and spatial exclusion. These systems produce hierarchies and moral dualities that legitimize control, violence, and the dehumanization of certain groups.

This is evident in the persistent failure to centre racism in analyses of youth and violence, even in contexts where the disproportionate exposure of Black youth to death, incarceration, and state violence has been widely documented. Processes of criminalization that target entire communities further justify practices of containment, surveillance, and rights violations, based on the assumption that young people in these territories are always at risk of "deviating."

Moreover, as analyses often continue to frame individuals as the problem — young men as violent, criminal, or gang-involved, and young women as sexually vulnerable or at risk — they obscure the structural organization of violence. In this sense, the relationship between youth and violence is frequently individualized, rather than understood as an integral part of broader systems that produce inequality and harm. This calls for a shift in analytical focus toward violence as structural, relational, and embedded in everyday social arrangements. For this reason, I adopt the concept of structural violence to examine young Black women's experiences of harm. This approach explores forms of violence that are often normalized or rendered invisible, making them difficult to name, recognize, and contest.

In addition, young women remain largely marginalized in the literature on youth and violence. When they are included, their experiences are often reduced to sexuality and reproductive risk. At the same time, race is a central axis structuring these dynamics. Peripheral territories are racialized spaces, and Black bodies are disproportionately constructed as dangerous and subject to control and violence. This underscores the importance of listening directly to young Black women and situating their experiences at the centre of analysis. To do so, I use an intersectional feminist framework, which allows me to examine how race, gender, class, place of residence, and age operate together in shaping vulnerabilities and possibilities. This thesis therefore centres young Black women, whose social location not only exposes them

to intersecting forms of structural violence but also positions them as knowledge producers capable of naming, analysing, and challenging the conditions that shape their lives.

Foregrounding the lived experiences of young Black women is also a way to contextualize statistical data, which, while essential for revealing patterns of inequality, can also abstract and depersonalize experiences of violence. By centring young women's voices, this study seeks to restore subjective, relational, and everyday dimensions of violence — how it is felt, interpreted, negotiated, and resisted. As this chapter has also shown, young people are not passive individuals within these structures. They navigate, resist, and reinterpret violence in their everyday lives, cultivating aspirations, relationships, and strategies for survival and transformation.

This thesis thus seeks to address two central research questions: 1. What do young Black women understand as violence, and how do they experience, interpret, resist, and respond to it? 2. How can feminist participatory research based on art-based interventions contribute to the production of alternative discourses about young women, narratives that centre their perspectives, values, and worldviews, and contribute to social justice?

Rather than treating violence solely as an event, this study explores its everyday, subtle, and normalized forms, centring young women's interpretations of what hurts, angers, constrains, and shapes their lives. It also examines how they resist, respond to, and navigate these conditions. In addition, this thesis seeks to understand how young women define and represent themselves, and how they wish to be seen, as a way of challenging dominant and disempowering narratives that have historically framed them in narrow and negative terms. In doing so, my objective is not only to document violence, but to rethink how violence is defined, recognized, and politicized, while also shedding light on resistance strategies and challenging stereotypical representations of young Black people living in marginalized urban communities.

CHAPTER TWO: STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AND INTERSECTING POWER RELATIONS

In this chapter, I aim to present the theoretical frameworks that guide the analysis of how young Black women living in a peripheral area of Brazil experience and respond to structural violence. Rather than approaching violence as an individual or episodic phenomenon, this chapter situates it within broader intersecting systems of power that organize social life and shape unequal conditions of existence.

The first section introduces the concept of structural violence, shifting the focus from individuals to the social, political, and economic structures that produce and normalize harm. The second section turns to intersectional feminism, tracing its origins in Black feminist thought and centring the experiences of Black women to understand how violence is differentially produced and lived. It also emphasizes how systems of power are interconnected, interrelated, and mutually reinforcing.

The final section brings these frameworks together, demonstrating how structural violence and intersectionality, when combined, offer a more comprehensive analytical lens for examining how violence operates across multiple domains of power. This integrated approach makes it possible to understand how violence is structured and sustained as well as how it is experienced, interpreted, and challenged in the everyday lives of young Black women.

1. Structural Violence: Expanding the Meaning of Violence

This section explores debates surrounding the concept of structural violence. This perspective helps explain how social arrangements can produce harm, even when such harms are perceived as neutral, ordinary, inevitable, or simply part of how society functions. This starting point is relevant for this study, as it shifts the focus from individual behaviour to the broader social arrangements that shape how violence is produced, experienced, and interpreted in marginalized contexts.

To do so, the first part introduces a group of authors who conceptualize structural violence primarily through poverty and socioeconomic disparities, including the foundational contributions of Liberation Theologians, Johan Galtung, and Paul Farmer. I then examine some of the limitations of this socioeconomically centred approach, particularly its tendency to frame "the poor" as the primary and almost exclusive victims of structural violence.

Finally, drawing on the contributions of Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois, I advance a broader understanding of structural violence as a continuum. This expanded formulation moves beyond strictly socioeconomic dimensions to consider how structural

violence produces exclusion and marginalization to the point of denying the full humanity of individuals and social groups.

1.1. The Centrality of Poverty and Socioeconomic Development in Structural Violence Frameworks

The concept of structural violence does not originate in academic theory, but in ethical and political readings of poverty as premature death. One pivotal root lies in the Liberation Theology movement that emerged in Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century (Scheper-Hughes, 2004). Developed in contexts marked by profound socioeconomic inequality and political repression, Liberation Theology foregrounded poverty not as a natural condition or individual failure, but as institutionalized violence produced by the unjust organization of states, economies, and elite power structures (Kim, 2013).

During periods of authoritarian rule in Latin America, particularly under military dictatorships, sectors of the Catholic Church became one of the few institutions capable of openly challenging state violence and political repression (French, 2007). In Brazil, this theological and political stance acquired particular significance under the civil-military dictatorship (1964–1985), when political dissent was violently suppressed. As repression intensified, segments of the Catholic Church aligned with Liberation Theology emerged as rare institutional spaces to publicly denounce human rights violations and inequalities (Edmonds, 2013; French, 2007).

In this context, the Church's moral authority and institutional protection enabled it to mobilize collective action to transform structures (Edmonds, 2013; French, 2007). This included grassroots initiatives such as base ecclesial communities, popular education projects, and human rights committees, as well as the work of religious and community leaders who pressured the state for social and institutional change (Moreira, 2016).

Latin American Liberation Theology understands Christian faith as a praxis of liberation from all forms of oppression and suffering (Moreira, 2016). As Alberto Moreira (2016) argues, it encompasses both theological training and activism. These are not separate domains: theory and practice constitute two inseparable and mutually reinforcing dimensions of the same project. The movement is grounded in lived experience and emerges from direct engagement with the realities of urban and rural poverty (Moreira, 2016).

Thus, beyond its political stance against authoritarian regimes, Liberation Theology also places social analysis at the centre of its project, grounding it in the lives, experiences, and voices of the poor. Within dominant social orders, people living in poverty are treated as

socially absent — silenced, excluded, and denied recognition (Gutiérrez, 1973). Liberation theologians challenge this absence by centring the realities of those most affected by injustice and exposing the conditions under which they live and die.

Gustavo Gutiérrez (1973) links poverty to premature death, arguing that deprivation destroys individuals, families, and communities through food insecurity, precarious housing, lack of access to healthcare and education, exploitative labour conditions, and denial of fundamental rights. These conditions are not treated as accidental hardships, but as expressions of institutionalized violence embedded in social, political, and economic systems. This perspective rejects the idea that poverty is inevitable, instead framing it as the outcome of structured inequalities that privilege some while excluding others (Kim, 2013).

As Jan French (2007) explains, liberation theologians demanded: "land for the landless, food for the hungry, literacy for the uneducated — not through charitable works, but by forcing the state to seriously take its responsibilities toward its poorest citizens" (p. 409). Rejecting charitable approaches that sought to alleviate suffering without transforming its sources, Liberation Theology called for political accountability and structural change.

Recognized as a root of the concept of structural violence, Liberation Theology made a crucial contribution by framing poverty as a form of violence. Rather than treating deprivation as unfortunate or inevitable, it exposed how poverty produces concrete harm and shortens lives. Liberation Theology thus operated as both critique and action, combining political denunciation with concrete practices of transformation. In doing so, it challenged dominant interpretations that treated poverty as an individual condition, instead exposing it as institutional violence embedded in unequal social arrangements.

Liberation Theology anticipated key elements later conceptualized in academic theory. Johan Galtung (1969) was the first scholar to define structural violence within academic debates on peace. He conceptualizes violence as the cause of the gap between what individuals or groups could potentially achieve and what they actually achieve under existing social conditions (Galtung, 1969, p. 168).

Within this framework, violence is present whenever the potential level of achievement exceeds the actual level attained. If the actual level is unavoidable given historical or material conditions, violence cannot be said to exist. Galtung illustrates this distinction through examples related to life expectancy and preventable death. A life expectancy of thirty years during the Neolithic period would not constitute violence, as it reflected the limits of that historical context. However, the same life expectancy in contemporary societies would be considered violent. Similarly, death from tuberculosis today, despite the availability of

effective medical knowledge and treatment, can be understood as a manifestation of structural violence.

Galtung (1969) distinguishes personal (direct) and structural (indirect) violence. Personal violence involves an identifiable actor who directly inflicts harm on another person and is typically visible and immediate. Structural violence, by contrast, is embedded in social structures and institutions and operates without a clearly identifiable perpetrator. This conceptualization is relevant for understanding youth in marginalized contexts, where violence is often interpreted as individual behaviour rather than as a product of social arrangements, a tendency that, as discussed in the previous chapter, contributes to framing marginalized youth as a problem. For Galtung, structural violence manifests through unequal distributions of resources and opportunities, producing systematic disparities in life expectancy, health, education, and overall well-being across social groups.

Thus, Galtung (1969) links structural violence to unequal power relations, particularly the power to decide how society distributes resources. These decisions generate unequal life chances, systematically privileging certain groups, often relatively small segments of the population, while leaving others with precarious or insufficient access to essential goods, services, and rights. In this sense, structural violence exposes how social arrangements privilege some lives over others.

Galtung's formulation has been influential, but it has also drawn criticism, particularly regarding its conception of power. Kenneth Parsons (2007), for instance, challenges Galtung's distributive understanding of power, which treats power as a commodity that can be possessed or allocated, and instead argues that power is relational and exercised within social interactions. This critique raises important questions about the relationship between power, violence, and human action, which I will address later in this chapter.

Despite these critiques, Galtung makes an analytical contribution by explicitly framing structural violence as equivalent to social injustice in his early formulations. I do not treat structural violence and social injustice as interchangeable concepts. However, I want to highlight how this reveals that concerns with addressing social injustice are foundational to the concept of structural violence. In Galtung's framework, violence is produced through unjust arrangements in the distribution of power and resources — arrangements that privilege certain groups over others and generate inequalities in life chances.

While Galtung defines structural violence as unjust distributions of power and life chances, medical anthropologist and physician Paul Farmer further develops the concept by

examining how these arrangements are historically produced, incorporating dimensions of human action and social suffering. Farmer conceptualizes structural violence as:

> Violence exerted systematically — that is, indirectly — by everyone who belongs to a certain social order: hence the discomfort these ideas provoke in a moral economy still geared to pinning praise or blame on individual actors. In short, the concept of structural violence is intended to inform the study of the social machinery of oppression. (Farmer, 2004, p. 307)

A central contribution of Farmer's approach lies in his assertion that structural violence is reproduced through participation in social orders. By emphasizing that violence is exerted by "everyone who belongs to a certain social order," Farmer challenges explanations that locate responsibility in isolated actors. Structural violence is thus collectively produced, even if without explicit intention or awareness. At the same time, this formulation opens space for collective responsibility and accountability in confronting structural violence.

For Farmer (2004), the concept of structural violence is intended to guide the study of the oppressed, particularly *the poor*, by revealing how social, political, and economic systems routinely generate, sustain and make invisible their suffering. Structural violence, thus, is not an anomaly or a breakdown of social order; it is constitutive of how societies function. It operates through historically constituted political and economic arrangements that have long exploited, and continue to exploit, marginalized populations globally (Farmer, 2004). One key purpose of the concept, therefore, is to make visible the mechanisms that naturalize oppression. Processes of historical erasure and desocialization obscure the social and political origins of suffering, allowing exploitative systems to persist while appearing natural, inevitable, neutral, or detached from human action (Farmer, 2004).

Here, Farmer diverges from Galtung's formulation of structural violence as indirect and without an identifiable actor by explicitly foregrounding human action. In Farmer's account, structural violence results from concrete political and economic decisions made by people over time — a point liberation theologians had already emphasized when denouncing authoritarian regimes and naming poverty and inequality as forms of institutional violence. Nevertheless, because these decisions are embedded in institutions and normalized through history, structural violence obscures its structural roots, displacing responsibility from social systems onto individuals or abstract forces.

Within this analytical framework, Farmer develops his work on *social suffering*. Victims of structural violence, he argues, experience social suffering: pain and distress that are lived individually but produced collectively, targeting entire groups rather than isolated persons

(Farmer, 1996). For Farmer, suffering is shaped by historical and economic processes that constrain agency. Life choices are not freely made, but are framed by structures such as racism, sexism, political violence, and extreme poverty. Although suffering is a universal aspect of the human condition, Farmer emphasizes that it is not randomly distributed. Certain populations, particularly those living in precarious socioeconomic conditions, are more likely to experience profound and sustained suffering than others; Farmer claims that "the world's poor are the chief victims of structural violence" and that those whose suffering is least likely to be noticed (Farmer, 1996, p. 280). This is partly because "structural violence all too often defeats those who would describe it" (Farmer, 1996, p. 272).

Farmer (1996) shows that this invisibility is also sustained by social distance: suffering tends to provoke moral urgency when it resembles one's own experiences, while the suffering of those who are geographically, racially, culturally, or socially distant often elicits far less empathy. Another challenge stems from how structural violence produces a sheer scale of suffering. When harm affects vast numbers of people, it is often reduced to statistics or abstract reports, obscuring the human dimension of individual lives and silencing those already occupying marginal positions in history (Farmer, 1996).

In addition, Farmer (2005) argues that studying structural violence provides an essential framework for understanding human rights violations. For him, human rights abuses are symptoms of what he calls *pathologies of power*, in other words, distortions in the way power is organized in society. These pathologies refer to power configurations that generate systematic and avoidable suffering for some populations while shielding others from harm. In this sense, violence results from systems of power organized in unequal and harmful ways. Kathleen Ho (2007) develops this connection between structural violence and human rights in her analysis of global poverty and structural violations of human rights.

Ho (2007) builds on the foundational contributions of Galtung and Farmer to examine structural violence through a human rights lens. Her analysis presents severe global poverty as an example of structural violence, drawing on global economic data to illustrate the extreme concentration of wealth. These patterns, Ho argues, are not accidental. Instead, they result from historically and economically constituted systems that reproduce unequal distributions of power, enabling a small segment of the global population to accumulate resources while systematically disadvantaging the poor (Farmer, 2004; Galtung, 1969).

From this perspective, global poverty can be understood not only as economic deprivation but as a form of structural violence that constrains agency to the point that fundamental needs cannot be met, thereby violating human rights. To substantiate this claim,

Ho (2007) points to profound disparities in the global distribution, concentration, and control of wealth. Resources are highly concentrated in regions such as North America, Europe, and prosperous countries in the Asia-Pacific. These concentrations are sustained by structural differences among countries that give major industrialized nations advantages in economic growth and privileged access to international financial and political resources.

Central to this argument is the idea that these conditions are avoidable. Ho emphasizes that the level of global inequality that produces extreme poverty is avoidable; even modest redistributions of wealth would reduce deprivation (Ho, 2007). Instead, existing structures generate conditions in which people living in poverty are systematically prevented from meeting their fundamental human needs. The central argument, therefore, is that structural inequalities that consistently deny access to necessities constitute structural violations of human rights. It is the restriction of individual agency by social, economic, and political structures, hindering the satisfaction of fundamental needs, that transforms structural violence into a violation of human rights.

This perspective also allows Ho (2007) to connect Galtung's notion of the gap between the actual and the potential to a human rights framework. She emphasizes the distinction between *de jure* rights, those formally guaranteed by law, and *de facto* rights, those effectively realized in practice. Structural conditions that constrain agency prevent individuals from exercising rights that ostensibly apply to all, creating a gap between the actual and the potential in the language of human rights (Ho, 2007).

This framework also acknowledges that individuals' social locations, along axes such as class, race, and gender, play a crucial role in shaping how agency is constrained and how vulnerability to human rights violations is produced (Ho, 2007). However, in this work, Ho's analytical focus remains primarily on poverty, demonstrating how people living in impoverished conditions experience heightened constraints on agency. By directing attention to social structures, Ho argues, it becomes possible to identify the systemic explanations for these constraints. As she concludes, "there are systemic and structural causes that place some populations at a greater risk of human rights violations than others" (Ho, 2007, p. 15).

While Ho's analysis foregrounds poverty as an expression of structural violence and a violation of human rights, her recognition that social location shapes differential exposure to harm opens space for a broader examination of how hierarchical arrangements shape inequality. Up to this point, scholars in this section have primarily mobilized poverty as the key category. Moving beyond an exclusive focus on poverty, Peter Iadicola and Anson Shupe (2003) place hierarchical social relations at the centre of their definition of structural violence.

At the same time, they retain the distinction between actual and potential development, emphasizing how inequalities prevent individuals and groups from realizing their full social, economic, and human capacities.

Iadicola and Shupe (2003) conceptualize structural violence as a product of hierarchical social organization. For the authors, violence plays a central role in constraining life chances and human potential of large segments of the global population. Preventable diseases, for example, continue to cause premature death because access to necessities, such as healthcare, clean water, sanitation, and adequate living conditions, is unevenly distributed along socioeconomic status (Iadicola & Shupe, 2003).

The authors define structural violence as violence that emerges from the ways societies establish, maintain, extend, or reduce hierarchical relations between categories of people (Iadicola & Shupe, 2003, p. 316). This formulation understands structural violence as an outcome of how societies are organized, leading to unequal opportunities for individuals and groups to live long, healthy lives and develop their intellectual, physical, and spiritual capacities (Iadicola & Shupe, 2003).

Iadicola and Shupe's approach expands structural violence beyond class-based inequality. They identify at least four fundamental and intersecting systems: class, gender, racial or ethnic identity, and age. These hierarchies shape distributions of life chances and vulnerability, indicating that structural violence is not experienced uniformly, but differently across social positions. On the one hand, individuals occupying dominant social positions, such as white populations of European ancestry, men, economic elites, and residents of core regions of the global political economy (including the United States, Western Europe, Japan, Canada, and Australia), are afforded greater access to institutional power and resources (Iadicola & Shupe, 2003). As a result, they possess a greater capacity to fulfill their human potential, as measured through indicators such as life expectancy, health outcomes, educational levels, and control over material resources.

On the other hand, those occupying subordinated positions, particularly women, racialized and ethnic minority groups, working-class populations, and residents of peripheral regions, face significantly reduced opportunities to realize this potential. Their lives are more frequently marked by premature death, illness, limited educational access, and economic precarity. While this approach shows how structural violence produces unequal life chances across social positions, it also reflects a developmentalist assumption that measures human potential against a normative model of a "fully developed" life.

The work of Iadicola and Shupe, Ho, alongside that of Liberation Theologians, Galtung and Farmer, consolidates an important analytical move: the framing of poverty and socioeconomic inequality as forms of violence. These early formulations demonstrate how social arrangements operate in ways that privilege some groups while exposing others to greater vulnerability. Structural violence, in this sense, is not an abstract force, but the outcome of historical, political, economic and social arrangements that distribute resources, protection, and life chances unevenly. By naming these arrangements as violent, these approaches shift the analytical focus away from individuals and toward the systems that produce inequality.

Another contribution of these studies comes from their ability to denaturalize what is often perceived as inevitable. Premature death, preventable disease, and unequal health outcomes are reframed not as biological destiny or unfortunate accidents, but as the effects of unjust social organization. This is particularly evident in the writings of Galtung and Farmer, whose analyses focus on avoidable mortality, differential life expectancy, and the uneven distribution of suffering. It is therefore not surprising that the concept of structural violence has gained significant traction in the field of health, where it intersects with debates on social justice, health equity, and the social determinants of health (Jackson & Sadler, 2022). It is a powerful analytical and political intervention to demonstrate that patterns of illness and death can also be socially determined, and that some groups are more exposed to harm than others,

However, this tradition also invites further scrutiny. Poverty as a central site of structural violence can itself become limiting. Although race, gender, and other axes of differentiation are acknowledged, poverty often remains the primary analytical category. Moreover, the recurrent emphasis on the gap between the actual and the potential introduces a linear narrative of progress that risks imposing assumptions about what constitutes a "better," "full," or morally superior life. Finally, framing power as something possessed and unevenly distributed, rather than relational and co-constituted through interaction, raises important theoretical tensions. I will examine these issues in the next section: the problem of "the poor" as a category, the linearity embedded in notions of potential, and the conceptualization of power.

1.2. Limitations of the Centrality of Poverty and the Developmentalist View

Moises Lino e Silva (2014) offers an important and provocative critique of the concept of structural violence. Rather than questioning the existence of inequality or suffering, Silva challenges the assumption, often explicit in structural violence frameworks, that poverty necessarily constrains freedom. Although his analysis focuses primarily on Paul Farmer's

work, the concerns he raises extend more broadly to approaches that position "the poor" as the primary and almost self-evident subjects of structural violence. Silva's central argument is that framing "the poor" as structurally and universally constrained risks becoming violent in itself, insofar as it imposes a totalizing interpretation on people's lives through academic language.

A recurring concern in Silva's critique is the strong and often automatic association between poverty and structural violence in academic debates, particularly in Farmer's (2004) identification of spaces such as expanding favelas in the so-called "Third World" as emblematic sites of structural harm. Silva (2014) argues that portraying poverty as an all-encompassing structural condition that limits freedom can constitute a form of symbolic and epistemic violence. This violence is enacted through discourse when scholars refer to diverse individuals and communities as "the poor," reducing complex and heterogeneous lived experiences to a single homogeneous explanatory framework. While structural violence approaches are frequently ethically motivated and oriented toward social justice, Silva warns that they may inadvertently reproduce hierarchies of knowledge by speaking *for* people rather than *with* them.

Furthermore, Silva (2014) notes how this narrative may trap people in a hierarchical, linear scheme that divides the world between those deemed "developed" and those still needing to attain a particular ideal of progress or "goodness." In this context, structural violence narratives can derive legitimacy from a broader developmentalist discourse that contrasts "developed" and "underdeveloped" countries, ranking ways of life according to a single normative standard. Silva's critique is not a romanticization of poverty, nor a denial of suffering or deprivation. Rather, it questions the implicit assumption that one universally desirable model of life exists for all individuals and societies to aspire to.

Silva (2014) also questions whether formalizing violence as a hidden structure to be revealed by the researcher may itself operate as a violent strategy. If structural violence is presumed to be invisible, naturalized, or misrecognized, the researcher assumes the role of unveiling what the alleged victims of it supposedly cannot see. For Silva, the problem is treating "violence" as a singular and overarching signifier that precedes empirical engagement. When scholars enter the field already equipped with a fixed understanding of violence, they risk imposing their own interpretations onto the lives of those they study. This becomes particularly problematic when researchers assume, from a privileged epistemic position, that they are better able to recognize violence than residents themselves — especially when residents' lived experiences contradict academic classifications of poverty, deprivation, or lack of freedom.

Drawing on his ethnographic work in Brazilian favelas, Silva (2014) challenges dominant narratives that equate poverty with constraint on freedom and shows how poverty can, in some contexts, be experienced as a form of liberation. He recounts conversations with favela residents who expressed relief at being less entangled in material accumulation and consumerist pressures. For these residents, having fewer material possessions was associated with a sense of lightness or freedom, rather than loss. This does not deny hardship or inequality. Rather, it challenges the assumption that the greater the constraints on agency, the more limited people's capacity to resist structural violence becomes (Farmer, 2004), or that structural violence often defeats those who attempt to describe it (Farmer, 1996). Silva's ethnography suggests the opposite: experiencing poverty can position individuals in a privileged location to identify violence as it unfolds, to refuse complicity, and to engage in everyday forms of resistance grounded in lived knowledge rather than external diagnosis.

Silva (2014) further observes that many favela residents, although classified as "poor" by external metrics, do not see themselves as living in poverty. This discrepancy reveals a tension in how poverty is conceptualized. Structural violence frameworks often resolve this tension by interpreting residents' self-understandings as evidence of false consciousness — arguing that structural conditions render poverty invisible even to those who experience it. Silva challenges this reasoning by asking whether researchers should trust how people understand and present their own lives or assume residents cannot recognize the structural conditions under which they live. In doing so, he exposes a deeper inequality: the unequal distribution of epistemic authority between academics and marginalized communities.

This critique also extends to how violence and danger are experienced within the same community. In Silva's (2014) account of a police incursion in a favela, where armed dealers and police officers occupied the territory, residents navigated fear and routine simultaneously. He describes a woman who insisted on taking out the garbage despite the possibility of an armed confrontation. Although the task was not urgent and could have waited, she chose to leave her house and dispose of the trash to affirm everyday normalcy amid danger. What might be interpreted from the outside as a moment of total restriction did not translate into uniform confinement. While some residents remained indoors, others continued aspects of their daily routines, refusing to entirely suspend ordinary life, echoing how young people navigate these contexts strategically rather than passively (Berents & ten Have, 2017; Cobbina et al., 2008; Rizzini & Limongi, 2016; Ursin, 2020; Van Dijk et al., 2025).

Thus, analyses that situate such episodes solely within broader narratives of structural violence risk flattening this plurality, heterogeneity and ambiguity by imposing a

predetermined explanatory frame (Silva, 2014). Silva's critique highlights the risks of imposing totalizing interpretations on people's lives and underscores the importance of attending to how individuals themselves understand and experience their conditions. In response, Silva proposes an alternative ethical and methodological orientation. Rather than beginning with large-scale narratives or rigid structural models, research on violence in urban peripheries should prioritize lived experiences and interpretations of those identified as victims of structural violence. Meanings should emerge from concrete encounters, conversations, and everyday narratives, rather than being imposed beforehand (Silva, 2014).

A related but distinct line of critique emerges in Kenneth Parsons' (2007) engagement with Galtung's concept of structural violence. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Parsons' argument centrers on a disagreement with Galtung's understanding of power. Galtung's (1969) formulation is closely tied to a distributive model in which power is treated as something unevenly allocated across society. Unequal distributions of power lead to unequal distributions of resources, which in turn produce structural violence. Parsons challenges this assumption by arguing that power should not be conceptualized as a commodity that can be possessed, accumulated, or transferred. Instead, power is inherently relational: it is exercised, negotiated, and enacted within social relations by actors who are conscious, strategic, and motivated by interests.

This reconceptualization has significant implications for how we understand violence. For Parsons (2007), violent relations cannot be reduced to power relations. Violence is a distinct phenomenon that requires analytical differentiation rather than absorption into a generalized theory of power (Parsons, 2007). When violence is equated with domination, there is a risk of overlooking how violent acts may also function as resources within social struggles. In certain contexts, particularly where marginalized groups might lack access to institutional resources, violence may be mobilized as a form of resistance or self-defence (Parsons, 2007).

In this sense, Parsons' argument resonates with Silva's insistence on attending to the meanings those who experience violence attribute to it. If power is relational, then all actors within a social relation exercise some degree of agency, even under conditions of constraint. Structures of domination may limit possibilities, but they do not fully eliminate the capacity for action, negotiation, or resistance. By analytically separating violence from domination and recognizing the role of human action, Parsons challenges structural violence frameworks that risk portraying marginalized populations as passive victims of oppressive structures.

The critiques advanced by Silva and Parsons do not deny the reality of inequality, oppression, or systemic harm. Rather, they call for greater conceptual precision and ethical

caution. They challenge the reification of "the poor" as a homogeneous category, question linear notions of actual versus potential life trajectories, and defy distributive models of power that obscure relational dynamics and forms of resistance. From these tensions, we can reconsider the concept of structural violence. In the next section, I introduce the work of Nancy Scheper-Hughes in particular, together with the contributions of Philippe Bourgois, to show how they offer a formulation that preserves the critical force of structural violence and expands its analytical scope beyond socioeconomic deprivation and developmentalist discourse.

1.3. Violence Continuum: Normalization, Moral Regulation, and Social Order

If earlier debates centred on poverty and the distribution of life chances, the work of Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois shifts the analytical lens toward the social production of indifference, the routinization of violence, and the moral discourses that define whose lives are valued and whose are not. Their formulation asks how violence becomes embedded in everyday practices, institutional arrangements, culture and social discourses. In doing so, they move structural violence beyond a developmentalist concern with deprivation and toward an examination of how certain forms of violence are rendered ordinary, permissible, and even necessary. Nancy Scheper-Hughes defines structural violence as:

> Structural violence is violence that is permissible, even encouraged. It refers to the invisible social machinery of inequality that reproduces social relations of exclusion and marginalization via ideologies, stigmas, and dangerous discourses (such as "youth violence" itself) attendant to race, class, sex, and other invidious distinctions. Structural violence "naturalizes" poverty, sickness, hunger, and premature death, erasing their social and political origins so that they are taken for granted, and no one is held accountable except the poor themselves. Structural violence also refers to the ease with which humans are capable of reducing the socially vulnerable (even those from their own class and community) into expendable non-persons, thus allowing the licence — even the duty — to kill them (Scheper-Hughes, 2004, p. 13).

Scheper-Hughes (2004) foregrounds a form of violence that is not merely tolerated but actively sustained within social systems. She further conceptualizes structural violence as the "invisible social machinery of inequality," drawing attention to how violence is embedded in the routine functioning of social life. Importantly, invisibility does not mean concealment. Rather, structural violence unfolds "right before our eyes," yet remains unrecognized because it is ordinary and taken for granted (Scheper-Hughes, 1996, p. 889). Its invisibility lies not in secrecy, but in normalization.

This insight resonates with Michel Parazelli's (2008) notion of the *public secret*, which refers to forms of knowledge that are collectively known and shared yet remain tacitly forbidden or unspoken because acknowledging them would disrupt the presumed normality of everyday life. In this regard, Liberation Theology can be understood as actively working to reveal these secrets, particularly through popular education and the training of community leaders capable of critically reading state structures, bureaucratic processes, and policy frameworks that sustain inequality. A public secret sustains the illusion that "all is well," allowing structural violence to persist without being fully recognized in its political roots (Parazelli, 2008). In this sense, structural violence operates as a public secret: visible, known, and experienced, but systematically denied.

This process of normalization is closely tied to the naturalization of suffering. When poverty, illness, hunger, and premature death are framed as inevitable or natural, they are no longer understood as the outcomes of specific policies, economic systems, or power relations (Scheper-Hughes, 2004). Instead, they appear as facts of life. This displaces responsibility: rather than holding institutions, states, or dominant groups accountable, blame shifts to those who suffer most from these conditions. Marginalized groups are rendered responsible for their own marginalization, while the structures that produce inequality remain intact (Scheper-Hughes, 2004).

This inversion of responsibility is sustained through symbolic processes that shape perception, moral judgment, and self-understanding — a dimension that Scheper-Hughes (2004) develops through her engagement with symbolic violence. Through these symbolic mechanisms, structural harm is reframed as individual failure, moral weakness, or cultural deficiency, reinforcing and normalizing the very inequalities that produce harm in the first place. In this sense, symbolic violence operates by legitimizing structural violence, emphasizing their interdependence.

This perspective also resonates with Galtung's (1990) notion of cultural violence, which refers to elements, such as religion, ideology, language, art, and scientific discourse, that legitimize direct and structural violence by transforming what would otherwise be seen as wrong into something perceived as right or necessary. In this way, violence becomes embedded within dominant discourses, shaping how it is interpreted, justified, tolerated, or condemned (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004).

Structural violence's effectiveness thus lies in its capacity to render those who are oppressed complicit in their own subjugation. Through the internalization of stigmatizing narratives and moral judgments, inequality is also reproduced internally. At the same time,

groups who benefit from existing social arrangements may come to perceive themselves as threatened rather than as sources of harm (Scheper-Hughes, 2004), a dynamic that, as observed in peripheral communities, sustains criminalization of poor and Black youth, social production of fear, stigmatization of cultural expressions, normalization of spatial control, segregation, and recurrent police violence (Fernandes, 2014).

Structural violence is therefore also reproduced through discourses that classify and differentiate populations along lines of race, class, gender, and age (Scheper-Hughes, 2004). These discourses shape who is perceived as dangerous, deviant, or disposable, reinforcing negative perceptions and legitimizing unequal treatment. In doing so, they contribute to the ongoing production of marginalization and exclusion.

The most extreme consequence of this process is the reduction of socially vulnerable individuals into "expendable non-persons," thus allowing the "licence — even the duty — to kill them" (Scheper-Hughes, 2004, p. 13). Through the process of dehumanization, certain lives are stripped of moral worth. Thus, structural violence extends beyond unequal access to resources and encompasses assaults on personhood, dignity, self-worth, and social value (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004, p. 1).

This reduction of certain lives to lesser value is mediated through moral classifications that define what counts as legitimate or illegitimate, permissible or sanctionable (Scheper-Hughes, 2004). This becomes evident in contrasts between "legitimate" state violence and the "undisciplined" violence attributed to so-called dangerous populations, categories that disproportionately include racialized and marginalized groups (Scheper-Hughes, 2004). As discussed in the previous chapter, these representations are central to how marginalized youth are constructed in public discourse, with young Black men often associated with danger and criminality, and young women framed through sexualized and moralized narratives. These constructions shape how people interpret, justify, and respond to violence.

Finally, Scheper-Hughes (2004) further argues that violence must be understood as a continuum rather than as a series of isolated incidents. Her notion of "small wars and invisible genocides" captures the diffuse and ongoing character of harm. These forms of violence unfold not only in conventional sites of conflict but within normative social spaces — schools, clinics, streets, bureaucratic institutions, courts, prisons, youth detention centres, and public morgues (Scheper-Hughes, 2004). Violence becomes embedded in the ordinary functioning of institutions and daily life, requiring attention to the "grey zones" of violence that are neither spectacular nor immediately recognized as violence (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004).

Structural violence, therefore, is not episodic but continuous and embedded in everyday life. It is part of how society is organized; it keeps the social machinery in motion, sustaining order in ways that favour those who occupy elite, dominant, and privileged positions. It operates through discourses, public policies, institutional responses, and social interactions, resulting in suffering, dehumanization, indifference, exclusion, and marginalization, and shaping how life chances, dignity, visibility, and survival are distributed. These processes are also spatially organized, unfolding unevenly across territories, as forms of control, neglect, and intervention shift in relation to how the state governs some areas and how local populations respond and resist.

However, some questions remain unresolved within the framework of structural violence alone, particularly those concerning power relations. Society is organized through power relations that extend beyond class to include ethnicity, gender, age, nationality, sexual orientation, ability, among others. These axes of power intersect and mutually reinforce one another, shaping how structural violence affects different social groups not in a hierarchically ordered way, but relationally, as processes that co-constitute and influence each other. In this sense, intersectionality is a useful conceptual framework for understanding how these forms of violence are produced, experienced, and justified differently across social groups.

2. Intersectional Feminism

While the concept of structural violence illuminates how harm is socially produced and normalized, it does not fully account for how different axes of power shape who experiences violence, in what forms, and with what intensity. In addition, structural violence operates through class inequality, but it is not reducible to class alone. Gender, race, age, sexuality, nationality, and ability are not secondary variables; they are constitutive dimensions of how power is organized. These axes do not function independently or hierarchically, but relationally, co-constituting one another and producing differentiated experiences of vulnerability, privilege, and resistance. Intersectionality thus offers a framework for analysing these intertwined relations of power, including in contexts where youth are differentially positioned through processes of racialization, gender norms, and territorial stigmatization.

Over the past decades, intersectionality has gained remarkable prominence within gender and sexuality studies and beyond (Bilge, 2018; Kyrillos, 2024). Gabriela Kyrillos (2024) shows how the term has become widely understood as an analytical tool for addressing multiple, simultaneous forms of oppression, circulating across disciplines, institutions, and social movements. However, this expansion has also transformed its meaning and use.

As Sirma Bilge (2018) argues, intersectionality emerged from a transformative, counter-hegemonic knowledge production committed to social justice. However, the term has increasingly been commodified and depoliticized by neoliberal ideology. Bilge shows how intersectionality has become "ornamental," often deployed alongside keywords such as diversity and equity, yet detached from substantive commitment to confronting the structures that produce and sustain inequalities and injustices. This dynamic is also present within academic disciplinary feminism, which "is more concerned with compliance with the parameters of what constitutes legitimate scientific knowledge than with challenging those very parameters" (Bilge, 2018, p. 71).

In this context, it is fundamental to recall that discussions of intersectionality emerged from critiques of White feminism, which failed to account for the experiences of Black women and often reproduced racial exclusions (Bilge, 2018). Bilge argues that a process of Whitening has taken place, one that reframes intersectionality in ways that marginalize race as a constitutive axis and erase the contributions of women of colour and queer people of colour (Bilge, 2018, p. 74).

Given this tension between popularization and political grounding, I first turn to how Black women were already articulating the core elements of intersectional analysis before the term gained academic visibility. More than simply tracing an origin, I understand Black feminist thought as the heart of intersectionality — what gives it centrality, substance, structure, tone, and political direction. It is Black feminism that contributes to understanding intersectionality not merely as an analytical tool, but as critical inquiry and praxis (Collins & Bilge, 2020). I then turn to the work of Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge to discuss intersectionality as both theory and praxis, outlining its key premises.

2.1. The Contributions of Black Feminist Thought

Although Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) is often credited with developing intersectionality, U.S. Black women's social movements in the 1960s and 1970s had already raised concerns about the inadequacy of single-axis analyses. These movements demonstrated that their experiences could not be reduced to a single analytical category, such as race or gender (Collins & Bilge, 2020). These activists denounced that their claims regarding labour markets, education, and healthcare were not adequately addressed by feminist, anti-racist, or labour movements, since each of these movements tended to prioritize one category over others, for instance, race within anti-racist movements, gender within feminism, or class within trade union struggles (Collins & Bilge, 2020). A single focus on social inequalities failed to capture

the complexity of the problems they faced, as they are simultaneously Black, women, and workers. As a result, their concerns were often subordinated within each movement, because none of them, on their own, addressed the full scope of the discrimination these women experienced (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

In addition, other Black intellectuals were already theorizing the interconnection of multiple forms of oppression prior to the academic formulation of intersectionality. For example, in 1983, Audre Lorde challenged the notion of a hierarchy of oppressions. As a Black lesbian woman, Lorde argued that sexism, heterosexism, and racism emerge from the same underlying belief: the presumed inherent superiority of one group over another, and the perceived right to dominate that group. Angela Davis offers another example in her 1981 book *Women, Race and Class*, whose very title signals the inseparability of these categories.

When turning to Brazil, Kyrillos (2024) argues that Black women were already articulating sexism, racism, capitalism, and colonialism as interconnected and structuring forces of Brazilian society. Brazil's social formation is rooted in a colonial and slaveholding history, alongside the enduring national myth of racial democracy that continues to structure racial hierarchies. The belief in racial democracy rests on the idea that Brazil, as a racially mixed nation, overcame racial prejudice through miscegenation (Kyrillos, 2020). According to this narrative, widespread racial mixture would have dissolved racial hierarchies. However, as Nilma Lino Gomes (2005) argues, Brazilian racism operates through denial. The nation constructed an image of itself as racially harmonious, joyful, and unified, erasing race as a meaningful category and presenting racism as nonexistent (Collins & Bilge, 2020). This self-image became a source of national pride.

Brazil's racial mixture, however, did not result from peaceful coexistence. As Kia Lilly Caldwell (2007) demonstrates, it was deeply shaped by forced sexual relations and the objectification of Black and Indigenous women during slavery. The wide variation in skin tones, hair textures, body shapes, and other physical traits that characterize the Brazilian population emerged from histories of coercion, exploitation, and racial hierarchy. These physical attributes continue to function as racial markers that shape access to education, employment, social services, and material resources (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

It is within this broader ideological and historical framework that Lélia Gonzalez's (1984) analysis becomes particularly powerful. In her foundational text on racism and sexism in Brazilian society, Gonzalez (1984) demonstrates how race and gender are not peripheral but constitutive elements of Brazil's national formation, including its myth of racial democracy.

According to Gonzalez, this myth functions to conceal rooted racism and symbolic violence directed at Black women.

Historically, Black women in Brazil have occupied multiple social roles, yet none has acknowledged their full humanity (Gonzalez, 1984). Rooted in Brazil's slaveholding past, these roles include the sexually available *mulata*, the nurturing "Black mother" who breastfed and raised enslavers' children, and the domestic worker responsible for maintaining white households. Across these roles, service to white men, whether sexual, maternal, or domestic, remained a defining feature (Gonzalez, 1984).

The myth of racial democracy becomes especially visible in how these roles are represented and valued. During Carnival, for example, Black women are exalted as mulatas, celebrated as symbols of national identity, while simultaneously reduced to hypersexualized objects (Gonzalez, 1984). This apparent and temporary celebration obscures the persistence of racial and gender hierarchies that structure Black women's lives.

The figure of the mulata is thus illustrative of how racism operates in Brazil. Nowadays, the term is widely recognized as offensive. As Djamila Ribeiro (2018) reminds us, mulata derives from mule, a hybrid animal resulting from the crossing of two species. The term thus carries pejorative connotations of impurity and improper mixture, historically used to describe lighter-skinned Black women, often born from the sexual violence of enslaved Black women by white slave owners. Beyond marking racial mixture, the term evokes the animalization of Black bodies, a legacy that persists in Brazilian society (Ribeiro, 2018).

As Ribeiro clarifies, the issue is not Black women's sensuality or how they choose to present their bodies. However, they are confined to sexualized positions — treated "as if they were pieces of meat ready to be devoured" (Ribeiro, 2018, p. 66). In this sense, sexualization operates as a form of control, through which Black women's bodies are regulated, interpreted, and reduced. These dynamics resonate with broader patterns in which young Black women's experiences are frequently reduced to sexuality and subjected to moral regulation within dominant discourses (Fernandes, 2023).

At the same time, this sexualization is not uniformly distributed. As Gonzalez (1984) shows, the exaltation of the mulata is selective and operates through gradations of skin colour. Women celebrated as symbols of Brazilianness are typically lighter-skinned Black women, whose features more closely approximate European standards (Caldwell, 2007). Darker-skinned Black women, by contrast, are rarely included in this symbolic elevation and are more commonly relegated to domestic work and social invisibility (Gonzalez, 1984).

Thus, rather than representing recognition, the figure of the mulata can coexist with other racialized roles, such as the Black mother and the domestic worker, revealing a structured division in how Black women are positioned. While some are hypersexualized and symbolically incorporated into national identity, others are devalued, rendered invisible, and confined to labour. Skin colour, therefore, plays a central role in shaping how Black Brazilian women are socially assessed, sexualized, and exploited.

Through this analysis, Gonzalez reveals how race and gender operate together to structure Brazilian society. Before intersectionality was formalized as an academic concept, Black Brazilian feminists were already exposing how multiple axes of domination intersect in the regulation, representation, and control of Black women's lives. This resonates with Patricia Hill Collins's (1990/2022) framework of controlling images, which explains how dominant representations of Black womanhood function ideologically to justify and sustain inequality.

Collins identifies recurring figures that shape how U.S. Black women are perceived and treated. Central among them are hypersexualized images such as the Jezebel, the "whore," or the "hoochie," which construct Black women as possessing an excessive, aggressive, and uncontrollable sexuality. Like the figure of the mulata (Gonzalez, 1984), these representations define Black female sexuality as deviant and morally suspect, legitimizing sexual exploitation and social regulation. In contemporary contexts, such dynamics can also be observed in the ways young Black girls are sexualized and labelled, for instance, through terms such as novinhas, reinforcing the idea that their bodies are inherently available, excessive, and in need of control (Fernandes, 2023).

These sexualized images coexist with other controlling representations that regulate Black women's social roles. The figure of the welfare mother, for instance, portrays poor and working-class Black women as irresponsible, overly fertile, and dependent on state support (Collins, 1990/2022). This image draws on the legacy of slavery, when Black women's reproductive capacities were exploited for economic gain, and rearticulates it in contemporary narratives that frame their reproduction as excessive, unnecessary, or even dangerous. In this framing, Black women are depicted as unwilling to work, transmitting "bad values" to their children, and as a burden on social systems (Collins, 1990/2022).

In contrast, like the Black mother (Gonzales, 1984), the mammy represents the idealized figure of the obedient and loyal domestic worker (Collins, 1990/2022). She is nurturing, self-sacrificing, and devoted to white families, often caring for them more than for her own family. This image naturalizes Black women's historical confinement to domestic labour and constructs subordination as acceptable, even virtuous (Collins, 1990/2022). The

mammy thus functions as a normative standard against which Black women's behaviour is evaluated, reinforcing expectations of obedience and service.

The figure of the Black matriarch operates as a counter-image: if the mammy is "good," the matriarch is constructed as "bad" (Collins, 1990/2022). She is portrayed as overly assertive, unfeminine, and responsible for social disorganization within Black families. By working outside the home and allegedly failing to properly care for her children, she is blamed for a range of social issues, including children's educational failure and involvement with crime (Collins, 1990/2022). This representation reinforces the idea that Black women's deviation from submissive roles produces broader social problems, positioning them as sources of instability.

These controlling images reveal how Black women are positioned within a limited and hierarchical set of roles, where sexuality, reproduction, and labour are regulated. Sexuality is central across these representations, whether through hyper-sexualization, moral condemnation, or reproductive control. These images shape how Black women's bodies and behaviours are interpreted, governed, and judged. Importantly, these representations also perform a broader ideological function: they shift attention away from structural inequalities and their causes (Collins, 1990/2022). By framing Black women as deviant, irresponsible, or problematic, controlling images individualize social issues and obscure the role of racism, patriarchy, colonial legacy, and economic inequality in producing these conditions. In doing so, they naturalize domination and legitimize unequal social arrangements.

It is against these limiting and dehumanizing representations that Black feminist thought asserts the need to reclaim Black women's full humanity. Sueli Carneiro, another fundamental Black Brazilian intellectual, emphasizes the importance of making Black women's experiences visible and the centrality of this visibility to restoring their humanity. In her essay *Enegrecer o feminismo: A situação da mulher negra na América Latina* (Blackening Feminism: The situation of Black Women in Latin America) (2012), Carneiro challenges the notion of "women" as a homogeneous category and calls attention to the urgency of asking which women are being referenced in feminist discourse. She critiques the universalization of categories that erase those located at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression, even though she does not use the term intersectionality.

For Carneiro, naming and making these experiences visible is not merely descriptive but transformative; it is a political act of reclaiming humanity in contexts where Black women have historically been reduced to controlling images and denied recognition as individuals. In her words:

> Being black without being only black, being a woman without being only a woman, being a black woman without being only a black woman. Achieving equal rights means becoming a complete human being, full of possibilities and opportunities beyond your race and gender. That is the ultimate meaning of this struggle (Carneiro, 2012, p. 5).

This formulation challenges the narrow and hierarchical representations imposed on Black women, affirming instead their multiplicity, complexity, and right to exist beyond roles defined by elite groups. This is the struggle articulated by Black women such as Carneiro: the pursuit of a diverse, plural, multiracial, and multicultural society in which differences are recognized, legitimized, valued, and celebrated, rather than translated into inferiority.

Echoing Kyrillos (2024), the concerns later named as intersectionality are not exclusive to North American debates. Rather, they emerge from broader intellectual and political traditions rooted in lived experiences of oppression and resistance across different regions. While the contexts and forms of articulation may differ, this does not diminish the significance of Kimberlé Crenshaw's contributions; instead, it demonstrates that these prior trajectories made it possible to name and formalize intersectionality as such (Kyrillos, 2024).

This broader political and intellectual tradition also helps explain what Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2020, p. 37) identify as intersectionality's organizing principles: critical inquiry and praxis. Intersectionality is a critical theory that interrogates, rejects, and commits to addressing social injustice — in ways that resonate with other traditions grounded in lived experience and political struggle, such as Liberation Theology. It is inquiry because it provides an analytical framework for understanding social phenomena; it is praxis because it challenges the status quo and seeks to transform power relations.

This orientation was already present in Crenshaw's foundational contributions. As Collins (2017) argues, academic acceptance of intersectionality involved what she calls an "imperfect translation," through which central elements of Crenshaw's original formulation were diluted or ignored. Crenshaw's work emerged from the lived experiences and knowledge of Black women; she situated herself within Black feminist thought and centred how multiple systems of power shape women's lives. Crenshaw's analyses prioritized social justice and remained committed to improving the material conditions of Black and of all people (Collins, 2017). In the next subsection, I turn to how academia formalized intersectionality.

2.2. Intersectionality: Interpreting and Challenging Power Relations

In her 1989 article, Kimberlé Crenshaw examines how both feminist theory and antiracist politics have frequently failed to address specific experiences of Black women due to what she

calls a “single-axis framework.” Within this framework, race and gender are treated as mutually exclusive categories of analysis, rendering Black women’s experiences theoretically invisible or distorted. Crenshaw argues that this intersectional experience is not simply the sum of racism and sexism, but a distinct configuration that emerges from their interaction (Crenshaw, 1989). Analyses that isolate race or gender therefore fail to capture how Black women are subordinated.

This limitation is evident in feminist critiques grounded in white women's experiences. For example, in a racialized society, Black women were never confined to the domestic sphere in the same way, nor were Black men universally recognized as powerful occupants of the public sphere (Crenshaw, 1989). Racism disrupts and reconfigures gender and class norms, demonstrating that theoretical claims based on white women’s experiences risk overgeneralization.

In *Mapping the Margins*, Crenshaw (1991) further develops intersectionality by situating it within debates on violence against women and identity politics. While feminist movements reframed violence as social rather than private, they often relied on universalizing narratives that ended up centring white women’s experiences. This obscured the specific conditions shaping Black women’s vulnerability to violence.

Through concrete examples, Crenshaw (1991) shows how race, class, and immigration status shape access to protection and support. For instance, Black women seeking refuge in shelters frequently faced overlapping structural barriers: unemployment or underemployment, poverty, caregiving responsibilities, and limited professional opportunities. These burdens were compounded by racially discriminatory housing and employment practices and by higher unemployment rates within racialized communities, making reliance on extended family networks less viable. In addition, services designed to protect victims often excluded immigrant women who did not speak English, turning institutions meant to provide safety into additional obstacles.

Crenshaw (1991) also highlights political tensions surrounding data collection on domestic violence. In one example, police statistics were withheld out of concern that high violence rates in minority communities would reinforce racist stereotypes and portray Black communities as inherently violent to justify oppressive police practices. While motivated by antiracist priorities, this strategic silence erased Black women by suppressing information that could have supported efforts to address violence against women within those communities. Through these examples, Crenshaw (1991) demonstrates that violence against women cannot be understood solely through gender. Structural, political, and cultural dimensions intersect to

shape how violence is experienced, recognized, and addressed. Without attending to these intersecting dynamics, responses to violence risk reproducing exclusions they seek to challenge.

Furthermore, Crenshaw (1991) also offers important insights into identity politics. While she acknowledges that identity politics can serve as a powerful source of collective strength grounded in shared experiences of marginalization, she argues that it often fails to account for internal differences within groups. By organizing around a single axis, such as "women" or "racialized people," these frameworks may inadvertently marginalize those whose lives are shaped by multiple, intersecting forms of oppression.

At the same time, identity politics often conflicts with dominant liberal frameworks that treat categories such as race and gender as prejudices to be eliminated. As Crenshaw observes, mainstream liberal thought seeks to "empty such categories of any social significance," suggesting that liberation lies in transcending difference rather than recognizing its political potential (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). In this view, equality is imagined as neutrality, achieved by erasing social location.

This concern anticipates later critiques regarding the depoliticization of intersectionality. Crenshaw's early warning resonates with what Bilge (2018) identifies as the neoliberal appropriation of intersectionality — a process through which the concept is detached from its Black feminist and social justice commitments and reframed within managerial or diversity-oriented agendas.

This tension is significant because it reveals a shared limitation: both identity politics and liberal universalism can obscure how power structures social categories. In this sense, the issue is not identity itself, but how identity is connected to relations of power and inequalities that produce distinct social positions.

Djamila Ribeiro (2018), a Black Brazilian feminist intellectual, reinforces this shift by emphasizing that articulations of race, class, and gender are not merely identity-based claims, but structural critiques. In this sense, debates over identity concern social location and recognition, as societies systematically devalue certain positions. This critique also extends to the definition of humanity: historically centred on white populations, especially white men, while denying full recognition to Black people, particularly Black women. Black feminist thought does not simply add new voices to existing debates but challenges the structures that determine whose experiences are recognized as fully human (Ribeiro, 2018).

Intersectionality, therefore, emerges not as a framework centred on identity as an endpoint, but as an analytical approach that uses identity as a starting point to examine how

power organizes hierarchies, meaning, and material conditions. It is precisely this shift from identity as category to power as structure that enables the development of intersectionality as a broader critical social theory. Patricia Hill Collins (2019) advances this formulation by describing intersectionality as a "critical social theory in the making." As hooks (1984) explains, this implies a theory that remains open to critique, revision, and the exploration of new possibilities.

At the centre of this framework is the understanding that power relations influence social relations across societies and individual experiences in everyday life (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Rather than treating categories such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality as separate variables, it understands them as mutually constitutive dimensions of power. Thus, a central premise of this framework is that systems of domination operate relationally (Collins, 2019; Collins & Bilge, 2020). Racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of inequality are interconnected, shaping material outcomes and social hierarchies. As a result, individuals occupy positions within these relations, and these social locations influence lived experience and knowledge production (Collins, 2019). Social location also reflects how some individuals are more vulnerable than others. Different intersections situate people in different social locations — some individuals are more likely to be excluded, marginalized, erased, and subordinated (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

This perspective also offers a distinct approach to social inequality. It rejects explanations that naturalize inequality as inevitable or inherent. Instead, it locates the production of inequality within structured power relations and examines how these relations generate social problems (Collins, 2019). In this sense, intersectionality moves beyond class-only analyses that treat race, gender, or sexuality as secondary additions, as well as beyond single-issue frameworks focused exclusively on gender or race. Rather than layering categories onto one another, intersectionality offers a more nuanced, multidimensional mapping of inequality (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Intersectionality thus does not merely analyse inequality; it seeks to dismantle unjust power relations and transform the status quo. In summary, its commitment to critical inquiry is inseparable from its engagement with praxis (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

3. The Use of Intersectionality to Analyse Structural Violence

As introduced earlier in this chapter, structural violence refers to forms of harm that are continuous, normalized, and embedded in the functioning of society. It sustains social order in ways that favour those occupying elite and dominant positions. However, speaking of structural

violence in the singular risks suggesting a monolithic structure. For this reason, it may be more analytically precise to speak of structural violence as plural forms of harm produced through distinct yet interconnected systems of power. These systems do not operate only through material arrangements, but also through social discourses that assign meaning to bodies and territories.

This becomes evident in how youth and violence are constructed in dominant narratives. As discussed in the previous chapter, Black youth are often placed at the centre of the problem, while racism is relegated to a marginal status in the analysis (Gomes & Laborne, 2018). Such displacement illustrates structural violence at work: premature deaths become normalized, and their political and social origins are obscured (Scheper-Hughes, 2004). When violence is detached from the power relations that produce it, responsibility shifts from structures to individuals, and structural violence is rendered invisible.

The normalization of large-scale harm further reinforces this dynamic. High rates of homicide among young Black men and high rates of sexual violence against young Black women do not generate a proportionate social or political outrage. As Farmer (1996) suggests, when suffering becomes widespread, it is reduced to statistics, rendering individual lives invisible and silencing their stories. This normalization is a key mechanism of structural violence.

In peripheral contexts, these dynamics are intensified through what Scheper-Hughes (2004) describes as "dangerous discourses" and localized "small wars and invisible genocides," in which entire groups are constructed as internal enemies. When Black bodies are represented as dangerous, animals, monsters, deviant, or uncontrollable, violence against them becomes socially justifiable (Fernandes, 2014; Gomes & Laborne, 2018; Ribeiro, 2018; Ursin, 2020). Policies and interventions that focus on controlling, disciplining, or eliminating young people from these territories further displace attention from inequalities and racism, reinforcing dynamics of exclusion and dehumanization.

Although more evident and discussed, these processes are not limited to men. As discussed earlier, controlling images can operate as mechanisms of structural violence. They shape how Black women are perceived and positioned, contributing to the normalization of inequality, the displacement of responsibility, and the justification or minimization of violence against them. Added to that, young women remain largely invisible within dominant discussions of youth and violence or are reduced to approaches that focus on sexuality and moral regulation. This absence reinforces the need to centre intersectional feminism as an analytical lens.

These dynamics are also sustained through normative regimes that organize social life in peripheral territories. Processes of criminalization, militarization, religious moral regulation, and the control of young women's sexuality function as forms of disciplinary power (Collins, 1990/2022). They operate not only through repression, but through the production of norms that define who is respectable, who is suspect, and who is disposable. In this sense, violence cannot be understood solely as an outcome — Farmer (2005) had already drawn attention to how violence results from unequal and unjust organization of power systems; but beyond being merely a result, violence is constitutive of the way power is organized and exercised.

Violence thus becomes one of the most revealing sites through which intersecting power relations materialize. Collins (2019) describes violence as a *saturated site of intersecting power relations*. By this, she means that violence gathers practices, institutions, representations, and everyday interactions that recur across seemingly distinct systems of oppression (Collins, 2019, p. 238). Violence becomes a nodal point where these relations intersect, exposing their mutual constitution.

Furthermore, violence functions as a kind of conceptual glue that holds systems of power together. More than a connecting concept, however, violence is fundamental to organizing and managing power as domination (Collins, 2019). Social hierarchies do not sustain themselves through consent alone. Maintaining unequal positions relies on coercion, intimidation, humiliation, routinized control, disciplinary regulation, and the normalization of harm (Collins, 2019).

Collins (1990/2022) further deepens this analysis by linking violence to the Matrix of Domination framework. This universal framework helps explain how seemingly distinct power relations are organized and operate through common domains. Four interrelated domains organize power relations: structural, disciplinary, cultural (or hegemonic), and interpersonal. These domains are interconnected, each performing a distinct function: the structural domain organizes oppression, the disciplinary domain manages it, the cultural domain justifies it, and the interpersonal domain shapes lived experiences and individual consciousness (Collins, 1990/2022, p. 349).

Drawing on the experiences of Black women in the United States, Collins (1990/2022) shows how the structural domain refers to the organization of core social institutions that reproduce subordination. Institutions such as employment, housing, education, health, religion, prisons, and the military may support, ignore, or, in some cases, challenge violence (Collins, 2024). The disciplinary domain, in turn, is closely linked to the structural domain, as it regulates and manages inequality within these institutions. Even when marginalized groups gain access

to institutional spaces, disciplinary mechanisms operate to maintain disadvantage and segregation, reinforcing their position within social hierarchies (Collins, 1990/2022). This domain involves the differential application of rules and regulations that monitor, discipline, and punish bodies according to their social categories of belonging (Collins, 2024).

The cultural or hegemonic domain legitimizes and justifies the practices of the other domains (Collins, 1990/2022, 2024). Through ideologies and cultural representations, it defines what is considered legitimate or illegitimate violence, linking institutional arrangements to organizational practices and shaping social interactions (Collins, 2024). Its power lies in its capacity to shape individual consciousness, particularly when subordinated groups come to internalize dominant ideologies that sustain systems of oppression (Collins, 1990/2022). Finally, the interpersonal domain refers to everyday interactions and how people treat one another (Collins, 2024). It highlights how thoughts, behaviours, and social relations can reproduce (or challenge) systems of domination in daily life. Across all these interconnected domains, power organizes violence, and violence, in turn, reveals how power is structured (Collins, 2024).

Understanding violence as a saturated site also addresses key critiques of structural violence frameworks, particularly concerns that they may equate power with violence and portray marginalized groups as passive victims (Parsons, 2007; Silva, 2014). If violence were omnipotent and total, resistance would appear impossible. However, when violence is understood as relational and situated within intersecting domains of power, new questions emerge about how resistance operates. Acts that denaturalize violence — challenging hate speech, exposing normalized institutional harm, refusing routinized practices — can destabilize the appearance of domination as fully hegemonic (Collins, 2019). Unmasking violence as illegitimate in a specific context may reverberate across broader systems of power (Collins, 2019).

In this sense, intersectional analyses of violence illuminate not only domination, but also the possibility of resistance and empowerment: collective action that contests and reconfigures power relations. Individuals occupying intersecting positions within systems of power also hold privileged epistemic positions to identify how violence operates (Silva, 2014). Both structural violence and intersectionality emerge from traditions of thought grounded in lived experience and social movements committed to social justice. They are not merely analytical tools, but frameworks developed to name, challenge and transform systems of oppression.

The integration of structural violence and intersectionality is not unprecedented. Catherine Flynn et al. (2016) expand structural violence beyond macro-level abstraction by incorporating symbolic, institutional, everyday, and intersubjective dimensions, drawing on intersectional feminist scholarship. This approach bridges structural processes and lived experience, showing how macro-level inequalities are mediated, negotiated, and contested in everyday life.

By emphasizing the intersubjective dimension, Flynn et al. highlight meaning-making, subjectivity, and agency. Structural violence is not imposed upon passive individuals; it can be interpreted, negotiated, internalized, and resisted. This perspective reinforces the idea that structural violence is dynamic, relational, and experienced unevenly across social positions.

While Flynn et al.'s (2016) framework is valuable for making visible the subjective dimensions of structural violence, in this thesis I draw more directly on Collins's (2019; 2024) formulation of violence as a saturated site of intersecting power relations. This perspective allows for a more dynamic understanding of how violence operates, one that does not separate subjectivity into a distinct analytical domain but rather situates it across the multiple domains through which power is organized.

By conceptualizing power as simultaneously structural, disciplinary, cultural, and interpersonal, Collins (2019) foregrounds how domination and resistance are co-constitutive processes. Institutions, cultural expressions, everyday interactions, and even regulatory practices are not inherently oppressive; they may also function as sites of contestation, re-signification, and resistance. This is particularly important for this thesis, as it enables an analysis that captures not only how structural violence is reproduced, but also how it is challenged in practice — including through cultural forms, relational dynamics, and alternative modes of regulation grounded in care, trust, and recognition rather than surveillance and punishment. In this sense, subjectivity is not treated as a separate dimension, but as embedded within and shaped through these intersecting domains of power, where individuals and groups may both reproduce and transgress dominant norms.

Violence, therefore, is a powerful analytical phenomenon for understanding how intersecting power relations are organized, sustained, and challenged (Collins, 2019). In this thesis, structural violence refers to recurring, normalized, and relational forms of harm produced through intersecting structures of power. It operates across interpersonal interactions, institutional arrangements, disciplinary practices, and cultural narratives, shaping who is exposed to exclusion, indifference, humiliation, attacks on personhood, and whose lives are devalued. This includes young people whose lives are structured by racialized, gendered,

classed, and territorialized forms of control, often constructed through dominant narratives that frame them as either dangerous or vulnerable victims.

As Collins and Bilge (2020) note, age encompasses social categories. It cuts across race, gender, class, and place of residence, intensifying young people's exposure to intersecting forms of structural violence. Age is also embedded in power relations. In adultist societies, adults are positioned as the authoritative social position, while children and young people are often constructed as less capable, less knowledgeable, and less credible than adults (Wall, 2025). Adultism operates through hierarchies of authority and credibility, shaping whose perspectives are taken seriously, whose experiences are considered legitimate, and whose voices are dismissed or underestimated (Wall, 2025). It is therefore essential to analyse how children and young people experience, interpret, and respond to violence within these power relations. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, dominant literature often treats violence as episodic or behavioural, contributing to the stigmatization and marginalization of youth by individualizing responsibility. At the same time, this literature has often failed to centre young people's own perspectives and interpretations of the violence they experience, positioning them mainly as objects of inquiry rather than as knowledge producers.

This reinforces the importance of centring lived experience. Understanding structural violence as relational and intersectional requires engaging directly with those who experience it as knowledge producers capable of articulating how violence operates in their lives. For this reason, I adopt Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a methodological approach — one that centres lived experience, prioritizes participants' interests, needs, and motivations, and is grounded in relational engagement and a commitment to social transformation.

CHAPTER THREE: BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT AND PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

In this chapter, I outline the methodological framework and research process of this thesis. It begins by presenting the epistemological foundations that guide the research, drawing on Black feminist thought, and then discusses my positionality and its implications for knowledge production. The chapter then introduces Participatory Action Research (PAR) as the methodological approach informing the study.

Afterward, I detail the different phases of the research process, including recruitment, an overview of the Vargem das Flores region, and the introduction of the co-researchers. I then describe the data collection process, including focus groups, interviews, and the arts-based intervention. This is followed by a discussion of the data analysis, based on reflexive thematic analysis. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of ethical considerations and the study's limitations.

1. Epistemological Position: Black Feminist Thought

Patricia Hill Collins (1990/2022) defines epistemology as the study of the standards used to evaluate what counts as knowledge and why certain claims are accepted as true. For example, the claim that young people living in peripheral and precarious neighbourhoods have an innate predisposition toward deviance reflects an epistemological position that treats this association as true and legitimate. But as I explored in Chapter One, this association is based on racist, criminalizing, and classist conceptions of these young people. In this sense, epistemology also helps reveal how relations of power shape who is believed and why (Collins, 1990/2022).

Collins argues that the validation of knowledge within dominant institutions has historically been controlled by elite white men or other groups occupying positions of domination. Their interests shape the themes, questions, and epistemological assumptions that guide traditional scholarship. As a result, knowledge produced from other social locations is often dismissed, distorted, excluded, or marginalized within academic debates (Collins, 1990/2022, p. 322). Black people therefore often become objects of knowledge produced by white scholars, but scholars rarely recognize them as individuals who produce knowledge (Kilomba, 2010). As Djamila Ribeiro (2024) adds, if individuals are positioned within dehumanizing and hierarchical social structures, their intellectual production is also treated as subordinate and less valuable. Thus, social location shapes whose knowledge is considered legitimate, contributing to silencing marginalized voices (Ribeiro, 2024).

Grada Kilomba (2010) argues that academia has long functioned as a site where white scholars produced theoretical and scientific discourses that constructed Black people as inferior or as the "Other." In this sense, knowledge production within academia cannot be understood as a neutral space of wisdom, science, or scholarship; it is also shaped by power and violence. As Kilomba (2010) writes, "here [in academia] we have been described, classified, dehumanized, primitivized, brutalized, killed. This is not a neutral space" (p. 27).

In addition, these dynamics cannot be understood outside the legacy of colonial thought, which has historically structured who is recognized as capable of producing knowledge. Colonial discourse propagated the notion that subordinated groups cannot articulate their own experiences or produce legitimate interpretations of their oppression (Collins, 1990/2022; Kilomba, 2010). Within this framework, the subaltern is either assumed to identify uncritically with dominant groups or to lack the cognitive capacity to understand their own sociopolitical conditions. Colonial ideology also rests on the claim that subordinated populations possess a diminished humanity compared to their rulers, rendering them less capable of speaking in their own name or producing valid knowledge. As a result, the perspectives of oppressed groups are often dismissed as inadequate or illegitimate, frequently portrayed as evidence of passivity or false consciousness rather than as interpretations of domination (Collins, 1990/2022; Kilomba, 2010).

Within the Brazilian context, Sueli Carneiro (2023) conceptualizes these processes through the notion of *epistemicide*. For Carneiro, epistemicide extends beyond disqualifying or erasing knowledge produced by subordinated groups. It also involves denying access to education, particularly quality education, producing narratives of intellectual inferiority, delegitimizing Black people as knowledge producers, and systematically undermining their cognitive capacity. These processes are reinforced by material deprivation and by the erosion of self-esteem generated through racial discrimination within educational systems (Carneiro, 2023, pp. 88–89). In this sense, it is impossible to disqualify the knowledge of dominated people without simultaneously disqualifying them as individuals and as a collective, and vice versa.

When we turn specifically to Black women, the colonial legacy becomes even more evident. As bell hooks (1991) demonstrates, Black women have historically been constructed as "all body, no mind" (hooks, 1991, p. 153). Within colonial and slaveholding societies, Black women were framed as a dangerous feminine nature that needed to be controlled. During slavery, Black women's bodies were treated as incubators for the reproduction of enslaved populations and as objects used to justify the sexual exploitation and rape of Black women by

white men (hooks, 1991). To sustain this system, dominant discourse constructed Black women's bodies as excessively sensual, representing a primitive and uncontrolled eroticism (hooks, 1991). This colonial legacy continues to shape the dominant images of Black women, distancing them from the realms of intellect, mind, and reason, reinforcing perceptions that they are inadequate, inferior, or deficient (hooks, 1991).

However, subordinated groups have never been merely passive victims or willing accomplices to domination (Collins, 1990/2022; Kilomba, 2010; Ribeiro, 2024). As Collins (1990/2022) argues, they produce what she describes as *subjugated knowledge* — forms of understanding grounded in the lived experiences of marginalized groups. Because social institutions controlled by white men have historically excluded the ideas and experiences of Black women, Amefrican women[5] have developed alternative spaces and practices for producing and circulating knowledge (Collins, 1990/2022). Music, literature, everyday conversations, and daily practices have functioned as important sites for the development of Black feminist consciousness. Black feminist epistemology is therefore grounded in these forms of subjugated knowledge, which emerge from Black women's self-definitions and lived experiences.

Thus, the first key element of Black feminist thought is centring Black women's lived experiences as a fundamental source of knowledge. Living as a Black woman, inhabiting this body, requires an understanding of the intersecting dynamics of oppression that shape everyday life and are often essential for survival (Collins, 1990/2022). This knowledge emerges from the lived wisdom of a group historically objectified and denied the protections that whiteness, masculinity, and wealth confer. In this sense, Black feminist epistemology acknowledges those who live these experiences and claim authority over their own narratives as more credible interpreters of these realities than those who approach them from a distance (Collins, 1990/2022). Thus, I treat the young women's accounts as valid knowledge, presenting their experiences as they described and interpreted. This reflects my epistemological position that

[5] I use the term *Amefrican women*, as proposed by Lélia Gonzalez (1988), in contrast to the term *Afro-American*, which often reflects the use of "America" as synonymous with the United States. Gonzalez's concept of *Amefricanidade* challenges this imperial and restrictive understanding by emphasizing that "America" refers to multiple interconnected regions, including South America, Central America, the Caribbean, and North America (Gonzalez, 1988). While Patricia Hill Collins (1990/2022) employs the term *African American* to refer specifically to Black women in the United States, which is appropriate to the historical and social context she analyses, my use of *Amefrican women* intends to acknowledge the shared histories of colonialism, slavery, and racialization across the Americas while acknowledging their regional specificities (Gonzalez, 1988).

those who live these experiences are authoritative interpreters of their own realities, while recognizing that such knowledge remains situated and partial.

As I explored in Chapter Two, Black feminist thought also aligns closely with the intersectional framework, emphasizing that understanding Black women's experiences requires looking at their entire lives and recognizing how race, gender, and class work together to shape everyday realities. As Ribeiro (2024) clearly articulates, systems of oppression do not operate separately:

> I like to joke that I cannot say I'll fight racism and then tomorrow, at 2:25 p.m., if I have time, I'll fight sexism, since these oppressions act in concert. Being Black and a woman, I am put in a place of greater vulnerability because of these oppressions, and they must accordingly be combated together. (Ribeiro, 2024, p. 57)

In the daily lives of Black women, race and gender operate simultaneously, even though they may be analytically distinguished (Collins, 1990/2022). Here, I want to highlight how this also counters the dualistic discourses characteristic of systems of domination. As bell hooks (1984) argues, systems of domination in Western society are structured in an "either/or" logic. In contrast, Black feminist epistemology rejects this dualistic framework, recognizing that these dimensions are interconnected and cannot be understood independently.

Dialoguing with hooks's (1984) critique of dualistic thinking in Western societies, Collins (1986) further explains how dichotomies such as black/white, male/female, reason/emotion, fact/opinion, and subject/object derive meaning through opposition to their contrasting pair (p. 20). These oppositions are not neutral differences but hierarchical relationships. Rather than functioning as complementary categories, one side of the pair becomes positioned as superior while the other is subordinated. Because such relationships rarely reflect equal difference, they resolve their instability by subordinating one group to the other (Collins, 1986).

Acknowledging that relationships between individuals should not be hierarchical and vertical is also fundamental to knowledge production based on Black feminist epistemology. Knowledge is validated through *dialogue* and *connectedness* (Collins, 1990/2022). Dialogue challenges this dualistic view of knowledge production structured around hierarchical relations between subject and object. Instead, it recognizes that knowledge emerges through conversations between individuals who bring their own experiences, perspectives, and interpretations, rather than through a one-sided discourse imposed by a knowing subject upon an object of study (Collins, 1990/2022).

Another key component of Black feminist epistemology is an *ethics of caring*, which recognizes personal expressiveness, individuality, emotions, and empathy as central elements in the process of validating knowledge (Collins, 1990/2022). Rather than dismissing these dimensions as subjective weaknesses, Black feminist thought understands them as part of how knowledge is produced and communicated. This perspective challenges how women's experiences have historically been treated in academic spaces, where emotionality, subjectivity, and personal narratives are often dismissed as incompatible with scientific knowledge.

Grada Kilomba (2010) illustrates this dynamic through her own experiences in academia. As a Black scholar, she frequently encountered remarks such as: "you have a very subjective perspective," "very personal," "very emotional," "very specific," followed by the question: "Are these objective facts?" (Kilomba, 2010, p. 28). Such comments function as mechanisms of silencing, pushing Black women's voices to the margins of academic knowledge production. As Kilomba explains:

> When they speak it is scientific, when we speak it is unscientific; universal / specific; objective / subjective; neutral / personal; rational / emotional; impartial / partial; they have facts, we have opinions; they have knowledge, we have experiences. These are not simple semantic categorizations; they possess a dimension of power that maintains hierarchical positions and upholds white supremacy. (Kilomba, 2010, p. 28)

Within Black feminist epistemology, however, emotions and personal experience are not treated as epistemological weaknesses but as part of an ethical orientation toward knowledge production that values attentiveness, empathy, and respect for others' lived realities. This approach is linked to the other dimension of an *ethics of personal accountability*, in which researchers are expected to take responsibility for their knowledge claims and remain accountable for how their interpretations affect others (Collins, 1990/2022).

Black feminist epistemology is therefore powerful in expanding our understandings of how devalued and silenced groups produce knowledge that can foster social transformation, challenge dominant narratives, and expose realities that are not meant to be seen or spoken (Collins, 1990/2022; Kilomba, 2010). Kilomba explains that this knowledge becomes threatening when it "addresses the thought that the oppressed is seeing something that is not to be seen and is about to say 'something' that is not to be said, something that should be kept quiet, secret" (Kilomba, 2010, p. 30). Thus, it provides a particular vantage point for interpreting and challenging social reality.

As bell hooks (1984) argues, living at the margins does not mean existing outside society but rather inhabiting a position that allows one to see both the centre and the margins simultaneously. Black women's survival has long depended on this awareness of distance and connection to dominant structures. Patricia Hill Collins (1986) conceptualizes this epistemic position through the notion of the *outsider-within*. Historically, Amefrican women have often occupied social roles that placed them inside dominant spaces while excluding them from those spaces. For example, many Black women worked as domestic workers within white households, sometimes described as “members” of these families while never fully belonging to them. This ambiguous position gave them a vantage point to observe the contradictions of racial hierarchies and the everyday workings of elite power. As Collins claims, this proximity often demystified the supposed superiority of dominant groups, revealing that their elevated social status was sustained not by superior intellect or merit, but largely by the advantages of racism.

This standpoint generates important insights, but it does not imply a superior or “purer” form of knowledge. As Collins (1990/2022) emphasizes, the lived experiences of Black women constitute a distinctive social position for investigating the intersections of power; however, all knowledge remains partial and situated. Different social groups develop interpretations of reality shaped by their own positions within social hierarchies, and these perspectives inevitably reflect both the insights and the limits of those locations.

Djamila Ribeiro's concept of speaking place further clarifies how social position shapes knowledge production. Ribeiro (2024) argues that the discussion is not only about individual experiences but also about how systems of oppression shape who is recognized as a legitimate speaker and whose knowledge is taken seriously. Ribeiro reflects on how marginalized groups assert their existence from this speaking place. It is primarily a structural discussion that examines who can speak, what they are speaking about, to whom, and with what interests. Ribeiro asks: in a patriarchal, colonial, racist, and classist society, who can speak?

