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ABSTRACT

The present article analyzes the role of women as heads of households in the Greater Tijuca region of the city of Rio de Janeiro from a territorial and intersectional perspective. It is based on the understanding that the increase in women's participation as household heads, although representing social progress, also reveals the persistence of gender, racial, and income inequalities. The research adopts a qualitative-quantitative approach, based on the analysis of data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (2022 Demographic Census) and the use of geoprocessing techniques for the production of thematic maps. The results indicate that more than half of the households in Greater Tijuca are headed by women, with a greater concentration in areas of higher social vulnerability, especially in favelas and their surroundings. The presence of Black women is also more significant in these territories, highlighting the racial dimension of inequalities. Therefore, this female protagonism is marked by conditions of overload and precariousness, reinforcing the need for territorialized and intersectional public policies and contributing to the debate on socio-spatial inequalities and regional development.

Keywords: Gender. Socio-spatial inequality. Women heads of households.

RESUMO

O presente artigo analisa o protagonismo feminino na responsabilidade pelos domicílios na região da Grande Tijuca, na cidade do Rio de Janeiro, a partir de uma perspectiva territorial e interseccional. Parte-se do entendimento de que o aumento da participação das mulheres como responsáveis por domicílios, embora represente avanços sociais, também revela a permanência de desigualdades de gênero, raça e renda. A pesquisa adota abordagem quali-quantitativa, com base na análise de dados do Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Censo Demográfico de 2022) e na utilização de técnicas de geoprocessamento para a elaboração de mapas temáticos. Os resultados indicam que mais da metade dos domicílios da Grande Tijuca possui mulheres como responsáveis, com maior concentração em áreas de maior vulnerabilidade social, especialmente em favelas e seus entornos. Observa-se também que a presença de mulheres negras é mais expressiva nesses territórios, evidenciando a dimensão racial das desigualdades. Logo, esse protagonismo feminino é marcado por condições de sobrecarga e precarização, o que reforça a necessidade de políticas públicas territorializadas e interseccionais, contribuindo para o debate sobre desigualdades socioespaciais e desenvolvimento regional.

Palavras-chave: Gênero. Desigualdade socioespacial. Mulheres responsáveis por domicílios.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades of the twentieth century, Brazilian women achieved significant improvements in their living conditions, as evidenced by the decline in several indicators of gender inequality and substantial gains in their rights. Although this progress is undeniable, many challenges still persist (Thomas, 2003).

