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Gender, Race, and Class in the University Curriculum: Structural Silences and Epistemic Tensions in Course Syllabi at a Global South Public University

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Abstract

Universities worldwide face a persistent tension between the expansion of access to higher education and the persistence of curricula structured by Eurocentric, white, and male epistemologies - a phenomenon that decolonial scholarship describes as the coloniality of knowledge. This study investigates this tension through an emblematic Global South case: the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), the largest public university in Northeast Brazil. We examined the presence and absence of the social markers of gender, race, and class in 3,248 course syllabi from 81 undergraduate programs, spanning the university's five major institutional areas. The analysis combined qualitative documentary analysis with Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) processed in IRaMuTeQ software - a scalable, replicable mixed-methods approach for large-scale curriculum audits. Of the total corpus, only 126 syllabi (3.9%) directly mentioned the social markers, revealing low curricular transversality despite a robust national and institutional regulatory framework. The DHC identified four lexical classes – (1) epistemological critique of Western modernity; (2) aesthetic-urban racialization; (3) explicit intersectional approaches; and (4) normative-legal content - that reveal distinct regimes for incorporating social markers. Curricular silence is concentrated in Engineering, Exact Sciences, Computing, Natural Sciences, Accounting, Communication, Archival Science, Vernacular Language Studies, and Music, whereas critical clusters emerge in the Humanities, Health Sciences, Education, and the Arts. We argue that this pattern configures a model of selective incorporation, in which claims of technical neutrality sustain historically consolidated epistemic hierarchies. By articulating these findings with international scholarship on epistemic justice (Connell, Fraser, Lugones, Kilomba), the study offers a replicable methodological model for auditing university curricula in other Global South contexts and argues that mainstreaming gender, race, and class requires deliberate institutional policy, not mere regulatory compliance.

INTRODUCTION

The tension between the democratization of access to higher education and the persistence of curricula structured by Eurocentric epistemologies is not unique to Brazil: it runs through universities across the Global South - from South Africa to India, from Colombia to the Philippines - where the massification of access coexists with curricular architectures inherited from colonial traditions (Connell, 2019; Kilomba, 2020). In Brazil, this process intensified from the 2000s onward, as affirmative-action policies significantly transformed the racial, social, and territorial profile of the student body (Ribeiro, 2019; Almeida, 2019). However, expanded access has not been matched by an equivalent curricular transformation: the criteria for selecting content, the theoretical frameworks granted authority, and the mechanisms that legitimize knowledge remain anchored in white, male, and Europeanized epistemologies (Kilomba, 2020). Even institutions that have diversified their student composition thus continue to operate structurally unequal curricula (Connell, 2019) - a pattern observable, to varying degrees, in public universities across the Global South that expanded access without substantially revising their curricular repertoires.

This mismatch between the inclusion of bodies and the inclusion of knowledges therefore constitutes a global issue of epistemic justice, not an isolated matter of national education policy. In this context, gender, race, and class function as central markers not only for understanding social inequalities but for analyzing the internal workings of higher education institutions. Lugones (2020) and Piscitelli (2021) show that these markers do not operate as individual attributes but as organizing principles of pedagogical practices, disciplinary hierarchies, and regimes of academic legitimacy. Race structures the social division of knowledge, delimiting which epistemologies are considered valid and which remain historically marginalized (Almeida, 2019). Gender regulates forms of intellectual authority and shapes professionalizing expectations (Puar, 2017). Class configures material and symbolic inequalities in access to valued cultural repertoires (Fraser & Bhattacharya, 2021). Investigating how these markers do - or do not - cut across the curriculum thus offers a privileged lens for examining the university's own epistemic architecture.

In Brazil, this debate carries specific regulatory weight: federal law mandates the inclusion of content on ethnic-racial relations and Afro-Brazilian, African, and Indigenous history at all levels of education (Laws 10.639/2003 and 11.645/2008; National Education Council Resolution CNE/CP 01/2004). At the Federal University of Bahia, Resolution 04/2023 consolidated these guidelines by requiring every undergraduate program to incorporate content on ethnic-racial relations, human rights, and environmental education into its curricular projects. This framework makes UFBA a particularly informative test case: few Global South institutions have such an explicit legal mandate for mainstreaming social markers across the curriculum, positioning it as a privileged observatory for assessing the gap between regulation and practice - a gap we assume has parallels in other public universities outside the Global North.