Reflecting on different speaking places therefore helps expose how unequal social structures distribute knowledge and authority. As Ribeiro notes, such reflections can “destabilize, create fissures and tensions that might lead to the emergence of new ways of seeing,” opening space for perspectives that challenge dominant discourses (Ribeiro, 2024, p. 68). In this sense, Black feminist thought does more than simply oppose hegemonic knowledge; it proposes alternative ways of understanding social reality grounded in different social experiences and interpretive frameworks. As Collins (1990/2022) argues, this epistemology challenges established forms of certified knowledge, questioning whether what has long been

accepted as truth can withstand the test of alternative ways of validating knowledge. This epistemological position therefore requires taking the voices and interpretations of marginalized groups seriously, recognizing that their accounts and lived experiences are not merely subjective perspectives but important forms of knowledge about their own realities and the organization of power relations.

I have established my epistemological foundations in Black feminist thought, which emphasizes that who speaks, from where, and under what conditions and interests are central questions in the production of knowledge. Reflecting on the researcher's positionality is therefore not simply a methodological requirement but an epistemological commitment. In the following section, I examine my own social locations and reflect on my experiences of race, class, and gender.

2. Positionality

I begin this section with what is most difficult for me, what feels most uncomfortable, and perhaps that is precisely why I feel the need to start here: with my racial identification. This discomfort reveals the contradictions and tensions within my social positions. In addition, I need to write this first in Portuguese, because that is what makes the most sense to me and how it is used in Brazil: I identify myself as *negra*. From this point forward, I will continue to use Black as a synonym for *negra*.

Many, many times, I questioned how I could be a Black woman. As the daughter of public servants, from age 3 to 17, I attended (paying tuition) the same private school, consistently ranked among the top schools in the city, and I have been able to make many choices throughout my life. In addition, my physical features are closer to whiteness. My skin is lighter, my hair is curly, and my nose and lips are considered more "refined."

I know what this phenotype means in a racially mixed country like Brazil, which has had a political project of whitening its population, where the ideology of racial democracy is still present, and where racism operates through colourism by creating divisions and hierarchies within the Black community. I know that this places me in a position of receiving differential treatment, the kind of treatment that white people receive, including because of my social class. I had privileges that many Black women do not, particularly those with darker skin, coily hair, and features more commonly associated with Blackness, such as broader noses and fuller lips.

So how can I consider myself a Black woman? Through reading Black women, and through the reflections and readings I engaged with for this thesis, I began naming and better understanding the sources of many of my discomforts and feelings. Moving to another country

also played an important role in this process. Immigrating to Canada made it more evident to me that I am non-white. As an international student, I was further exposed to many instances where I had to deal with implicit assumptions that my educational background was inferior to that of my Canadian colleagues, that I was less capable, less educated, and not good enough.

These are relatively recent reflections, and they also reflect a position of privilege. The fact that I have only come to understand my racial position at this stage in my life speaks to the differential treatment I have received — a treatment closer to that afforded to white people. In a context where whiteness is positioned as the unmarked and universal subject, being able to "discover" oneself as racialized later in life is an expression of privilege. For many Black children, this awareness emerges much earlier, often through experiences of exclusion and discrimination.

But I have always felt in my body how much effort it took for me to feel good about myself — to feel secure, confident, and to have any sense of self-esteem. This was never stable ground for me; it was something I was always navigating unevenly. There was always something about me that needed to be improved, corrected, and modified.

When I was a child, and into my teenage years, my godmother would often tell me that I should not marry a Black man. She used to say that it was already enough that my mother and I had "bad" hair, and that if I had a child, they would be born with tightly coiled hair, and she would refuse to brush or have to braid a child's hair like that.

I straightened my hair for the first time when I was around 13 years old. I remember how traumatic that experience was, and how painful it was every single time I went to straighten my hair. I remember the strong smell of the chemicals, the pain of having my hair constantly pulled, my scalp burning, and my eyes irritated. The first time I chemically relaxed my hair, the damage was so severe that, for nearly an entire school year, I had to keep it tied up because it had become rigid and fragile. But I continued straightening my hair until I was 26 years old (I am now 34), and all that suffering seemed worth it at the time so that I could have straight hair — hair that could move freely, swing, be light and flowing, and that could be ruined at any moment if there was any chance of rain.

Another aspect now relates to being a woman, which cannot be separated from being Black. As a child, I was a very cheerful and playful girl, always putting myself at the centre of attention, dancing, singing, and performing. I clearly remember a song that my relatives used to sing to me, and that I would also sing, proudly and playfully: *"eu sou pequenininha da perna grossa, vestidinho curto papai não gosta"* ("I'm a little girl with chubby legs, daddy doesn't like my short dress").

My body, even as a child, was already curvilinear: thick legs, wide hips, and I was the first among my friends to develop breasts. This body became the main tool I used to be accepted, desired, and seen as if it were the only interesting thing I had to offer. My teenage years were marked by many encounters with young men in which my body was treated like a piece of meat, a form of currency, an object — something to be consumed and touched, but not to be loved, cared for, or respected.

But I was also a child with many privileges. I come from a middle-class family, and the stability of my parents' professions (public servants, now retired) provided me with many opportunities and possibilities. I am part of a privileged elite in a country as unequal as Brazil. My family belongs to the top 5% of the population, and I know that this protects me.

I could make many choices. I was able to choose to pursue a PhD in Canada, which I had to partially fund, something I know is inaccessible to many people. During my childhood, I could explore all my interests. Not only explore them, but I also had the freedom to start and stop any activity I was engaged in. I practiced ballet, handball, and horseback riding for seven years (an activity I know is often accessible only to elite social groups), as well as guitar, accordion, watercolour painting, and English classes. I attended private school and later went to a public university (which, in Brazil, has historically been more accessible to elite social groups). Still, I was fortunate to have parents with a strong sense of class awareness. My parents, especially my father, always reminded us that we were part of the working class.

Holding all these dimensions together is not straightforward; it is complex, contradictory and full of conflicts. My experiences as a middle-class Black woman, marked by discomfort, bodily regulation, and racialized and gendered forms of violence, coexist with positions of privilege shaped by my class background, my proximity to whiteness, and the opportunities I have had access to throughout my life. Recognizing this requires acknowledging that I also occupy positions that are aligned with dominant and oppressive structures, and that I benefit from them in ways that shape how I see, move through, and interpret the world.

This positionality demands a continuous process of reflexivity, particularly in relation to how I engage with the young women involved in this research. Some of these tensions became evident during fieldwork, especially in how I navigated the territory and in the fear and apprehension I could not shake. These feelings were not emerging from concrete experiences or specific incidents, but from internalized and socially produced perceptions of the periphery as a dangerous space. Throughout the fieldwork, there was only one incident that led us to cancel a day of research activities due to a reported threat of an attack at the site where the study was taking place. However, the organization's coordinator informed me in advance and

managed the situation carefully, in coordination with local security actors. The threat did not materialize, no one was harmed, and the response was handled in a calm and organized manner.

At the same time, as I moved through the territory, whether by car or on foot, during the day or at night, whether I was alone or accompanied by one of the young women when giving them a ride, I often felt uneasy. Entering narrow streets, alleys, and spaces with limited visibility or few exit routes intensified this feeling. But even in less constrained situations, such as walking to the school at night during recruitment, I felt apprehensive when leaving the building and returning to my car, or when leaving the community later in the evening. I found myself anticipating potential risks, worrying about my physical safety, about my car being targeted, or about something happening to me. These reactions were often disproportionate to the situations in question. They occurred even in the absence of any warning from the young women or concrete evidence that I was in danger.

In this sense, my fear was less a reflection of the realities of the community and more an expression of socially produced narratives that construct the periphery as inherently unsafe. These spaces are imagined as constant threats to social order and to the safety of those positioned as respectable, morally superior, and in need of protection — a position I found myself inhabiting at times. This reveals how my positionality is also shaped by my proximity to privilege and, at times, by my alignment with dominant ways of perceiving and interpreting these territories.

These reflections are central to how I engaged with and interpreted the data. They required me to continuously question how my social positions, assumptions, and internalized dominant beliefs shaped what I saw, how I coded, and the meanings I attributed to the young women's experiences. In this sense, adopting a reflexive thematic analysis was not only a methodological choice, but an epistemological commitment aligned with Black feminist thought and participatory approaches.

It required me to remain attentive to my role in producing knowledge, making visible the interpretive decisions, tensions, and shifts that emerged throughout the analytical process. This positioning also foregrounds the relational nature of this research, which I develop further in the following section, where I discuss participatory action research (PAR) as a collaborative approach that brings into dialogue my position as a researcher from outside the community and the situated knowledge of those who live within it.

3. Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research (PAR) aligns with the premises of intersectionality, particularly regarding relationality (Collins, 2019). As I explored in Chapter Two, relationality is foundational in intersectional feminism and is embedded in the term intersectionality itself. Similarly, within Black feminist epistemology, knowledge production is validated through respectful, horizontal, and caring dialogue (Collins, 1990/2022). In this sense, PAR resonates with my epistemological commitments by recognizing lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge and by emphasizing the relational processes through which knowledge is produced.

Dana Takagi (2015), discussing the use of PAR within ethnic studies, highlights how this approach differs from conventional research methodologies by emphasizing iteration and reflection. Recalling Audre Lorde's (1979) essay *The Master's Tools Will Not Dismantle the Master's House*, Takagi (2015) highlights the importance and difficulty of methodological choices in research committed to social justice. As Lorde argues, using the tools of oppressive systems may allow temporary victories within those systems. For instance, using patriarchal strategies to challenge patriarchy itself, but such strategies rarely produce structural transformation. In this sense, choosing PAR reflects a commitment to research approaches that challenge traditional hierarchies of knowledge production rather than reproducing them.

Tara Brown (2024) defines PAR as a methodological approach in which "insiders" become involved as co-researchers in the research process, typically in partnership with "outsiders." Insiders, often referred to as local researchers, are members of the community or population being studied whose lived experiences are directly affected by the social issue under investigation. Outsiders, in contrast, are typically affiliated with academic institutions, such as professors or graduate students, and are not members of the population being studied.

PAR is therefore conducted through collaboration between academic researchers and marginalized social groups "who, historically, have had little control over academic research on their lived experiences" (Brown, 2024, p. 2). This methodological approach rests on the epistemological assumption that individuals who directly experience the social issues under investigation have a significant advantage in producing knowledge about them, understanding their dynamics, and identifying possible responses (Brown, 2024). In this sense, PAR centrers lived experience as a source of knowledge and recognizes those who experience social problems as credible interpreters of the realities they navigate. This assumption resonates strongly with Black feminist epistemology.

Louie Rodríguez and Tara Brown (2009) outline three key principles that guide PAR with young people. The first principle is to ensure that the motivation, development, and outcomes of the research are grounded in questions that resonate with young people's lives. This requires recognizing young people as human beings with valuable experiences and perspectives, rather than treating them merely as sources of data (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). PAR projects therefore emerge from the local contexts young people navigate, using their lived experiences as a starting point for defining research questions and research directions.

The second principle emphasizes meaningful participation. Rodríguez and Brown (2009) highlight the importance of creating collaborative processes in which young people's knowledge and skills are validated, incorporated, and used to generate new forms of knowledge. Throughout the research process, young people's experiences and insights are expected to influence the study's directions and outcomes. This principle is particularly important because young people are rarely given opportunities to meaningfully influence decisions about how they learn, how research about them is conducted, or how adults engage with them (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). By recognizing young people as knowledge holders and co-researchers, PAR challenges conventional assumptions about expertise and authority.

Young people's active participation in the research process, including shared decision-making power, also helps reduce power imbalances between researchers and participants (Guy & Arthur, 2022). While an inherent hierarchical relationship remains between university researchers and participants, PAR seeks to minimize these dynamics through collaborative research practices (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). At the same time, it is important to recognize that such participation can be challenging, particularly for young people who have been marginalized within educational institutions and whose experiences are frequently dismissed or invalidated (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). Offering diverse forms of participation and valuing young people's knowledge are therefore essential strategies for fostering genuine engagement and promoting a more balanced distribution of power within the research process.

This principle is relevant when working with young Black women living in marginalized communities, who are often invisibilized, objectified, and silenced within dominant narratives about youth, violence, and peripheries. Recognizing their experiences and interpretations as legitimate sources of knowledge is therefore central to this study's epistemological foundations.

A third principle highlighted by Rodríguez and Brown (2009) concerns the commitment to ensuring that research contributes to transforming social conditions and practices that affect marginalized youth. PAR recognizes that young people often identify and

critique systems of injustice in their everyday lives. Yet, they are rarely given meaningful opportunities to express their views or influence decisions that affect them.

Similarly, Batsheva Guy and Brittany Arthur (2022) note that PAR aligns with intersectional feminist research because both approaches emphasize the interconnectedness between theory and practice. Investigating social reality is not understood as an end but as part of a broader process that seeks to contribute to social transformation. In this sense, PAR incorporates action, linking the knowledge produced through research to practical interventions that aim to address the issues under investigation.

Having outlined the key principles that guide this study, the following sections present the research design and the different stages of the research process. Throughout these sections, I also demonstrate how the principles of Participatory Action Research were implemented in practice, as well as the challenges and limitations encountered in translating these principles into the concrete realities of fieldwork.

4. Recruitment

In line with the epistemological foundations of PAR and Black feminist epistemology, I approached recruitment as an opportunity to build relationships of trust and dialogue with potential participants, rather than merely identifying research participants. This perspective recognizes that knowledge production emerges through relationships and that the ways participants are invited into the research process can shape dynamics of participation, power, and collaboration.[6]

The inclusion criteria for this project were that participants self-identified as women, self-identified as Black or *Pardas* (anyone who identifies as a mix of two or more racial or ethnic groups, including white, Black, and Indigenous), were between 15 and 17 years old, and lived in the Vargem das Flores region. To identify potential participants, I initially used a purposive, site-based, snowball sampling recruitment strategy (Abrams, 2010; Arcury & Quandt, 1999). While I was still in Canada, my initial recruitment strategy involved contacting facilitators of Fica Vivo! Workshops, community members who are often recognized as local leaders with whom I had previously worked. My goal was for them to help me reach young women who fit the profile, and to suggest and facilitate my contact with other professionals

[6] Some of the methodological reflections presented in this chapter, particularly regarding recruitment and the development of participatory processes, are discussed in greater detail in a forthcoming book chapter based on this study. See: Cardeal, C., Lapierre, S., & Ribeiro, L. (in press). Co-creating knowledge, challenging inequality and power: A PAR experience with young Black women in a Brazilian periphery. In *The Palgrave Handbook on Participatory Action Research with Children*.

working in the community. These professionals make it easier for me to contact organizations, as they also shared information about which organizations had staff members who were willing, interested, and open to helping with my project. For example, some of the facilitators of the Fica Vivo! program workshops advised me not to approach the Fica Vivo! program team, explaining that I would face greater bureaucratic obstacles and would need to obtain institutional approvals — even if it were just to ask these workers for help in publicizing the research. So, a workshop facilitator suggested I contact a school principal and the coordinator of a social assistance program; based on his experience, he believed these professionals were more likely to collaborate on the research.

The principal was at a school that offered Educação de Jovens e Adultos (EJA) (Youth and Adult Education Program), which provides educational opportunities to individuals excluded from formal schooling at the expected age. This was important because the school did not offer high school (which would have included more young people in the study's age range). Still, it did have young people closer to the inclusion criteria's age range who were enrolled in EJA, highlighting an additional vulnerability for these young women: the discrepancy between their age and grade level. Furthermore, the school was in a non-central area of Vargem das Flores, which could have helped reach young women living in outlying parts of the community. This situation also presents another vulnerability factor: distance from the main hub of services and infrastructure.

The other professional the workshop facilitator recommended was the coordinator of the Centro de Referência de Assistência Social (CRAS) (Social Assistance Reference Centre). CRASs are state-run public agencies that organize and provide basic social protection services, where citizens can access information about social assistance benefits and programs, guidance on their rights, and support for resolving family conflicts and strengthening family and community bonds. Families and individuals living in poverty, without income, or facing difficulties accessing public services use this service, with priority given to those who receive government benefits. This organization was in the central part of the region, which allowed me to reach more young people while also reaching vulnerable populations. It was primarily through the Serviço de Convivência e Fortalecimento de Vínculos (SCFV) (Socializing and Bond Strengthening Service)[7] that I was able to connect with young women; these

[7] This is a service that is part of the basic protection policy of social assistance and aims to strengthen family and community relationships, as well as promote integration and the exchange of experiences among participants, and value a sense of collectively. SCFV is a preventive program that emphasizes the defense and affirmation of clients' rights, and the development of clients' capacities.

professionals working at the SCFV, who were already leading groups with young people, helped me identify potential participants who met the study's inclusion criteria.

At the outset of the study, I aimed to work with a group of six to ten co-researchers. This range is considered appropriate for qualitative research designs involving repeated encounters and in-depth engagement with participants (Morse, 2000; Rego et al., 2018). This sample size allows for the generation of rich, detailed data, particularly when multiple methods are employed, as is the case in this thesis. However, as discussed throughout this section, recruitment was dynamic and challenging, and the number of participants gradually decreased over time. Ultimately, the study included five co-researchers, who are introduced later in this chapter.

Initially, twelve young women were identified as meeting the research criteria. Then, I scheduled two conversation circles with the potential co-researchers, one at EJA and the other at CRAS. These meetings were designed to introduce myself, the research assistant who supported me in all the study group activities and the project, and to give the young women a chance to decide whether they wanted to participate. The poster advertising these conversation circles highlighted the study topics such as violence, inequality, injustice, and forms of resistance. Recruitment facilitators informed the identified young women about the meetings and helped circulate the invitation within their networks to potentially reach more young Black women. Despite these efforts, these traditional recruitment methods, including posters and scheduled information sessions, proved ineffective. Attendance was minimal: only one young woman came to the EJA meeting, and none attended the session at CRAS.

This experience revealed the limits of recruitment strategies based on impersonal forms of communication and formal invitations. In contrast, Black feminist epistemology emphasizes the importance of relationality, dialogue, and trust in processes of knowledge production (Collins, 1990/2022). In response, I shifted the strategy toward a more organic and relational approach: engaging young women directly in the community spaces they already occupied. This adjustment also aligned more closely with PAR principles, centring participants' realities and rhythms rather than imposing an external logic of engagement (Brown, 2024). I had previously visited the EJA during class hours, but many students in the target age group were frequently absent. In response, I began visiting the school more regularly and attended the Fica Vivo! graffiti and Afro-braiding workshops, as well as youth activities organized at CRAS.

Through these encounters, recruitment gradually emerged through everyday interactions and conversations rather than through formal invitations alone. As a result, ten

young women expressed interest in joining the research project, and I scheduled a preparatory meeting for the following week to further explain the research process and planned activities.

I designed the preparatory meeting not only as an introduction to the research process but also as an attempt to create a horizontal, co-constructed space aligned with PAR principles. I aimed to foster early collaboration, build trust, and reduce hierarchical relations between participants and me (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). This approach also resonates with Black feminist epistemology, which emphasizes relationality, dialogue, and accountability in processes of knowledge production (Collins, 1990/2022). However, as the process unfolded, it became evident that while this meeting was important for initiating shared decision-making about how we would generate the data and creating a sense of group, it could not fully mitigate the uneven power dynamics that shaped each young woman's experience.

Of the ten young women who initially expressed interest in participating in the study, only six attended the preparatory meeting. Some did not provide a reason for their absence; one said that she no longer wished to participate, and another mentioned that an unforeseen issue had arisen. These last-minute withdrawals invite further reflection on the recruitment process. I was making personal invitations during face-to-face conversations. At the same time as I was introducing the study, I was also "selling" participation in the study as an initiative that would be interesting and fun for them to take part in. It is possible that, in those moments, some of the young women felt uncomfortable declining the invitation directly and therefore agreed to participate without being interested. Although trusted community members were involved in supporting the project, this experience suggests the importance of designing invitation strategies that further minimize the potential for coercion. For instance, allowing more time for young people to reflect before deciding, creating online communications (since youth can be more familiar with these) that provide detailed information about the activities to be carried out, so they could have more information to make a decision, or offering alternative ways to express interest without the pressure of an immediate response.

Despite these recruitment challenges, the preparatory meeting became an important step in building the relational foundation of the research process. It included ice-breaker activities, followed by a presentation of the research objectives and an introduction to the concepts of structural violence and intersectionality. I explained the consent process in detail, including both the guardian consent forms and the assent forms participants would need to sign. We discussed potential risks, benefits, and the voluntary nature of participation, as well as confidentiality and privacy. The meeting also gave the young women space to decide together the day, time, and location of future meetings. In line with the project's commitment to creating

a youth-led environment, the young women were encouraged to co-create a safe, flexible space — one without fixed schedules for breaks or snacks, where they were free to eat, pause, or leave at any time during the activities.

The final part of the preparatory meeting focused on reviewing the focus group and individual interview guides. It was important to review these instruments with them to determine whether the terms I was using and the way I structured the questions made sense to them. Moreover, it provided an opportunity for the young women to envision what participation in the research would entail, the topics we would address, and to decide whether they truly wanted to take part.

I encouraged the young women to contribute, review, and ask questions about the proposed questions. While they did not suggest substantial changes to the content or format, they asked for more concrete examples of exclusion, discrimination, and injustice — the kinds of situations that I was referring to. Each young woman received a copy of the guides to take home. Maya, for example, later shared that she spent time reflecting on the questions, thinking about how she might respond, and initially felt unsure about her ability to participate. This meeting also marked the beginning of our conversations about the study action component.

However, as the research process began to unfold, it also became clear that the ability to participate was not experienced equally among the young women. Despite my intentional efforts to design the preparatory meeting as a collaborative and inclusive space, where power imbalances between participants and me could be minimized, underlying hierarchies among the young women themselves quickly surfaced. These internal dynamics, shaped by differing levels of social vulnerability and access to resources, signalled that power relations could not be mitigated through facilitation alone.

Of the six young women who attended the initial meeting, only four[8] remained involved in the research, highlighting the complex interplay between social conditions and the ability to participate. One participant chose to withdraw due to scheduling conflicts, as she was in her final year of high school and needed to prepare for the Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio (ENEM) (National High School Exam). Another participant, Nadia, discontinued her participation without offering a specific reason. Her withdrawal may reflect how the intersections of various social positions and contextual barriers can influence young women's ability to remain engaged in research projects.

[8] Ana joined the study at the first focus group.

Nadia was initially enthusiastic about the research project, describing it as an opportunity to leave her house and engage in something different, since she did not have friends and typically only left home to attend school. However, despite this initial interest, she eventually withdrew from the project. At the time, Nadia was 15 years old, and, among all participants, she was the only one enrolled in EJA (Youth and Adult Education Program), which placed her in an educational context that did not align with her age group. According to the school educator, it was Nadia's mother who had suggested this enrollment due to Nadia's difficulties keeping up with traditional school classes. Being in the study environment with peers of similar age but at a different educational level may have contributed to a sense of inadequacy or discomfort, which could have influenced her disengagement from the study. Something I had not thought of before.

Geographic location also appeared to be a constraining factor. Nadia lived in a community that is the most distant neighbourhood from where the research activities were held. As I will show in the next section, Vargem das Flores is a large region encompassing various neighbourhoods, and the research meetings were held in more central locations. For the preparatory meeting, I gave Nadia a ride, with her mother's prior approval. I picked her up at her school, which she lived close enough to walk there regularly. During the conversation with Nadia's mother, she mentioned that her daughter had never taken public transportation alone and that walking such a distance was not feasible. These mobility constraints, shaped by Nadia's age and the infrastructure limitations of her neighbourhood, may have made continued participation more challenging for her.

In addition, digital exclusion may have played a role. Unlike the other participants, Nadia did not own a cell phone. During the preparatory meeting, the group discussed creating a WhatsApp group and using personal devices to complete parts of the arts-based activities, such as taking photos and recording videos. Not having access to a phone likely limited Nadia's ability to engage with these aspects of the project and may have contributed to her decision to withdraw.

These elements illustrate how intersecting social factors, such as age, educational pathway, place of residence, and access to technology, can shape young women's ability to engage in participatory research, particularly in peripheral areas. Nadia's case is emblematic: her initial enthusiasm and interest in participating in the study may not have been enough to sustain her engagement when she was faced with the limitations imposed by mobility, digital exclusion, and educational trajectory, which set her apart from the other participants. These created layers of constraint that distinguished her experience, potentially leading to feelings of

exclusion, inferiority, incapability, or disconnection from a group of peers who, despite sharing similar ages, gender and racial identity, seemed distant due to the nuances of their lived contexts.

These experiences illustrate how recruitment and participation in participatory research are shaped by structural conditions of participants' everyday lives. Factors such as mobility, access to technology, educational trajectories, and local infrastructure influence not only who is able to join research projects, but also who is able to remain involved over time. Nadia's experience highlighted how territorial dynamics and unequal access to resources can shape young women's opportunities to engage in collective spaces of participation. These reflections also underscore the importance of understanding the broader social and spatial context in which the research took place. The following section therefore introduces the Vargem das Flores region, providing a contextual overview of the territory where the young women live and where this study was conducted

5. Introducing the Region

This study was conducted in the Vargem das Flores region, located in the city of Contagem. Contagem is situated in the central region of the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil, and forms part of the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte (RMBH), the state capital. It is currently the second-largest city in the state, after Belo Horizonte, with a population of 621,863 inhabitants according to the 2022 Brazilian Census.

Contagem's history is strongly shaped by industrial development. Beginning in the 1940s, the establishment of the Cidade Industrial (Industrial City) near Belo Horizonte initiated a process of industrialization that significantly transformed the municipality's economic and demographic profile. The location was strategically chosen due to its proximity to the state capital, which provided labour, availability of raw materials, and access to electricity (Ribeiro & Araújo, 2024). From 1948 onward, several industries began establishing operations in the city, attracting migrants from different regions and contributing to rapid population growth (Ribeiro & Araújo, 2024).

While industrialization generated important economic expansion, it also produced significant social challenges. Rapid population growth placed pressure on urban infrastructure and the provision of basic services (Ribeiro & Araújo, 2024). Many neighbourhoods were developed to accommodate industrial workers, often with limited urban planning and insufficient infrastructure. Over time, the urban area expanded toward more peripheral parts of the city, including the watershed region of Vargem das Flores (Ribeiro & Araújo, 2024).

Today, Contagem is divided into eight administrative regions: Ressaca, Vargem das Flores, Nacional, Petrolândia, Eldorado, Riacho, Industrial, and Sede. The Vargem das Flores administrative region represents approximately 9.1% of the total population of Contagem and includes both the Vargem das Flores reservoir area and the district of Nova Contagem (Ribeiro & Araújo, 2024).

Historically, the Vargem das Flores region was predominantly a rural area composed of farms and small agricultural properties (Ribeiro & Araújo, 2024). The territory is named after the Vargem das Flores watershed and encompasses several communities. Among them, Nova Contagem constitutes the most central, urbanized, and densely populated area within the basin (Azevedo & Costa, 2022), which often leads the name Nova Contagem to be used as a synonym for the broader Vargem das Flores region. The neighbourhood of Nova Contagem emerged as an area receiving migrants from other parts of the municipality and surrounding regions (Ribeiro & Araújo, 2024). This area also became home to the Nelson Hungria Penitentiary, the first maximum-security prison in the state.

Nova Contagem has often been described as “the city outside the city” (Costa Neto, 2016) and as “the end of the world” (Guimarães, 2014), expressions that reflect the ways in which the territory has been geographically, socially, and symbolically marginalized. The map below highlights Nova Contagem (green marker), the most populous neighbourhood in the administrative region. It situates the area within the Belo Horizonte Metropolitan Region, allowing visualization of its distance from both the central area of Contagem and the city of Belo Horizonte. As illustrated, Nova Contagem is geographically positioned on the outskirts of the metropolitan area, located approximately 35 km from downtown Belo Horizonte and about 18 km from the centre of Contagem.

Map 1 – Spatial Position of Nova Contagem in Relation to Contagem and Belo Horizonte



Source: Google Maps

Despite municipal efforts to restrict urban expansion in the Vargem das Flores basin, informal occupations continued because of various socioeconomic pressures. Many of these settlements emerged through informal subdivisions of rural land into plots smaller than those permitted under rural zoning regulations (Ribeiro & Araújo, 2024). Because many of these areas developed informally, infrastructure provision often remained limited, particularly regarding sanitation services. This situation contributed to environmental degradation and to risks affecting the reservoir and surrounding water sources (Ribeiro & Araújo, 2024). The region also presents several geological risk zones associated with erosion processes, which, when combined with irregular occupation patterns, increase the risk of landslides, particularly in Nova Contagem (Ribeiro & Araújo, 2024).

The Vargem das Flores region is internally heterogeneous. In addition to Nova Contagem, the region includes several smaller neighbourhoods and vilas, such as Vila Esperança, Vila Renascer, Vila Estaleiro, and Vila Ipê Amarelo, along with other neighbourhoods with varying levels of infrastructure and urban development. Some of these areas, especially the vilas, are classified by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) as Favelas e Comunidades Urbanas (Favelas and Urban Communities), a term used in official statistics to designate urban territories characterized by irregular land tenure, limited urban infrastructure, and reduced access to public services (IBGE, 2025). These areas often emerge through informal occupation processes and tend to develop spatial arrangements that

differ from formal urban planning patterns. They are also frequently characterized by legal insecurity regarding land tenure and a significant presence of Black populations (IBGE, 2025). The young women who participated in this study live in different neighbourhoods and vilas within the region. For confidentiality reasons, their specific places of residence are not identified.

Despite longstanding infrastructural challenges, the region has experienced gradual improvements in recent years. Municipal investments have expanded access to basic services, including street paving, sanitation infrastructure, healthcare facilities, and educational institutions. Local commerce and housing development have also grown, suggesting improved living conditions in certain areas of the region (Costa Neto, 2016).

Nevertheless, the Vargem das Flores region continues to face significant challenges related to spatial segregation, uneven public investment, and territorial stigma. Nova Contagem has long been associated with narratives of marginalization and with the presence of the Nelson Hungria Penitentiary, the largest prison in the state (Costa Neto, 2016; Guimarães, 2014). Established in the 1980s and located in Nova Contagem, the prison has historically shaped local dynamics and perceptions of the region. Like many prisons in the Brazilian penal system, the Nelson Hungria Penitentiary has faced recurring overcrowding, rebellions, and human rights violations (Ribeiro & Araújo, 2024).

A recent study examining criminal dynamics in Contagem provides additional insight into patterns of violence in the municipality. According to Ludmila Ribeiro and Isabela Araújo (2024), between 2019 and 2023, the Vargem das Flores region accounted for approximately 15% of attempted and completed homicide cases in the city, ranking third among Contagem's administrative regions after Industrial and Ressaca. At the same time, broader trends show a decline in the city's homicide rate. Between 2014 and 2022, Contagem experienced a significant reduction in firearm-related homicides, with the number of cases decreasing by nearly one quarter over this period (Ribeiro & Araújo, 2024). This pattern reflects the national trend.

The available data also reflect broader patterns of lethal victimization observed across Brazil. Most homicide victims were young people between 15 and 34 years old, representing 76.14% of cases. Most victims were male (94.7%) and were Black (74.8%). Additionally, 87.6% of victims had between four and eleven years of schooling (Ribeiro & Araújo, 2024). These patterns highlight how lethal violence disproportionately affects young Black men with limited educational opportunities, reflecting broader inequalities present in Brazilian society.

These territorial dynamics have shaped how Nova Contagem is often perceived and described. Costa Neto (2016), for example, portrays the region in the following terms:

> Nova Contagem, a city outside the city. Nova Contagem, born from the gathering of people from other parts of the city and other municipalities. Nova Contagem, a pocket of poverty isolated and left to itself and to everything it lacks, but that, in some way, resists through work and through the search for new forms of knowledge. (Costa Neto, 2016, p. 97)

This description reflects how forms of territorial isolation and uneven urban development have historically shaped Nova Contagem. Often described as a "city outside the city," the region has been marked by its geographical distance from the municipality's central areas, limited public investment, and concentrated social inequalities. These conditions have helped shape the territory into an isolated "pocket of poverty," often portrayed through narratives of absence and deprivation. At the same time, these dynamics have also required residents to develop everyday strategies to navigate these conditions. As Costa Neto (2016) suggests, life in Nova Contagem has been sustained through work, creativity, and locally grounded knowledge that allows residents to respond to the challenges of living in an area often left at the margins of urban development.

Furthermore, despite its demographic and social significance within the metropolitan region, Nova Contagem remains relatively underrepresented in academic research. This study was conducted in the region not only because of my previous professional experience working there but also because of the importance of contributing to knowledge production about territories that remain largely invisible in scholarly debates.

In this context, this thesis explores how young women navigate everyday life in this place, shaped by processes of spatial segregation, structural inequalities, and persistent territorial stigma, while also engaging in practices of creativity, solidarity, and resistance. The following section introduces the young women who participated in this study as co-researchers.

6. Introducing the Co-researchers

The study population consisted of young women aged 15 to 17 years who self-identified as negras (parda or Black) and lived in the region of Vargem das Flores, Minas Gerais, Brazil. The co-researchers are Ana, Eloise, Gabriela, Isabel, and Maya.[9] All were 16 years old, except Maya, who turned 17 during the study. Eloise, Isabel, Gabriela, and Ana self-identified as

[9] All names used in this thesis are pseudonyms. The co-researchers selected their own, while I chose the remaining fictitious names.

Black, while Maya identified as parda. They were all in the second year of high school. Gabriela, Eloise, and Maya study at the same school on the evening shift.[10] Isabel also attended the same school, but on the morning shift. Ana studies at another school, on the evening shift. All of them identify themselves as cisgender women and heterosexual. Isabel and Ana did not know what the term cisgender meant. Eloise, Maya and Gabriela were in a relationship. None of them were mothers.

Maya and Gabriela were raised in the Vargem das Flores region. Isabel has lived in the area for nine years; before that, she lived in another neighbourhood in Contagem, closer to the city centre. Ana has been living in Vargem das Flores for six years. She had previously lived in the region for a shorter period, moved away, and later returned. Eloise has lived in the Vargem das Flores region for eight years. She was born in the Jequitinhonha Valley, a rural region in the state of Minas Gerais. Before moving to Vargem das Flores, she lived for a period in another city in the Greater Belo Horizonte metropolitan area.

All co-researchers lived in owner-occupied houses with their families in the Vargem das Flores region. Isabel lives with her mother and younger brother, while Ana lives with her mother and two older sisters. Maya lives with both parents, Eloise lives with her parents and older sister, and Gabriela lives with her parents and younger sister.

The young women come from low-income households. Their families are enrolled in social assistance programs, and some receive government benefits. At the time of the research activities, only Ana was working. She worked as a manicurist and hair braider, earning approximately 300 Brazilian reais per month (about CAD$78), which she used to pay for her computer course. The other young women were actively seeking employment through the Young Apprentice program,[11] and had recently attended job interviews.

All five participants were also enrolled in workshops offered by the Fica Vivo! program. Ana, Gabriela, and Isabel participated in the Afro braiding workshop; Eloise and Maya attended the graffiti workshop; and Eloise also took part in the Muay Thai workshop.

[10] Although most high school students attend school in the morning, it is common for some to also attend classes in the evening. According to data from the latest school census by the Anísio Teixeira National Institute for Educational Studies and Research (INEP), in 2024, most high school students (85.5%) attended school during the day and 17.5% at night. The option to attend high school in the evening is a way to guarantee the right to education. Many students from the marginalized areas, starting at age 16, seek to enter the labour market, as was the case with the co-researchers. Evening high school thus ensures both the completion of basic education and entry into the labour market.

[11] Young Apprentice (*Jovem Aprendiz*) is a Brazilian government program aimed at providing professional training and work opportunities for youth aged 14 to 24 through a combination of theoretical and practical learning. It seeks to fight child labour, school dropout, unemployment, and crime by supporting socially vulnerable young people with no prior work experience.

Isabel also attended the Socializing and Bond Strengthening Service offered by CRAS. Through these activities and programs, the young women were already engaged in different forms of community participation. The table below summarizes the participants' main characteristics.

Table 1 – Participants' sociodemographic characteristics

	Age	Racial identity	Gender identity and Sexual Orientation	Education	Relationship	Origins	Participation in community programs
Ana	16	Black	Cisgender (not aware of this term) woman and heterosexual	2nd year of high school – evening shift	Single	Living in the area for the past 6 years	Afro braiding Fica Vivo! workshop
Eloise	16	Black	Cisgender woman and heterosexual	2nd year of high school – evening shift	In a relationship	Living in the area for the past 8 years. Born in a rural area	Graffiti and Muay Thai Fica Vivo! workshop
Gabriela	16	Black	Cisgender woman and heterosexual	2nd year of high school – evening shift	In a relationship	Born and raised in Vargem das Flores	Afro braiding Fica Vivo! workshop
Isabel	16	Black	Cisgender (not aware of this term) woman and heterosexual	2nd year of high school – morning shift	Single	Living in the area for the past 9 years	Afro braiding Fica Vivo! Workshop, CRAS Socializing and Bond Strengthening Service
Maya	17	Parda	Cisgender woman and heterosexual	2nd year of high school – evening shift	In a relationship	Born and raised in Vargem das Flores	Graffiti Fica Vivo! workshop

These elements situate the co-researchers within the broader social, economic, and territorial dynamics that characterize the Vargem das Flores region, as discussed in the previous section. While they share important commonalities in terms of age, schooling, and participation in community-based programs, their trajectories also reflect distinct experiences of mobility, origin, access to resources, and forms of engagement within the territory. These similarities and differences shaped how they engaged with the research process, the topics discussed, and the ways they chose to express their experiences. In the following section, I describe the data

collection process, detailing the focus group, interview and art-based intervention conducted for this thesis.

7. Data Collection

In this section, I outline the data collection process, which is organized into two complementary components. The first section includes focus groups and individual interviews, through which the young women were invited to reflect on their experiences of violence, exclusion, and social inequalities. The second section presents the art-based intervention, including the photography workshop, photoshoot, and subsequent discussions around the images produced. These stages reflect the PAR approach guiding this study, combining collective dialogue, individual narratives, and creative expression as interconnected forms of knowledge production. This design also seeks to create different opportunities for co-researchers to engage with the research process.

7.1. Focus Groups and Interviews

Participatory Action Research (PAR) projects employ a variety of research methods, including qualitative, mixed methods, visual, or performance-based approaches. However, PAR studies rarely rely exclusively on quantitative methods, as this approach is grounded in participants' voices, lived experiences, and collective reflections (Brown, 2024). For this reason, qualitative methods are particularly well suited to PAR, as they allow researchers to explore meanings, experiences, and perspectives in depth. Building on these principles, I adopted a qualitative and multi-method approach to data collection.

Data collection was carried out during the first semester of 2024 and combined multiple qualitative strategies, including focus groups, individual interviews, and an arts-based intervention aligned with the epistemological foundations of PAR. It also enabled the young women to express and reflect on their experiences in ways that conventional academic methods might not capture, allowing for deeper insight into their social positions, perspectives, and values (Takagi, 2015).

Focus groups and interviews played complementary roles. Focus groups created a dialogical space in which co-researchers collectively reflected on their experiences and discussed shared concerns. In line with the epistemological emphasis on dialogue and collective knowledge production within participatory and Black feminist research traditions, focus groups allowed young women to engage with one another's perspectives, identify common experiences, and reflect on structural conditions affecting their lives. On the one hand,

these discussions can foster peer support, as participants recognize that others have faced similar challenges, reducing feelings of isolation (Trad, 2009). Individual interviews, on the other hand, provide an opportunity to explore co-researchers' personal experiences in greater depth. Interviews allow participants to elaborate on issues raised during group discussions and to reflect more privately on topics they might not feel comfortable discussing in a group setting (Knott et al., 2022).

The first focus group focused on power systems and reflected on inequalities, exclusions, and social problems (Appendix Four). The discussions explored how different forms of exclusion, for instance, racism, sexism, and age-based discrimination, are experienced in everyday life across spaces such as school, home, and the community, and how these processes shape who is included or excluded. Co-researchers were also invited to reflect on the connections between these forms of exclusion, their emotional impacts, and possibilities for resistance and social change.

In the second focus group, we centred the discussions on structural violence and how it is understood and experienced in the daily lives of the young women (Appendix Five). The conversation explored their understandings of violence and the different forms it takes in the community and beyond, including interpersonal, institutional, and symbolic dimensions. Co-researchers were also invited to reflect on structural violence connections to social norms, such as expectations around gender and race, as well as to broader processes of exclusion, inequality, and access to opportunities. Both focus groups lasted approximately two hours and were held in the same room as the preparatory meeting, at the CRAS facilities.

The interviews were semi-structured and guided by open-ended questions (Appendix Seven). This format offered flexibility and encouraged a narrative approach, allowing new insights to emerge and enabling co-researchers to guide the conversation toward issues they considered important. The interviews began with questions based on the sociodemographic form (Appendix Eight), followed by reflections on previous group discussions about exclusion, discrimination, and violence. Because the interviews revisited the same topics discussed in the focus groups, they gave the young women an opportunity to elaborate on personal experiences that might not have been explored in the group setting. Therefore, I analysed the focus group and interview data together. The young women were invited to share personal experiences of racism, sexism, adultism, and other forms of marginalization, alongside how these intersect in their everyday lives. The conversation also explored how these experiences shape their sense of self, access to opportunities and services, and the ways they navigate, resist, and respond to violence. Finally, participants reflected on what they wanted for the art-based intervention and

the messages they wished to convey. The interviews were also conducted at the CRAS, in private counselling rooms commonly used by social workers and psychologists, which provided a more welcoming and intimate setting for the conversations. Each interview lasted between 90 and 140 minutes.

In addition to focus groups and interviews, I also incorporated an arts-based intervention, which offered the young women alternative ways of expressing and reflecting on their experiences. I will explore this intervention in the next section.

7.2. Art-based Intervention

The PAR approach emphasizes that research should not only produce knowledge but also generate forms of action or intervention developed collaboratively with those most affected by the issues under investigation (Brown, 2024; Canas et al., 2020). Within this framework, arts-based approaches offer meaningful possibilities for participatory engagement by creating alternative ways for participants to reflect on and represent their lived experiences.

Arts-based research encompasses a wide range of creative practices that allow individuals to express their experiences through multiple forms of representation. These approaches can contribute to a deeper understanding of human experiences by allowing participants to communicate meanings that may not be easily captured through conventional verbal or textual methods (Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield, 2018).

According to Moshoula Capous-Desyllas and Nicole Bromfield (2018), a major strength of arts-based approaches is their ability to open multiple perspectives for interpreting social experiences. Through artistic expression, participants can represent their realities from their own viewpoints and according to their imagination, creativity, and embodied experiences (Bird, 2017; Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield, 2018). This emphasis on perspective and subjectivity resonates with Black feminist epistemology, which challenges dominant assumptions about objectivity and recognizes the importance of situated and other forms of knowledge production.

Arts-based methods also contribute to the democratization of knowledge production. The use of artistic expression as research data allows individuals who have historically been marginalized or silenced by traditional forms of academic knowledge production to communicate their experiences in alternative ways (Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield, 2018). For participants who face barriers related to educational background or who may find it difficult to articulate their experiences through formal writing or verbal responses, artistic forms of expression offer accessible and meaningful ways to share their perspectives (Canas et al.,

2020). In some cases, experiences that are difficult to verbalize become easier to express through visual or creative forms (Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield, 2018).

Finally, arts-based approaches are powerful reflective tools. Because PAR aims not only to generate knowledge but also to contribute to social change, it is important that the research process creates opportunities for critical reflection among participants. In this study, the artistic intervention was designed to provide a space for young women to reflect on their daily lives, their social condition, and interactions with various systems of power.[12] Eugenia Canas et al. (2020) argue that creating such a space is important for groups that have historically been denied opportunities to reflect collectively on their experiences and living conditions.

During recruitment, I informed potential participants that the study would include an artistic intervention connected to the themes explored in this thesis. My initial proposal was to use photography as the primary tool, allowing participants to express their experiences through self-portraits or images of the neighbourhood. At first, I envisioned these images as a form of social denunciation, highlighting the violence, injustices, and exclusions experienced by the young women. I imagined that participants could write messages on posters or even on their own bodies to draw attention to the different forms of violence they faced.

During the preparatory meeting, we began discussing more openly what they would like to do. We explored different artistic possibilities, including drawing, painting, graffiti, poetry, and performance. The young women also suggested recording a podcast or creating a documentary that could combine photographs, testimonies, and videos of the region. While these ideas generated enthusiasm, I explained that producing a documentary or a podcast would require more time and resources than those available for this project.

The possibility of photographing the neighbourhood was also discussed. I initially saw this as an opportunity to present the region to audiences unfamiliar with it, particularly considering that the research was being conducted by a Brazilian researcher affiliated with a Canadian institution. However, the young women disagreed. They explained that there was nothing particularly beautiful or interesting to photograph in the neighbourhood. They briefly considered photographing places associated with the Fica Vivo! program, graffiti they had painted on local walls, or a neighbourhood ice cream shop that served as a common meeting point for young people. In the end, none of these options was pursued.

[12] In Chapter 9, I examine in depth the creation, implementation, and the young women's experiences with the artistic intervention process, particularly in relation to their reflections on racial and gendered violence, stereotypes, and power relations. In this methodological section, my focus is on describing the process through which the arts-based intervention was developed and carried out.

The initial conversations before data collection indicated that we shared the intention of focusing the arts-based intervention on experiences of violence. However, as discussions progressed, the meaning attributed to the photos began to shift. While the overall study centred on systems of injustice, violence, inequality, exclusion, discrimination, and subordination, it became clear during the creative process that these were not the primary messages the young women wished to convey. This moment became an important turning point in the project, showing how the intervention's direction emerged from participants' perspectives, interests, and priorities rather than being predetermined by me. This shift also resonates with Black feminist discussions on self-definition, which emphasize the importance of marginalized groups producing their own representations rather than being defined by external narratives (Collins, 1990/2022).

Rather than focusing on violence, the intervention evolved into a project that represented and celebrated the diversity of Black bodies, the beauty of Black womanhood, and the importance of friendship among young women. Participants decided the photographs should portray how they wanted to be seen. They emphasized the diversity of Blackness represented within the group, including differences in skin tones, hair textures, styles, and forms of self-expression. They also highlighted the importance of clothing, aesthetics, and collective images that would express bonds of friendship and solidarity among them. In this sense, the intervention reflected a process that is consistent with participatory research principles, because participants actively shaped the direction and meaning of the research process.

Once this direction was established, I contacted a photographer to do the photo session. I was concerned about working with someone who had experience engaging respectfully with marginalized communities. I wanted to avoid reproducing stereotypical or victimizing representations of the young women and instead sought a professional who approached photography through an ethical, political, and socially engaged lens. This led me to invite photographer Isis Medeiros, whose work documents social movements, feminist struggles, and the social and environmental impacts of mining activities in Minas Gerais.[13] I had previously encountered her work through a photographic reinterpretation project titled *Mulheres Cabulosas da História* (Badass Women in History), which highlights women who dedicated their lives to social and political struggles in different areas and regions.[14]

[13] To learn more about her work: https://www.instagram.com/isis.medeiross/
[14] For more information: https://www.instagram.com/mulherescabulosasdahistoria/

Before the photo session, Isis suggested offering a photography workshop for the young women. The workshop also took place at the CRAS, in the same room where other group activities were held (preparatory meeting and focus groups). The workshop introduced basic photography concepts, including how to better use the cameras on their own cell phones. The idea was to demonstrate that meaningful photographs do not require professional equipment, and that participants could develop their own photographic styles using tools already available to them. During the workshop, Isis also discussed different types of photography, including portrait, landscape, and group photography. Ana could not attend this workshop because of a prior commitment.

The initial idea was that the young women themselves would take the photographs and be photographed by one another, with the professional photographer providing only technical support. This approach aligned with the participatory intention of encouraging the participants to lead the photographic process. However, once the photo session began, the process proved to be slower than anticipated, and due to time constraints, Isis ultimately took most of the photographs. Nevertheless, the young women remained actively involved in the preparation and composition of the images, contributing to decisions about lighting, positioning, and overall aesthetic choices.

The photo session took place at the home of one of Isis' friends, who is also a photographer. They chose this location because it matched the visual ideas the young women had been expressing during previous discussions. They envisioned an atmosphere connected to nature, flowers, and open outdoor spaces. The house offered a large garden and green areas, making it possible to create the environment they had imagined.

Because the location was in a different city and in an area unfamiliar to the young women, some mothers were initially concerned about allowing their daughters to participate. These concerns related to both the distance and not knowing me or the circumstances under which their daughters would be travelling to another part of the city. I therefore contacted some of the mothers by phone or WhatsApp message to explain the day's plans, who would be accompanying the young women, and how transportation and activities would be organized. I also made myself available as a regular point of contact and kept the mothers informed throughout the day, letting them know when we were leaving, when we had arrived, and when we were returning. Some mothers also preferred an adult to stay with the young women throughout the activity, and I assured them I would accompany them for the entire trip. We rented a van so that the group could travel together to and from Vargem das Flores. Once all

the mothers agreed to their daughters' participation, we finalized the date and time for the photo session.

The photo session location also gave the young women a chance to visit a part of the city they were not familiar with. The house was in a more affluent neighbourhood of Belo Horizonte, near the Pampulha Lagoon, one of the city's main tourist sites. None of the young women had visited the area before, or they had been there only when they were very young and did not remember it. For this reason, we arrived earlier than scheduled so that they could walk around and explore the area. They enthusiastically took photos, walked around the lake, and enjoyed the experience of discovering a new part of the city together. While the images produced during this moment were not part of the formal research data, the experience itself became an important collective moment within the intervention process.

The final collective meeting took place after the photo session, when we met at a local ice cream shop. This meeting served not only to formally close the research activities, but also to celebrate the project experience together. During this encounter, we discussed how the young women felt about the photo session and about the day. They also reviewed the photographs together and selected the group images they liked most.

This meeting also functioned as an opportunity to reflect on the research process itself. We discussed how the co-researchers experienced the project and how they felt about their involvement in the study. In line with participatory research principles, this moment gave the young women space to share their impressions and evaluate the process.[15] The recorded discussion based on the guiding questions (Appendix Six) lasted approximately 15 minutes. However, the process of selecting the photographs was not recorded, as it involved more of the young women's choices with limited discussion, and the ice cream shop setting introduced background noise that affected audio quality. At this stage of the study, the young women also appeared more tired of engaging with the research themes, and the meeting took on a more informal and relaxed tone, allowing for more spontaneous conversations beyond the research topics. From a participatory perspective, this shift can also be understood as part of creating a more horizontal and less structured space, where participants could engage on their own terms, beyond the formal demands of data production.

Finally, after I had returned to Canada, I conducted individual video calls through WhatsApp with each young woman so that they could select their preferred individual photographs. These conversations also gave the co-researchers an opportunity to reflect on how

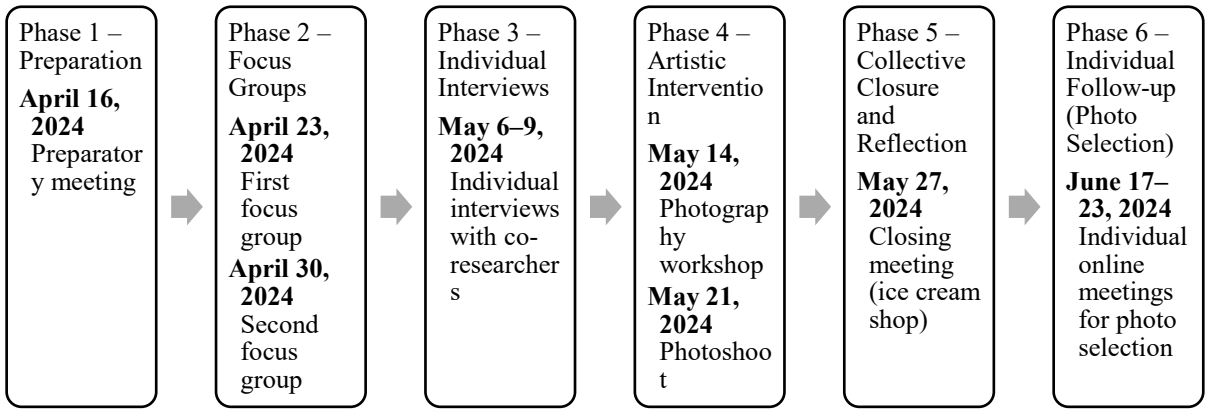
[15] All these reflections are explored in greater depth in Chapter 9.

they felt when revisiting the images, as well as to discuss them in a more private setting. These conversations lasted between 25 and 60 minutes, and all the young women joined from their homes.

These stages illustrate how the artistic intervention emerged through a collaborative and evolving process shaped by the co-researchers' perspectives and decisions. Importantly, the selection of the photographs used in the analysis was also defined by the young women, who chose the images they considered most meaningful. In this sense, the photographs not only constitute part of the data generated in this study but also reflect co-researchers' active role in shaping what is represented and how. The intervention further created opportunities for dialogue and critical reflections, which I explore in greater depth in Chapter 9.

Data collection unfolded over approximately three months, progressing from collective discussions to individual interviews, followed by the artistic intervention and a final phase of collective and individual reflection, as shown in the timeline below. All data generated in this study, including focus groups, individual interviews, the final group meeting, and the individual conversations about the photographs, were audio-recorded and transcribed. In the next section, I discuss how I interpreted these different forms of data through a reflexive analytical process.

Figure 1 – Timeline of Data Collection



8. Data analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA). According to Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2021), reflexive TA highlights the role of the researcher's subjectivity as an important analytical resource. Rather than attempting to eliminate the researcher's influence, this approach emphasizes the importance of reflexive engagement between theory, data, and interpretation throughout the analytical process.

This perspective is particularly important for this thesis. Although the study was grounded in participatory principles, time and geographic constraints prevented the young women from participating in the data analysis process. For this reason, reflexive TA provided a methodological approach that allowed me to remain attentive to my social positions and interpretive role while engaging with the data, particularly considering my proximity to positions of privilege and to dominant ways of interpreting the communities, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Following Braun and Clarke, the analysis involved six phases: 1) data familiarisation and writing familiarisation notes; 2) systematic data coding; 3) generating initial themes from coded and collated data; 4) developing and reviewing themes; 5) refining, defining and naming themes; and 6) writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 331). Importantly, this was not a linear process. The analysis involved continuous reflection, questioning, recoding, and revisiting the data. I frequently moved back and forth between data, codes, theoretical frameworks, and emerging interpretations before arriving at the final themes.

Initially, I adopted a deductive approach to coding. This first approach was informed by previous research and theoretical frameworks that operationalize the concept of structural violence in social work. I drew on the framework proposed by Catherine Flynn (2014) and further systematized in the work of Flynn, Dominique Damant, Jeanne Bernard and Geneviève Lessard (2016). Their analysis, grounded in intersectional feminism and the literature on structural violence, emerged from a PAR conducted with young women experiencing homelessness in Quebec.

Flynn et al. (2016) propose that structural violence can be analysed through four interconnected dimensions: institutional violence, symbolic domination, everyday violence, and intersubjectivity. However, as the analysis progressed, it became clear that many of the young women's experiences overlapped across these dimensions. Sexual harassment is an illustrative example. Co-researchers described experiences of harassment perpetrated by teachers and discussed school rules that contributed to victim-blaming discourses, which could be understood as institutional violence. At the same time, they referred to cultural discourses that legitimize harassment, such as narratives suggesting that women's clothing invites sexual violence, reflecting symbolic domination. They also described frequent experiences of harassment in public spaces and daily interactions with men in the streets, which correspond to everyday violence. Lastly, the ways in which the young women narrated and interpreted these experiences reflected their own subjective meanings and responses, relating to the dimension of intersubjectivity.

Because these experiences frequently intersected across multiple dimensions, it became difficult to categorize them without creating repetition across themes. Recognizing these limitations, I shifted toward a more inductive approach to the data. In this phase, themes were developed more directly from patterns within the data, while still being interpreted in dialogue with the theoretical frameworks guiding the study (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Throughout this process, the analysis remained iterative and reflexive. I repeatedly revisited the data, redefining, refining, and renaming codes and themes as new insights emerged. This iterative process required sustained engagement with the data and careful consideration of how my interpretations were evolving over time.

At the initial stages of the analysis, I used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to support data organization and coding. During the phases of familiarisation with the data, systematic coding, and the generation of initial themes, NVivo was useful in managing the substantial volume of qualitative material collected in this study. The software enabled me to organize the transcripts, facilitating early engagement with patterns across the dataset.

As I became more deeply engaged in the iterative and reflexive process of analysis, however, the coding structure within NVivo became increasingly complex. New codes were continuously generated, often overlapping and intersecting, with some excerpts being assigned to multiple nodes. While this resulted in a dense and messy coding system, it also allowed for the identification of connections and interrelations across different parts of the data.

As the analysis progressed, I gradually moved away from relying exclusively on the software and engaged more directly with the data through manual processes of interpretation, comparison, and synthesis. The development of final themes was therefore not the product of a linear coding structure, but of a sustained and interpretive engagement with the data. The table below presents the final themes. In this study, codes functioned as analytical units used to identify patterns of meaning within the data, while themes represent broader, complex, and interpretive narratives that capture shared meanings and experiences across participants (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021).

Table 2 – Final Codes and Themes

	Codes	**Themes**
Place	Living in poverty	Living with absence and distance
		Living on the most precarious edges of the margins
		Making sense of their own social class position
		Learning to navigate armed violence

	Living in a criminalized and militarized territory	Living with a constant sense of threat: everyday interpersonal interactions	
		Learning not to rely on the police	
Home	Living gendered responsibilities	Having free time captured by domestic work	
		Sharing domestic responsibilities with mothers	
		Questioning expectations of care	
Men	Living with men's violence	Facing sexual harassment	Facing sexual harassment in public spaces: streets and public transport
			Facing sexual harassment from uncles
			Facing sexual harassment at school from peers and teachers
		Growing up with domestic violence	Living with a controlling and violent father
			Living with family violence
		Questioning Men's Power in Intimate Relationships	
School	Being trained to obey	Learning that student voices do not count	
		Being given responsibilities without authority	
		Being treated as students with no future/destined to fail	
		Finding adults who listen and support	
Body	Inhabiting a Black, feminine, young, and peripheral body	Growing up with a body constantly judged	
		Learning that belonging requires changing their body	
		Being treated differently because of their body and style	
		Having sexuality monitored and controlled	
		Navigating conflicting expectations of femininity	
		Living with the pressure to become the perfect girl	
Possibility	Creating alternative discourses	Creating the art-based intervention: celebration of Black beauty, diversity, and friendship	
		Seeing themselves differently: challenging stereotypes and making the invisible visible	

In reflexive TA, themes do not passively emerge from the data or from coding procedures. Rather, they are actively produced through the interpretive work of the researcher. As Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasize, themes should be understood as the final outcome of an iterative analytical process rather than as elements that simply exist within the data waiting

to be discovered. Themes can therefore be understood as analytical narratives created at the intersection of theoretical perspectives, the researcher's analytical resources and skills, and the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Recognizing this interpretive dimension was fundamental to ensuring that the analysis remained attentive to questions of power, representation, and social justice that are central to this thesis.

Aligned with the principles of PAR and Black feminist epistemology, reflexive TA recognizes that the researcher's social position, cultural background, political commitments, and theoretical assumptions inevitably shape data interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). As Braun and Clarke note, while researchers amplify participants' voices, it is ultimately the researcher who constructs the narrative that emerges from the data. This responsibility requires careful reflection and accountability regarding how participants' experiences are interpreted and represented.

This emphasis on accountability also resonates with the principles of Black feminist epistemology, which highlight the ethical responsibility of researchers to critically examine their assumptions and interpretive frameworks (Collins, 1990/2022). Therefore, I continuously examined how my interpretations were shaped by my social position, theoretical commitments, and prior assumptions.

To conclude this section, I present two examples that illustrate how I remained attentive to my own positionality throughout the process of data analysis. The first relates to the young women's professional aspirations (which I develop in Chapter Nine). Initially, I coded their accounts of future aspirations under a broader theme that I had labelled *constraints on freedom*, which also included their experiences of living in the periphery. In this initial interpretation, I understood their professional perspectives as being constrained by their social class. Coming from a background in which I had access to a wide range of choices and did not face financial limitations in pursuing my goals, I interpreted their narratives as reflecting restricted possibilities.

However, this reading not only echoed critiques of structural violence that assume a direct relationship between poverty and constrained freedom but also was inaccurate in relation to how the young women themselves described their aspirations (Silva, 2014). I noticed a contrast between how these aspirations were expressed in focus groups and in individual interviews. In collective discussions, the young women often appeared more resigned to their social position, expressing skepticism about whether studying or working hard would allow them to overcome poverty (as I discuss in Chapter Four). Yet, in individual interviews, they spoke about their dreams and professional aspirations with hope and enthusiasm. Interpreting

their accounts through the lens of constraint therefore risked misrepresenting their perspectives and overlooking the complexity of how they imagined their futures.

The second example relates to the analysis of the young women's daily routines (discussed in Chapter Five). Initially, I approached their routines, which revealed a central role of domestic and caregiving work in organizing their everyday lives, through the lens of the sexual division of labour, interpreting these experiences primarily in terms of gendered inequality and subordination. This interpretation was shaped by my own social position. Throughout my childhood and youth, domestic work was not part of my daily life. My family employed two women who were responsible for maintaining the household: a domestic worker who worked from Monday to Friday, and a cleaner who came once a week. This meant that I did not have to engage in domestic tasks myself. It was only later in life, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, that I began to take on some of these responsibilities.

This initial interpretation was informed by feminist analyses of the sexual division of labour, which highlight how gender norms organize social life through the unequal distribution of responsibilities and value between men and women (Hirata & Kergoat, 2007; Picanço et al., 2024). Within this framework, domestic and care work are historically assigned to women and devalued as natural, unpaid, and often invisible forms of labour. This perspective resonated with my own experiences and with my resistance to being confined to the domestic sphere.

However, this framing became difficult to sustain on its own. Domestic and caregiving work did not emerge in the young women's accounts as something they named as violence. Rather, these responsibilities appeared as an ordinary and expected part of their daily routines, often discussed in terms of availability, necessity, or support within the household. Their accounts revealed the ambivalent nature of domestic and caregiving work, as a space where unequal gender norms coexist with forms of agency, recognition, and relationality.

Remaining attentive to these tensions required resisting the imposition of an external interpretive framework that did not fully align with how the young women understood and narrated their own lives (Silva, 2014). These examples illustrate how I applied reflexive thematic analysis not as a linear process, but as an ongoing negotiation between theory, empirical material, and my own social position. I now turn to the ethical considerations of this thesis.

9. Ethical Considerations

To conduct this research, I was required to obtain approval from multiple research ethics committees. In addition to the Research Ethics Board (REB) at the University of Ottawa, to

which I am affiliated, conducting research in Brazil required approval from two additional ethics bodies. The first was the REB at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, where my co-supervisor is affiliated. The second was the National Research Ethics Commission (CONEP) of the Brazilian National Health Council, as I was classified as an international researcher.[16] The procedures described in this section are therefore the result of the review and approval processes conducted by these three ethics committees.

The first procedure concerned risk assessment. Co-researchers faced minimal risks during the research activities. However, considering the topics discussed throughout the study, it was possible that the young women could recall experiences of discrimination, exclusion, or violence while reflecting on systems of power, oppressions, and inequalities. Participants who had experienced different forms of violence might also have remembered distressing situations, which could potentially cause emotional discomfort during discussions.

To mitigate these risks, several measures were implemented. Participants were given access to the research instruments before the research activities began. During the preparatory meeting, the young women were able to review the focus group and interview guides, ask questions, and provide feedback on the proposed activities. Each participant received a copy of these documents and was able to take them home, ensuring transparency about the topics that would be discussed during the meetings.

In addition, drawing on my previous experience working with marginalized youth and conducting research on sensitive topics, I was attentive to participants' emotional responses and prepared to provide appropriate support if distress emerged during discussions. Participants were also provided with a list of psychological and emotional support resources available in the community if needed.

Efforts were also made to create a respectful and supportive environment during research activities, where the young women could share their experiences without pressure and at their own pace. The meetings took place in a welcoming environment at the CRAS facility. Some of the participants were already familiar with this space, which helped create a comfortable atmosphere for the research activities. CRAS has several accessible rooms that are commonly used for community meetings and group activities.

[16] Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the REB of the University of Ottawa on August 24, 2023 (certificate number: S-04-23-9102; see Appendix Ten), as well as from the Federal University of Minas Gerais Research Ethics Committee and the Brazilian National Research Ethics Commission (CONEP) on November 12, 2023 (certificate number: 70944523.5.0000.5149).

Because the in-person research activities were conducted intensively over a two-month period, participants' needs and preferences were considered when defining the location, day, and time of the meetings. A one-week interval between activities was maintained whenever possible. Meetings were scheduled at times that suited the young women's availability, and transportation support was offered when necessary to facilitate their participation.

Participation in the study was voluntary. The consent form was fully presented and explained to participants during the preparatory meeting, where we discussed the objectives of the study, potential risks, and the terms of participation. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, refuse to answer any questions, or take breaks during research activities.

As participants were under 18 years old, additional ethical procedures were required. According to the Brazilian National Health Council (Resolution No. 466/2012), research involving individuals under the age of 18 requires both a consent form signed by parents or legal guardians and an assent form signed by the teenagers. Both documents were obtained prior to the beginning of the research activities.

The age range of participants was an issue raised by the REB at the University of Ottawa. Initially, the study was designed to include young women between the ages of 12 and 24. However, the REB expressed concerns about the large age gap between participants, as well as the potential sensitivity of discussing topics such as violence and inequality with younger teenagers. The protocol officer suggested dividing participants into three age groups (12–14, 15–17, and 18–24). Given the time constraints of the doctoral research and the desire to conduct shared activities among participants, the study was redesigned to focus exclusively on the 15–17 age group.

All participants' personal information and statements were protected through confidentiality procedures. Demographic data were collected using questionnaires that did not include identifying information, making it impossible to link participants' names directly to their responses. Participants' full names and personal information were stored separately in a password-protected folder at the University of Ottawa. These documents will be securely stored and destroyed seven years after the completion of the project, in accordance with institutional guidelines.

Because several research activities involved group discussions and participatory exercises, complete confidentiality among participants could not be guaranteed. This limitation was explained to the young women in the consent process. Participants were encouraged to respect the confidentiality of the information shared by others during group discussions. At the

beginning of the research process, the young women also discussed how they would prefer to be represented in the artistic intervention, including whether their names or faces could be used. After discussing research ethics and confidentiality considerations, they agreed to use pseudonyms, which they selected themselves. They also agreed that photographs used in the research findings would not reveal their faces, and any images that included identifiable features were kept for their personal use only.

A protocol was also established for situations in which the safety or well-being of participants might be compromised. In cases where a young woman's safety was at risk, the appropriate child protection authorities would be contacted, and confidentiality could not be maintained. Participants were informed of this limitation during the consent process.

Finally, I conclude this section by describing a key point of tension between the ethical frameworks in Canada and Brazil. Initially, the REB at the University of Ottawa recommended that financial compensation be offered to the study participants. I had allocated funds for this purpose, as I received support through the PhD Student International Research Scholarship (Mobility), which is designed to assist students conducting fieldwork outside Canada.

I had planned to offer a financial compensation of 50 Brazilian Reais (approximately CAD$12) for each meeting as a recognition of the time required to participate in the study, the potential financial precarity faced by participants, and the possibility that this time could otherwise have been used to generate income. Additionally, this compensation was intended to acknowledge and value the young women’s expertise, perspectives, and contributions to the research.

However, this approach is not permitted within the Brazilian ethical framework. According to Resolution No. 466/2012, participants cannot receive financial compensation in exchange for their participation in research; only reimbursement is allowed in cases where participants incur expenses because of their involvement. As a result, no financial compensation was provided to participants. Nevertheless, food and drinks were offered at all research meetings as a way of supporting their participation and creating a welcoming environment.

10. Limitations

As with any research process, this study also has methodological and contextual limitations. This section outlines key limitations related to the PAR implementation, the temporal and geographical conditions under which the research was conducted, sample composition, and recruitment dynamics.

One important limitation is that PAR was not fully implemented at all stages of the research process. PAR ideally involves iterative cycles of reflection and collective decision-making throughout and in each research stage (Brown, 2024). In this study, I entered the field with the research topic, research questions, theoretical framework, and methodology already defined, as well as with the focus group and interview guides prepared. I invited the young women to review these research instruments, but they were not involved in developing the broader research design. This represents a limitation in how much decision-making was shared at the earlier stages of the research process. This was partly related to the institutional requirements of a doctoral project, which required me to submit a research proposal specifying the research topic, questions, theoretical framework, and methodology before beginning the fieldwork.

PAR implementation was also constrained by time and geographical distance. At the time of the fieldwork, I was already living in Canada while conducting research in Brazil. The research process was also subject to the time constraints of a doctoral project, and the ethics approval process took longer than anticipated, delaying the start of the fieldwork. As a result, all in-person activities were carried out within two months. With more time, it would likely have been possible to extend the recruitment process, refine research instruments through additional cycles of conversation, and develop research questions more collaboratively with the young women.

One consequence of these time limitations is that the co-researchers could not participate in the data analysis process. Although I had initially envisioned greater involvement of the co-researchers in the interpretation of the data, the limited time available during fieldwork made this difficult to implement. Nevertheless, participatory principles were incorporated in different stages of the research process, particularly during the collective reflections and decision-making in the art-based intervention. The intervention provided an important space for the young women to shape the research process and contribute their own perspectives, experiences, and forms of knowledge. In addition, using reflexive thematic analysis, which emphasizes the researcher's continuous engagement with participants' voices and meanings as central elements to the interpretive process, helped to mitigate this limitation.

Therefore, while the study did not fully implement all dimensions of PAR, I consider it a participatory research process because of the young women's meaningful involvement, particularly in the art-based intervention and the knowledge co-construction that emerged throughout the study. I use the term co-researchers throughout this thesis rather than participants to acknowledge their contributions, lived experiences, and expertise, while also

recognizing the limitations of their involvement in some stages of the research process. As discussed further in Chapter Nine, not all of the young women identified themselves as researchers; nevertheless, I retain the term co-researchers to acknowledge and value the contribution they brought to the research process. These limitations highlight the tensions between the methodological ideals of participatory research and the practical constraints of conducting a doctoral study within specific institutional, temporal, and geographical boundaries.

Another limitation of this study relates to the small number of co-researchers involved in this study. Although the participatory process included multiple encounters with the co-researchers and employed different data collection methods, including in-group and individual meetings, allowing for the generation of rich and diverse qualitative data, the study involved only five participants. This means that the findings cannot be interpreted as representative of the broader population of young Black women living in Vargem das Flores or similar peripheries. Instead, the results should be understood as in-depth insights into the experiences and reflections of a small group of young women who engaged in this study.

In addition, as discussed in the recruitment section, the final composition of the group may reflect certain forms of selection bias. For example, Nadia initially expressed interest in participating but did not continue in the study. As a result, it is possible that the young women who remained involved were those who already had greater access to community programs and support networks. All of them were already connected to services and initiatives operating in the region, which may indicate that they had some greater access to institutional support compared to other young women in the community. Consequently, the study may not fully capture the perspectives of those who are more socially isolated or disconnected from community resources.

Another limitation relates to the absence of participants with darker skin tones, particularly those who would be described in Brazilian terms as *retinta* (dark-skinned Black). In the Brazilian context, skin tone plays a significant role in shaping differential treatment, with darker-skinned individuals often facing more intense forms of discrimination and social invisibilization. As highlighted in Black feminist scholarship, it is through skin colour that Black women are socially evaluated, sexualized, and exploited (Caldwell, 2007; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Gonzalez, 1984). Therefore, the findings presented here may not fully capture the specific experiences and forms of violence encountered by young darker-skinned Black women. These limitations mean the findings are context-specific, while also highlighting the value of these young women's in-depth perspectives.

CHAPTER FOUR: PLACE – LIVING ON THE MARGINS

Starting with this chapter, I begin to present the research findings. The first five chapters of findings examine young women's experiences with structural violence from different but interconnected social dimensions: beginning with the place of residence, moving on to the domestic sphere, relationships with men, school, and, finally, the body. The order of these chapters moves from the broader social context in which young women live to more intimate spaces, showing how structural violence is produced and experienced across different spaces and scales. The neighbourhood thus serves as the starting point, showing how living in a marginalized community involves not only exposure to criminal dynamics and armed violence but also inequalities in access to infrastructure, services, and other resources. Building on this, Chapter Five on the domestic sphere examines how these unequal socioeconomic conditions, stemming from place of residence, also shape the organization of young women's routines, how they use their free time, and the distribution of domestic work, responsibilities, and care within families. Chapter Six on relationships with men shows how gender relations and sexual harassment permeate different aspects of young women's lives, spanning public spaces, family relationships, and school. Chapter Seven on school shifts the focus to an institution where various power relations converge and explores how young women experience this space as violent, disrespectful, and marked by silencing. Finally, Chapter Eight on the body takes the analysis into a more intimate and embodied dimension, exploring how these power relations and inequalities are also inscribed in and experienced by young women's bodies. These chapters move across interconnected social spaces and scales, tracing how structural violence is reproduced across these spheres, where boundaries between forms and sites of violence are not isolated but rather overlap, intersect, and mutually reinforce one another.

The final chapter of the findings presents the art-based intervention, which is directly related to the discussions in the previous chapter. After exploring experiences of structural violence, the chapter shows how young women responded through an intervention that promoted counter-hegemonic representations of beauty, diversity, friendship, and collective empowerment.

In the current chapter, I explore young women's experiences of the place they reside in, focusing on what it means to live on the margins of urban life. This chapter examines how everyday life in urban peripheries is shaped by unequal access to resources, exposure to violence in a militarized environment, and the overlapping effects of race, gender, class, and territory.

The first part of the chapter examines the young women's experiences of poverty. I begin by exploring how they navigate the absence of services and the geographic and social distance that characterize their region. I then turn to Eloise's experience, which stands out due to her trajectory from a rural to an urban context, and her residence in an area that is more precarious and less assisted. Finally, I examine how the young women make sense of their own social class position, reflecting on inequality, social mobility, and their place within class structures.

The second part of the chapter focuses on their experiences with armed violence, drug dealing, and criminal dynamics as elements of daily life in urban peripheries. I first explore how they learn to navigate territories marked by the presence of these dynamics. I then examine how they interpret their interpersonal interactions with individuals involved in drug dealing and gang activity. Lastly, I analyse their relationship with the police, highlighting how this institution often contributes to feelings of insecurity, indignation, and lack of protection.

1. Living in Poverty

Although discussions about marginalized youth often focus on armed and criminal violence (Caruso et al., 2020; Pimenta, 2023), young women face other challenges and precarious situations that mark life on urban peripheries. While these material conditions point to forms of deprivation and inequality, it is important not to reduce poverty to violence. As Silva (2014) cautions, equating poverty with structural constraint risks imposing a totalizing interpretation that overlooks how people understand and navigate their lives. The young women's accounts in this section echo this tension: they are aware of the limitations they face, yet they do not experience their lives as reducible to precarious conditions. Rather, their reflections reveal a coexistence of constraint, attachment, and agency.

In this section, I examine how the young women navigate life in a socioeconomically marginalized neighbourhood, their perceptions of local infrastructure and services, and the ways in which they experience limited or restricted access to essential resources. As will be described throughout this section, the young women acknowledge that they enjoy living in their neighbourhood because the community has its positive aspects and has even improved in recent years. At the same time, they stress that much remains to be done. This simultaneous criticism and attachment challenges simplified interpretations that equate poverty with pure deprivation (Silva, 2014).

1.1. Living with Absence and Distance

This section explores how the young women experience everyday forms of absence, distance, and uneven access to services in the neighbourhood, showing how geographic and socioeconomic marginalization is lived in practice. Maya, for example, describes the region as "a forgotten neighbourhood that no one has ever heard of. You tell people [where she lives] 'I've never heard of it' [people's usual response]. It's in the middle of nowhere" (Interview). Maya states that although she likes living there, she would like to leave it, as she says, "to be honest, there is nothing here" (Interview). She elaborates, "because, you know, people who live here are poor. Everyone who lives in this neighbourhood is poor, so we live far from downtown and commerce, which are much farther away" (Maya, Interview). Maya's account reflects broader processes of spatial confinement that characterize urban peripheries, where access to the city and its resources is unevenly distributed and restricted (Fernandes, 2014). In addition, it also echoes the broader perception of the area as the "end of the world," a label that captures Vargem das Flores geographic distance from the city's central regions and its social distance from spaces of privilege and opportunities (Guimarães, 2014).

