

Domestic work in Brazil: the protagonism of Laudelina de Campos Melo (1904-1991)

ARTICLE

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Abstract

This article analyzes the central role of Laudelina de Campos Melo in the struggle for the social, legal, and educational recognition of domestic work in Brazil. It seeks to understand how her personal and political trajectory contributed to legal advances and to the development of educational practices focused on citizenship, anti-racism, and the valorization of domestic labor. The study adopts a historical, cultural, and legal approach, based on the analysis of biographies, historical documents, labor legislation, and recent statistical data on domestic work in Brazil. The theoretical framework draws on studies of coloniality, gender, race, and intersectionality, engaging authors such as Aníbal Quijano, Pierre Bourdieu, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Carlo Ginzburg. The findings reveal that, despite significant normative achievements, including Constitutional Amendment No. 72/2013, persistent structural inequalities reinforce the contemporary relevance of Laudelina de Campos Melo's political and educational legacy.

Keywords: Gender. Laudelina de Campos Melo. Domestic Work. Legislation. Interdisciplinarity.

Trabalho doméstico no Brasil: o protagonismo de Laudelina de Campos Melo (1904-1991)

Resumo

O artigo analisa o protagonismo de Laudelina de Campos Melo na luta pelo reconhecimento social, jurídico e educacional do trabalho doméstico no Brasil. O objetivo é compreender como sua trajetória pessoal e política contribuiu para avanços legais e para a construção de práticas educativas voltadas à cidadania, ao antirracismo e à valorização do trabalho doméstico. A pesquisa adota uma abordagem histórico-cultural-jurídica, fundamentada na análise de biografias, documentos históricos, legislações trabalhistas e dados estatísticos recentes sobre o trabalho doméstico no Brasil. O referencial teórico dialoga com os estudos sobre colonialidade, gênero, raça e interseccionalidade, mobilizando autores como Quijano, Bourdieu, Adichie e Ginzburg. Os resultados evidenciam que, apesar dos avanços normativos conquistados, como a EC nº 72/2013 e legislações posteriores, persistem desigualdades estruturais que reforçam a atualidade do legado político-educativo de Laudelina de Campos Melo.

Palavras-chave: Gênero. Laudelina de Campos Melo. Trabalho Doméstico. Legislação. Interdisciplinaridade.

1 Introduction

This article explores the central role of Laudelina de Campos Melo in the history of domestic work in Brazil, linking her trajectory to the theoretical debate on the (re)construction of historical narratives and legal issues. The objective was to analyze, through legislative documents and from a historical, cultural, and legal perspective, how the life history and activism of this Black woman were relevant to the struggle for the rights of domestic workers. The research is grounded in an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on the theoretical and methodological foundations of cultural history, fundamental rights, and the analytical categories of gender and intersectionality, as proposed by Carlo Ginzburg in *O Queijo e os Vermes* (2002), particularly with regard to methodological rigor in the selection of historical figures.

Laudelina de Campos Melo represents a significant historical figure in Brazil, as her efforts highlighted the complex layers of inequality faced by domestic workers, especially Black women, within a context shaped by the legacies of slavery and structural machismo. Her achievements, which were only belatedly acknowledged in formal legal texts, provide evidence of a persistent struggle that, although it has produced legal advances, still calls for effectiveness in their implementation. Examining her trajectory reveals the interconnection between issues of race, gender, class, and citizenship, underscoring the need for a holistic approach to understanding and combating social injustices.

The (re)construction of this figure's actions aligns with an interdisciplinary perspective that seeks to problematize the invisibility of Black women in traditional historiography, to define temporal frameworks that connect her life history to the events of her time and their reverberations in the present, and to apply an analytical focus on gender and race to elements encompassing her life and her influence on legislation (Abreu, 1998).

The paradigm crisis in the final decades of the twentieth century exposed the inability of prevailing frameworks to explain social relations shaped by the dimensions of race and gender. Gender as an analytical category is discussed as a means of bringing to the forefront underrepresented subjects and the protagonism of Black women. Biography acquired a renewed status, interconnected with the legal, economic, political, social, and cultural contexts in which a historical figure's life unfolded. Life histories, valued by schools such as the Chicago School, became key guidelines for understanding human relations. Individual existence and the aggregation of experiences, as problematized by theorists such as Bourdieu in *Coisas Ditas* (2004), demonstrate that every individual exists within a network of diverse social relations.

From the 1980s onward, the need to expand theoretical and methodological reflections opened a broad field for women's studies. Gender, as a category of analysis, began to engage in dialogue with other categories, methods, and schools of thought, addressing the construction of femininity and masculinity in a relational manner, as well as issues of race/ethnicity and social groups. These groups were socially, culturally, and historically constituted within specific times, spaces, and cultures, thereby influencing the normative field.