Despite this framework, evidence suggests that implementing these guidelines runs into recurring structural barriers: curricula organized around rigid disciplinary traditions, internal disputes over what counts as "core" versus "peripheral" content, and persistent notions of technical neutrality that in practice function as forms of resistance to including debates on inequality (Silva et al., 2022). These barriers are not exclusive to the Brazilian context: they are mirrored in accounts of curricular reform at South African, Indian, and Latin American universities, where claims of scientific objectivity frequently mask the maintenance of colonial epistemic hierarchies (Connell, 2019). Systematic curricular analysis thus becomes a privileged - and replicable - method for identifying how social and epistemological tensions materialize within higher education institutions worldwide.

This is the context for the present study. By examining undergraduate course syllabi at UFBA as a Global South case study, we seek to understand how the markers of gender, race, and class are - or are not - incorporated into the university curriculum, and we propose a replicable curricular audit method for institutions facing similar tensions between student diversity and epistemic architecture. Rather than merely describing the presence of these markers, we are interested in what their inclusion, absence, or manner of treatment reveals about how the university produces, authorizes, and distributes knowledge. Against this backdrop, we ask: how are gender, race, and class incorporated into UFBA's undergraduate course syllabi, and what epistemological, political, and institutional tensions does this incorporation

reveal in the context of the contemporary public university - and, by extension, in the broader context of Global South universities?

METHODS

Study design

This study is characterized as a qualitative documentary analysis that understands the curriculum as a political, historical, and epistemological artifact (Pimentel, 2017), combined with a quantitative lexical classification stage. This mixed-methods integration addresses a methodological gap identified in the literature on curricular audits: small-scale qualitative studies offer interpretive depth but are difficult to replicate across large corpora, whereas purely quantitative studies tend to reduce complex curricular content to keyword counts, losing nuances of meaning. Combining documentary analysis with Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC), processed in IRaMuTeQ software, seeks to overcome this limitation by offering a scalable method for systematically examining curricula in large institutions - a methodological contribution that can be replicated by researchers at other Global South universities interested in systematically and comparably auditing the mainstreaming of social markers in their own curricula.

Corpus and institutional context

We examined 3,248 course syllabi belonging to the 81 undergraduate programs of the Federal University of Bahia, public, open-access documents made available through the university's Academic Information System (SIAC). As institutional documents, syllabi express disciplinary choices and disputes over the legitimacy of knowledge (Kripka, Scheller & Bonotto, 2015), making them an appropriate unit of analysis for investigating how the curriculum formalizes - or renders invisible - debates on social inequality.

Selection criteria and screening flow

Of the 3,248 syllabi analyzed, 126 (3.9%) contained direct mentions of the previously defined social markers: gender, race, racism, feminism, social class, intersectionality, and coloniality. The screening process followed four steps: (1) collection of the 3,248 syllabi; (2) exploratory reading; (3) identification of direct mentions of the social markers; (4) selection of the 126 syllabi that composed the final corpus for lexical analysis.

Analytical procedures

The documentary analysis proceeded from the premise that syllabi are not neutral records but institutional texts that express the values, priorities, disputes, and silences characteristic of disciplinary traditions. We thus sought to move beyond identifying isolated keywords, instead capturing the regimes

of visibility and erasure that structure the presence - or absence - of social markers in the curriculum (Pimentel, 2017; Sousa et al., 2019). Exploratory reading of all syllabi allowed us to identify expressions associated with the markers - including references to social inequality, ethnic-racial relations, diversity, feminisms, racism, social class, socioeconomic inequality, coloniality, and intersectionality - capturing both explicit mentions and more indirect thematic formulations.