Gabriela reinforces Maya's perspective by emphasizing the region's physical distance from the city centre. She highlights that many services and amenities are only available in faraway neighbourhoods, which limits their opportunities and imposes financial burdens. Reaching these spaces demands both time and money, such as paying for long bus rides, barriers that are not always easy to overcome. The young women note that some services are absent, while others need improvement. Among the most significant gaps they identify are the lack of banks, post offices, and hospitals, as well as the need for better schools and, most notably, leisure spaces.

Regarding the absence of banks, the young women describe how this limitation creates logistical and financial challenges. Any banking-related errand requires travelling to distant neighbourhoods, which is time-consuming and costly. Isabel explains that she rarely goes to the bank, doing so only when strictly necessary, for example, to sort out issues related to her Pé-de-Meia.[17] She points out, however, that her mother often handles financial matters over the phone, reducing the impact of not having a bank nearby. Nevertheless, Isabel acknowledges that a local bank would simplify residents' everyday life. It is also relevant that, during the

[17] *Pé-de-Meia*, in a free translation, means "savings." The Pé-de-Meia federal program, created in the beginning of 2024, is a financial-educational incentive aimed at students enrolled in public high schools who are beneficiaries of the Federal Government's Social Programs for low-income families. The program works as a savings plan to promote student's retention and completion of schooling.

research period, all the young women were actively job-hunting and attending interviews. This context created a renewed need to engage with banking services, as some anticipated needing to open checking accounts.

Regarding postal services, Maya explains that the community once had a post office, but it closed due to low mail volume. She expresses frustration with this closure, as she now must collect parcels from distant points. Previously, she could walk to the local post office; now, she must rely on public transportation. Although Maya did not explain why she needed to walk to the post office to collect parcels, it is possible that delivery restrictions in certain regions required her to do so, due to issues such as limited access, safety concerns, or infrastructure problems. Once again, the young women's accounts highlight how commuting imposes both financial and time constraints, limiting their access to services.

This absence also becomes significant in contexts of online shopping. As Isabel points out, digital commerce has broadened the range of consumer goods available, but without a robust address system and a local post office with mailboxes, the possibility of receiving and returning products is compromised, leaving residents further distanced from the digital consumption opportunities that increasingly are part of contemporary life (NIQ, 2025). Thus, while they acknowledge that physical commerce has expanded, the lack of adequate postal services may continue to mark the community as marginal to urban and digital markets.

In terms of healthcare, the young women report that the region has only one health facility, an Unidade de Pronto Atendimento (UPA) (Emergency Care Unit).[18] They argue that access to healthcare could be improved, particularly through the construction of a hospital closer to the community. Gabriela acknowledges that the local UPA is currently undergoing renovation but maintains that its infrastructure remains inadequate. The existence of a single emergency unit limits available services, as priority is given to critical patients. Ana illustrates this challenge through her personal experience:

> One day, I stayed at the UPA from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. without eating anything, just waiting to be seen. When my turn finally came, I went through triage, and then the dentist told me he couldn't see me because they only handled urgent cases. My face was completely swollen, and my stepfather took me to Eldorado right away. As soon as I arrived there, they saw me immediately. At the [UPA's name], there were many people before me,

[18] Established in the early 2000s within Brazil's Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS) (Unified Health System), the UPAs are public facilities that operate free of charge, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They are part of the national emergency care policy and work as intermediate services between primary care and hospital emergency departments, integrating the fixed pre-hospital network for urgent and emergency care (for more details, see Gisele O'Dwyer et al., 2017).

> but they prioritized my case and saw me right away. But here, it wasn't like that. They said I would only be seen if I had *dengue* [break-bone fever] or a severe condition (Interview).

Ana's account reveals the difficulties in accessing healthcare, as less critical cases are glossed over. She refers to the example of dengue, a tropical disease that can be fatal in critical cases. At the beginning of 2024, a dengue surge affected several Brazilian cities, including the Vargem das Flores area, coinciding with the research period. Ana's experience underscores the broader issue of healthcare accessibility in the neighbourhood, reinforcing the perception that adequate medical attention is only available in life-threatening conditions. Furthermore, Ana mentions that she had to travel to the emergency care unit in the Eldorado neighbourhood. This is the most developed area of Contagem, being the city's main commercial region, with better infrastructure and facilities, as reflected in its UPA. This healthcare quality gap between Vargem das Flores and Eldorado highlights social inequality in accessing health services, reflecting broader structural dynamics of Brazil's Unified Health System (SUS).

Established by the 1988 Constitution, the SUS is grounded in the principles of universality, equity, and integrality, ensuring coverage from health promotion and prevention to high-complexity care. While undeniable progress has been made, significant challenges persist in the spatial distribution of medical procedures, equipment, and human resources (Tomasiello et al., 2023). As Diego Tomasiello et al. (2023) demonstrate, despite the expansion of primary care in peripheral areas, specialized and hospital-level services remain concentrated in central regions, reinforcing racial and socioeconomic inequalities. Low-income and Black populations living in urban peripheries face longer travel times and reduced access to complex care compared to wealthier, white populations in central zones (Tomasiello et al., 2023). The young women's demand for a hospital in Vargem das Flores, and Ana's struggle to receive timely care in her community, echo this broader contradiction: while universality and equity are guaranteed in theory, territorial and racial inequalities continue to restrict the realization of comprehensive healthcare for marginalized populations.

Beyond pointing out what the region lacks, the young women also reflect on services that could be improved. Gabriela believes that the quality of teaching in local public schools is good, while Maya notes there are very few schooling options available, naming only two. Ana, in turn, discusses the limited access to vocational and professional training courses, such as English and Business, which she sees as important for developing transferable skills and entering the job market. She explains that there is only one training centre in the area offering such programs, and although she attended it, she found the quality disappointing. In contrast,

Ana now travels to a more distant institution located in Eldorado (the wealthier neighbourhood previously mentioned), which she considers significantly better. Although this course is more expensive due to transportation costs, she relies on public transportation or Uber; Ana believes the investment is worthwhile, as she can clearly see progress. Her account highlights the unequal distribution of resources across the city, reinforcing how geographic and economic disparities shape young women's educational and training opportunities.

Among the different forms of absence identified, the lack of leisure options emerges as what the young women most strongly emphasize, reflecting a lack of adequate leisure infrastructure in Brazilian urban peripheries (Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco, 2014). Maya notes that there is nothing particularly attractive to do in the area, no zoo, mall, or cinema, and that all such places are located far from the neighbourhood. She even describes the local square as uninviting because she finds it ugly, though she does not elaborate on the reasons behind this perception. Gabriela echoes this sentiment, saying that although it is a nice neighbourhood, recreational options for youth are limited. She mentions an ice cream shop and a well-known bakery, which have become informal meeting points among young residents. For her, the ice cream shop ends up being the only real option for going out.

All the young women mentioned missing a mall. This absence they feel is not surprising. Malls play a significant role in youth sociability in Brazil. As Gabriela puts it: "A mall here, wow. That would be great! But it's kind of an impossible dream, right? Because it's still small here. But I think that in about 20 years, there will be one [a mall]; it's expanding here, right? Faster than I expected" (Gabriela, Interview). These spaces are not only commercial centres but are also designed as hubs of entertainment, leisure, and culture for youth (Gonzaga, 2010). For many of them, malls represent one of the few accessible leisure options, even if their presence can be marked by a sense of exclusion.

Although the young women did not mention it directly, it is impossible not to recall the *rolezinhos* that gained national attention in late 2013 and early 2014, exposing Brazil's racial, social, and spatial segregation (Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco, 2014). These were mass gatherings of mostly poor and Black youth from urban peripheries in shopping centres to stroll, socialize, and sing funk. Their presence triggered strong reactions from middle- and upper-class customers, leading mall owners to obtain court injunctions to prohibit such events and, in practice, exclude these youth (Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco, 2014). As Rosana Pinheiro-Machado and Lucia Scalco (2014) argue, the criteria for barring their entry became arbitrary, rooted in class and race positions, and widely endorsed by public opinion. The widespread rejection of the rolezinhos legitimized violent police repression and was accompanied by racist

and classist discourses portraying young people as loiterers, troublemakers, and deserving of violence (Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco, 2014).

Given this scenario, the young women's wish for a mall in Nova Contagem can be read not only as a desire for leisure but also as a form of protection — a space where young people could enjoy themselves without confronting the stigma and exclusion they risk when crossing into wealthier neighbourhoods. The difference is that, in rolezinhos, youth crossed racial and class boundaries and made themselves visible in "spaces not meant for them," whereas in community events, they remained within their own territories, away from the middle- and upper-class discrimination (Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco, 2014). It is to these local festivities that Ana turns when describing one of the positive aspects of living in the region.

Ana shares that, for her, one of the positive aspects of living there is the local festivities that happen almost every month. She compares the area to Eldorado, noting that Vargem das Flores has more frequent events. However, these are not just general community festivals — Ana refers to gatherings organized by and for youth, often featuring funk music, a genre associated with favela culture. She highlights that these events are accessible, open to everyone, and usually organized by local digital influencers who charge a symbolic fee to cover costs and bring in popular artists, especially MCs (funk singers) who resonate with the local youth. These gatherings closely resemble the *bailes funks* — street parties rooted in the cultural and social life of favelas and urban peripheries. Far from being merely entertainment, these events serve as vital spaces for youth sociability, cultural expression, and the affirmation of local identity (Dayrell, 2002).

Thus, while the young women point out what is lacking and what could be improved, they recognize positive aspects and acknowledge that infrastructure and commerce in the region have advanced significantly. The most frequently cited improvement is the paving of streets, something they recognize as a meaningful change, and considering that until recently, many roads were unpaved, it illustrates the area's precarity. Maya also mentions that some houses have been renovated, but she expresses concern about extensive deforestation in the neighbourhood. She notes that many trees have been cut down, and comments on how the area now feels unusually hot, sunny, and dry. For Maya, "there are only a few trees left. I used to think trees made the area feel more, I don't know, alive. Now it feels strange, and it's hard to get used to it after growing up with a tree that was always there, and then, suddenly, it's gone. It's weird" (Maya, Interview). Her reflection points to the environmental consequences of urbanization processes in marginalized neighbourhoods, where development often comes at the cost of green spaces. This also illustrates how environmental inequalities intersect with

socioeconomic disparities, as low-income and marginalized communities are more frequently exposed to environmental burdens, such as extreme heat, and its impacts on quality of life (Wood-Donnelly, 2023).

Isabel states that Vargem das Flores has significantly improved. Coming from a large family that has lived in the area for a long time, she recalls how precarious things used to be but now sees the neighbourhood growing and fulfilling its potential. The young women note that there used to be very few stores, but now there is a wide range of commercial options, including supermarkets, butcher shops, and various retail stores. Isabel cites the arrival of a large cosmetics chain as an example of this growth and notes that she can now find everything she considers essential. Gabriela mentions the local fair held on weekends, and occasionally on Fridays, which offers a variety of products ranging from cheese, jam, and meat to clothing and jewelry. Maya adds that one of the region's advantages is affordability, as prices are lower than in other neighbourhoods.

In general, the young women report that they have seen improvement but focus on increasing and diversifying access to consumer goods rather than basic services. This reflects a broader contradiction of Brazil's recent development model, in which public policies of social inclusion and income growth expanded access to consumer markets for lower-income groups (Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco, 2014). While lower classes can purchase more of the goods they desire, this consumption does not translate into meaningful social change. As Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco (2014) propose, without symbolic and social capital, or reliable access to quality public services such as education, health care, and transportation, this form of inclusion remains superficial.

In this sense, access to consumption appears to be prioritized over the guarantee of rights, producing forms of inclusion that are mediated through the market rather than through citizenship. Such dynamics help sustain existing power relations and the social machinery of inequality, as participation is enabled primarily as consumers, while inequalities in access to services and opportunities remain unchanged. In practice, consumption becomes the main, and sometimes only, marker of social inclusion, although in an unstable and often temporary way, since the elites quickly reorganize the markers of distinction, creating other forms and goods of consumption to differentiate themselves (Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco, 2014).

The reflections in this section show that experiences of distance, absence, and uneven access to services reflect broader patterns of structural violence. The gaps identified by the young women, between what is formally guaranteed and what is accessible, between peripheral and central areas, illustrate how social conditions constrain life chances and limit access to

health, education, and leisure (Galtung, 1969; Iadicola & Shupe, 2003; Ho, 2007). These dynamics are further shaped by processes of spatial segregation that confine peripheral communities and restrict their access to the city (Fernandes, 2014).

At the same time, while the young women reflect on what is lacking, they also express attachment to their community, highlighting the coexistence of constraint and belonging in everyday life (Rizzini & Limongi, 2016). However, these experiences are not uniform. Differences within the periphery itself point to how structural violence can be lived unevenly, shaped by intersecting relations of inequality, which I turn to in the next section.

1.2. Living in the Most Precarious Edges of the Margins

In this section, I show how experiences of marginalization are not uniform but vary according to location within Vargem das Flores. Eloise describes a part of the region that has not even experienced these limited consumerist advances, where the lack of infrastructure and services is even more pronounced. As someone living in a *vila* (an area not yet recognized as a formal neighbourhood), she says she misses having more stores and services nearby. As Eloise explains:

> Eloise: In my neighbourhood, I miss stores, right? Because it's a *vila* [an informal neighbourhood], it's not a neighbourhood. I discovered this recently when I was at school. The teacher said that [Vila's name] and [Vila's name] are called that because they're not considered neighbourhoods yet.
>
> Camila: Do you know what it takes to be considered a neighbourhood?
>
> Eloise: I think you need, like, a school. Or some kind of nursery, some kind of business for education. I think so because most neighbourhoods have them, right? And there's a lack of stores, bakeries, too. So, not that my community is so big, right, but I think there's a lack of clothing stores, bakeries, these things, squares, too. There's no square there (Interview).

Eloise's distinction between a vila and a formal neighbourhood recalls the former census category of subnormal agglomeration, which until 2022 classified favelas and urban communities primarily through the lens of illegal land occupation, minimizing the absence of basic services (Catalá & Carmo, 2021) — precisely what Eloise highlights when she describes being a neighbourhood without schools, squares, or stores. Eloise explains that most of the things she needs to do require travelling to other neighbourhoods within Vargem das Flores. She says that in Vila "there's nothing there, apart from my church. There are only churches there; I've never seen anything like it"! (Eloise, Interview).

In addition to churches, Eloise describes a liquor store as being the only other establishment, and that is it. The almost exclusive presence of churches and liquor stores in her neighbourhood not only reflects the absence of basic services but also points to the coexistence of different normative regimes in the territory, where religion, particularly evangelical churches, and crime emerge as central organizing forces of everyday life (Beraldo, 2022). As I will discuss later in this chapter, liquor stores are run by individuals who were, or still are, involved with armed groups and drug dealing. Eloise mentions that even a small grocery store or a school nearby would make a significant difference. Isabel, who also lives in the same area as Eloise, but closer to the border of a formal neighbourhood, jokes that there are only gossipers on her street. However, she later points out that her street has a beauty parlor and some small grocery stores, indicating a slightly better level of local commerce compared to Eloise's area.

While reflecting on the infrastructure of her community, Eloise also comments on her family's decision to move from a rural area to the city. She shares that many of her relatives moved to the city in search of a better quality of life. However, they ended up facing some challenges. Eloise talks about an uncle and an aunt who once lived in a huge house that felt more like a farm, but they eventually moved to the city. However, later, they returned to the rural area to care for Eloise's great-grandmother. Eloise mentions that her aunt had mixed feelings about this move. On one hand, in the city, her aunt worked hard and was able to buy things. On the other hand, she had to give up the large house she had in the rural area, which had been her dream, and as Eloise says, "who doesn't dream of having a big house?" (Interview). However, the rural area provided more security in terms of food, as much of it was grown by the family, unlike the city. Despite the comforts of rural life, her aunt missed the conveniences of the city, like malls, big stores, and restaurants — things that are not accessible where they live now.

Although she recognizes some advantages of rural life, Eloise would not want to return there, mainly because she believes she would have fewer educational opportunities and, in the future, fewer chances to pursue her dream of becoming an artist. Her parents, with a different perspective, imagine returning to the countryside or a small town, but Eloise resists this possibility, affirming: "I won't go, because if I go there, it will completely ruin my future, because I want to be an actress. If I go there, I won't have a chance to become an actress" (Interview). The city is imagined, and often experienced, as a place of greater opportunity, especially regarding education and professional pathways. Yet, as Eloise's account makes clear, this promise is unevenly fulfilled: those who settle in marginalized urban areas continue to live in precarious conditions. Just as in the case of limited social inclusion through access to

consumer goods mentioned earlier, moving to the city does not guarantee social mobility, integration, or better living conditions (Fernandes, 1964/2008). Eloise's reflections illustrate this contradiction: while the city is imagined as a place of opportunity, her everyday life in a marginalized neighbourhood reveals persistent inequality and exclusion.

Eloise highlights this paradox when she reflects on the different mindsets between rural and urban residents. Her relatives from the countryside tend to view the city as a place of hope, where life is significantly better. While Eloise agrees that the city does offer more professional opportunities and that, in some ways, the future may be more promising for those who move there, she reflects that even she and her family, who live in what is technically considered the city but in a low-income informal neighbourhood, still face many difficulties. Despite these struggles, people from rural areas often perceive them as wealthier and more educated.

Eloise claims that, although there may be some illusion surrounding the idea that life in the city is better, there is also a degree of truth to it, especially when it comes to education. She points out that cities have greater availability of training courses, better schools, and access to universities. To illustrate this, she shares the example of her cousin, who is around her age:

> He, I'm not sure if he's a year younger or older than me, but he can't read yet. Once, he sent me a message, and I replied with "hi, how are you?" Then he sent me a voice message saying, "send a voice message because I can't read." I was like, how is it that you're almost my age and can't read yet? And he's in the same grade as me, and they kept approving him, even though he can't read (Interview).

Eloise explains that, although her cousin is currently in school, he is still illiterate. Reflecting on her own family's migration to the city in search of better living conditions, Eloise recognizes that, although they have indeed achieved some improvements, they continue to face many challenges. Eloise's experiences, as someone who moved from a rural context to an urban periphery and lives in a vila, add further complexity to the analysis of marginalization. An intersectional lens helps to illuminate how her position within the periphery is shaped not only by class and race, but also by place of residence and origins, placing her in a context of heightened precarity compared to other young women in the same region. The absence of basic services and limited state presence in her area not only constrain her everyday possibilities but also create conditions in which other actors, such as religious institutions and criminal groups, can become central to the organization of social life.

The young women's accounts reveal how geographical and economic restrictions shape their access and opportunities. Access to healthcare, education, and leisure remains unevenly distributed, and the limitations they face, such as long and costly commutes to reach basic

services, often come with financial burdens and a lack of free time they cannot afford (as will be further explored in the next chapter). As Maya describes, it is a "forgotten neighbourhood," a place where "everyone is poor" and distant from the city's centres of opportunity. This awareness of being left behind, of living in a space marked by scarcity, distance, and inequality, not only defines their daily struggles but also nurtures a growing awareness of social class position within a broader social order. Indeed, their social position, at the same time, places them in a more vulnerable position and provides a privileged epistemic standpoint from which they can identify and analyse how power systems are organized (Collins, 1986; 1990/2022; hooks, 1984; Kilomba, 2010; Silva, 2014). It is from this recognition of exclusion that the young women begin to articulate a critical understanding of the structures that shape their lives, as I explore in the following section.

1.3. Making Sense of Their Own Social Class Position

In this section, I explore how young women make sense of their own social class position, reflecting on inequality, opportunity, and the limits of social mobility. They describe teenage years as a turning point, a time when they start identifying certain experiences as unfair, unequal, and violent. As Gabriela explains: "At the beginning of teenage years, whether we like it or not, we start to become more aware of the world. Like, we always know what is right and wrong because our parents teach us. But their perception is different from ours" (FG1). Gabriela highlights that it is during this period that they develop their own perceptions of the world beyond what was taught at home, reaching conclusions about what they consider right and wrong according to their lived experiences. Gabriela refers to this awakening as the emergence of class awareness:

> It's like class awareness — when it hits you, it shatters you, because you realize that, whether you like it or not, you will never have that [referring not to a specific object but to an entire way of life: the comfort, security, and opportunities associated with middle-class parameters], even if you work yourself to the bone, even if you study endlessly. You will never have it, not in the way you dream of (FG1).

In expressing this realization, Gabriela challenges the notion of meritocracy, exposing how effort and perseverance are insufficient to overcome social and economic barriers. She exemplifies this through the National High School Exam (ENEM), explaining that even if she achieves a high score and secures a spot in a university program, she will still need to move to another city and financially support herself, unlike wealthier students who live off their families. As she puts it: "Unlike someone who was born into a wealthy background, they can

simply live their whole life studying. They'll have money" (FG1). Emotionally, Gabriela concludes: "And when it strikes, it really strikes us — it strikes, and it hurts" (FG1). This emotion resonated across the group when I asked how they felt in the face of such inequalities. In unison, they responded that the strongest feelings were outrage and anger. Gabriela reinforced: "Because, whether we like it or not, there are people who have far less than we do, and there are people who have far more" (FG1). Rather than being merely reactive, these emotional responses are part of how the young women make sense of and engage with social reality. From a Black feminist perspective, emotions such as anger and frustration are not opposed to knowledge production, but are central to it, constituting ways of knowing that emerge from lived experience and relational understanding (Collins, 1990/2022).

At the same time, these accounts challenge assumptions that such conditions are either misrecognized or normalized. Rather than being unaware of their position, the young women demonstrate a sharp awareness of inequality and its effects. Their reflections resonate with Silva's (2014) argument that those living in poverty are not necessarily constrained in their ability to perceive or name structural conditions but may instead occupy a privileged position from which to critically interpret them.

In addition, these shared emotions mark more than frustration — they reflect a growing awareness of structural inequalities and the realization that hard work alone cannot alter their social position. It is from this recognition that the young women begin to articulate the limits of mobility and the unattainable promise that one day they can change the social class to which they belong. The dialogue that followed revealed how the young women articulate the limits of social mobility:

> Gabriela: The idea that you must study and work hard because one day you will be rich — I don't believe that because no matter how much you study and work, it's very difficult to be rich. If you were born poor, you will die poor. Because that's the system, there's no point, either you accept it, or it swallows you up. It will swallow you up anyway.
>
> Maya: I wanted to change my role.
>
> Eloise: We hope we'll be rich one day, but probably we won't.
>
> Gabriela: That's when we become aware of class differences. Then we see that there's not much chance of us being rich one day.
>
> Maya: To be able to do what you want, you need to have money, and you don't. In other words, you're going to be poor for the rest of your life (FG2).

This exchange captures the young women's awareness of the limits imposed on their lives. Maya's remark about wanting to "change her role" speaks to the weight of social determination: to escape poverty would require becoming someone altogether different — to rewrite herself as another protagonist in her own life story, freed from the script imposed by class and place of residence. At the same time, Gabriela's insistence that "if you were born poor, you will die poor" reflects a stark recognition of the rigidity of class boundaries in Brazil. But that does not mean they do not exercise autonomy and make choices within those constraints. Young women adapt, pursue their professional aspirations, and assert their visions for the future, as I will explore further in this thesis.

These reflections reveal how early in life they confront that social mobility is not equally accessible and that their futures are constrained not by a lack of effort, capability, or desire, but by a system that, as Gabriela puts it, "swallows you up anyway." Their words reveal the limits of class mobility as well as how these are compounded by intersecting structures of gender, race, place of residence, and age. For young Black women, the barriers to change are not merely economic but also symbolic and embodied, reinforced by stereotypes and social expectations that mark them as less capable or deserving. Ana adds another dimension to this reflection, describing feelings of envy in the face of inequality:

> There's envy, also, right? Well, I know I'm worthy. But why does someone else have more than me? I think there are certain aspects we use to compare ourselves, and then we are in denial because we cannot reach the same level, no matter how hard we try. And although we work hard and are honest, no one praises you for your effort, for the ability you have for striving to be someone better every day. So, this ends up creating resentment (Ana, FG1).

Eloise agreed with Ana and added: "I think everyone from a lower-class background thinks, 'Why wasn't I born rich?' Things like that. 'Why wasn't I born having everything handed to me?' We think like that: why do I have to struggle while they don't?" (FG1). Gabriela then connected these reflections to the history of inequality in Brazil:

> That's exactly what we think, since whether you like it or not, when a family is wealthy, they are so because they took from someone; they often have a slave-owning and conquering past, and usually the conquering side is always the one that is heard. Who was conquered? Black people, mainly. We still suffer today. And we have always been the victims and continue to be so. And it's not something that we look at and say is going to change soon because, gee, it's been over for a long time, and it's not going to change because it's rooted in society (Gabriela, FG1).

The young women's reflections highlight the awareness that, despite their efforts, opportunities are not equally distributed, and that the structures of race, class, and gender continue to reproduce disadvantage. Gabriela's words echo Florestan Fernandes's (1964/2008) analysis, which demonstrates that the transition to an urban and industrial society did not automatically integrate Black people into Brazilian social life. By exposing how racial hierarchies persisted under the guise of modernization, Fernandes directly challenged the narrative of racial democracy that reduced inequality to a matter of class alone. In a similar vein, Gabriela also contests this myth when she links current socioeconomic inequalities to Brazil's slaveholding past, underscoring that wealth accumulation has historically been tied to exploitation and racial domination. The young women's testimonies reveal this same contradiction: the promise of integration and social mobility through study, work, or urban life collides with the persistent barriers of systemic hierarchical power relations.

Thus, this section concludes by demonstrating that life in marginalized communities is not defined solely by scarcity, precariousness, and lack, but also by resistance and the development of a critical awareness of how race and class intersect in shaping urban life. This awareness emerges during teenage years as the young women confront the limits of their opportunities and the weight of inequality, producing strong emotions of anger, envy, and frustration, but also sharp analyses of historical social injustices. Their narratives stress how social position limits their lives, while at the same time enabling them to critically situate their experiences within Brazil's broader inequalities. The young women's reflections articulate a critique of the social order, exposing structural barriers that make integration and mobility far more challenging for young Black women living in marginalized urban peripheries.

2. Living in a Criminalized and Militarized Territory

As discussed in Chapter 1, the presence of drug dealing and armed actors, including the police, is part of everyday life in urban peripheries (Berents & ten Have, 2017; Cobbina et al., 2008; Rizzini & Limongi, 2016; Ursin, 2020; Van Dijk et al., 2025). Although these experiences are not totalizing, they remain an inescapable dimension of daily life, shaping how young women move, relate, and make sense of their surroundings. This section first explores how young women learn to navigate contexts marked by armed violence, the presence of drug dealing, and rival gangs. It then examines how they interpret their interactions with individuals involved in these dynamics. Finally, it turns to their relationship with the police, highlighting how this institution often contributes to feelings of insecurity.

2.1. Learning to Navigate Armed Violence

The presence of armed and criminal groups affects everyday life in urban periphery communities, producing new forms of sociability marked by proximity to crime, constant negotiation of risks, and adaptation to armed power (Berents & ten Have, 2017; Cobbina et al., 2008; Fernandes, 2014; Machado da Silva & Menezes, 2019; Rizzini & Limongi, 2016; Ursin, 2020; Van Dijk et al., 2025). In this context, residents' relationships and routines become intertwined with dynamics imposed by these groups.

It is therefore not surprising that, when I asked the young women how they would describe the neighbourhood, one of their first responses was to associate it with both tranquillity and turbulence. They perceived the region as agitated because of their daily encounters with shootings, gang activity, drug dealing, and violent conflicts between neighbours. These experiences show how the presence of armed actors permeates social life, transforming what can sometimes feel like a peaceful environment into one marked by danger, surveillance, and unpredictability.

In recounting their experiences, the young women emphasized that they grew up already immersed in the presence of criminal groups. Born in the 2000s, they found the peripheries of the Greater Belo Horizonte area (RMBH) under the consolidated control of drug-dealing groups (Zilli, 2015) — this helps explain why they describe violence as a normal part of everyday life. As Gabriela states: "because we grew up seeing this, we shape our minds differently. So, for us it's not surprising anymore, like, seeing gunned people" (FG2). Eloise agrees and adds that she also no longer feels affected by the visible presence of guns in the neighbourhood. Gabriela reinforces, in an ironic tone: "yeah, it's just another person carrying a gun… as long as the bullet doesn't hit me" (FG2). The anticipation of violence thus emerges as a generational marker for those who grew up in this environment, as Gabriela reflects: "I think it's because we grew up here, so we get used to it" (FG2).

Gabriela also recalls when she was younger: "there were a lot of drug-dealing wars. I don't know how to say it, it's like, there's a *boca*[19] [drug sales point] here, then the boca there wants to take the boca from here. So, it was very violent" (Interview). She also remembers deaths occurring right at her doorstep:

> My street used to be a very violent place, but it's changed over the last five or seven years. The people at the boca are more on their own [keep it to themselves]. Everyone

[19] "*Boca*" is an abbreviation for the term "*boca de fumo*." Boca de fumo is a term used in the Brazilian context to refer to drug-dealing spots inside communities. In a free translation, it could be considered trap houses.

> respects each other. But before, wow, people were killed at my door. But then, I think we get used to it (Gabriela, FG2).

Eloise, in turn, also acknowledges that there have been changes, but for her, drug dealing activities remain active and are expanding. She recounts her family's trajectory of leaving the countryside in search of better living conditions and first moving to a city in the RMBH before settling in Vargem das Flores. About that city, she says that, in addition to economic hardship, it was "a violent city," recalling robberies and kidnappings, including an attempted abduction she experienced when a van stopped next to her and opened its door. When comparing it with Vargem das Flores, she states: "it's not that it's safe here either" (Interview). For her, homicides and shootings have decreased, but drug dealing remains highly active:

> When I first came here, it was worse than now. You heard more gunshots, people dying, several accidents, and car races. But for a while now, it has been getting better – except for drug dealing. Because, like, when you enter my neighbourhood, you already see people exchanging money for drugs right there. You see a lot of that. But the rest, I think, has become more peaceful regarding homicides, and things like that. But not drugs. I think that has increased (Eloise, Interview).

Isabel, who also lives in the same neighbourhood as Eloise, describes a different reality: "thank God," she celebrates that the drug-selling point which used to operate on the corner of her street no longer exists (FG2). Gabriela, in a playful tone, replies: "How could you miss such a job opportunity?" (FG2). For Isabel, the absence of the *boca* has transformed her everyday experience, bringing relief.

The comparison between Isabel and Eloise, two young women from the same neighbourhood but with opposing perceptions of the presence of drug dealing (just as they also had a different view of the infrastructure of the Vila where they both live), reveals how local experiences challenge the homogeneous view often attributed to peripheries. In popular imagination, these areas are territories entirely dominated by armed groups, stigmatized as dangerous (Fernandes, 2014). However, the young women's accounts point to another reality: the periphery is marked by nuances and internal differences, where the same neighbourhood can encompass contrasting and dynamic situations, from the persistence of drug dealing on some streets to the disappearance of selling points on others.

Isabel reinforces this point by recounting that, once, when returning home by Uber, the driver remarked that had he known the destination, he would not have accepted the ride, as he considered the area extremely dangerous. She was not surprised, saying that even residents often characterize the neighbourhood as a favela — a synonym for a dangerous place marked

by armed violence and criminal activity. As Márcia Pereira Leite (2012) argues, this association results from a long-standing social construction that essentializes favelas as the city's "other," territories of violence and deviant sociability, fundamentally distinct from the "legitimate" urban space. Isabel, however, rejects this totalizing view and reminds us that not the entire area should be considered in such terms. Her account highlights how, although popular stigma insists on homogenizing the periphery as a risky space, the young women's everyday lives underscore its internal heterogeneity.

The young women's narratives also allow for a broader reflection on the dynamics of urban violence in Belo Horizonte and the RMBH (Greater Belo Horizonte area), which differ from those observed in other major Brazilian metropolises such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. In São Paulo, as demonstrated by Ciro Biderman et al. (2019), the illegal markets are monopolized by a single organized criminal group, the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) (First Capital Command), which exercises centralized control, even contributing to the reduction of violent crime in favelas. In Rio de Janeiro, Felipe Zilli (2015) shows that three major groups dominate extensive urban territories through armed control and military-like occupation. In contrast, the RMBH presents a markedly different configuration: a fragmented criminal landscape in which numerous smaller and rival groups coexist within the same neighbourhoods (Zilli, 2015).[20] This fragmentation helps explain the heterogeneity perceived by the young women — why some streets seem calmer while others remain tense, and why feelings of safety can shift from one block to the next.

At the same time, this multiplicity of groups creates a volatile environment where conflicts may erupt for many reasons. Disputes are not limited to the control of drug sales but also involve identity-based and moral motivations, such as common and everyday conflicts among youth at parties, due to rumours and gossip, childhood rivalries, or romantic conflicts, without necessarily carrying the mercantile character of drug dealing, such as eliminating competition or taking over a selling point (Costa & Rocha, 2021; Motta et al., 2022; Zilli, 2015). What often begins as minor disagreements can intensify through cycles of retaliation, eventually leading to lethal outcomes. As Marco Aurélio Costa and Rafael Rocha (2021) argue, these morally driven homicides are, in fact, a defining feature of the dynamics of lethality in

[20] Indeed, it was this fragmented configuration and mode of operation of criminal groups in Belo Horizonte and the RMBH that prevented the PCC from consolidating its institutional presence in the state of Minas Gerais. As Douglas Viana, Rafael Rocha, and Ludmila Ribeiro (2023) demonstrate, the PCC's attempts to impose centralized governance and standardized rules over drug markets, prison dynamics, and use of violence met strong resistance from local actors who valued autonomy and personal control over conflict resolution. These groups' emphasis on independence and masculine ideals of honour and self-assertion stands in contrast to the PCC's rationalized, business-like model of organization.

the RMBH. In this context, cycles of vengeance become deeply rooted in local life, where one killing can spark another in a chain of reprisals that transforms neighbourhood disputes into prolonged wars (Costa & Rocha, 2021). Retaliatory homicides thus emerge as intense episodes that erupt and subside, but remain latent, ready to be reactivated at any moment by new triggers.[21]

Eloise's account of a recent homicide (which occurred in early 2024), in which a drug dealer and his relatives were executed, reveals how fragile an apparent calm can be and how quickly everyday disputes can escalate into prolonged wars:

> There was an accident, right? I wasn't here, thank God, but the guy who ran one area died. They shot him in the head, blew his brains out, that ugly thing, it was even on the internet, and they killed, I don't know if it was his nephew or his son, and some other guys too. Yes, it was violent, one even was the police [the one who killed the criminal]. But the others belonged to other gangs from other neighbourhoods (Eloise, Interview).

This example can illustrate how retaliatory homicides operate: each death becomes both a consequence and a cause, feeding a cycle of retaliation, involving friends, family members, or neighbours of the victim, which can last years (Costa & Rocha, 2021). For the young women, the possibility of witnessing or hearing about such events remains a constant part of life. Ana provides another account of when she and her sister found a dead body at her doorstep on her way to work: "there was a day when I went to work, it was Saturday, 5:40 in the morning. There was a young boy, the boys had just killed him. They left him dead on the lamppost outside my house" (Interview). She recounts that her sister panicked and went back inside, but she had to keep going, because the bus was about to arrive. As Ana explains:

> My sister was absolutely terrified; she started crying and went back into the house. I had to go because my bus was about to arrive. I had to work, so I went, but I felt lightheaded the entire day. When I returned from work, the forensics team was still there to pick up the body. His body was already stuck to the ground. It was an extremely hot and sunny day. So, it was tragic. But it happens. That's why I'm telling you today. Unfortunately, here we think it's all very normal because it's our day-to-day life. There's nothing we can do about it (Ana, Interview).

[21] Although these killings are not always directly related to drug dealing, the illegal drug market plays an important role in sustaining cycles of violence by providing access to guns and motorcycles, which are frequently used in ambushes and surprise attacks (Costa & Rocha, 2021; Motta et al., 2022).

The normalization of such violence, however, coexists with a deep and persistent uncertainty. Even as the young women describe these experiences as "normal," their accounts reveal an ongoing sense of apprehension, a feeling that violence can erupt anywhere, at any time — echoing what Berents and ten Have (2017) observe: it is not necessarily a normalization of violence but an anticipation. It is in this tension between familiarity and unpredictability that the context described by Machado da Silva and Leite (2008) as *vida sob cerco* (life under siege) becomes relevant: a form of socio-territorial and political confinement in which the permanent threat of armed confrontations disrupts routines, generates insecurity, and limits public expression of demands.

In the middle of this coexistence of normalization and uncertainty, the young women's accounts illustrate how life under siege materializes in their everyday lives. The anticipation of shootings and the routine sight of armed individuals shape how residents move and interact, producing a constant state of vigilance and the persistent sense that violence may erupt at any moment (Ursin, 2020). Eloise, for instance, describes that even when the neighbourhood seems calm, guns remain a latent threat: "like, in my neighbourhood, sometimes it's quiet, but sometimes at night you're woken up, and you hear gunshots." (Eloise, Interview). They also describe how frequently they see individuals carrying guns in their neighbourhood. Eloise expands on this observation, stating: "this thing of shooting back and forth. Sometimes it's the boys making fun, isn't it? Those who are new to the gang or because they're killing someone for something" (Eloise, Interview).

Maya was the only one among the young women who said she had never seen anyone carrying a gun. This revelation surprised the others, who even asked in disbelief, "but not even at school?" Gabriela then shared that she had witnessed armed individuals near their school on multiple occasions. She describes two different cars that frequently drive past the school when students are leaving, playing loud music, and exhibiting guns as they circle the area. Despite this, the young women discuss these incidents in a lighthearted manner, even making fun of the behaviour. As Gabriela concludes, "wow, it's really ridiculous" (FG2).

Another example the young women share, which demonstrates their experiences navigating everyday life under constant caution, is the visible presence of drug dealing. As Eloise describes: "I always walk on the street there. Like, when I come back from school, or from anywhere, there they are. They're selling their drugs like crazy; you pass by, and it's fine, normal. It's normal for me" (Eloise, FG2). But as Maya adds, "I'm not going to snitch," and Eloise responds, "that's because if you snitch, it's over" (FG2). They know that any involvement, even indirect, such as reporting illegal activities, can bring consequences. This

everyday vigilance reflects a persistent threat of harm and the need to continuously assess and navigate risk, illustrating what Berents and ten Have (2017) describe as the figure of the skilled navigator: young people who draw on local knowledge and experiences to move through environments marked by violence and uncertainty.

The young women's experiences reveal how growing up amid criminal dynamics and urban violence produces a paradoxical environment in which familiarity does not necessarily translate into safety. They learn to navigate these spaces with caution and strategic silence, but their daily lives remain marked by unpredictability, gendered risks, and vigilance. Their accounts highlight not only how violence constrains decisions, mobility, and relationships, but also how feelings of safety may vary across individuals.

For Gabriela, safety is tied to her immediate surroundings and protective strategies. She explains that she feels safe on her street, despite the risk of someone fleeing from the police and jumping over her wall. The police have even entered her house in the past while searching for suspects, but she adds that her family has two Rottweilers, which she believes deter intruders, echoing that the home environment may also be at risk (Rizzini & Limongi, 2016; Ursin, 2020). Still, Gabriela insists that she lives in "a very good neighbourhood," adding, "I'm not going to badmouth my own neighbourhood, right?" (Interview). She also emphasizes that she has more freedom to move around today compared to the past. Her remark reveals a sense of attachment and a gesture of defence against the stigma often associated with her community. By affirming the value of her neighbourhood, Gabriela also resists external representations that define it solely through risk, crime, and danger and shows how, despite a militarized environment, young people can have a strong sense of belonging to the community (Rizzini & Limongi, 2016)

Eloise presents a similar, but more ambivalent perspective. She feels at ease moving through the area, even at night, but this sense of safety is mediated by walking with classmates. However, she noted that her parents were more cautious, frequently checking what time she would be home and urging her to be careful and quickly return after evening classes. For Eloise, walking in groups functions as a protective tactic — a way of reducing vulnerability and avoiding the risks associated with moving alone through streets marked by the presence of drug dealing and gang activity. As a young woman moving through this territory, this strategy reflects broader gendered patterns of risk management, in which girls rely on collective presence and self-restriction to navigate public spaces shaped by the threat of male violence (Cobbina et al., 2008).

Maya, by contrast, explicitly frames her neighbourhood as safer than other places she visits, especially Belo Horizonte. She explains that her familiarity with the neighbourhood, combined with the presence of busy public spaces like the local fair and supermarket, gives her confidence: “It’s packed; if something happens, everyone sees it. And then there’s no need to pull into the alley and disappear” (Maya, Interview). Maya shares a specific incident she heard from a friend about an attempted abduction near a theatre. Maya attends a drama course on weekends in Belo Horizonte and recalls an incident in which a colleague was pulled into an alley, but a passerby intervened and prevented further harm. For Maya, the familiarity and knowledge of the place outweigh the threat of gangs and drug dealing, which she sees as something distant from her everyday life.

Ana’s narrative sharply contrasts with these accounts. For her, the same spaces that Maya associates with safety, such as the neighbourhood fair, represent a greater danger once night falls. She describes dealers openly advertising sales during festivities and recalls:

> They start selling things in front of kids, and we're there; they start shouting “it’s going on” and start selling their drugs in front of us. Sometimes you bump into them like that, and they start picking fights with you; they want to beat you up and sort things out. Instead of talking things through, they start to fight. So, it's a lot of things that could be good if they'd just said, “well, today's a festive day, at least let's take a break today.” Now they don't; they take advantage so they can make that dirty money off us who have nothing to do with it (Ana, Interview).

Ana’s account reveals the volatility of daily interactions in such contexts, where even an accidental bump can escalate into a physical confrontation, which illustrates the militarized logic of enemy-making and confrontation (Ursin, 2020). Her words also convey the frustration of residents who “have nothing to do with it” but are nonetheless forced to coexist with, obey, and adapt to the imposed rules of territories under siege.

Ana also emphasizes the territorial dimension of risk, noting that some areas are effectively off-limits due to gang control, which contributes to restricting their mobility (Rizzini & Limongi, 2016; Sampson & Villela, 2017; Van Dijk et al., 2025). Entering a neighbourhood where you do not live can be dangerous if the local group conflicts with the gang from your own area. For example, Ana avoids certain places and people near her home, as such interactions could expose her to random threats. As she puts it, “there’s a death risk because of a fight that isn't even yours” (Interview). Her vulnerability is particularly pronounced when walking alone, and she has no choice but to live in contact with crime dynamics, as Ana explains:

> When I am with girls, like my sister, we go to the gym together. I protect her because I do not care if anything happens to me while helping her, but I feel very vulnerable walking down the street alone. Just like yesterday, when I was leaving, there were four guys on the street from the gang up there. I thought, if these guys come, there is nothing I can do, right? Because I'm alone. I'm a woman, I'm weaker than four men together. So, there's no choice. I feel vulnerable when it comes to being forced to walk in the middle of this kind of thing, when we must face it alone, because even the police do not do anything anymore. They're all up there together. The police stop there every now and then, talk to them, and nothing happens (Ana, Interview).

These narratives reveal that young women's sense of safety is not homogeneous. While some highlight familiarity, family strategies, or the presence of peers and attending busy public spaces as protective factors, others emphasize their raw vulnerability, especially as young women dealing with male-dominated gang dynamics. What emerges is a picture of relational, situational, and unequal safety – shaped by gender, time of day, territorial boundaries, and the unpredictability of life in a minefield (Menezes, 2015). State institutions further reinforce this inequality: as Ana pointed out, even when the police intervene, their actions rarely alter the local balance of power, reflecting the militarized environment (Ursin, 2020). The young women's accounts point not only to how they navigate through risk, but also to how they must constantly negotiate relationships within it. In the next section, I explore the young women's interactions with individuals involved in criminal dynamics.

2.2. Living With a Constant Sense of Threat: Everyday Interpersonal Interactions

Everyday life in urban peripheries can be shaped by proximity to armed violence and drug dealing dynamics and consequently by ongoing, ambivalent interactions with those involved in it. Gabriela explains that her parents, who work as hairdressers, have never had direct problems, but she acknowledges that this relationship is ambiguous. Clients connected to gangs would "help" her family when needed, but, as she emphasizes, it was help in quotation marks, permeated by imminent violence. In a gossip-like tone, she recounts an episode to illustrate this ambiguity, as part of the stories and rumours that circulate in peripheral neighbourhoods and favelas, fueling the atmosphere of apprehension (Menezes, 2015). As Gabriela said, she was not there, but she was "telling [me] the gossip:"

> My neighbour, an old man, has only had bitches in his house since his wife died about four years ago. There was a woman there who had a son, wow, it was all day [she imitated how they keep shouting the child's name], "that son of a bitch, that boy is

> ruining my life" [the neighbour's words]. The boy was 3 years old. She then went to [name of city], and he put another woman inside. So, then there was a woman and a gay man. This gay person was such a deadbeat. But he had an amazing voice. He could have been successful, but he was not. He did drugs and would go there to use them. Then one day, my mother was looking after a client, and this gay guy came in and asked my mother's client for an Uber ride. The gay guy got a bit nervous. Then the woman said, "no, I'm not going to call it because you didn't pay me last time." "Oh no, call the Uber, and I'll pay you" [the man's response]. She requests a ride to the middle of nowhere (Gabriela, Interview).

The way Gabriela narrates this episode also reveals how moral interpretations are embedded in these everyday accounts. Her remark that he "had an amazing voice" and "could have been successful" but instead "did drugs" reflects a common framing of individuals as having chosen the "wrong path," positioning them as responsible for the consequences they face (Motta, 2016; Ursin, 2020). Gabriela comments that the man never appeared again, but soon after, "a couple came in selling drugs. We did not even know where this couple was from; they were not from the boca on my street, they were from another street" (Interview). For her, the fact that the drug dealers were unknown explains the seriousness of the threat: if they had been from her street, "this probably would not have happened," since there would have been some degree of recognition and protection. This episode illustrates how ordinary residents suddenly become implicated in alien conflicts, turning into potential targets. Gabriela continues:

> They [drug dealers] arrived at my mother's beauty parlor saying that they were going to knock my mother and her client down, telling them they were covering up for a scoundrel. Since he had not paid his debt, they [Gabriela's mother and the client] were going to pay with their lives. My mother then called my father, crying. My father left his job to come here. He took a baseball bat; he had a baseball bat. He went down to the boca and said, "what have you people come here for? I'm going to finish him off, and I don't want you to get in the way, okay? You sort it out with your people who sell their drugs there; I have nothing to do with it." He waited there, but the gay man never showed up again. However, the couple did not come around to collect from my mother either (Interview).

Gabriela's story illustrates how violence is both pervasive and unpredictable, contributing to an everlasting state of alert. This experience echoes what Palloma Menezes (2015) conceptualizes as a *campo minado* (minefield): even when armed confrontations decrease,

violence remains latent, less visible, but always unpredictable. Like buried mines, one never knows when or where the risk may explode, and any interaction can trigger new threats.

Although Gabriela's family was not directly attacked, the episode shaped her sense of safety and self-protection strategies. Her father's intervention with a baseball bat functioned as a form of deterrence and informal conflict resolution, but it also reinforced the atmosphere of uncertainty that requires constant vigilance. As Gabriela summarizes: "it's not as normal as taking a shower, right? We're always scared because, like, we know it's violent, but we don't know how violent it is, how cruel the person can be to us" (Interview). And here lies a crucial point: despite the young women's familiarity with criminal dynamics, the minefield regime implies unpredictability — they never know where the "bomb" might explode and the scale of the damage (Menezes, 2015). Gabriela's words reveal the anticipation of violence with an awareness that any situation can quickly escalate and even become lethal (Berents & ten Have, 2017). Gabriela shares another example:

> I don't see these things [violent acts], but I hear about them. These people, not those who do drugs, but sell them. There was a boy, I think he was stealing in my street. Then these beautiful, wonderful boys [sarcastically], who have nothing to lose, grabbed him in the middle of the street and started beating him. Then my neighbour started screaming in the middle of the night. Later, we found out that the boy who was being beaten was a teenager, 16 years old, and he wasn't even stealing; he wasn't the right boy, they had grabbed the wrong person. Then they [neighbours] got in the middle of it. But they got in the middle, in quotes. Because after it started making a fuss and everyone went out to see what was going on, they took the boy and shoved him into the car so they could beat him up without anyone bothering them. We don't know where he was taken to, but afterwards they said he was fine (Interview).

These episodes, narrated between direct observation and rumours circulating in the neighbourhood, reinforce the dimension of minefield connected to life under siege: the lingering instability about where a conflict may erupt and who will be affected. This uncertainty is deepened by the territorial domination of armed groups, whose presence regulates movements, behaviours, and interactions.

These groups, however, are also seeking new forms of organization and integration into the community. This is partly because when violent confrontations and killings become too visible, they attract media and police attention, pushing criminal groups to adapt their strategies (Machado da Silva & Menezes, 2019). The young women notice these transformations. Gabriela, for instance, explains that many of the most dangerous men in the area are now either

in prison, dead, or have transitioned to running liquor stores. Eloise agrees, commenting: “wow! It is a new business here” (FG2). Gabriela adds: “on my street, there are three liquor stores.” This shift suggests an economic reconfiguration that may reduce overt armed confrontations while maintaining an atmosphere of surveillance and latent violence, as weapons and networks of power remain active (Motta et al., 2022).

Gabriela comments on these men involved in crime dynamics but who currently own liquor stores, seen as respected figures and even as examples of change. Still, these men continue to reproduce violent practices, as she recalls in one episode:

> I always talk to old men at liquor stores. They're no danger. Actually, they are. There's a guy who has a liquor store, either a liquor store or a bar, it's always like that. He has a liquor store company. My mother thought he was very respectful because, even though he was from this world [of crime], he wasn't aggressive or anything. He was a good husband. He stopped doing drugs because his wife asked him to. Now he's in the church. Then my mother said, “he's an example of a man, he's in the world of crime, but he's in the right way of being in the crime world.” [In Gabriela’s mother’s view, his conduct represented a kind of moral balance — someone who, despite his involvement in criminal networks, seemed to follow a personal code of discipline and responsibility]. But doesn't my grandmother come in saying that he has beaten up a woman on the street because she was badmouthing his wife? An older lady! [who was beaten up] (Interview).

In addition to highlighting the overlap between the worlds of crime and religion (Beraldo, 2022), these narratives reinforce the perspective that residents live in a minefield, in which violence is both a concrete experience and a threat constantly renewed by hearsay. However, as Menezes (2015) argues, an intersectional lens reveals that the experience of the minefield is not lived in the same way by everyone; it depends on the person, the place, and the moment. Factors such as social position — whether an adult, a young person, a community leader, a pastor, a police officer, or a drug dealer — shape how people experience uncertainty in diverse ways and varying intensities (Menezes, 2015).

This perspective helps explain why the young women describe ambiguous relationships with criminal actors. They distinguish older men, sometimes seen as “incorporated” into the community, such as store owners or respected figures, from young men in gangs, who represent a more immediate, violent, and unpredictable threat. As Gabriela explains:

> I don't listen to these young boys because they have nothing to lose. I have a lot to lose. I've got my whole life ahead of me; they don't. They know they're in this world, and at

any time, they could die there.[22] For them, “oh, I've got the world in my hands, I want you, you're going to be mine” (Gabriela, Interview).

In group discussion, the young women talked about how these young men can represent a threat to them:

> Gabriela: I'm not afraid of old men. Because they're there with their liquor stores, I go there and buy my soft drink, and that's it. I'm afraid of the young ones. Because, like it or not, the guy is still a *vapor*, [23] so he sells drugs and passes messages on.
>
> Eloise: They're hotheads.
>
> Gabriela: They think they're the big boys. I'm afraid they'll say, “I want you.”
>
> Isabel: Yes! Oh my God!
>
> Gabriela: I want you, and you're going to be mine.
>
> Eloise: That's scary. The person obsesses over you, and you're dating, or almost. But then they turn to you: “no, I want you.” “But I'm dating.” “Who's your boyfriend? Wait a minute, if your boyfriend is in the neighbourhood, I'll kill him.”
>
> Gabriela: Kill your boyfriend, shave your hair, make you bald (FG2).

The young women’s accounts reveal how patriarchal masculinity is reproduced through these interactions, where young men see themselves as entitled to possess and control women, regardless of their consent, availability, or relationships (Pimenta, 2023). To “take” a girl becomes an assertion of dominance and prestige, embedded in the militarized and criminalized logics that organizes everyday relations (Fernandes, 2014; Ursin, 2020). These organizations typically reproduce patriarchal logics that expose women to submission, punishment, and retaliation, which can culminate in physical assaults or even death (Dias & Corrêa, 2025).

The so-called “favela law” also helps to make sense of these dynamics. As Zilli (2015) observes, it is a normative system that combines loyalty, respect, and fidelity with traditional notions of honour and virility, legitimizing sexist and violent practices. This logic, which turns young men into guardians of local order, is manifested in episodes such as the one Gabriela narrated about the teenager mistaken for a thief and beaten by gang members, illustrating how punishment and intimidation regulate community life. In this configuration, young men

[22] As Zilli (2015) demonstrates, beyond possible lethal disputes between rival gangs, young people in gangs run the risk of being killed for any “deviation” they might commit. For example, if a resident reports illegal activity, they may be expelled from the territory or beaten. For a young gang member, however, any suspicion that they may have committed an “infraction” in the eyes of their own group will likely be punished with their life, executed by their companions.

[23] “Vapor” (steam, in a free translation) is the name given to individuals, usually children or teenagers, who drug dealers hire to guard the entrance to the *boca*. They are called this because when they have information that the police are coming, they evaporate, that is, they disappear, escaping the police.

position themselves as guardians of the community; their authority, however, is sustained through coercion, domination, and violence, reinforcing a warrior ethos (Zaluar, 2014; Zilli, 2015).

This ethos is further marked by the moral and strongly local character of criminal dynamics in Belo Horizonte and the RMBH (Greater Belo Horizonte Area), where family and friendship ties are enough to draw other young people into violent disputes (Motta et al., 2022). As Luana Motta et al. (2022) observe, even without direct involvement in criminal activities, being a cousin, neighbour, or romantic partner of someone linked to a gang can associate a young person with a rival group. This contributes to blurring the boundaries between who is "inside" and "outside," increasing everyday risks and causing violence to go beyond streets and reach school environments as well.

The young women recount how, at school, trivial disputes often turn into threats and physical assaults. Gabriela, reflecting on her role as a class representative, explains how she faced threats from other students who were unhappy with her decisions, including physical aggression such as pulling her hair or assaulting her at home. Eloise and Maya, in turn, describe an episode in which a disagreement over a classroom assignment resulted in about thirty students gathering to beat up a classmate named Kevin after school. The disagreement among the students arose when one group claimed that the teacher had not assigned a specific task, while the other group, seated at the front of the room, argued that it had been assigned. During this exchange, one student cursed the teacher and was expelled, but the situation escalated into a verbal confrontation between Kevin and a young woman. Maya describes the conversation between them:

> I actually remember the conversation. The girl at the back said, "oh, he [the teacher] didn't write anything on the board." And people in front said, "Yes, he did." Then Kevin also said, "Yes, he did." Then the girl at the back said, "Oh, zip it, we're talking to the teacher." Then he just turned around and said, "You zip it; I'm not talking to you either. I'm talking to the teacher." Then everyone was shouting (FG2).

Maya's recollection of the dialogue between the students highlights how the argument revolved around a trivial issue: one side claimed that the teacher had not assigned the task, while the other side insisted that he had. The young woman who was arguing with Kevin ended up calling others to intimidate and beat him up at the end of the school day. As Eloise explains:

> When he stepped outside, all I knew was that about thirty boys were waiting outside to beat the shit out of him. All I know is that she gathered these boys. I don't know if they are friends of hers or not, but they were about to beat him up because he had answered

her back. But it wasn't even a sexist kind of answer. He just said, “no, he [the teacher] didn’t.” They even had to call the police to escort him home (FG2).

Eloise adds that Kevin's mother was called to school, although nothing happened to the young woman: “the girl who stirred up the guys to hit someone else at school is violence, isn’t it? Nothing happened to her” (Maya, FG2). In addition to threatening to beat up Kevin, the students also threatened to harm his girlfriend. As Gabriela explains, “because the boys were trying to get her, as they couldn't get him” (FG2). The young women reflect on this incident, highlighting how disproportionate the response was to a minor school conflict. When faced with situations where any disagreement or speaking up could result in backlash, they fear for their physical integrity.

These experiences highlight how processes of rivalry can extend beyond gangs, permeating everyday life and interactions among young people. As Motta et al. (2022) summarize, the fragmentation of gang disputes increases the potential for danger within youth relations and creates a scenario in which ordinary actions, such as going to a party, becoming romantically involved with someone at school, or disagreeing with a classmate, can be drawn into a broader dynamic of violent rivalries. This is relevant in the context of Vargem das Flores, within the Belo Horizonte Metropolitan Region, where the presence of multiple, competing groups within the same neighbourhood makes rivalry a central feature of everyday life (Zilli, 2015). In this context, the boundaries between collective disputes and individual safety become blurred: the potential for violence is ever-present, shaping how young women move, relate, and evaluate risk in their daily routines. In this context, the institutions expected to provide protection do not necessarily function as sources of safety but can instead become part of the landscape of insecurity that young women must navigate in their everyday lives. In the next section, I explore the experiences of the young women with the police.

2.3. Learning not to rely on the police

Despite not being the primary target of police action, the young women express mistrust toward law enforcement. Their reflections reveal that distrust is not abstract but grounded in lived and collective experiences: the deaths of family members, recurrent episodes of racial profiling, and the awareness that the police cannot be relied upon even in moments of need. These testimonies show how the police fail to be a protective force and actively reproduce fear, discrimination, and violence (Anunciação et al., 2020; Cavalcanti, 2017; Motta, 2016; Ursin, 2020).

The experiences of the young women reveal a broader pattern of mistrust and hesitation in calling the police. In their communities, where police presence is often associated with violence rather than protection, residents learn to manage conflicts through other means. As Ursin (2020) argues, this reflects a broader process of militarization, in which logics grounded in intimidation, reputation, and the use of force become normalized as part of everyday life and social control, including by state actors.

Maya recalls a violent dispute between neighbours on her street, in which a woman was stabbed during a fight over the right to enter a house she had helped pay for. At the time of her interview, traces of blood were still visible, and the victim was pregnant. Despite the severity of the incident, no one called the police. Knowing when to call upon local armed groups, when (or if) to involve the police, and when to remain silent may reflect the calculations residents must constantly make to prevent disputes from escalating into lethal violence, always under the latent risk that any spark may detonate the minefield of everyday life (Menezes, 2015).

In addition, as demonstrated in Chapter One, in these territories, the police often act not as a protective force, but as another actor in the violent struggle for local power (Ursin, 2020). Rather than strengthening the democratic state, military police's crime-fighting logic frequently mirrors the dynamics of gangs and armed groups, contributing to increased homicides and weakening the legitimacy of institutions (Beraldo, 2022; Manso & Zilli, 2021; Ursin, 2020). This pattern also appears in the accounts of young women. As I mentioned earlier, Eloise spoke about the death of a drug dealer who coordinated a local area and other members of his group, noting that while rival dealers were responsible for most of the killings, the police also ended up shooting someone during the confrontation. She also recalled the death of her own cousin.

Eloise says she does not know the story properly, but from what she heard, the police killed her cousin by mistake, as she explains: "they [her family] said he [the cousin] was in the wrong place, you know?" (Interview). Eloise says that her cousin was on the street when the police arrived looking for a guy and ended up mixing them up. The police mistakenly shot and killed her cousin. She mentions how this was a tough situation for her family, making her aunt and uncle leave the community. When I asked Eloise how these things affect her, she claimed to be used to this kind of thing and incapable of doing anything about it. However, in addition to her feeling of helplessness, Eloise also ends up distrusting and hating the military police. In her words:

> I don't really know. I don't think it impacts me that much, you know? Because I think we get used to it because I've lived here since I was young, right? It makes you sad,

> doesn't it? But what can you do? It doesn't solve anything. But I think we also end up hating the police a little bit, that sort of thing (Eloise, Interview).

The killing of Eloise's cousin is not an isolated incident, nor can it be dismissed as a mistake in a police operation or the result of inadequate training. Instead, it reflects a recurring pattern of state violence that reveals deeply rooted racism in Brazilian society (Rodrigues et al., 2024). When I asked Eloise if she trusted the military police, she responded, "so-so." She once dreamed of becoming a federal police officer, but she no longer has that aspiration. Although the federal police operate differently from the military police, Eloise's disenchantment with law enforcement in general has led her to abandon this dream. The military police's strong presence in communities may have influenced this perspective shift, as they are the primary force interacting with the population. Eloise's past aspiration reflects a common reality for young people in Brazilian marginalized communities, where pursuing a career in law enforcement is often seen as a pathway to social mobility (Alchorne et al., 2019). However, Eloise adds: "while the cops protect us, we become a little suspicious because they end up killing people in our family, so it generates mistrust there. You know, I'm not confident that the police are going to protect me" (Interview).

While none of the young women have personally experienced police violence, their testimonies reveal a deep awareness of the systemic racial profiling and brutality that disproportionately impact Black communities. As presented in Chapter One, racism is a constitutive element of police action, in which Black youth are the preferred targets of police stops, being constructed as suspicious individuals (Anunciação et al., 2020; Cobbina et al., 2008; Hill et al., 2024). Although young Black men are most frequently targeted, the young women share accounts of how law enforcement actions have harmed their family members. These experiences shape their perceptions of the police, reinforcing a sense of vulnerability and powerlessness in the face of institutionalized and racial violence.

The young women's comments demonstrate police profiling, which discriminates and disproportionately targets Black people. As Ana explains, "police officers have stopped and searched my cousin numerous times coming from church, with his Bible in his hand, because they think he is carrying something else. Only because he's Black" (Ana, FG1). Isabel also mentions the case of her cousin, who was on his way to deliver a spare car key to his father, Isabel's uncle, and was stopped by the police under suspicion that he had the key to a stolen car. As Isabel describes it:

> My cousin, he's Black; our family is all Black. And then my uncle had left his car keys in the car, and my cousin went to take him the spare key. The police officer pulled him

> over. He said, “Where did you steal this car?” And he said, “I didn't steal it; I'm taking the key to my father because his key got stuck inside the car.” Then the police officer threw his brand-new iPhone on the floor and broke the whole screen because he was Black, thinking he had stolen the car, but it was nothing of the sort (FG1).

As Isabel's account makes clear, the frequent criminalization of Black people, and the way skin colour and other racial markers shape a police officer’s decision to “suspect” someone and conduct stop-and-search procedures, is nothing new (Anunciação et al., 2020; Sinhoretto et al., 2014). As Isabel concludes, “simply because the person is Black, they are seen as thieves, as bad people” (FG1). The young women are thus acutely aware of the criminalization of Black people, racial bias embedded in policing, and they also recognize how this bias extends into the judicial system itself. In a group discussion following these accounts, Gabriela reflected: “that’s why I’m not in favour of the death penalty in Brazil. In smaller cases, those who have money already get away with it. Imagine something like that? The ones who would die the most would be people from the periphery, just one more.” To which Eloise added: “It’s just one more number for the government” (FG2).

Their exchange reflects a critical understanding of how racial and class inequalities operate across the justice system — where punishment is unevenly distributed, and poor, Black, and peripheral populations are treated as disposable. In describing how people from the periphery would become “just one more [death]” or “just one more number,” the young women point to the ways in which structural violence operates through abstraction, reducing lives to statistics and obscuring the human weight of loss (Farmer, 1996). Yet rather than rendering this violence invisible, their accounts make it visible and nameable. As Scheper-Hughes (2004) argues, such forms of violence are often ordinary and taken for granted, but for those who experience them, they are neither abstract nor distant. Instead, the young women’s reflections reveal critical awareness of how Black lives are devalued within broader systems of power.

Maya was the only young woman who raised a distinct perspective from the others. When I asked if she trusted the police, she responded, “I don't know.” She recalled an incident when her aunt called the police on her father, but the interaction between the police and her family was uneventful. Maya also described situations where she walked close to police officers, even when they had their guns drawn due to incidents in the area. She referred specifically to a neighbourhood with frequent conflicts between local gangs and the police. Maya explained that sometimes she intentionally made a suspicious face when walking past the police so they might think she was a suspect. However, she noted that she was not concerned about being stopped because, as she put it, she was innocent and therefore had

nothing to fear. When I asked if she had ever been stopped or searched by the police, Maya said no, emphasizing that she had never experienced such an interaction. She also recounted an incident when she was running home from school and encountered police officers. Fearing they might think she was fleeing a crime scene, she slowed down but did not stop.

Maya is the only one who identifies herself as parda, with lighter skin, which may explain why she has experienced the privilege of being presumed innocent, "playing" with the police, acting suspiciously, or running past them without being stopped. This example also illustrates how colourism (Devulsky, 2021) shapes police action: the discrimination and hierarchy within Black populations based on skin tone mean that individuals with lighter skin and features closer to whiteness are often treated with less suspicion and prejudice than those with darker skin (I will return to the discussion about colourism in Chapter Eight).

Maya's contrasting experience illustrates how differential treatment operates based on skin tone, highlighting the protective effects of lighter skin within racialized policing practices. In sum, the young women's accounts show that, rather than ensuring protection, policing in these territories becomes part of selective, racialized, and discriminatory dynamics of control, inequality, and violence.

3. Closing Remarks

The experiences narrated by the young women show how living in peripheral neighbourhoods means navigating a daily reality shaped by intersecting inequalities and constrained access to resources and opportunities. Violence emerges not only through the unpredictability of armed conflicts, criminal dynamics, and policing practices (Cavalcanti, 2008; Machado da Silva & Leite, 2008; Menezes, 2015; Ursin, 2020), but also through the unequal distribution of infrastructure, services, and possibilities (Galtung, 1969; Iadicola & Shupe, 2003; Ho, 2007). In this sense, their accounts illuminate how violence is understood and experienced, reflecting the conditions of living in the periphery — shaping where they can go, what they can access, and how they must continuously navigate risk.

At the same time, these experiences point to broader patterns through which structural violence operates in multiple dimensions of the young women's lives. The dynamics identified in this chapter, such as restricted mobility, unequal access to services, exposure to risk, and the normalization of insecurity, reappear across other dimensions of the young women's lives, revealing how violence is relationally produced and sustained, operating as a site through which intersecting relations of power are articulated, reproduced, and made visible in everyday life (Collins, 2019).

The young women's narratives also demonstrate that they are not passive recipients of these conditions. Their reflections on inequalities, social mobility, class divisions, and police racial selectivity show how they actively interpret and make sense of structures that shape their lives. Their accounts reveal critical awareness and everyday forms of negotiation that challenge dominant portrayals of young women in peripheral contexts as either victims or problems.

In this chapter, I began by examining the young women's place of residence as an entry point into understanding how they experience structural violence. Structural violence, however, is not only produced through poverty and socioeconomic inequality. It also connects to the organization of everyday life and the conditions that affect what the young women can do in their free time. Thus, the following chapter turns to the domestic sphere to further expand this understanding, examining how violence is experienced and negotiated within the home. In doing so, it shifts the focus from exclusively territorial dynamics to daily routines and intimate spaces of the young women's lives, highlighting how structural violence is also embedded in how time is structured, used, and constrained.

CHAPTER FIVE: HOME – LIVING GENDERED RESPONSIBILITIES

In this chapter, I present the young women's accounts of their routines. The first section discusses the central role of domestic and caregiving work in organizing their time. They describe days structured around cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger siblings, often balancing these responsibilities with school and other activities. These accounts consistently position these tasks as part of their own responsibilities, while fathers are largely absent from these descriptions. Domestic work emerges as a regular and expected dimension of their daily lives.

The second section reflects on how domestic work and responsibilities also provide young women with a sense of responsibility, autonomy, and participation in the functioning of the household. Through these practices, relationships of care, support, and solidarity between women, particularly between mothers and daughters, are sustained. The young women's narratives reveal the ambivalent nature of domestic and caregiving work, as a space where unequal expectations coexist with forms of agency, recognition, and relationality.

To conclude this chapter, I demonstrate how reproductive work is not experienced passively. The young women express a clear awareness that responsibilities in domestic and caregiving work are unevenly distributed. Some speak about feeling overwhelmed, having too many tasks, and how this made them mature earlier, but others also feel the pressure of not being seen as responsible enough. They also challenge the expectation that, as women, they are naturally seen as responsible for caring for others.

This chapter thus examines how domestic and caregiving work shape the everyday lives of the young women, attending to both the structural conditions that organize these responsibilities and the ways they are lived, interpreted, and negotiated in practice. Rather than assuming a fixed meaning, the analysis engages with tensions and ambivalences that emerge in their accounts.

1. Having Free Time Captured by Domestic Work

In describing their daily routines, several young women frame their involvement in domestic and caregiving tasks not as an obligation, but as something that emerges from having "free time." Rather than presenting these activities as imposed, they often explain them as something they take on simply because they are available to do so.

This framing is significant. Had this research been conducted with young men, it is unlikely that domestic work would occupy such a central place in their accounts of everyday life, even if they also had time available, reflecting the persistent fact that girls and young

women continue to bear a disproportionate share of domestic responsibilities (Pinheiro et al., 2023; Plan International Brazil, 2021). Furthermore, the fact that "free time" becomes translated into domestic responsibility for girls reveals how gendered expectations shape what is considered a natural or appropriate use of time. This section explores how this process unfolds, showing how tasks are gradually incorporated into the young women's routines, often without explicit assignment, and how "having time" becomes a key mechanism through which domestic responsibilities expand.

Gabriela, for example, begins talking about her routine by emphasizing that she has a lot of time on her hands. She describes waking up, doing her morning hygiene, having breakfast, and then starting to prepare lunch. She even mentioned the dishes she had made on the day of her one-to-one interview, proudly noting how good it turned out: "Today my lunch was good, I made rice, beans, boiled sweet potatoes and carrots, and for meat I made sausage and pasta with stewed meat" (Gabriela, Interview). After lunch, she explains that she does the dishes and feeds her dogs. She adds that she cleans the house three times a week, usually on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays, clarifying that she reserves Saturdays for a thorough cleaning.

Gabriela explains that the only task she considers her obligation is doing the dishes. However, she gradually took on other chores simply because she had time. As she puts it, "I think that after I started doing it, they stopped doing it" (Interview), pointing to a shift in household dynamics once she began doing these tasks regularly. This process shows how families often transfer care responsibilities generationally to girls as soon as they perceive them as capable of performing them, thereby reinforcing the expectation that women will naturally assume these roles. As Gabriela explains:

> I only wash the dishes. But then I have time to wipe; I wipe, and the person who used to wipe has stopped wiping. I went to wash the bathroom, then the person who washed the bathroom stopped washing the bathroom. Then it was all for me. I just accept it; there's nothing I can do (Interview).

This gradual task buildup, which began because she had free time, led Gabriela to take on more than she initially intended. Yet, when it comes to laundry, her response reveals a slightly different dynamic that contrasts with how her family has distributed other chores at home. When asked who is responsible for washing the clothes, Gabriela responded with surprise: "Do the laundry? I put everything in the machine." She expressed relief and added, "it used to be handwashed, what a pain to handwash! Nobody deserves to handwash clothes. Now, everyone does their own laundry" (Interview). Her comment points to a change in domestic conditions

— a significant sign of improved material circumstances. The fact that her family once washed clothes by hand, including Gabriela, underscores the domestic hardship they faced. The family's likely recent acquisition of a washing machine illustrates this shift, showing how affording such an appliance helps ease the burden of domestic work. Gabriela explains that she is responsible for washing her own clothes and bedding and takes care of everything in her bedroom, including cleaning, organizing, and tidying it.

Turning to Eloise's account, she similarly describes how domestic responsibilities gradually became her own because of her availability. She notes that she now does more household tasks than in the past, reflecting a gradual internalization of these duties within the family routine. At home, Eloise tidies up, washes the dishes, and completes her schoolwork. She adds that her mother, who works as a cook, usually prepares dinner after returning from work in the evening. However, when her mother does not cook, Eloise prepares her own food, while her father, a supervisor at the same company as her mother, makes his own meals. Her older sister, who still lives with them, meanwhile, works in telemarketing. As in Gabriela's case, Eloise's reflections reveal that she has assumed more domestic responsibilities mainly because other family members have less free time. As she explains:

> Now, a lot more [domestic work], right? Because my mom, my dad, and my sister work all day. My dad works every other day, but I am responsible for always keeping the dishes clean and everything tidy and in place. I'm also responsible for cleaning the whole house since none of them have time now. So, sometimes, it's a bit tough (Eloise, Interview).

Eloise's narrative also illustrates how domestic work becomes internalized as a matter of availability rather than an inherent obligation. Although her account differs slightly from Gabriela's, as Eloise mentions including time for school homework in her daily routine, most of her free time remains absorbed by housework. This reveals how girls' leisure time is often consumed by domestic work, whereas boys in similar contexts tend to spend their time socializing outside the home (Nodari et al., 2016). Thus, society constructs and limits how women's "availability" can be used, reinforcing the expectation that women's time should be devoted to domestic work rather than leisure, rest, or education (Garcia & Marcondes, 2022).

In practice, however, Eloise is not that available. She explains that she feels overwhelmed by household chores, but also by increasing demands on her time outside the home. Her routine has become increasingly demanding as she participates in multiple community activities: while she used to only attend school and the Fica Vivo! graffiti workshop, she has since joined a Muay Thai workshop through the same program and taken

on responsibilities related to this research project, previously held on Tuesdays. In addition, as noted in the previous chapter, Eloise lives in an area distant from the main service hubs, which makes her daily routine even more time-consuming. She describes the long and exhausting walks she undertakes to attend either the Muay Thai or graffiti workshops, both located in different venues, emphasizing that distance is not a deterrent, but potential work commitments could limit her ability to participate. Finally, she explains that weekends are also structured: Saturdays are usually free, but Sundays are filled with church activities in the morning and evening.

Eloise's account begins to challenge the notion of young women's constant availability, revealing how multiple responsibilities and mobility constraints limit their time. This tension becomes even more evident in Ana's experience, where competing demands intensify further. Ana's daily routine is the busiest among the young women, marked by a constant balancing of domestic work, paid work, school, and extracurricular courses. Her schedule is full from early morning until late at night:

> Monday, I wake up, clean the house, cook, and then I leave home around 11 AM. Then I go to my computer and attend my administration course. I take care of two [manicure] clients of mine; I always schedule two clients before going to school. I get home around 6:40 PM, take a shower, and go to school. Then I leave school around 10:25 PM, get home around 10:30 PM, and go to sleep.
>
> On Tuesdays, I have a barbering course, so I clean the house early. That day, I must wake up earlier because I schedule clients in the morning. I take care of two people, go to the course, leave at 4:40 PM, take care of another client, and go to school. Then I get home and go to sleep.
>
> On Wednesdays, I have my computer and administration course again, so I clean the house, change clothes, make lunch, and leave it ready for my mom. Then I go to my course. On Wednesdays, I get home later because there's always a test after class. As soon as I finish it, I go home, take a shower, and because on Wednesdays school starts earlier, I just get home and sleep.
>
> Thursday, I wake up, clean the house, cook lunch, take a shower, and go to Elena's course [the Fica Vivo! Afro Braid workshop]. At Elena's course, we always end up staying longer. I leave around 4:40 PM, get home around 5:40 PM, take a shower, change clothes, and go to school.

> On Fridays, I have the braiding course again. [In the morning] I take a shower, change clothes, clean the house, and make lunch. Then I go to the course [Fica Vivo! Afro Braid workshop], come back, and go to school.
>
> On Saturdays, I have English classes. English takes up my whole morning. I wake up at 5 AM, clean the house, leave home at 6:40 AM, and take my course from 8 AM to 11 AM. I leave around 11:20 AM, then take the bus. I get home around 12:40 PM, more or less. That's the day I usually work the most; I take care of about six manicure clients that day. Then I get home, take a shower, and go to church.
>
> On Sunday mornings, everyone is home. I take a shower, clean the house, help my mom with lunch, and sometimes we go out on Sundays. At night, we go to church (Ana, Interview).