The expansion of research themes proposed by gender studies opened up new sources, including personal diaries, life trajectories, testimonies, notarial records, newspapers, magazines, and legal documents. The survey of these sources and of the state of the art on Laudelina de Campos Melo revealed her dedication to the labor rights of domestic workers, as she was responsible for founding the first association in the category, promoting the first debutante ball for Black young women, and facilitating the inclusion of Black women in party politics. Her trajectory resonates with discussions on intersectionality and decoloniality. Her silencing finds echoes in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who invites us to reflect on *O perigo de uma história única*. Likewise, it aligns with Aníbal Quijano's reflections on the "colonialidade do poder" which describe how colonial structures of racial and gender domination persist. Laudelina's struggle for the rights of domestic workers,

predominantly Black women, exposes the colonial and racist roots that have perpetuated the exploitation and invisibility of these workers in Brazil.

Her activism reveals how the coloniality of power impacted the lives of these women. Moreover, it highlights how resistance to this structure is expressed through their claims, reaffirming the importance of recognizing and affirming Anti-Discrimination Law as an integral part of Constitutional Law, especially within the field of Constitutional Theory, as systematized by Adilson José Moreira.

Thus, the guiding axis of this research is the legacy of Laudelina de Campos Melo, her silenced protagonism, and the struggle for domestic workers' rights, the removal of negative forms of discrimination, and the reduction of inequalities.

Methodologically, the article articulates the biographical narrative of Laudelina de Campos Melo with a legal-educational analysis of domestic work in Brazil, understanding her trajectory as an expression of broader historical processes related to coloniality, structural racism, and the sexual division of labor. By adopting a historical, cultural, and legal perspective, the study seeks to demonstrate how the political, educational, and union practices led by Laudelina contributed to the construction of rights and to the formulation of anti-racist educational proposals, thereby enabling an understanding of the persistence and ongoing reconfiguration of these inequalities in contemporary society.

2 Methodology

The research is conducted through a qualitative approach of a historical, cultural, and legal nature, articulating documentary, biographical, and normative analysis. The sources mobilized include biographies and academic studies on Laudelina de Campos Melo, with particular emphasis on the dissertation by Elisabete Aparecida Pinto (1993), as well as legislative documents related to the rights of domestic workers and recent statistical data produced by official institutions, such as DIEESE and the federal government.

The analysis of the sources was guided by the categories of gender, race, coloniality, and intersectionality. Coloniality is understood, following Aníbal Quijano (2005),

as a pattern of power that originates in the historical process of colonization but persists beyond formal colonialism, structuring social relations through the racial classification of the population, the hierarchization of labor, and the naturalization of inequalities. It constitutes a foundational axis of modern capitalism, in which race, division of labor, and domination are durably articulated.

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In the Brazilian context, this logic of coloniality manifests itself clearly in domestic work, which has historically been associated with Black women and marked by social devaluation, informality, and the delayed inclusion of labor rights. Thus, understanding domestic work through the lens of the coloniality of power makes it possible to demonstrate how colonial legacies continue to operate in the organization of labor, in the production of gender and racial inequalities, and in the legal marginalization of these workers.

The dialogue between cultural history and law made it possible to relate the individual trajectory of Laudelina de Campos Melo to collective processes of political organization, unionization, and the construction of public policies, highlighting how her activism challenged the logic of coloniality by claiming rights, promoting political education, and producing educational practices oriented toward citizenship, human rights, and anti-racist education.

Born on October 12, 1904, in the city of Poços de Caldas, in the state of Minas Gerais, to parents born after the enactment of the Law of the Free Womb (1871), her trajectory is marked by actions that opposed the structures of oppression that shaped her existence. Her mother, Sidônia, subjected to a semi-enslaved labor regime, cared for the *sinhá*'s daughter, while her father, Marco Aurélio de Campos, worked in woodcutting until his death in service, leaving the family under Sidônia's responsibility (Pinto, 1993).

In school records, personal correspondence, family documents, and diaries analyzed through the lens of the coloniality of power, a concept developed by Quijano (2000), it is evident that from a young age she denounced the persistence of racial, gender, and class hierarchies perpetuated within social structures. Her political and social engagement represents a rupture with the hegemonic narrative that silences Black women's voices, as noted by Adichie (2013). For Laudelina, the legislation that formally

brought the slave regime to an end should have entailed concrete transformations in social and labor practices.