Methodological rationale for using IRaMuTeQ and Descending Hierarchical Classification

The choice of IRaMuTeQ as a lexical analysis tool is justified on three grounds. First, its theoretical-methodological foundation (Camargo & Justo, 2013) integrates statistical tools with qualitative interpretation, avoiding both the interpretive relativism of purely hermeneutic analyses and the reductionism of simple frequency counts. Second, Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) segments the corpus into text units and groups them into lexically homogeneous classes based on statistically significant co-occurrences, revealing latent semantic fields that would be difficult to identify through manual reading alone in large-scale corpora - a particularly relevant resource for institutions with dozens or hundreds of programs, where the exhaustive, comparative reading of thousands of documents is unfeasible without computational support. Third, and most relevant to this study's methodological contribution, DHC produces quantifiable results - the percentage of the corpus per class, chi-square values per word - that make curricular audits comparable across institutions and replicable over time, features essential for turning curricular analysis from a one-off exercise into a permanent instrument of institutional monitoring. The choice of DHC was therefore not guided by an expectation of quantitative neutrality, but by the possibility of articulating structured lexical patterns with a critical reading grounded in decolonial and intersectional scholarship, extending the understanding of curricular organization beyond what isolated qualitative reading could achieve in a corpus of this magnitude.

Robustness indicators of the lexical analysis

The final corpus, composed of the 126 syllabi, generated 347 text segments, of which 309 were classified by the DHC, achieving a classification rate of 89.05% - above the 70% minimum considered desirable by Camargo and Justo (2013) and indicative of high analytical stability. We recorded 11,795 occurrences distributed across 1,728 distinct forms, of which 1,322 were active forms; 544 forms had a minimum frequency of three occurrences, ensuring lexical density adequate to the robustness of the DHC. The average of 33.99 words per segment indicates that, despite being short texts, the syllabi displayed sufficient thematic diversity to sustain the classification process. The classes revealed by IRaMuTeQ were interpreted based on chi-square (χ^2) values, considering statistical significance at $p < 0.05$ and high significance at $p < 0.001$.

Limitations

The main limitation concerns the incomplete filling-in of the syllabus-content field for some programs, which may lead to an underestimation of the presence of social markers in courses whose content was not fully documented in SIAC. As with any large-scale documentary audit, the results reflect what is formally recorded in institutional documents, not necessarily actual classroom pedagogical practice - a distinction relevant both to interpreting the findings and to transferring the method to other institutional contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Institutional distribution of social markers

The examination of 3,248 syllabi from 81 undergraduate programs at UFBA (Appendix 1) identified 126 syllabi with direct content related to gender, race, and class (3.9% of the total), unevenly distributed across the university's five major institutional areas (Table 1). For the purposes of this study, we considered only syllabi in which the social markers appeared explicitly in the text. Descending Hierarchical Classification, processed in IRaMuTeQ, identified four distinct thematic clusters within this corpus, showing how social markers appear - directly or through subtler means - in the institution's syllabi (Fig. 1).

Table 1
Undergraduate programs, by institutional area, with direct presence of the social markers of gender, class, and race in the syllabi of mandatory courses (data collected in 2025, consolidating an updated institutional picture over the 2025–2026 biennium).

Area	Programs with direct presence of social markers
Area I	Architecture and Urban Planning; Architecture and Urban Planning (evening); Geography; Geography (evening); Geology; Oceanography.
Area II	Medicine; Medicine (Vitória da Conquista); Nutrition; Nutrition (Vitória da Conquista); Dentistry; Public Health; Occupational Therapy; Biotechnology; Biotechnology (Vitória da Conquista); Biological Sciences; Biological Sciences (evening); Biological Sciences (Vitória da Conquista); Nursing; Nursing (Vitória da Conquista); Physical Therapy; Speech-Language Pathology; Gastronomy.
Area III	Social Work; Law (evening); Gender and Diversity Studies (evening); Education (evening); Economics; Social Sciences; History; History (evening); Philosophy; Psychology; Museology; Executive Secretarial Studies; Law.
Area IV	Vernacular Language Studies; Vernacular Language Studies (evening); Foreign Language Studies; Foreign Language Studies (evening); Library and Information Science.
Area V	Visual Arts; Dance; Drawing and Plastic Arts.