After describing her exhausting routine, I asked Ana how she perceived all the domestic work she mentioned as part of her day. She explained: "At home, no one has time because by 5:00 AM, everyone is already up and leaving for work" (Interview). Once again, the discourse of availability appears to justify why domestic work falls to her. Ana's detailed account, however, reveals the contradiction embedded in this logic. Despite her tightly packed schedule, she constantly finds ways to fit in her paid work as a manicurist while pursuing several vocational and professional courses. Between these activities, she manages household chores and keeps the family's daily life running smoothly: she cleans, does the laundry, cooks, and prepares lunch in advance so her mother can eat when she returns from work. In this sense, Ana's day does not simply reflect an individual routine but an intricate coordination of multiple forms of labour, reproductive and productive, that sustain both her household and her own aspirations. As she further explains:

> So, in the morning, since I'm not working at the place where I used to take my course anymore, it ends up falling on me. Like, I take care of the house chores — cleaning, doing the laundry, cooking, paying the bills. If there's anything that needs to be taken care of, it's me who does it. But for me, it's not a big deal; I've gotten used to this routine. It's been like this since I was little, so I'm already used to it (Ana, Interview).

Ana clarifies that one of her sisters works at a factory all day and only arrives home around the time Ana is leaving for school. Her other sister works as a cashier at a bakery in the city centre, starting early in the morning and returning in the afternoon, while Ana is still at her course. Ana's mother works as an assistant at a restaurant on their street. Within this family dynamic, where all women contribute to sustaining the household through paid or unpaid labour, Ana positions herself not only as a helper but as a central figure of care. Her concern extends beyond

domestic tasks to the emotional and physical well-being of her mother. She proudly recounts how she and her sisters helped their mother leave an exploitative bakery job for this position in a nearby restaurant that offered better working conditions, where she would no longer have to carry heavy loads. This episode captures the shared strength and solidarity among women in her family, who collectively protect one another in the face of precarious work and limited structural support.

It also reveals how caregiving roles are transmitted across generations: Ana internalizes the responsibility of ensuring her mother's well-being, embodying the expectation that women must care for others and for each other. At the same time, her actions reflect an ethic of mutual care that contrasts with the absence of men in these responsibilities. This moment illustrates the extent of Ana's responsibilities; she is not only managing the household but also safeguarding her mother's health and dignity, a theme that connects to the history of domestic violence they experienced, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

These accounts reveal how the idea of "having time" operates within a broader gendered and classed organization of care. As Flávia Biroli (2016) argues, while the sexual division of labour structures women's lives more broadly, it does so unevenly: women with greater economic resources are often able to delegate domestic work to poorer women, whose labour remains undervalued and precarious. In contrast, in low-income households where outsourcing care is not possible and where public support is limited, domestic responsibilities must be absorbed within the family itself. In this context, the young women's "availability" does not simply reflect individual choice, but rather a structural condition that organizes how time, labour, and responsibility are distributed.

For young Black women, however, this dynamic is further shaped by a long history in which care and domestic work have been racially assigned and normalized as their responsibility. As Nadya Guimarães, Helena Hirata, and Kurumi Sugita (2011) remind us, in the Brazilian context, activities such as "taking care of the house," "taking care of children," or "taking care of the husband" have historically been associated with submission — first imposed on enslaved people and later naturalized as women's duty. Black women, therefore, have been positioned at the centre of these arrangements.

As Lélia Gonzalez (1984) argues, Black women have historically occupied roles such as the *Black mother*, responsible for nurturing and raising the children of slave-owning families, and the *domestic worker*, responsible for maintaining their households. These figures resonate with what Patricia Hill Collins (1990/2022) conceptualizes as the *mammy*: a controlling image of Black women as obedient, loyal, self-sacrificing, and naturally suited for

care work. These historical constructions contribute to the normalization of Black women's confinement to domestic labour and to the framing of this subordination as acceptable, or even virtuous. As bell hooks (1991) further notes, this figure is characterized by an expectation of selfless service, reinforcing the idea that Black women should always be available to meet the needs of others, often at the expense of their own.

At the same time, as Nadya Guimarães and Priscila Vieira (2020) suggest, in contexts marked by scarcity, caregiving activities are not always recognized as "work," but are instead framed as forms of help embedded in everyday relations of reciprocity. This helps explain why the young women describe their involvement in domestic tasks as something they do because they "have time," rather than as an obligation imposed upon them. Their accounts reflect not only gendered expectations but also participation in broader circuits of care that sustain family life in the absence of adequate state support. These arrangements blur the boundaries between obligation and solidarity, making domestic work expected but also meaningful within relationships.

Furthermore, these practices can also be shaped by the broader social devaluation and stigmatization of peripheral spaces. In many low-income families, maintaining a clean and organized home may function as a way of asserting dignity and countering dominant representations that associate Black and peripheral communities with disorder, dirt, and neglect (Fernandes, 2014; Gonzales, 1984). In this sense, domestic work may not only be about maintaining the household but can also operate as a form of moral and social affirmation. It is not uncommon in Brazil to hear people from low-income backgrounds say, "you can come in, my house is clean," as a way of anticipating and resisting stigmatizing assumptions.

These dynamics, however, do not unfold uniformly across all co-researchers, as Maya's routine reveals a different configuration of time and responsibilities. Unlike most of the other young women, Maya presents a routine that encompasses not only household and school responsibilities but also personal interests. While the others primarily focus on domestic work, Maya is the only one who presents her routine as including time dedicated to her passion for dubbing and drama, activities she clearly values. She also mentions the time she devotes to reading, taking care of her hair, and participating in group activities for school. This sets her apart, as she can balance her domestic obligations with pursuits that are meaningful to her. As she describes:

> First, I wake up in the morning, like around 8 AM, have breakfast, and study dubbing and drama. Then, after a little while, I'm like, "ah, I'm tired of studying," so I go on my phone, and do something. Then I go to the kitchen, wash the dishes from last night's

> dinner, and make lunch. After I cook, I eat, do the dishes, and brush my teeth. Then I read a book. I don't even know how many hours I spend reading; then I take a shower. Sometimes, during the week, I wash my hair twice. I wash it, comb it, spend some time fixing it; it depends on how I'm styling it (…) Then, if I have something to do for school, I do it. It could be in the afternoon or the morning; it doesn't matter. Or I read a book or do something if I remember.
>
> Then what do I do? I talk to people [classmates] because they're giving us a lot, a lot of group assignments. So, we talk about how we're going to do them, those things. Then I get ready and go to school. Then I go to school, study, come back running, meet up with my boyfriend, and then around 10:50 PM, he leaves, and I go home. Then it's dinner time, right? Gotta heat it up because it gets cold. I heat dinner up, eat, wash my plate, brush my teeth, change clothes, and go to sleep. Then I wake up in the morning and do it all over again (Maya, Interview).

After describing her routine, Maya adds that on Mondays and Thursdays, she participates in the Fica Vivo! graffiti workshop, and on Tuesdays, she engages in activities related to this research. However, she notes that Saturdays are the only days when she is busy throughout the day because of her drama course. Since her theatre school is in another city, she must leave early to catch the bus, a journey that takes about an hour, although it may take longer if the bus is delayed or does not show up. She returns home at the end of the day. On Sundays, as she says, "rest day! I don't even wash the dishes" (Maya, Interview).

When I asked her about domestic work, Maya explained that her responsibilities are limited to "washing and putting away the dishes, making the bed, cleaning the kitchen floor, and cleaning the table. And that's it" (Interview). Her mother, who works as a cleaner in an irregular and less formal arrangement, has more flexibility and takes on most of the reproductive labour, such as laundry and cooking, while her father, employed in a company with more regular hours, appears to occupy the breadwinner role. Maya only cooks occasionally when her mother is away. This clearer division of roles, with her father primarily responsible for productive work and her mother for reproductive work, appears to partially shield Maya from the heavier burden experienced by the other co-researchers, allowing her to dedicate more time to school, leisure, personal projects, and aspirations.

Maya herself makes this distinction when comparing her path with her sisters': "I study for what I want to be. My other sister is unemployed, and the other did nurse school, but she doesn't even work in the field and didn't want to do it either; she just did it for the sake of it. She works in a company. At least my dream is going" (Maya, Interview). Maya's ability to

focus on her dreams, rather than only on immediate income or domestic work, suggests a relatively more favourable position within her household arrangements.

This contrast highlights how the young women experience the sexual division of labour differently depending on family structure and arrangements. In Maya's case, the more traditional split between her parents, with her mother assuming most reproductive work and her father the productive work, appears to reduce the extent to which she must divide her time between domestic and other responsibilities. This relative freedom creates the conditions for her to invest in long-term aspirations like dubbing and drama, opportunities that might otherwise be less accessible. This contrast draws attention to broader structural inequalities that shape the other young women's routines. Financial hardship, absence of fathers, and unequal distribution of reproductive responsibilities often leave them with little choice but to prioritize domestic work and immediate economic survival over leisure, rest, and long-term personal or professional aspirations.

Across the young women's accounts, the absence of fathers, whether physical or in terms of their limited involvement in domestic life, emerges as a recurring feature shaping how care responsibilities are organized within the household. In this context, domestic and caregiving work is not only redistributed across generations but also reorganized through relationships between women, the theme of the next section.

2. Sharing Domestic Responsibilities with Mothers

Rather than being carried out in isolation, domestic work is often shared between mothers and daughters, forming arrangements that combine necessity, learning, and mutual support. While this dynamic reinforces the gendered expectation that care remains a female responsibility, it also reveals forms of collaboration and interdependence that sustain everyday life in contexts marked by economic precarity and limited institutional support.

In this section, I explore how this partnership between mothers and daughters unfolds in practice, examining how domestic responsibilities are negotiated, shared, and transmitted, as well as how these relationships shape the young women's sense of responsibility, maturity, and future aspirations.

Gabriela, for example, explains that her mother (rather than her father) sometimes takes over household chores when Gabriela decides she needs a break and informs her that it will be her day off. Her mother promptly agrees and reassures her that she will do the tasks. Gabriela also describes how she and her mother share moments of rest and leisure. For instance, on

Mondays, which are typically her mother's days off because the beauty parlor where she works is closed, they make popcorn and watch a movie, or her mother takes the opportunity to rest.

These moments illustrate how domestic responsibilities are not only distributed between them but also negotiated in ways that allow for rest and care among women. At the same time, they reinforce how such responsibilities remain contained within the female domain, circulating between mothers and daughters rather than being redistributed more equally within the household.

While Gabriela's account highlights moments of negotiation and shared responsibility, Isabel's experience makes this dynamic even more evident. Unlike the other young women, Isabel did not initially describe her routine in terms of "free time," which is why her account was not included in the previous section. Instead, her narrative centres more directly on caregiving and domestic responsibilities, offering a clearer view of how these roles are structured and lived in practice.

Isabel assumes a caregiving role within her household, balancing school responsibilities with domestic work. From Monday to Friday, she attends school in the morning, returns home for lunch, and then takes her younger brother to school when needed. Afterwards, she cleans the kitchen and does housework, with specific responsibilities such as cleaning the bathroom, organizing the kitchen, dusting, and keeping the house tidy. While her mother also contributes to household tasks, such as cooking, sweeping, and mopping the floor, some duties fall to Isabel. For example, her mother dislikes cleaning the stove, so this has become Isabel's task.

The division of labour within Isabel's family reveals how gender roles continue to organize everyday life: with her father absent, her mother assumes the burden of productive labour, relying on multiple forms of income, babysitting, cleaning, and selling rugs, while Isabel increasingly takes on reproductive work at home, including caring for her younger brother. She also occasionally does paid braiding, though less frequently, which may help to supplement the family's income. This dynamic reinforces how, in low-income households headed by women, the sexual division of labour persists, with the mother primarily responsible for bringing in resources and the daughter gradually absorbing domestic and caregiving responsibilities once she is considered "old enough" to do so.

Like Eloise, Isabel also mentioned the community activities she participates in. She explains that Mondays and Tuesdays are usually less busy, except when she is engaged in this research. On Wednesdays, she attends a workshop at the Social Assistance Reference Centre, and on Thursdays and Fridays, she participates in the Fica Vivo! Afro Braid workshop. She also occasionally goes grocery shopping with her mother and picks up her brother from school,

though this usually depends on her mother's availability. During the research period, while her mother worked long hours as a babysitter, Isabel took on more responsibility for accompanying her brother to and from school.

Her mother spends most of the day away from home, as Isabel emphasizes. The house where she works as a babysitter is far away, meaning her mother leaves early and does not return until 8:00 PM. Isabel highlights that the commute is the most exhausting part of her mother's job, describing it as "horrible." This also reflects the geographic marginalization of Vargem das Flores, discussed in the previous chapter, which adds another layer of burden to women's workdays.

Isabel's account shows how she has supported her mother by looking after her brother — dressing him, helping with homework, and being present whenever needed. These caregiving responsibilities, taken on at an early age, have shaped how she sees herself today: "I saw everything my mom went through, you know? So, I think like this: I must be someone who works, who has financial stability. So, I can, I don't know, have a good life, you know? But it's like, just from watching it, you know? My family and all that" (Isabel, Interview). For Isabel, witnessing her mother's struggles and stepping in to help are key reasons why she believes she matured early and became a determined young woman.

During the research, Isabel shared that she no longer has any contact with her father. Following her parents' separation, he gradually withdrew from his parental role. He would promise to pick her and her brother up on weekends but often cancelled at the last minute, inventing excuses. He would occasionally reappear with small gifts — "I say I was a fool because, like, he came, bought a candy, a juice box, and a pen for me, and I was super happy, you know? 'Wow, that's so nice,' and then he disappeared, then later came back again" (Isabel, Interview). As she recalls, "my mom always worked really hard to raise my brother and me. She went to work, paid people to stay with us, and we never lacked anything. Then the pandemic came. My mom lost her job and told him [Isabel's father], 'I'll need you to help me more,' and he said, 'figure it out'" (Interview). Her mother then went to court to demand child support, which was the last time Isabel saw her father, at the courthouse years ago.

Through these memories, Isabel highlights not only her father's emotional and physical absence but also his refusal to fulfill his socially expected role as provider. In his place, Isabel identifies other male figures, such as her uncle, who embody what she describes as a "family man."

> Nowadays, I don't see him [my father]; I don't have contact; I don't know about his life, and I don't need to, so I don't even care. Like my uncle, I see him as an example

> of a man, like a real family man. He's someone that if I say, "Uncle, I need this," I know he'll help me. "Uncle, could you pay for a course?" Because he's already said, "when you start your manicure course, I'll pay for it." You know? He and my cousin are men I look up to, but it's not something I feel is missing. It used to bother me, but not anymore (Isabel, Interview).

Isabel's reflection reveals how she contrasts her father's negligence with other men's reliability, reproducing the gendered division of roles that associates men with provision and women with care. Isabel concludes:

> If one day he [her father] says he misses me, I'll say, "that's your problem. When I was little, you didn't want to know about me. Now it's your problem." Maybe someday my mind will change about this; I might think differently. But for now, no. I don't want to see him; I don't want to know. I don't want him to look for me either, because I'm not in a phase where I want to talk to him. Because I saw everything my mom went through to raise my brother and me. And he, like, didn't care — "that's your problem, figure it out, take care of it, you'll manage, you'll do it." So, for me, he doesn't matter (Isabel, Interview).

Faced with her father's abandonment, Isabel and her mother built a relationship grounded in mutual support and partnership. The father's withdrawal from both caregiving and financial provision intensified the mother's workload and reinforced a gendered division of responsibilities within the household, in which Isabel gradually became her mother's main source of assistance and companionship. At the same time, her account also reveals how she positively interprets these responsibilities, for example, caring for her brother and being able to accompany her mother on her rug sales, as expressions of affection, solidarity, and a form of retribution. In Isabel's view, assuming these roles allows her to give back for everything her mother did to raise her and her brother alone, without the father's presence: "when I was little, I didn't do anything" (Interview). She elaborates:

> She's always been that kind of mom, the one who does everything. And I say, even today, my mom hands me my food. She serves my brother's food, serves mine, and I just grab it from the table, too. Then people say, "you spoil your kids too much, you hand them their food." And she's like, "let me! When they were little, I was working. Nowadays, when I'm home, I can do it" (Isabel, Interview).

Isabel recalls that her mother's routine has always been shaped by long workdays far from home, often closer to the city centre. Reflecting on her childhood, Isabel explains that most of their time together was in the evenings, when her mother would cook, help her brother with

homework, and assist Isabel with school questions. When Isabel was younger, her mother could pay a neighbour to care for her and her brother while she worked. However, when Isabel was around 10 or 11, her mother stopped paying for Isabel's care and only kept the arrangement for her younger brother. By then, Isabel's responsibilities began: heating meals, washing dishes, and keeping the house organized. As her brother grew older, they eventually stayed home alone, with Isabel as the main caregiver when her mother was away.

This shift illustrates an important moment in the family's dynamics: once Isabel was considered "old enough," her mother no longer needed to pay for someone else to look after her, which eased the family's financial burden while transferring greater caregiving responsibilities onto Isabel. From an intersectional perspective, this decision reflects structural pressures of low-income households, where paid childcare can be a high cost, and daughters often step in as unpaid caregivers.

These accounts show that the partnership between mothers and daughters is not simply a matter of shared domestic work, but a central arrangement through which care is sustained in contexts marked by economic hardship, limited state support, and, often, the absence or disengagement of fathers. In these households, daughters gradually become key actors in the reproduction of everyday life, taking on responsibilities that combine practical necessity with emotional commitment. As Isabel's narrative illustrates, this process is shaped by structural conditions: long working hours, exhausting commutes, and unstable forms of employment push mothers to rely on their daughters, who, in turn, step into caregiving roles at an early age. These dynamics reinforce the gendered organization of care but also illustrate forms of solidarity, support and interdependence between family members (Weber et al., 2025).

At the same time, these relationships cannot be understood only through the lens of burden or exploitation. The young women often interpret their participation in domestic and caregiving work as expressions of affection, responsibility, and reciprocity, particularly in relation to their mothers' efforts and sacrifices. This moral dimension challenges a reading of domestic labour as purely imposed, showing how care is also a site of meaning-making and relational commitment. However, this does not mean that these arrangements are unproblematic or uncontested. As the next section will show, while the young women take on significant responsibilities within their households, they also reflect on, challenge, and at times resist the expectations placed upon them, revealing that their engagement with domestic work is neither passive nor uncritical.

3. Questioning Expectations of Care

While the previous sections have shown how domestic and caregiving responsibilities are incorporated into the young women's everyday lives, these roles are not accepted uncritically. This section examines how the young women reflect on and question the gendered expectations that position them as primary caregivers, as well as the unequal distribution of responsibilities within their households. Their accounts reveal a growing awareness of how these expectations are tied to broader gender norms that naturalize women's responsibility for care while often exempting men from similar obligations.

At the same time, their narratives highlight the tensions produced by these responsibilities, particularly in relation to age and life stage. Ana and Isabel describe having to "grow up" earlier than they would have liked, taking on adult roles and responsibilities at a young age. Maya, however, describes being judged when she still seeks moments of leisure, play, and enjoyment, and is therefore perceived as immature. By exploring these reflections, I show how the young women navigate and question expectations placed upon them, revealing the contradictions that shape their experiences between responsibility and youth.

These tensions become particularly visible in how some of the young women question the unequal distribution of responsibilities within their households. Gabriela's account offers a clear example of this dynamic. Gabriela and her mother carry the weight of domestic work, while her father remains absent from these responsibilities. Yet Gabriela voices a critical perspective, exposing the gendered nature of this arrangement and refusing to accept housework as an unquestioned obligation. She makes clear that she refuses to clean when her father is at home, precisely because his presence sitting idly on the sofa while she works highlights the unfairness of the division of labour:

> Then on Saturdays I do a lot of cleaning, only when my father isn't at home; when my father is at home, I can't do anything. Because he sits on the sofa, and I get angry. I'm not going to do anything with this man sitting here; I can't stand it. I usually only wash the bathroom and clean the kitchen when he's home (Interview).

Rather than accepting these responsibilities as naturally hers, Gabriela critiques the unequal distribution of domestic work. She seeks ways to redistribute the tasks, delegating some to her nine-year-old sister, for instance, cleaning after the dog, and insisting that everyone in the household should contribute, since everyone benefits from the work. What she resists most strongly is the image, so common in many homes, of women tidying up while men rest on the couch. This awareness is even more explicit during the focus group, where Gabriela directly

challenged the assumption that care is a woman's social role — challenging the very naturalization of the sexual division of labour:

> Oh, it's like that, right? Women are born to care. I saw that on TV, and I wanted to jump into the screen and punch the woman. "Oh, we women are born to care." I wasn't born to care. If we're not taught or forced to do something, we won't know how. So, I wouldn't have been born for that if I hadn't learned. My mom once asked my dad, "why didn't you wash the dishes?" And he replied, "with a 15-year-old daughter, do you think I'm going to do the dishes? You must be crazy." But, guys, I don't live alone. I wasn't even home! [Gabriela's response] And we feel a bit like that because, whether we like it or not, society expects this from us. The professions that women have been allowed to have, when women can have a profession, are things like teaching, nursing—things related to taking care of others. Normally, when men see a woman in a position of power, like a judge or a police officer, we don't respect it, right? I mean, men, most of the time, don't (Gabriela, FG1).

Gabriela's statement, "if we're not taught or forced to do something, we won't know how," powerfully reveals how domestic and caregiving practices are not innate feminine qualities but the result of socialization and coercion. What she names as "being taught or forced" encapsulates both the gendered socialization that trains women to assume responsibility for care and the historical coercion that has tied racialized women to this form of labour. Her reflection exposes how these practices are embedded in social norms rather than biology, illustrating that women are not "born to care" but rather positioned and disciplined into this social role. At the same time, her broader critique extends beyond the household, linking these patterns to societal structures that devalue women's work and limit their access to positions of authority.

Furthermore, Gabriela's case also illustrates how refusing to see care as her automatic duty can create room for negotiating the distribution of responsibilities. Gabriela explains that she no longer needs to pick her younger sister up from school, since she convinced her mother to allow the girl to commute on her own with a name tag containing contact information in case of emergencies. Gabriela recalls the conversation she had with her sister: "I told her, 'Oh, you're coming straight home. The school is up the street from our house, so there's not much danger. I'm going to trust you, but the first mistake you make, it's over'" (Gabriela, Interview). This change was recent and marked the third time her sister went to school alone. Until then, Gabriela had been responsible for dropping her off and picking her up, again, not because she saw it as her duty, but because her parents were often busy with work and she was available.

By persuading her mother (rather than asking her father, showing how society constructs caregiving as a woman's job) to share this responsibility differently, Gabriela not only eased her own routine but also challenged the assumption that caregiving tasks must remain her permanent burden. In this sense, her actions represent her agency and resistance to the sexual division of labour, showing how young women can negotiate and redefine the limits of their responsibilities within the family.

Gabriela's reflections can be understood within the broader framework of gender norms that organize social life through a binary and hierarchical system, in which men and women are assigned distinct roles, behaviours, and values (Scott, 1986). Within this system, care and domestic work are constructed as inherently feminine, grounded in essentialist beliefs that associate women with nurturing, affectivity, and responsibility for others. As Hirata and Kergoat (2007) argue, these norms sustain the sexual division of labour through two key principles: separation, which defines certain tasks as "women's work," and hierarchy, which systematically devalues these activities in relation to men's work. Gabriela's refusal to accept that she was "born to care," and her insistence that such practices are learned and imposed, challenges this naturalizing ideology. By questioning why care is expected of her and not of her father, she exposes how these roles are socially produced rather than biologically determined, making visible the unequal power relations that sustain them.

While Gabriela's account makes this questioning explicit, resistance also appears in more subtle ways. The young women reflect on, negotiate, and at times push back against the expectations placed upon them, particularly in relation to age and responsibility. Maya expresses discomfort with being seen as too childish, while Ana and Isabel view themselves as "older teenagers" who were pushed into early maturity. Ana, for instance, reflects on how her childhood experiences accelerated her transition into adulthood: "They [Ana's sisters] usually say that I'm an old teenager. It's not the kind of maturity I wanted to have at such an early age, but unfortunately, I was forced to have it" (Interview). As I demonstrated, Isabel and Ana come from families marked by absent or abusive fathers, which contributed to them taking on adult responsibilities prematurely. Isabel's father abandoned the family, and Ana grew up with a violent father, experiences that shaped their sense of responsibility and urgency.

Viewed through the lens of the sexual division of labour, these trajectories show how early maturity can be tied to the unequal distribution of productive and reproductive labour within their families. In Isabel's case, with her mother shouldering the responsibility of generating income, she became the one primarily responsible for reproductive labour at home, including the care of her younger brother. In Ana's family, by contrast, her older sisters and

mother took on productive labour through formal employment, while Ana, the youngest, was left with much of the reproductive work inside the home. In both cases, gendered and classed expectations positioned them as those who "must grow up sooner," assuming domestic responsibilities as soon as they were considered capable of doing so.

Ana elaborates on the expectations placed on her, shaped by family dynamics, classed, and gendered social norms:

> They expect a lot from me, especially on the street where I live. People know us as "the girls who don't cause trouble." Why? Because you never hear our names being talked about in the neighbourhood. But for that to happen, we must be really well-behaved. We must follow the standard of being a "perfect person," so we don't embarrass my mom. People still talk about my mom's teenage years, saying she was a great girl, always focused on her studies, working from an early age, and never giving my grandma any trouble. So, I see that my sisters have already been through this stage and had support from everyone, right? In my family, my two sisters and my two older cousins are like the pride of the family. Everyone says, "the younger ones must follow their example. If you're not like your sisters were, you won't be anyone in life." So, there's a lot of pressure on us to be like that (Ana, Interview).

Ana's reflection illustrates how gender norms not only assign women caregiving roles but also demand moral perfection and discipline, reinforcing the idea that being a "good girl" requires self-control, modesty, and respectability. These expectations impose behavioural boundaries that confine young women to idealized models of femininity, in which deviation risks moral judgment and social exclusion. Thus, Ana feels pressured to be studious, hard-working, and well-behaved, which limits her ability to enjoy leisure or non-productive activities. When asked if she ever wanted to rebel, she admitted longing to do the kinds of things young women her age usually do: "I never went out with friends to the mall at night because I'm always busy with various courses, studying, and looking after the house. So, it's a whole schedule there. So, I wanted to be a normal teenager" (Ana, Interview).

She further elaborates that these expectations were intensified by her family dynamics and the domestic violence they experienced. For Ana, maturity stemmed primarily from the emotional burden of supporting her mother and siblings, rather than simply from being studious. In this context, the rare moments when she could simply act like a teenager became a relief, a pause from the responsibilities she constantly shouldered: "So, like, the fact that I want to go out, just like I always go out alone. I don't mind not having company just because I can go out and be a teenager for two hours, max. (…) I go to the mall; I walk alone during the

day" (Ana, Interview). The idea that being a teenager is reduced to a limited period highlights the extent to which her everyday life is structured by responsibility rather than by youth.

Isabel echoes these feelings, describing her early assumption of responsibilities. Isabel explains: "I have a mind like, not the mind of those girls who are 16, you know, not saying that they have a childish mind, but I've been through some things in my life" (Interview). She attributes her "adult mind" to the challenges her family faced, especially the emotional and material abandonment of her father, which motivated her pursuit of a better future (which is reflected in the way Isabel plans her future and professional aspirations, as will be discussed in Chapter Nine).

In contrast, Maya reflects on her efforts to preserve her childhood. She enjoys cartoons, playing with dolls, and singing cartoon soundtracks: "I played, and I still play. I don't think there's an age to stop playing" (Interview). Unlike Ana and Isabel, Maya is not compelled to divide her time between productive and reproductive labour in the same way. Her father assumes the role of breadwinner through formal employment, while her mother's more flexible work hours as a cleaner allow her to devote more time to domestic and caregiving tasks. This clearer separation of productive and reproductive roles shields Maya from the early responsibilities the other young women describe, allowing her to invest time in her hobbies, friendships, and artistic aspirations.

However, Maya's behaviour is often criticized. Her sisters and others see her as immature and suggest she should be more serious: "They told me that I'm too childish, that I need to grow up and be more mature, that I must learn how to walk on the street, to talk, and interact with people. And I am like, 'wait, but I already know how to do those'" (Maya, Interview). Maya's discomfort reveals a tension: while many young women are expected to take on adult responsibilities early, Maya is allowed to remain playful. This is not a flaw, but a reminder of what childhood should be. Her enjoyment of play and artistic expression highlights what is often lost due to structural inequalities. What is troubling is not Maya's playfulness but that others are denied it.

This tension also reflects broader gendered and classed expectations. Maya becomes a target of judgment, perceived as naive or unserious. One person told her, "Life isn't easy" because she danced in the street or laughed too loudly. Maya responded: "That doesn't mean I have to change the way I am. (...) If I'm too serious, I won't be able to do what I want to do" (Interview). She worries that if she "hardens up," as others suggest, she might lose her creative essence. This highlights the conflict between personal dreams and social expectations in contexts marked by poverty. In these settings, careers in the arts are often dismissed as

impractical, not only because they are seen as uncertain or unconventional, but also because, like other career paths that require long-term investment before yielding financial returns, they appear unattainable in contexts marked by economic precarity, where immediate income is often a pressing necessity.

The pressure to be "realistic" functions as a social constraint that limits what young people can do and who they can become. Maya's position is exceptional. Her ability to sustain dreams, playfulness, and joy underscores broader inequalities. It is no coincidence that she strongly emphasized that the artistic intervention should represent freedom to be whatever one wants. As the following chapters will discuss, Maya's view of freedom reflects the weight of the constraints she and others must navigate. Yet, this very possibility of imagining and investing in their dreams is not equally available to all.

4. Closing Remarks

The young women's accounts show how their everyday lives are structured by arrangements that extend beyond the sexual division of labour, revealing how structural violence also operates through the organization of time, care, and responsibility. Their so-called "free time" is not simply available; it is captured by domestic and caregiving work, limiting their access to leisure, rest, and opportunities for self-development. Although these dynamics are rarely named as violence, they reflect broader systems of inequality that constrain what young women can do. In this sense, early maturity is not a matter of individual disposition, but a product of intersecting power relations that naturalize care as women's responsibility while unevenly distributing its burdens across lines of race, class, and age (Biroli, 2016). Maya's exception makes these inequalities particularly visible: her ability to sustain her interests, dreams, and playfulness highlights not her immaturity, but the injustice of a social order in which such possibilities remain unevenly accessible.

An intersectional lens is crucial to understanding these dynamics, as it reveals how the sexual division of labour cannot be analysed in isolation from the historical and racialized organization of care, nor from the material constraints that shape life in urban peripheries (Biroli, 2016; Collins, 1990/2022; Gonzales, 1984; Guimarães et al., 2011). For young Black women, expectations of care are not only gendered but also racialized and classed, tied to long-standing constructions of Black women as inherently available for service (hooks, 1991). These experiences point to broader patterns through which structural violence operates across multiple dimensions of the young women's lives, revealing how the regulation of time and the

expectation that young women make themselves available for service are central to the operation of power relations to keep inequalities in place.

Yet, the young women's accounts also demonstrate that these expectations are not simply internalized. By questioning why care is expected of them, resisting unequal arrangements, and seeking moments of leisure, autonomy, and self-development, they challenge the idea that their time and labour should be endlessly available to others. In doing so, they expose a system that demands premature maturity and service, denying them the full experience of youth, while offering important insights into how they affirm their agency in negotiating and giving meaning to the conditions imposed upon them.

The previous chapter and this one begin to show how structural violence operates through interconnected mechanisms that produce insecurity, constraint, and uneven access to space, time, and protection in the young women's lives. While the territorial dimension revealed how militarization, segregation, and criminalization restrict their presence in public spaces, this chapter has shown how the domestic sphere is not simply a refuge, but also a site where their time and labour are captured through gender, class, age, and racial expectations of care and responsibility. These dynamics do not operate in isolation. Rather, they are part of broader systems of domination that shape where young women feel they belong, where they can move, and how safe they can be, across public and private domains (but never in a totalizing way).

The following chapter turns to the young women's relationships with men to further examine how these conditions are reinforced through interpersonal dynamics. By focusing on experiences of harassment and control, it explores how the insecurity that limits young women's presence in public spaces and how they must be available for others are intensified, while also revealing how the domestic sphere itself cannot be assumed as a safe space. In doing so, it deepens the analysis of how structural violence is lived across interconnected domains, where protection, belonging, and autonomy are continuously negotiated.

CHAPTER SIX: MEN – LIVING WITH MEN'S VIOLENCE

In this chapter, I examine young women's experiences of men's violence against women. Often discussed under the broader category of gender-based violence (GBV), this form of violence refers to a range of practices that disproportionately affect women and girls, including sexual harassment, domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and other forms of coercion (Oo, 2024). However, rather than treating these as isolated or individual acts, this chapter frames men's violence against women as a structural phenomenon.

GBV constitutes a form of structural violence insofar as it is embedded in and sustained by patriarchal social relations that organize power unevenly between men and women. Drawing on Black feminist thought, particularly the work of bell hooks (1984), male violence operates as a mechanism through which male dominance is asserted and maintained. Within hierarchical systems structured by gender, race, and class, those positioned as dominant are more likely to resort to coercion and force when their authority is challenged. In this sense, "male violence against women in personal relationships is one of the most blatant expressions of the use of abusive force to maintain domination and control" (hooks, 1984, p. 120).

These dynamics do not operate in isolation from other systems of power (hooks, 1984). They are intensified in the lives of Black women and girls, who experience intersecting forms of oppression shaped by race, gender, age, and class (Collins, 1990/2022). As also demonstrated throughout this thesis, stereotypes of Black women continue to be shaped by a colonial history that simultaneously sexualized and dehumanized their bodies (Collins, 1990/2022; Fernandes, 2023; Gonzalez, 1984; hooks, 1991; Ribeiro, 2018). Historically constructed as hyper-sexual, immoral, and inferior, Black women have been positioned as both desirable and disposable. As a result, they are more likely to be exposed to violence and less likely to be recognized as deserving of protection, rendering such violence more easily normalized and overlooked.

The young women recount experiences of both sexual harassment and domestic violence. I begin by exploring their accounts of sexual harassment, which they describe as a routine and normalized part of everyday life — occurring across multiple settings, including public spaces, schools, public transportation, and within their families. I then turn to their experiences of domestic violence, focusing on Ana's and Gabriela's narratives, both of whom have been directly affected by violence in their families: Ana by her father and Gabriela by her grandfather.

These experiences are not lived passively or uncritically. The young women interpret and negotiate them through reflexive and critical perspectives that reveal their awareness of

gendered power relations. The chapter concludes by examining how they challenge abusive relationships and question the naturalization of male dominance in heterosexual romantic relationships. Through their reflections, the young women articulate forms of resistance and solidarity that reimagine intimacy and assert emotional and relational autonomy.

1. Facing sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is a pervasive form of violence that the young women frequently experience, particularly in public spaces such as streets and transportation, but also at school and within their families. According to Simone Santos (2015), such everyday acts, like whistles, comments, or intrusive stares, constitute more than isolated gestures; they are mechanisms through which men exercise power and assert moral and sexual dominance over women's bodies, reinforcing gendered hierarchies in everyday interactions. I begin this section by examining the young women's experiences of harassment in streets and public transportation, then turn to cases perpetrated within the family, particularly by uncles, and finally explore harassment in school settings — including both peer and teacher dynamics, as well as institutional practices that contribute to victim-blaming discourses.

1.1. Facing Sexual Harassment in Public Spaces: Streets and Public Transport

Sexual harassment in public spaces emerges in the young women's accounts as a routine and taken-for-granted dimension of everyday life. This type of harassment, often minimized or normalized by society, reveals the ordinary and systemic nature of gender-based violence that many women face in their daily lives. As Santos (2015) argues, this violence is rooted in the historical and social construction of gender inequalities that control women's bodies and undermine their autonomy. It operates as a disciplinary mechanism that restricts women's rights to public spaces. Consequently, women's presence in public spaces remains conflictual, marked by constant reminders that their safety and belonging in urban environments are conditional, precarious and dangerous.

Gabriela reflects on how this normalization operates subtly and insidiously, describing it as veiled *machismo*. She explains, "the person speaks, and we only realize, like, my God, that person said that to me. It's veiled *machismo*. Then I thought, 'my God, that man that age said that to me, I'm a child'" (Gabriela, FG1). Here, machismo refers not only to sexist beliefs about women's inferiority, but to a culturally specific form of patriarchal masculinity rooted in colonization, particularly in Latin American contexts, that valorizes aggression, dominance, and sexual conquest as expressions of male power (Oliveira et al., 2018; Pimenta, 2023).

Gabriela's reflection reveals how unsolicited and unwelcome sexual comments have become an ordinary, almost expected, feature of young women's daily lives. Her indignation lies not only in the inappropriateness of the comment itself but also in the audacity of an older man who felt entitled to sexualize a child. By emphasizing the age difference, Gabriela exposes the deeply gendered and generational power dynamics that sustain this form of everyday harassment. Her account underscores how men's sense of entitlement to women's and girls' bodies and attention is socially legitimized, allowing them to make inappropriate remarks without fear of reprisal.

Ana's subsequent reflections reinforce and expand this critique. Both she and Eloise challenge the notion that harassment is a natural or instinctive male reaction, defying the cultural narratives that excuse men's behaviour while holding women responsible for preventing it. As Ana begins, "we get harassed on the street anyway" (FG1), and continues:

> Ana: There's also the issue that some women's clothes are an invitation, right? I think that's absolutely ridiculous. It's a completely wrong idea because you see a lot of cases of babies being raped, of children of three, five years old wearing a low-cut dress; is that an invitation? I don't know, "it's a man's instinct." He's not an animal that can't handle himself.
>
> Eloise: Yeah, an animal in heat (FG2).

Ana's comment is far from superficial; rather, it reflects a critical stance against widely held but harmful beliefs. Their comments point to the persistence of rape culture in Brazilian society, where sexual violence is often tolerated, and survivors are frequently blamed for the violence they suffer (IPEA, 2014). A national survey conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA) on societal tolerance of violence against women revealed that while most Brazilians disagreed with the statement "women who wear revealing clothing deserve to be attacked," a majority still agreed with the claim that "if women knew how to behave, there would be fewer rapes." The young women's reflections expose the normalization of sexual harassment as part of a broader rape culture – one that positions men's sexual impulses as uncontrollable and women's behaviour as the source of blame (Sousa, 2017).

This broader cultural context is not abstract for the young women and is constantly experienced. Ana, for example, begins discussing this issue regarding the clothes she wears. She explains that when she wears shorts or a form-fitting dress, she is subjected to unsolicited comments from men. One of her strategies is to ignore these remarks and avoid reacting to the attention directed at her body. However, this approach often proves ineffective, as she continues to face verbal harassment and insults. She recounted an episode in which she was on

her way to the gym with her sister, and the harassment was so persistent that it ultimately led her sister to stop going to the gym with her.

During one such episode, Ana and her sister were in a public square on their way to the gym when a man began calling out to them. They stopped and asked what he wanted, to which he replied, "can I give you a compliment?" Her sister declined, politely thanking him. In response, the man reacted with contempt: *"*Do you think any guy would look at a slut like you? Besides the fact that I wanted to compliment you, you said no*"* (FG1). The situation quickly escalated as he began shouting, making sure that everyone nearby could hear the insults he directed at their bodies. Reflecting on this incident, Ana described it as a clear instance of sexual harassment, emphasizing that their attempt to remain polite and de-escalate the situation was met with verbal aggression: *"*He was trying to attack us with words even though we had treated him politely and tried to avoid confrontation*"* (FG1). This episode underscores how street harassment often operates not as a form of admiration but as a mechanism of control and domination, in which women's refusal, even when expressed with civility, is met with punitive and gendered hostility.

This sense of male entitlement to women's attention extends to other public spaces, such as public transportation. Research shows that sexual harassment in public transit disproportionately affects women (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ceccato, 2022; Tiznado-Aitken et al., 2024). As Ignacio Tiznado-Aitken and colleagues (2024) emphasize, "public transport is essential to ensure women's full participation in society, when it fulfills its mission of providing convenient access to key social and economic opportunities" (p. 2). Its role is crucial in Latin American cities, where low-income and peripheral communities depend heavily on it for mobility — and this is particularly significant in the context of the young women living in the Vargem das Flores region, a place widely recognized as being isolated from the rest of the city. Yet, while public transportation ensures access, autonomy, and participation, it simultaneously becomes a space marked by fear and insecurity, a terrain where women's right to mobility is constantly constrained.

The young women describe uncomfortable and distressing experiences on buses. Maya recalls the first time she was harassed on public transport: the bus was packed, she was on an aisle seat, and a man standing beside her kept brushing up against her. She explains that she froze, thinking, "I can't believe this is happening to me. This has never happened before. What do I do?" (Maya, FG2). Gabriela and Eloise agree with her, emphasizing how in such moments they often feel paralyzed, afraid that reacting could trigger aggression and escalate the situation. Ana adds, "it makes you want to cry" (FG2).

Reflecting on these experiences, Maya recognizes how her perspective changed after becoming a victim herself. “I’ve always told people to get up and punch the man in the face,” she says, “because before it happened to me, I was like, why don’t you go and punch him? The guy is there harassing you, making a pass, wolf-whistling. Why don’t you show him the middle finger?” (Maya, Interview). She recalls doing this once, while walking with Eloise and friends, when a man whistled at them. Yet she later contrasts this with her inability to react when the harassment happened to her, realizing how shock and fear can immobilize. It was common for the young women to talk about how they are caught off guard and by surprise in these harassment situations, and how they do not react.

This sense of paralysis is exacerbated in overcrowded environments, where physical proximity blurs the line between accident and aggression. Gabriela describes the sense of unease she feels in crowded buses:

> The worst thing is when you're standing, the bus is packed, and the driver doesn't see that the bus is full and keeps stopping the bus [at each bus stop]. Then a bunch of men get on. You're standing there like that, then you freeze. Because whether you like it or not, it's too crowded; the person is going to touch you. Then you don't know if they're touching you with malice, or if they're just touching you because they don't have a choice (Gabriela, FG2).

Gabriela’s words convey both physical discomfort and emotional tension, capturing how blurred boundaries of physical contact in overcrowded spaces make it difficult to distinguish intentional harassment from accidental touch. Ana and Eloise echo this experience with vivid frustration:

> Ana: What's worse is when you're like this, with your ass facing backwards, and a guy comes and stands in front of you. And he keeps bumping into you. Guys, I get so uncomfortable with it.
>
> Eloise: It makes me want to cry. Then you get off the bus, when I get off, there's usually a bus stop like this, I sit down, and I'm like, wow, I can't believe it (FG2).

These accounts reveal how harassment on public transport is not an isolated act but part of a broader structural condition of urban inequality and precarious infrastructure that shapes women’s daily mobility. As Vania Ceccato (2017) observes, environments characterized by high passenger density, overcrowded buses or stations, become fertile territory for sexual harassment, particularly in large cities of the Global South, where poor transit provision increases women’s exposure to victimization. Overcrowding does *not cause* sexual crimes, but it *facilitates* them (Ceccato, 2017). The long, slow, and insufficiently planned transit system

exposes young women to discomfort, exhaustion, and constant risk, leaving them with no safe or viable alternatives for getting around.

As several studies point out, a large percentage of women in cities of the Global South, and many low-income or immigrant women in cities of the Global North, are "transit captives" or "captive users," having no access to private cars and relying on public transportation due to the lack of feasible or affordable alternatives (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ceccato, 2022; Tiznado-Aitken et al., 2024). As Ana adds, when she complains about harassment, "the man can simply say, 'call an Uber, then'" (FG2) — yet accessing ride-hailing apps is not always a viable option, given the financial constraints and infrastructural limitations they face.

Gabriela recalls an episode when she went for a job interview and took the 5:30 AM bus; the bus was already full, and a man did this to her: he stood behind her and leaned on her back. Her strategy was to put her backpack on her back to create a barrier between her and the man. Isabel shares a similar story, recounting a day when she had a doctor appointment downtown in Belo Horizonte at 2 PM. To arrive on time, she had to leave home at 10:30 AM. She was the last to be seen and only left at 7:30 PM. She describes the exhaustion of that day — having not eaten, enduring a long, crowded bus ride home with no available seats, and suffering from intense heat. On top of her fatigue, she also had to endure the distressing experience of "that thing [a man's genital] touching" her (FG2).

Findings from a recent study in Santiago, Chile, align with the young women's experiences (Tiznado-Aitken et al., 2024). The authors found that young people are more affected by harassment, particularly those who rely on public transit for daily commutes. From an intersectional perspective, these patterns show how social position shapes experiences of harassment. Low-income women were more likely to experience several forms of harassment and to feel greater fear of assault than wealthier women (patterns also confirmed by Matheus Siqueira et al., 2022), while Black women tended to perceive higher levels of risk than white women. As the authors note, this is "bad news for efforts to position sustainable transport as a real and feasible option" because when public transit is unsafe, women's ability to move freely is restricted, perpetuating structural inequalities and marginalization (Tiznado-Aitken et al., 2024, p. 8).

The young women's accounts corroborate these findings. They describe harassment as a recurrent experience, and their narratives reveal a deep sense of powerlessness in responding to it. As shown in the literature, women's autonomy is often compromised by inappropriate male sexual behaviour (Tiznado-Aitken et al., 2024). Despite their indignation, they often find themselves unable to react, expressing emotions of fear, humiliation, and exhaustion, with

many describing the experience as something that "makes you want to cry." This emotional impact highlights the psychological burden of navigating a world where harassment is common and unaddressed.

1.2. Facing Sexual Harassment from Uncles

While in the last section I explored the young women's experiences, highlighting how sexual harassment permeates public spaces, the young women's accounts also reveal that such violence is not confined to the street but extends into the private sphere of the family. While family is commonly regarded as a space of safety, support, and care, this perception does not hold true for all. For Isabel, however, it does. She describes her family as a joyful and protective environment: "that's my family, in the crazy, goofy sense, but in a good way, you know? My mom is super cool. A little crazy too. My cousins? Don't even get me started" (Isabel, Interview). Referring to what the group called "the uncle story," a recurring theme among the co-researchers' accounts of sexual harassment, Isabel remarks that she was never affected. She explains that there are five men in her family, and none of them were abusive, emphasizing her sense of safety and close bonds with them. Isabel's experience, which should be the norm, instead appears as the exception.

As a researcher, I remember how Isabel's silence during the focus group had initially led me to anticipate something different, that her story might be even more painful or "unspeakable" than the others. "The uncle story" had become such a recurring, collectively shared narrative that, for me, her silence could have signalled unspoken trauma. However, when I later met Isabel for the one-to-one interview, her silence revealed the opposite: she remained quiet not because she had experienced such violence, but because she had not. For the other co-researchers, family was not a protective space but rather one where they had to remain vigilant to avoid harm. The young women's experiences of sexual harassment align with broader data on sexual abuse in Brazil. Research indicates that violence against children, including sexual abuse and harassment, is most often perpetrated by family members or individuals within the child's close social circle, those they know and trust (FBSP, 2025).

The experiences of young women show that male relatives, often socially perceived as affectionate and trustworthy, engaged in behaviours that crossed personal boundaries and left lingering emotional scars. In Brazilian cultural contexts, the figure of the uncle is often associated with a familiar but ambivalent presence — someone who is affectionate and playful, yet also prone to making inappropriate jokes, comments, or gestures that are dismissed as harmless or part of his personality. This "out-of-line" behaviour is frequently normalized,

which can obscure how such interactions may also constitute forms of boundary violation and abuse.

For the young women, many of these interactions were initially normalized in their childhoods, framed as playful or affectionate gestures. Only later did they begin to recognize them as forms of violence. Confronting such behaviour remains difficult, especially when family members respond with denial or minimization, reinforcing a culture of silence and complicity around the issue. Gabriela and Eloise reflect critically on this contradiction:

> Gabriela: It's because, whether we like it or not, a stranger doesn't know us. He'll interact with us, but not like that. There are different cases, aren't there? Sometimes it goes further, but in the family it's different. They know us — usually older men who try to violate women. Why? "Oh, I saw her grow up, so she won't expect that from me." And that's where we least expect things to happen.
>
> Eloise: It's like, "you're not going to do anything because I'm your family," and the family itself will cover up for that person (FG1).

Their comments highlight the complexity of family violence, which often occurs precisely because of the trust, intimacy, and authority that can structure family relationships. The expectation that home is a space of care and moral protection makes it even harder to recognize abuse when it happens. As Renata Sousa (2017) notes, families frequently refuse to acknowledge the possibility of sexual violence within their own walls, choosing instead to deny or reinterpret it, a dynamic that compounds victims' confusion and isolation.

As Maya recounts, she has an uncle who, since her childhood, has been regarded by her family as very loving towards children due to his frequent physical displays of affection, such as hugging and kissing. While Maya was telling this story, the young women expressed their discomfort with this type of physical affection from male family members.

> Maya: Ever since I was a child, my family has said that my uncle is very loving with children; he hugs them and kisses them. When I was a child, I thought it was normal, just that he hugged me, kissed me on the cheek, ran his hand through my hair, that sort of thing. When I grew up, I realized that my uncle was weird.
>
> Gabriela: It's dirty affection, isn't it? (FG1).

Maya recounts attending a family member's birthday party where this uncle harassed her. She describes feeling deeply uncomfortable and upset by his behaviour. As Maya explained in the first focus group:

> Maya: Then there was a birthday party at the house, and this uncle was invited. He went there, and I saw that he was there. I just kept looking around; he was here, and I was

there. An hour later, I walked around, and I saw that he was there. Then he said, “come here,” he hugged and kissed me on the neck. “What's that? I don't even remember you anymore; I don't even know your name.”

Eloise: He pulled you and forced you.

Maya: Yeah, he pulled me. I wasn't even going to say hello properly, so I just went the other way. I was going to get a glass of water, then I started crying. I thought it was strange. Since I was a child, I haven't wanted this anymore. Then my boyfriend was there. He said, “you go and talk to your uncle; otherwise, I'm going to punch that man in the face.” So, I went there and said [to her uncle], “man, I want you to stop this stuff” “but I've been treating you like this since you were a kid.” [uncle’s response] and then my sister asked why I was crying, “that's my uncle, who gave me a kiss,” “so what”? [Maya’s sister’s response] (FG1).

Maya’s reaction illustrates both courage and awareness. Despite her discomfort and fear, she confronted her uncle in a significant act of resistance in a context where such behaviour is often minimized or dismissed. Her uncle’s response, justifying his actions as a continuation of long-standing “affectionate” gestures, reveals how the naturalization of violence in families often disguises itself as care. Maya’s sister’s reaction further compounds this dynamic: by interpreting the situation as harmless, she denies Maya’s distress and reinforces a culture in which young women’s discomfort is invalidated. These responses demonstrate how familial hierarchies and emotional bonds can sustain silence around abuse, discouraging disclosure and complicating the process of recognizing violence within intimate family settings.

This difficulty in identifying and naming sexual violence within the family reflects what Sousa (2017) describes as a pervasive dynamic of denial and disbelief. Families often struggle to admit that such acts could occur “under their sacred roof,” choosing instead to deny or reinterpret the violence (Sousa, 2017, p. 20). Victims, especially children, are frequently doubted or pressured to doubt their own memories, as if they have “misunderstood” an ambiguous gesture of affection (Sousa, 2017). As Suzana Braun (2002, as cited in Sousa, 2017) observes, secrecy in abusive families stems from children’s confusion and fear that no one will believe them or that disclosing abuse might cause family conflict. These mechanisms of disbelief and silence contribute to the normalization of violence and make its recognition even harder.

Gabriela further reinforces this notion of invisible violence, emphasizing how men in her family tend to disregard or overlook abusive behaviour, while women are more likely to

sense and discuss it among themselves. In her family, there is one uncle whose past misconduct is tacitly known but rarely confronted. As Gabriela explains:

> Wow, uncle, why do you need to have an uncle in the world? There's one [uncle] who, ever since I was little, I started to notice, and I became aware of this [violent behaviour] very early on. Then you realize that certain incidents shouldn't have happened; it's not normal. There's an uncle of mine who now lives in the countryside. There's always one [woman] who seems suspicious. Men, nobody cares, but women, after a while, always seem to realize that he did something: "oh, he did that to me," or "oh, he touched me like that" (FG1).

Gabriela's words capture how the act of breaking silence among women often triggers a process of collective recognition, one disclosure leading to another. As women begin to share their experiences, what was once isolated and invisible becomes recognizable as a pattern of abuse, challenging the notion that such incidents are exceptional or individual. The fact that "there's always one woman who seems suspicious" illustrates how gendered knowledge circulates informally, through embodied awareness, rather than through formal acknowledgment by men or institutions.

She also describes how this same uncle exercises strict control over his daughter's autonomy, reflecting how patriarchal authority reproduces itself across generations and relationships. Gabriela avoids visiting his home despite her cousin's invitations, explaining: "so I avoid going to his house and his daughter, she has a disability, and he's extremely possessive of her. He won't let her cut her hair. He won't let her wear certain clothes. Her room doesn't even have a door" (Gabriela, FG1). Gabriela observes that the relationship between her uncle and her cousin deviates from typical father-daughter dynamics. Her cousin, despite being 19 years old, experiences significant restrictions on her personal autonomy. The father imposes limitations on dating, and she cannot colour her hair or use lipstick. Gabriela also talks about how her uncle makes a lot of sexist jokes, including with young girls, who, despite still being children, do not escape their uncle's inappropriate comments. In describing her encounters with this uncle, Gabriela offers a vivid account of the physical sensations that accompany fear and discomfort:

> He wanted to be close to me. And I don't like physical contact; I don't like it. It feels like you're scratching me. And he'd pull me by the arms and want to hold me around the waist and keep me close. You know, it's that thing where you get uncomfortable, and your body heats up, you get a lump in your throat (Gabriela, FG1).

Gabriela's description reveals her embodied knowledge — how physical unease, tension, and heat become bodily markers of threat and discomfort. In this sense, her reaction is not merely emotional but epistemic: her body becomes a site of recognition, producing knowledge about danger and boundary violation. Attending to these embodied experiences aligns with Black feminist epistemology, which validates lived experiences, emotions and subjectivities as legitimate sources of knowledge and places them at the centre of knowledge production (Collins, 1990/2022; Kilomba, 2010). Gabriela continues, "I told my grandmother, and my grandmother said, 'don't, really, don't get close to him, because he's not trustworthy.' And my cousin, she always calls inviting me to sleep over there. And there's no way I'm sleeping there" (FG1). By sharing her discomfort, Gabriela finds her feelings validated by her grandmother, who reinforces her decision to maintain distance from her uncle. Although she worries about her cousin, Gabriela transforms this embodied knowledge into an act of self-preservation, asserting her boundaries and resisting the normalization of unsafe family intimacy.

In another account, Gabriela connects domestic violence to alcohol abuse in her family, noting that "they go hand in hand" (FG1). She mentions another uncle: "I have an uncle who's an alcoholic, he's already killed two of his wives, then, like, today he's got a new one, it's like, nobody cares, you know? It's not something that shocks them; it's something natural" (FG1). This normalization of extreme violence, to the point where the murder of two women does not provoke outrage or accountability, illustrates how deeply silence and complicity can permeate family relations, allowing cycles of violence to persist unchallenged.

On one occasion, while visiting her grandparents at a rural property, Gabriela and her cousin went horseback riding when they encountered this uncle alone on a rural path. He said, "there's no place for me in that saddle?" Gabriela replied, "no uncle, it's a children's saddle." In other words, the saddle was too small even for them. He insisted, "no, I'll hold on very close to you, no problem, I'll hold on behind." Gabriela looked at her cousin, who responded sharply, "only if I tie you to a rope and drag you along" (FG1).

This brief exchange encapsulates how normalized sexual comments and insinuations by older men can be. Men who feel entitled to make such remarks even toward much younger relatives. As Gabriela had earlier observed, it reflects the audacity of men who, because of their social position, assume the right to sexualize girls without consequence. However, her cousin's quick, biting reply disrupts that dynamic, using humour and irony as a defence and illustrating a moment of resistance that reclaims power in an otherwise threatening situation.

Gabriela recounts that when she and her cousin returned, she told her father about the incident. Her father reacted with disbelief and remarked that she could have called him,

suggesting she tell her uncle, “go and sit on my father's lap; my father has a special place for you” (Gabriela, FG1). Although meant to express anger, his reaction also carries a trace of the same gendered language that objectifies and ridicules, revealing how even protective gestures can reproduce normalized sexualization of women’s bodies within the family.

Gabriela further expresses her frustration over how her uncle’s abusive behaviour is widely recognized within her family yet remains unspoken and concealed.

> And it's something we know he did, but it's veiled, you know? We know he did it and to whom he did it. He's such a person, such a friend of the world; he is Black, a good person, nice, that even the assault his wife suffered is veiled. It's something that nobody talks about. And I think that's so bad, because whether we like it or not, we feel so insecure. Even though it's in our family, we know it's not a good place for us. It's a place we must keep our distance from (Gabriela, FG1).

Gabriela’s words expose how violence is rarely acknowledged within the family. The uncle’s public image as “a good man” overshadows the reality of his actions. This silence operates as a mechanism of protection for men’s control over women — maintaining a family order that privileges male authority and minimizes women’s pain. This form of denial reflects what Sousa (2017) identifies as a collective psychological barrier: it is easier for families to believe that sexual violence is committed only by “monstrous” men outside their social circle than to accept that it can be perpetrated by fathers, brothers, or uncles. Such dynamics make it difficult to confront violence that originates within the intimate and trusted sphere of family life. As the young women repeatedly emphasize, “no one cares” or “everyone thinks it’s normal.” Even when abusive behaviours are widely known, they remain unspoken, leaving perpetrators unaccountable and reinforcing male control, gender inequality, and power hierarchies within the family.

1.3. Facing Sexual Harassment at School from Peers and Teachers

Just as violence within families is often overlooked and dismissed, the young women also encounter sexual harassment at school, where similar patterns of silence and covering it up persist. For example, Ana recalls an incident involving a friend, which highlights how sexual harassment is normalized and ignored, even within educational settings. As she begins to explain, “we [she and a friend] also talk a lot about sexual harassment because wherever we go, we’re attacked, especially at school” (Interview):

> There was a day when she [Ana’s friend] was wearing leggings, and she walked past a boy, and the boy literally grabbed her bum. And she said, “are you going nuts?” and

started crying because it was awful. Then he said, “girl, you look like you've got no clothes on, how come you don't want us to put our hands on you?” (Ana, Interview).

This statement encapsulates the brazenness with which male entitlement operates, revealing how harassment also articulates a supposed “right” to women’s bodies. His response exposes a logic in which women’s clothing is interpreted as consent, and men’s actions are justified through desire, a discourse that both trivializes violence and reinforces patriarchal control. The ease and confidence with which he voices such words show how deeply rooted these norms are, particularly within settings like schools that often reproduce rather than challenge them.

Ana went with her friend to report the incident to administration. However, the school administration reversed the situation. When they reported it to the principal, they blamed Ana’s friend, not the young man who had sexually harassed her. The principal wrote her up, saying that her clothes were indecent. This institutional response reveals how schools, rather than addressing harassment, reproduce the logic that blames and regulates young women’s bodies.

The young women illustrate how uniform rules at school often place the blame for harassment on them, reflecting how disciplinary power works in monitoring and punishing bodies according to social categories (Collins, 1990/2022, 2024). They describe how these rules are stricter for young women than for young men. One example they give is the restriction on leggings, which are deemed inappropriate because they are seen as too tight or transparent. They mention that leggings are only allowed if a young woman is pregnant, and even then, only after the fourth month of pregnancy. However, Ana shares an example of a young woman in her class who is six months pregnant but is still not allowed to wear leggings and must wear her pants unbuttoned instead.

Eloise adds that there is also a rule that young women’s knees cannot be visible, as “the boys will freak out” (FG2). As a result, young women are only permitted to wear pants that cover their knees. In a country where high temperatures are constant for most of the year, such restrictions become especially punitive, forcing women to endure physical discomfort in the name of “modesty.” Gabriela reflects on the consequences of such rules, explaining that if she is harassed, the school might justify it by pointing to the clothes she wore, saying, “look at the clothes you want to wear to school” (FG2), which is exactly what happened to Ana's friend.

This dynamic illustrates how schools operate as institutions that reproduce social norms of gender and sexuality. As Sousa (2017) argues, patriarchal discourses place sexual power in the hands of men, legitimizing their right to exercise it over women (or over men who fail to conform to dominant ideals of masculinity and virility). Through everyday practices, such as regulating young women’s bodies, clothing, and behaviour, these values are transmitted and

normalized. By defining what counts as “appropriate” women's behaviour and clothes, schools participate in a broader process of socialization that teaches young women to internalize control and to take responsibility for preventing men’s violence. As Sousa (2017) notes, women are taught from an early age that they must follow conduct rules regarding what to wear, how to behave, and when to be outside to avoid placing themselves in “risky situations.” In this way, institutional responses to harassment not only minimize men’s accountability but also perpetuate victim-blaming discourses that hold women accountable for the violence they experience.

Gabriela also shares a case of harassment and physical assault between students: “I think we're always very vulnerable at school” (Interview). She describes how Dom, a classmate, repeatedly harassed young women and once pushed one of them down the stairs. Other students considered retaliating but ultimately decided against it. Gabriela explains that Dom had previously filed a police report in relation to another incident, in which he was the victim. This report became a strategic tool — it gave him a form of protection, since any retaliation against him could result in more severe legal consequences for those who acted.

Gabriela recounts how the school principal visited classrooms, warning students that if they intended to confront Dom, they could do so but were not to report it to her; otherwise, she would be obligated to intervene. Gabriela expresses her anger: “Wow, I was really deranged. He just pushed the girl; she rolled down the stairs and hit the last step. She fainted and stayed there, limp” (Interview). She reflects on the situation, saying:

> There are people who are young and have nothing to lose, right? Then they can say, “oh, I've got a police report” [as a form of protection]. Then the other boy says, “I've got an iron bar here; what are you going to do with my iron?” But whether they like it or not, I really think that there are people who have nothing to lose but use it well, right? But there are people who say “oh, I have nothing to lose, I'm going to do evil and that's it” (Interview).

This scene illustrates the precarious and liminal position many students occupy, especially in contexts where gang-related violence spills over into school life. As seen in Dom’s case, young people who have been involved in previous violent incidents and labelled as victims can manipulate this status strategically to shield themselves from accountability. Dom used the police report as a protective tool, enabling him to harass young women with a degree of impunity. His prior victimization raised the stakes for anyone who might act against him, making retaliation riskier and, perhaps, not worth it. In such contexts, institutional responses

are often insufficient, and legal tools meant to protect can be co-opted to sustain cycles of violence and gendered power.

Moreover, this episode can also illustrate how militarization logics reinforce hyper-masculinity (Ursin, 2020). For many young men, violence operates as both a language and a resource for negotiating reputation, recognition, and prestige. Dom's behaviour can thus be read not only as an expression of individual aggression but also as a performance of masculinity, where asserting dominance, intimidation and objectification over young women reaffirms one's position within social hierarchies of peers.

In addition to situations of harassment among students, the young women also talk about a teacher who harassed them. As they explained during the second focus group:

> Isabel: Because it was like this, at least in my class, the boys would ask to go to the bathroom, and he wouldn't let them.
>
> Gabriela: And he would come this close [very close to the face] to talk to us.
>
> Isabel: The boys would ask him something about the lesson, and he wouldn't explain it. But when it was a girl, he would explain it. Then he would stand this close [very close to the young woman's body] to explain the lesson.
>
> Gabriela: Oh, it was so uncomfortable.
>
> Isabel: He would be so close to us, face to face.
>
> Eloise: When you'd ask, "oh, teacher, can you explain this to me?" He would come, glued to you, and talk.
>
> Gabriela: He made sure to be holding onto you.
>
> Isabel: He had to touch you in some way (FG2).

The young women continue to describe how the teacher behaved in classrooms, giving other examples of how, during activities, he favoured physical contact with women. For example, the teacher would only call young women to go to the front of the class, not young men. Over time, young women began to recognize that his actions were not isolated gestures of friendliness but part of a broader pattern of misconduct, a series of sexually inappropriate and unwelcome behaviours. They started asking young women from other classrooms if they had experienced similar incidents and soon discovered that the same behaviour was occurring across multiple groups without being addressed. Gabriela highlights how uncomfortable the situation was. While she recognized the teacher's actions as unacceptable, she also struggled to comprehend how a teacher, someone entrusted with authority and responsibility for students' well-being, could behave in this way.

This difficulty in believing that a teacher could be abusive reflects the deep trust society places in educators. As Peter Jaffe et al. (2013) demonstrate, abuse by a teacher can be particularly damaging because teachers are seen as mentors and role models. In contexts where teachers are viewed as moral guides and caretakers of students' learning and development, the recognition of misconduct becomes even more complex and distressing. At the same time, the hierarchical and authoritative nature of teacher–student relationships can create environments that enable sexual misconduct. As Jaffe et al. (2013) and Greetje Timmerman (2003) note, the power imbalance inherent to these relationships increases teachers' ability and opportunities to engage in inappropriate sexual behaviour.

Isabel recalls the episode that triggered a greater mobilization among the students, both young women and young men, to report this teacher to the administration. It happened on a day when he got very physically close to a student but, as Gabriela mentions, before this incident "one girl had already complained, another girl had gone to the administration, then another girl, but nothing had been done. It was only when we threatened to make a scene that he was fired" (FG2). This collective act of confrontation, when individual complaints failed to provoke action, illustrates how solidarity becomes a necessary strategy for accountability in institutions that routinely disregard young women's voices.

These episodes of sexual harassment, perpetrated by both peers and teachers, also highlight the school's failure to understand, prevent, and effectively address such violence. The young women's narratives reveal how vulnerable, unprotected, and, above all, discredited they feel within the school environment. The young women's lived experiences align with research findings, which identify schools as one of the primary environments where harassment and gender-based violence occur (Plan International Brazil, 2021). Overall, young women have described incidents of sexual violence and harassment involving students as well as teachers, whose comments and actions often create a sense of discomfort and unease in the classroom. This situation is further exacerbated by school administrators who are often unable to recognize these actions as forms of violence, as such behaviours are frequently perceived as "normal" or expected expressions of masculinity, which leads them to protect these actions, cover up misconduct and fail to provide an effective response to these forms of violence (Plan International Brazil, 2021).

The young women's narratives presented elucidate the pervasive nature of sexual harassment experienced by them across various environments, including streets, educational institutions, public transportation, and within their own families. The emotional burden of these encounters is exacerbated by societal silence, normalization, and enduring victim-blaming

discourses, which contribute to feelings of being unsafe, unheard, and unsupported. Although public spaces are frequently perceived as the most dangerous, the accounts of the co-researchers reveal a more intricate reality, in which violence infiltrates even the most intimate and supposedly protective environments. The following section delves into the experience of domestic violence in their lives, with a particular focus on family relationships, where expectations of protection and care are frequently undermined.

2. Growing Up with Domestic Violence

In Brazil, domestic violence is governed by Law 11,340/2006, commonly known as the Maria da Penha Law. This legislation establishes mechanisms to prevent and address domestic and family violence against women, defining such violence as any gender-based act or omission that causes death, injury, physical, sexual, or psychological suffering, or moral and economic harm. The law adopts a broad understanding of domestic and family settings, including permanent or occasional cohabitation, relationships formed by kinship, affinity, or expressed will, and any intimate relationship in which the perpetrator lives or has lived with the victim, regardless of formal cohabitation. While the law explicitly addresses violence against women, an extensive body of literature has highlighted how children are also deeply affected. Far from being passive witnesses, children experience violence with all their senses — they hear it, see it, and live through its aftermath as individuals in their own right (Lapierre et al., 2025; Overlien, 2013; Overlien & Hydén, 2009).

This thesis engages these insights through narratives of the young women who reflect on how domestic violence shaped their childhoods, family relationships, and permeates their everyday lives. Ana and Gabriela's stories expose the emotional, relational, and profound impacts of growing up in environments where violence was a daily reality. Their narratives reveal not only how their mother and grandmother endured suffering but also how children and young people navigate and resist such situations. While Ana's story revolves around her father's control and aggression, which forced her into premature adulthood, Gabriela's experience highlights the intergenerational patterns of violence within her family.

2.1. Living With a Controlling and Violent Father

Ana explains how, since she was very young, she remembers her father being very aggressive towards her mother. The first thing that she mentions is how people outside her family deem her father as a very cool and nice guy but, for her, her mother, and sisters, he is a perpetrator: "he's a good person to outsiders. If you get to know him, you'll say 'you're a liar, because your

father had nothing to do with what you said,' because he knows how to be a nice person to outsiders, to those who aren't inside his home" (Ana, Interview). As I mentioned in the section about uncles, Ana's reflection also exposes the difficulty of recognizing "good men," for instance, fathers and uncles, as perpetrators of violence, a theme that recurs across the young women's accounts, reinforcing the notion that violent men are exceptional figures, rather than ordinary men in families and communities.

Ana narrates her family story. When she was about 10 years old, and her two sisters were around 17 and 18, her father sent her two sisters away to live with their grandmother in Vargem das Flores. At this time, Ana was the only one who stayed with her parents, and her father's aggressive behaviour towards her mothers started to escalate. She mentions how she was very young and could not do anything to stop her father from beating her mother.

Ana shares how she had to begin working to earn money to help them escape their violent home environment. This financial contribution was crucial for them to leave and start rebuilding their lives in a safer context.[24] Ana began working at the age of 10, taking a job as a babysitter and selling chocolate truffles at school. She felt compelled to shoulder this responsibility because her mother, at 40 years old, was severely depressed and physically debilitated. Ana explains that her father kept all the money he earned for himself, refusing to provide for household expenses. He also prevented her mother from working, exacerbating their difficult circumstances. In Ana's words:

> Then my father started working just for himself. He, like, didn't bring food home; he didn't pay for any food; he didn't let us touch his money either. He didn't want my mother to work, so, like, we were going to starve, die of everything without any resources, and he was living his life (Interview).

Ana's words capture both the cruelty of the potential deprivation and the clarity with which she recognizes her father's control. Her account reveals not only economic neglect but also the deliberate restriction of her mother's autonomy, a form of violence that pushed Ana into more responsibilities. Ana shares her experience working as a babysitter for three girls, earning 500 Brazilian reais a month (about CAD$133). Her routine involved heading straight from school to the children's house at around 11:40 AM and staying there until 6:00 PM. Upon returning home, she was still expected to tidy up the house. Ana assumed significant responsibilities

[24] At the time of Ana's experience, there were no public mechanisms ensuring financial support for women seeking to leave violent homes. This has changed only recently: with the enactment of Law 14,674 of September 14, 2023, women protected under the Maria da Penha law can now request financial assistance, including a rent subsidy (*auxílio-aluguel*), because of their social or economic vulnerability. This measure represents an important step toward enabling survivors of domestic violence to secure housing and rebuild their lives in a safety space.

from an early age, which extend to the present day. As I demonstrated previously, Ana described how she is responsible for domestic work, provides emotional and practical support to her mother, and manages aspects of the family's daily life, even though she sometimes wants to be "a little rebellious."

Ana's experience aligns with literature on children exposed to domestic violence, which shows that they often adopt adult-like roles within the family (Dariotis *et al*., 2023). While such dynamics, often described as *parentification*, are frequently framed in the literature as emotionally burdensome or developmentally inappropriate, some scholars have also acknowledged their potential to foster coping skills, emotional maturity, and resourcefulness (Dariotis *et al*., 2023; Fitzgerald *et al*., 2008). In Ana's case, her early assumption of responsibility also reveals gendered and classed dimensions of domestic violence: her mother's economic dependency, physical and mental health issues, compounded by her father's controlling and violent behaviour, which prevented her mother from working, effectively "pushed" Ana into both productive and reproductive labour at an age when she should have been free to simply be a child.

Ana's premature sense of responsibility, however, also became a source of strength: it allowed her to contribute to her family's survival and to support her mother in breaking the cycle of abuse. Ultimately, it was this early maturity that allowed them to flee the violent home environment. Her story illustrates the ambivalent and complex nature of these experiences, showing how caregiving and productive roles can simultaneously reproduce gendered inequalities while enabling acts of agency and emancipation.

Ana also reflects on the intense control her father exerted over their daily lives: "Just so you know, it was in 2020 that we were able to watch television in peace. Because at home we couldn't be in the same room as my father, he refused to breathe the same air as us" (Ana, Interview). She also describes a persistent sense of isolation, explaining that her father never allowed her or her sisters to play with their cousins or have friends. According to Ana, he would say that "girls don't need to be friends with women and shouldn't be friends with men" (Interview). This rigid restriction of social interactions functioned as a mechanism to isolate and control the girls within the household.

In addition to social isolation, Ana's father imposed economic and emotional forms of control. She recounts how he refused to eat the same food prepared at home, instead choosing to dine at restaurants or bakeries, while Ana and her mother depended on whatever they could afford through Ana's earnings. Despite her efforts to support the family under difficult financial circumstances, Ana remembers her father accusing her of engaging in sex work and insinuating

that her income was illegitimate: “he started throwing it in my mother's face, that I was using my body to get that money, because it didn’t make sense for a girl my age to have money” (Interview).

Ana’s narrative illustrates how domestic violence often extends far beyond physical harm, encompassing a broad range of coercive strategies designed to incite fear, enforce subordination, and restrict autonomy. As Evan Stark (2023) argues, coercive control involves perpetrators' patterns of domination through psychological abuse, manipulation, deprivation of resources, surveillance, and entrapment. Ana’s account reveals how her father used a combination of mind games, intimidation, and resource deprivation to maintain obedience and subjugation within the household. Her experience underscores the importance of recognizing domestic violence not solely through its physical manifestations, but through the lens of coercive control — one that brings visibility to the often-overlooked, yet equally or even more damaging, tactics of psychological manipulation, intimidation, and systemic deprivation used to dominate and entrap women (Stark, 2023). In this sense, domestic violence emerges as a manifestation of structural violence that operates to sustain gendered power relations within the household. Yet, as Ana’s trajectory shows, these same conditions can also give rise to forms of resistance (Collins, 2019), as the responsibilities imposed on her simultaneously produced suffering and enabled her to challenge and escape this regime of control.

Ana's story shows how her ability to work and earn money supported her and her mother and empowered her to stand up to her father. She recounts how she confronted his remarks with strength and refused to be intimidated by his words:

> I’ve never had any respect for him; I was never afraid. So, for me, whether I spoke to him or not was the same; he was a stranger. And then I started to hit him back and said, “I'll bring the money into the house, because it's your duty as a man, but you're not even good enough for that.” And then he got angry. He'd get very aggressive, leave the house, stay out all day and only come home at night to sleep (Ana, Interview).

Ana describes how her father would come home at night, retreat to his room, and lock the door, leaving her to arrange her bedroom so her mother could sleep there with her. Despite these circumstances, Ana worked tirelessly, using her earnings to support herself and her mother while also saving enough money to purchase tickets to travel to the Vargem das Flores region, where they could reunite with her sisters and grandmother.

She explains that she did not seek help from her older sisters, as they were already overwhelmed with their own challenges, particularly caring for their grandmother, who had begun using a wheelchair. Reflecting on the support she could have sought elsewhere, Ana

shares how she, her sisters, and her mother felt isolated in the town they lived in, despite her father's relatives residing there. She explains that she tried to seek help from them, but no one believed her. When speaking about these relatives, Ana makes it clear that she does not consider them part of her family. Ana also shares how at school, people noticed signs of distress and inquired about her well-being. However, she chose not to disclose her struggles, instead telling them that everything was fine. As she puts it:

> Then at school, they started to notice my behaviour because some days I couldn't sleep; I was worried about my mother for fear of her getting sick, right? I'd arrive at school tired, looking weak, and then they started wanting to go after my mother. And I'd say, "no, everything's fine, nothing's happening" (Ana, Interview).

Ana concludes by saying, "it's always been like that," a recurring observation in her narrative. This phrase underscores how she has always felt compelled to disguise her struggles, pretending that nothing was wrong, even in the face of significant challenges and violent episodes (as I will demonstrate later, Ana speaks extensively about how difficult it is for her to open up about what she is going through). Ana's narrative reveals a combination of premature responsibility, emotional isolation, and resilience. Despite the absence of external support and the disbelief of those around her, Ana assumed the role of provider and protector within her household. Through her work, resistance, and emotional strength, she challenged her father's authority and carved out the possibility of a different life for herself and her mother.