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According to Pinto (1993), Laudelina attended school only up to the third grade at the David Campestre Public School Group and was, from an early age, directed toward work as a page, caring for children, assisting her mother in the production of sweets, and performing domestic cleaning. As Rago (1991) observes, these tasks, although imbued with a discourse of nobility, served to maintain the prevailing social order. At the age of sixteen, she joined the “Treze de Maio” Group, an organization formed by young Black people from her community. The group promoted cultural, social, and political activities aimed at the Black population of Poços de Caldas, functioning as a space of resistance against structural racism. For Adichie (2013), questioning established rules makes it possible to open space for multiple voices and to transform power relations. Laudelina became the group’s director, occupying a leadership position, challenging the limits imposed by coloniality (Quijano, 2000), and refusing the single story assigned to her (Adichie, 2013).

Following her involvement in charitable and leisure associations in the working-class neighborhoods of her hometown, she began to act directly and indirectly in the promotion of initiatives aimed at the Black population (Pinto, 1993). Her paid activities, however, remained restricted to work as a page and as a domestic worker in the homes of affluent families, including that of Juscelino Kubitschek.

At the age of eighteen, Laudelina began a romantic relationship with Henrique Geremias Campos, a worker involved in the construction of a hotel owned by the Kubitschek family. The relationship, kept secret due to family disapproval, ended with Henrique’s return to the city of Santos after the completion of the construction work. This seemingly intimate episode prompted Laudelina to reflect on the sexual division of labor, the codes of conduct imposed on men and women, and the historical constructions that shape gender roles in Brazilian society.

In 1922, accompanying the move of Kubitschek’s mother to São Paulo, Laudelina also relocated, but soon decided to settle in Santos, where she began working for the

Kasamone family, an experience marked by labor conditions analogous to slavery. She resumed her relationship with Henrique and, after the end of the Paulista Revolt of 1924, married him. In Santos, the couple became involved in the *Saudades de Campinas* Association, created between 1924 and 1925, focused on cultural and leisure activities aimed at the Black population. Laudelina recognized the pedagogical and political potential of these initiatives and took on the roles of official spokesperson and vice president of the association, while Henrique assumed the position of secretary.

Laudelina's active participation in associational spaces reveals her ability to articulate practices and strategies of resistance. As proposed by Quijano (2000), the decolonization of being involves the reconstruction of identities denied by colonialism. In this sense, Laudelina's actions contributed to the consolidation of a symbolic territory of Black belonging in opposition to the logic of domination. It was in this environment that she came into contact with Black activists who discussed power relations in Brazil. She met Geraldo Campos de Oliveira, founder of the *Associação Cultural do Negro* in São Paulo and a member of the *Frente Negra Brasileira*, as well as Professor Vicente Lobato (Silva, 2012). Through these interactions, she became active in Black organizations, expanding her understanding of the structures of oppression that shaped her experience as a Black woman and worker.

In 1922, she gained access to the proposals of the first *Sociedade Feminina Brasileira* and of the *Federação Brasileira pelo Progresso Feminino* (FBPF), based in Rio de Janeiro. These organizations demanded, among other points, the promotion of women's education, the protection of childhood and motherhood, the achievement of legal and political rights for women, and the recognition of women's labor (Schwartz, 2017).

In 1925, her son Alaor was born, and in 1928, her daughter Neusa, who died in early childhood. In the same year, the family moved to São Paulo, where they remained until 1934. This new phase marked the expansion of her activism and the deepening of her commitment to the struggle for social, racial, and gender justice.

In the city of São Paulo, she contributed to the newspaper *O Clarim da Alvorada*, part of the Black press, which, according to Santos (2010), not only disseminated news to

the Black community in the city but also encouraged awareness of Black identity. Nevertheless, in 1934 the family returned to Santos, and in 1938 the couple separated. Laudelina would carry the social mark of being a Black and separated woman, a condition that sharpened her interest in politics and in women's struggles.

8 On July 8, 1936, she founded the Association of Domestic Workers and attended the Labor Congress encouraged by Geraldo and Vicente. Together, they drafted a manifesto agenda¹ unionization of domestic workers, which was intended to be presented at what should have been the First Workers' Congress² in the city of Rio de Janeiro. As the congress did not take place, Laudelina managed to meet with the Minister of Labor, Lindolfo Collor³, during which she requested that domestic workers be allowed to unionize; however, he rejected the request, considering that the category did not contribute economically to the country.

Laudelina understood the lack of labor rights for domestic workers as linked to the legacy of slavery, due to the way the work was performed, their descent from enslaved people, and the perception that Black people were subordinate. She joined the Communist Party and fought against the paternalistic, protective, and welfare-oriented approach toward domestic workers promoted by the association.