Figure 1. Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) of the textual corpus built from syllabi containing ethnic-racial, gender, and class content across UFBA undergraduate programs (2025–2026 survey). [Insert original dendrogram generated in IRaMuTeQ.]

After processing, the 126 syllabi were segmented into 347 text segments, of which 309 were classified (89.05% classification rate). We recorded 11,795 occurrences distributed across 1,728 distinct forms (1,322 active forms), of which 544 had a frequency of three or more - a vocabulary sufficiently dense to sustain the DHC, with an average of 33.99 words per segment. The DHC results, organized into four distinct lexical classes, are detailed in Table 2, which presents the most representative words of each class, ranked by chi-square (χ^2) value.

Table 2
Words with the highest chi-square (χ^2) value per lexical class. Original terms from the Portuguese-language corpus are given with an English gloss in parentheses.

Class	% of corpus	Key word	χ^2	p
Class 1	14.9%	filosofia (philosophy)	13.42	< 0.001
		ciência (science)	12.98	< 0.001
		racionalidade (rationality)	11.05	< 0.001
		fundamento (foundation)	8.56	< 0.005
Class 2	13.6%	África (Africa)	15.10	< 0.001
		arte (art)	13.67	< 0.001
		cidade (city)	11.92	< 0.001
		arquitetura (architecture)	10.44	< 0.005
Class 3	56.3%	gênero (gender)	23.79	< 0.001
		raça (race)	21.11	< 0.001
		experiência (experience)	19.05	< 0.001
		saúde (health)	16.88	< 0.001
Class 4	15.2%	legislação (legislation)	18.41	< 0.001
		gestão (management)	15.53	< 0.001
		educação (education)	13.01	< 0.001
		sistema (system)	9.95	< 0.005

Class 1 (14.9% of segments) grouped words related to science, philosophy, rationality, foundation, and modernity. Class 2 (13.6%) grouped terms associated with architecture, art, city, Europe, and Africa. Class 3 accounted for the majority of segments (56.3%), with words such as gender, race, culture, class, politics, diversity, health, and experience. Class 4 (15.2%) grouped terms related to organization, the educational system, legislation, and school management.

The distribution also revealed marked inequality across areas. In Area I (Engineering, Exact Sciences, and Computing), no mandatory syllabus mentioned gender, race, or class - including programs such as Civil Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Geology, Computer Science, and Statistics. A similar pattern characterized part of Area II (Natural Sciences and Health), in programs such as Veterinary Medicine, Animal Science, and Pharmacy. In Area III, Accounting, Journalism, Cultural Production, Archival Science, and Physical Education likewise showed no mentions; in Area IV, Vernacular Language Studies with a Foreign Language; and in Area V, Composition and Conducting. In contrast, programs in the Humanities, Arts, Health, and Education concentrated the highest density of markers - most notably the Bachelor's degree in Gender and Diversity Studies, which included references in 18 of 21 syllabi analyzed.

This distribution confirms that UFBA's curriculum does not respond homogeneously to the legal and epistemological requirements for incorporating social markers, echoing scholarship that points to persistent hierarchies in Brazilian higher education, such as Queiroz (2004), who demonstrated the concentration of privileged groups - chiefly white men - in the most prestigious institutional areas. Our findings advance this literature by showing that such inequalities are not confined to access or student composition: they materialize in curricular content itself, defining which topics are legitimized as knowledge and which remain structurally absent - a pattern that, in light of the international literature reviewed in the Introduction, suggests that UFBA is not an institutional anomaly but the local expression of a broader phenomenon of epistemic inequality in Global South universities.

The low incidence of markers (126 of 3,248 syllabi, 3.9%) suggests that this silence is not random. Almeida (2019) argues that the university reproduces historical forms of knowledge organization grounded in Eurocentric and masculinist epistemologies; our findings corroborate this thesis empirically by showing that areas that claim technical neutrality - Engineering and Exact Sciences, in particular - reproduce a curricular model that excludes debates on inequality, perpetuating the ideal of abstract universalism that Connell (2019) describes as a central mechanism for maintaining epistemic hierarchies in modern science. Even within an institutional context that formally recognizes the importance of diversity - as expressed in Resolution 04/2023 - the curricular organization preserves structures that naturalize the absence of social markers as though that absence were neutral rather than politically constructed.