Ana recounts the last episode of violence she experienced before leaving home with her mother, an incident that occurred during a visit from one of her sisters. Her father asked her to fry an egg, and while she was in the kitchen, "I think it was on purpose, he went and bumped into me when I had the frying pan on my arm like that, and then the oil fell all over my arm" (Ana, Interview). Reflecting on her emotional responses to such experiences, Ana describes herself as emotionally distant and "cold," emphasizing how these characteristics are not innate, but rather survival strategies developed in response to years of violence, emotional neglect, and a lack of safe spaces for expression. As she puts it: "I've never been one for crying because I'm too cold sentimentally to be able to open, cry to someone or ask for emotional help, to talk about what's going on" (Ana, Interview).

Ana's account demonstrates strength, agency, and resilience in confronting her father's violence; these acts of resistance, however, do not erase the pain they entail. Ana continues to tell the story:

> And then I stopped and stared at him, I put the frying pan on the sink and put my arm under the water. I put the egg on the plate, handed it over and walked off, and then he

> came after me. And I was very skinny too; at 11 years old, I weighed around 30kg. He wrapped his arm around my hand because he's always been very big. He wrapped his arm around my hand, so he dragged me through the kitchen, and I was calm because anyone who knows me knows that I'm a very calm person, literally. I'm very apathetic. And then he started swearing at me, saying that "you don't know how to do anything. That's how you want to be in life. You'll never achieve anything in life." (Ana, Interview).

Although Ana describes herself as more apathetic and able to respond to her father's comments with composure, she reflects on the lasting impact of his behaviour on her life:

> I think those words he used somehow have power in people's lives, because when a father curses a child's life, the words are very heavy, and no matter how much you've achieved, you feel an emotional void. What you think is, well, if my father says I'm not going to achieve anything, it's because what I'm achieving here is nothing, right? (Ana, Interview).

During this episode, Ana's sister intervened, warning their father that Ana, at her age, should not be responsible for handling the stove, as she was not old enough. But as Ana adds, "little did she know that I had become the housekeeper, right?" (Interview). This reaction from her sister led their father to slap her across the face. Witnessing this, Ana pushed their father, causing him to stumble and fall to the ground. In retaliation, he punched Ana in the face. This act of aggression had lasting consequences on Ana's physical health, as she describes: "when he came at me, it gave me problems in everything in my life" (Ana, Interview). Firstly, the burn on Ana's arm, which she was checked by a doctor, revealed that the skin was very weak and thin, with more visible veins, a lingering impact of the injury. Additionally, the punch her father inflicted caused chronic and severe headaches, which she still experiences today, and eyesight problems.

The incident involving the fried egg became a turning point for Ana, pushing her to increasingly seek a way out and to start confronting her father more assertively:

> I told him that he wasn't man enough; I don't even know why he had invented a family if he wasn't ready to give love and affection to a child. Then he went and started saying that it had never been his wish to have children, that if he could, he would have left home a long time ago because he wasn't ready to be a father, that he wanted my mother and not children. So much that he felt no love or empathy for us. So, I said to him "fine, if you don't want children, from today on you won't have them anymore" (Ana, Interview).

His words reveal a refusal of paternal responsibility, an attempt to absolve himself from the role of fatherhood even after having three daughters. By asserting that he "never wanted to have children," Ana's father reaffirms gendered dynamics of care and responsibilities within the family: while men can disavow their obligations, women and girls are compelled to bear them. In contrast, Ana's response, "if you don't want children, from today on you won't have them anymore," signals a reversal of this hierarchy. Through her words and subsequent actions, she reclaims agency and protection, assuming a caregiving role that her father had long abandoned.

Using the money she had earned, Ana secretly purchased bus tickets to travel to Vargem das Flores, where she and her mother could stay with her sisters and grandmother. She kept her intentions hidden and did not reveal them to her mother, instead telling her they were simply going for a visit. This was because Ana's mother had often expressed concerns about Ana growing up without a father. To this, Ana responded that it would be better to live without a father than to live without her mother. As Ana says, "my mother used to say 'oh, but you'll grow up without a father, what kind of childhood will you have?'," to which Ana responded, "I'll be better off without a father than without you" (Interview). Ana's statement challenges the dominant ideal that a father's presence is essential for a child's healthy development. In contexts marked by neglect and violence, she redefines what family and care can mean, asserting that love and safety matter more than preserving a patriarchal family model. Once they could move out of her father's house and settle in Vargem das Flores, Ana began a new phase. Her mother was still very frail at the time, and Ana also had to continue working to help support the household.

As I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, having to shoulder responsibilities from a very young age made Ana grow up quickly. As she explains, her sisters sometimes remark that their mother is too lenient with Ana — unlike when their mother was stricter with them at the same age, not even allowing them to leave the house. However, Ana's response is:

> But it's like I tell them [her sisters]: "But at my age, you didn't become our mother's mother. You didn't have to be the pillar of our home, because you had each other's support." I grew up alone. I keep my pain to myself; I solve my problems on my own, because I'm always trying to support you (Ana, Interview).

Ana's experience with her violent father illustrates how she had to navigate and cope with these situations largely on her own, considering herself the household pillar. She received no support from extended family members, nor did she want others, such as her teachers, to know about the violence, out of concern for her mother's health. Ana found strength and a sense of

empowerment in her ability to work, even though she was still a child, which ultimately allowed her and her mother to break the cycle of violence.

2.2. Living With Family Violence

Gabriela also experienced domestic violence, though not from her father, but from her grandfather. Although she did not live with her grandparents, she often stayed at their place while her parents were at work; she would stay in her grandparents' house, where she witnessed numerous episodes of violence. Gabriela reflects on violence in her family on her mother's side, noting how men, including her grandfather, are typically aggressive.

As I described in the section on sexual harassment by uncles, Gabriela highlights the connection between the men in her family, including her grandfather, and the ways in which alcohol consumption is intertwined with violence. A recent narrative review of peer-reviewed qualitative studies conducted by Ingrid Wilson et al. (2024) has examined the complex intersections between men's alcohol use and intimate partner violence, emphasizing that while alcohol does not cause violence, it can intensify its frequency, severity, and volatility. In addition, women's narratives across diverse contexts show how alcohol consumption can interact with broader social norms of masculinity where heavy drinking is often viewed as a marker of toughness and male entitlement, which can reinforce dynamics of control and harm to women and children (Wilson et al., 2024).

Gabriela's account resonates with these findings. She explains that her grandfather was a kind and affectionate man when sober but became violent when drinking. As she recalls, every time she witnessed her grandfather hitting her grandmother, he was drunk. Over time, Gabriela came to understand that these incidents were not isolated outbursts but patterns of violent acts. She recounts them with visible anguish, describing how her grandfather would hit her grandmother in her presence, seemingly indifferent to the impact it might have on a child. Reflecting on this, she suggests that perhaps, because she was so young, he assumed she would neither understand nor remember, but she did understand and remember:

> Cases I've experienced of my grandfather hitting my grandmother and saying "oh, you're little, I don't care" and my grandmother saying, "oh no Gabriela, look away." And then you're like, "what do I do now?" We feel very powerless not to do anything. Because at the time, I was little. I didn't even have a sister. My sister was born when I was 7. After my sister was born, I also saw it a few times. But before, it was more often (…). Until I became aware of what he was doing, I didn't care, right? He was my

> grandfather. Then I started to see that he never minded doing things in front of me. Then I stopped liking him (Gabriela, Interview).

Gabriela's account underscores how young children can recognize and interpret violence, despite adults' frequent tendency to minimize, dismiss, or disbelieve their perceptions. Gabriela explains that as she entered her teenage years, her father began warning her that she would no longer be allowed to visit her grandparents alone. He feared that if her grandfather assaulted her grandmother, Gabriela might try to intervene and, in doing so, put herself at risk. At the same time, her father also expressed distrust toward her grandmother, questioning her ability to protect Gabriela from potential harm. Gabriela recalls one incident in which her grandfather physically assaulted her grandmother in front of her father. Despite witnessing the violence, when her father took her grandmother to the police station, she refused to press charges.

But Gabriela's grandmother should not be blamed for not wanting to report it; the problem runs deeper than that. In a patriarchal and sexist society where notions that men hold power over women are constantly reinforced, dynamics of gender inequality are perpetuated, often justifying or minimizing domestic violence (Santos & Sanches, 2025). These gendered stereotypes constrain women's choices, positioning them in subordinate roles and sustaining a culture of masculine control and domination. The normalization of violence within intimate and family relationships creates an environment that discourages victims from reporting their abusers. This reluctance may stem from a variety of factors, including fear of retaliation, concerns about not being believed, social pressure to preserve family unity, the stigma surrounding divorce, and economic dependence (Santos & Sanches, 2025).

Gabriela's narrative also reveals how experiencing domestic violence becomes a form of trauma that extends beyond the immediate act itself. Her recollection of feeling "powerless" underscores how violence within the family not only harms the direct victim but also affects the children's well-being. Through these experiences, young women like Gabriela learn early on that violence is both gendered and normalized — a lesson reinforced by the silence of those around them and by the endurance of unequal gender roles that make women responsible for maintaining family cohesion at any cost. Her final reflection highlights how memories of violent scenes remained vivid and profoundly disturbing:

> Sometimes, psychology tells us that our brains tend to erase very traumatic memories, and we get little flashes. But I have several little flashes like that, like aggression and violence that I didn't want to have. It erased them in such a way that the good ones disappeared, and the bad ones remained. You get a bit disturbed if you stop to think

about it because it's something that wasn't supposed to happen, but it did, and whether you like it or not, it's normalized. My grandmother is with my grandfather to this day, and they're both going to die together (Gabriela, Interview).

Ana and Gabriela's experiences demonstrate how domestic violence extends beyond immediate physical harm inflicted on women to deeply impact children and shape their trajectories. Ana's story, in particular, underscores how economic control and coercive tactics reinforce cycles of abuse, while her strength and determination ultimately enabled her and her mother to escape. Gabriela's reflections highlight the normalization of violence within families, showing how witnessing abuse at a young age can lead to both distress and critical awareness of violent behaviours. Initially, they may not recognize some acts as violence, but over time, they begin to identify and name them as abuse. However, this awareness comes with the challenge of facing a lack of support from family members, who often dismiss or normalize violence as typical behaviour or just the way relationships are. These narratives reaffirm that in contexts of domestic violence, it is not only women who suffer, but also children, who experience, suffer, and resist violence. As Ana and Gabriela's stories powerfully reveal, they did not merely witness violence passively; they endured its emotional consequences, which continue to affect them into their teenage years.

3. Questioning Men's Power in Intimate Relationships

Having discussed how the young women experience and witness various forms of men's violence against women within their families, schools, and everyday spaces, this section turns to how they critically reflect on and challenge the normalization of violence, submission and domination in heterosexual romantic relationships.

The young women recognize that men's dominance in relationships is not only exercised through physical or economic means but also through more subtle forms of coercion that exploit women's emotions, vulnerabilities, and desires for affection. They speak about sisters, aunts, cousins, and friends who remain in abusive relationships, despite being financially independent, because they feel emotionally trapped.

bell hooks (1984) argues that, within patriarchal societies, violence is not only normalized but often reinterpreted as a legitimate expression of masculinity and care. Cultural narratives frequently frame male aggression, particularly when associated with protection or emotional intensity, as evidence of love, rewarding men's use of force while reinforcing their dominance (hooks, 1984). Within this framework, women are socialized to interpret violence in intimate relationships as a sign of affection, and the endurance of abuse becomes intertwined

with the desire to maintain emotional connection. Leaving, therefore, is not only about escaping harm, but about confronting the perceived loss of care, attachment, and meaning. As a result, women may tolerate or rationalize abusive dynamics, not because they fail to recognize the violence, but because emotional bonds have been constructed as central to their sense of self and well-being (hooks, 1984).

In addition, women's decisions to remain in abusive relationships are shaped by multiple and intersecting factors that extend beyond material dependence (Barnett, 2001). Ola Barnett (2001) highlights how emotional, psychological, and social dynamics, including internalized gender-role socialization, encourage women to seek validation and self-worth through attachment to male partners rather than through personal achievement. In this context, women's sense of well-being may depend on maintaining their relationships, even when these relationships are abusive. The fear of isolation, rejection, or failure, of not being able to "keep" a relationship, may lead them to interpret a partner's violence as a reflection of their own inadequacy rather than his abusive behaviour (Barnett, 2001).

In the words of the young women, they refer to the difficulty women have in leaving abusive relationships as *emotional dependency*. As Gabriela defines: "you can't imagine yourself without that person. You get used to their presence in a way that makes you think you'll be nothing without them. You can't see your future without that person" (FG1). Eloise adds:

> Even if the person mistreats you, insults you, hits you, and everything else, you can't leave them. You can't imagine yourself without them. Oh, he mistreats me, humiliates me, but it must be love. He only wants what's best for me. He's talking about this, but it's for my own good, for our relationship. She can't get out of it (Eloise, FG1).

In naming this dynamic, Eloise reproduces in her own terms what hooks (1984) critiques: a cultural logic in which violence equates to love. Through these reflections, the young women expose how emotional dependency operates as a form of control sustained by internalized gender norms that equate love with endurance and sacrifice. Their comments reveal a deep understanding of how women are often socialized to interpret domination and jealousy as expressions of care, and to find meaning and self-worth within romantic relationships (Barnett, 2001). This notion that a woman's identity is fulfilled through attachment to a man remains a powerful cultural script that naturalizes subordination and constrains women's emotional autonomy.

At the same time, by naming and reflecting on this dynamic, the young women challenge these inherited expectations. Their analyses subvert the traditional view that

women's goal is to be in a relationship or to preserve it at any cost. Instead, they challenge the idea that love involves violence and that women are expected to stay, while they think about forms of affection and partnership that might emerge once dependence is no longer seen as love.

The young women critically discuss these dynamics, offering concrete examples from their own families and social circles. Isabel, for instance, reflects on her aunt's experience, highlighting how emotional dependence and control can persist even when women are economically independent: "in the case of women, right? Who work, have their own independence, and yet are totally with a guy like that, toxic" (FG1).

Isabel describes how her aunt's partner "wanted to own her," recounting a family gathering where he had a jealous outburst, accusing another family member of flirting with her and creating a public confrontation. Such episodes were frequent: any interaction between her aunt and another man would trigger anger, jealousy, and accusations of betrayal. He also engaged in physical altercations, once pulling her aunt's arm violently, and justified this behaviour as natural, claiming that this was simply "how men are." Isabel avoided him whenever possible. Her aunt, convinced that he might change, encouraged him to see a psychotherapist, but his controlling behaviour persisted. Eventually, she decided to break up, an act Isabel interprets as both personal courage and resistance to the normalization of male possessiveness. Isabel reflects: "But thank God she opened her eyes, you know? And she's not with him anymore. We see her as a much happier person, you know? She's always been cheerful, liked to dance and jump around, but not when she was with him; then they were always fighting, it was horrible" (FG1).

Gabriela comments that Isabel's aunt "lost herself to please him," and Isabel agrees, explaining that her aunt gradually withdrew from social life and family gatherings, fearing that he might cause conflict. Their reflections expose how emotional dependence often operates not through financial control but through the internalization of fear, guilt, and responsibility for the partner's reactions, mechanisms that sustain women's subordination.

Maya offers a similar account, this time involving her sister's teenage relationship with an abusive boyfriend. She recalls how her sister would return home crying but asked Maya not to tell anyone. Out of fear for her sister's safety, Maya began accompanying her to the boyfriend's house: "So I went because I was afraid, right? What if something happened? If she died, I would die with her, no problem" (FG1).

Maya witnessed episodes of both physical and emotional violence. Although their mother repeatedly advised her sister to split up, Maya believes her sister's emotional

dependency prevented her from doing so. This dynamic reflects what Barnett (2001) identifies as the internalization of gender roles that lead many women to seek validation through romantic attachment. Particularly during teenage years, when girls' and young women's self-confidence and self-esteem often decline, their behaviours may increasingly concentrate on obtaining validation from peers and young men (Barnett, 2001). In this sense, Maya's sister's experience illustrates how emotional dependency and low self-worth can reinforce a cycle of control and subordination, making it difficult for young women to recognize abuse or envision a life outside the relationship. The relationship only ended when the boy eventually disappeared. Gabriela reflects on the lingering impact of such experiences, noting how they leave "a huge stain" and foster mistrust in future relationships.

Maya also recounts the story of her aunt's relationship, marked by control and abuse that extended not only to her aunt but also to her younger cousin. She explains that her aunt's boyfriend is violent and authoritarian, often deciding how both mother and daughter should behave, dress, or spend their time. Maya describes him as a man who "thinks he's always right," whose control manifests in everyday interactions and how he attempts to shape her cousin's future.

One evening, during dinner at their house, the conversation turned to what her cousin wanted to be when she grew up. The girl, five years younger than Maya, enthusiastically said she wanted to be a fashion designer and showed some of her sketches. Interrupting her, the boyfriend said: "No, you're going to be a police officer." Maya immediately intervened: "No, she wants to be a fashion designer. She's going to be what she wants to be." He replied: "But I decide; I tell her what she must be. I know what's best for her, and she doesn't. She's just a kid" (Maya, Interview).

This interaction exemplifies how control within abusive relationships often extends beyond the partner to children, shaping their sense of autonomy and reproducing patriarchal authority across generations. By asserting his authority over the girl's dreams, the man reaffirms his dominance and entitlement to define the lives of women and girls in the household.

Maya, however, resists this dynamic by encouraging her cousin to trust her own choices: "don't let him tell you what you are to become in life. You will be whatever you want to." Her cousin responded, "I know that. I'm not going to let him tell me what I should be." Maya proudly notes how her cousin has started to "talk back," and that when relatives ask, "Is it Maya who's teaching you to talk like that?" she answers confidently, "yes. Maya wants to be this [actress], and she will be, and so will I." This intergenerational exchange becomes an

act of resistance, a moment when Maya challenges adultism and patriarchal control by affirming her cousin's voice and autonomy.

Maya also shares that her aunt's boyfriend was physically violent toward her cousin. She recalls an episode when the girl, crying because of a loose tooth, resisted his attempt to tie it up and pull it out forcefully. Furious, he grabbed her arm harshly, pulled her, and cursed at her. Distressed, Maya urged her cousin: "My God, why don't you go live with our grandmother?" Her cousin replied, "I wanted to live with my grandmother, but my mom would stay here, and I don't want to leave her behind." Maya reflects:

> I'll tell my mom. I need to tell an adult what's happening. Because there's nothing I can do, I'm not going to call the police, and no one else will either. People don't get involved in other people's lives. We've already told my aunt many times: break up with him. He's not good for you. He's manipulating you. Like, if there's a family party at my grandmother's house and he doesn't want to go, then she won't go either (Maya, Interview).

Maya's account reveals her acute awareness of manipulation and control that define abusive relationships. She recognizes both her limited power as a young person and her agency and capacity to resist within those constraints — by seeking help from adults, refusing to normalize the abuse, and supporting her cousin. Her reflections also highlight how cycles of domination and submission are transmitted through emotional bonds and family structures. However, these cycles can be disrupted through acts of solidarity and resistance.

These accounts reveal how the young women recognize the persistence of abuse beyond economic dependence and challenge cultural scripts that conflate love with control. By naming emotional dependency as a mechanism of domination, they expose how gendered power is reproduced within intimate relationships and, at the same time, how women's decisions to leave, to protect each other, or to "open their eyes" constitute acts of resistance against this normalization.

This awareness also extends to broader institutions that shape gender relations, such as the evangelical church — and this is particularly important given the central role that religious logics, especially those of evangelical churches, play in governing everyday life in urban peripheries (Beraldo, 2022). During her one-to-one interview, reflecting on her relationship with the church, Eloise emphasizes how the values preached by pastors do not help her deal with issues related to womanhood. Precisely because they still reproduce hierarchical notions between men and women, framing men as rational leaders and women as naturally submissive.

She challenges this doctrine, questioning its incompatibility with her own values of equality and mutual respect:

> Because I think it should be the same. The two of them must be submissive to each other, and the two of them also must rule, not just the man who is in charge and says, "oh you have to do this here, that there, and these here, too, because you're a woman and I'm only going to do those at over there because I'm a man" (Eloise, Interview).

Eloise's statement reveals how she is not only contesting abusive dynamics at the interpersonal level but also interrogating the ideological foundations that sustain them. This critique is particularly significant in contexts where religious discourse is pervasive and plays a central role in shaping moral values, gender expectations, and intimate relationships. In such settings, notions of respectability operate as mechanisms through which women are evaluated, distinguishing those considered "worthy of respect" from those who are not (Beraldo, 2022). By challenging gendered hierarchies embedded in religious teachings, Eloise also disrupts these regimes of respectability, refusing the expectation that women must embody submission and obedience to be valued. In doing so, she reclaims authority, envisioning relationships grounded in reciprocity rather than submission. Thus, the young women challenge how gendered hierarchies are naturalized across both intimate and institutional domains.

Witnessing women in their families (mothers, aunts, sisters, and cousins) endure relationships marked by jealousy, domination, and violence profoundly shapes the young women's understanding of intimacy. These observations, combined with their experiences of sexual harassment and domestic violence, along with their critique of religious structures that reinforce gender inequality, contribute to a heightened sense of vigilance and awareness in their interactions with men. The young women describe how such experiences have made them cautious, even suspicious, of romantic relationships, and how they reflect on the signs of control, manipulation, and emotional dependency that might lead to harm.

Ana illustrates this awareness through a story about a brief relationship she had with a young man named Jonas. At first, she describes him as handsome, attentive, and seemingly ideal. They met in church, where he was close to the pastor, someone Ana admired and trusted, which led her to view Jonas as a "*varão*."[25] However, as Ana later discovered, Jonas was involved with a local gang, illustrating the overlap between the "world of crime" and the "world of church" (Beraldo, 2022).

[25] "*Varão*" is a term used in evangelical churches to refer to men, with its feminine form being "*varoa*." In this context, these terms are used among members of the church to address one other, symbolizing men and women who are faithful, pious, respectable, and believers in God.

Ana recounts their first official date, when they had planned to go for ice cream. As they walked, however, she began to feel uneasy because they were heading toward an unfamiliar area known for gang activity: “I thought he was going to kill me,” she recalls (FG2). When she asked where the ice cream shop was, Jonas revealed that they were going to his house, explaining that his mother had invited her to a barbecue. Despite her discomfort, Ana continued to see him for a short time, recalling that on New Year’s Eve, he was “sweet,” attending church with her and even coordinating their outfits.

However, the relationship soon changed. Within weeks, Jonas told her he had lost his job and his motorcycle, and shortly afterwards began posting pictures of himself smoking weed and drinking on social media. When Ana confronted him, he justified his behaviour as a way to “relax,” but she noticed his increasing irritability and aggression. His behaviour also became controlling: he repeatedly demanded her Instagram password, accusing her of talking to other men and cheating on him. Ana resisted these demands, refusing to surrender her privacy and imposing clear boundaries. Her refusal marks an important act of agency and self-protection. Considering all of this, Ana decided it would be better if they stopped seeing each other.

When she decided to split up, Jonas reacted aggressively, revealing his gang involvement and using it as a means of intimidation: “The guys from my *pista* [gang] said you’ve already messed around with them,” he told her. Surprised, Ana responded: “What do you mean? Do you have a *pista*?” It was at that moment that she realized the extent of his ties to criminal networks and the potential risks involved.

Ana immediately decided to end the relationship. Jonas, however, refused to accept her decision, threatening and insulting her: “you’ve been with me this far; you’ll be with me until the end because I won’t accept that,” he said, later threatening to “show her the medicine that’s good for women who do this [cheat], for a whore” (FG2). He continued to threaten her, claiming that since he was involved in crime, he would show her that he was a “man of respect” if she continued to disrespect him — illustrating the risks young women face in militarized contexts that reinforce hyper-masculinity and the need to assert respect, thereby exposing women to intimidation (Ursin, 2020).

Recognizing the escalation of risk, Ana took steps to protect herself — blocking all contact, avoiding his neighbourhood, and warning her friends. Her decision to break up, despite fear and intimidation, reflects her awareness. Ana recounts:

> This situation was really crazy because I didn't expect it. He was my dream. He was studying civil engineering. He worked, looked after his mother, went to church, and said he didn't drink or smoke. But then he started to show his true colours like that. He

> became the worst kind of person in the world. Because, as well as not wanting to work anymore, he started getting involved with this kind of thing, and that totally ruined our relationship (FG2).

Ana's experience demonstrates the risks of romantic relationships governed by militarized logics. Gabriela's reaction to Ana's story further underscores the gravity of these risks. Reflecting on Ana's relationship with Jonas, she comments that if something similar had happened to her (if she had been involved with a young man in a gang), she believes she "would have died," because she "wouldn't be able to tolerate being interrogated or accused of talking to someone else" (FG2). Her statement captures the latent fear of lethal consequences that accompanies women who reject men whose masculinity is rooted in control and domination. In this way, Gabriela's reflection not only affirms Ana's decision to protect herself but also exposes the gendered and territorial logics that make intimate relationships in such contexts potentially deadly for young women.

Gabriela also recalls having had the opportunity to become involved with a young man affiliated with a gang but deciding not to. She reflects on the changes she observed in him over the years, from her neighbour to a drug dealer and father of several children, and how his life became marked by instability and irresponsibility. Despite his attempts to get closer to her, Gabriela expresses her clear rejection, emphasizing how she sees him as an undesirable figure. She explains:

> He has four children, each with a different partner, and he hasn't taken care of any of the children. He's about 24. And I'm 16! He's not even handsome, has nothing going for him, does drugs, sells drugs, and still lives with his mother. He's got four ex-wives, and I'm supposed to apply to be the next one? Thanks, but no thanks (Gabriela, FG2).

Gabriela's witty comment captures a critical awareness of the risks involved in romantic relationships in her social environment. This attentiveness to whom they get involved with romantically or sexually is central to the young women's strategies of protection. Gabriela explains that, as a way of safeguarding herself from the risk of becoming entangled with men involved in gangs, she prefers to date people she already knows and trusts. She gives the example of her current boyfriend, someone she has known for over a year, and adds: "I always try to find out about the person's past, so I know what I'm getting myself into" (Gabriela, FG2). Maya adds, "the person could have been perfect, but ended up going down the wrong path of their own free will," and Gabriela agrees, "they'll end up crashing" (FG2). These statements reflect an ongoing process of discernment, grounded in their social realities and in the awareness that "bad paths" can have serious, even fatal, consequences.

At the same time, their language shows how they do not escape the dualistic logic that separates “right” and “wrong” paths in the periphery. By invoking “going down the wrong path of their own free will,” they reproduce dominant discourses that individualize responsibility and obscure structural constraints (Motta, 2016). While these distinctions function as strategies of self-protection, they also reproduce classificatory frameworks that legitimize differential forms of control, surveillance, and punishment toward those deemed to have “chosen” the path of criminality.

The young women’s own experiences, combined with what they witness among relatives and friends, have fostered vigilance and skepticism. When asked how their proximity to interpersonal violence in their families affected their views, Maya replied that such exposure caused them to “lose their innocence” (FG2). Gabriela added, “you start to lose faith in human beings. I am very suspicious of those around me” (FG2). Similarly, Maya reflected, “you end up not believing in anyone else; you think you are going to be single for the rest of your life because there’s no one in the world who is normal” (FG2). Ana concluded that finding a loyal and respectful partner is a privilege: “you’re rich if you find a boy like that” (FG2). As the young women conclude:

> Gabriela: Every doubt you can have about a man, you must have.
>
> Ana: If I'm on the street like this, alone, I'd rather be with the devil. Because my goodness. But that's it, folks. Be very careful (FG2).

Their words, though delivered with humour, reveal a deep awareness of gendered power relations and the persistent asymmetry between men and women. What might appear as exaggeration or irony is, in fact, a critical commentary on the pervasive fear that structures women’s everyday interactions with men — a fear grounded not in paranoia, but in lived experience.

In her one-to-one interview, Gabriela recalls a viral TikTok trend asking women whether they would rather be trapped in the woods with a man or a bear. Most women chose “a bear,” explaining that while the bear might kill them, a man could subject them to prolonged violence. Gabriela connects this trend to a broader collective awareness among women of the dangers embedded in patriarchal socialization. As she notes, men even commented under the post, joking, “wow, I’m more powerful than a bear.” She also recalls a punk song that says, “oh, I thought it was a man. Phew, what a relief, it was just Satan.”

These cultural references, whether on social media or in music, function as forms of resistance. They illustrate how cultural power can operate not only in favour of dominant groups but also in challenging and denaturalizing violence (Collins, 2024). Through humour,

exaggeration, and shared recognition, women articulate a critique of male dominance and the omnipresent threat of violence. For Gabriela and the other young women, such expressions resonate with their realities: they both expose and challenge the normalization of fear that permeates relationships between men and women.

Gabriela calls for collective action in confronting men's domination. Drawing from her own encounters with everyday sexism and fear, she connects personal discomfort to broader social structures, insisting that gendered oppression must be publicly named and collectively resisted:

> Ah, because we are girls, we always suffer. Wow, to come here [she had mentioned at the beginning of the interview how there was a man on a motorcycle following and bothering her], wow, women have no peace. We must fight, impose on the world that we are uncomfortable, and that it is wrong. Whether we like it or not, the worldview is patriarchal, right? Men are right about everything. I think that if women don't unite… It's like talking about the working class, too, because we must talk about it, right? If we don't unite as one, we will continue to be trampled on. Because there's no point in me going to the governor and stating my position, saying, "hey, I think this and that, you know? You are this and that." We must come together. Like teachers, they are coming together now; they go on strike, they protest, but very few teachers participate. I think that for the people to be heard, they must unite. One person alone is useless. Whether we like it or not, especially as women, it's something we all suffer from, but it's still taboo, right? Oh, it's the woman's fault. It's always the woman's fault. It's something they use to intimidate us, to make us feel bad." (Gabriela, Interview).

Gabriela's statement synthesizes a sharp political consciousness grounded in lived experience. She acknowledges both the personal ("we always suffer") and the structural ("the worldview is patriarchal"), situating gendered oppression within a broader field of class and collective struggle. Her insistence that "one person alone is useless" reframes women's suffering as a collective condition, not an individual failure. She calls for solidarity not only among women but also across social movements, connecting the feminist demand for unity with the historical struggles of the working class. In her words, awareness is not enough — it must be transformed into action, into what she calls *imposing on the world that we are uncomfortable*. This is a deeply political gesture: to make discomfort visible is to refuse silence, to insist that what has been normalized must be unsettled.

Eloise's reflections complement Gabriela's structural critique by grounding the power of resistance in intimate and relational spaces. She finds strength not in formal activism but in

everyday bonds with other women in her family, particularly those whose experiences of violence have been stigmatized or silenced. Eloise speaks about her cousins, both survivors of sexual abuse, as sources of knowledge and trust:

> When we are together, we talk a lot about these things [topics related to sexuality], and I really like her because she told me things that even my mother never did, like stuff about women's bodies, marriage. I like to learn about those things, and life, too. I think she talks about it really well, especially because of what she has been through, right? (Eloise, Interview).

Eloise acknowledges that one of her cousins, despite being known in the family as "the slut," also shares important lessons and advice. Far from reproducing this stigma, Eloise recognizes in these women a form of embodied expertise, knowledge forged through pain, survival, and experience. By turning to them for guidance, she reclaims a different genealogy of wisdom, one rooted in resilience rather than respectability. These women, once silenced or discredited, become legitimate authorities on life, care, and womanhood.

Gabriela and Eloise offer complementary visions of resistance and agency. Gabriela's collective call to name, unite, and act positions women's struggle within a broader political horizon of solidarity and social transformation. Eloise, in turn, illuminates how change also begins in the private sphere, through trust, mutual care, and the validation of women's lived experiences. Both perspectives converge in affirming that confronting patriarchal power requires both outrage and affection, public mobilization and everyday work of rebuilding relationships between women, across generations, and with themselves. In doing so, they also demonstrate how young people's agency in contexts of constraint is multiple and dynamic — unfolding at individual and collective levels and involving a constant assessment of risk and trust (Berents & ten Have, 2017; Van Dijk et al., 2025). These forms of agency are not only about survival, but about navigating and challenging cultural, institutional, and interpersonal logics that render their bodies persistently exposed and vulnerable to violence.

4. Closing Remarks

The young women's accounts make visible how men's violence against women is widespread across multiple domains of their lives. As Gabriela's reflection — "that man that age said that to me, I'm a child" (FG1) — so powerfully encapsulates, these experiences are shaped by intersecting positions of gender, age, race, and class, where youth becomes a condition that intensifies vulnerability and unequal power relations (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Across contexts, in the streets, on public transportation, at school, and within their own families, violence is

enabled and sustained by institutional arrangements and social norms that normalize male entitlement and undermine young women's credibility and protection. From overcrowded buses in a segregated region to school environments that fail to address harassment, and homes where coercive control operates, these experiences reveal how structural violence is embedded in everyday life, maintaining relations of domination while rendering them ordinary and taken for granted (Scheper-Hughes, 2004).

At the same time, an intersectional feminist lens reveals that these conditions do not produce only subordination, but also critical consciousness and resistance (Collins, 2019). The young women's narratives expose how violence is recognized, named, and contested through their own terms — whether by rejecting the idea that harassment is provoked by women, questioning religious and cultural norms, or redefining what constitutes love and respect. In doing so, they refuse both victimhood and respectability as the only available scripts. Even within constraining conditions, such as Ana's early entry into the workforce, experiences marked by hardship also become sources of agency, enabling her to support her mother, confront her father and escape abuse. This ambivalence underscores how domination and resistance are not opposites, but coexisting processes (Collins, 2019).

Dialoguing with the previous chapters, these experiences further illustrate how structural violence operates through interconnected mechanisms that produce insecurity, constrain mobility, and shape young women's sense of safety, belonging, and access across public and private domains. If segregation and territorial dynamics restrict their presence in public space and limit access to services and opportunities, and domestic arrangements capture their time and labour (often in response to material constraints and family needs), interpersonal violence reinforces these conditions by intensifying feelings of vulnerability and positioning young women as available to men's demands, desires, and control, further limiting where and how they can move, relate, and exist. At the same time, these dynamics reveal that neither public nor private spaces can be assumed as inherently safe, as violence permeates both in distinct but interconnected ways.

The following chapter turns to the school as a central institution in the young women's lives, where they spend a significant part of their time and where social inequalities are reproduced, negotiated, and challenged. By examining their experiences within educational spaces, the analysis further expands how structural violence is organized and lived, highlighting how processes of exclusion, control, and devaluation are also embedded in educational practices, shaping not only access but also how young Black women are seen, treated, and valued.

CHAPTER SEVEN: SCHOOL – BEING TRAINED TO OBEY

In this chapter, I analyse how the young women experience situations in which their voices are dismissed and their authority denied at school. These experiences reflect intersecting relations of power shaped by age, gender, class, and race. The co-researchers often link such situations to their age — a perception that resonates with what John Wall (2025) defines as *adultism*, a system in which adults monopolize credibility and devalue young people's perspectives. However, their narratives also reveal that these dynamics cannot be understood through age alone. Schools themselves reproduce stigmatizing discourses that position young people, particularly those from marginalized communities, as difficult, lacking potential, or predisposed to criminality (Sampson & Villela, 2017), while also being experienced by youth as an institution marked by hostility and violence (Weber et al., 2025).

Importantly, the perception of school as a violent place was the most widely shared experience among the co-researchers — the *only point of consensus* across their diverse narratives. Repeatedly, they emphasized how the school is a place where they are not listened to, respected, or taken seriously. Their efforts to assert themselves, claim rights, and take initiative are often met with disregard and silencing, reinforcing hierarchies that keep them in inferior positions.

As presented in the Methods Chapter, at the time of this study, all co-researchers were enrolled in the second year of public high school and attended evening classes, except for Isabel, who studied in the morning. The following excerpt from the second focus group illustrates this perception about the school as a violent place:

> Eloise: I think the school is very violent toward students, even though it's supposed to be a place for us.
>
> Gabriela: A place of care. A place of learning.
>
> Camila: Generally speaking, would you all consider the school a violent place?
>
> Eloise, Maya, Gabriela: Yes, very much so. Absolutely.
>
> Maya: School, I don't know, it was a good place until fifth grade.
>
> Gabriela: As if?
>
> Eloise: Back when we didn't even have the awareness to notice it, right? Because we were naïve (FG2).

This dialogue among the young women reveals how they perceive school as an institution that, although intended to be a space of learning and care, enacts violence. As Eloise suggests, this perception became clearer during teenage years; earlier, they lacked the awareness to recognize it, describing themselves as more "innocent." Now, however, they view school as a site that

reproduces existing hierarchies and contributes to their subordination. As a key institution in the socialization process, the school functions as a guardian of dominant values and norms, therefore maintaining and perpetuating the status quo by imposing conformity on students (Saldana, 2013).

In this sense, the school operates as an institution that contributes to power relations of domination. In this chapter, I first explore the young women's experiences of not being heard, particularly in situations where their voices are only taken seriously when mediated by parents. I then examine how schools delegate responsibilities to students without granting them real autonomy or authority — a dynamic that serves to sustain the functioning of the school system while limiting students' capacity to question its norms. Next, I analyse how the young women are constructed as students without a future, often positioned as destined for failure. Finally, I show how, although institutions can reproduce violence, they can also be sites of resistance. I highlight the presence of supportive teachers and, beyond the school, the role of facilitators from the Fica Vivo! program as adults who create spaces of listening, care, and protection.

1. Learning That Students' Voices Do Not Count

The young women described experiences when they realized that their voices carry little weight within school settings. In this context, when the young women demand changes in the school's practices, the institution's refusal to listen or seriously consider their claims is not simply a failure of responsiveness. Rather, it is the fulfillment of its normative role. By disregarding students' voices, the school reproduces and legitimizes adultist discourses in which adults monopolize authority to decide what is right and how things should be done, while young people are expected to obey. For Black women in particular, this denial of legitimacy is compounded by gendered and racialized expectations that already devalue their voices.[26] As an institution committed to upholding prevailing norms, the school resists opening space for those norms to be questioned, thereby systematically denying young women the opportunity to be heard, respected, and recognized as legitimate agents.

The young women give concrete examples of how schools tend to address issues only when parents or legal guardians intervene, even after students themselves have reported the problem multiple times. Gabriela recalls a situation in which a teacher failed to record her

[26] As will be explored in the next chapter, the young women describe experiencing racism at school from an early age, which continues into the present. They also frequently report incidents of racism and sexism perpetrated by teachers and school staff, illustrating how gendered and racial hierarchies intersect with adultist norms in shaping their experiences.

grade, even though she had completed all the required assignments, as documented in her notebook. She explains:

> Then I complained to the principal; he didn't give me anything. I complained to the teacher; nothing came of it. The supervision didn't come to anything. Then I called my father, “dad, could you come to school and sort this out for me?” So, my father went, and on the same day the teacher gave me the grade (Gabriela, FG2).

Eloise and Maya also describe similar experiences, noting that the school administration only resolves problems once an adult intervenes. Eloise mentions that she had difficulties with her class grades, and although students repeatedly brought the issue to the principal’s attention, the response was consistently dismissive, with phrases like “come back tomorrow” and “come a bit earlier.” This pattern continued for two weeks until a parent finally visited the school, at which point the matter was promptly resolved.

These examples highlight how schools reproduce adultist logics, systematically denying students’ authority and reinforcing the idea that only adults’ voices carry legitimacy. Even when young women demonstrate evidence, persistence, and initiative, their claims are disregarded until an adult validates them. This dynamic becomes even more pronounced when the conflict involves teachers’ conduct — adults who hold not only age-based authority but also the institutional power of their professional role. Gabriela shares about a case involving a teacher accused of arrogance, mockery, and verbal abuse:

> When the problem is with a student, they [the administration] expect to receive several complaints about the same student before they address it. But when it’s about a teacher [when they complain about a teacher], it’s different, like what happened with [the teacher]. He came into my class last week and said, “I heard information from the administration. I don’t know if it came from this classroom, but I’ve been here for 17 years, and it doesn’t matter how much you complain, I’m not leaving” (FG2).

This statement illustrates the entrenched power imbalance within the school system, where teachers occupy a position of authority and institutional protection that effectively shields them from accountability. The certainty expressed by the teacher that no amount of student complaints will result in consequences reflects a system that privileges staff over students and perpetuates a culture of impunity and silencing of youth voices.

The young women describe how the school diminishes and devalues them through its everyday practices. When they assert their rights, for instance, by demanding fair grading for the work they completed or reporting a teacher’s inappropriate conduct, teachers and administrators often dismiss their concerns, treating them as incapable of advocating for

themselves or unworthy of being taken seriously. Their accounts show how the school actively undermines their ability to solve problems on their own, reinforcing the idea that children and teenagers do not know what is best for themselves or what they are doing. This dynamic exposes a broader hierarchy of credibility. As young women from a marginalized community, they face intersecting disqualifications, since institutions already devalue women's voices and treat young people's perspectives as inherently illegitimate. These mechanisms are further intensified by classed and racialized prejudices that stigmatize residents of urban peripheries as undisciplined, unmotivated, and incapable of success. In this sense, the young women are not only treated as "too young" to be credible but also as part of a social group symbolically marked as having no future. This idea will be further developed through Jessé Souza's reflections (2009), which illustrate how this logic is embedded in the functioning of public schooling in Brazil's peripheries.

Gabriela's experience as a class representative exemplifies this dynamic of discredit and exclusion. In a role designed to represent students' perspectives, she recounts being consistently denied the opportunity to speak during meetings, interrupted, and sidelined in favour of teachers' voices. As she reflected: "Am I nothing here?" (Interview). At the same time, the young women point to another contradiction: although their authority is denied when it comes to voicing demands, they are frequently expected to take on responsibilities that support the daily functioning of the school. As Ana explains, "the authority they claim to give us, they take away from us" (FG2). Their conversation underscores this paradox:

> Eloise: You can see that everyone has said that when we try to solve it, nothing gets resolved. It's only when a parent steps in that things are addressed.
>
> Ana: It's like, we're not capable because we're still teenagers. But when it comes to doing their work in the classroom, like calling the roll properly, collecting supplemental exams, or knowing how to distribute project grades, then we *do* have autonomy.
>
> Gabriela: We figure it out.
>
> Ana: "Because us, whose job it is and who are paid to do this, don't actually do it." [speaking as if it were a statement from the teachers and the school administration] (FG2).

Before examining how the young women interpret this contradiction and the withdrawal of authority from them, it is important to situate the broader context of Brazilian public education. While the young women's remark that teachers "are paid to do this" reflects their perception of unfair workload distribution, it also points to a deeper structural problem. Despite the constitutional guarantee of free schooling, public basic education is often marked by chronic

underfunding, limited infrastructure, and scarce staff support. Teachers in public schools frequently work under precarious conditions, including overcrowded classrooms, insufficient administrative support, and persistently low wages, leading to ongoing struggles such as campaigns to raise the national salary floor (Oliveira, 2020).

In this sense, these dynamics can be understood as an expression of structural violence, reflected in the gap between what is formally guaranteed and what is provided, and in the unequal conditions between public and private education (Galtung, 1969; Iadicola & Shupe, 2003; Ho, 2007). As in other domains, these disparities constrain opportunities and shape everyday experiences, producing institutional arrangements in which scarcity is normalized, and responsibility is unevenly distributed. Within this context, tasks that should be fulfilled by the institution are displaced onto students, particularly in under-resourced schools.

Within this strained environment, responsibilities that should belong to the school administration or staff are often transferred to students. The following section examines how the young women make sense of a contradictory scenario: on the one hand, these delegations are symptomatic of systemic resource shortages; on the other, they reproduce hierarchies that deny students real authority while burdening them with tasks essential to the functioning of the school.

2. Being Given Responsibilities Without Authority

Before we continue, it is relevant to understand how the school organizes the role of class representatives. At the time of the fieldwork, Gabriela held the position of class representative, while Maya and Eloise had previously held the same role. As Maya explained, the administration and teachers presented this role as one of assistance: representatives were expected to collect assignments for absent students, deliver announcements from the administration, and communicate information to their peers so that the coordination did not need to visit each classroom directly.

In practice, however, the representatives' responsibilities went beyond these support tasks. Isabel pointed out that representatives often ended up performing duties that should fall to the administration or teachers themselves. Eloise and Gabriela agreed, with Gabriela adding that representatives were routinely held responsible for bureaucratic processes. For example, if a student failed a class, it was the representative who had to retrieve the supplemental exam from the administration, deliver it to the student, collect it once completed, and return it to the teacher. Gabriela even recalled missing classes because she was chasing down students and teachers to manage this process.

Class representatives were also responsible for managing the school logbook — a notebook used to record infractions such as tardiness, absences, or disrespecting a teacher. While teachers were supposed to document these infractions, it was the representatives who had to pick up the logbook from the administration each morning, carry it to class, and return it at the end of the day. At the close of each semester, the logbook formed the basis for disciplinary assessments in which students, together with teachers, reviewed behaviour and determined whether each student would keep their initial five points or have some deducted.

Another task that ended up being delegated to representatives is the distribution of grades. Eloise recounts an incident that happened to her, which she frames as violence. She explains that every semester, students must complete a project, and the representatives are responsible for distributing grades. In her class, the representative got some things mixed up, giving zero to students who had completed their work and full marks to students who had not. This also illustrates how these responsibilities of the representatives end up affecting the relationship between them and other students. Eloise says that she, along with other students, complained to the administration and the school's pedagogical department. They managed to change some grades, but when they checked the system, some students still had zeros. When they complained again, the school educator responded by saying it was the students' fault for not seeking help and not being responsible. Some students ended up with low grades, and the school educator even deducted another point from each of them for the class's "lack of responsibility." However, as Eloise and Maya report, they had already complained about the grade issue more than five times.

According to Maya, behind this idea that the school is "sharing" tasks to make students more responsible, the reality is that they are simply transferring their workload onto the students. Gabriela agrees and gives an example of a teacher who made her check all students' grades. The teacher gave her the spreadsheet with the grades for all the activities of the entire semester, asked her to sum them up, check who was in supplemental, inform the students, and hand them their supplemental exams. As Eloise reflects, "imagine if you make a mistake with one student's grade?" (FG2).

The young women's reflections expose a striking contradiction at the core of the school's discourse of autonomy. Although teachers and administrators often claim to be preparing students to become more responsible, independent, and resourceful in the future, their everyday practices undermine these very capacities. As the young women reported, what prevails is a feeling that they are incapable. When I asked them why they thought this was happening, Gabriela said, "I think they expect too much from us." Eloise adds that she thinks,

“they think ‘oh, let’s do this, so they become more responsible.’” Maya continues, “so when they leave school, they’ll already know how to do things, be independent” (FG2). However, as they evaluate, this is not helping, and Gabriela says their problems only grew.

In practice, however, these narratives of future empowerment mask current forms of subordination. Students are burdened with responsibilities that exceed their role and limit decision-making capacity, while being denied recognition and legitimacy when they try to speak or demand accountability in matters that directly affect their school experience. Rather than fostering autonomy, these practices reinforce institutional hierarchies that train young people to obey, not to act. By delegating administrative duties such as grade management and communication of results under the guise of “building responsibility,” the school blurs its institutional boundaries and imposes adult responsibilities without corresponding rights. The rhetoric of “preparing for the future” thus masks a mechanism of control in the present — one that sustains adultist logics in which young people’s capacities and rights are continually dismissed (Muñoz, 2006). For the young women, this framing translates into an expectation to remain submissive, preparing them to sustain the machinery of how society works rather than to challenge or transform it.

As Jessé Souza (2009) argues, education dynamics cannot be understood apart from broader structures of social inequality. Brazilian public schools often operate as spaces of systemic neglect, where both teachers and students bear the weight of institutional abandonment. Conceived as abstract and meritocratic institutions, they reproduce a social order that distinguishes those “born for success” from those “born for failure,” resulting in two educational systems: one for the privileged, and another, far more precarious, for the poor (Souza, 2009) — a dynamic that is similar to the inequalities found in Brazil’s public health system, as discussed in Chapter Four. As discussed earlier in this section, public schools face severe material and structural challenges, including chronic underfunding, deteriorating infrastructure, and inadequate working conditions (Oliveira, 2020; Raizer & Caregnato, 2019; Ribeiro, 2011; Sekkel & Pandita-Pereira, 2020).

These dynamics illustrate how structural violence operates across multiple domains of social life, reflecting how power is organized and experienced (Collins, 2024). It is evident in the material inequalities that structure access to education — producing stark divisions between public and private systems (Galtung, 1969; Iadicola & Shupe, 2003; Ho, 2007) — but also in the cultural realm, through stigmatizing discourses that frame students from marginalized communities as deficient or disposable (Scheper-Hughes, 2004). These logics are further reproduced through everyday interpersonal interactions between school staff and students, as

well as through disciplinary practices that continually remind students of their subordinate position within social hierarchies. In this way, the school emerges as an institution that contributes to the production and maintenance of violence. This becomes even more evident in how students are positioned as having no future, a dynamic explored in the following section.

3. Being Treated as Students with No Future

The school's refusal to take students' concerns seriously is not merely a matter of indifference but part of its normative function. It reinforces not only adultist hierarchies but also classed and racialized inequalities, which position students from marginalized communities as inherently less credible and less deserving of voice. The denial of their authority, then, is both pedagogical and structural: it is how the school contributes to keeping the social machinery of inequality.

This structural logic extends to the teachers themselves, whose professional identities are also shaped by the same hierarchies of value. The social devaluation of public education, particularly in marginalized urban areas, produces a situation in which those who teach in peripheral schools occupy an ambivalent position: they are both agents and victims of a system that denies legitimacy. As Emerson Rocha and Roberto Torres (2009) argue, teaching in these schools is often viewed as an inferior or undesirable occupation within the field of teaching professions. This broader devaluation influences how many teachers and administrators perceive both their work and their students. Within this logic, they often develop resentment towards students who, in their eyes, make their professional lives disappointing (Rocha & Torres, 2009); after all, these are young people who are "destined to fail."

Eloise, Isabel, and Ana offer examples of how everyday school interactions reproduce harmful discourses (Scheper-Hughes, 2004). Eloise recalls an episode when she assisted a teacher by exchanging a set of books. When she approached the administration to request the replacement, they questioned whether she was telling the truth — even though she was holding the books in her hands. As she reflects, "it's as if they thought we were going to steal the books, as if we weren't responsible. I think that's just how they see us" (Interview). Eloise's experience demonstrates how students experience this discourse that they are a "lost cause." As she says, at school, they are seen as irresponsible and, in this case, reproducing discourses that they are potential delinquents (Motta, 2016).

Isabel describes a teacher who repeatedly humiliated her class, saying, "I don't know what you're going to do with your lives, you're all stupid… everyone has no future, everyone's going to be a garbage collector" (FG2). When students complained to the principal, no

measures were taken; instead, the teacher's hostility increased. As Isabel notes, "she wants respect from us, but she doesn't like to respect us. She treats us like we're nobody" (FG2). The institutional silence that followed their complaint reinforced the legitimacy of this discriminatory and prejudiced behaviour. In this dynamic, students are not simply disrespected — their personhood, dignity, self-worth, and social value are attacked, and they are positioned as the embodiment of failure itself (Motta, 2016; Scheper-Hughes, 2004; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004).

Ana recounts a similar experience of humiliation. After being prevented from entering class due to a delay caused by the doorman, she attempted to clarify the situation with a school supervisor. Instead of resolving the issue, the supervisor made a series of offensive remarks about Ana's family, focusing on her lack of contact with her father. During the incident, the supervisor asked Ana to sign a school report, but Ana refused, believing she had done nothing wrong and that it could be prejudicial to her because she had had an assignment that day. She tried to call her mother, who was unavailable because she was at work. The supervisor then asked why she did not contact her father instead, and Ana explained that she did not have his number because they were not in contact (and it is important to remember that the lack of contact is due to domestic violence she experienced). The supervisor continued:

> Then she said, "why? Does he have another family?" Then I said, "why do you want to know?" She said, "wow, because if a father doesn't commit to his daughter, he's practically abandoned you, right? That's what you mean, right, that you don't have any love from your father, because a father who doesn't even give a phone number to the school doesn't care if you die today or not." Then I said, "but do you know me?" She said, "I know your name." "My name; you don't know me. So, you have no right to talk about my life, let alone my father's, because you don't know what goes on inside my house." Then she said, "at least in my childhood and teenage years, I had my father present; he was always with me, and he always cared about me. It's not like you, who often turn up a mess without any psychological support because of your father." Then, she started to laugh (Ana, FG2).

This exchange reveals how school authority reproduces stigmatizing discourses that link poverty and family disruption to deviance, framing the absence of a father as a moral failure and as a predictor of future dysfunction (Motta, 2016). The following day, Ana and her mother went to the school to speak with the principal, since missing the assignment would affect her grade. The supervisor denied having made those remarks. However, Ana had recorded the entire conversation and presented it to the principal, along with photographic proof of the time

she arrived. Even in the face of this evidence, the administration placed the blame on Ana. As she recalled, “They said, ‘we’re going to repeat the assignment for you, but don’t let it happen again.’ As if it was my fault that I hadn’t entered the school” (FG2).

This episode encapsulates how moralizing discourses and classist assumptions converge to invalidate students’ experiences. The supervisor’s comment that Ana had “turned up a mess” exemplifies how schools reproduce discourses that marginalized youth are inherently deficient not only academically but morally and psychologically (Motta, 2016). In this sense, Ana’s experience coincides with the broader symbolic discourses that mark peripheral students as those “destined to fail,” stripping them of recognition, legitimacy, and dignity.

These episodes reveal how schools not only neglect but participate in the symbolic production of inferiority. Through adultist, racist, sexist, and classist assumptions, educators reproduce the idea that students from poor and Black communities lack discipline, intelligence, or moral worth. This dynamic also helps explain how such forms of violence become normalized and tolerated. As Souza (2009) argues, this stems from an educational system abstracted from its social context — one that cultivates the illusion of meritocracy while naturalizing structural inequality. This process is further sustained by what Farmer (1996) identifies as the role of social distance in rendering suffering invisible: when the lives of these young women are perceived as socially, racially, and territorially distant, their experiences are less likely to provoke empathy, making it easier for institutions to dismiss or justify harm. Within this framework, as discussed earlier, teachers also experience social devaluation and institutional abandonment, conditions that are often displaced onto students through discourses of incapacity and failure.

As Rocha and Torres (2009) observe, teaching in these schools is often perceived as nearly impossible. The precarious working conditions, combined with everyday challenges of violence dynamics in a militarized environment, generate what the authors describe as a *feeling of non-being* — a sense of being unable to achieve positive fulfillment in their profession (Rocha & Torres, 2009, p. 217). In these contexts, both teachers and students mirror one another’s frustrations: teachers feel professionally diminished, while students experience the constant denial of their worth and potential. This dynamic reinforces an atmosphere of disillusionment in which neither side finds space for affirmation, dignity, or growth. However, some teachers resist and challenge oppressive norms, becoming allies who offer support to young women, which I will explore in the next section.

4. Finding Adults Who Listen and Support

While the school as an institution reproduces hierarchy, silence, and control, the young women's accounts also reveal moments of exception in encounters with teachers who foster recognition and care. The philosophy teacher, for example, emerges in their narratives as someone they trust and turn to for advice. As Gabriela explains, he engages with them by asking more questions than he provides answers, demonstrating genuine interest in their life stories, thoughts and perspectives: "But will it help you? Will you be happy if you do this? What's your vision for the future?" As she concludes, "he wants to know about us" (Gabriela, FG1).

His dialogical approach positions him not as an authority who transmits knowledge but as someone who encourages reflection and self-determination, creating space that recognizes students' leadership roles (Sampson & Villela, 2017). By asking rather than prescribing, he invites the young women to think critically, make their own choices, and see themselves as capable agents in defining their own lives. In doing so, he recognizes their humanity and protagonism, something denied in most of the young women's institutional interactions. These moments interrupt the everyday reproduction of invisibility and create possibilities for mutual recognition, where care and respect replace discipline and control.

As Gabriela further reflects, "I think it's very important for us to have a good relationship with our teachers and older people. Because we don't know everything, neither do they, but they know more than us" (Gabriela, FG1). Her reflection challenges the logic of adultism by reframing intergenerational relationships not as hierarchies of authority but as exchanges of experience and knowledge. While acknowledging that adults possess a form of wisdom gained through life experience, she refuses to equate age with superiority; as Gabriela says, nobody knows everything. Instead, she envisions a dialogical relationship grounded in reciprocity and mutual learning, highlighting the potential of intergenerational alliances. Despite their negative encounters with adult figures, the young women continue to hold faith in these relationships as possible spaces of trust and growth.

From this perspective, the relationships the young women build with the Fica Vivo! workshops facilitators can also be understood. Like the classroom, the workshops are also spaces of learning, training, and socialization. Yet, unlike the school, they allow for relationships grounded in reciprocity, trust, and solidarity. The graffiti instructor, for example, was frequently mentioned as someone they could rely on and talk to openly, without fear of judgment or reprisal. As Eloise explained, "he's not like a father, but like an older brother, because we talk to him about everything. And he talks to us, explains, talks about everything" (Interview). Maya added, "he knows how to talk" (Maya, Interview).

Similarly, the instructor from the Afro-braiding workshop became a trusted figure for Gabriela — someone she felt comfortable approaching when facing personal difficulties (for example, Gabriela turned to this instructor for support during a conflict with her parents, after they had read private conversations between her and her boyfriend, which I will discuss in the next chapter). Eloise also highlighted the Muay Thai instructor's openness, which made it possible to discuss topics often avoided, such as sexuality. As she explained, "there are some older people who have this older mindset that makes it harder to open to them. Because if you start talking about it with them, they'll say, 'oh, you want to have sex, right? That's why you want to know.' Their mindset is all this: you want to have a child" (Eloise, Interview).

Eloise described how easy it was to open up to this instructor because she did not respond with moral judgment, but with curiosity and care. This openness, as Eloise suggested, made it possible to discuss subjects otherwise treated as taboo or shameful. As she reflected, "I think that if more girls talked about this, there wouldn't be so many girls getting pregnant at 13, 14, even 12 years old" (Eloise, Interview). Her observation captures the transformative potential of these relationships: being able to speak openly with an adult who listens and respects them, rather than silencing or condemning, can itself be a form of protection.

Thus, this relationship between these professionals and youth matters because it transforms the meaning of educational encounters and builds safe spaces where youth feel comfortable sharing their concerns, doubts, and vulnerabilities (Weber et al., 2025). The young women describe bonds characterized by familiarity, empathy, and care, as Antonio Nunes (2024) argues in his doctoral research with Fica Vivo! facilitators: these professionals are *social educators* — individuals who work in contexts marked by violence and vulnerability and who draw on shared territorial and biographical experiences to build trust. The program intentionally recruits facilitators who live in the same communities where they work, based on the understanding that a shared sense of belonging can foster closeness and mutual understanding. Most of these educators identify as Black and have experienced various forms of violence (Nunes, 2024). This proximity allows for the creation of bonds that resemble kinship, the figure of the "older brother" or "sister" that the young women evoke, which opens more horizontal spaces of dialogue and care rarely available in other institutions.

While formal schooling often operates through abstraction — detaching teachers and students from their social contexts and reproducing hierarchies that separate those "born for success" from those "born for failure" (Rocha & Torres, 2009; Souza, 2009) — the Fica Vivo! program builds its pedagogical approach on the opposite logic. The facilitators' work is grounded in proximity, shared experience, and territorial belonging. As Nunes (2024)

describes, these professionals often live in the same communities where they work and are often recognized as community leaders. Thus, their legitimacy does not derive only from formal credentials (for mastery of Muay Thai, graffiti, or braiding Afro hair) but from a lived history intertwined with the community's struggles and everyday negotiations with violence.

The workshop space becomes not merely a site for transmitting skills but a space for cultivating bonds capable of fulfilling the premises of the program, "teaching how to stay alive" (that is the name of the program Stay Alive) in contexts marked by risk and exclusion (Nunes, 2024). As Nunes explains, the educators' expertise emerges from embodied experience: their knowledge is grounded in the realities they have lived and the encounters they have faced with sex, drugs, the police, and dynamics of local gangs. Beyond transmitting skills, they teach strategies to navigate these environments, such as managing fear, recognizing danger, and protecting oneself and others. This situated knowledge, rooted in shared social conditions, enables identification and mutual recognition between workshop facilitators and youth, fostering relationships of trust and solidarity.

In contrast to the formal school environment, where students and teachers often experience a shared feeling of non-being (Rocha & Torres, 2009), Fica Vivo! cultivates a relational pedagogy grounded in empathy and interdependence. The social educators' willingness to "put their own bodies on the line," as Nunes (2024) observes, whether by intervening in conflicts, shielding youth from police or gang violence, or mediating community tensions, signals a radical form of commitment. Through this embodied engagement, they rehumanize educational relations and create spaces where young people feel seen, valued, and protected. This dynamic also resonates with Black feminist epistemologies, in which knowledge is validated through lived experience, dialogue, and relational connection, rather than detached authority (Collins, 1990/2022). These relationships illuminate how alternative forms of education, support and care can challenge institutional logics of silencing and control, opening spaces where young women are recognized as legitimate individuals of knowledge, voice, and experience.

5. Closing Remarks

Across the co-researchers' narratives, the school emerges as a *unanimously* recognized site of violence, revealing how educational institutions participate in the reproduction of structural violence. Schools operate as key sites through which power is organized, and inequalities are maintained. The chronic underfunding of public education, particularly in peripheral and segregated areas such as Vargem das Flores, manifests in precarious infrastructure, limited

resources, and the devaluation of teachers' labour, in stark contrast to private schooling (Oliveira, 2020; Raizer & Caregnato, 2019; Ribeiro, 2011; Sekkel & Pandita-Pereira, 2020). These material inequalities, however, are inseparable from the stigmatizing discourses that circulate within and about these institutions — discourses that construct poor and racialized youth as lacking potential, predisposed to deviance, and destined to fail (Motta, 2016; Rocha & Torres, 2009; Souza, 2009). In this sense, structural violence operates not only through deprivation, but through a mutually reinforcing dynamic in which material neglect and symbolic devaluation sustain one another, legitimizing the unequal distribution of resources and the denial of the young women's worth, voice, and future.

At the same time, the school reveals how these relations of power are lived in everyday interactions, particularly through adultist hierarchies that position young people as inherently less credible and undeserving of authority (Wall, 2025). Age, as experienced by the young women, becomes a central axis through which their voices are dismissed and their agency constrained, illustrating how institutional practices discipline them into accepting subordinate positions. Yet, as this chapter has also shown, schools can also be sites of possibility. Moments of recognition, care, and dialogue, whether through supportive teachers or through the relationships built in spaces such as the Fica Vivo! workshops, point to alternative pedagogical logics grounded in reciprocity, trust, and shared experience. These encounters suggest that transforming educational spaces requires more than redistributing resources; it demands rethinking how relationships between adults and youth are structured.

Connecting with previous chapters, the school can be understood as a central institution where these interconnected dimensions converge and are further reinforced. It becomes a key locus through which social segregation and unequal access to opportunities in peripheral territories materialize. The school also complements the domestic sphere by reinforcing logics of subordination, service, and obedience, while also confirming that it is not a space of protection or belonging, but one where the young women remain exposed to disrespect and devaluation. As such, the school plays a crucial role in socializing young women into meeting broader social expectations, shaping how they understand their place within existing hierarchies.

The following chapter turns to the final dimension explored in this thesis, examining how experiences of structural violence are also inscribed, lived, and contested through bodies that are Black, female, young and peripheral. In doing so, the analysis further expands how relations of power operate not only through spaces, institutions, and relationships, but also through regulation, representation, and meanings attributed to the body itself.

CHAPTER EIGHT: BODY – INHABITING A BLACK, FEMININE, YOUNG, AND PERIPHERAL BODY

This chapter analyses how relations of power are inscribed, contested, and negotiated through the bodies of young, poor, Black women living in urban peripheries. I explore how the co-researchers experience, challenge, and respond to dominant discourses that define which bodies are seen as beautiful, respectable, or valuable. The analysis turns to the symbolic dimension of these processes, where racial, gendered, and class hierarchies are reproduced through everyday interactions and embodied experiences. The body thus emerges not only as a site of subjugation but also as a space of meaning, resistance, and political expression.

In the first section, I focus on how racial and class dimensions shape the young women's experiences of embodiment. I discuss how characteristics associated with Blackness, particularly hair texture and skin colour, are marked as socially inferior and subjected to control, humiliation, and exclusion across multiple spheres of life. When the body is constructed in these negative terms, it becomes something that must be altered. In the second section, I examine how young women learn that acceptance often requires changing their physical appearance, focusing especially on their experiences with hair-straightening practices.

In the third section, I examine how, once their bodies are socially read as inferior, unattractive, or deviant, the young women are subjected to differential and often criminalizing forms of treatment. I then move to an analysis of how these bodies are also regulated through sexual control, drawing on the young women's experiences of objectification and the policing of their presumed sexual behaviour.

The final sections explore how the young women navigate expectations of femininity and the consequences they experience under the pressure to become "perfect" girls. I examine how gendered norms and masculine domination intersect with neoliberal and conservative ideals of traditional femininity. I show how these ideals exalt women who conform to beauty standards grounded in whiteness and middle-class values — standards that structurally exclude and marginalize young Black women. Within this framework, femininity becomes a disciplinary project: to be desirable, one must be docile, thin, straight-haired, and emotionally restrained. These expectations reinforce the persistence of patriarchal norms and the illusion of autonomy promoted by contemporary neoliberal culture, which places the burden of self-regulation and perfection on women's shoulders, resulting in suffering and competition among women.

The chapter reveals how structural violence extends into the most intimate and subjective dimensions of life, shaping how young Black women perceive, inhabit, and regulate

their bodies. Mechanisms that define who is considered beautiful, respectable, or worthy of belonging operate as subtle yet powerful instruments of social control, sustaining racialized, classed, and gendered hierarchies under the guise of personal choice and moral order. Through the young women's narratives, the chapter highlights how structural violence is not only institutional or material but also embodied, emotional, and everyday, operating as an enduring force that regulates visibility, value, and the boundaries of humanity.

1. Growing Up with A Body Constantly Judged

Kia Lilly Caldwell (2004) argues that hair operates as a key marker of racial difference in Brazil, shaping classification processes and social hierarchies. For Black women, these meanings are intensified through racialized constructions of femininity and beauty, producing recurring experiences of judgment and everyday humiliation (Caldwell, 2004). During our first official meeting, the preparatory session where I introduced the research objectives and we discussed the focus group and interview guides, the young women immediately pointed to their natural hair as a key example of judgment, exclusion, and prejudice. From that moment, they shared how excluded they felt because of their natural curly or coily hair. They emphasized that from a young age, they were expected to keep their hair tamed, meaning straight, flat, and not too voluminous, and to appear well-groomed, as if styled in a beauty parlor. These expectations were imposed primarily by family members and reinforced in school and work settings.

For most of the young women, the family environment was the first place where they experienced exclusion and painful comparisons. Eloise, for example, shared that she was born with straight hair, but as she grew up, her hair turned curly. When this change occurred, one of her uncles, whom she emphasizes is white, began shaming both her hair and her cousins' hair. Her uncle would say, "and that hair of yours. You don't brush it, you don't wash it" (Eloise, FG1), showing how he associated Eloise's natural hair with being dirty and unkempt, a common association in the Brazilian cultural context (Caldwell, 2004; Gomes, 2002). Eloise reflects on how, when she was younger, she did not see a problem with it; she thought it was normal; however, as she grew older, she recognized it as inappropriate. Furthermore, her uncle would physically pull Eloise's and her cousins' hair, prompting her to question, "he would come up to us and pull our hair, yes, that's aggression, isn't it?" (FG1).

Eloise illustrates how violence becomes normalized when other family members perceive it as harmless (which is also reflected in other forms of violence, such as sexual harassment and domestic violence discussed in Chapter Six). In the context of an uncle-niece

relationship, his behaviour is reframed as acceptable, even as a peculiar form of affection. As Eloise describes, “in other words, he kind of mistreats and humiliates us. And everyone in my family thinks it's normal. Like, they don't care, you know?” (FG1). Ana adds, “they think it's his way of being,” to which Eloise agrees, “yeah, they think it's normal. Ah, it's a form of love, because it's uncle and niece” (FG1). Eloise's experience demonstrates how racist discourse persists within the family, as well as how humiliation and aggression are minimized and reframed as expressions of care or love. This normalization blurs the boundaries between affection and violence, leaving the young women unprotected in spaces where they should feel most secure.

The situation escalated when Eloise cut her hair because her uncle started calling her a man. The shorter hair also made it fuller, and the uncle continued with his racist comments: “your *Bombril* [nappy] hair,[27] you're a little charcoal.” (Eloise, FG1). Beyond the physical aggression of having her hair pulled, these comments deepened the humiliation. They reinforced her sense of inferiority. The reference to “charcoal” also carries symbolic weight, reflecting how darker skin is constructed through colonial imagery as dirty, contaminating, and undesirable, something that “stains” everything it touches. This association of Blackness with impurity and contagion reveals racial contempt and the persistence of a discourse that frames Black bodies as repulsive. During the one-to-one interview, Eloise reflected on how this experience left a lasting mark: she still sometimes sees this uncle when she travels to her hometown, and each encounter makes her uncomfortable. As she explained, this is something she believes will linger throughout her life, showing how racist discourses can cause immediate suffering while also being long-lasting.

Gabriela also reflects on her experience within her mother’s family, where all her relatives are white, except for her and her sister, who are the only Black members. Like Eloise, she recalls that as a child she did not initially interpret racist comments as such. Although they made her feel uncomfortable, she chose to disregard them, convincing herself that her uncle had no harmful intentions and would never change his behaviour. This perception shifted, however, when one of his racist comments targeted her nine-year-old sister:

> After I had my sister, my perspective changed completely. One of my uncles came up to her and said, “I do not know what this little girl has with her bad hair.” I scolded him: “You do not even have hair. You do not even help yourself at the table.

[27] Eloise's uncle said that she had “*Bombril*” hair. This is a racist expression used in Brazil that associates coily hair with steel wool. “Bombril” is a famous Brazilian brand of steel wool.

> What do you have to say?" He never messed with my sister again. It was my sister. It wasn't even me. With me, I never cared; boys will be boys. It will not change; there is no point in me saying anything. But with my sister, I try to get it into her head that it is not normal. So that she does not accept it because it really is not normal (Gabriela, FG1).

Gabriela's account also reflects broader Brazilian understandings of hair as a racial marker. As Caldwell (2004) argues, notions of "good hair" and "bad hair" are widely used across Brazilian society as a means of classifying individuals along racial lines, particularly in a context marked by racial mixture, where hair texture becomes a key indicator of Blackness. Thus, her uncle's comment is not an isolated remark but reflects a system of racial classification that devalues Blackness and natural hair from an early age.

The testimonies of Eloise and Gabriela reveal how racist discourse and practices are reproduced within the very spaces that should offer protection and belonging. Both describe being harmed and made to feel inferior in their own families. Yet Gabriela's account also marks a turning point: when her uncle's behaviour becomes unacceptable after he targets her younger sister, prompting her to confront him. In defending her younger sister, she interrupts the cycle of normalization, refusing to allow the same comments to be dismissed as harmless. Her narrative expresses a form of protection rooted in the belief that, while it may feel "too late" for her, the next generation still has hope. Wanting her sister not to see racism as something "normal," Gabriela underscores the importance of childhood as a formative space where alternative understandings of identity, dignity, and racial justice can still be nurtured.

For the young women, family was often the first site where racist comments and hierarchies around their Blackness and physical features emerged, teaching them that their hair and skin colour marked them as different and less valued. For Isabel, however, her family represented precisely the opposite: a space of protection, celebration, and recognition. Isabel was the only young woman who described her family as a source of protection against racism and other forms of violence (as she was also the exception in stories shared by the young women about sexual harassment committed by uncles). She speaks with pride and joy about her relatives, emphasizing close ties that extended beyond her mother to cousins, uncles, and aunts. During her interview, she shared photos and highlighted how this strong sense of belonging protected her. As she explained:

> I never really cared much about skin colour, you know? Because my own skin colour never affected me. I never experienced racism, at least not that I noticed. In my family, we're all basically Black. Some are lighter, more like me, parda. But I think it never

> really affected me. I've always been close to my family, and everything's been fine (Isabel, Interview).

For Isabel, the closeness and intimacy she shares with her extended family, where everyone is Black, even if with different skin tones, offer her a sense of protection and safety that, as she puts it, "makes everything fine." Yet, her case was the exception. For the other young women, particularly those in more racially mixed families, their Blackness often became a target of racist comments. Racism, however, was not confined to the family sphere; it also permeated other dimensions of the young women's lives, including work and, most notably, school.

Beginning with the work environment, as demonstrated in this thesis, Ana was the only one among the young women who had already had work experience from a young age. These early experiences exposed her to various situations of harassment and violence, including racism. Ana began working at the age of eleven in a small bakery.[28] She rotated between tasks as a cashier, shop assistant, and cleaner. She recalls a specific incident when a customer openly targeted her with a racist comment. At such a young age, Ana had already realized that her skin colour made her vulnerable to aggressive and disrespectful treatment. She described the episode:

> Then it was that time of the pandemic, right? We wore masks; we were very careful. Then a woman [customer] came in, and I realized that every time she got there, she didn't like me at all. It had to be the owner's son to assist her because he was white. And I was trying to put a psychological blindfold over my eyes so I wouldn't see what she was doing (Ana, FG1).

Ana's attempt to "put on a psychological blindfold" speaks to a broader strategy that the young women describe as a way to counter racism: to ignore or minimize situations that would otherwise be too painful to confront. Gabriela echoes this when she explains that in racist situations "we veil things a lot, we put on a psychological blindfold. To try not to hurt us so much, it's better not to see than to see and feel" (FG1). However, there are moments when no blindfold is strong enough, when violence is so explicit that it dismantles any attempt at self-protection. Ana continues:

> Then one day I was alone as usual, and then she came in, and she tried to call him over [the owner's son], but I said, "there's only me here today." She said "no, I refuse to be

[28] Ana considers this to be her first formal job; however, as I discussed in the chapter on men's violence, Ana had previously worked in other jobs. At age 10, she worked as a babysitter for three children. During this time, she had to work to help herself and her mother break the cycle of domestic violence. She considers, however, her work at the bakery to be her first formal job.

> served by you." "Either you buy from me, or you come back another time, and I guarantee he'll be here soon." [Ana's response]. She said, "give me 2 BRL of cinnamon." I was wearing gloves on one hand and a mask, but I was having a hard time opening the bag. So, I went to open it with my bare hand, but I was wearing gloves. Then she said, "let me do something." She went and turned the cinnamon on the floor, tore the whole packet up, threw it at my foot and said, "I hate people of your colour. So next time be careful before you touch my stuff, it'll go in my mouth. I'm not garbage to have to mix with garbage" (Ana, FG1).

In that moment, the subtle racism that Ana had learned to ignore gave way to its most brutal form, one that could no longer be masked or rationalized. Being told you are "garbage" cannot be unseen or unheard; it lays bare the dehumanization that structures racism, a form of harm that attacks the dignity and humanity of Black people by framing their very presence as disposable (Gonzales, 1984). As Lélia Gonzalez (1984) argues, Black people are positioned as the "trash" of Brazilian society through a logic of domination that seeks to silence, infantilize, and speak for them. Ana's response disrupts this logic. Rather than remaining silent or turning away, she speaks back, refusing the place assigned to her. In doing so, Ana's reaction is a refusal of this imposed silence, a moment in which, as Gonzalez provocatively puts it, "the trash will speak" (p. 225). Ana stood up for herself:

> So, I went around the cashier and stood next to her. Then I threw some bags on the scale and said "now you weigh it. Because I hate people of your colour and I'm not going to get dirty touching you." And she asked me, "why are you treating me like this?" "Just as you didn't like me, I'm putting you in my situation so you can see the reality that I unfortunately have to face every day, while someone like you puts your head on the pillow to sleep at night, as if you were the best person in the world." [Ana's response] (Ana, FG1).

Although Ana resisted the aggression, the customer escalated the conflict by calling the bakery owner. Instead of offering Ana support, the owner dismissed her concerns. As Ana explains:

> She said I had no right to treat a customer like that because she didn't need me to work there, and she preferred her client a thousand times over me. Because she's different from me, she generated some profit for her, and I had to start being more friendly with people, because the way I was and the fact that I was impulsive, I could still get in the way of a lot of people (Ana, FG1).