The association counted on the support of the Santos community: doctors, lawyers, the Church—which initially provided a space for its activities—politicians and political parties, unions, and journalists such as Santini, president of the newspaper *Tribuna de Santos*. With this support, domestic workers gained access to legal counseling, medical consultations, and lessons in cooking and household management.

A theater group called *Saudades de Campinas* was also created to encourage initiatives in the cultural field.

¹ The document, although never presented at the Congress, was kept by Laudelina for 52 years (Pinto, 1993).

² The Congress was scheduled to take place on September 5 in the then-capital of the country (Rio de Janeiro), but it was canceled due to fears of a general strike and its consequences.

³ Grandfather of Fernando Collor.

During the period of the Second World War (1938–1945), the association's activities were temporarily suspended. Laudelina decided to enlist as a volunteer in passive defense as a war auxiliary. She completed several preparatory courses and served from 1941 until May 10, 1945.

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With the establishment of the Estado Novo in 1937, Laudelina became affiliated with the Progressive Republican Party (PRP)⁴. In this context, she moved to Mogi Mirim, residing at Fazenda São José, a property owned by Benta, where she replaced the deceased housekeeper. Later, with part of the farm adapted for use as a hotel, she initially assumed management and subsequently the administration of the establishment, exercising extensive decision-making autonomy. During this period, she maintained contact with various political actors, working briefly as a cook and also selling snacks at the Guarani and Ponte Preta stadiums.

Between 1953 and 1954, through the Cultural Club, she was appointed director, began visiting Black residents in rural areas, and aimed to discuss Black culture (Pinto, 1993, p. 23). In 1954, she was elected president of the women's department of the pro-Adhemar de Barros committee and participated in the *Teatro Experimental do Negro*⁵.

In 1955, Laudelina left the Cultural Club and founded the *Escola de Bailados Santa Efigênia*. Initially, she faced the challenge of finding a teacher willing to instruct Black girls, which was resolved with the engagement of the also Black teacher Léo Tigre, from São Paulo, who was sympathetic to the cause. Subsequently, Laudelina contacted the mayor of Campinas⁶, who provided a location for the school. Although the project was initially intended exclusively for Black students, the institution began to welcome both Black and

⁴ A national political party, founded in 1945 by Adhemar de Barros and João Café Filho. In 1946, it merged with the Popular Syndicalist Party and the National Agrarian Party, giving rise to the Social Progressive Party (PSP). Available at: CPDOC/FGV.

⁵ In 1944, in Rio de Janeiro, the *Teatro Experimental do Negro* (TEN) was founded, aiming to promote Afro-Brazilian culture and the Black population in Brazil through education, culture, and art, in response to colonial legacies and scientific racism (Nascimento, 2004, p. 210).

⁶ Mayor of Campinas from 1952 to 1955. Available at: Wikipedia, entry "Antônio Mendonça de Barros." Accessed July 28, 2020.

white students, boys and girls. In addition to classical ballet, the school offered courses in tap dance, modern dance, and folk dance.

As the house was large, she began hosting cultural events, such as dance performances with live music and parties. At one of these events, she met a judge who was interested in creating a project for abandoned children, and it was there that the idea of implementing such a project was born.

With the arrival of the new mayor, Ruy Novaes, Laudelina was invited to return the house to the city administration; however, she scheduled a meeting with the mayor to secure the school's continued use of the property and succeeded. Despite this, in 1957, due to the city's expansion plan, the house was to be demolished, and the *Escola de Bailados* relocated to a rented house in Indaiatuba, paid for with her own funds, where the *Associação Cidade dos Menores* was established.

In 1957, she organized the *Baile Pérola Negra*, an idea that emerged after a benefit ball in support of the *Associação Cidade dos Menores*. Prior to the event, letters were sent to the magazines *Manchete* and *O Cruzeiro*. Ferreira (1957) reports that tickets were sold out a week before the event and that Campinas's Black society lacked a proper venue for such a gathering, requiring the mayor's intervention to secure the Municipal Theater (*Theatro Municipal*). At the time, the venue hosted only one annual ball, intended for debutantes of the *Sociedade da Hypica*, composed of members of Campinas's high society.

In 1959, together with others, she founded a Black society called the *Grupo Cultural do Negro Campinense*, but they did not have a headquarters. They therefore relied on support from the São Paulo State Government, which granted them land for construction. They temporarily received support from the mayor and some city council members, but after the elections, this assistance was not continued. The *Grupo Cultural do Negro Campinense* was dissolved, and both the members from Campinas and São Paulo dispersed.