Theoretical dialogue with the four lexical classes

Interpreting the four classes produced by the DHC allows us to deepen this analysis by explicitly linking each lexical pattern to the international literature on epistemic justice.

In Class 1, terms related to modernity, science, rationality, and foundation reveal an epistemological critique that problematizes the foundations of Western thought without necessarily mobilizing social markers as explicit analytical categories. This pattern converges only partly with Lugones (2020): for the author, questioning the coloniality of knowledge does not automatically entail incorporating gender and race as analytical axes - epistemological critique can remain at an abstract, philosophical level without translating into concrete analysis of the inequalities it addresses. Class 1 thus demonstrates a partial

and disarticulated incorporation of decolonial critique: present as a conceptual structure, but insufficient to challenge concrete inequalities of gender, race, and class within the curricular space.

Class 2, which groups words related to architecture, art, city, and Africa, brings together aesthetic scholarship and the racialization of urban space. Kilomba (2020) and Piscitelli (2021) argue that racialization should be understood as a structural, cross-cutting process rather than an attribute of specific objects of study; Class 2, however, tends to situate these debates as topics confined to particular fields - architecture, urban planning, art history - without reorganizing the institution's broader disciplinary hierarchies. This methodological displacement is revealing: race appears as a characteristic of specific urban and cultural phenomena rather than as a cross-cutting category capable of reconfiguring the curriculum's own criteria of epistemic legitimacy. The limitation evidenced by Class 2 is, in this sense, emblematic of a broader pattern identified by Kilomba (2020): racialization is thematized but rarely structuring.

Class 3 features the most consistent approach and the one most closely aligned with contemporary scholarship on social justice. The words identified - gender, race, class, politics, health, diversity, and experience - correspond to what Fraser and Bhattacharya (2021) call the structuring categories of contemporary social and economic inequality, in which recognition and redistribution operate in tandem. In this class, markers are mobilized in an integrated fashion, corresponding to the understanding of intersectionality as a central analytical tool advocated by Piscitelli (2021). The fact that Class 3 concentrates 56.3% of the text segments in the reduced corpus - the 126 syllabi that already mention the markers - should not be read as evidence of broad institutional transversality: rather, it confirms that, where markers do appear, programs in the Humanities, Health, and Education constitute nodes of knowledge production committed to critical perspectives - nodes that coexist with an overwhelming majority of curricula (96.1% of all syllabi) in which these debates remain entirely absent.

Class 4 groups normative content related to legislation and educational management, showing that a significant share of the presence of markers stems from legal requirement rather than epistemological conviction or structural curricular transformation. This finding is consistent with Silva et al. (2022), who argue that the inclusion of debates on inequality in the university often occurs in a procedural fashion - responding to formal guidelines without producing deep change in institutional culture. From the standpoint of the epistemic justice framework proposed by Fraser and Bhattacharya (2021), Class 4 illustrates a structural limit: formal-legal recognition of a problem does not equate to its effective redistribution within the curricular space; the norm creates the obligation but does not guarantee the transformation of the knowledge hierarchy that Classes 1 and 2 reveal to remain intact in fields that self-identify as technically neutral.

Taken together, the four classes reveal a central tension running through the institution: some areas incorporate the markers critically and in an integrated way (Class 3); others address them partially or in a circumscribed manner (Classes 1 and 2); and a predominantly normative, procedural response (Class 4) coexists with the near-total absence of mentions across nine major disciplinary fields. This pattern

reveals the coexistence of two models of the university within the same institution: one that recognizes gender, race, and class as structuring dimensions of social reality, and another that sustains practices of technical neutrality that treat these dimensions as irrelevant to professional training. Connell (2019) and Almeida (2019) help interpret this dichotomy by arguing that curricular organization is a privileged site for reproducing structural inequalities and for maintaining the legitimacy of particular groups and epistemologies - a reading that, combined with this study's empirical findings, supports the claim that curricular silence functions as an active mechanism for reproducing epistemic hierarchies, not as an incidental absence of content.