Ana's boss's reaction, describing her as "impulsive" and suggesting that she should be more "friendly," reflects the persistence of the controlling stereotype of the "Angry Black Woman"

(Collins, 1990/2022). This myth constructs Black women as naturally aggressive, irrational, and emotionally unstable, serving to silence and delegitimize their anger when they confront injustice or resist subordination (Collins, 1990/2022). As Kilomba (2010) reminds us, expressing anger in such contexts is not a matter of personal disposition or "private" emotion, but a response to racism that must be spoken and theorized. Ana's reaction, therefore, is not impulsive but politically grounded, reflecting an early and critical awareness of how racial hierarchies structure everyday interactions. When her boss accused her of being impulsive, she replied, "look, the point is that if someone of my colour had done this to you, we'd be at the police station right now" (Ana, FG1).

After the episode, Ana went home and tried to report it to the police with her mother, but they were told nothing could be done because it was not a physical assault. As she reflects, "and then you see that the support of justice that we should have, unfortunately, we end up being left out because of our colour" (Ana, FG1). Although racism has been legally recognized as a crime in Brazil since 1989 (Law 7,716/1989), the police's response illustrates how structural violence can manifest through a gap between rights formally guaranteed and those effectively enforced (Ho, 2007). It is well documented that policing institutions contribute to the persistence of racism in Brazilian society and beyond (Anunciação et al., 2020; Cavalcanti, 2017; Hill et al., 2024; Rodrigues et al., 2024). Despite speaking out, reacting, and defending herself, Ana received little institutional support, neither from her employer nor from public authorities. Her testimony underscores the hostility of racism, as well as the strength and racial awareness she developed from a young age.

These findings also resonate with Hill et al. (2024), who show that while racial discrimination is widespread, it is experienced in gendered ways. Young women more frequently report forms of everyday humiliation, disrespect, and racialized insults tied to appearance, language, and cultural markers, whereas young men's experiences are more often framed through criminalization and policing. The accounts presented here contribute to this discussion by highlighting the multiplicity of racialized violence shaping young Black women's lives, extending beyond the more visible dynamics of criminalization. While the latter remains central to understanding racial inequality, particularly in relation to young Black men, these narratives underscore the importance of also examining more diffuse, embodied, and relational forms of racism that operate through the regulation of appearance, dignity, and social belonging.

As the young women's trajectories show, these processes begin early in life. Already in childhood, they learn that others read their appearance negatively and that their presence can

be dismissed. These notions are first constructed within the family sphere, reinforced by early work experiences, as in Ana's case, and further intensified in the school environment. The young women describe how, at school, many explicitly perceive that they will be treated differently, isolated, overlooked, and excluded because of their physical characteristics. Over time, these repeated experiences do not remain external judgments but are internalized, shaping how they see themselves and what they believe they need to be accepted. In this process, belonging becomes conditional upon modifying their bodies and appearance.

2. Learning That Belonging Requires Changing Their Body

From an early age, Black girls are confronted with dominant social values that distort, devalue, and stigmatize their physical features (Caldwell, 2004). In childhood, and particularly within school environments where belonging is negotiated daily, this confrontation takes on a heightened significance. As the young women's accounts show, the desire to be accepted, included, and to form friendships makes these pressures especially acute, leading many to understand that changing their bodies and appearance is necessary to fit in. Ana and Gabriela describe feeling isolated and excluded as Black girls in primary schools where most students were white with straight hair. Ana explains that "you end up being a child, you start to perceive that the world isn't going to include you like it includes everyone else" (FG1). Gabriela also talks about how "when you're in kindergarten, sometimes you don't realize it, but most of the time, seeing myself as a Black girl who always wore my hair up, I didn't have any friends" (FG1). Gabriela recalls a conversation with her best friend, where they discussed their shared sense of loneliness in childhood:

> I had this conversation with my best friend this week, and thank God she came into my life; otherwise, I would have died alone. She was talking about her childhood. The time she straightened her hair was sort of the same time as mine. And we didn't know each other, and she said that when she was little, there was a group in her classroom that had a queen bee, and she was a white girl with green eyes, straight, blonde hair, and all the girls wanted to be like her. All the girls were there for her. "Oh, carry my lunchbox here, take this here, throw this here to me," then you'll see, because we grow up with this, because whether we like it or not, "wow, what a pretty girl" (FG1).

The admiration directed at the "white girl with green eyes" operates as a social lesson: to be considered beautiful, worthy, or even visible, they must conform to racialized ideals. For the young women, this contrast reinforced their own feelings of exclusion, highlighting both what they were denied in relation to dominant societal ideals and who was symbolically elevated

within the school environment. In other words, their feeling of loneliness was not only the absence of friendships but also the presence of a racial hierarchy that organized admiration, recognition, and belonging around whiteness.

As Nilma Lino Gomes (2002) observes, the appearance of Black children, marked by natural hair and skin colour, is often perceived as outside the norm when they enter school. Until that moment, many may be relatively protected from racism in interactions with family members and close communities (as in Isabel's case). However, upon entering the school environment, they face not only the imposition of curriculum and behavioural norms, but also implicit demands for physical conformity – norms that carry racial content, such as hygienic standards that consider natural Black hair "dirty," "messy," or "unkempt" (Gomes, 2002).

The young women's experiences both confirm and expand upon this proposition. An intersectional lens reveals that, for youth from marginalized contexts who may begin working at a very early age, the workplace also becomes a premature arena of exposure to racism. Ana, for example, comments that although she had already faced situations at school, it was at work that she suffered the most blatant and violent offences. Furthermore, as presented, young women also report experiencing racism from family members. Thus, for many, school was not their first encounter with racism, but rather a space that reinforced exclusions already experienced in other contexts. It was also in school that the young women developed a clearer awareness that the exclusions they faced were not isolated incidents, but expressions of structural racism that persist to this day.

A striking example is Gabriela's account of a racist comment she heard in 2023, in her first year of high school, during a classroom assignment for Black Awareness Day.[29] Gabriela recounted an incident in which their English teacher, Mia, a white woman with straight hair, told her and her friend Sofia they needed to "learn how to behave," adding that they should not wear their hair up and instead straighten or braid it because "it looks much prettier that way" (Gabriela, FG1). Disturbed by the comment, Gabriela and Sofia immediately approached Cora, a teacher they trusted. Cora expressed shock and disbelief, particularly because Mia seemed unaware of the offensive nature of her statement. The situation eventually reached the school administration, prompting a meeting with the principal.

[29] Brazilian Law 10,639/2003 incorporated November 20 into the school calendar as "National Black Awareness Day." The law mandates that both public and private primary and secondary schools include Afro-Brazilian history and culture in their curricula. In 2023, Law 14,759 was enacted, officially declaring November 20 a national holiday in Brazil to commemorate the National Day of Zumbi and Black Consciousness.

However, instead of addressing the teacher's racist comment, the administration's approach treated Gabriela and Sofia as if they were at fault. As Gabriela explained, during the meeting with the principal and teacher Mia, Mia attempted to defend herself by showing a photo of her son, claiming he was Black. Gabriela, however, remarked that "the kid was the colour of a palm heart" (FG1). The principal, also a white woman with straight hair, insisted that all of them, as "Black women," should support each other. She further dismissed the young women's concerns, stating that Mia's comment had been misunderstood and was not actually prejudiced. As Gabriela concludes, "we came out of it looking wrong, even though we were the victims, and the school hadn't done anything."

This episode reinforces how schools can function as institutions that frequently contribute to maintaining power relations of domination, racial hierarchies, and violence (Collins, 2024) — as discussed in the previous chapter. It also reveals the institutional incorporation of the controlling image of the "Angry Black Woman" (Collins, 1990/2022), as cited earlier in this chapter. When they speak out against racism, their assertiveness risks being reinterpreted as aggressive, irrational, or emotionally unstable, contributing to silence in the face of racial violence. In this context, Gabriela's decision to resist and denounce the injustice is not merely an act of defiance but also an act of courage that challenges a long history of disciplinary narratives designed to contain Black women's voices and emotions. At the same time, her reaction to this episode also exposes the fragility of such controlling images. The "Angry Black Woman" stereotype depends on denying Black women's emotional complexity, including that they also feel vulnerable and sad. When Gabriela recounts how deeply the incident affected her, her words disrupt this narrative, revealing the emotional impact of racism and the way these stereotypes dehumanize Black people.

During her one-to-one interview, Gabriela recalled this incident and talked about how devastated she was when it happened:

> But I got home, I cried, I cried my eyes out. I wasn't even going to cry. Then I went to have a shower. Wow, why did I go to have a shower? Then I started crying; I went to talk to my mum, and then I was crying, crying, crying. Then my mum said, "no, I'll go to school." She ended up not going to school. Then she went to speak to my father. My father said, "tough luck." What do you mean, tough luck? Because not only had the teacher spoken in the classroom, but gossip spread to the other classrooms, saying that the girl who had suffered suffered together with me, and it spread to the whole school that the teacher was this, this, and that" (Gabriela, Interview).

This statement from Gabriela shows how the situation was turned around. Within the school, Gabriela and Sofia were seen as the ones at fault, just as Gabriela's own father also failed to recognize the racism she had experienced. Gabriela says, "I tried to handle it, you know, the best way I could. In fact, later she went to the classroom and apologized, and I was like, 'don't talk to me.'" Mia apologized to Gabriela individually, not publicly. As Gabriela says, "she only apologized to me because in her mind, she was right, and the fault was mine. And the principal also believes that Mia was right, and the fault was mine, that I was the one who took her comment the wrong way" (Interview).

Gabriela's experience also exemplifies the gap between the intended goals of Law 10,639/2003 and the reality within many schools, where Afro-Brazilian history and culture are not fully integrated into the curriculum, and racial prejudices and exclusion persist. In 2003, Brazil passed Law 10,639, requiring the inclusion of Afro-Brazilian History and Culture in the national curriculum. Resulting from Black Movements' mobilization, the law aimed to challenge the Eurocentric bias in education and promote ethnic-racial diversity and anti-racist practices (Macedo & Cardozo, 2023). Yet, over two decades later, schools still struggle to effectively implement it, which may be a manifestation of structural violence (Ho, 2007), since persistent political resistance hinders teacher training and the adoption of relevant teaching materials (Macedo & Cardozo, 2023; Santana & Pinheiro, 2023). Gabriela's account reveals how, even during events meant to affirm Afro-Brazilian identity, racism persists.

This episode also illustrates how racism in Brazil takes on specific forms, sustained by the myth of racial democracy and the historical process of miscegenation. The idea that "we are all Black women and need to support one another," mobilized by the school administration, echoes broader national discourses that emphasize a mixed and harmonious Brazilian identity, often framed through the notion that "we are all Brazilian," neither Black nor white (Caldwell, 2004). Such discourses function to erase racial distinctions in the name of unity, while obscuring the material and symbolic inequalities that structure everyday life. In this context, the appeal to a shared identity disqualifies the concrete violence experienced by the young women, reframing it as a misunderstanding rather than racism. This same context of a so-called racial democracy, by denying racism's existence, has contributed to the creation of internal hierarchies within the Black community itself, expressed through colourism.

As Alessandra Devulsky (2021) observes, colourism is one of the branches of racism, distributing society along a gradient of skin tones sustained by the ideology of white superiority. Colourism then ranks Black people according to their phenotype: closer to or further from African features, closer to or further from European features. In Brazil, lighter

skin is often associated with a degree of miscegenation that places a person closer to attributes linked to whiteness, such as rationality, intellect, and beauty. In the case of Gabriela and her friend Sofia, they could not change their skin colour, but they could "learn how to behave to become prettier" by straightening or braiding their hair to approximate white superior ideals of becoming more beautiful.

At the same time, this case also signals the complexities and tensions of the racial debate in Brazilian society. The teacher's defence, showing a photo of her son and claiming he was Black, and Gabriela's remark that "the kid was the colour of a palm heart" expose the ambivalent terrain of colourism. On one hand, the teacher invokes her son's supposed Blackness to claim proximity and deflect responsibility; on the other, Gabriela contests this claim, suggesting that he is "not Black enough." This exchange is not only about divergent perceptions of who "counts" as Black, but also about how colourism structures belonging and legitimacy within the Black community. Lighter-skinned individuals can claim Blackness without being subject to the same intensity of racial violence, while darker-skinned individuals like Gabriela and Sofia see their experiences relativized or dismissed. Thus, Gabriela's experience is not merely an isolated conflict at school, but an expression of historical structures that naturalize exclusion, relativize violence, produce internal hierarchies and segregations that reinforce white superiority.

The racial hierarchies promoted by colourism did not go unnoticed by the young women. They recognize and experience how skin colour and hair texture operate as markers of social value and admiration, shaping who is considered "acceptable" or "beautiful." In this context, all of them reported having undergone chemical hair straightening at some point. These procedures appear as attempts to conform to whiteness standards that associate straight hair with care, hygiene, and beauty.

Maya and Isabel reflected on their experiences with hair-straightening treatments. Maya talks about how she liked the option of having her hair both ways, where she could blow it out if she wanted it straight, and then she could just wash it and wear it curly again. However, when she was a child, she once went to a beauty parlour which, as she put it, "is a hair salon for people who have straight hair, who think straight is better" (Maya, interview), and they ended up doing a procedure that straightened her hair. The way Maya refers to that first salon subtly points to a dimension of class: accessing a space that promotes a particular aesthetic associated with straight hair implies a level of financial stability that grants her entry into beauty spaces not commonly frequented by young women from less privileged backgrounds — salons "for people who have straight hair," who conform to dominant beauty standards. It

is important to highlight that the maintenance of straight hair also necessitates the financial capacity to afford regular visits to hair salons for straightening treatments. Maya, however, speaks about her visit to this salon with resentment, recalling how she later had to visit a salon specializing in curly hair, where she was forced to cut her hair shorter to mitigate the effects of the straightening procedure.

Isabel shared that she has never been skinny or had naturally straight hair, and it was because of the dominance of white, feminine beauty norms that she began chemically straightening her hair. At the time of this research project, she was transitioning her hair back to natural, but she says that it is a long process. She must be patient and often feels like relaxing her hair again, which is a chemical treatment to permanently straighten curly hair. These gendered, racialized, and classed expectations shape subjectivities and self-perceptions of young Black women from a very young age, persisting to the present day and encompassing diverse areas of social life.

Gabriela shares her experience of going for a job interview at an ultrasound clinic, where she did not pass because she did not fit the desired profile. As she explains, “wow, the moment I arrived, I thought, I'm not going to be hired. Because I was supposed to be on reception, where the women were all white, with straight hair, if I'd known I'd at least blow-dried my hair” (Gabriela, Interview). Her statement highlights how she felt that she needed to change her hair to be considered presentable in an environment that was predominantly white. Gabriela’s awareness points to the recurrence of job postings that still emphasize requirements such as “good appearance,” “hygiene,” or “long hair,” criteria that, while seemingly neutral, are deeply racialized and reveal a preference for candidates who do not display African ancestral features (Rezende & Andrade, 2023).

Gabriela even remarks that hearing about Ana’s experience at the bakery confirmed her reluctance to ever work in customer service, given the risks of direct exposure to racism. Gabriela's observation directly dialogues with what Lélia Gonzales was questioning in the 1980s: “Black women are naturally cooks, cleaners, maids, bus conductors, or prostitutes. Why is it that they only perform activities that do not involve dealing with the public? That is, activities where they cannot be seen? Why do job advertisements speak so insistently about ‘good appearance’? (Gonzales, 1984, p. 233). Four decades later, Gabriela’s observation reveals the persistence of the structures Gonzalez denounced, as racial hierarchies continue to restrict opportunities and regulate Black women’s visibility in professional and public spaces. At the same time, her reflection also signals a form of critical awareness that refuses to naturalize these constraints. By recognizing and naming these patterns, the young women

amplify Gonzalez's critique, transforming lived experience into a form of consciousness that both exposes and resists the conditions imposed upon them.

The young women's experiences illustrate how the demand for "good appearance" extends far beyond the labour market. To be employable, respectable, or merely tolerated, Black women are expected to modify their bodies and appearances in ways that approximate whiteness. Racism, as an ideological code that assigns value and meaning to physical characteristics, imposes negative connotations on Black people that affect them both socially and subjectively (Gomes, 2002). Thus, the same aesthetic hierarchies that determine who is deemed "fit" to serve or represent an establishment also dictate who is allowed to occupy public space without suspicion.

3. Being Treated Differently Because Of Their Body and Style

Gabriela and Eloise provide vivid accounts of how clothing and skin colour become grounds for discrimination, denial of access, and presumptions of criminality in public and institutional spaces (Anunciação et al., 2020). Reminders that the myth of racial democracy cannot obscure the persistent intersections of race and class in structuring everyday life.

Gabriela recalls a situation when security prevented her from entering a health clinic while accompanying her grandmother. Running late, she had put on shorts and a black tank top. In her words, "then I knocked on the door [health clinic] and the security guard wouldn't let me in to look for my grandmother, because people like me couldn't afford to pay for a place like that to have an exam" (FG1). She was particularly upset because her grandmother needed care, and yet she was barred entry based on her appearance. As she explains, "when I realized that he had judged me because of the way I dressed, it made my heart so sad, because before I arrived, a girl came in wearing exactly the same clothes as me, but she was white, with straight, straight hair" (Gabriela, FG1). This experience illustrates how race and class intersect in everyday acts of exclusion: while Gabriela's clothes were read as proof that she did not belong, the same outfit on a young white woman did not provoke suspicion. Her testimony exposes how racialized codes of belonging continue to shape access to public and private spaces in Brazil.

As Fernandes (1964/2008) argues, the supposed social integration that followed the abolition of slavery was never accompanied by genuine equality in Brazil. Instead, Black people were symbolically incorporated into the nation while remaining structurally excluded from its institutions and privileges. Gabriela's experience reveals the persistence of this racial hierarchy in contemporary Brazilian society. In a context where visual markers of race and

class still determine who is granted dignity, respect, inclusion, and access, and who is treated as out of place, her story captures how structural racism continues to regulate who can occupy certain spaces and under what conditions.

At the same time, her account also signals a broader process of criminalization, in which Black bodies are not only devalued but constructed as inherently suspicious bodies to be monitored, contained, or excluded (Anunciação et al., 2020; Fernandes, 2014; Gomes & Laborne, 2018). If Gabriela was denied entry to a health clinic for "not belonging," Eloise experiences the same logic of suspicion through surveillance in commercial spaces. As she explains, she is constantly watched when shopping, as if her presence alone demands monitoring:

> I think it's not that much, but it bothers me just a little, like when I go into stores. I don't know if it's a security thing, but when it's just me in the store, no one else with me, right? The store person, the salesperson, like, "Do you need help?" He was just standing at the entrance, and the store was packed. But when I walked in, he just came after me, following me, you know? I was in an aisle, and there were lots of other people in the aisle. He saw I was in that aisle, gave me this look, and then when I switched aisles, he kept doing it, you know? Following me. That bothered me a little, you know? Because I noticed he wasn't following other people, just me. Maybe it's because of my skin colour, or my style too, and because I usually spend a lot of time in stores (Eloise, Interview).

As Fátima Cecchetto and Simone Monteiro (2006) point out, in Brazil, young Black men are disproportionately and excessively subject to surveillance in public spaces. In these contexts, posture, gestures, clothing, and environment are all read as signs of potential threat, reinforcing a racialized pattern of suspicion that limits Black youth's right to the city and to equal participation in consumer spaces (Ceccheto & Monteiro, 2006). Eloise's experience, however, shows that this logic of surveillance extends beyond young men. Young Black women also become targets of suspicion. In her account, Eloise highlights how her skin colour and style trigger an immediate reaction of distrust, as if her presence were a threat to the setting.

Eloise's account also illustrates the internalization of these dynamics. While she recognizes the discomfort of being watched, she partially justifies the salesperson's behaviour, saying that "I don't judge them much either. It's because a lot of teenagers have this thing about taking something, putting it in their pocket and leaving. It happens a lot, right?" (Eloise, Interview). Her reflection reveals the subtlety of symbolic domination: even when young Black women identify discriminatory treatment, they may still perceive it as inevitable, justifiable or

understandable (Scheper-Hughes, 2004). This process leads to forms of self-deprecation that reinforce the existing order, showing how racial hierarchies, criminalizing and militarizing discourses are embedded in social interactions, shaping not only how Black youth are seen, but also how they come to see themselves (Motta, 2016; Ursin, 2020).

Gabriela and Eloise's accounts highlight how, in various spaces they occupy, their bodies are marked by suspicion. Whether barred from a clinic or shadowed in a store, they are reminded that Blackness is read not as neutral, but as deviant and needing to be monitored, excluded, or disciplined. While the criminalization of Black youth is most often associated with young men, particularly through their overrepresentation in the criminal justice system, these accounts reveal how young Black women are also subjected to logics of criminalization in everyday institutional and commercial settings. Through an intersectional lens, it becomes possible to recognize how race, gender, and age intersect to produce forms of surveillance and suspicion that are less visible, yet no less pervasive. Their stories reveal how surveillance operates as a condition of their everyday lives. The surveillance of young women's bodies, however, does not stop at the boundaries of exclusion and criminalization; on the contrary, the most visible part extends into the sexual domain. The same racial hierarchies that construct them as suspicious, inferior, and undeserving of respect also objectify them as available for male consumption and control, a theme that I will explore in the next section.

4. Having Sexuality Monitored and Controlled

In this section, I explore young women's experiences with sexual objectification and the control exerted over their behaviour, clothing, and sexuality. It is important to note that the young women did not necessarily articulate these experiences through an explicitly racial lens when discussing sexual control. However, as poor young Black women living in an urban periphery, it is impossible to disregard how racialized and classed stereotypes about Black womanhood shape their experiences and justify inequalities (Collins, 1990/2022). As Jezebel, whore, hoochie, or mulatas, Black women are seen as possessing an excessive, aggressive, and uncontrollable sexuality (Collins, 1990/2022; Gonzalez, 1984). These images coexist with the figure of the *welfare mother*, which links poor, working-class Black women to the misuse of social welfare benefits and reproduces the idea that their fertility must be controlled (Collins, 1990/2022).

These intersecting controlling images shape how the young women understand and experience the policing of their sexuality. They discuss how, even today, women are judged and labeled based on their sexual behaviour, especially when men perceive them as "easy."

Several derogatory nicknames are commonly used in their communities to reinforce these ideas. For instance, *marmita* (a packed lunch) *e marmota* suggests that the woman is readily available — all it takes is a quick "reheating" to be consumed; *marmota* is often added simply because it rhymes. Another term, *restaurante popular* (public cafeteria), implies that anyone can "eat there" because it is cheap and accessible. Similarly, *miojo* (instant noodles) refers to someone who is "ready in three minutes," reducing a woman to fast, easy consumption. As Gabriela comments: "women used to be objects only for reproduction, and how are we seen today?" Eloise replies: "The same, it's the same, nothing has changed" (FG1). The circulation of these nicknames reveals how objectification is naturalized in everyday interactions. Yet this normalization is not limited to peer dynamics; it is also reproduced in institutional spaces, where teachers reinforce the same logic. Eloise recalls a biology class in which the teacher made a comment about female genitalia in front of the class:

> And then he [biology teacher] just said, because he was looking at a vagina in the book, and my teacher said, "you're not going to be horny, you're getting a hard-on because you're seeing a pussy." So, I was like, you know, wow, something a bit unnecessary, and everyone was laughing (Eloise, Interview).

This episode highlights how the female body is treated as an object of sexual consumption. Even when depicted in an educational context, it is reduced to a source of male arousal, reinforcing the notion of women's bodies as mere objects for public display and commentary. Eloise questions whether sex education can be taken seriously in such environments, noting that when teachers treat these topics with disdain and sarcasm, students, especially young men, learn and internalize the same attitudes, considering them acceptable. These forms of objectification are not without consequence. By reinforcing the notion that young women's bodies exist primarily for male consumption, they also legitimize the constant surveillance of their sexuality. It is in this context that Ana highlights how even clothing choices become grounds for judgment and control.

Ana tells how she and her cousin would wear shorter clothes, and this was immediately associated with the possibility that "they could expect the worst from them." In other words, they are perceived as women who lack self-worth and are undeserving of respect due to being sexually active or perceived as provocative.

> Sometimes we [her and her cousin] would put on the same skirt or shorts, and a top [tank top/short t-shirt]. Then he [uncle] would start telling my mother and her mother that if we kept it like that, they could expect the worst from us any day [be a slut, a

whore]. He would also come home and tell my mother and my aunt that he had seen us in groups of boys. He would make up stories about the clothes we wore (Ana, FG1).

Ana's experience aligns with the social construct of *novinhas*. As discussed in Chapter One, it is a term used to describe girls and young women who are perceived as bold, rebellious, and sexually precocious (Fernandes, 2023). As Fernandes shows, this figure is surrounded by moral panic: these girls are simultaneously constructed as dangerously seductive and sexually uncontrollable, which positions them as in need of discipline and control. Importantly, the novinha is not a neutral category but a deeply racialized and classed one, primarily projected onto poor Black girls, whose bodies are already marked as excessive, deviant, and threatening (Fernandes, 2023). As such, this figure reinforces broader racialized hierarchies that frame Black girls' bodies as both socially disruptive and subject to regulation.

However, at the same time, Ana also reflects on how her clothing choices are constantly judged, not only for being too "revealing" but also for being considered too "mature." She recalls attending a university event in tailored trousers, a blouse, and heels, an outfit she considered "more adult" than what women her age usually wore. While her younger cousin was praised for wearing a dress and sneakers, Ana was criticized for wanting to "grow up too fast" (and she did grow up "too fast," considering that, as shown in Chapter Five, Ana describes herself as an "old teenager," someone who carries adult responsibilities and is mature. There is no safe position for women: whether too childish or too mature, too modest or too daring, we will always be judged), even though she had previously been accused of trying to make her cousin look like a "slut" when they wore similar outfits. Her account illustrates how women's bodies are never neutral: regardless of whether they are dressed in clothes deemed too short, too revealing, or too adult, they are always read as excessive, inappropriate, or available. In other words, they are rendered perpetually susceptible to judgment and control, all in the name of socially imposed notions of what is considered appropriate for a (respectable) woman.

This dynamic of constant criticism underscores how control over young women's behaviour extends beyond public spaces and is reproduced within the family. In Gabriela's case, her parents' monitoring and judgment of her romantic life reveals how norms of gendered control and respectability are reproduced within the household. Gabriela's parents took her phone and read her private conversations. One conversation caused alarm: a joke between Gabriela and her boyfriend Elias that her parents interpreted as inappropriate sexual conduct. Gabriela insists the message had multiple meanings but was taken out of context. This breach of trust was particularly painful for Gabriela. She expresses indignation over her parents' actions, pointing out, "they say they trust me, but then they read my messages. My phone

doesn't even have a password. It’s often in my sister's hands. If I had something to hide, I wouldn't leave it like that” (Gabriela, Interview).

In addition, Gabriela says that she had always been open with her mother, even sharing details about her romantic relationship from its early stages. Her father reacted harshly, texting Elias to reprimand him. Elias responded with respect and apologized, which somewhat softened her mother’s stance but not her father's. Gabriela recalls:

> I tried to talk to my dad, but he wouldn't speak to me for a week. When I looked at him, he turned away. After a week, I asked, “don't you want to meet him?” He said, “I don't even want to see him painted in gold. Boys today only want sex. Soon you'll be stuck at the stove and sink if you keep acting like this” (Gabriela, Interview).

Gabriela’s father resorts to a deeply sexist expression to reprimand her behaviour, warning that “soon [she’ll] be stuck at the stove and sink.” His statement echoes a common Brazilian saying that reduces women’s lives to domestic work, heating their belly at the stove and cooling them at the sink, implying that a woman’s worth and destiny are confined to domestic work, cooking and cleaning. While he frames this comment as a cautionary message intended to protect his daughter from the consequences of heterosexual relationships with young men who “only want sex,” his words reveal a contradictory stance. On one hand, he criticizes Gabriela’s conduct by invoking the fear of domestic entrapment; on the other, he upholds the very gender norms that perpetuate women’s confinement to domestic spaces. As I demonstrated previously, his refusal to participate in household chores, justifying it by asserting that there is no reason for him to wash dishes when he has a 16-year-old daughter at home, illustrates his perspective.

Moreover, as a man, his role in reinforcing these norms is also structural. His authority in the household, to watch, punish, and define what is “appropriate” for his daughter, illustrates how patriarchal control over female sexuality operates through moral judgment and gendered expectations of purity and obedience. His position allows him to both criticize young men for their intentions and simultaneously police Gabriela’s behaviour, placing the burden of control and consequence on her.

Gabriela’s account also reveals a contradiction in her mother’s approach to her sexuality, which oscillates between support and moralistic surveillance. At one point, her mother offered her a condom, defending this choice against the father's outrage by arguing, “I'm not encouraging her, but she's almost 17, and eventually she’ll need it. Better that she needs it and has it, than needs it and goes without” (Interview). Despite this seemingly pragmatic stance, her mother later expressed guilt about having given her a condom and blamed it for Gabriela's interactions with her boyfriend.

This moral surveillance over young women's sexuality is also reflected in broader social and institutional discourses. As discussed in Chapter One, research and public debates in Brazil have largely framed young women's experiences through sexuality and reproductive risk, particularly focusing on early pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. While these approaches are important for exposing gendered and racialized inequalities, they also contribute to narrowing the lens through which young women are understood, reinforcing a moral panic that conflates sexual activity with irresponsibility and moral failure. Within this moral framework, young women are socialized to fear sexuality as a source of shame, danger, and punishment, while men's sexual behaviour remains largely unexamined. Rather than promoting comprehensive sexual education or fostering healthy and informed relationships, these narratives often reinforce control over young women's bodies, regulating their desires through fear and guilt; after all, these novinhas are not supposed to become welfare mothers.

This climate of moral panic is mirrored in Gabriela's relationship with her mother, where affection becomes entangled with distrust and surveillance. In one incident, her mother secretly went to school to watch Gabriela, suspecting misbehaviour. She filmed Gabriela talking with Elias and another friend and sent the video to Gabriela's father. Gabriela was devastated. When she confronted her mother, her mother replied, "I wanted to see if you were up to something." Gabriela expressed how violated and humiliated she felt, recounting a particularly painful remark her mother later denied having said: "I thought now that you broke up with the saint [Gabriela's ex-boyfriend], you were going to start spreading yourself around. Like a bus turnstile, spinning for everyone." Gabriela said, "I cried the whole day." Her account illustrates how moral surveillance over young women's sexuality often turns affection into suspicion, leaving them devastated, humiliated and blamed for supposedly stepping outside of the boundaries of respectability.

This constant monitoring reflects a broader moral panic that polices women's behaviour, while rarely demanding accountability from men. Gabriela draws attention to this double standard in another episode with her mother, when the burden of judgment once again fell on women rather than men. Gabriela shares an incident where her mother asked her opinion about a married instructor who was cheating on his wife. Gabriela replied, "I don't have to think anything about that. He is the one who's married. He has seven kids and cheats on his wife. That's unacceptable." Her mother then asked, "and what about the women he sleeps with? You're not outraged at them?" Gabriela answered, "no. The women have nothing to lose. He does. He should think of his wife and family." When her mother pressed, "what if it were you?" Gabriela replied, "if I were the wife, I'd be furious. The guy has seven kids with me and cheats

with a young, pretty girl. Wow, it would destroy my mind. And if I were the other woman? I have nothing to lose. I wouldn't be with him because he's ugly." Gabriela continues, "I said it in a way that women have their own freedom to choose, just like he chose to cheat. The other woman has no one to betray. Maybe she doesn't even know he's married" (Gabriela, Interview). Gabriela's insistence on women's sexual autonomy and rejection of double standards challenges prevailing gender norms, positioning her response as a form of resistance.

Gabriela's perspective contrasts with Chacham and Jayme's (2016) findings, which show how young women in favelas often reproduce discourses that reinforce female sexual submission, including the condemnation of women with multiple partners and the belief that women value love over sex. Rather than reproducing these norms, Gabriela articulates an alternative understanding of sexuality, one that refuses to hold women responsible for men's actions and affirms their right to choose. At the same time, as Beraldo (2022) argues, notions of respect operate as moral categories in marginalized contexts, functioning as classificatory devices that distinguish those deemed worthy of respect from those who are not. As the young women's accounts reveal, they are constantly positioned in relation to these ideals of respectability, even as they sometimes reproduce them. These tensions call for further reflection on how certain gender norms remain naturalized and reproduced, even as other forms of inequality, particularly those related to race, are more readily recognized and contested.

Ana reproduces moralizing discourses when she says that some women "do not value themselves" and are easily influenced by their peers. Using the metaphor of "mouldy oranges," she describes how a friend's behaviour changed after joining a new group — she started dating young men from the same friend circle and having sex on the first date, which is consistent with the findings of Chacham and Jayme (2016). However, her comment can reveal more than internalized judgment; it also reflects her attempt to assert alternative values, such as caution, self-respect, and protection. As she concludes, "for boys, it's a win-win, right?" (FG1), pointing to the double standards that reward young men for the same behaviours that stigmatize young women. Maya adds that some boys assume, "I can get her anytime; she's there for me" (FG1). These reflections expose the tension the young women navigate. They may judge other women's sexual behaviour, but they also critically engage with, and reject, the broader logic that demands women comply with male desires.

Rather than fully conforming to dominant gender norms, Ana's stance can be read as an effort to disrupt them by valuing emotional reciprocity and relational equality. She positions herself and the other co-researchers differently, stating: "You can see that we value ourselves, right?" (FG1). This statement, however, also illustrates how resistance and moralizing can

coexist: by contrasting herself with those who supposedly "do not value themselves," Ana simultaneously challenges male domination while reproducing a hierarchy among women. She reflects on the kind of relationship she is seeking: one based on respect, emotional maturity, and mutual dialogue, not power or submission. As she explains:

> Nowadays, most girls aren't lucky enough to find that in a relationship. It's rare to see people who have a good, healthy relationship with each other, and that's essential because most of the time, the girl ends up losing her value because she lets herself become submissive to the man, which gives him total power over her. Then, when he wants to treat her like an object, he does, and that's it (Ana, FG1).

She concludes that young women must value themselves, have an active voice, and be empathetic with themselves first. Ana shares how she refused a young man who had bullied her, even though others pressured her to accept him because he was attractive. She reflects: "I started thinking to myself. Was I wrong to say no to this boy? (...) He makes fun of me instead of showing me respect" (Ana, FG1). Later, in her interview, she remarks with irony: "Wow, he made a joke about my appearance. Now I'm going to fall in love with him." Through this ironic rejection, Ana demonstrates how resistance can coexist with internalized moralizing discourses. She refuses to accept disrespect as the foundation of a relationship, asserting her right instead to be valued and seen as a person, not as an object. Her response also subverts a pervasive cultural narrative that normalizes male aggression and emotional neglect as signs of hidden affection — part of the myth of romantic love widely reproduced in films, television, and popular culture. By rejecting this logic, Ana articulates a counter-discourse that links love not to subjugation or control, but to respect and reciprocity.

These accounts reveal the ambivalent terrain the young women navigate. While some of them cannot escape moralizing discourses that place the burden of responsibility on women rather than men, their reflections also carve out possibilities for rethinking these norms, as they are questioning double standards, affirming self-respect, and envisioning relationships grounded in equality rather than submission. In this sense, Gabriela's reflections are especially telling, as she frames sexuality not as something shameful, but as a sphere where women should be free to make choices, with autonomy and responsibility, a stance that contrasts sharply with the blame, control, and surveillance imposed on them.

So far, this chapter has demonstrated how the experiences shared by the young women reveal how the Black female body becomes a central site where multiple systems of power converge. Through the intersections of race, class, gender, and age, their bodies are read and treated as repositories of stigma and negative social value, at once hyper-visible and invisible.

From early childhood, they learn that their natural hair and skin colour are seen as "ugly," "dirty," or "unprofessional"; that their bodies are excluded, policed and watched, deemed threatening and disposable; and that their sexuality and behaviour are subject to moral regulation. These overlapping forms of objectification and control create a continuum of violence that attacks their social value, self-worth, dignity and personhood (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004). For the young women, to inhabit a Black body is to move through spaces where one's existence is constantly questioned, disciplined, and dehumanized, shaped by dangerous discourses that sustain inequalities and marginalization (Scheper-Hughes, 2004). A reality that makes acceptance and admiration unattainable.

5. Navigating Conflicting Expectations of Femininity

In this section, I examine how beauty standards and norms of femininity, produced within a patriarchal, racist, and class-based society, structure the young women's experiences. Far from operating beyond race, such standards gain meaning at the intersection of race, gender, class, and age. Within this intersection, aesthetic and moral standards acquire normative power and define who can be seen as desirable and respectable.

Moreover, in Brazil, where the body is treated as capital and bodily exposure is socially valued, such pressures take on specific meanings within the local culture, turning "being in shape" into a moral obligation (Goldenberg, 2011a; 2011b). More than clothing or accessories, the body is the "true clothing" to be displayed, shaped, worked on, and controlled (Goldenberg, 2011a). In this context, in a nation known for its beaches and high temperatures for most of the year, the preference for minimal clothing is accentuated, making the importance of physical appearance in everyday life even more evident (Goldenberg, 2011a). As Mirian Goldenberg (2011b) reminds us, being "in shape" requires not only discipline and sacrifice, but also rigorous (self-)control of impulses and physical appearance, in obedience to social codes that dictate how the body can or should be displayed. This is an idealized body: thin, young, sexy, achieved through financial investments, time, and effort — a standard that produces a culture of deep aesthetic investment and, at the same time, permanent dissatisfaction, especially among women (Goldenberg, 2011a).

This normative regime thus produces not only aesthetic discipline but also moral fatigue and a persistent sense of insufficiency and inadequacy, as the young women describe through their internalization of (while simultaneously contesting) the idea that they will never be enough. Added to this is a contemporary ideal of femininity that, as Angela McRobbie (2015) argues, is grounded in female self-regulation. Young women are encouraged to construct their

self-definition through ideals of perfection that revive traditional notions of femininity, now rearticulated through neoliberal principles of individualism and competitiveness (McRobbie, 2015). In this way, existing gender hierarchies and male dominance are preserved, particularly through control and discipline of women's bodies. Gabriela reflects on how painful this is:

> Then society tells us that you're ugly, you're this, you're that, no one will want you if you put on, I don't know, 2kg, if you have stretch marks, no boy will want you, if you carry on with your personality like that, no boy will want you. It's all about that, you know. It's something so frustrating for us because sometimes we just want to live. We don't even care about boys, because nobody will, let's face it. It's something that's been with us forever, and something that not everyone cares about, and it's going to be with us for a long time (Gabriela, FG1).

Gabriela's words emphasize how gendered norms around appearance and behaviour generate a deep sense of exhaustion reflected in the feeling of being constantly evaluated not for who they are, but for how closely they align with an unattainable ideal. As Pierre Bourdieu (2001) argues, under masculine domination, women are socialized to perceive and inhabit their bodies as bodies-for-others — symbolic objects whose value derives from being pleasing, welcoming, and available to the male gaze (p. 66). Within this structure, female subjectivity is mediated through the expectations and desires of others, rendering women's self-expression perpetually vulnerable to moral judgment.

In addition, Gabriela's reflections point to the suffering and self-judgment that emerge from discourses persuading young women that they can achieve perfection and success only by conforming to highly heteronormative standards (McRobbie, 2015). According to McRobbie (2015), the ideal of perfection is grounded in the pursuit of a successful domestic and sexual life through self-regulation, promising what is perceived as a "good life," which means to be considered beautiful, thin, with a body free of any visible marks, and accompanied by a boyfriend. Gabriela's insight underscores the indignation that arises from realizing that, despite more urgent concerns, women remain subject to relentless scrutiny, being judged according to norms that prioritize satisfaction of masculine pleasure. The fatigue Gabriela describes reflects the narrowness of what is deemed acceptable and the extension of masculine domination: those who fail to conform are corrected, and those who exceed these boundaries are punished.

For Eloise and Maya, sanction arises when they fail to perform normative femininity: loose clothing or short hair read as "masculine" trigger suspicions about their sexuality and character. Thus, while some are pressured to embody the normative ideal of beauty, delicacy,

and posture, others are disciplined for not being "feminine enough." Their decisions regarding clothing, behaviour, and hairstyle become frequent targets of prejudice and control. This judgment often manifests through direct comments from relatives, reinforcing these controlling norms in everyday interactions.

Maya recounts how her sister reacted by saying, "then when my sister arrived, she saw that I wore my hair short, a big blouse, shorts, all that stuff, 'why don't you shave your head and become a man?' [Maya's sister comment]" (Interview). The message here is clear: since Maya does not "want" to look or dress like a woman, she might as well become a man. Eloise's account also illustrates how failing to meet societal expectations of femininity can lead to questions about women's sexuality, often framed negatively. In this dynamic, they are not only questioned but treated as inherently "wrong," denying their subjectivity, as even the possibility of a non-normative identity is used to disqualify them, regardless of whether it applies.

> Then they're [family members] like, "oh, you look like a boy, especially with your hair cut short." And there's also a judgment in their heads that they often said I was going to be a lesbian. Not that I'm prejudiced against these things, right? But they kept judging me, telling my mother that I was going down the wrong path because they kept judging. If you're a lesbian, if you're gay, you're all going down the wrong path (Eloise, FG1).

Eloise's words reveal how deviations from normative femininity are moralized, especially within Evangelical environments, where gender, sexuality and sexual orientation are often framed through a moral vocabulary of sin and purity (Rosas, 2018; 2023). Eloise and her family are active members of their congregation, attending services every Sunday, twice a day. Within this context, as Nina Rosas (2018) observes, same-sex relations are interpreted as unnatural, a sin, a disease, an immoral use of the body, and a deviation from what has been divinely established as an affective and reproductive standard (p. 178). Eloise's experience captures this tension: the idea of "going down the wrong path" reflects the religious framework in which sexual orientation is strictly linked to morality, and any divergence from heteronormative expectations is seen as moral failure. They are not allowed the freedom to exist differently; rather, their deviation from the norm is interpreted as a sign that something is wrong with them.

This moral framing also shapes how forms of affection or friendship are perceived. Eloise's story illustrates how these moral codes penetrate ordinary interactions, distorting her friendship with Maya into something suspect. Eloise talks about how she and Maya have been friends since they were young. She used to talk about how they were going to live together when they grew up, and her cousin would comment, "two dykes living together?" Eloise says,

“I think I was 12. Then in my head, I was like, wow, what do you mean? She is my friend. I do not like her, and she does not like me, in a romantic way. Like, in my head, even if I did, what does that have to do with you?” (Eloise, FG1).

Eloise’s Evangelical background further illuminates how these expectations are reproduced through religious discourses that link morality to appearance and behaviour. She explains that her choice of clothing often became a source of discomfort and judgment, leading her to feel out of place during her younger years at the Evangelical church.

> Because sometimes I wear baggy clothes, things like that. And I go to church like this. Actually, I still do. It's just that when I was younger, I wore baggy pants to church, and as it's a slightly more traditional church, they started looking at me like that, you know? Looking down at me, things like that and sometimes even judging. I think, at the time, because I was a bit younger, I think I felt out of place; I felt bad, you know? (Eloise, FG1).

During her interview, Eloise adds that, as she got older, she started wearing dresses more often and noticed that people began to compliment her appearance at church. However, she perceives these compliments as conditional, a form of approval that depends on her compliance with gendered expectations of how a “respectable girl” should look. She recounts an episode in which a woman who ignored her in everyday life suddenly became affectionate during services, praising her beauty and encouraging her to date her son. Feeling uneasy, Eloise told her mother, who suggested that the woman hoped she could “bring the boy back to church.” The young man ended up getting involved with gangs and drug dealing, pointing to broader connections between crime and religion, in which religious belonging is often imagined as a pathway away from criminality (Beraldo, 2022).

Eloise interprets this differently and challenges the idea that she should be responsible for men’s behaviours and life choices. As she explains, “so, I think in her mind [the young man's mother], if I started dating him, I'd pull him back into the church. But it doesn't work like that, does it? The person must want to” (Eloise, Interview). Eloise refuses to play the saviour role, which, again, is part of care work assigned to women. Her account exposes the double bind she faces. When she wears baggy clothes, she is read as deviant; when she wears dresses, she is rewarded with conditional praise. Rather than choosing one side, she insists on her right to inhabit both — to wear what she likes, whether loose pants or dresses, without being judged or turned into a moral symbol. In doing so, she challenges gender norms that link femininity to moral worth and situate women as caretakers.

Ana, who also describes herself as a committed Evangelical, recounts similar experiences of moral judgment within her congregation. It is important to remember that Evangelical churches play a central role as normative regimes in peripheral contexts, shaping expectations, behaviours, and moral boundaries through notions of respectability (Beraldo, 2022). As noted in Chapter Five, she regularly attends services on Saturdays and Sundays. She recalls comments made when she was 12 years old that left her feeling disheartened about attending. Community members claimed that she and her sisters only danced and sang to seek attention and satisfy their egos, rather than as an expression of genuine worship. According to Ana:

> They started saying that my sisters and I were doing things in church for our own ego. We weren't going to seek God anymore; we were going to sing because our voices were beautiful. I danced because I knew how to dance, not because I wanted to worship God. And it turned out that after that, as much as I go to church and truly seek God, ever since I was a little girl, I can't — like, my flame doesn't light up as it used to because of criticism (Interview).

Ana's story illustrates how religious spaces, while offering belonging, also function as sites of moral regulation where bodies and desires are disciplined (Beraldo, 2022). As Rosas (2018) argues, Evangelical teachings are often directed toward women as instruments of bodily and emotional control. The body is seen as both sacred and dangerous — a "temple of the Holy Spirit" that must be sanctified, but also a potential "den of perdition," vulnerable to impurity and lust. Within this framework, young women are taught that "the pleasures of the flesh," adultery, fornication, and lasciviousness — are sins that must be subdued, and that unmarried women should find fulfillment only in God (Rosas, 2018, p. 183). It is this association between female embodiment and temptation that underlies moral judgments that Ana experienced at age 12, when her dancing and singing were interpreted not as faith, but as vanity and sensuality.

While religious environments make mechanisms of control explicit, the same moral logic extends to other social spaces. Whether in churches or schools, young women learn that their value depends on how well they conform to narrow ideals of femininity that demand restraint, discipline, and constant self-surveillance. If Maya and Eloise are disciplined for not being "feminine enough," Isabel reveals the other side of the same coin: the demand for "excessive femininity." She describes the expectation to embody delicacy, thinness, straight hair, and docility.

In her one-to-one interview, Isabel explained that within the school environment there is a clear expectation: to be considered beautiful, one must be thin and have straight hair. This

imperative of thinness reflects how femininity is policed not only through racialized ideals of straight hair but also through body size, where slimness is equated with beauty, discipline, and worth. As Goldenberg (2011b) observes, in Brazilian society, where the body is an important capital, fat and flaccidity are perceived as visible signs of laziness, neglect, and lack of discipline – almost a moral flaw. Within this logic, beauty and physical fitness are framed as the outcomes of individual effort, rendering each person responsible for their appearance. McRobbie (2015) reflects that gaining weight comes to signify personal failure, a loss of status, sexual appeal, and self-respect, since responsibility and blame are individualized: it is the woman who is deemed undisciplined.

Conforming to the ideal of thinness, however, often requires access to resources that many young women in marginalized communities do not have. Maintaining a slim body, for example, implies the ability to avoid cheaper, ultra-processed foods, which are often the most accessible and affordable options in these areas, and to have both financial means and free time to engage in workouts and physical activities. While it is important to acknowledge that body types also vary due to genetic and biological factors, Isabel's reflection underscores how beauty ideals intersect with material conditions, further reinforcing class-based inequalities.

The pressure on women to fully embody the script of normative femininity prescribes not only appearance — being thin and having straight hair — but also specific behaviours of delicacy, discipline, and docility. This process is not restricted to the domestic sphere; discourses across different social arenas, including authority figures such as teachers, continuously reinforce it. Ana recounts a classroom episode that illustrates this logic, when a teacher stated: "jeez, you're just like my wife. When I was going to have sex with her, she'd start chatting, which made me limp." (Ana, FG2). For Ana, this comment was profoundly offensive, even though the class did not react. The teacher's words reveal how women are expected to embody a specific social role, to be pleasant, silent, and available, and how any deviation from this expectation threatens masculine authority and desire. There is something perverse in this logic: a woman who seeks dialogue or emotional connection is reprimanded because she disrupts the fantasy of female passivity and sexual availability. Far from being an isolated anecdote, this type of discourse sustains broader norms that punish women for being "too much," reaffirming masculine domination patterns of docility, submission, and restraint (Bourdieu, 2001).

Isabel's reflection broadens the discussion by revealing how these expectations of delicacy and restraint extend beyond isolated comments to shape young women's everyday

conduct. She describes how young women are constantly reminded of how they should sit, speak, and behave, while young men are not subjected to the same scrutiny:

> Girls must sit with their legs closed because they're girls. They must be delicate. A girl always must be tidy because she always must be pretty; everything must be pretty. So, like, there's a lot of that. The girl must do this. Because she's a girl, not a man, and men can do whatever they want; girls can't. Girls must speak properly because they're girls. She must be polite, behave in that way; she's very princessy and, like, I'm not princessy at all (Isabel, Interview).

Isabel's reflection illustrates how young women are coerced into adopting a specific posture solely because of their gender, while young men are not subject to the same expectation. They are socially coerced into a series of "musts" and expected to behave "like a princess," meaning that their value is often linked to beauty, delicacy, submission, and socially appropriate behaviour. As Isabel adds, "I'm a bad person, I don't have any posture, so much so that I don't like wearing dresses or skirts" (Isabel, Interview).

The young women's accounts show that they are navigating expectations of femininity that they are never fully allowed to meet. As poor, Black women living in peripheral areas, they are already positioned outside dominant ideals of beauty, respectability, and desirability. Yet, this exclusion does not free them from these norms; rather, it intensifies their exposure to judgment, correction, and regulation. Being marked as "not enough" or "too much" simultaneously places them in a constant state of inadequacy, where their bodies and behaviours are continuously scrutinized. As the following section shows, these processes have consequences, shaping how they relate to themselves, their bodies, and other young women.

6. Living With the Pressure to Become the Perfect Girl

Pressures shaping contemporary femininity are often associated with white, middle-class young women (McRobbie, 2015). However, as this section shows, the *perfection dispositif* — a neoliberal mechanism that disseminates and enforces ideals of feminine "perfection" as a way of sustaining gendered power relations (McRobbie, 2015) — extends far beyond these groups, also structuring the lives of young Black women, who have never been positioned as "ideal" or "perfect." As Sueli Carneiro (2003) reminds us, Black women have historically been excluded from the myth of fragility, never recognized as delicate or in need of protection. Yet, this exclusion does not shield them from its effects; instead, it produces a contradictory demand. They are simultaneously denied femininity and required to perform it. In this sense,

young Black women are compelled to confront ideals of princess-like femininity that they know were never meant for them, producing suffering, dissatisfaction, and revolt.

Even when the young women try to adapt, a gap remains between the normative ideal and the real possibilities of their bodies and circumstances. Ana captures well how these beauty standards are imposed on all of them. As she explains, "nowadays you must follow the standard. Unfortunately, not everyone has a body that can be shaped to that standard, right? This ends up getting to our heads a lot" (Interview). Her statement points to the impossibility of moulding bodies to fit the ideal. Women may lose weight, straighten their hair, undergo plastic surgery, or adopt styles of clothing, yet there will always remain a distance, an unbridgeable gap, between the dominant standard and the real (and material realities of) bodies. Ana illustrates this frustration:

> I have heard so many negative words. For example, "wow, I've seen such a pretty girl at your age," "you should start wearing make-up." "You are fat; if I were you, I would lose weight. No one wants a fat girl." Do you understand? So, these people make a huge apology for a standard. They create a standard for you to follow; you are obliged to, even if you can't (Ana, Interview).

Reflecting on her trajectory, Ana recalls growing up surrounded by comments that questioned her beauty — a constant exposure that, in her words, "is something that hurts" (Ana, Interview). Ana also notes that while she is active on TikTok and frequently encounters trends and songs that critique these ideals and their effects on young women's self-perception, it remains difficult to resist internalizing such norms. McRobbie (2015) asks: Is this pursuit of perfection a phenomenon confined to white, middle-class young women, those who already possess the privilege and access that make such aspirations appear more attainable? As both McRobbie's reflections and the co-researchers' experiences illustrate, the perfection dispositif adapts and extends its reach, also shaping the lives of young Black women in marginalized urban communities. However, precisely because these ideals are structurally unattainable, they weigh even more heavily on those for whom exclusion is part of their existence.

Gabriela captures this tension when, asked if there was a "right way" to be a young woman, she replied, "to start with, we are Black and poor" (FG2). Her answer exposes how race and class already disqualify them from dominant ideals of femininity. In that discussion, Ana gave the example of Vera, a classmate who, for her, embodies what it means to be the "perfect girl." For the co-researchers, my question about the "right way" was understood as how close a girl can come to perfection.

> Think of a perfect girl: she is white, her hair is straight down to her bum, but it is also curly. She can wear her hair both ways, and it looks beautiful. She is not very tall. She has a great body. She is evangelical. She plays in church. She plays all kinds of instruments. She teaches English. She is only 16, and her first kiss was with her first boyfriend, and they are still together. A complete family at home: a father, a mother, and an older brother, who is her best friend. They travel throughout the year and every holiday, all of them together. She totally fits the standard (Ana, FG2).

Ana's description illustrates how the perfection dispositif is rooted not only in physical appearance but also in the stability and material resources that enable young women to excel across different domains of life: a complete nuclear family, regular travel, time and support to develop extracurricular skills, and a strong religious and moral framework. These markers of middle-class life are structurally out of reach for the young women. Within this horizon, "Vera" crystallizes the totalizing standard of traditionality, respectability, whiteness, nuclear family, faith, discipline, and cultural capital.

As Gabriela further reflects, these expectations create overwhelming pressure. The idealized figure of Vera becomes a symbol of the excessive demands placed on them — expectations they are supposed to meet without guidance or support in an unequal society. She says:

> I think they expect us to be like a "Vera" in life. I don't know her; she might have her own problems, but I feel like they expect too much from us. And we don't come with a manual on how life is and what we are supposed to be. We're full of uncertainties. And whether we like it or not, we look up to adults. But as we grow up, we realize that they don't know what they're doing with their lives either, let alone us. I think we end up feeling a bit lost. And the people around us are also lost, so there's not much we can do (Gabriela, FG2).

The young women's accounts expose the deep disconnect between societal ideals and the lived realities of marginalized youth. As Gabriela succinctly put it, "we are Black and poor" – a statement that encapsulates the heavy weight of structural inequality, where race and class together foreclose the possibility of being seen as any kind of "ideal girl." Moreover, the sense of helplessness and uncertainty that Gabriela emphasizes also points to the consequences of the perfection dispositif — the way suffering has become a normalized component of contemporary femininity (McRobbie, 2015). The perfection dispositif also functions to divide and isolate women: by demanding constant self-evaluation and self-regulation against demanding, elitist, and often unspoken standards, it generates both internal competition and

rivalry among women. As McRobbie (2015) observes, it is as if, "as if by magic," women are now expected to master every aspect of life, sustaining the dangerous illusion that it is always possible to improve and manage oneself in pursuit of an unattainable perfection. As Ana notes, however, even Vera, the embodiment of the "perfect girl," feels insecure about her supposedly flawless body and self. As Ana explains:

> But I don't know why she [Vera] has a mental problem; she can't think she is pretty, even though everyone at school, literally everyone who knows her, talks about how beautiful Vera is. She is perfect. I think she's very, very beautiful. But she also feels insecure about her body because of a comment she once got: "There is no point in going to the gym and thinking you are going to be beautiful" (FG2).

The pressure to adhere to contemporary femininity has significant implications for young women, as they reflect on their personal experiences and those of their peers. These pressures are not temporary; they are persistent and long-lasting. Considering the Brazilian context, as Goldenberg (2011a) observes, even women who have achieved professional success, economic independence, and sexual freedom remain haunted by dissatisfaction with their bodies and by fears of loneliness. Her research also shows that these pressures only begin to lose strength in old age: while women in midlife still emphasize bodily decline and the absence of male partners, older women increasingly describe aging as a moment of liberation – when they finally stop prioritizing the judgment of others and begin to focus on their own desires, speaking instead of happiness, pleasure, and freedom. If such expectations remain burdensome into adulthood, their weight during teenage years and youth, when identities are still being formed, can become even more overwhelming, as the young women's experiences make clear.

As McRobbie (2015) demonstrates, the perfection dispositif produces profound suffering among young women, at times with lethal consequences. She recalls the cases of young women who took their own lives after being called fat, ugly, or failing to meet expectations of sexuality, such as being labelled "sluts" for supposedly stealing someone else's boyfriend, or even for being considered too attractive.

Recent national data from Brazil also point to a concerning scenario regarding young women's mental health. Findings from the 2024 National School Health Survey (PeNSE), conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, show that young women, especially in the age range between 13 and 17 years old, report significantly higher levels of sadness, anxiety, irritability, and feelings that life is not worth living compared to boys (IBGE, 2026). They are also more likely to report intentional self-harm and feelings of abandonment. These findings highlight the urgency of addressing teenagers' mental health in Brazil,

particularly among young women. At the same time, formal mental health resources may remain inaccessible due to cost, stigma, and fear (Weber et al., 2025), a dynamic that resonates with the young women's accounts in this study.

This dynamic is not confined to extreme or exceptional cases; it permeates the everyday lives of young women. Ana's account reveals how this suffering unfolds in ordinary school settings, where a single remark about one's body can trigger profound emotional pain. She recounts the story of a classmate who experienced intense distress after another young woman made a hurtful comment about her appearance. Following that episode, Ana noticed that her classmate began wearing loose-fitting clothes, a style she had not previously chosen. In addition to changing her behaviour, "she would not laugh, she would not talk, she became a nobody in class" (Ana, Interview). Ana associates her classmate's behaviour with anorexia, noting that she herself previously experienced this eating disorder and elaborates:

> I've already had anorexia, which is that period when you are more than thin. But with so many comments, so much pressure, you feel fat, and then, like, you feel the need not to eat, to do everything you can to lose weight, to cover up your body because you feel ugly because of the comments (Ana, Interview).

Isabel adds to this idea, recalling how she had previously suffered bullying because of her teeth. However, she says, "nowadays I try to be stronger, you know? I try not to pay too much attention to what other people say; I try not to listen" (Isabel, Interview). Isabel acknowledges that bullying remains a significant issue at school, explaining that some people laugh right in your face, "if you don't have a very centred mind, you end up going a bit crazy, you know?" (Isabel, Interview). Despite her current attitude of not caring as much, Isabel shares the story of a classmate who has been bullied for a long time: "She tried to kill herself three times; she's depressed. And, like, I see that she doesn't have her head in the right place; like, I don't care what people say, she does. And the boys don't care; they keep making fun of her" (Isabel, Interview).

Reflecting on these experiences, Isabel explains how she has come to handle emotional pain differently than in the past. While she still gets hurt, she has learned to focus inward rather than allow others' opinions to dictate her self-worth. As she says, "I have to love myself first, because if I don't, you don't have the mental strength to deal with things" (Isabel, Interview). She adds that she prefers to act indifferent when someone tries to hurt her feelings: "because if you show you're upset, it only gets worse – they do it even more. So, you must act like you don't care. You cut them off" (Isabel, Interview).

Although Isabel found ways to deal with negative comments that ultimately made her stronger, her inward-oriented strategy of self-love also reflects how the perfection dispositif operates through an individualizing project that demands constant self-management and expects young women to fix things for themselves (McRobbie, 2015, p. 15). This dynamic contributes to the feelings of loneliness and disconnection that the co-researchers describe.

When asked whom they turn to for help, the young women expressed strong reluctance to seek support. Maya, for instance, shared in her one-to-one interview: “I talk to myself and work things out, for example, as if I were my own psychologist talking to me. I talk, I answer, I ask questions, I answer these things” (Maya, Interview). Similarly, Ana described using internal dialogues as a coping strategy when facing personal issues. A practice that, while revealing resilience, also points to a broader unmet need for support and care.

Ana’s reflections bring a sense of isolation into sharper focus. She laments the absence of spaces for genuine emotional support: “We could have psychological support, because I think most teenagers today are fucked up” (Ana, FG1). Gabriela also raised this concern during her one-to-one interview, emphasizing that teenagers should have access to psychological assistance at school. She explained that many teenagers today struggle to manage their emotions, which often leads them to seek comfort within themselves. As Ana put it, “everyone has a best friend, but I am my own best friend because I talk to myself. Sometimes I give myself advice” (Interview).

Ana traces this self-reliance to her childhood, when she felt responsible for emotionally supporting her mother and sisters. As she starts, “I keep things to myself because I find it easier than having to explain to people all the reasons why I haven't been well since I was 9.” Ana continues, “everyone is used to seeing me smiling. So, no one imagines that I have the problems I have” (Interview). By cultivating a serious and guarded posture, she protects herself from intrusion and judgment. “I just don’t let myself seem vulnerable,” she explains, “because when I give an opening, people feel entitled to say anything” (Interview). Ana’s emotional strategies, while forged in hardship, also represent an effort to reclaim agency and define the terms on which she allows herself to be seen and understood, not as a fragile victim but as a tough person.

Ana’s experience illustrates the complexities of navigating youth at the intersections of gender, race, class, age, place of residence, and lived experience. Beyond the consequences of how contemporary femininity is constructed, there are also other factors that affect young women’s well-being, elements that are often difficult to articulate. As Ana explained in her

interview, “I understand it in my head. I know exactly why, but if I try to find the words to explain it to you, I can’t.”

> Unfortunately, not all of us are able to open up. In my case, for example. I can't talk about what hurts me, how it hurt me, right? How much it affected my mental health, how much I wanted help, how much I sought help and didn't find it, so it turns out that our messed-up mental health comes from our family, from an absent father, from a lack of friends, from comments about our body, about our appearance, about what you can and can't do. About what you have that others don't have. So, this influences everything in our mental health (Ana, Interview).

Eloise’s reflections build on this sense of emotional solitude but add another layer: mistrust. Eloise explains that, at their age, it is difficult to seek help due to fear that personal matters will not remain confidential:

> Like, I need help, and I'm going to seek help from people around us, but at our age, it's really difficult and, like, I'm going to come here and vent to this person because she is my friend. But this friend ends up spreading everything you told her to the whole school, to the whole neighbourhood. We end up feeling insecure about telling other people about it (Eloise, FG1).

Her account reveals how fear of exposure and betrayal reinforces emotional withdrawal, showing that isolation is not only the absence of support but also a defensive response to mistrust and judgment. This dynamic of caution is also connected to another recurring theme in the young women’s narratives: the difficulty of building supportive friendships with other women.

In addition to affecting young women’s mental health, normative beauty pressures and the pursuit of unattainable standards also shape their ability to form friendships with other women. During the first focus group, the young women spoke extensively about what they called *female rivalry* and how it relates to their struggles with self-acceptance. Once again, this reflects how the perfection dispositif operates – not only through women’s competition with themselves, as previously discussed, and through its effects on young women’s well-being, but also by fostering competition among women. By producing a competitive self, this dispositif establishes a constant ranking among women, reminding them that they could always be doing more and better (McRobbie, 2015). The result is a cycle of self-criticism, regulation, judgment, and comparison, which generates antagonisms directed toward other women. In this way, it revives traditional forms of female competition — the “mean girls” dynamic explicitly mentioned by the co-researchers and as exemplified by McRobbie.

The dialogue among the young women during the first focus group demonstrates how they understand female competition, which, as they explain, positions women as rivals to one another:

> Ana: Instead of the girls coming over with the good intention of making friends with you, they're already judging you.
>
> Gabriela: Look at her, the clothes she is wearing. She's a slut.
>
> Ana: Look at her flip-flops.
>
> Eloise: She's trying to get attention.
>
> Gabriela: Just like that scene with Regina George,[30] "oh, how beautiful you are" and then she turns her back, and they start talking.
>
> Ana: And then she starts talking badly (FG1).

The young women's dialogue illustrates how they begin to judge and monitor each other's appearance and behaviour, which also functions as a form of social control. This dynamic fosters an environment where young women become enforcers of normative femininity, engaging in constant comparisons and regulations among themselves, fueling a competitive environment. Rather than forming supportive bonds, they are encouraged to see one another as competitors — scrutinizing clothing, body image, and attitudes in ways that reflect broader societal expectations of femininity.

As Ana explains, "instead of trying to help each other, the girls start criticizing or putting each other down" (FG1). According to the young women, female rivalry also hinders the development of relationships based on trust and acceptance. Ana explains that young women are often criticized for their makeup choices or hairstyles, yet their behaviour may stem from a desire to feel good about themselves. Since they are frequently judged solely on their appearance or clothing, this superficial judgment prevents meaningful conversations about the deeper motivations behind their choices. For many, wearing makeup or dressing a certain way serves as self-protection, providing a sense of comfort and safety.

Ana argues that some young women may prefer friendships with young men because they find relationships with other women to be emotionally difficult or even harmful: "because unfortunately, when you have friendships with girls, it ends up in betrayal, or they are dishonest with you, or they only judge you and are not nice" (Ana, FG1). Gabriela adds, "or they kind of

[30] Regina George is a fictional character from the film Mean Girls (2004, 2024), portrayed as the archetype of a "queen bee," a popular but manipulative high school girl known for her superficial charm, backhanded compliments, and covert bullying tactics. Considering McRobbie's (2015) discussion on contemporary femininity and female competition, it may not be coincidental that *Mean Girls* was remade in 2024.

put you down" (FG1). Eloise also reflects on how she realized that nearly all her friends are boys, with Maya being the only close girlfriend she truly has. According to her, all friendships she has had with other young women have been about jealousy, envy, comparison, and betrayal. Eloise finds herself in friendships she cannot trust, where some of the young women secretly speak negatively about her to others behind her back. Gabriela adds that this may lead Eloise and other young women to question if there is something wrong with themselves, but she recognizes that the problem is not with them.

Ana recalls reading several messages from one of her classmates, who criticized her appearance: "she was body shaming me, talking about my make-up, saying that she doesn't know what I wear make-up for, that if I'm trying to look pretty, I'm not succeeding (...) saying that she thought I was the ugliest girl in my class" (Ana, FG1). This criticism made Ana feel suspicious whenever she walked past a group of friends whispering, thinking they were talking about her. She explains that she wears make-up to hide marks of her father's aggression. Ana further shares, "I've been wearing make-up since I was a little girl, because I have a lot, a lot of aggression marks on my face. So, like, I prefer to hide it, because it's also a way for you to have higher self-esteem, right? You feel good about yourself" (Ana, FG1). Another incident involved a classmate with whom Ana is often compared. The teacher mistakenly called her friend by Ana's name, and her classmate angrily reacted, shouting, "this girl started crying in the middle of the classroom and said, 'don't compare me to that girl; she's ugly, she's weird. I have nothing to do with her. Don't ever compare us again, teacher.'" (Ana, Interview).

This creates a cycle in which young women feel compelled to regulate each other to collectively conform to dominant norms of femininity and social acceptability, without, however, altering existing power relations between men and women, precisely what McRobbie (2015) interrogates. She demonstrates how authority has been delegated to women in the realms of beauty and fashion, where, embedded within a patriarchal structure, masculine domination appears to have vanished. Women are now encouraged to self-regulate through the discourse of individual choice, which ultimately operates as a new form of control over their bodies. For example, women supposedly no longer seek to be beautiful to please men out of obligation, but rather as a matter of "personal choice" and well-being, doing it "for themselves." The result, however, is that women are left to blame themselves if they become trapped by beauty and fashion industries, while masculine domination remains unquestioned (McRobbie, 2015).

But this does not go unnoticed by the young women. Although they discuss the difficulties they face in building friendships with other women, when asked why this occurs,

Gabriela immediately responds: “patriarchy.” There is a shared understanding that the problem does not stem from young women themselves, but from broader societal structures shaped by men's dominance and authority:

> It always revolves around men because, like it or not, our society is patriarchal. And coming from there, the rule, like the beauty standard, is always dictated by men. Then some girls follow it, and when there is one who does not, “oh you're not good enough to hang out with us” (Gabriela, FG1).

Gabriela’s reflection underscores how patriarchal norms are internalized by young women, leading them not only to conform to expectations of femininity but also to monitor and exclude those who deviate from them. As these standards are ultimately unattainable, the result is a persistent atmosphere of rivalry and judgment among women. Eloise adds, “so, automatically, everything revolves around men. Exactly, everything you do has to have a man in the middle. Ah, about friendships between girls, a man in the middle” (FG1). In a way, Eloise and Gabriela’s reflections reveal how male domination, though often rendered invisible, can be made visible through their critical awareness of how gender relations shape even their friendships.

Furthermore, what the young women name in their own words as *patriarchy* resonates with academic definitions of the term. As Gerda Lerner (2019) defines it, patriarchy is the “manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society at large. Men have power in all important institutions of society, and women are deprived of access to that power” (Lerner, 2019, p. 290). Their reflections show how this structure takes shape in their everyday lives: from friendships and beauty norms to the broader rules that organize belonging, recognition, and exclusion based on what has been defined by men. As Eloise says, there is always a man in the middle.

Gabriela and Eloise’s reflections reveal how patriarchal norms not only dictate standards of beauty and behaviour but also erode trust and solidarity among women. Within this structure, competition becomes naturalized, and judgment replaces care. Instead of recognizing each other as allies, young women are positioned as rivals, measuring themselves and one another against ideals defined by male approval. The relentless and competitive pursuit of perfection, along with the demand for self-regulation, constitutes a form of violence that intensifies gendered inequalities, precisely because the dispositif of perfection is directed exclusively toward girls and women (McRobbie, 2015). As McRobbie (2015) argues,

neoliberal feminism extends the mechanisms of control over women to preserve the status quo, undermining the possibilities of collective solidarity, social critique, and political mobilization.

The experiences of the young women expose how patriarchal and racialized ideals of beauty and behaviour produce competition, self-regulation, and deepen emotional isolation. Their accounts suggest that while they have learned to rely on themselves, this self-reliance is both empowering and painful. It is an autonomy born out of necessity, one that protects them from judgment and exposure but also confines them. As I will show in the next chapter, when they began sharing their stories with each other during this research, they identified the act of mutual listening as one of the most transformative experiences, revealing their desire and capacity to build trusting relationships beyond judgment and fear — offering glimpses of how a collective and solidaristic feminism might be reclaimed.

7. Closing Remarks

This chapter has deepened the analysis of how relations of power intersect in the lives of young Black women living in urban peripheries, turning to the body as a central site where power, domination, and resistance converge. The Black female body, as shown throughout the narratives, carries a powerful symbolic meaning: it is racialized, classed, and sexualized in ways that make Black women targets of rejection, prejudice and control. The young women's experiences reveal how racism, classism, and sexism intertwine to produce forms of dehumanization, such as being seen and treated as ugly, dirty, disorderly, or inappropriate. These processes reactivate long-standing controlling images that sustain exclusion, subordination, and denial of humanity (Caldwell, 2004; Collins, 1990/2022; Gomes, 2002; Gonzalez, 1984).

At the same time, analyses of contemporary femininity and the perfection dispositif show how neoliberal and masculine domination reinforce traditional values through the language of self-regulation, autonomy, and choice (McRobbie, 2015). The pursuit of perfection, to be beautiful, disciplined, thin, and desirable, demands constant self-surveillance and self-correction, generating suffering, emotional isolation, and competition among women. These dynamics reveal how disciplining the female body extends beyond physical appearance, shaping emotions, behaviours, relationships, and possibilities for solidarity.

Contributing to the discussions developed in the previous chapters, this chapter concludes the analytical axis through which different dimensions of young women's experiences of structural violence have been examined. The use of violence as an instrument of domination, subordination, and dehumanization extends across territorial, domestic,

institutional, interpersonal, subjective, and embodied dynamics. These dimensions illustrate how the maintenance of social hierarchies and unequal relations takes multiple forms, while being sustained by shared underlying logics. These are evident, for example, in unequal distribution of resources, capture of young women's time, pervasiveness of sexual harassment, lack of recognition and listening within educational spaces, and imposition of homogenizing and exclusionary beauty standards.

Across all these spheres, harm is naturalized, legitimized, reproduced, and interconnected through persistent understandings that position young Black women as inferior, perpetually available to others, denying their social value, worth, potential, and humanity. In this sense, structural violence cannot be understood as confined to any single domain, but rather as a pervasive and relational phenomenon that operates across interconnected dimensions of young women's lives.

The following chapter turns to the arts-based intervention to explore how these processes can be challenged and countered. The participatory action research process creates conditions to disrupt hierarchies by redistributing voice, authorship, and interpretive authority. Through the photographic intervention, the young women were able to re-signify their bodies, asserting alternative ways of seeing and defining themselves. In this sense, the analysis examines how alternative narratives can be collectively produced, affirming their voices, values, and worldviews, contributing to social change.

CHAPTER NINE: POSSIBILITY – CREATING ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSES

Throughout this thesis, I have examined how structural violence shapes the everyday lives of young Black women living in a Brazilian urban periphery. The previous chapters have shown how relations of power are spatialized, embodied, and reproduced through multiple institutions and social interactions, producing forms of criminalization, invisibility, dehumanization, and objectification that mark the young women's trajectories. Yet, I have also demonstrated that power is never unidirectional. Because power is relational, it generates not only domination but also resistance and solidarity (Collins, 2019). The young women do not respond passively to hierarchies that constrain and harm them; they name, navigate, challenge, and disrupt structures that attempt to limit their being and becoming.

This chapter continues that conversation but shifts the direction of the analytical lens. While earlier chapters focused on how the young women are seen and treated by others, by institutions, community actors, and broader social imaginaries, here I centre how they *wish to be seen*. Instead of reproducing narratives of pain, deficit, and survival that often define representations of people from the peripheries, I examine the narratives they create for themselves. Grounded in the participatory and arts-based dimension of this thesis, this chapter explores the visual stories they constructed through individual and collective photographs, as well as their reflections on creating these images.

I show how the young women actively reframe the meanings attached to their bodies and their territory. In their visual narratives, they present themselves not as victims of inequalities but as individuals of dignity, beauty, joy, and diversity. Their images, and their interpretations of them, reimagine what it means to be a young Black woman from a peripheral community, asserting forms of presence that counter dominant scripts of marginality and suffering.

First, I examine the process of co-constructing the artistic intervention, highlighting the dialogues, negotiations, intended messages, and creative choices that shaped it. Second, I turn to the meanings that the young women attributed to the images: how they interpreted the photographs and what narratives they sought to challenge. Third, I reflect on the PAR approach's transformative potential, particularly its capacity to foster agency, critical consciousness, and collective empowerment. Finally, I present the young women's visions for the future: their dreams, aspirations, and recommendations to those in positions of power to build more just and equitable social worlds.

Overall, this chapter shows how the young women claim new narratives about Blackness, womanhood, and peripheral life. Through their images and reflections, they

challenge the status quo and propose alternative discourses grounded in solidarity, celebration, diversity, justice, agency, and inclusion. In doing so, they illuminate the possibilities that emerge when marginalized youth are not only heard but recognized as creators of knowledge, meaning, and social transformation.

1. Creating The Art-Based Intervention: Celebration of Black Beauty, Diversity, and Friendship

As demonstrated in the Methods Chapter, my initial idea was that the artistic intervention would focus on violence as a form of social denunciation. Thus, giving visibility and voice to young Black women would enable them to expose the multiple forms of violence they experienced, which are often silenced and naturalized. Initially, they agreed and even planned how we could produce this intervention, combining some personal testimonies with photos and videos. However, as the project progressed, they no longer wanted to pursue it. This shift also reflects a core principle of Participatory Action Research (PAR), which seeks to redistribute control over knowledge production to those marginalized within academic production about their own lives (Brown, 2024).

Although the study centred on systems of injustice, violence, inequality, exclusion, discrimination, and subordination, it became clear during the research process that these were not the messages that the co-researchers wished to convey. In line with PAR and Black feminist epistemologies, this moment underscores how those who directly experience social problems hold a privileged position to interpret their realities, define what should be said, and what we could do about them (Brown, 2024; Collins, 1990/2022). As the project developed, the young women reached a consensus around an experience they all shared: seeing themselves as young Black women who do not meet beauty standards, especially around hair, skin colour, and body types. This perception shifted the artistic intervention, prioritizing the young women's self-definitions and representations and challenging dominant representations that have historically defined Black women from the outside (Collins, 1986, 1990/2022). They decided to create photographs that celebrated diversity, highlighting their different hairstyles, skin tones, and body types. They also wanted to show that friendship, trust, and solidarity among young women are possible and powerful.