Following the closure of the ballet school, she founded the Association of Domestic Workers of Campinas, which received support from local newspapers and unions to

publicize the opening of the association. In this endeavor, she was assisted by Juventina de Souza, Amélia Duarte, and Amália Trevisan, and held meetings in which they discussed the challenges of being domestic workers, marginalization, overwork, and low wages (Pinto, 1993, p. 39).

During this period, she lived on Barão de Jaraguá Street, the same street where thirteen unions were located, including the Construction Workers' Union, where she became friends with Pedrinho Semionato, then president. In communication with Pedrinho, she conceived the idea of drafting a founding statute for the domestic workers' association.

On May 18, 1961, she officially founded the Association of Domestic Workers of Campinas, located alongside the other thirteen unions. In 1962, the Workers' Congress was held in Brasília, which Laudelina attended.

With the military coup in 1964, the unions were dissolved. However, the Association was not closed, and the UDN⁷ authorized its operation solely as a charitable institution. In 1966, she joined the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB)⁸ and later the Workers' Party, when it was founded in 1980. In that year, a meeting took place with the Minister of Labor, Jarbas Passarinho, regarding the regulation of domestic workers, which ultimately did not materialize.

However, the minister informed Laudelina that as long as her request remained isolated, no progress would be made, emphasizing the need for support from other workers in the category. Based on this understanding, Laudelina launched a mobilization campaign for domestic workers, grounded in the right to voluntary enrollment in the INPS⁹ through individual payment of both the worker's contribution and the corresponding employer's share. Given the non-implementation of the ministerial directive, she traveled to Brasília to report the failure to comply with the law and to demand its enforcement. In total, sixty-two

⁷ União Democrática Nacional (UDN): a national political party, founded in 1945 as an opposition front to the Estado Novo and Getulism, active in the Brazilian electoral scene until 1965. Source: CPDOC/FGV.

⁸ Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB): an opposition party created in 1966 within the context of the two-party system established after Institutional Act No. 2 (1965). Source: CPDOC/FGV.

⁹ National Institute of Social Security (INPS): an agency created by Decree No. 72 of November 21, 1966, resulting from the merger of private-sector retirement and pension institutes. Source: CPDOC/FGV.

associations expressed support for the cause and “forwarded a document to the Senate for the regulation of the law” (Pinto, 1993, p. 40).

These actions contributed to her participation in 1965 in the First Congress of Domestic Workers in the city of São Paulo. In the same year, the association was recognized as a public utility organization, receiving funding from the city hall for its maintenance. Laudelina applied for funds to pay the rent for the association’s headquarters, and once she obtained it, she established a daycare at 631 Proença Street for the members.

As with any association or union, proposals and strategies for advocacy were not uniform, producing disagreements and opposition. In 1968, member Isaura Brás organized an opposition slate, which did not win the elections.

In 1970, already holding a diploma as a volunteer social worker, she continued her work on charitable projects and public policies aimed at improving infrastructure in working-class neighborhoods. These projects received support from the progressive wing of the Catholic Church. She attended the 2nd (in Rio de Janeiro) and 4th National Congresses of Domestic Workers (in Porto Alegre), taking political positions in the congresses’ action platforms. In 1985, she participated in the 5th Congress of Domestic Workers in Olinda.

In 1988, at 84 years of age, she achieved the unionization she had sought since 1936. The 6th National Congress of Domestic Workers was held in 1989 in the city of Campinas, with 1,200 attendees. The First Congress, by comparison, “included only forty-eight women” (Pinto, 1993, p. 64).

She passed away in 1991, leaving domestic workers significant achievements¹⁰ and the foundation of the National Federation of Domestic Workers¹¹.

¹⁰ Major legal milestones for domestic work in Brazil: Laws No. 10,208/2001, No. 11,324/2006, and Complementary Law No. 150/2015, which expanded labor and social security rights for the category.

¹¹ National Federation of Domestic Workers (FENATRAD): a representative entity composed of 22 unions and one association, active in 13 Brazilian states, representing approximately 7.2 million domestic workers (FENATRAD, 2020).

3 The life of Laudelina, the experience of Independence, and constitutional advances: the effectiveness of citizenship

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The personal trajectory of Laudelina de Campos Melo cannot be understood as an isolated individual path, but rather as an expression of a historical context marked by the coloniality of power, structural racism, and the sexual division of labor. The experiences of domestic work, migration, and social exclusion she faced from youth onward constituted the ground on which her political consciousness and collective engagement were forged. In this sense, her transition from the private sphere to public activism represents a pedagogical and political movement, in which everyday experiences of inequality are transformed into organized action for the claim of rights.