From local silence to a global pattern

These findings extend the already well-established critique of inequality in higher education by showing that the university reproduces inequality not only through access but also through structural curricular silence. The systematic absence of social markers in specific areas confirms that the curriculum is a political device that determines which experiences and debates are legitimized as valid knowledge. This suggests that, despite initiatives to incorporate the markers, UFBA operates a model of selective incorporation, in which critical clusters coexist with broad zones of silence - producing a fragmented and insufficient form of transversality.

We argue that this pattern of selective incorporation is not a Brazilian singularity but a situated manifestation of a broader dynamic observable in public universities across the Global South that expanded access without substantially revising their curricular architecture. The method employed here - a large-scale documentary audit combined with DHC processed in IRaMuTeQ - thus offers a replicable instrument for other institutions to systematically and comparably investigate the extent to which their own curricula translate formal commitments to diversity and social justice into effective epistemic transformation.

CONCLUSION

This analysis shows that the incorporation of the markers of gender, race, and class into UFBA's curriculum is sporadic, uneven, and concentrated in a small number of fields: only 126 of the 3,248 syllabi analyzed (3.9%) contained a direct reference to the markers, evidencing an institutional pattern of low curricular transversality despite a robust regulatory framework.

Descending Hierarchical Classification, with an 89.05% classification rate, identified four classes of lexical organization that express different curricular regimes: (1) epistemological critique of Western modernity; (2) aesthetic-urban and historical-cultural racialization; (3) explicit intersectional approaches to social inequality; and (4) normative content tied to legislation and educational management. The presence of markers is concentrated in the Humanities, Health Sciences, Education, and the Arts, while their total absence characterizes Engineering, Exact Sciences, Computing, Natural Sciences, Accounting, Communication, Archival Science, Vernacular Language Studies, and Music - evidencing structured patterns of curricular silence sustained by notions of technical neutrality and abstract universalism.

The comparison across areas reveals that the inclusion of gender, race, and class stems from localized initiatives - dependent on specific disciplinary traditions and the agency of committed faculty groups - rather than from fully consolidated institutional guidelines. This internal inequality shows that Brazil's legal framework, though robust, has yet to translate into uniform curricular practice, confirming the gap between formal recognition and effective redistribution discussed by Fraser and Bhattacharya (2021).

We conclude that UFBA presents a picture of selective incorporation of social markers, in which nodes of critical density coexist with broad areas of structural silence. This finding has implications that extend beyond the Brazilian case: Global South universities that expanded student access without substantially revising their curricula face, with local variations, similar tensions between institutional diversity and epistemic architecture. The results point to the need for institutional policies that ensure effective curricular transversality, ongoing faculty development, and the systematic review of program curricular projects - not as a procedural response to regulatory requirements, but as a substantive commitment to epistemic justice.

As a methodological contribution, this study demonstrates the feasibility of large-scale curricular audits combining qualitative documentary analysis with Descending Hierarchical Classification, offering a replicable instrument for researchers interested in mapping, comparing, and monitoring, over time, the mainstreaming of social markers in university curricula - in Brazil and in other Global South contexts.

Declarations

Competing interests:

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics approval:

As this study involved documentary analysis of public institutional records with no human participants, it did not require review by a research ethics committee.

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Author Contribution

Ráren Paulo da Silva Araújo, Climene Laura de Camargo, Renata Meira Veras, and Wanderley Cordeiro Gonçalves Junior contributed equally to the study's conception, data collection and analysis, manuscript

drafting, and critical revision of its intellectual content. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability

All data supporting the conclusions of this study are available in the article and its Supplementary Information.

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Figures

Figure 1

Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) of the textual corpus built from syllabi containing ethnic-racial, gender, and class content across UFBA undergraduate programs (2025–2026 survey). [Insert original dendrogram generated in IRaMuTeQ.]

Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- Appendix1.docx