Each young woman brought individual perspectives about what they wanted the photos to convey. Isabel, Eloise, and Ana returned to themes raised in the focus groups, particularly the importance of portraying diversity. For instance, Eloise emphasized how this could empower and challenge negative perceptions about curly hair:

> I think it's in that context, like, when people say curly hair looks like *bombril* (steel wool) and all that. So, showing our hair is something awesome. Because for them, straight hair is considered the best. Even wavy hair is seen as bad. Straight hair, straight hair, straight hair — that's what's better, what's easier to take care of. So, I think showing our hair brings a little more empowerment, too (Eloise, Interview).

Ana also reflected on the group conversations about beauty standards and the importance of showcasing diversity. She recalled:

> On the beauty standards we talked about, how we don't fit in because we don't see our bodies as standard, you know? I think, like, by bringing this up, like in the idea of taking pictures of our bodies, it's a way of showing that we don't have to fit the standard to stand out. That if we show things we find beautiful in ourselves, maybe it can even open other people's eyes (Ana, Interview).

Gabriela showed interest in how photographs can convey emotion and wanted the images to represent joy and love. Maya stated that she wanted the photos to convey freedom. As she put it: "Oh, I think we could show, like, everyone's freedom. I think that's it. I don't really want to show anything about violence or anything like that. I want to show that everyone is free to do whatever they want" (Maya, Interview). Maya's statement reinforces this common understanding among the young women that they did not want to show negative aspects that permeate their lives, such as violence. Rather than reproducing dominant narratives that frame marginalized communities primarily through violence and deficit, their choices point to the transformative potential of arts-based approaches to reimagine identities and expand what can be seen and said (Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield, 2018).

This shift from an intention of denunciation (which was much more mine than theirs) to one of celebration marked a turning point in the project, creating opportunities for them to define their own narratives, priorities, and meanings (Brown, 2024; Collins, 1990/2022). The focus moved away from exposing structural violence toward affirming their identities and reimagining themselves beyond narratives of suffering and pain that often define individuals in urban peripheries. Once they defined what they wanted to express through the photographs, the next step was deciding where they would be taken, and once again, their choices diverged from my expectations.

Based on the decision that the photos would celebrate Blackness, diversity, and beauty, we started thinking about where and how to take the photos. Again, my initial idea was to take photos in the community and show what the region was like (especially since this thesis would be defended at a Canadian institution, with examiners who might be less familiar with Brazilian

landscapes), but they did not want that either. They ironically commented that they could show some animals that roam the streets in the area, such as goats, pigs, horses, and dogs, joking that this is probably something you would not see happening on Canadian streets. But the young women did not pursue these ideas because, for them, there would be nothing interesting, beautiful, or cool to show about the community. This refusal resonates with the discussions presented in Chapter Four, regarding how they describe the region as a place without attractions, uninviting, and with scarce leisure options. In this sense, the artistic intervention took a new direction: these photos would not mirror daily life but imagine a new one in which they could represent what they wanted to feel, be, and especially be seen. The intervention thus becomes not only expressive but also political, opening space for imagining alternatives to the structural constraints that shape their everyday lives. This shift in perspective paved the way for the aesthetic construction process of the images, which began in the photography workshop.

As described in the methods chapter, after the focus groups and individual interviews, the photographer who collaborated on the project led a workshop. In addition to teaching elementary photography, the photographer introduced the co-researchers to a set of visual references to inspire their own portraits. The photographer selected images of Black women to help inspire the co-researchers as they began conceptualizing their photographs.

The photographer presented images that depicted Black women in various aesthetic compositions, body expressions, and photographic styles. Overall, they conveyed a sense of Black femininity grounded in strength, freedom, beauty, and sensuality. Some images emphasized the face, the glow of the skin, and expressive makeup, adding a performative, artistic dimension. Others highlighted Afro and braided hairstyles, exploring the movement, volume, and diverse textures of Black hair. Bodies were sometimes portrayed from behind, with heads tilted or in motion. These images celebrated the Black body in its materiality and aesthetic power, promoting a message of pride and strength aligned with the young women's desire to represent the diversity and beauty of Black bodies.

In other photographs, particularly in portrait-style compositions, Black women appeared with confident postures and expansive gestures, often with their arms raised or in motion, suggesting liberation, dance, power, and self-affirmation. In general, the images formed a visual repertoire that challenged the passive representation of Black women. Instead, the photos presented them close to the figure of the Strong Black Woman, characterized by physical strength, emotional resilience, and the suppression of vulnerability (Carter & Rossi, 2019; Wyatt, 2008). Yet the simultaneous presence of soft gestures and vigorous expressions captured the complexity and ambiguity of the co-researchers' interpretations. They perceived

in these images a dialogue between calmness and confrontation. As they commented, the photos conveyed both serenity and aggressiveness. Instead of fitting into fixed categories, these images suggest ways of being that transcend the either/or logic through which systems of domination often operate, where one side of a duality is privileged and superior to the other (Collins, 1986; hooks, 1984).

Although these first images presented by the photographer primarily evoked images of strong Black women, new dimensions emerged once the co-researchers began sharing their reference images in the WhatsApp group. The photographs they chose contrasted with the initial repertoire. This time, the element of aggressiveness was absent. While the first set emphasized power, presence, and strength, the co-researchers' selections evoked delicacy, calmness, and affection. This shift does not replace one set of meanings with another but expands the range of representations available to them.

The young women shared reference images that featured softer colours and open environments, often with flowers and natural landscapes. The women portrayed appeared with serene expressions, gentle gestures, and contemplative gazes. Many photos suggested moments of introspection, rest, or togetherness among friends, such as picnics (which made them want us to have a picnic during the photoshoot, as we did), walks, and gestures of affection and touch that conveyed intimacy, collectivity, and mutual care.

By choosing these images, the young women were already proposing a re-signification of visual imaginaries surrounding Black women: strong and resilient, or sensual, hot, and attractive, or unattractive, dirty, and unkempt. In doing so, they implicitly challenge controlling images that have historically shaped representations of Black women, including hyper-sexualized figures such as the *mulata* (Gonzalez, 1984), the *novinha* (Fernandes, 2023), and the *Jezebel* (Collins, 1990/2022), as well as representations of the *Black matriarch* as overly assertive and unfeminine (Collins, 1990/2022) and the connection with being dirty and disheveled (Caldwell, 2004; Gomes, 2002; Gonzales, 1984).

The emphasis shifted toward an image of Black women who also have the right to rest, delicacy, pleasure, and kindness. In this sense, their choices disrupt hierarchies that associate strength with value while devaluing softness and vulnerability, particularly for Black women, moving the focus away from mandatory strength or aggressiveness toward other dimensions of affection, friendship, contemplation, and care. What emerged was also a bucolic visual imaginary, featuring countryside scenes with abundant flowers, standing in stark contrast to the urban periphery where they live. Alongside these visual references, they also described the

emotions they wanted their photos to express: freedom, friendship, happiness, peace, tranquillity, serenity, and harmony.

These visual references shaped the atmosphere and emotions they wanted to portray and influenced aesthetic decisions for the photoshoot. The young women brought several outfit options for the day and collectively decided that, for the group photos, they would all wear white, a colour that symbolizes calmness and peace. Given these expectations and desires, the photographer suggested that the photos could be taken at her friend's, who was also a photographer and lived in a house with a garden that closely resembled the visual references that the young women were sharing.

The day of the photoshoot brought to life what they had envisioned throughout the process — an atmosphere of calm, connection with nature, and harmony. After the session, I invited each co-researcher to select the photographs that best represented the group and themselves individually. My goal, as I explained, was to have images I could use in different contexts, such as conference presentations, that aligned with how they wanted to be seen. These selections, much like their earlier choices of outfits and setting, reveal how they generally sought to communicate sweetness, tranquillity, and beauty through the images.

The first photo, chosen collectively to represent the group, shows the young women in a circle, their hands joined by small branches of white flowers (Photo 1).

Photo 1 – The young women in a circle of unity and affection



The use of white, the natural setting, and the gestures of closeness visually communicate the values they wanted to convey, such as unity, peace, love, delicacy, and friendship among women. The idea of delicacy is also present in the individual portraits. It is interesting to note that almost all the young women chose two different outfits (except for Maya, who preferred not to change clothes), which often contrasted with each other: one aligned with a more traditional, "girly" femininity associated with grace and a romantic aesthetic, and another with a more urban, relaxed style, with darker colours, looser clothing, and less connection to conventional middle-class white femininity.

Ana chose her photograph wearing a white floral dress with pink and green details, elements that evoke traditional femininity (Photo 2).

Photo 2 – Ana: choosing softness and femininity



Her necklace with a cross stands out, revealing her religiosity. The other outfit Ana selected for the photoshoot included a cap, a black top, and jeans (Appendix 1, Photos 10 and 11). When I asked her what these quite different styles meant, she explained: “These are my two styles. Sometimes, I spend the entire day dressed like this, more girly; at night, I put on wide-legged pants, a loose blouse, sneakers, and that's it. So, I end up being torn between these two styles.” (Ana, Photo Interview). By bringing these two compositions together, Ana demonstrates that femininity and strength, softness and confidence, tradition and freedom are not opposites but complementary dimensions of her identity, challenging binary frameworks that position these attributes as mutually exclusive (hooks, 1984; Collins, 1986). This complexity had already appeared throughout Ana’s participation in the focus groups and interviews, for example, when she described choosing outfits considered “too adult” or “too revealing” (as discussed in the last chapter), demonstrating how she navigates between different possibilities without being reduced to any of them, but rather seen and respected in her full complexity.

Gabriela’s photographs strikingly express the coexistence of serenity and power. The photo she chose to represent herself shows her sitting outdoors, barefoot, wearing a translucent dress embroidered with small daisies and holding a bouquet of colourful flowers (Photo 3).

Photo 3 – Gabriela: choosing rest and serenity



The choice of flowers and the gentle gesture of holding them reinforce the sense of peace and serenity that Gabriela associates with this image. Gabriela claims that someone who sees this photo may think she was mourning, but for her, it simply represents a woman who was tired and decided to sit down for a moment to rest. This again indicates their desire to break free from narratives of suffering, pain, and death — aspects so easily associated with life in urban peripheries.

The other outfit Gabriela selected presented a sharp contrast: a black back-tied top and velvet pants (Appendix 1, Photos 13, 14, 15). With this outfit, she took other photos – one showing her from behind, arms raised, displaying her muscles in a gesture of strength and self-confidence (Appendix 1, Photo 13), and another holding her hair (Appendix 1, Photo 14). These were, in fact, my favourites, and once again, my expectations diverged from theirs. I had imagined that these would be the photos Gabriela would choose to represent herself. Perhaps

as a reflection of her critical stance throughout the research process, in which she named systems of power with clarity, spoke openly about patriarchy, racism, class awareness, and the legacy of slavery in Brazilian society. I expected she would prefer images that portray a Black woman asserting her presence and strength, proudly and freely exhibiting her body. Yet she chose the photograph that conveys sweetness and grace. Nevertheless, her choice does not erase or diminish her political stance or critical perspective; it reinterprets how she wants to be seen, affirming her agency and showing that resistance can also be expressed through softness, calm, peace, and delicacy, countering expectations that Black women must embody either strength or hyper-sexualized visibility to be seen.

Maya's photographs compose a visual narrative that reflects her imagination, creativity, and performative spirit, characteristics that align with her background as a drama student who enjoys experimenting and exploring new roles. She was the only one who chose not to change outfits for her individual photos, keeping the same green dress made of light fabric, paired with a fitted black bodice, puffed sleeves, and a pearl necklace. According to her, this outfit represented a medieval princess, and the photo she chose depicts a runaway princess searching for her way in the middle of the forest (Photo 4).

Photo 4 – Maya: choosing a princess on the run



This playful choice reveals how she embraced fantasy and imagination while creating a majestic image that repositions marginalized women within a symbolic space historically denied to them, one of royalty, delicacy, and belonging to a world of beauty and power, including the realm of fairy tales itself.

It is also relevant that Maya has often mentioned experiencing prejudice for wearing loose-fitting or “masculine” clothes, as discussed in the previous chapter. In contrast, her decision to portray herself as a princess represents both an aesthetic and personal act of reinvention. It connects with her dream of becoming an actress and her desire to continue playing, preserving, and extending her childhood rather than being forced into premature adulthood. By reinterpreting the princess imagery, Maya asserts her right to dream, to play, and to rewrite gender and racial scripts from her own perspective. Her choice embodies poetic and insurgent femininity that is both delicate and untamed (after all, the princess is on the run).

The photo chosen by Eloise reflects her aspirations of becoming an artist (a theme further explored in this chapter). She selected the image in which she is holding paintbrushes while wearing a lilac shirt (Photo 5), a symbolic affirmation of her artistic dreams and her desire to be recognized as an artist.

Photo 5 – Eloise: choosing painting as expression

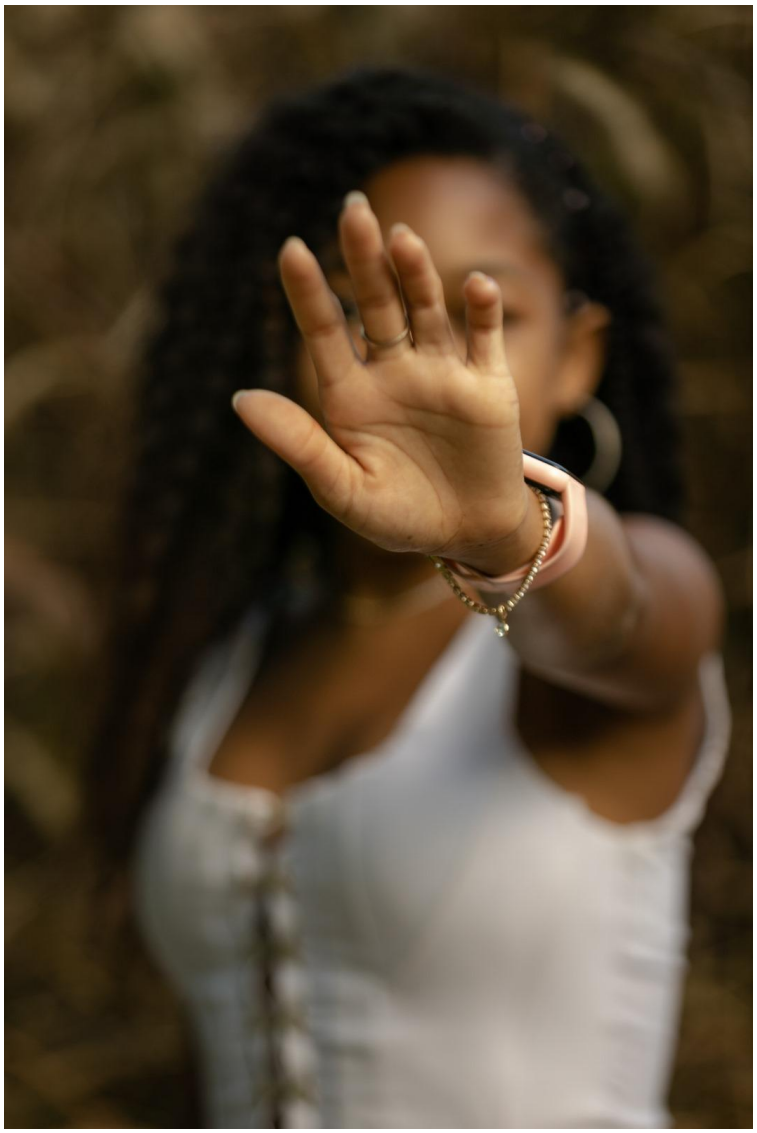


Her second outfit, however, conveyed a different aesthetic: a long pink dress with ruffles (Appendix 1, Photo 19). Eloise joined Maya's playful idea of embodying a medieval princess, embracing a more romantic and girly style. This choice reaffirms her aspirations to be an artist who may be a painter or an actress. And just like Maya, it is also relevant to revisit what Eloise also reported throughout the research, namely her experiences of prejudice for wearing what is considered "masculine" clothes and being criminalized in stores because of her clothing choices and skin colour, as discussed in the last chapter. The opportunity to play with this princess character reaffirms Eloise's right to dream and to explore different possibilities of being. At the same time, by choosing the photograph with paintbrushes, she asserts her agency and claims the power to define how she wants to be seen: as a Black woman artist from an

urban periphery, whose creativity and aspirations resist the social boundaries imposed upon her.

The photo Isabel chose shows her wearing a fitted white top, but her body appears in the background, partially obscured by her hand covering her face (Photo 6).

Photo 6 – Isabel: choosing not to conform



The rest of her outfit consists of ripped jeans and black sneakers (Appendix 1, Photos 22, 23). Her other outfit was a green-and-white jumpsuit with a leafy pattern (Appendix 1, Photos 24). Isabel's choices align more closely with what she shared throughout the research process — her refusal to conform to clothing styles considered more feminine or "princess-like."

In this section, my goal was to show how the artistic process unfolded from conception to execution, including the young women's choices of messages and preferred photographs.

What began as a form of social denunciation evolved into a celebration of diversity, friendship, and Black women's beauty. Their chosen representations highlight affection, playfulness, and tenderness, insisting on demonstrating that their femininity cannot be reduced to toughness alone. Rather than conforming to fixed or oppositional categories, their representations foreground multiplicity, ambiguity, and coexistence as central to their identities, challenging the binary logics that sustain systems of domination (Collins, 1986; hooks, 1984).

Although most of the young women's choices might be viewed through the lens of traditional femininity and ideals of perfection (as discussed in the last chapter, drawing on Angela McRobbie's [2015] reflections), I argue that their desire to be seen as delicate, gentle, and sensitive young women constitutes a form of resistance. As McRobbie (2015) asks, who has the right to be "imperfect"? Who has the right to be seen and respected when breaking stereotypes? This privilege is often reserved for middle-class young white women, who can afford to embrace failure as part of the process of growing up. For young people living in marginalized urban peripheries, failure and mistakes frequently have far more severe consequences, including violence, incarceration, or even death.

The young women, therefore, seek to be seen beyond the recurring narratives of victimhood, pain, suffering, and death. Instead, they celebrate the life in flowers and vibrant colours that fill their images. Thus, their aesthetic choices do not signal conformity, but rather a reclamation of humanity and sensitivity denied to them. The problem is not that they choose to wear these styles of clothing, but rather systems of power that insist on valuing and admiring only women who conform to traditional white femininity.

As Ana explained, these photos prove that they do not need to conform to white, middle-class, and slim beauty standards to be admired or to occupy spaces of visibility. They can appear however they wish, whether in floral, romantic dresses, or in jeans and a top, as princesses or as artists. Through these empowering representations, they reveal what they find beautiful, meaningful, and interesting about themselves. As Ana put it, perhaps these images "will open people's eyes," inviting them to see these young women beyond controlling images of criminalization, dehumanization, hyper-sexualization, and objectification (Collins, 1990/2022) to perceive instead complexity, diversity, and value in young Black women from urban peripheries. In the next section, I will discuss the reflections and impacts the young women identified through the artistic intervention, both in the photographs and in the photo shoot experience.

2. Seeing Themselves Differently: Challenging Stereotypes and Making the Invisible Visible

As discussed in the previous section, the co-researchers emphasized their wish for the photos to highlight the beauty of Black women in all its forms, challenging narrow aesthetic hierarchies by celebrating curly and coily hair, diverse skin tones, and body shapes that fall outside white and middle-class ideals of femininity. The young women's assessments show that, in addition to wanting others to recognize beauty in diversity, they also could see themselves as beautiful and deserving of appreciation. Gabriela shared that, through this experience, she realized how beautiful she is. Maya similarly reflected on how the photos led her to appreciate her appearance. Eloise added that she had never participated in a photo session like this before, and that it left her feeling more empowered.

For young women who, since childhood, have heard racist and violent remarks about their hair, skin, and bodies, being told they were "garbage," that their hair was "bad," or that their bodies did not fit the standard, the act of recognizing themselves as beautiful is not trivial. As Eloise expressed, feeling empowered after seeing herself through the photos reflects more than self-esteem; it embodies a powerful act of resistance against the structures that have long sought to deny them visibility, dignity, humanity, and the right to feel pride in their own bodies. It may also help to explain why some of them gravitated toward princess-like and "perfect girl" representations — not only as a form of imagination or play, but as a way of protecting themselves from the persistent devaluation they experience in their everyday lives.

This process of self-recognition also carried an external dimension: by seeing themselves as beautiful, they hoped that others, too, would come to recognize and value the beauty of Black women. Isabel emphasized how the photos portray the beauty of Black people more broadly:

> Not just us, like, the girls, the teenagers, but other people from outside can also see that this Black beauty, this curly, coily hair, is something beautiful, too. It's not all about that standard look, straight hair and all that. Like, whatever each person is, everyone has their own beauty. And, like, Black beauty also has its place in the world. Not just the people who fit the standard, but yeah, I think it brings up friendship, happiness, love, and that we should accept ourselves the way we are. Because there are so many girls who straighten their hair. And now I see that my hair is beautiful, too; I don't need to keep straightening it (Isabel, Photo Interview).

Isabel's reflection illustrates how the humanization of Black people entails valuing and affirming African features as inherently beautiful, without the need for alteration or conformity

to dominant standards. As discussed, in the Brazilian context, hair functions as a central marker through which racial difference is read, and hierarchies are reproduced, particularly shaping how Black women are evaluated within dominant ideals of femininity and beauty (Caldwell, 2004). These dynamics help explain why many of the young women, including Isabel, engaged in hair straightening practices, and why her statement that she now sees her hair as beautiful is significant, particularly as she was going through a process of transition during the research. Her reflection that "we should accept ourselves the way we are" points to how hair can become a site through which shifts in self-perception and racial awareness take place (Caldwell, 2004). At the same time, this process should not be understood in prescriptive terms: embracing natural hair does not necessarily indicate a fixed level of critical awareness but rather opens up the possibility for hair practices to be guided by personal preference and self-recognition, rather than by socially imposed beauty standards that privilege straight hair (Caldwell, 2004).

Eloise in turn discussed how Black women are often hyper-sexualized, portrayed with shiny skin, perfect curls, athletic bodies, and large hips, often framed as "hot" or exotic. She stressed that Black women are much more than that, directly challenging the images of mulatas, Jezebels and novinhas (Collins, 1990/2022; Fernandes, 2023; Gonzales, 1984). This reflection is particularly powerful in a country where the visibility and celebration of Black women often occur only when their athletic bodies are exposed and sexualized, for example, during Carnival, a context in which admiration is conditional and objectifying (Gonzales, 1984). By choosing to present themselves through images of calmness, creativity, and tenderness, the young women subvert this logic, asserting their right to be seen beyond erotic spectacle and reclaiming control over how their bodies and identities are represented.

Maya added that the photos humanize and give visibility to Black people: "some people out there are crazy; they don't see Black people as people; the photos show, here, oh yes, they are people" (Photo Interview). By simply saying that the photos show how Black people are people is powerful — especially in a country built on the legacy of slavery, where for centuries Black people were legally and symbolically denied humanity, treated as property rather than as individuals. This historical dehumanization continues to reverberate in contemporary Brazil because Black lives are still systematically criminalized, marginalized, and rendered disposable (Fernandes, 2014; Gomes & Laborne, 2018; Gonzales, 1984). In this context, Maya's statement gains deep political resonance: to insist that Black people are people is to confront the continuum of structural violence that sustains racial hierarchies and inequalities, attacking personhood, dignity, self-worth and social value (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004). Through her words and the group's images, she reclaims the right to visibility and humanity, demanding

to be seen not as an object of suspicion or desire, but as a person who is fully human, deserving of respect, care, admiration, and life.

While the reflections of Isabel, Eloise and Maya centred on how the photos challenge racialized and gendered stereotypes of Black women and individuals, Gabriela extended this critique to another layer of young people's representation from urban peripheries. Shifting the focus from Black women in general to the broader imagery surrounding peripheral youth, she highlighted how class, race, and territory intersect in shaping which bodies and expressions are considered socially visible. Gabriela reflects on how the images disrupt dominant representations of youth in urban peripheries. Seeing Isabel's photo with flowers in her hair (Photo 7), she notes: "sometimes we think, especially here, like it or not, it's a low-income area, when we see Isabel's photos with flowers in her hair, we don't really expect to see someone like that around here" (Photo Interview).

Photo 7 – Isabel: disrupting expectations



Gabriela's account exposes both critical thinking and her internalized biases. She recognizes how dominant narratives associate her community with crime and disorder, yet her own words also echo some of those judgments. She explains:

> Like, on my street… 'cause whether we like it or not, I live on a street that has a drug spot at the end of it, and the girls who live closer to that end, they kind of grew up

> around that, so for them, it's more normal than it is for me, you know? 'Cause they're in it. So, the way they dress, the way they talk, the way they express themselves — it's all totally different. And since they're the ones people see the most, they kind of shape the image people have of the area. That's why the photos are cool, because they break that image (Gabriela, Photo Interview).

Her reflection illustrates a tension between challenging external stigmas and reproducing internal boundaries related to visibility and respectability. On the one hand, Gabriela is aware that public portrayals of her neighbourhood are dominated by representations of crime, violence, and disorder (Fernandes, 2014; Machado da Silva & Menezes, 2019). On the other hand, her words reveal how pervasive these imaginaries are in also shaping the perceptions of residents who, like herself, seek to detach their identities from such associations (Motta, 2016; Ursin, 2020). This ambivalence reflects a broader frustration among peripheral residents who are continually confronted by mainstream media, television programs, and news coverage that depict the periphery as dangerous and dominated by criminals (Fernandes, 2014; Ursin, 2020). As I have demonstrated, visual and symbolic codes often linked to crime, clothing, manner of speaking, bodily expression, and forms of sociability (as Gabriela reproduces in her reflection) are projected onto Black populations, producing the "reasonable suspicion" (Anunciação et al., 2020).

In this sense, Gabriela's reflection captures both the weight of these stigmatizing representations and the effort to resist them. By acknowledging that the people "who are seen the most" tend to shape dominant perceptions of the area, she highlights how visibility becomes politicized: who gets to be seen, and under what conditions. Her appreciation for the photos lies in their capacity to challenge these associations and to open space for multiple reality perspectives and interpretations (Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield, 2018): to present young people from the periphery not through the lens of crime, drug dealing, danger, or gang affiliation, but through images of gentleness and creativity. As she put it, "the photos are cool because they break that image," showing young people surrounded by flowers, expressing tenderness rather than threat, and reimagining the periphery as a space where beauty, sensitivity, and humanity also reside.

Beyond reimagining the periphery and Black population, the co-researchers also interpreted the photos as proposing new narratives about friendship among women. Friendship emerges as a central theme across the group's interpretations, highlighting young women as capable of unity, affection, and mutual care rather than rivalry or competition. Isabel added

that the photos evoke friendship and love, echoing Maya's view that the group photos communicate unity and mutual support. Eloise elaborated:

> For example, my photos with Maya show friendship and togetherness. Like, we talked about how most of the time girls are seen as rivals, and the photos really show friendship. Like the ones of Maya and me, our hair (Photo 8), us in the water (Photo 9); so, I think it shows other girls that they can be united too (Eloise, Photo Interview).

Photo 8 – Maya and Eloise: intertwined hair and connection



Photo 9 – Maya and Eloise: girls can be united



Eloise's words encapsulate the emotional and political power of these representations. The young women wanted the photos to show that it is possible for girls to walk side by side, hold hands, support one another, rather than compete. The image of their intertwined hair forming a heart (Photo 8), which they pointed out during the sessions, became a visual metaphor for connection and care. Through these collective representations, the young women create a counter-dominant narrative to the perfection dispositif, which operates by demanding constant self-evaluation and self-regulation against often unspoken, elitist standards, fostering competition and rivalry among women (McRobbie, 2015). By contrast, their images highlight support and interdependence, providing a visual and emotional counterpoint to individualism and competition. In a dominant context that often pits young women against each other, their photos reimagine friendship as both an emotional refuge and a political gesture reclaiming collective solidarity among women to counter gender domination (McRobbie, 2015).

Beyond producing new images and narratives about Blackness and femininity, the photo session also allowed the young women to experience new ways of relating to social circles that so often exclude them. While they expressed how enjoyable the photo shoot had been, what stood out most in their accounts was the sense of welcoming and belonging they felt. The session took place in a mansion located in an upper-class neighbourhood, a setting

that starkly contrasted with the peripheral environments where they live. For all of them, it was the first time they had been to that neighbourhood.

They described how the house doors had been opened to them, and how the host treated them with warmth and respect, allowing the young women to feel comfortable and free, without surveillance or judgment. The host spent some time with them in the morning, engaging in conversation, and then quietly withdrew, leaving the space to us.

This experience was deeply meaningful for the young women. It contrasted sharply with the forms of monitoring, exclusion, and suspicion they routinely face in their daily lives as young Black women often perceived as inferior, disruptive, or even criminal (Anunciação et al., 2020; Caruso et al., 2020; Cavalcanti, 2017; Fernandes, 2014; Fernandes, 2023; Leite & Machado da Silva, 2013; Motta, 2016). In this setting, they were not only welcomed but *seen*, being treated as individuals worthy of attention, respect, and trust. The photo session thus offered a lived moment of recognition, a space where they could freely create, imagine, and present alternative narratives about themselves and Black people, which no one was there to watch, discriminate against, or judge.

Being in that environment, one that they might otherwise have entered as domestic workers, cleaners, or in service positions (Collins, 1990/2022; Gonzalez, 1984), rather than as guests, and occupying it instead as protagonists, transformed their relationship with the space. In the wide, well-kept garden that became the backdrop for their portraits, they were free to exist in their full humanity — to pose, to play, to imagine, and to occupy the space. Furthermore, being present in that space also provoked reflections on existing social inequalities.

As I mentioned, the photo shoot took place in an upper-class neighbourhood. It was the young women's first time in such a setting, and upon arriving, Gabriela made a comment that lingered with me. She said "ah, Camila, if you wanted to humiliate us, you have succeeded." Intrigued by her reaction, I followed up during the individual meeting, when they were selecting photos and reflecting on the experience. Gabriela explained that the visit had been emotionally impactful and described the contrast she felt:

> Later that week, there was the [Afro braiding] workshop, right? And the teacher wanted to know how it went and all, and it was me, Isabel, and Ana from the project, so we started talking about it. For us, it was a huge reality check. Like, when we're entering the neighbourhood, and you see that fancy party venue with those Greek columns. I had never seen anything like that! The most "columnish" thing I see is like a balcony post,

> you know? Made of plaster. That's in a little private school around here, which, even that, is already kind of far from my reality (Photo Interview).

Gabriela's description uses vivid imagery to contrast the architectural opulence she encountered with the material precarity of her neighbourhood. Her astonishment exposes how buildings can operate as markers of inequality — the "Greek columns" functioning almost as symbols of exclusion and distance. Her remark about the small plaster columns in the local private school, the closest thing she associates with that imagery, is equally telling. Even those modest versions stand as reminders of privilege and inaccessibility. This "reality check," as she described it, highlights how class inequality is not only economic, but also spatial and aesthetic: inscribed in the architecture and urban geography of cities.

As I discussed throughout this thesis, Gabriela had already articulated a sharp class awareness grounded in the everyday realities of living in the periphery: the constant proximity to poverty, the routine encounters with scarcity, and the embodied awareness that inequality is part of the landscape they inhabit. This form of awareness emerges from below — from witnessing deprivation firsthand and navigating a territory where social hierarchies are materially evident. The artistic intervention, however, offered a different vantage point. By bringing the young women into a wealthy neighbourhood and inside an upper-class home, the process allowed them to see inequality from the other side as well. What they usually perceived through the lens of their own environment was now confronted with the excess of wealth. This spatial and sensory contrast deepened their critical reflection, making visible not only what was missing in their world, but also what is unequally concentrated elsewhere, as Gabriela continued to share her feelings:

> And then you realize that some people have *so, so, so* much, and others have so little, and we see which side we're on. I mean, thank God, I have food on my table every day, I have a close family, a comfy bed to sleep in, I don't starve or freeze, but I live so close to people who do. And when I went there, I felt so far away from that (Gabriela, Photo Interview).

Gabriela's reflection is powerful in its clarity. It encapsulates an acute awareness of structural inequality, not as an abstract concept but as something felt and seen. Her words reveal the moment in which the contrast between "those who have so much" and "those who have so little" becomes tangible, embodied in the material distance between her daily life and the affluence she encountered during the photo shoot. When she says, "we see which side we're on," she expresses a recognition of social position: an understanding of where they stand within a deeply unequal social order. This realization is not marked by resentment but by lucidity.

Gabriela acknowledges her relative stability, having food, family, and shelter, while recognizing that this security borders on scarcity and deprivation.

Thus, Gabriela's reflections demonstrate the spatial symbolism of crossing into a wealthy neighbourhood, which becomes a metaphor for broader social divisions. Her discomfort is directed not only at the wealth she witnessed but at systemic inequality that denies others the same access. What makes her reflection striking is the awareness of how inequality becomes normalized in everyday life. The constant exposure to poverty, precarious infrastructure, and limited public services signals to her that "something is wrong." However, as she notes, this awareness is mitigated by routine: deprivation is so ordinary that it becomes almost invisible, "super chill" (illustrating structural violence at work), as she puts it.

> And in a way, I wasn't sad because she [the house's owner] has all that. I was sad thinking about the ones who don't. I thought, like, wow, today I'm here, I'm enjoying this… it was really cool to go there. I had never been to that neighbourhood before. I thought, wow! That huge lake, the sun reflecting on it… but there are people who'll never get that chance. And then I started thinking about them. It really hit me to see the class difference so blatantly. Like, we *know* it exists, but because of where we live, it kind of becomes normal. It's super chill for me here. I won't say it's beautiful, that it shines or anything, 'cause there are parts that really aren't. But when you get over there, it's like you're in another country. Everything's so structured, you know? (Gabriela, Photo Interview).

Gabriela's words crystallize the experience of crossing an invisible border between two worlds: one marked by absence, and the other by abundance. The image of the "Greek columns" and the "huge lake" evokes more than architectural contrast; it exposes the architecture of inequality itself. The "other country" she refers to is not a distant place but the other side of the city, a symbolic geography of privilege made tangible through walls, gates, and landscapes of order. For Gabriela, the experience disrupted the normalization of inequality, transforming what was previously "super chill" into a critical realization of structural distance.

I then asked Gabriela whether she would have preferred not to go or to take the photos elsewhere. She emphasized that what truly mattered was the experience itself, which she compared to her aspiration of traveling abroad. In her words:

> It's actually good for me to know what the world out there is like. Like, I wanna go to Italy, and when I get to Italy, I can't just hold on to what I see here, because when I get there, it's not gonna be like what I have here; it's gonna be new things. So, I have the

> choice to take it in and learn from it, or the choice not to go and just miss out on that experience (Gabriela, Photo Interview).

For Gabriela, the discomfort of difference was not a reason to retreat but rather an invitation to expand her understanding of the world. The "reality check" she described was not only about witnessing inequality but about *seeing* it — transforming what had been normalized into something visible, nameable, and therefore open to critique. The lived experience of entering that space made tangible the social distances that shape everyday life but also exposed how structural violence operates through invisibility: by rendering inequality ordinary, acceptable, and inevitable (Farmer, 2004; Galtung, 1969; Ho, 2007; Scheper-Hughes, 2004).

Gabriela's reflection reveals how the encounter with material privilege, though uncomfortable, became an opportunity to challenge invisibility and naturalization. What she experienced was a confrontation with an architecture of inequality that distributes spaces, access, and opportunities to preserve the privileges of dominant groups. By framing this moment as a learning experience, Gabriela reclaims agency within structures that seek to confine and restrict their rights to the city (Fernandes, 2014). Therefore, stepping into that other world and choosing to see, reflect, and learn from it is an act of resistance, a moment of visibility and awareness that disrupted the everyday normalization of structural violence.

Beyond individual experiences, these moments of reflection illustrate the broader transformative potential of the research process itself. The next section turns to this participatory dimension, examining how collective involvement in the project through dialogue, collaboration, and creativity fostered processes of critical reflection, empowerment, and solidarity.

3. Learning Through Participation: Critical Awareness, Mutual Support, and Collective Empowerment

Building on the artistic intervention examined in the previous sections — through which the young women redefined how they wish to be seen and produced alternative narratives about Black womanhood in the periphery — this part of the chapter shifts focus to the participatory process itself. If the photographs allowed them to create new meanings about their bodies, their community, and their collective presence, the PAR process opened a space for them to reflect on their own participation: why they chose to join the project, how they experienced the research encounters, what they learned, and how they saw themselves within it. In other words, while the artistic intervention illuminated how they sought to represent themselves to the world, this section explores how they engaged with the research as a relational, dialogical, and

transformative process. Their assessments of the project reveal not only their motivations and expectations, but also the forms of recognition, belonging, and critical awareness that emerged through participation.

I asked the young women what had initially motivated them to take part in this study. Their answers revealed a range of expectations and curiosities that, over time, evolved into deeper forms of engagement and reflection. For Maya and Isabel, their participation began with more casual, curiosity-driven motivations. Maya shared: "Oh, it's because you said there was going to be food, and you also said we were going to take pictures. I was like, wow, that's cool... there's gonna be photos, food, talking, it's gonna be the easiest thing in the world" (Interview). Isabel added: "Well, I've got nothing to do on Tuesday or Monday, really, so I think I can check it out… If it seems cool, okay" (Interview).

What began as a lighthearted, leisurely motivation gradually became a more meaningful experience, illustrating how participatory research processes can invite young people to move from passive involvement to active co-construction of meaning (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). A central outcome of the PAR process was creating such a space: one where the young women could come together to talk, share experiences, and reflect on their lives. A space that, as Ana later observed, had been largely absent.

The co-researchers described the project as a setting in which someone was genuinely interested in what they had to say, knew, and had lived. Therefore, they treated their experiences as valuable forms of knowledge. This process reflects an epistemological orientation that treats lived experience and emotional engagement not as limitations, but as integral to knowledge production, while also requiring attentiveness and responsibility toward how these experiences are represented and shared (Collins, 1990/2022). In addition, as Rodríguez and Brown (2009) argue, although young people often criticize systems of injustice, they are rarely invited to participate in research or social processes that validate their perspectives as epistemological contributions. Gabriela expressed this sense of recognition: "Ah, I like taking part. Like it or not, when we participate in research, in interviews, it's a way for us to share our opinion, right? With the world. 'The world,' in quotes, you know? Whoever sees it will know my opinion" (Interview).

For Gabriela, participation was not simply about being heard but about occupying a space of enunciation to "share [her] opinion with the world." Her words convey the awareness that her voice and experiences, often silenced, discredited, and made invisible, could now circulate in a broader arena. This awareness reflects the transformative potential of

participatory methodologies and Black feminist thought, in which knowledge emerges through dialogue and co-construction rather than extraction (Brown, 2024; Collins, 1990/2022).

Eloise, in turn, highlighted the novelty and emotional impact of being invited to take part. She described her surprise at being seen as someone whose experiences mattered:

> I had never taken part in anything like research, and I've always wanted to. It's just that no one had ever said, "hey, let's take part in this research because something about you caught our attention," or whatever. No one ever did that, so it makes you want to, right? It's a new experience (Eloise, Interview).

Eloise's reflection captures how meaningful it can be to be invited into a process of knowledge production. Her emphasis on "something about you caught our attention" expresses a reconfiguration of how she sees herself: as someone worthy of interest, attention, and intellectual engagement. In contexts where young Black women are often hyper-visible as stereotypes, yet invisible as individuals of knowledge (Collins, 1990/2022; hooks, 1991; Kilomba, 2010; Ribeiro, 2024), this recognition carries profound symbolic and political significance.

Ana further elaborated on this sense of belonging and purpose. For her, the project filled a structural void: the absence of dedicated spaces for teenage girls to speak freely about their experiences and emotions:

> Here, it's a place that really lacks people who care about teenage girls (…) We don't have a girls' workshop where you can come together and talk about what bothers you, what your insecurities are, what you're going through, if you need to ask for help — we don't have that, unfortunately. What you gave us was an opportunity to be there. At least to relieve a bit of the weight we carry on our shoulders, that we carry alone just for being teenage girls" (Interview).

Ana's reflection points to a broader pattern in which young women's access to space is shaped by gendered dynamics that confine them to the domestic sphere, while young men more readily occupy public space (Cobbina et al., 2008). Public environments are often perceived as unsafe for young women, particularly in contexts where young men dominate them and may be associated with criminal dynamics, limiting young women's sense of safety and freedom to circulate (Berents & ten Have, 2017; Cobbina et al., 2008; Rizzini & Limongi, 2016; Ursin, 2020; Weber et al., 2025). In this context, Ana's emphasis on the absence of spaces "for teenage girls" underscores not only a lack of services but a structural exclusion from environments where they could express themselves without fear of judgment or exposure. Her account

highlights the importance of creating safe, supportive spaces where young women can share their experiences, build trust, and seek help (Sampson & Villela, 2017; Weber et al., 2025).

Ana also compared this experience with other initiatives in the community, particularly sports programs directed at young men. While she recognizes the value of these spaces in bringing young men together, offering opportunities for dialogue, and fostering relationships with caring adults, which can provide alternative moral frameworks to violence and militarization (Sampson & Villela, 2017; Van Dijk et al., 2025), her reflection also reveals a gendered gap in access to such opportunities. These programs are often designed in response to young men's overexposure to criminal dynamics (Cavalcanti, 2017; Motta, 2016), but in doing so, they tend to overlook young women's specific needs. As a result, young women are left without equivalent spaces for collective expression and support, reinforcing their social isolation and the emotional burdens associated with navigating girlhood in contexts marked by militarization.

Beyond the opportunity to participate, the young women also spoke about how the process deepened their relationships with one another, creating a space of mutual support, friendship, and belonging — echoing their earlier desire for the photos to portray the possibility of genuine friendship among women, as discussed in the previous sections. Although this was not a planned component of the research, it became one of its most powerful outcomes. Given how often themes of female rivalry and loneliness appeared in their accounts, their emergence of solidarity takes on particular significance. Gabriela described this sense of connection and longing after the end of the meetings:

> Now I miss it. I didn't know Eloise and Maya; I used to see them every day but had barely talked to them. Isabel, I already knew her well when I got there. Ana, I didn't know her that much either, but we started getting closer. And for me at least, I don't know about them, I really miss having everyone together every week. I miss each one's company. It was really nice! (Interview).

The research space allowed them to form closer bonds, something Ana also reflected on. While the young women already knew one another and shared community spaces, the research setting offered new possibilities for deeper connection:

> Like, after we started coming here, Gabriela, Isabel, and I have gotten a lot closer. We've had more to talk about because we're seeing each other outside of there [the Afro braiding workshop]; since over there, we're in different sections, they're more advanced than me in braiding. So, we didn't really have much to talk about or much contact (Ana, Interview).

As Ana's observation suggests, even though workshops can foster dialogue and shared learning, as discussed in Chapter Seven, they are also structured around learning a trade. Differences in skill level and the focus on technical practice can limit opportunities for deeper personal exchange. By contrast, the research created a different kind of collective space, one oriented toward listening, reflection, and mutual support, in which emotional, rather than technical, connections could emerge. In this sense, the space also reflects an epistemological orientation in which knowledge is produced through dialogue and connectedness, rather than through hierarchical relations between those who know and those who are expected to learn (Collins, 1990/2022), aligning with participatory approaches that centre lived experience and participants' voices in knowledge production (Brown, 2024). Ana further elaborated:

> But by coming here, getting to know a bit of each other's stories, realizing that it's not just me; they also haven't had an easy life, that makes a big difference. It really opens our minds up, like, wow. (…) And now that we're here together, spending time together, listening to each other's experiences, things we've gone through that weren't very good, we feel more at ease to talk to one another (Ana, Interview).

Through these exchanges, the young women not only learned more about each other but also began to perceive their struggles as shared rather than individual. The space of the research thus operated as a bridge between physical and emotional proximity: while they had long resided in the same community and saw each other often, it was through conversations, dialogues, sharing, and listening that they came to recognize deeper forms of connection, realizing that they were not alone, not only in physical space but in the experiences, challenges, and emotions they carried.

This sense of shared experience was echoed by the others. The collective process of sharing experiences and listening produced a sense of relief and a form of healing. During our last collective meeting, Maya shared, "It was really nice talking to you... It took a weight off my shoulders." Eloise agreed: "I think when we talk about these things, we feel more relieved" (FG3). Isabel emphasized the importance of realizing shared struggles: "It was nice because these are certain things we don't really talk about in everyday life. You get to open (…) It's not just me feeling this way... there are others too" (FG3).

Although this once again points to the lack of safe spaces for the young women to express their insecurities and experiences (Sampson & Villela, 2017; Weber et al., 2025), it also highlights how the research process itself created an opportunity for them to articulate their perspectives and reflect on the conditions shaping their lives. This aligns with participatory approaches that recognize that marginalized youth are not only able to identify

and critique systems of injustice but also emphasize the importance of providing meaningful spaces for them to express their views (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009).

These exchanges illustrate how powerful it can be to speak, listen, and be heard. By transforming what is usually private and unspoken into a shared experience, the research space provided the young women with an opportunity to reflect and speak about things that are usually not discussed in everyday interactions, as Isabel observes. Through dialogue, they recognized that their struggles were not isolated or individual but collective and structural. The weight that Maya described being lifted reflected the relief of realizing that they were not alone, that other young women carried similar burdens, and that their pain could be met with empathy rather than judgment.

What emerged was a collective acknowledgment that sharing can be an act of care, resistance, and validation. This process allowed them to reframe their experiences not as personal failures or individual shortcomings, but as reflections of broader structural problems. In recognizing that their struggles and suffering were rooted in enduring relations of power and social hierarchies rather than in something "inherently wrong" with them, the young women shifted from an individualization of the problem to structural awareness, a transformative form of empowerment (Weber et al., 2025).

This growing awareness extended beyond the group space and into their everyday lives. The conversations did not simply produce reflection; they also contributed to build confidence and agency in how the young women expressed themselves within their families. Ana shared that participating made her more assertive at home: "Even though I'm still afraid of not getting the answer I want, everything that bothers me at home, I say it" (FG3). Eloise reflected, "I think my mindset also got lighter when it comes to talking about these things. Talking to my mom and everything**,** I'm not scared anymore" (FG3).

These accounts reveal how the participatory process also nurtured the courage to speak up, naming discomforts, questioning hierarchies, and communicating feelings that were previously hidden, silenced or repressed. As bell hooks (1984) argues, feminist praxis involves recognizing the power women already exercise in their everyday lives, even when it is suppressed or undervalued, and transforming that recognition into a basis for resistance and liberation. In this sense, empowerment was a lived, collective, relational practice: one that began in peer dialogue, reverberated into their everyday interactions, and contributed to reconfiguring power relations.

To conclude this section, I asked the young women whether they felt more like co-researchers or participants, a central component of the PAR process. Despite their active

involvement, some did not fully identify as researchers. When asked if she felt like one, Maya responded: “I felt more like I was participating in the research. Not like a researcher” (FG3). Gabriela, however, offered a more nuanced view: “I think I felt a little bit [like a researcher] because, like it or not, we learned from each other” (FG3). Ana agreed, noting how they discovered things about each other’s lives during discussions: “through stuff from our lives that we talked about, we discovered things” (FG3).

Their reflections illustrate the pedagogical dimension of PAR — how participatory processes generate learning, critical insight, and deeper awareness of social injustices (Brown, 2024). Gabriela emphasized how the project helped her better understand relations of domination based on dualities and hierarchical relationships (Collins, 1986): “It became clearer to me how human beings feel superior, you know? Like they have ownership over others, especially over women” (Interview). But the most significant shared learning, repeatedly mentioned across interviews and focus groups, concerned the stories about uncles who had engaged in sexual harassment or abuse. These accounts, discussed collectively (except for Isabel, who had not experienced this), deeply affected the young women.

Ana, reflecting on these conversations in her one-to-one interview, explained how hearing the co-researchers’ experiences made her reinterpret situations within her own family. “Because it was like Maya said, right? Her uncle treated her in that way, with touches that weren’t very nice, and her family didn’t see it as a problem. That made me reflect too” (Ana, Interview). She continued:

> Because in my family there’s a man like that, but everyone treats it as normal. “Oh, that’s just how he is.” But that’s not “just his way.” If someone outside saw that “way of his,” he’d get killed, right? Because it’s very serious. So, this helped me open my mind to speak up and say, “hey, this isn’t right,” or at least look at the situation more carefully” (Ana, Interview).

This process of denaturalizing abusive behaviour and recognizing that what is normalized inside the home is, in fact, violence, was profoundly powerful for them. As Ana's words illustrate, now at least she can act, do something, even if it is just being more careful. The story of “the uncles” became a recurring symbol of this collective realization. In the final group meeting, Eloise joked, “like the uncle,” and Gabriela concluded, “we came to the conclusion that no one deserves uncles” (FG3). But this time Isabel did not remain quiet; she intervened: “yes, we do deserve one. Depends on your uncle. Out of ten, maybe one is good. It’s rare, it’s really rare. But there are some good ones” (FG3). Her intervention is meaningful: it shows how the research process also created space for her to validate her positive experiences with her

extended family, something she had not voiced before, and to offer a counter-narrative that affirmed the possibility of safe family relationships.

For the co-researchers, being "a researcher" came to mean more than just knowing and applying technical procedures; it meant engaging in a process of learning, reflection, and discovery about themselves, about one another, and about social conditions that affect their lives. Through dialogue, humour, and recognition of shared pain, they collectively produced knowledge that challenged silence and normalized violence within their everyday environments.

In this sense, the project redefined research as a relational and emancipatory practice — one that resists the individualism and silence imposed by structural violence. For Ana, in particular, this process also promoted a form of protection and awareness, as she mentioned how she began to interpret certain behaviours of male relatives with a more suspicious and cautious eye. Such realizations illustrate how the act of doing research, when grounded in dialogue, reciprocity, care, and justice-oriented practice, can itself become a tool of resistance, emancipation, and transformation.

4. From Dreams to Demands: Reimagining Possibility and Advocating for Rights

In this final section, I turn to how the young women imagine their futures. I first explore their narratives about professional aspirations and the accomplishments they hope to achieve, and then examine the futures they envision, desire, and recommend — both for themselves and for other young women, as well as for their community and the country in which they live. Each of them articulates concrete goals, dreams, and plans, often balancing pragmatism with imagination and creativity. Their reflections illuminate how young people from marginalized contexts reimagine what is possible for themselves, expressing ambition alongside a sharp awareness of the structural barriers they must navigate (Rizzini & Limongi, 2016; Van Dijk et al., 2025).

Gabriela shared that what she really wants is "one thing," but that she is aware of the costs and challenges involved, so she has already considered alternative paths, highlighting her awareness of how structural constraints can shape and limit her possibilities (Van Dijk et al., 2025). Her first dream was to open a coffee shop and become a veterinarian. "But that's very difficult," she explained, "because whether you like it or not, it's [veterinary] medicine, so everything is very expensive" (Gabriela, Interview). She describes how veterinary care, in her view, can be a privilege, since only certain people can afford to take their pets to the vet regularly. As she puts it, "we can't just think about love, we have to think about money too."

Her reflection illustrates how young people exercise agency in reconfiguring their aspirations in response to structural barriers, adapting their life projects to what is materially possible (Van Dijk et al., 2025).

Recognizing these structural barriers, Gabriela began exploring other possibilities that also align with her interests. She is considering studying law and specializing in forensic work: "since there's no way I can work with animals, I'll open people up instead, right?" (Gabriela, Interview). She explains that she plans to apply for the Trilhas de Futuro (Paths to the Future) program,[31] which offers a technical course in necropsy; in Gabriela's words: "it is a government initiative where we can take courses for free; the government pays for the course, meals, and transportation."

Her reflections show how she navigates aspirations and constraints with pragmatism and transforms limitations into alternative routes. Her "plan B" also reveals her determination and an awareness of proximity and opportunity, thinking about a career that she would still be in the law field: "If I don't manage to become a forensic scientist, I can take the exam to become a prison officer or civil police officer. A prison officer would be cool because sometimes I'd end up at Nelson Hungria [the largest penitentiary in the state]. Just up the street, it's great" (Gabriela, Interview). Gabriela imagines possible futures that integrate her interests, public resources, and the social geography she inhabits. Her reflections demonstrate how, for young Black women like her, imagining a future is both an act of strategy and resistance, a way of claiming possibility amid structural inequalities.

At the same time, her professional aspirations are particularly significant in a context where fields such as law enforcement, forensic science, and legal investigation remain overwhelmingly dominated by white men.[32] By envisioning herself in these spaces, Gabriela challenges racial and gendered boundaries of belonging. Her desire to work "within the law," whether as a forensic scientist or an officer, can also be a political choice, as she asserts that

[31] Trilhas de Futuro (Paths to the Future) is a project run by the Minas Gerais State Government that offers free technical courses to high school students, such as agriculture, graphic design, nursing, information technology, mechanics, environment, nutrition, chemistry, radiology, occupational safety, among many others. Students regularly enrolled in this project's courses benefit from the payment of their monthly fees, provision of teaching materials, transportation and meal assistance.

[32] This statement is based on data from the Research on the Profile of Public Security Institutions, conducted annually by the Brazilian Ministry of Justice and Public Security since 2004. The survey collects nationwide data on the organizational structure and functioning of public security institutions, including Civil Police, Military Police, Military Fire Departments, and official forensic bodies, with the aim of informing public policy. Recent data (2024) indicate that, for example, forensic institutions are composed of 65% men and 53% white individuals. Available at: https://www.gov.br/mj/pt-br/assuntos/sua-seguranca/seguranca-publica/estatistica/pesquisaperfil (accessed April 1, 2026).

Black women, too, have the right to occupy and redefine institutions that have historically excluded or criminalized them.

Gabriela's reflections about her future also include a long-term dream that connects back to her early passion for animals. She outlined a financial plan that would allow her to make this dream possible: "If everything works out, I can divide my salary into 50%, 20%, and 30%. Then I save 30%, spend 50% on expenses, and 20% on leisure. Then when I retire, I'll get my pension, and I'll have that 30% for the rest of my life" (Gabriela, Interview). She imagines retirement not as an end, but as the moment when she will have the freedom and stability to dedicate herself to what she loves most, caring for animals:

> Now my retirement plan is all in my head. When I'm about 50, I want to open an NGO to take care of stray animals, a rescue NGO. I'll pick them up, take care of them, and find them a place to live. Then I want to buy a really big piece of land and build a big kennel. (…) I'll live there too, so I won't be far away, right? Sometimes they need something at night, so I'll be there, right? Dogs that need help. So, I'll have this little place with this NGO. I think that's my dream: to have this little NGO with this little place (Gabriela, Interview).

This vision merges responsibility, care, and love into a coherent life project. Gabriela's retirement dream represents a long-term horizon of dignity, stability, and purpose. Ana's reflections focus less on a specific profession and more on the kind of life she wants to build, one marked by stability, dignity, and the ability to rest, which echoes her life story, as demonstrated throughout this thesis. As she explained:

> For all the effort I put in, I just want at least a stable and secure life. Like, I don't want to lack money, time, or opportunities to do and experience things I want, because right now I don't have time for anything. I'm working hard to achieve my goals so that, in the future, I can pay people to work for me. So that I can have quality time with my family (Ana, Interview).

Her words resonate with what I discussed earlier in this thesis about her daily life: a routine packed with work, school, and domestic responsibilities. Having assumed adult responsibilities from an early age, Ana envisions a future where her effort is finally recognized and rewarded. A future that allows her not only to survive but to rest, enjoy, and spend time with her loved ones without exhaustion. She also speaks of wanting to pursue higher education, either in coaching or psychology: "I want to be a coach or a psychologist. Do a psychology college. I'm even going on the 16th, I'm going to [University's name] to check out the psychology workshops" (Ana, Interview).

Ana's aspirations reflect the realities of her childhood and teenage years. She often described her lack of time for leisure, her sense of not being acknowledged or valued in her work, and the feeling that she is always giving to others without receiving support in return. Her vision of the future is therefore deeply meaningful: she imagines herself finally able to enjoy the fruits of her labour, to the point of paying others to work for her. This desire reflects not only an aspiration for comfort, but also a reconfiguration of the unequal distribution of care and domestic work that currently structures her everyday life, pointing to a possibility that remains largely inaccessible to her in the present — outsourcing work and reclaiming time for herself (Biroli, 2016).

At the same time, Ana imagines herself in professions rooted in care, guidance, and listening, as a coach or psychologist. This is significant given her reflections throughout the research on how often she feels isolated, how difficult it is for her to open up, trust others, share what she is going through, and how she identifies that the community lacks a safe space for teenage girls. Envisioning herself in roles that involve listening, support, and emotional presence suggests not only her awareness of what she lacked, but her desire to become, for others, the kind of support she did not have. For a young Black woman who has long carried heavy responsibilities in silence, imagining herself as someone who provides care, validation, and accompaniment to others is a powerful act of reimagination, agency, resistance, and self-definition.

Like Ana, Isabel emphasizes the importance of financial stability and security, but in her case these aspirations are closely tied to independence and short-term material self-sufficiency. Throughout the research process, she expressed a heightened sense of urgency: she repeatedly mentioned how much she wanted to find a job quickly and how her movements within the community were oriented toward staying as close as possible to opportunities that could help her secure employment, so that she could then access and purchase the things she wants. As she explains:

> Getting my driver's license, having a car, being in a good financial position, you know? I was talking to my mom, and I want to start working. I know that in the first few months I won't have money for anything, because, like I told her, I want to buy a television, which I don't have yet. My closet is in very bad shape, and so is my bed, which is in very bad shape because I broke it (Isabel, Interview).

Isabel also describes how she plans to achieve these goals, speaking in an affirmative tone that signals determination and confidence in her capacity to succeed:

> I know that in the early days I won't have any money for anything, but I'm going to buy my things. I'm going to save money; I don't know, take out 50, 100 BRL a month, and keep putting it aside. Because when I turn 18 at the end of next year, I'll get my driver's license and stuff (Isabel, Interview).

Turning eighteen, a legal marker of adulthood approaching quickly, structures much of her anticipation for the future. As demonstrated in Chapter Five, Isabel sees herself as more mature than other young women her age, and her reflections express an immediate, practical desire to earn her own money and buy things for herself. This desire is shaped by the strength she sees in her mother, a woman who, as Isabel often emphasized, has worked hard to provide for her and her brother.

Beyond these short-term goals, Isabel envisions a future where she is running a business — her own beauty parlour. She imagines a professional path grounded in her interest in hairstyling and beauty work, as well as in the supportive ties she has with her mother and extended family:

> Oh, I've always wanted to. Ever since I was little, I've always liked these things: doing hair, painting nails. I used to do my aunt's hair. I also used to paint her nails and stuff, so now I want to have my own salon. And I'm thinking about going to beauty school, but I don't know yet. But I'm thinking about having a salon that does these things: nails, hair, makeup. And I think about it, like, at home, it's a nice house; if I want to build on top of it, I can. I can just live there too. My mom, my brother, and I, right? Until a certain age, maybe, but I dream of having my own house (Isabel, Interview).

Isabel combines early interests with the strong, healthy relationships she has with her family. She imagines a future in which those bonds remain close, supportive, and mutually sustaining. She even considers starting her beauty parlour in her mother's home, taking advantage of a space already available to her, though she ultimately dreams of having her own house in the community.

Her plans also reveal a process of professionalization and a strategic use of community resources. She describes joining the Fica Vivo! Afro-braiding workshop because it offered skills and training in an area she enjoys: "I really like working with hair. I want to have a salon, so I'm going to learn things. Very good, I'm going to do it there [at the Afro-Braiding workshop]. It worked out" (Isabel, Interview). In addition, she sought other courses, such as gel-nail design, through community organizations offering free training. Isabel's aspirations thus combine practicality, long-standing interests, a sense of belonging, and strategic engagement with local opportunities, illustrating how she actively mobilizes available

community resources to pursue her goals and navigate structural constraints (Van Dijk et al., 2025).

Eloise in turn dreams of becoming an actress, a goal she describes with both passion and pragmatism. She explains that, like Maya, she would already like to be enrolled in a drama course. However, she notes that Maya's family is in a slightly better financial position, which allows her friend to pursue that training while Eloise cannot. In addition, Eloise reflects on how she does not feel encouraged by her parents — not necessarily because they disapprove, but because they have never asked about her aspirations. As she put it, "I think that to this day they don't even know that I want to be an actress, because they don't ask" (Interview).

Yet despite the absence of parental encouragement, Eloise does not feel discouraged or deterred from pursuing her dreams. She participates in the Fica Vivo! graffiti workshop, where she learns painting techniques, and she plans to follow the "traditional" academic pathway by taking the National High School Exam (ENEM) and applying to study performing arts at university. In her words: "I want to study performing arts at college after finishing school. Take the ENEM exam in my third year, next year, and study performing arts."

Eloise also recognizes that achieving her professional goals may require complementary training. She therefore plans to take a drama course as well, and she considers enrolling in a painting course: "so if I can't become an actress, I can become a painter in different areas" (Eloise, Interview). Rather than expressing resentment, Eloise speaks with determination and clarity, framing her dream as something attainable through persistence, study, and creative exploration. Her reflections suggest a young woman who, despite structural and family constraints, insists on imagining a future in the arts by asserting her right to pursue a path often perceived as distant or inaccessible for young women in her social position.

Maya, in turn, articulates her aspirations in the artistic field with strategic clarity. She envisions a future in voice acting, driven by curiosity and joy: "My future, the things I want to do… I want to work in voice acting, because I think it's really cool, I think it's really fun." She also frames her dreams in terms of financial independence and an established career: "I want to be a successful person, have my own house so I don't have to live off my parents" (Maya, Interview). Her plans reveal a blend of imagination and practical reasoning. Aware that success in the arts may demand technical knowledge and preparation, she outlines a concrete plan for how to reach her goal:

> It's part of it, doing college, because it's the process I must go through to get there. And that's why I'm going to do it, because otherwise I would only be doing the theatre course. But I'm going to study performing arts so I can learn more, and I'm also going

> to take a voice acting course to learn even more, so I can get there and know what everything is, know what a sound stage is, the microphone, the television, and the producers there. So I can get there and know. Not get there and be like, "What is this? What do I do with this?" "Hey, you didn't come here to do voice acting if you don't know that." Yeah, that's why just the paper won't get me anywhere; you must study" (Maya, Interview).

Maya's words reveal an acute awareness that a university diploma, the "paper," may not be enough to access the types of artistic careers she desires. She recognizes the need to accumulate specific forms of capital in that field: technical knowledge, familiarity with professional environments, and practical experience. As I demonstrated in Chapter Five, she already takes a drama course and, when describing her routine, talks about the time she dedicates to studying voice acting and other aspects of the artistic world. Maya knows that she must prepare in advance to *arrive already knowing*.

This strategic posture resonates with dynamics of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Middle-class youth often reach these spaces with prior exposure to arts, private lessons, cultural institutions, and networks that facilitate entry and mobility. Maya, by contrast, must actively construct these opportunities from scratch, compensating for the lack of a prior repertoire that many privileged young people receive as "natural." Her efforts reflect a form of anticipatory labour — a recognition that she must study more, familiarise herself more, and prepare earlier to enter spaces that were not designed with young women like her in mind.

At the same time, Maya (and Eloise as well) reimagines artistic careers as attainable, legitimate, and intellectually demanding pursuits for young Black women from the urban periphery. Through their dreams, they challenge structural limits placed on what kinds of futures are seen as possible for young women in their social position, asserting their right not only to dream, but to strategically plan for futures that exceed the narrow expectations imposed on them (Motta, 2016).

Beyond her professional aspirations, Maya also spoke about dreams that go beyond work and education, the ones she calls her "real dreams." When I asked what she imagined for her future, her response revealed a horizon of joy, exploration, and curiosity: "My dreams are to see snow, visit Egypt, have a black horse, swim at the bottom of the sea, travel by cruise. These are the things I want, but to achieve them I must work" (Maya, Interview).

These words expand the possibilities available to her. Maya deliberately distinguishes between the practical steps she must take, studying, working, planning, and the deeper, imaginative dreams that give meaning to those efforts. In doing so, she reclaims the right to

dream beyond survival. Wanting to travel abroad, to see snow, to have a horse, to swim under the sea, these are not trivial desires; they are gestures of freedom that reach far beyond the spatial, social, and economic boundaries typically imposed on youth from urban peripheries. Maya's dreams refuse the script of limitation. They push against the horizon of what is usually imagined or allowed for young women in her social position.

Across their different trajectories and life circumstances, the young women articulated futures grounded in both realism and imagination. Whether through concrete professional plans, like Ana's pursuit of stability or Isabel's entrepreneurial ambitions, or through dreams that blend care and creativity, like Gabriela's vision of her animal rescue NGO and Maya's desire to explore the world, their reflections reveal more than individual aspirations: they offer ways of reimagining possibilities distant from criminalizing discourses (Motta, 2016).

In envisioning their futures, the co-researchers challenge the structural constraints that seek to define what young women from peripheral neighbourhoods can hope for or achieve. They refuse to be confined to crime, survival, or precarity, asserting instead the right to imagine and plan careers and lives that connect their interests, aspirations, and creativity.

This imaginative work also shaped the young women's recommendations for change. In one of my final questions, I asked what message they would like to convey to society, politicians, decision-makers, caregivers, and researchers; what changes they would like to see; and what they believe could be done so young women do not feel excluded and can feel safer.

Maya's reflections can be read as a subtle, powerful critique of dominant ways of defining knowledge, success, and legitimacy. Rather than aligning with a rigid or linear life script, she articulates a desire for greater freedom, for "the right to be whatever one wants to be," without predetermined expectations or social constraints. In doing so, she calls into question the idea that knowledge and worth are validated primarily through formal education, credentials, and institutional recognition, echoing Black feminist critiques that centre lived experience as a legitimate and meaningful source of knowledge (Collins, 1990/2022). As she put it:

> Be free with life. I want to be that; I will be that. And I have nothing to stop me. I don't have to go to high school and college to be able to do it. It's all about "I must work to get something," "I must have a high school diploma, elementary school education to be able to get into the company." I'm only going because I have experience and stuff. A free world would be cool, I think (Maya, Interview).

Maya's words emphasize the importance she places on lived experience, a form of knowledge and qualification that is not validated by traditional markers of expertise, such as formal

schooling or institutional credentials. Her critique is not of learning, but of how education becomes detached from curiosity and meaning, turning into an obligation governed by utility: “And that’s only causing me problems because I have to do these things [studying math] and I don’t have time to study this and that and the other thing” (Maya, Interview). She condensed this critique of productivity into a powerful reflection:

> Your life is a cycle: you study, you work, and you die. And it’s been that way since childhood. “What is your dream?” “Oh, I want to work. My dream is to work in that field.” No, my dream is to live in a quiet house in the countryside, have enough food to live on, and have a black horse. That’s one of my dreams. But no, people keep asking you, “what you want to be when you grow up?” They’ve been asking that since childhood. “Oh, I want to be a doctor” (Maya, Interview).

Through these reflections, Maya challenges the idea that a person’s identity should be defined primarily through work or a future profession. She notes that this script begins in childhood, when the question “what do you want to be when you grow up?” narrows the horizon of what children can imagine for themselves. Her words show how such expectations can limit imagination, future possibilities, and what counts as a meaningful life. When dreams are reduced to job titles, little space remains for exploration, desire, or other forms of fulfillment.

If Maya’s reflections centred on freedom as a way of living, Eloise’s recommendation focused on autonomy, particularly teenagers' desire for more rights and participation in decision-making. She proposed creating laws that would explicitly protect teenagers’ autonomy, giving them a greater say in their own lives. As she explained, she is aware that laws alone do not end racism or violence against women but still believes that such measures could serve as protection and validation: “It may sound a little rebellious, but I would say, ‘Mom, it’s the law, so I can do it.’ I think that would help a little. Because my mom says something like: ‘Oh, it’s the law. And you’re a minor; you can’t do that.’ She talks like that” (Eloise, Interview).

Eloise’s words reveal a nuanced understanding of how authority and protection operate in her everyday life, which can be shaped not only by generational hierarchies but also by her social position as a young Black woman. Her proposal for legal recognition is less about disobedience and more about legitimacy and validation, based on her wish to be trusted as capable of making choices about her own body, mobility, and future. In contexts where young Black women, particularly those living in marginalized communities, are often positioned as needing control rather than being recognized as capable decision-makers, the law appears, for Eloise, as a possible resource to assert her voice and negotiate power within these relationships.

In that sense, autonomy appears not as separation from adults, but as an assertion of maturity and agency. She gave a personal example that illustrates how this autonomy is already beginning to take shape in her relationship with her father: “even though my dad is a bit distant, I’ve noticed that every time we go to the doctor now, he lets me do everything. I fill out the forms, I go in the office, I speak” (Eloise, Interview).

This seemingly small moment represents a profound shift. Being allowed to speak for herself, to manage her own paperwork, and to address adults directly marks an experience of recognition, a sign that she is being seen and treated as an individual, not merely as someone under authority. For Eloise, autonomy is being acknowledged as someone who can participate and have a say in decisions that affect her life. It is a relational form of empowerment, built through trust, dialogue, and gradual shifts in everyday interactions.

Gabriela’s recommendation was a call for recognition, not only of the peripheries, but of the people who live in them. Her reflections demonstrate an acute awareness of the criminalization, segregation, and exclusion of peripheral areas (Fernandes, 2014). Her appeal was directed at those in power, whom she urged to *see* and *embrace* the peripheries rather than treat them with neglect or disdain:

> I think they should look out for us more. Because whether we like it or not, we're in a good position, but we're still on the periphery. I think it says “peripheries”; they [politicians] talk as if we were nothing. They treat us with a certain disdain, those people from the peripheries (Gabriela, Interview).

Her critique extends beyond local politics; it challenges broader imaginaries of Brazil. As Gabriela points out, representations of the country often reproduce the same hierarchies of visibility that marginalize peripheral regions: “when they talk about Brazil, they only talk about Rio [de Janeiro], right? But they don’t show beautiful things about Rio; they show favelas. Who wants to see favelas? I see favelas every day. There’s more than that here” (Gabriela, Interview).

Gabriela denounces how the periphery, and by extension, Black and working-class populations, are simultaneously hyper-visible as symbols of poverty and violence, and invisible as spaces of creativity, vitality, and aspiration. Her demand for attention, therefore, is about dignity and inclusion: “I think they see us as nothing, like a head in the world, just another vote for me, and that's it. I don't think it should be like that. I think the community should… not the community, because we try. Politicians should embrace the community more” (Gabriela, Interview).

At the same time, Gabriela acknowledges and celebrates concrete initiatives that have begun to bridge this gap. She cites examples of municipal programs that gave "greater visibility to young people," particularly in the field of leisure — a dimension the young women repeatedly identified as lacking in their daily lives, as demonstrated in Chapter Four. She highlights the inauguration of the Estação Juventude (Youth Station) in 2023, a public youth centre offering free workshops and different professional courses, such as English, drawing, music production, sign language, barbershop, eyebrow design, braiding, basketball, computer skills, graffiti, dance, and photography. She also mentions cultural events like the *Geek Festival* in Contagem: "It's something no one had ever stopped to think about young people in that way. I thought it was really cool what she [the mayor] did" (Gabriela, Interview).

Gabriela also reflects on the scarcity of institutional spaces through which peripheral youth can express themselves publicly: "I think it's great that they look to young people, because we want to be heard, but we don't know how our voice will reach them" (Gabriela, Interview). She expands on this point through a critique of meritocratic forms of recognition that fail to account for structural inequalities: "Like Math Olympiads. I don't do well in Math Olympiads. Then there's Portuguese Olympiads, but they ask things I never studied that show up on the test. So, it's no use; my voice won't reach them through this Portuguese Olympiad" (Gabriela, Interview). Her words reveal how meritocratic models privilege middle-class youth, while peripheral young people face unequal conditions to compete, leaving few pathways for their voices to reach decision-makers. In this sense, her claim sheds light on how structural violence operates by maintaining a gap between what individuals can achieve and what they could potentially achieve under more equitable conditions, systematically privileging some groups over others (Galtung, 1969).

For this reason, Gabriela celebrates initiatives that bring opportunities into the periphery rather than requiring young people to travel to the centre, highlighting the importance of starting from the margins to understand the needs, demands, and aspirations of those who live there (hooks, 1984). She recalls the first edition of Natal das Luzes (Christmas Lights) held in the Vargem das Flores region, an event traditionally restricted to the downtown area and, for the first time, brought into her community:

> They had shows for children, cotton candy, free popcorn, and they painted faces too. I gave an interview that day; it's on the city website. It's interesting to see, right? Because when we think about the city hall's actions, we only think of the centre, where the city really is. Normally, everything happens there. And now she's [the mayor] bringing

things here. I consider here the countryside of Contagem, because there's nothing here. So, she [the mayor] is bringing things here" (Gabriela, Interview).

Gabriela's excitement about being interviewed and seeing her words published on the city's official website is particularly telling. For her, having her perspective heard and publicly acknowledged is not a trivial experience. It is a rare and profound act of recognition in a context where voices from the periphery are often dismissed, ignored, or rendered irrelevant. Being interviewed, in this sense, is not merely symbolic; it is an affirmation of existence, agency, and belonging: her perspective matters and deserves to circulate.

Her reflections expose how the centre–periphery divide reproduces material and symbolic exclusion. As Fernandes (2014) argues, this process is sustained through the social production of fear, the stigmatization of Black and poor youth, the criminalization of cultural expressions, and the spatial confinement that restricts the right to the city. Gabriela's demands directly challenge these dynamics. By valuing cultural events, youth initiatives, and public recognition in the periphery, she reclaims these spaces as sites of creativity, expression, and social life, rather than territories marked only by danger and absence.

To Gabriela, bringing events, activities, and recognition into peripheral areas signals more than policy change; it represents a symbolic redistribution of visibility, making the periphery recognizable as part of the city and the nation. Gabriela articulates a clear political awareness: she connects recognition with participation and visibility with belonging. Her vision of change is oriented toward collective transformation — toward a Brazil where the periphery is not a margin to be managed, feared, and watched, but an essential and valued part of the whole.

Isabel's recommendation centred on addressing the sexual and racial division of labour. Her words reflect a sharp social awareness and a commitment to justice that extends beyond her own circumstances:

> I think, like, I don't know, include women more in terms of wage dignity, because often men and women work in the same company, doing the same thing, but men get paid much more than women. Or white women get paid much more than Black women, even though they do the same job, and both do it very well. So, I think issues like that. Give more value to women, especially Black women, you know? Because it's not always and everywhere, but there are times when white women have more privileges than Black women. Or men have more than women (Isabel, Interview).

Isabel articulates an intersectional critique of inequality that recognizes how gender and race intersect in the organization of labour and the distribution of value. Her emphasis on "wage

dignity" and the need to value Black women's work underscores a broader call for structural change, one that confronts persistent hierarchies of privilege in Brazilian society.

Ana, in turn, shifts the focus from gendered inequality to homelessness, highlighting her concern for those in situations of extreme precarity. When asked what she would demand of decision-making people, she responded: "I would ask for more assistance for people living on the streets" (Ana, Interview). She recalled a recent encounter with an elderly homeless man that had a deep emotional impact on her: "I spent the whole night thinking about it. I couldn't sleep at all, thinking, wow, I'm here in my house, right? I have a roof to sleep under, a bed, and he's out there, in those conditions, already old, without a family to take care of him" (Ana, Interview).

Ana's reflection conveys a profound sense of empathy and social responsibility. It also resonates with the ethic of care that runs throughout the young women's accounts, a concern not only for their own well-being but for the collective, for those whose suffering is normalized or ignored.

This orientation toward care and responsibility also emerged in group discussions about early childhood education. The young women emphasize the importance of recognizing children as individuals with their own subjectivities, rather than as mere extensions of their parents. Gabriela reflects:

> Whether we like it or not, they're [children] another being, not an extension of the parent; they're another person. So, I think we should get the child to think and let them be conscious from an early age. They'll become a better person. Like, set boundaries: "What did you say? You said this and that. Now think about it. Did it hurt you? No? But it hurt them." Like, it's not something you can just go around saying. If we really think of children as our future, then our future will truly be better, but only if we give them the attention they need (Gabriela, FG1).