Of particular note in the life trajectory of Laudelina and her ancestors is the way in which the history of the Brazilian state influenced the construction of constitutionalism and fundamental rights¹². In this regard, the post-Independence period and the years following 1822 stand out, marked by the enforcement of the first Brazilian Constitution, the 1824 Charter, which remained in effect throughout the Empire (1824–1889). Despite the formal existence of a Supreme Law, the near-complete maintenance of slavery during this period reveals the persistence of the marks of colonization and the exploitation of both territory and human lives.

Laudelina was the daughter of formerly enslaved people and was born free, under the first laws that, albeit in a limited way, legally negated slavery—a practice that was constant and legalized during the colonial period, whose consequences have traversed Brazilian history and continue to generate the disrespect and stigmatization of the Black population. The Law of Free Birth (*Lei do Ventre Livre*) paved the way for the abolitionist process by formally removing the enslaved condition from those born after 1871; until then, however, slavery remained the legal reference and was considered legitimate by broad

¹² It is important to emphasize that constitutionalism carries two major missions: the limitation of acts of power and the consequent structuring of states within a Constitution, and the protection of fundamental rights, which emerges as the primary *raison d'être* of Constitutions.



sectors of society. Therefore, her mother was born free, and Laudelina was born under slavery abolition. This does not mean that her experience was far removed from her mother's, as the marks of inequality, violence, oppression, and invisibility remained inscribed—albeit symbolically—on the lives of most Black women and continue to be part of contemporary reality. Laudelina lived a long life, resisted, and became part of history. She is part of our history.

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The influences of patriarchy marked the historical, legal, and cultural construction of the Empire and the Republic and, although formally removed with the 1988 Constitution, remain evident. This persistence occurs despite its incompatibility with the affirmation of equality, a structuring value of the Democratic Rule of Law, endowed with the legal nature of both a fundamental principle and a fundamental right. The Constitutional State is affirmed as democratic, grounded in citizenship, human dignity, the social values of labor and free enterprise, and political pluralism, as well as the rejection of all forms of discrimination and the pursuit of social justice, solidarity, and reduction of inequalities as a social transformation agenda, in addition to the protection expressly recognized in the corpus of human and fundamental rights (Bettini; Schwartz, 2022).

Unlike her mother and grandmother, who, as a result of slavery and semi-slavery regimes, died very young, consumed by labor, Laudelina lived a long life marked by multiple experiences. These experiences became milestones of transformation for Black women and for society as a whole, even in the face of the various forms of intersectional discrimination she endured, involving gender, race, and social class.

Independence, the promulgation of Constitutions¹³—the Imperial Constitution of 1824 and the Republican Constitution of 1891—as well as laws that formally abolished slavery, such as the Law of Free Birth (*Lei do Vento Livre*) and the Abolition, did not shield her from the everyday violence experienced in the *Casa-Grande*, a space where

¹³ The Brazilian Independence movement and the establishment of a constitutional government are connected to the liberal processes that occurred in Portugal (1820) and Spain, in opposition to absolutism. In Brazil, these liberal and Enlightenment influences underpinned the Imperial Constitution, although they were shaped by the legacies of colonization.

domination persisted. Nor was the school exempt from these practices, with racism being a recurring experience in Laudelina's life. Unwilling to accept this reality, and unlike her mother and grandmother, Laudelina spoke out and rebelled against such violence in defense of herself and her mother, producing effects that extended to all those who shared the same stigmatization inherited from colonization.

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In addition to liberalism and the protection of rights explicitly or implicitly derived from the principles and regime established by the Constitution of the Republic of February 24, 1891—recognized as the “cornerstone of the Rule of Law” (Bonavides; Paes de Andrade, 1991) and reproduced in its fundamentals in subsequent Constitutions—the period was marked by crises arising from the oligarchic elites. Notable among these were crises stemming from the Abolition of Slavery and the maintenance of “feudal” forms of authority exercised by local coronels, expressed in various revolts. These elements are relevant to the present study as they highlight the historical difficulties in ensuring the supremacy of the formal Constitution and the material enforcement of the rights it guaranteed.

Alongside legislative innovations that enabled access to education and political rights, this study observes the influence of these processes on the structuring of an activity that initially extended the logic of slavery to Black women¹⁴: domestic work (Teixeira, 2021). Until the advent of unionization, professional regulation, and, later, the equalization of rights and duties under the 1988 Constitution, Laudelina's achievements stand out as an active seed of constitutionalism (Hesse; Konrad, 1991), influencing the constitutional protection of pressing social needs, especially those of Black domestic workers. However, this process was not immediate. The Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT) of 1943, as well as scattered subsequent legislation, excluded domestic and rural workers despite the recognition of these employment relationships.