Eloise added a critical note on how this notion of "children as the future" often remains an empty slogan: "there are so many people who say, 'children are our future,' and all that, but they don't actually do anything; they just talk" (Eloise, FG1). Her words expose the distance between rhetoric and practice, between promises of protection and the lived reality of young people who rarely have their needs, voices, or rights taken seriously.

The young women's recommendations reveal a sophisticated and politically aware understanding of social responsibility, justice, and the guarantee of rights (Weber et al., 2025). Maya's call for freedom, Eloise's demand for autonomy, Gabriela's insistence that the peripheries be seen in their fullness rather than through deficit lenses, her demand for dedicated

spaces for youth, and Isabel and Ana's appeals for dignity, safety, and equality all reimagine civic life from the margins: grounded in solidarity, interdependence, and the conviction that everyone, regardless of age, gender, race, or class, deserves to be seen, valued, and protected.

The young women use a human rights language, and through this lens, their reflections resonate strongly with the language of guarantee and protection, particularly the right to participation. Their recommendations echo the principles enshrined in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which recognizes that children are "capable of forming their own views" and have the right to "express those views freely in all matters affecting them." What the young women articulate, whether by demanding spaces for leisure, calling for political recognition, or insisting that their experiences and opinions matter, is precisely this: the right to be heard, taken seriously, and included in decisions that shape their lives and communities.

Their voices thus affirm that participation is a fundamental right. By naming the gaps, imagining alternatives, and proposing concrete solutions, the young women assert themselves as individuals of rights, not passive recipients of policy. Their recommendations challenge society and the state to move beyond rhetoric and recognize Black girls and young women from urban peripheries as legitimate political actors whose insights are essential for building a more just and equitable future.

Thus, their recommendations make visible a language of rights that runs through their visions for themselves, their communities, and their futures — a demand to be recognized as individuals of rights whose dignity and well-being should never be negotiable. In this sense, what they are resisting are not only material inequalities, but also the everyday assaults on personhood, dignity, self-worth, and social value that characterize structural violence (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004). Their claims, therefore, can be read as demands not only for inclusion, but for the recognition of their full humanity. And perhaps this is the insight that should guide us from the outset: that researchers, policymakers, and all those in positions of power ought to begin, not end, with the premise that these young women deserve the full protections and possibilities that a just society owes to every human being.

5. Closing Remarks

This chapter has traced a movement toward the margins — a shift in analytical focus to what is often dismissed, devalued, or rendered invisible within dominant representations of Black youth and peripheral communities. By grounding the analysis in the young women's desires, self-representations and self-definitions, I sought to illuminate what becomes possible when

the point of departure is not the problem-oriented or deficit-based narratives imposed upon them, but the knowledge they produce, the worlds they imagine, and the ways they choose to be seen.

The artistic intervention made this shift clear. When I initially proposed framing the photographs as a form of social denunciation, the young women declined, not because violence was irrelevant to them, but because they refused to be positioned once again as symbols of suffering, lack, or survival. Their insistence on images that celebrated beauty, diversity, joy, and friendship reoriented the narrative: they claimed the right to be seen in their humanity and positive aspects of their lives. The photographs, as they interpreted them, pushed back against stereotypes about Black women, the Black population, and peripheral residents more broadly. They opened space for expressions of delicacy, care, confidence, and pride, qualities rarely associated with poor young Black women in Brazil's racialized, classed, and gendered social discourses.

What unfolded in the research process further demonstrated how powerful it can be when structural constraints are not internalized as individual shortcomings. Through dialogue, collective listening, and shared experiences, the young women found relief, recognition, and mutual support. They discovered one another in new ways, strengthened relationships, and reframed personal challenges as symptoms of broader inequalities rather than personal failings. Being invited into a process where their voices mattered, where their opinions circulated, and where their experiences counted as knowledge was a form of resistance. Participation became a transformative practice: a space where their emotional burdens were lightened, their sense of belonging deepened, and their critical awareness sharpened.

Their aspirations and recommendations extend this movement of reframing and reclaiming. Whether calling for autonomy, freedom, dignity, structural change, recognition of the periphery, or a reimagining of labour and gender equality, the young women articulate visions that challenge dominant narratives about who they are and what futures are possible for them. Their dreams (professional, personal, political) contest the narrow horizons imposed on youth from peripheries. In doing so, they position themselves not as marginal subjects to be managed, disciplined, or rendered disposable but as protagonists of their own futures and as individuals entitled to rights, visibility, respect, and possibility.

CHAPTER TEN: DISCUSSION

My objective in this thesis was to challenge how violence is usually defined, recognized, and politicized, while also aiming to challenge stereotypical representations of young Black women living in marginalized communities. Dominant social discourses and institutional practices have framed marginalized Black youth as a social problem to be managed. However, as I argued, the problem does not lie with young people themselves, but in how society is structured. Systems of racism, patriarchy, sexism, class inequality, and enduring colonial legacies are not isolated forces; they are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, producing hierarchies and moral divisions that legitimize control, normalize violence, and sustain the dehumanization of certain groups.

In this context, I aimed to reframe the analytical perspective. Rather than treating young people as the locus of the problem, or as objects of concern, risk, or intervention, this study centres young women's perspectives, voices, experiences, and interpretations, and highlights where they identify the problem to lie. In doing so, the focus shifts from locating the "problem" within youth to finding the problem *with* young people. Thus, it investigates social arrangements, institutions, discourses, and interpersonal interactions that affect their lives in harmful ways, as well as those that affirm their value, recognize their perspectives, and support their autonomy.

To make this shift possible, the analysis combined the lenses of structural violence and intersectional feminism. These frameworks offer a comprehensive analytical lens — one that allows us to understand the broader organisation of society while also bringing into focus the nuances of lived experience. This "magnifying lens" reveals how violence functions not only as an event but as a continuous instrument of power that sustains the social machinery of inequality (Collins, 2019; Scheper-Hughes, 2004). At the same time, these dynamics are never totalizing; where domination operates, forms of resistance also emerge, challenging and confronting these structures and making visible the scale of inequalities and how they are felt, embodied, navigated, and resisted in daily life (Collins, 2019).

In this chapter, I initially address the first research question, which examines what young women identify, experience, and how they respond to violence. To do so, I revisit their experiences, drawing connections across the different dimensions explored in this thesis and showing how relations of power operate through violence as an instrument of domination. In the second section, I turn to how the young women's accounts of violence reveal the organization of power relations across structural, disciplinary, cultural, and interpersonal domains. The third section outlines this doctoral thesis's contributions. In the fourth section, I

address the second research question that guided this study, examining how feminist participatory research, grounded in an arts-based intervention, can contribute to the production of alternative discourses about young women. The fifth section discusses implications for policy and practice, and the final section identifies directions for future studies.

1. Experiencing and Challenging Intersecting Structural Violence

Centring young Black women's voices living in a marginalized community, this study foregrounded their social location as both a site of exposure to intersecting forms of structural violence and a position from which critical knowledge is produced (Collins, 1986, 1990/2022; hooks, 1984; Kilomba, 2010). To that end, one of my goals was to answer this research question: What do young Black women understand as violence, and how do they experience, interpret, resist, and respond to it? In this section, I discuss how the young women's accounts reveal that violence is not limited to discrete acts or extraordinary events, but is continuous and embedded in the spatial, social, intimate, and institutional organization of everyday lives. They are not, however, passive recipients of these conditions, but active interpreters who name, analyse, and challenge the forces shaping their lives.

The first dimension I examined was the young women's experiences with their place of residence. They demonstrated awareness of the social implications of living in an area far from urban centres, from geographical, socioeconomic, and symbolic perspectives. They identified the uneven distribution of resources and opportunities that affect their lives: limited access to services such as healthcare, education, and professional training; the absence of basic infrastructure such as banks and post offices; and the scarcity of leisure spaces for young people. They experience this through constant comparisons with other areas of the city, where services are more available, accessible, and higher quality. Furthermore, the young women's reflections make visible how unequal access is stratified within the community, as some live in areas marked by greater precarity and neglect. At the same time, the young women note improvements, particularly in relation to increased access to consumer goods. However, these shifts do not alter underlying structures of inequality. Rather, they coexist with, and in some ways obscure, the persistence of rigid social hierarchies.

In this context, the young women's perceptions resonate with reflections on structural violence, particularly in relation to the gap between actual and potential (Galtung, 1969). By comparing their area with more central neighbourhoods that offer higher-quality services, as well as with different areas within Vargem das Flores, the young women recognize socioeconomic inequality and situate themselves within broader class structures. They show a

clear awareness of being underserved, having access to lower-quality services, poorer infrastructure, and fewer leisure opportunities, reflecting their more precarious social position. Their accounts illustrate what it means to reside in territories marked by a structural deficit of citizenship, where residents are not seen as citizens with rights, material guarantees are unevenly distributed, and full integration into the urban project is denied (Fernandes, 2014).

Confronting this unequal reality is a source of suffering. For the young women, violence is the lived experience of inequality and injustice, not necessarily in terms of material deprivation. What emerges as particularly painful for the young women, what generates frustration, anger, and indignation, is the recognition of the limits of meritocratic promises. This illustrates how the young women experience one mechanism of the social machinery of inequality, reproduced through harmful and dangerous discourses (Scheper-Hughes, 2004). In this case, meritocracy functions as one of these discourses, obscuring structural inequalities and transferring responsibility from social systems to individuals. It naturalizes the idea that all individuals compete on equal footing, valuing them based on effort, ability, and achievement, while ignoring the unequal conditions that shape their opportunities.

The young women challenge the idea that hard work and dedication alone can ensure upward mobility, as they know the conditions available to them are fundamentally unequal. Limited access to quality education, the absence of nearby universities, inadequate healthcare, and the need to spend long hours commuting all shape their ability not only to access higher education, but to remain in it and to compete in the labour market. These constraints put them at a structural disadvantage compared with middle-class students who attend private schools and live closer to opportunities. Importantly, the young women do not interpret these limitations as individual failures. They do not question their own abilities; they see themselves as dedicated, hardworking, and committed. Rather, they recognize that they are systematically denied equal access and opportunities. In this sense, violence is felt in the gap between what is discursively promised and what is structurally denied.

In addition to experiences of socioeconomic inequalities, the young women also describe how living in the periphery entails navigating a militarized environment (Ursin, 2020). They speak about armed violence, drug dealing and gang dynamics with a degree of familiarity; however, this does not diminish the constant anticipation of harm, unpredictability and risk that permeates their everyday lives (Berents & ten Have, 2017; Machado da Silva & Leite, 2008; Menezes, 2015).

At the same time, the young women's accounts also demonstrate the internalization of dominant narratives that divide the periphery between those who follow the "easy" and

“wrong” path of crime and those who, through sheer willpower, choose the “harder” and “morally superior” path of distancing themselves from these dynamics (Motta, 2016; Ursin, 2020). This reflects the force of systems of domination in producing divisions and moral dualities between groups (Collins, 1986; hooks, 1984). In this sense, structural violence operates through discourses that reduce certain individuals to disposable lives and create divisions within the community (Scheper-Hughes, 2004). These discourses legitimize logics of enemy elimination, in which young people involved in criminal dynamics are constructed as threats, monsters or animals, whose extermination becomes justifiable (Ursin, 2020).

However, it is important to situate these perspectives within the broader conditions that shape the young women’s lives. Their interpretations are formed within an environment that is not safe for women, where they are indeed more exposed to risk. The militarization of the territory reinforces forms of hypermasculinity that position young women in situations of heightened vulnerability, particularly in their interactions with young men of similar ages (Menezes, 2015; Ursin, 2020). In this context, it is necessary to recognize the complexity of these dynamics: while young women may reproduce discourses that dehumanize young people involved in criminal activities, these same individuals can also represent real threats to their safety within a patriarchal environment that valorizes forms of masculinity expressed through aggression, fearlessness, and the capacity to exert control (Pimenta, 2023).

Yet, the young women do not passively accept these dynamics. They often interpret and respond to performances of hypermasculinity with irony, at times mocking the exaggerated displays of toughness, fearlessness, and dominance enacted by some young men. In doing so, they disrupt these performances and challenge superiority claims that sustain them, shaking gendered logics of subordination, objectification, and control that are part of militarized environments (Ursin, 2020). This critical stance, however, does not eliminate risks. The young women continue to live under conditions of vigilance, where the possibility of being caught in conflicts or exposed to harm remains ever-present (Machado da Silva & Leite, 2008; Menezes, 2015).

These militarized dynamics also shape how young women occupy public space (Berents & ten Have, 2017; Cobbina et al., 2008; Rizzini & Limongi, 2016; Ursin, 2020; Weber et al., 2025). Their mobility and presence are organized along gendered lines. While young men tend to claim the streets as their territory, occupying and asserting control over public space, young women’s movements are more constrained. As a result, the community does not operate as an extension of their homes in the same way it often does for young men. Instead, public space is experienced as unevenly accessible, marked by gendered risks and exclusions.

The second dimension I explored was the experiences of young women in the domestic sphere. However, rather than depicting it as a space of simple confinement, the young women's accounts reveal its complexity and ambivalence. Their daily routines are shaped by significant responsibilities related to domestic and care work, which are demanding and limit their access to leisure, rest, the pursuit of personal interests, and opportunities outside the home. These responsibilities are tied to the material conditions of low-income households, where the lack of financial resources and limited access to public services, such as childcare, make it necessary for families to rely on the unpaid labour of young women (Biroli, 2016).

The young women's routines reveal how the sexual and racial division of labour is naturalized in everyday life. They are positioned within a social order in which domestic and care work is not only expected, but pre-assigned to them. Family expectations often place them as primarily responsible for reproductive labour, reinforcing the idea that their role, now and in the future, is to remain in service to others. As daughters of domestic workers, babysitters, and cleaners, they are socialized into positions that they are expected to reproduce, reflecting broader racialized and gendered continuities (Collins, 1990/2022; Gonzalez, 1984; hooks, 1991). These expectations are rarely framed as problematic. Instead, they are naturalized to the point that the limitations they impose on education, rest, leisure, and personal development become invisible. In this sense, maintaining the social machinery of inequality depends on this process: that marginalized young Black women learn, internalize, and accept their assigned place within the social structure.

At the same time, these practices of care cannot be reduced to imposition, burden, or subordination alone. They are also embedded in relationships of affection, protection, reciprocity, and responsibility. The young women describe their involvement in care work not as an obligation, but as a contribution to the household's functioning, particularly in contexts where other family members work long hours outside the home and in response to their mothers' hardships. Therefore, young women's interpretations of care challenge reductive readings of domestic work as solely oppressive, highlighting the importance of centring lived experience in understanding how power operates.

Care is also a site through which they express solidarity, commitment, and a desire to "give back," while positioning themselves as central actors in the organisation and management of everyday life. This fosters a sense of responsibility, competence, and maturity, providing security and strength. Yet, this sense of maturity is not without cost. It often emerges alongside premature responsibility that curtails their childhood and teenage years, generating exhaustion

and a persistent sense of burden. Moments of being "just a teenager" become limited and conditional, confined to brief periods in which responsibilities momentarily decrease.

In addition, the young women's experiences also reveal the gendered organization of power within the household through the absence, or limited involvement, of fathers in care and domestic responsibilities. These dynamics reflect broader patriarchal structures that assign differential value to productive and reproductive roles, reinforcing gendered hierarchies across domestic and institutional domains (Hirata & Kergoat, 2007; Picanço et al., 2024). When present, male figures are often associated with the productive sphere, occupying roles that are more socially valued and symbolically positioned as superior. At the same time, reproductive labour remains feminized, undervalued, and disproportionately assigned to women. Domestic and care work expectations, however, are not passively accepted. The young women know these patterns resonate with broader patriarchal norms. In this way, the domestic sphere is a site where violence and resistance are entangled: where inequalities are reproduced through everyday expectations but also where young women negotiate, reinterpret, and challenge gender norms.

Inequalities between men and women extend beyond the domestic sphere. In this regard, the third aspect I investigated was the young women's interactions with men in various contexts, in which gender hierarchies and relationships of subordination are reproduced and enforced through direct violence. The young women's accounts reveal how sexual harassment is a pervasive and recurrent feature of their everyday lives. Their interactions with men, whether fathers, grandfathers, uncles, teachers, peers, or strangers, are marked by a constant exposure to behaviours that are violent, abusive, intimidating, controlling, harassing, authoritarian, objectifying, and devaluing. These experiences reflect the weight of patriarchal, sexist, and racialized structures that legitimize such behaviours as mechanisms through which men assert and maintain positions of domination (hooks, 1984).

In public settings, young women describe frequent experiences of sexual harassment in the streets and on public transportation, reinforcing how access to public space is structured by gendered relations of power, shaping who can move freely and who remains exposed to harm (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ceccato, 2022; Tiznado-Aitken et al., 2024; Santos, 2015). In more intimate contexts, uncles emerge as an ambivalent figure: socially constructed as trustworthy and affectionate, yet often crossing boundaries through inappropriate sexual comments and behaviours. These dynamics expose how family environment, often idealized as a space of protection, can also be a site where violence is normalized, minimized, or rendered invisible (Sousa, 2017). This ambivalence highlights how violence is often embedded within

relationships of trust, contributing to its normalization and invisibility within family contexts. It can also be understood as a "public secret" — structural violence that remains concealed and unspoken, even though it is widely known and experienced (Parazelli, 2008).

A similar pattern emerges in schools. Although schools are expected to function as educational spaces of protection, trust, and support, young women's experiences reveal a different reality. Schools are also environments where sexual harassment occurs, both through institutional practices that reproduce victim-blaming discourses and through harassment perpetrated by male peers and teachers. Rather than challenging these dynamics, schools often contribute to the maintenance and reproduction of systems of domination. Sexual harassment thus is a constant presence in young women's lives, spanning public spaces, family environments, and institutional settings.

However, the young women challenge these conditions. Drawing on their own experiences and those observed within their families, they develop critical awareness. Feelings of distrust and disillusionment lead them to become attentive to red flags in relationships, including emotional dependency and controlling behaviours. In response, they articulate aspirations for romantic relationships grounded in respect, care, autonomy, equality, and reciprocity. These aspirations point to a reimagining of gender relations, challenging dominant norms and opening possibilities for alternative forms of intimacy and connection.

The fourth dimension I focused on was the school. The school emerges as a central institution where hierarchies and inequalities are reproduced and actively maintained. The young women's accounts, particularly when considered alongside their experiences of racism and sexual harassment within schools, reveal how this institution plays a key role in shaping their position within the social order. Significantly, this was the only point of consensus among the young women: they identified the school as a site where multiple forms of violence converge — an institutional space where harm is produced, covered up, and normalized. This shared recognition among the young women underscores the centrality of the school in their experiences of structural violence.

Through adultist practices, their voices are undermined: their perspectives are dismissed, their complaints disregarded, and their participation limited, unless mediated by adults. While responsibilities are delegated to them, opportunities to question, intervene, or shift power relations remain restricted. Schools also reproduce stigmatizing narratives that position them as lacking potential or destined for failure, further eroding their sense of recognition and belonging. In this sense, schools operate as sites where young women are

taught to comply and accept their place within hierarchical relations of obedience and subordination.

However, the young women also identify moments of support and recognition in their relationships with some teachers, who disrupt institutional logics and engage with them, affirming their voice and legitimacy. Moreover, they recognise the value of relationships with adults and do not reject intergenerational alliances; their experiences with facilitators in the Fica Vivo! workshops illustrate this. In these spaces, they describe being seen, heard, and valued as individuals. Rather than being treated as subjects to be controlled or managed, they are recognised as persons with knowledge, agency, and capacity to interpret and transform their realities. These encounters point to alternative possibilities for engagement — ones that affirm their dignity and create conditions for participation, trust, and meaningful connection, challenging dominant institutional logics centred on control and discipline.

It is important to emphasize that all these experiences are lived through young, Black, female bodies residing in the periphery. This underscores how structural violence is embodied, shaping not only life chances but also how bodies are perceived, valued, and treated. It is within this context that the fifth and final dimension I examined concerns how young women navigate the world through the encounter between their bodies and their surroundings.

The young women's accounts reveal how their bodies are constantly devalued, discarded, regulated, controlled, and dehumanized, demonstrating how structural violence strips certain groups of moral worth, in ways that are deeply connected to the historical devaluation of Black women (Collins, 1990/2022; Gonzalez, 1984; hooks, 1991; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004). Situated at the intersection of race, gender, age, class, and place of residence, their bodies are persistently targeted by norms and expectations that frame them as inadequate, excessive, deviant, or in need of correction.

From an early age, the young women encounter messages that position their bodies as undesirable, inappropriate, unworthy of admiration, whether through pressures to alter their hair, regulate their clothing, or conform their behaviour and sexuality to socially imposed moral standards of beauty and respectability. Even though they sometimes also perpetuate moral discourses that restrict and judge women's sexual autonomy — which is noteworthy because, unlike racial relations, when it comes to gender norms, they still reproduce these expectations, pointing to some normalization within everyday life.

These embodied experiences are further intensified by the fact that they are not immune to contemporary neoliberal ideals of femininity, which demand constant self-surveillance and self-discipline in the pursuit of beauty, desirability, and perfection (McRobbie, 2015). Even

when they are structurally excluded from fully accessing these ideals, the young women are nonetheless affected by discourses that demand that girls and young women excel in all areas of their lives. This produces impacts on their mental health and contributes to feelings of isolation, comparison, and competition among young women, highlighting how structural violence also operates at the level of subjectivity, affecting how young women perceive themselves and relate to others. However, the young women also critically interpret these pressures, recognising them as connected to broader patriarchal norms and noting that it is men who set these rules.

These findings reinforce that violence cannot be understood only through direct acts of harm, but also through indirect processes that are embedded in the unjust and hierarchical organization of society (Farmer, 2004; Galtung, 1969; Iadicola & Shupe, 2003; Scheper-Hughes, 2004). In many cases, there is no single identifiable perpetrator to whom responsibility can be attributed. Rather, violence is produced through a social order that systematically targets entire groups, shaping conditions that generate suffering, constrain possibilities, and deny recognition (Farmer, 1996, 2004). As the young women's experiences demonstrate, harm is not always the result of explicit aggression, but of being positioned within structures that normalize exclusion, unequal access, and limited opportunities. These processes are sustained through harmful discourses that classify, divide, and hierarchize populations, rendering some lives less valuable, less protected, and more expendable than others (Scheper-Hughes, 2004; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004). In this sense, structural violence is not exceptional but ordinary: it operates through the everyday, through what is normalized, repeated, and taken for granted, producing suffering and keeping inequalities in place.

2. What Young Women's Experiences Reveal About Power Relations

In the previous section, in which I revisited what the young women identified and named as violence, it becomes possible to observe the pervasiveness with which power relations operate in everyday life through instruments that produce harm and suffering. These findings demonstrate that the co-researchers' experiences of structural violence cannot be understood through isolated domains of life but must be approached as interconnected processes operating simultaneously across space, relationships, institutions, and embodied experiences. Structural violence emerges here as a global, all-encompassing, continuous, and relational process, requiring attention to multiple dimensions of young women's lives. As Collins (2019) argues, violence constitutes a saturated site of intersecting power relations, and the young women's

experiences illustrate how these relations operate in practice, using violence as a mechanism of domination.

Looking at the structural domain of power, it becomes possible to see how oppression is organized (Collins, 1990/2022). The young women's accounts illustrate how social institutions are structured in ways that sustain social hierarchies. When they describe inequalities in access to healthcare and education, as well as the absence or poor quality of services in their communities, they reveal the outcomes of historically produced policies and institutional arrangements that systematically exclude Black women from fully exercising their citizenship rights (Collins, 1990/2022). Relegated to life in the periphery, they experience social exclusion through under-resourced services, poorly funded and racially segregated schools, and limited infrastructure. These conditions are not accidental but reflect intentional processes of exclusion, consistent with "decivilizing" dynamics shaping peripheral territories in Brazil (Fernandes, 2014). In these contexts, institutional fragility, state neglect, the deterioration of public life, rights violations, and the normalization of punitive control converge to deny the material and symbolic guarantees necessary for full participation in the urban project (Fernandes, 2014).

This analysis also resonates with Farmer's (2004) formulation of structural violence as violence exerted systematically and indirectly by "everyone who belongs to a certain social order" (Farmer, 2004, p. 307). The young women's accounts show how, within a social order, entire communities become constructed as dangerous territories, legitimizing rights violations and framing residents as potential criminals rather than citizens entitled to rights (Fernandes, 2014).

From the perspective of the cultural domain of power, these constructions are not merely descriptive but constitutive: dominant discourses sustain them by framing peripheral territories as spaces to be managed, controlled, and watched. These representations legitimize the unequal distribution of protection, recognition, and resources, reinforcing the structural organization of power. In this sense, what Farmer (2004) describes as a diffuse and collective form of violence is made possible and sustained by a structural and cultural organization of power that legitimizes exclusion and organizes intervention, surveillance, and control over marginalized communities.

Within this broader landscape, the school emerges as a particularly significant institution. It concentrates multiple forms of power and reveals how racism, sexism, classism, and adultism are deeply embedded in institutional practices. In doing so, it plays an active role

in maintaining the organization of oppression across class, race, age, and gender — thus illustrating how structural power operates to sustain inequality.

Turning to the disciplinary domain of power, the findings show how oppression is managed through everyday practices, particularly through organizational procedures (Collins, 1990/2022). The young women encounter multiple actors who function as agents of discipline and surveillance, ensuring that social hierarchies are maintained. This includes, for instance, security personnel in healthcare settings who deny access based on appearance, store employees who watch them under assumptions of criminality, and school administrators and teachers who reproduce racism while denying its existence. It is also evident in school rules that shift responsibility for harassment onto young women, institutional responses that silence complaints, and educational practices that position students as failures all function as disciplinary mechanisms. These processes regulate behaviour and reinforce social hierarchies, producing young Black women expected to be quiet, orderly, docile, and disciplined — so they know their place in the social hierarchy (Collins, 1990/2022).

Importantly, this disciplinary power must be understood as extending beyond formal institutions and bureaucratic procedures. As Collins (1990/2022) argues, the objectification of Black women means that members of more powerful social groups feel entitled to watch them, and when we take age into account, this becomes even more evident. The young women's accounts clearly demonstrate this: they are disciplined not only by institutions, but by a wide range of actors in their everyday lives: older sisters, mothers, fathers, extended family members, teachers, peers, white individuals, adults, and men. Across these interactions, everybody assumes the authority to speak for them, judge them, and regulate their behaviour.

Positioned at the bottom of social hierarchies, young Black women are consistently treated as individuals in need of control, correction, and supervision. They are perceived as less knowledgeable, less capable, and less legitimate, allowing others to claim moral and social superiority over them. As a result, their bodies and lives are continuously monitored and regulated — through their clothing, hairstyles, behaviour, and life choices. There is always someone watching, evaluating, and intervening. In this sense, disciplinary power operates not only through institutional rules and bureaucracies, but through everyday social relations that normalize the constant surveillance, regulation and public scrutiny of young Black women.

The cultural domain of power further reveals how oppression is justified and legitimized through dominant ideologies, symbols, and representations (Collins, 1990/2022). This is evident in the young women's experiences of pressure to straighten their hair, in the association of Black bodies with dirt or undesirability, in the policing of femininity through

clothing and appearance, and in the normalization of harassment as a response to women's bodies, clothes or behaviour. These representations naturalize inequality and reinforce systems of domination.

Finally, the interpersonal domain of power highlights how these dynamics are reproduced in everyday interactions and treatment (Collins, 1990/2022). The young women describe numerous instances in which they are mistreated, devalued, or victimized in routine interactions across different contexts with a wide range of people. These are recurring, familiar practices that often go unnamed as violence. By naming and making visible these experiences, the young women disrupt their normalization and expose how structural violence operates through the ordinary.

Thus, centring young women's voices and identifying violence as an instrument of systems of domination makes it possible to illustrate how these systems are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, operating through shared underlying logics. What may appear as distinct dimensions, such as mobility, access to resources, domestic responsibilities, interpersonal violence, or exclusion, are different expressions of the same processes of power. Speaking about one of these dimensions inevitably reveals the others, as class, race, gender, age, and territory are co-constitutive and cannot be analytically or experientially separated (Collins, 2019; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Ribeiro, 2024).

In this sense, young women's mobility is restricted through the combined effects of racism, classism, and sexism, which transform access to the city into a privilege, construct Black bodies in public space as threats, and position the streets as male territories. These same logics are present in the unequal distribution of access and opportunities, sustained by systems that devalue poor populations and assume that women's time should be made available for others. They are also evident in the expectation that young women's bodies remain indefinitely available, whether to meet men's desires and demands or to fulfil roles of care and domestic work. They operate through the normalization of insecurity and lack of protection in a context where men are permitted to harass and control women, where families are not safe spaces, and where institutions such as schools deny young women authority, credibility, and recognition. They are also present in exclusionary ideals that determine who is worthy of visibility, admiration, and value, privileging those who conform to dominant, racialized, classed, and gendered standards of beauty and respectability.

These processes illustrate how structural violence systematically operates to displace young Black women from positions of visibility, recognition, admiration, prestige, and social value. What is at stake is not only material inequality, but the ongoing denial of their presence,

voice, worth, and credibility across multiple social life domains. For this reason, these dynamics cannot be addressed in isolation. Challenging gender norms without confronting racialized and classed constructions of marginality or addressing socioeconomic inequality without disrupting racist and patriarchal ideologies risks reproducing hierarchies that these efforts seek to dismantle.

At the same time, while structural transformations require collective efforts and institutional change to advance social justice, the interconnectedness that sustains these systems also creates possibilities for disruption across domains (Collins, 1990/2022). Because power relations are mutually reinforcing, actions that challenge one axis of domination can reverberate across others, destabilizing inequalities. In this sense, these findings challenge any notion of structural violence as totalizing or deterministic. Across all dimensions, young women actively interpret, negotiate, and respond to the conditions shaping their lives. Their accounts reveal ambivalence, contradiction, and critical awareness, illustrating that domination and resistance are co-constitutive processes (Collins, 1990/2022). As a saturated site of intersecting power relations, violence also reveals possibilities for resistance and transformation.

Furthermore, because resistance also operates within the interpersonal domain, it takes multiple forms (Collins, 1990/2022). The young women demonstrate how ordinary individuals can contribute to social justice not necessarily through large-scale acts of activism, but through small, everyday practices that are nonetheless significant. These include speaking out against racism and sexism, denouncing violence, building solidarity with other women, reframing social problems as structural rather than individual, refusing abusive relationships, making plans, demanding equal treatment, and asserting their own self-definitions and worth. In doing so, they not only survive and navigate oppressive conditions, but participate in destabilizing the logics that sustain them.

Yet, the young women's responses also reveal internalized forms of oppression. Their perspectives and actions may also contribute to the criminalization of other young people or to the reproduction of gender norms. However, as Collins (1990/2022) reminds us, individuals rarely occupy positions of pure victimhood or pure domination. Systems of oppression are inherently contradictory, and social positions might entail both penalties and privileges (Collins, 1990/2022). Recognizing this complexity allows us to move beyond simplistic binaries of oppressors and oppressed, which would otherwise reproduce the same dualistic logic through which systems of domination operate (Collins, 1986; hooks, 1984). A feminist intersectional perspective, therefore, emphasizes complexity and relationality, enabling

analyses that do not prioritize one axis of oppression over another, nor one form of resistance over others (Collins, 2019; Collins & Bilge, 2020). Rather, it highlights how multiple systems of power intersect, reinforce, and are simultaneously contested in everyday life.

3. Thesis Contributions

As summarized in the previous sections, examining the young women's experiences of what they identify and interpret as harmful contributes theoretically and empirically to giving substance, visibility, and meaning to structural violence — mechanisms of oppression that produce forms of harm that often remain unnoticed, in secret, and are normalized to keep the social machinery of inequality (Collins, 2019; Parazelli, 2008; Scheper-Hughes, 2004). By centring young women's lived experiences and their own interpretations of what hurts, constrains, and affects them, this thesis sheds light on dimensions of violence that are typically rendered invisible or taken for granted. In doing so, it illustrates how violence is a saturated site of intersecting power relations and provides a rich and grounded understanding of their lives, making explicit how systems of power use violence as an instrument of domination (Collins, 2019). This contribution is important given that these systems operate precisely through processes of invisibilization.

Moreover, as I explained in the previous section, this study contributes, on the one hand, by empirically demonstrating how power relations operate across interpersonal, structural, disciplinary, and cultural domains (Collins, 1990/2022). On the other hand, I also show that, within this organization of power, forms of resistance emerge across interpersonal relationships, cultural expressions, and in acts that challenge disciplinary norms that regulate and punish bodies according to their social positioning. However, it is significant that no institution emerges as a site of counteraction to violence. This absence is analytically important and speaks to the role of social institutions in reproducing and maintaining social inequalities.

This thesis also reinforces the importance of social context, a central concern in intersectional analysis (Collins & Bilge, 2020). While young women in marginalized communities may share experiences of violence, such as sexual harassment, objectification, domestic confinement, and restricted mobility, these patterns risk becoming homogenized when context is overlooked. By focusing on Vargem das Flores, I show how structural violence is differently configured and lived through localized conditions, including, for example, geographic isolation, a vast and internally diverse region and the presence of multiple rival gangs. In doing so, it demonstrates that intersectional analyses must remain grounded in the specificity of place, as intersecting structures of oppression do not produce only uniform

experiences, but also unique, distinct and contextually shaped forms of oppression and resistance.

This thesis also contributes to scholarship on youth and violence by challenging dominant framings that have traditionally shaped the field. Existing literature has largely been guided by quantitative data on interpersonal violence, where violence is primarily understood as direct, observable acts, closely associated with crime. As a result, research has disproportionately focused on young men, who are positioned as the main actors in violent dynamics, both as victims and perpetrators, particularly in relation to homicide and involvement in illegal activities (Caruso et al., 2020; Pimenta, 2023). In contrast, when young women are considered, discussions tend to centre on sexual violence and reproductive risks, reinforcing a gendered division in how youth experiences of violence are conceptualized (Chacham & Jayme, 2016; Fernandes, 2023; Hill et al., 2024; Teixeira & Taquette, 2010).

At the same time, scholarship has documented how processes of criminalization, militarization, and moral regulation shape life in peripheral contexts, often producing homogenizing representations of marginalized communities where children and young people are seen as inherently predisposed to deviance and therefore in need of constant control (Beraldo, 2022; Fernandes, 2014; Ursin, 2020). However, these analyses have also tended to focus primarily on young men, further consolidating a masculinized image of peripheral youth.

This thesis advances this body of work by centring the voices of young women and examining how these broader regimes of control are experienced across multiple dimensions of their everyday lives. In doing so, it shows that criminalization, militarization, and moral regulation are not confined to contexts directly related to crime but operate pervasively across social life. These dynamics shape not only young women's exposure to violence, but also how they are disciplined, controlled, and positioned within hierarchical social relations.

Furthermore, this study contributes by connecting forms of harm that are often treated separately in the literature. While it is known that young women are disproportionately affected by poverty, domestic responsibilities, and gender-based violence, this research demonstrates how these experiences are interconnected and embedded within broader structures of power. By examining everyday spaces from the street to the home, from schools to public services, and intimate experiences, this thesis reveals "grey zones," less visible, unrecognized, and often overlooked forms of violence that shape young women's lives beyond more obvious or spectacular forms of harm (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004).

Finally, this thesis expands existing discussions on youth agency. While previous research has shown that young people are not passive in the face of violence, this has often

been explored in relation to survival strategies within contexts of armed conflict or criminal dynamics (Berents & ten Have, 2017; Rizzini & Limongi, 2016; Van Dijk et al., 2025). This study demonstrates that young women's agency extends far beyond these contexts. They are not passive in any dimension of their lives, but actively interpret, negotiate, and challenge the conditions they encounter across multiple domains, from interpersonal relationships to institutional settings and cultural norms.

Considering these contributions, this thesis also calls attention to how structural inequalities extend to the production of knowledge. The unequal distribution of epistemic authority between academics and marginalized communities shapes not only what is studied, but how young people are represented and understood (Silva, 2014). As discussed, dominant scholarship on youth and violence has largely centred deficit-based and problem-oriented narratives, contributing to framing young people, particularly racialized youth and those from marginalized communities, as problems to be managed, controlled, or explained. By contrast, this study demonstrates the importance of centring young women as legitimate knowers of their own realities.

In doing so, this study not only challenges dominant youth representations but also promotes research as a space for resistance. This shift is significant given that many forms of violence identified throughout this thesis are those that attack young women's dignity, self-worth, and humanity. Creating space for self-definition and empowerment, as foregrounded in Black feminist epistemology, thus emerges not only as a methodological choice, but as a political and epistemic intervention (Collins, 1990/2022). Considering this, the following section addresses the second research question, examining how feminist, participatory, and arts-based approaches can contribute to the production of alternative discourses about young women that centre their voices, values, and experiences.

4. Producing Alternative Discourses: Feminist Participatory Research and Young Women's Voices

This section addresses the second research question that guided this thesis: How can feminist participatory research based on art-based interventions contribute to the production of alternative discourses about young women, narratives that centre their perspectives, values, and worldviews, and contribute to social justice? To answer this question, I build on the epistemic shift discussed in the previous section, which highlights the importance of challenging the unequal distribution of epistemic authority between academic knowledge production and marginalized communities (Silva, 2014). As discussed in Chapter Three, the PAR approach

was not fully implemented across all stages of the research due to temporal and contextual constraints. Nevertheless, the participatory process created meaningful opportunities for the young women to contribute to knowledge production and to build alternative discourses about their lives and experiences.

By focusing on young women's lived experiences through theoretical, methodological and epistemological approaches grounded in the premise that those who experience reality are best positioned to interpret it and imagine alternatives, this study rethinks how knowledge can be produced differently (Brown, 2024; Collins, 1990/2022). Across the analysis, this orientation makes it possible to attend not only to what harms, but also to how young women interpret, confront, and respond to these conditions in their everyday lives. Thus, it challenges dominant and problem-oriented narratives that frame young Black women from peripheral communities in narrow and disempowering ways, refusing representations that position them solely as victims. Instead, it foregrounds their roles as active knowledge producers about their own lives and social realities. In this sense, research becomes a site of humanization and resistance. By positioning young women as protagonists and knowledge producers, it challenges the limited horizons imposed by inequalities and affirms their capacity to name, theorize, imagine, and demand more just realities.

Importantly, the findings also suggest the need to reconsider how research frames marginalized young people. While experiences of structural violence are central to their lives, they do not fully define them. This becomes visible in the arts-based intervention, where creativity, imagination, and collective expression foreground what sustains, inspires, and brings joy and empowerment. However, this is not limited to the intervention itself; it is present throughout the study, as young women articulate forms of protection, resistance, and meaning-making alongside experiences of harm. Focusing exclusively on violence risks reproducing the same limiting narratives that research often seeks to challenge. In contrast, attending to both oppression and resistance opens possibilities for a more comprehensive, nuanced, and transformative understanding of young people’s lives.

The artistic intervention becomes a key site to produce alternative discourses, making visible how young women actively reframe dominant narratives on their own terms. Crucially, it revealed a significant epistemic shift: rather than centring narratives of harm, the young women chose to foreground what they valued, celebrated, and wished to affirm about themselves. This choice is analytically important, as it challenges the tendency within research to privilege narratives that reduce young people to sites of victimization, risk, and deficiency.

Through the photographs, they foregrounded the diversity of Black bodies, hair textures, and skin tones, while also highlighting friendship and solidarity among young women as powerful forms of resistance. In doing so, they challenged dominant beauty standards rooted in whiteness and middle-class norms, portrayals of the Black population, as well as controlling images such as hyper-sexualization and the denial of Black women's vulnerability. By prioritizing self-representation, beauty, friendship, and solidarity, the young women not only resisted dominant representations but also redefined what is worth knowing and making visible.

The participatory process also enabled critical reflections on space and inequality. By occupying elite urban locations for the photoshoot, the young women recognized how spatial inequalities are normalized in their everyday lives. At the same time, the PAR approach created a space that is often absent in their communities: one where they could speak openly, be heard, and collectively make sense of their experiences. A key transformation observed was the shift from individualized understandings of suffering to a structural awareness of inequality. Experiences such as domestic violence and sexual harassment, illustrated, for instance, in discussions about "uncles," were denaturalized, generating both relief and a sense of collective protection.

Thus, I demonstrate how knowledge produced from marginalized positions can challenge dominant narratives and foster social transformation (Collins, 1990/2022; Kilomba, 2010). As Kilomba (2010) argues, such knowledge becomes threatening because it makes visible what is meant to remain unseen and unspoken, contributing to the spread of the "public secret" of structural violence (Parazelli, 2008). By creating space for young women to name and reflect on these realities, this research contributes to transforming what is known but silenced into knowledge that is shared, contested, and politicized.

In this sense, feminist participatory research grounded in principles of self-definition becomes a powerful intervention in discussions of structural violence (Collins, 1990/2022). Because structural violence operates through ongoing attacks on dignity and personhood, the ability of young women to define and show themselves on their own terms becomes profoundly significant. Self-definition allows young women to reclaim authority over how their lives are represented, shifting the focus from externally imposed narratives of deficiency to articulated understandings of value, beauty, and self-worth. As the findings show, what the young women chose to foreground — their beauty, delicacy, diversity, and relationships of care and solidarity — speaks directly to what structural violence seeks to undermine. In this way, self-definition emerges as a response to domination and a means of reconfiguring the terms through which young women are seen, known, and valued.

5. Implications For Policies and Practices

Acknowledging structural violence is fundamental for practitioners working with young people, as it challenges the tendency to individualize social problems that place responsibility on youth. As I show, violence is not limited to direct or visible acts; it is embedded in how institutions, discourses, and everyday practices are organized. This is significant given that no institution emerged as a site of opposition to violence. While individual actors, such as certain teachers and workshop facilitators, at times resisted and challenged harmful dynamics, institutions largely contributed to existing inequalities.

Practitioners must therefore be attentive not only to visible or extreme forms of harm, but also to the subtle, normalized, and multiple forms of violence that affect young women's dignity, self-worth, and sense of belonging. This involves making visible what has been normalized, naming what has been silenced, and contributing to the transformation of "public secrets" into shared and overt knowledge. In this sense, social workers can play an important role in alleviating the suffering produced by systems of oppression while also contributing to broader structural change (Mullaly, 2007).

At the same time, these findings point to the importance of practitioners acting as critical allies within institutional settings. Even when institutions rely on disciplinary power, practitioners can occupy positions that allow them to challenge, disrupt, and reconfigure these dynamics from within. Rather than reproducing logics of surveillance, control, and judgment, practitioners can foster relationships grounded in trust, solidarity, and care. This involves recognizing young people as competent individuals, creating space for dialogue, and resisting practices that reinforce hierarchical relations of authority. In doing so, practitioners contribute to challenging disciplinary power and reshaping how institutions engage with young people (Collins, 1990/2022). This insight connects to young people's expressed need for spaces where they can seek support without fear of stigma or judgment (Sampson & Villela, 2017; Weber et al., 2025).

Another key implication for practice lies in the urgent need to create organizational and institutional spaces where young women can speak freely and be heard. The study's participatory process illustrates the transformative potential of approaches grounded in trust, care, and collaboration. Rather than positioning young people as passive recipients of intervention, such approaches recognize them as active individuals capable of interpreting their realities and contributing to meaningful change. This has direct implications for how programs and services are designed, suggesting the need to move away from models centred on control,

discipline, and risk management toward those that prioritize recognition, autonomy, confidence, leadership, and participation.

Importantly, this also requires addressing the current imbalance in youth programming, where initiatives are often designed with young men in mind, particularly in contexts focused on crime prevention. As a result, young women's needs, interests, and demands remain largely overlooked. Developing programs specifically oriented toward young women is therefore essential to ensure that they have access to supportive spaces that respond to their realities, including as a way of fostering solidarity and connection among young women, while countering dynamics of rivalry, competition, and loneliness.

In addition, these findings point to the urgent need to rethink public space as a site of safety, belonging, and accessibility for young women. Peripheral territories are often framed as dangerous spaces, which leads to interventions predominantly focused on public security (Cavalcanti, 2017; Fernandes, 2014; Machado da Silva & Menezes, 2019; Motta, 2016). However, such approaches fail to address the everyday experiences and needs of young women, leaving them underserved and exposed to harm. Public policies must therefore move beyond security measures and invest in creating safe, welcoming, and inclusive environments where young women feel entitled to occupy, circulate, and exist. This includes ensuring that streets, community spaces, and public facilities are accessible and safe for them. In this regard, mobility is a central concern. In contexts such as Vargem das Flores, improving public transportation is fundamental. This involves not only increasing efficiency, accessibility, and reliability, but also ensuring safety, particularly considering the widespread experiences of harassment reported by the young women. Safe, affordable, and accessible transportation is essential for enabling young women's access to education, work, leisure, and public life more broadly.

Finally, I want to reinforce the young women's recommendations for practice. Their recommendations point to the need for a society in which they are not limited in what they can become, where they have greater autonomy and freedom to define their own paths. They call for peripheral communities to be recognized not only for their deprivation, but for their potential, diversity, and richness. They emphasize the importance of creating more spaces where young people can be heard and where their demands can be voiced and taken seriously. They also highlight the need for greater access to services, opportunities, and events within peripheral areas. In addition, they stress the importance of valuing Black women, ensuring fair wages, recognition, and equity in the labour market. Their concerns extend beyond their own

experiences, calling for broader social recognition and support for other marginalized groups, including people experiencing homelessness.

6. Future Studies

This thesis also presents limitations that point to important directions for future research. Given the broad scope, which engages multiple dimensions of young women's experiences of violence, it was not possible to examine each dimension in depth. While this approach allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how structural violence operates across different domains of everyday life, it also points to avenues for future research. Each theme explored in this study could be further developed through more focused analyses. In particular, the role of religion remains underexplored. Although it emerged in the data, I did not include a dedicated section examining its influence. Because religion constitutes an important normative regime in peripheral contexts (Beraldo, 2022), future research could examine how religious beliefs and institutions shape interpersonal interactions, regulate behaviour, promote moral values, and influence young women's experiences and interpretations of violence.

A rights-based approach to understanding and addressing young people's experiences of structural violence also emerges as an important direction for future research. Notably, the language of rights came up in the young women's own narratives, as they articulated demands for recognition, dignity, and access to opportunities. This suggests that rights should not be explored only in legal frameworks, but as meaningful tools and theories that can be mobilized in research in different fields to name injustices, claim recognition, and open possibilities for action and transformation (Scheper-Hughes, 2004).

Drawing on Ho (2007), exploring this further could help bridge discussions of structural inequalities with human rights frameworks, particularly in ways that foreground young people as individuals of rights rather than objects of protection or intervention. In this sense, adopting a rights-based approach not as an endpoint but as a starting point for research may open new possibilities for analysing how access to education, healthcare, safe public spaces, and dignified living conditions are not only distributed, but actively claimed, negotiated, and often denied in practice.

To conclude, another important direction for future research is to shift analytical starting points away from harm and deficit, and toward what young people identify as empowering and meaningful in their lives. Rather than focusing primarily on problems, risks, or vulnerabilities, research could begin from young people's own understandings of what brings them confidence, joy, a sense of belonging, and possibilities for growth. Attending to

these dimensions may reveal underexplored forms of resistance, collective support, and everyday practices that contribute to well-being and social justice. In this sense, examining what enables young people to thrive, even within constraining conditions, can offer valuable insights into alternative pathways for intervention, policy, and practice that build on existing strengths rather than address deficits alone.

In sum, these directions point to the need for future research that is attentive to young people's voices, experiences, and capacities to analyse their realities and reimagine their worlds. This also calls for greater incorporation of critical, participatory, and creative methodologies in studies on youth and violence, where such approaches remain largely underutilized.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I examined how young Black women living in a marginalized Brazilian community denominate, experience, interpret, and respond to violence, and how feminist participatory research can contribute to alternative discourses that centre their voices, values, and worldviews. By drawing on intersectional feminism and the concept of structural violence, and through a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, I sought to move beyond dominant framings of youth and violence that place young people, particularly Black youth, as problems to be managed, controlled, or corrected.

My findings demonstrate that violence, as the young women experienced, cannot be reduced to isolated events or exceptional occurrences. Rather, it is embedded in the organization of everyday life, operating through interconnected systems of power that shape access to resources, opportunities, recognition, and safety. Across the different dimensions examined in this thesis — territorial, domestic, interpersonal, institutional, and embodied — violence emerges both as an outcome and as a mechanism: a relational, pervasive phenomenon that assumes different forms while shared logics of domination sustain it.

The analysis shows how spatial inequalities restrict mobility and access to services, how housework captures young women's time, how interpersonal dynamics through interaction with men produce insecurity and constrain their presence in public and private spaces, and how institutions such as schools reproduce and legitimize hierarchies while often failing to provide recognition and protection. These processes are inscribed in the body, where intersecting systems of race, gender, class, and age shape how young Black women are seen, treated, and valued. These dimensions illustrate how structural violence operates through the articulation of multiple and interconnected domination mechanisms that shape the conditions of young women's lives.

At the same time, this thesis also demonstrates that these conditions do not produce only subordination. The young women's accounts reveal forms of critical awareness, interpretation, and resistance that challenge dominant narratives. They question the naturalization of inequality, contest gendered and racialized expectations, and articulate alternative understandings of respect, care, support, and autonomy. In doing so, they refuse to be positioned solely as victims or as problems, instead asserting themselves as individuals capable of making sense of and responding to the conditions that affect their lives.

In this sense, one of this thesis's pivotal contributions is foregrounding young women's voices as a source of knowledge. Their narratives not only provide empirical insights into how structural violence is lived but also offer analytical interpretations of the systems that produce

it. This challenges unequal distributions of epistemic authority that privilege academic knowledge over lived experience and underscores the importance of creating research spaces where marginalized young people are recognized as knowledge producers. PAR was central to this process, contributing to more equitable, accountable, and dialogical forms of knowledge production.

The arts-based intervention further illustrates how participatory approaches can challenge dominant representations and enable the emergence of alternatives. Through photography, the young women self-defined their bodies and identities, contesting harmful discourses that frame them as inferior, deviant, or deficient. This process helped produce narratives that affirm their perspectives, values, and aspirations, while also creating space for collective reflection and expression. In this way, the intervention showed how research can move beyond documenting inequality to contributing to recognition, agency, empowerment, social transformation, and justice.

The study findings have important implications for research, policy, and practice. They point to the need to move beyond narrow, individual problem-oriented approaches to youth and violence, and to instead address structural conditions that produce inequality and harm. Addressing structural problems includes investing in public services and infrastructure in marginalized areas, addressing gendered and racialized inequalities in public and private spheres, and transforming institutional practices, particularly at schools, to ensure that young people are seen, heard, and supported. At the same time, the study highlights the importance of creating spaces that foster dialogue, participation, and connection, where young women can articulate their experiences and help shape policies and practices that affect their lives.

Finally, this thesis challenges how society and scholars usually understand and address violence. Rather than focusing solely on individual behaviours or isolated incidents, I argue for an understanding of violence as embedded in structural power relations that produce unequal conditions of existence. Addressing violence, therefore, requires not only individual-level interventions but also structural transformations that challenge systems of power that sustain inequality.

By putting a spotlight on the voices and experiences of young Black women, this study contributes to making visible forms of violence that are often overlooked, as well as voices that are frequently disregarded. It affirms the importance of listening to those most affected by structural violence, not only to better understand the problem, but also to contribute to more just and equal societies. In this sense, while young Black women may be involved in situations that require attention, protection, or intervention, they may be perceived as causing problems,

but they are not the problem themselves. It is therefore essential to recognize and affirm the humanity, complexity, ambivalence, contradictions, and heterogeneity of their experiences and perspectives. Refusing simplified and binary moral interpretations of good or bad, victim or perpetrator, agency or constraint, is part of disrupting the logics that sustain domination. Within this multiplicity and diversity, alternative ways of knowing, being, and building more just social life emerge. Ultimately, attending to these nuances is a commitment to affirming young Black women as full, complex individuals whose lives cannot be reduced to socially imposed terms.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Young women's photos

Photo 10 – Ana

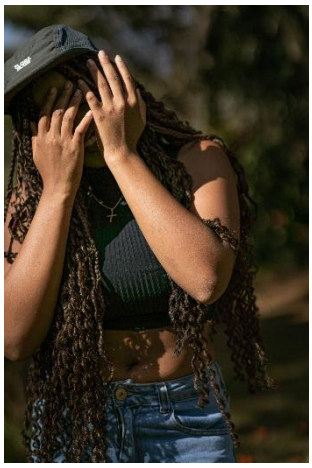


Photo 11 – Ana



Photo 12 – Ana



Photo 13 – Gabriela



Photo 14 – Gabriela



Photo 15 – Gabriela



Photo 16 – Maya



Photo 17 – Maya



Photo 18 – Maya



Photo 19 – Eloise



Photo 20 – Eloise



Photo 21 – Eloise

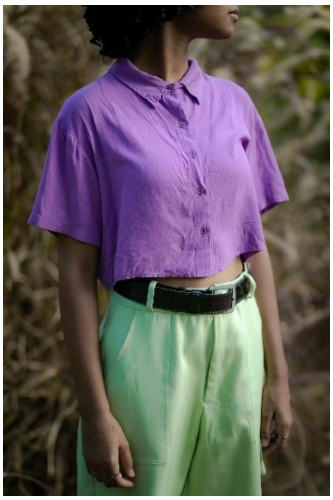


Photo 22 – Isabel



Photo 23 – Isabel



Photo 24 – Isabel

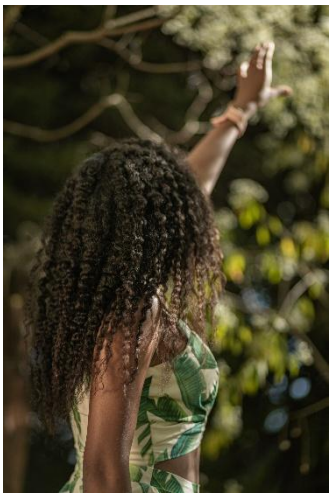


Photo 25 – Co-researchers group



Photo 26 – Co-researchers group



Photo 27 – Co-researchers group



Appendix 2 – Consent form to the participant's parents or guardians

FREE AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM TO THE ADOLESCENT'S GUARDIANS

Title of the study: An intersectional analysis of structural violence in young women's lives in a Brazilian periphery

This research project aims to explore what are the perceptions, understandings, and experiences that young black women living in Nova Contagem have about violence, injustices, inequalities, prejudice, and discrimination. This is a doctoral study and is conducted by Camila Costa Cardeal, under the supervision of Professor Simon Lapierre (School of Social Work, University of Ottawa, Canada) and Professor Ludmila Mendonça Lopes Ribeiro (Department of Sociology, Federal University of Minas Gerais).

Participation: My child is invited to participate in different research activities. The first of these is participation in a preparatory meeting. In this meeting, they will talk about how each research activity will be carried out.

After this meeting, my child is invited to participate in two focus groups, which can also be understood as discussion groups.

In our first focus group, my child will be asked to fill out a short sociodemographic questionnaire about my personal information, such as age, gender, education, and work.

The first focus group will be on different forms of injustice, discrimination, exclusion, and inequalities. The second focus group will be on violence. They will discuss the various understandings of these different terms and what situations are considered unfair and violent that happen both in Nova Contagem and outside of here. They will also talk about the strategies that the participants have already identified, and which can be taken to confront injustices and violence.

Then, an artistic intervention will be produced. This work of art will be a collective action that will be decided together with the other participants in the project. Based on the themes they discussed in the focus groups, the artwork will be produced as a way to show the community what their understandings of violence and injustices are, and how they deal with these situations. A painting, collage, poetry, painted t-shirts, or a performance can be produced.

After the artistic intervention, an individual interview will be conducted about my child's life story and experiences with the different topics that they discussed in the focus groups.

Finally, they will gather in a collective space once again, and the last focus group will be held. In this focus group, they will evaluate the research process, and my child will be able to share what it was like to participate in the study.

All research activities will last about two hours and will be held weekly, which means that there will be a break of at least a week between each of these meetings. The research activities are expected to last up to twelve weeks.

Benefits: By participating in this study, my child might be able to share experiences and be part of discussions about things she may not normally discuss about it. My child will also contribute to research on violence and young people that broadens the voice of young women. As a result of this project, they may be able to improve programs and policies for young people who have experienced violence and discrimination.

Risks: The possible risks of the research are related to possible emotional and psychological discomfort, as we will discuss situations involving discrimination, prejudice, exclusion, and violence.

Responsible/parents initials _____
Researcher's initials _____

Supervisor's initials _____

At any time, my child may refuse to answer a question, take a break, or withdraw from the study.

In case my child needs help, she can contact different organizations that offer free psychological or emotional support services, Fica Vivo! the Crime Prevention Centre (31 3392-8039), Projeto Prosseguir (31 99476-8670) and she can also use the free services of the Center for the Valorization of Life (CVV), which can be accessed by calling 188. The right to compensation is also guaranteed in case of possible damage resulting from the research, according to Resolution 466/12 of the National Health Council.

Confidentiality and Privacy: Every care will be taken to ensure the secrecy and confidentiality of the data, which will be accessed only by the interviewer and her supervisors from a password-protected system. In the case of group activities, such as focus groups and artistic intervention, due to the collective nature of these activities, it is not possible to guarantee the protection of the identity of the participants. Although the researcher respects confidentiality, she cannot guarantee that the other members of the group will do the same. However, the researcher will ask all participants to respect confidentiality and not share information with people outside the group.

The researcher will also have a protocol in place for situations where adolescents' safety and/or development would be compromised. In cases where the safety of an adolescent is compromised, a report will be made to the child agency, and confidentiality will not be maintained.

Conservation of Data: The information obtained in this project will be used only according to the objectives of the research. The discussions in the focus group, about the artistic intervention and the interviews will have the audios recorded. After recording, the files will be transcribed in their entirety into a Word document. Consent forms and sociodemographic forms will be scanned. Audio recordings, transcripts, and scanned documents will be destroyed after a period of seven years. About the artistic production that will be made, my child will be able to keep her own art. For collective artistic productions, they will decide together with the other participants the best way to archive them.

Voluntary Participation: My child's participation is voluntary, and she is under no obligation to participate and, if she chooses to participate, she can withdraw her consent at any time and withdraw from the study. She may also, at any time, refuse to answer any question without suffering any negative consequences or prejudice.
If my child chooses to withdraw from the study, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be removed from the dataset, deleted, and not used in the study.
For the collective activities, focus groups and art-based intervention, if my child leaves the activity before it is over, the data collected about her will be used in the research results. It will not be possible to delete only those parts of the discussion in which she participated due to the collective nature of the discussion and the intervention.

I will receive a copy of the consent form to document my child's participation in the study. It is recommended that I save this copy of this consent form for my records. The researcher undertakes to disseminate the results of the research in a format that is accessible and understandable to the participants.

We thank you in advance for your contribution to the development of the research activities and are available for any questions or clarifications.

Responsible/parents initials _____
Researcher's initials _____

Supervisor's initials _____

You can contact researcher Camila Cardeal by email (email address), by Whatsapp (number) or by phone (number).

Acceptance: By checking the boxes below, you agree to the adolescent under your responsibility participating in this research study.

- ☐ I agree that my child fills out the sociodemographic questionnaire.
- ☐ I agree that my child participates in focus groups on injustice and violence.
- ☐ I agree that my child participates in the artistic intervention.
- ☐ I agree that my child participates in the individual interview.
- ☐ I agree that my child participates in the last research evaluation focus group.

VOICE USAGE AUTHORIZATION (The voice authorization is only for the adolescent's voice to be recorded during the research activities. The audio of the research activities will be transcribed, and any necessary parts will be translated into English).

- ☐ Yes, I authorize the use of my child's voice.
- ☐ No, I do not authorize the use of my child's voice.

Date: _____
Participant's name: _____
Responsible/Parent's signature: _____
Researcher's signature: _____
Supervisor's signature: _____

This document was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Ottawa and the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Minas Gerais. This document was also reviewed by the National Research Ethics Commission – CONEP SRTV 701, Via W 5 Norte, lote D - Edifício PO 700, 3rd floor – Asa Norte CEP: 70719-040, Brasília/DF. CONEP is a unit linked to the National Health Council and its main function is to evaluate the ethical aspects of research involving human beings in Brazil.

If you have any questions regarding the ethical aspects of this study, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity at the University of Ottawa (Canada) by email (ethics@uottawa.ca) or telephone (+1 613-562-5387).

You may also contact the Research Ethics Committee (COEP) of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) at the following address:
COEP - Research Ethics Committee
Antônio Carlos, 6627 - Administrative Unit II - 2nd floor - Room 2005
Belo Horizonte, MG - Brazil
Zip Code: 31270-901
Phone: 31 3409-4592, e-mail: coep@prpq.ufmg.br

The coordinating researchers of the study can be contacted at the following address:
Simon Lapierre
School of Social Work, University of Ottawa
20 University Private, Ottawa, ON K1N 9A7, Canada
Phone: number, e-mail address: email address
Ludmila Mendonça Lopes Ribeiro
Centre for Studies in Crime and Public Security (CRISP)
Av. Pres. Antônio Carlos, 6627 - Administrative Unit III, 31270-901, Belo Horizonte, MG – Brazil
Phone: number, e-mail address: email address

Appendix 3 – Participants Consent form

FREE AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR THE ADOLESCENTS

Title of the study: An intersectional analysis of structural violence in young women's lives in a Brazilian periphery

This research project aims to explore what are the perceptions, understandings, and experiences that young black women living in Nova Contagem have about violence, injustices, inequalities, prejudice, and discrimination. This is a doctoral study and is conducted by Camila Costa Cardeal, under the supervision of Professor Simon Lapierre (School of Social Work, University of Ottawa, Canada) and Professor Ludmila Mendonça Lopes Ribeiro (Department of Sociology, Federal University of Minas Gerais). The collaboration in this research is very important to contribute to research on violence and youth that can amplify the voices of young black women.

Participation: My participation will consist of participating in different research activities. The first of these is participation in a preparatory meeting. In this meeting, we will talk about how each research activity will be carried out.

After this meeting, I am invited to participate in two focus groups, which can also be understood as discussion groups.

In our first focus group, I will be asked to fill out a short sociodemographic questionnaire about my personal information, such as age, gender, education, and work.

The first focus group will be on different forms of injustice, discrimination, exclusion, and inequalities. The second focus group will be on violence. We will discuss the various understandings of these different terms and what situations are considered unfair and violent that happen both in Nova Contagem and outside of here. We will also talk about the strategies that the participants have already identified, and which can be taken to confront injustices and violence.

Then, an artistic intervention will be produced. This work of art will be a collective action that will be decided together with the other participants in the research. Based on the themes we discuss in the focus groups, the artwork will be produced as a way to show the community what our understandings of violence and injustices are, and how we deal with these situations. A painting, collage, poetry, painted t-shirts, or a performance can be produced.

After the artistic intervention, an individual interview will be conducted about my life story and experiences with the different topics that we discuss in the focus groups.

Finally, we will gather in a collective space once again, and the last focus group will be held. In this focus group, we will evaluate the research process and I will be able to share what it was like to participate in the research.

All research activities will last about two hours and will be held weekly, which means that there will be a break of at least a week between each of these meetings. The research activities are expected to last up to twelve weeks.

Benefits: By participating in this study, I might be able to share experiences and be part of discussions about things I may not normally discuss about it. I will also contribute to research on violence and young people that broadens the voice of young women. As a result of this project, we may be able to improve programs and policies for young people who have experienced violence and discrimination.

Risks: The possible risks of the research are related to possible emotional and psychological discomfort, as we will discuss situations involving discrimination, prejudice, exclusion, and violence.

Responsible/parents initials _____
Researcher's initials _____

Supervisor's initials _____

At any time, I may refuse to answer a question, take a break, or withdraw from the study.
In case you need help, you can contact different organizations in Nova Contagem that offer free psychological or emotional support services, Fica Vivo! the Crime Prevention Centre (31 3392-8039), Projeto Prosseguir (31 99476-8670) and you can also use the services of the Center for the Valorization of Life (CVV), which can be accessed by calling 188. The right to compensation is also guaranteed in case of possible damage resulting from the research, according to Resolution 466/12 of the National Health Council.

Confidentiality and Privacy: Every care will be taken to ensure the secrecy and confidentiality of the data, which will be accessed only by the interviewer and her supervisors from a password-protected system. In the case of group activities, such as focus groups and artistic intervention, due to the collective nature of these activities, it is not possible to guarantee the protection of the identity of the participants. Although the researcher respects confidentiality, she cannot guarantee that the other members of the group will do the same. However, the researcher will ask all participants to respect confidentiality and not share information with people outside the group.

The researcher will also have a protocol in place for situations where adolescents' safety and/or development would be compromised. In cases where the safety of an adolescent is compromised, a report will be made to the child agency, and confidentiality will not be maintained.

Conservation of Data: The information obtained in this project will be used only according to the objectives of the research. The discussions in the focus group, about the artistic intervention and the interviews will have the audios recorded. After recording, the files will be transcribed in their entirety into a Word document. Consent forms and sociodemographic forms will be scanned. Audio recordings, transcripts, and scanned documents will be destroyed after a period of seven years. About the artistic production that will be made, you will be able to keep your own art. For collective artistic productions, we will decide together with the other participants the best way to archive them.

Voluntary Participation: My participation is voluntary, and I am under no obligation to participate and, if I choose to participate, I can withdraw my consent at any time and withdraw from the study. I may also, at any time, refuse to answer any question without suffering any negative consequences or prejudice.
If I choose to withdraw from the study, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be removed from the dataset, deleted, and not used in the study.
For the collective activities, focus groups and art-based intervention, if I leave the activity before it is over, the data collected about me will be used in the research results. It will not be possible to delete only those parts of the discussion in which I participated due to the collective nature of the discussion and the intervention.

I will receive a copy of the consent form to document participation in the study. It is recommended that I save this copy of this consent form for my records. The researcher undertakes to disseminate the results of the research in a format that is accessible and understandable to the participants.

We thank you in advance for your contribution to the development of the research activities and are available for any questions or clarifications. You can contact researcher Camila Cardeal by email (email address), by Whatsapp (number) or by phone (number).

Acceptance: By checking the boxes below, you agree to participate in this research study.

- ☐ I agree to fill out the sociodemographic questionnaire.
- ☐ I agree to participate in focus groups on injustice and violence.
- ☐ I agree to participate in the artistic intervention.

[ ] I want to remain anonymous in regard to my art. This means I do not want my name to be mentioned in reference to my artwork.
[ ] I want my full name to appear on all references to my artwork. Specify how you want your name to appear: _____
[ ] I want my first name to appear on all references to my artwork. Specify how you want your first name to appear: _____

- ☐ I agree to participate in the individual interview.
- ☐ I agree to participate in the last research evaluation focus group.

VOICE USAGE AUTHORIZATION (The voice authorization is only for the adolescent's voice to be recorded during the research activities. The audio of the research activities will be transcribed, and any necessary parts will be translated into English).

- ☐ Yes, I authorize the use of my voice.
- ☐ No, I do not authorize the use of my voice.

Date: _____
Responsible/Parent's signature: _____
Researcher's signature: _____
Supervisor's signature: _____

This document was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Ottawa and the Research Ethics Committee of the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais. This document was also reviewed by the National Research Ethics Commission – CONEP SRTV 701, Via W 5 Norte, lote D - Edifício PO 700, 3rd floor – Asa Norte CEP: 70719-040, Brasília/DF. CONEP is a unit linked to the National Health Council and its main function is to evaluate the ethical aspects of research involving human beings in Brazil.

If you have any questions regarding the ethical aspects of this study, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity at the University of Ottawa (Canada) by email (ethics@uottawa.ca) or telephone (+1 613-562-5387).

You may also contact the Research Ethics Committee (COEP) of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) at the following address:
COEP - Research Ethics Committee
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Appendix 4 - Focus Group One Script

1st focus group:
Systems of power/oppression/inequalities/exclusion/social issues

Discussion questions

1. There are many ways to exclude, be unfair to, and intimidate people, colleagues, friends, for example, because of skin colour, gender, age, or sexual orientation. What have you heard about this at school, on TV, among your friends, or in your family?
   1.1. What does this mean to you? How would you define and describe situations you consider unfair?
2. Do you see any injustice, exclusion, or unfair situations here in Nova Contagem? At school, at home, at church, on the streets, wherever you go. How does this happen? Who is included, who is excluded? Why do you think this happens?
   2.1 How do you feel about this? Do you think it's fair? Does it upset you?
3. Do you think there is a form of exclusion that is more prevalent (visible) in your daily life, at school, among your friends? Do you think one is worse than the other? How does this happen?
4. Can you identify any connection between these different forms of exclusion? How?
5. Does the way people are excluded and disrespected affect their access to services? For example, in the way they are treated by the police or teachers, or in the way they receive medical care.
6. Are things here in Nova Contagem different from other places? For example, places you've been to, heard about, or seen on TV.
7. Would it be possible to make the world a better place if we didn't exclude others? How can we help teenage girls and people who feel excluded? What could we do to overcome, resist, and change these unjust situations and social issues?
8. What would you like to do in the artistic intervention?

Appendix 5 - Focus Group Two Script

2nd focus group: Structural violence

Questions for discussion

1. At school, among your friends, in your family, wherever you go, what do you hear about violence?
2. What does violence mean to you? What do you consider and define as violence? Is there a difference between what you think is violence and what you hear?
   2.1. What do you consider to be violence, but that other people would not consider?
3. What kind of violence do you see in your community every day?
   3.1. And outside the community? In places you've visited, seen on TV, or heard about. Is there a difference? How do they differ?
4. There are several organizations here in the community—the school, the church, the police, the prison, the health center. Do you think any of these places are violent? How? Why?
5. Do you think there's a "right" way to be a girl, to be a Black teenager? How was that defined? What do you think about that?
   5.1. Do you think there's a "right" way to be a Black girl here in Nova Contagem? Is it different outside of Nova Contagem? How? Can you give an example?
6. Do you think violence has anything to do with the "right" and "wrong" ways of being? How?
7. In the last focus group, we discussed different forms of exclusion and unfair situations. Is there a connection between the discussion about violence and the discussion about exclusion? How?
   7.1. What about the fact that some people are ignored or have more opportunities than others? Do they have anything to do with violence? What?
8. What can we do to prevent and resist violence?
9. What would you like to do in the artistic intervention?

Appendix 6 - Focus Group Three Script

3rd focus group: Project feedback/Strategies and resistance

Questions for discussion

1. What was your experience participating in this research like?
2. Did the activities we carried out change any perceptions you had before? For example, regarding violence, racism, sexism, ageism, exclusion, or bullying. How?
3. Do you have any suggestions for future research? What else could be done?
4. What strategies could be implemented to address discrimination/exclusion and violence in the community?
5. What changes would you like to see?
6. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

Appendix 7 – Individual Interviews Script

Semi-structured individual interview guide

Duration: 120 minutes

1. Could you tell me a little about yourself?
   (Based on the information provided in the sociodemographic form).
2. How would you describe yourself physically? How would you describe your appearance, for example, to someone who can't see you?
3. This project addresses violence, unjust situations, and social and community issues. We've discussed different forms of exclusion over the past few weeks—we've talked about racism and sexism. How did that go for you? Have you thought about it? How do you feel about it?
4. Based on the topics discussed last week, were there any of these aspects that particularly resonated with you? Which ones? How?
5. Have you ever felt humiliated, embarrassed, or discriminated against because of your appearance? How did you feel? Examples? And because of the colour/race of your skin?
   5.1. What about being a girl/woman? How do you feel? Examples?
   5.2. What about your age, since you are a teenager/young person? How do you feel? Examples?
   5.3. What about living in Nova Contagem? How do you feel? Examples?
   5.4. What about your sexual orientation? How do you feel? Examples?
   5.5. And because of what you have (or don't have), what services do you have access to (or don't have access to), what places can you go to (or can't go to)?
   5.6. Aside from physical characteristics, do you feel excluded because of how you behave, how you dress, or what you believe? How does this happen?
6. Do you feel pressured to behave, act, or be in a certain way? Why do you think this happens? Can you explain to me how this works? For example, when we talk about the "right" way to be a Black girl, do you think you meet that expectation? How do you feel about that?
7. Are these different forms of discrimination/exclusion related to one another? How?
8. We've also been discussing violence over the past few weeks. How was that for you? Were there any aspects of this that particularly resonated with you? Which ones? How?
9. Would you like to share an incident of violence that happened to you, your family, friends, or in your community? What happened? How did you deal with that violence?
10. In what ways do you see violence in your daily life? How does it affect your life?
11. When you feel violated, discriminated against, excluded, or invisible, what is your reaction?
    11.1. What are your strategies for protecting yourself? And for preventing this violence?
    11.2. Who do you turn to for help?

12. What message would you like to convey to society, politicians, decision-makers, those in charge, and researchers—what change would you like to see? What do you think they could do so that girls don't feel excluded and feel safe?

13. What would you like to express through the art project? What message would you like to convey? What does this mean to you?

14. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

Appendix 8 – Sociodemographic Form

1) How old are you? _____

2. How would you describe your sex?
[ ] Male
[ ] Female
[ ] None of the options apply to me. I describe my sex as _____.

2.2) How would you describe your gender?
[ ] Cis woman
[ ] Trans woman
[ ] Non-binary
[ ] None of the options apply to me. I describe my gender as _____.

2.3) How would you describe your sexual orientation?
[ ] Lesbian
[ ] Heterosexual
[ ] Bisexual
[ ] Not sure
[ ] None of the options apply to me. I describe my sexual orientation as _____.

3) What is your race/ethnicity?
[ ] Black
[ ] Parda

4) Are you in a relationship?
[ ] Married
[ ] In a relationship
[ ] Single
[ ] I'd rather not answer this question

5) Are you a mother?
[ ] Yes. How many children? _____
[ ] No
[ ] I prefer not to answer this question

5.1) If yes. How old were you when your first child was born? _____

6) How long have you lived in Nova Contagem? _____
6.1) Do you own or rent your home? _____
6.2) How many people live with you in your home? _____

7) Are you currently in school?
[ ] Yes
[ ] No
[ ] I'd rather not answer this question

7.1) If so, what grade are you in? _____
[ ] I prefer not to answer this question

7.2) If no, how many years did you attend school? _____
7.3) What was the last grade you completed? _____
[ ] I prefer not to answer this question

8) Do you have a job?
[ ] Yes
[ ] No
[ ] I prefer not to answer this question

8.1) If yes, what do you do for a living? _____

8.2) On average, how much do you earn per month? _____

8.3) Are you responsible for any household expenses?
[ ] Yes
[ ] No
[ ] I prefer not to answer this question

8.4) If yes, how much do you pay? _____

Appendix 9 – University of Ottawa Ethics Certificate

Université d'Ottawa
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa
Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

S-04-23-9102 - REG-9102 - Certificat d'approbation éthique / Certificate of Ethics Approval

(English message follows)

Cher/Chère Camila Costa Cardeal,

Veuillez trouver ci-joint le certificat d'approbation éthique pour le projet intitulé «An intersectional analysis of structural violence in young women's lives in a Brazilian periphery».

Le certificat est valide jusqu'au : 24-08-2024

I wish you pleasant and fruitful research activities.

Recherche financée : veuillez faire suivre une copie du certificat au Service de gestion de la recherche.

Si vous avez des questions, n'hésitez pas à communiquer avec le Bureau d'éthique à ethique@uottawa.ca ou en composant le 613-562-5387.

Vous pouvez voir votre demande en vous connectant à votre compte eReviews.

Cordialement,

Germain Zongo
Responsable d'éthique en recherche

Ceci est une réponse automatisée, merci de ne pas répondre à ce courriel.

Dear Camila Costa Cardeal,

Please find attached the certificate of ethics approval for your research project titled "An intersectional analysis of structural violence in young women's lives in a Brazilian periphery".

This certificate is valid until: 24-08-2024

I wish you pleasant and fruitful research activities.

Funded research: A reminder that you must provide a copy of this certificate to Research Management Services.

If you have any questions, please contact the Ethics Office at ethics@uottawa.ca or by telephone at 613-562-5387.

You can view your project at any time by logging into eReviews.

Best regards,

Germain Zongo
Protocol Officer

This is an automated message. Please do not reply directly to this email.

Attachement(s) / Attachment(s)

550, rue Cumberland, pièce 154 Ottawa (Ontario) K1N 6N5 Canada
550 Cumberland Street, Room 154 Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5 Canada

613-562-5387 • 613-562-5338 • ethique@uOttawa.ca / ethics@uOttawa.ca
www.recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie | www.recherche.uottawa.ca/ethics