¹⁴ Teixeira (2021) highlights that, even with the increased formalization of domestic work, the presence of live-in domestic workers was associated with high levels of exploitation, reproducing forms of servitude. He also points out the rhetoric of “being almost part of the family” as a mechanism for maintaining hierarchies, inequalities, and racial segregation within the domestic space.

The analysis of legal milestones related to domestic work in this article is conducted from a historical-cultural-legal approach, which allows legislation to be understood not merely as a normative product, but as the result of social, political, and educational disputes. By relating the actions of Laudelina de Campos Melo to subsequent legal advancements, it becomes evident how the collective organization of domestic workers challenged colonial power structures, contributing to the gradual expansion of labor rights and the redefinition of their social position.

It was only in 1972, with Law No. 5,859, that the legal treatment of domestic work began to guarantee formal employment contracts and 20 days of paid annual leave. Domestic work was characterized by continuity, personal provision of labor, and the absence of profit motive, yet the precariousness of protection was evident. Even with the 1988 Constitution, unlike other workers who receive thirty-four (34) fundamental social rights, domestic workers were granted protection for only nine (9) rights (Teixeira, 2021).

The paradigm shift in domestic work, from live-in monthly workers to day laborers, in the early 2000s—driven by the intent to increase earnings but in the daily exercise of heavy tasks, total informality, and lack of state support—highlighted the need to carefully protect these workers. This led to what jurists have called an expansion of citizenship through Law No. 11,324/2006, which increased the category's rights. In 2012, PEC 66/2012, known as the “Domestic Workers PEC,” began to be processed in Congress, aiming to establish equality among all workers under the same constitutional protection, that is, extending the same rights granted to all workers to domestic workers as well.

On April 2, 2013, Constitutional Amendment No. 72 was promulgated, with immediate effects on the regulation of domestic workers' working hours, including overtime. Regulation followed in 2015 with Complementary Law No. 150, known as the Domestic Workers Law. Even with legislation in force, informality remains widespread, especially in the North and Northeast regions, demonstrating and reaffirming that Laudelina's teachings and struggles must always be remembered, ideally through public policies aimed at reducing inequalities across the country, particularly gender inequalities and intersectionalities with race and social class (Bettini; Schwartz, 2024).

This recognition was ratified through Law No. 14,635/2023¹⁵, known as the “Laudelina Law,” which declared Laudelina de Campos Melo a “Heroine of the Nation” and reaffirmed her historical relevance in the fight for domestic workers’ rights and against racial and gender discrimination. Teaching about Laudelina’s trajectory, in this sense, contributes to the realization of citizenship for these workers and to the reduction of historically imposed social inequalities.

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The implementation of educational policies that inform about the discriminations that have historically excluded and segregated domestic workers becomes urgent, while simultaneously promoting education for equality and the effective constitutional protection of fundamental human rights—an indispensable condition for a dignified life. In this regard, it is essential to teach the frameworks of Anti-Discrimination Law, systematized in Brazil by Adilson José Moreira (2020), understood as an integral part of Constitutional Law. This perspective is indispensable for the realization of democracy, as it recognizes and gives voice to the plurality of subjects, identities, and cultural matrices, grounded in the Constitution, particularly in the Fundamental Principles, the objectives of the Republic, and the effectiveness of fundamental rights.

The foundations of Anti-Discrimination Law derive from theories of discrimination and allow the identification of practices that produce exclusion, segregation, loss of autonomy, and subordination. Giving voice to and empowering Black people historically marked by subordination and stereotypes—including when these manifest as so-called humor, as in cases of recreational racism (Moreira, 2019), which operate through microaggressions—is essential to confront sociocultural dynamics of domination and marginalization of the Black population, which are incompatible with democratic values.

Moreira (2019) proposes new foundations for constitutional interpretation, guided by the experiences and perspectives of those who occupy historical positions of vulnerability and subordination. This perspective requires anti-racist legal education, capable of overcoming the idea of the universal subject and recognizing the plurality of

¹⁵ BRASIL. Law No. 14,635, of 2023. Available at: Portal da Legislação, Presidency of the Republic. Accessed on: Jun. 2, 2025.



social realities, which demand legal responses distinct from those produced by abstract interpretations detached from multiculturalism and the constitutive differences of these realities.

Knowing and recounting the life of Laudelina, her struggles, and the construction of social foundations aimed at transforming the legacy of slavery and the formation of Brazilian society oriented by sexism, racism, and misogyny is part of Anti-Discrimination Law. This field consistently affirms and publicizes numerous negative discriminations that many fail to identify or refuse to acknowledge. Giving voice to Black women and empowering them is to reaffirm urgent constitutional agendas for social transformation through an interpretation that prioritizes multiculturalism and counters structural racism through anti-racist education, ultimately altering the paradigm of political decisions—that is, bringing dignity to Black women.

The expansion of citizenship for Black women depends on intentional political action and alignment with the Constitution, International Human Rights Treaties, and the 2030 Agenda – Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Within this framework, SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 10 (reduction of inequalities), and more recently SDG 18, which establishes targets aimed at promoting ethnic-racial equality and combating structural racism in coordination with the other Agenda goals, stand out (Schwartz; Bettini, 2024).

Both public authorities and private actors must adopt intentional measures aimed at reducing inequalities and their intersectional dimensions. In the context of this study, this entails giving voice to, promoting visibility, and empowering Black women. Such coordinated and deliberate action makes it possible to alter the colonial-slavery patterns still present in the cultural experiences of our people. Educating about and recognizing Anti-Discrimination Law is a mission of the State and private actors alike, since there exist forms of knowledge that do not rely on domination, violence, or the invisibility of Black women. It is necessary to promote a Humanity Ethics, in which everyone has duties and responsibilities, to enhance citizenship, human dignity, and foster transformations that lead to social justice and solidarity (Attié, 2020; Attié; Bettini, 2022).

Tributes to Laudelina de Campos Melo must go beyond the enactment of a law that praises her achievements and all the advances her resistance and political activism enabled. Her legacy surpasses legal victories; it is a testament to interculturality and the struggle for dignity. It is essential to establish educational policies that make it mandatory, at all levels of education, to learn about the life of this heroine, her achievements, and accomplishments that today ensure the protection of countless Black women and their citizenship, giving voice to the diversity of women who, like Laudelina, form the foundation of Brazilian cultural identity. She teaches us that the unity of people from different cultures is a powerful force for societal transformation.

Recent data highlight the persistence of structural inequalities that characterize domestic work in Brazil. According to the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (DIEESE), in the fourth quarter of 2024 there were approximately 5.9 million people employed in paid domestic work, over 90% of whom were women and around 68% Black women, revealing the centrality of intersections between gender, race, and labor in this sector (DIEESE, 2025a; DIEESE, 2025b).

Information released by the Ministry of Women indicates that 64.5% of domestic workers earn less than the minimum wage, in addition to facing high levels of informality, as approximately 75% work without a formal employment contract and only a small minority contribute to Social Security (Brazil, 2025). These data demonstrate that, despite normative advances achieved throughout the 20th century and early 21st century—such as Constitutional Amendment No. 72/2013 and subsequent legislation—the precariousness of domestic work persists as an expression of structural racism and the sexual division of labor.

These contemporary empirical data do not constitute a deviation from the historical focus of this study but rather reinforce its analytical relevance. By highlighting the persistence of informality, wage inequality, and the racialization of domestic work, these indicators show that the structures denounced by Laudelina throughout the 20th century remain operative, albeit under new legal forms. Thus, the empirical results directly align

with the research objective, demonstrating the persistence of inequalities and the need for educational and legal policies to address these colonial legacies.

4 Final considerations

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The articulation between biography, theory, and legal analysis allows us to assert that the trajectory of Laudelina de Campos Melo constitutes not only a historical milestone but also an educational reference for understanding the intersections of labor, race, gender, and citizenship in Brazil. Throughout this article, we have sought to demonstrate that her political and union activism produced effects that go beyond the normative field, constituting a formative and pedagogical practice capable of guiding public policies and educational processes committed to social justice and addressing structural inequalities.

In this context, the trajectory of Laudelina de Campos Melo remains historically relevant, as her political and educational activism anticipated contemporary debates on labor rights, social recognition, and public care policies, reinforcing the need for anti-racist educational practices and civic education aimed at valuing domestic workers.

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Responsible publisher: Genifer Andrade.

Ad hoc specialist: Luciana de Moura Ferreira and Mirelle Araújo da Silva.

How to cite this article (ABNT):

CAETANO, Sheila Cristina Silva Aragão; BETTINI, Lúcia Helena Polleti; SCHWARTZ, Rosana M.P.B. Trabalho doméstico no Brasil: o protagonismo de Laudelina de Campos Melo (1904-1991). **Rev. Pemo**, Fortaleza, v. 8, e15951, 2026. Available at: <https://revistas.uece.br/index.php/revpemo/article/view/15951>

Received on September 1, 2025.

Accepted on December 26, 2025.

Published on February 4, 2026.