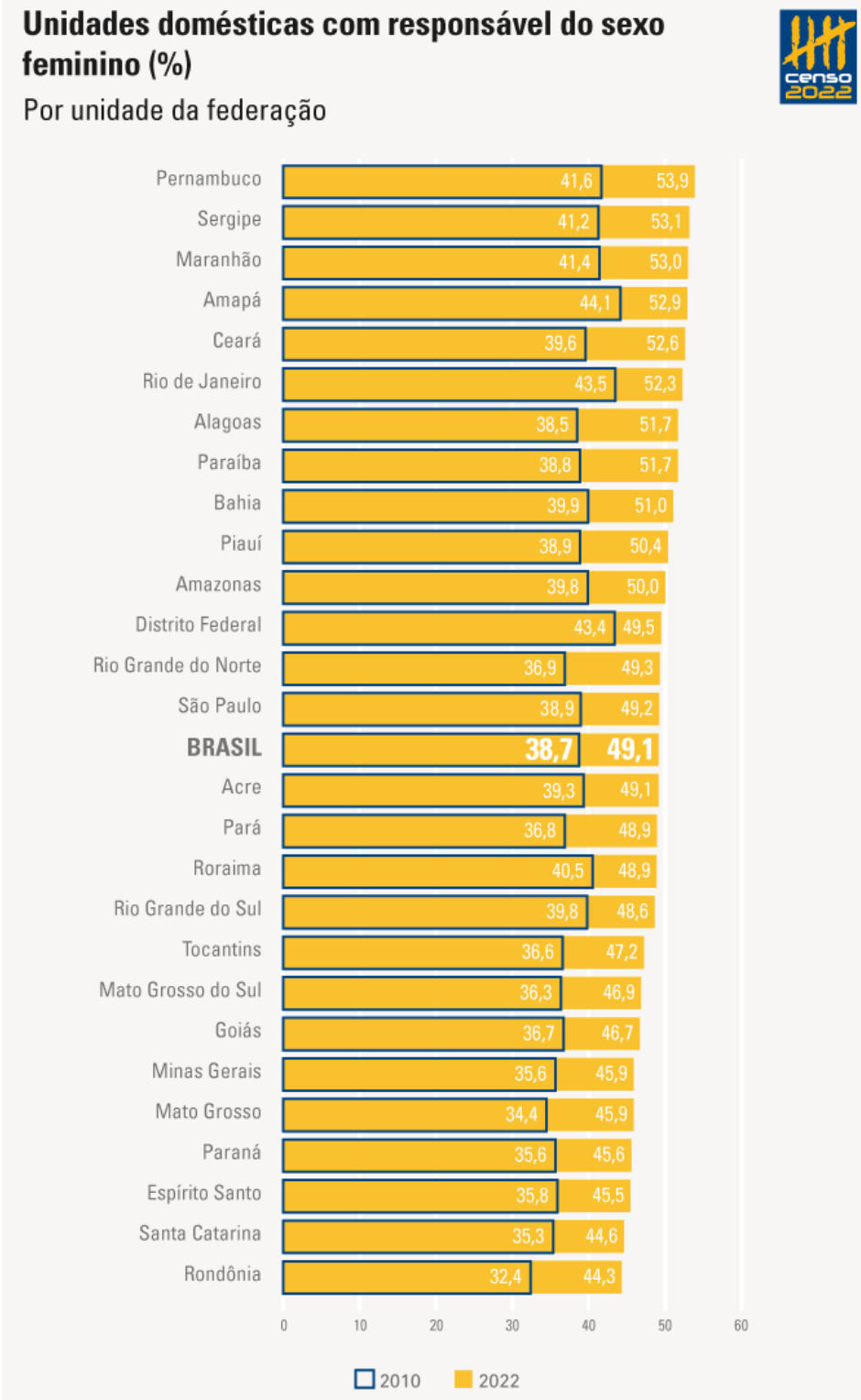
In this context, understanding how these transformations materialize across the territory is essential to the debate on regional development, particularly in urban contexts marked by socio-spatial inequalities. Analyzing women's role as heads of households makes it possible not only to identify vulnerabilities but also to recognize their important contribution to the organization of social and economic life.

This study is justified by the need to deepen the debate on the relationship between gender, territory, and regional development, contributing to the production of knowledge with social impact. Its general objective is to analyze the role of women as heads of households in the Grande Tijuca region of the city of Rio de Janeiro from a territorial and intersectional perspective, considering gender, race, and income inequalities and their implications for regional development. The specific objectives are to identify the proportion of women responsible for households in Grande Tijuca based on data from the 2022 Demographic Census, disaggregated by race/skin color, and to demonstrate how spatial analysis can support public policies aimed at gender equality, in alignment with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 and gender mainstreaming guidelines.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Data from the Demographic Censuses conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) reveal a significant increase in women's participation as heads of households in Brazil between 2010 and 2022. During this period, the proportion of women responsible for households grew considerably, approaching that of men and revealing an important shift in the country's family and social structure. In several states, women already account for more than half of those responsible for households, as shown in Figure 1. In 2022, the state of Rio de Janeiro reached 52.3% of households in which women were responsible, surpassing the halfway mark and exceeding the national average (49.1%). In 2010, this percentage was significantly lower, at 43.5%, demonstrating a consistent change over the period (Siqueira and Britto, 2024).

Figure 1 | Increase in women's participation as household heads in Brazil by state (2010-2022).



Source: Siqueira and Britto, 2024.

Such a scenario may be associated with transformations in the structure of Brazilian society, such as the increase in women's economic autonomy, changes in family arrangements, and the growing prevalence of female-headed single-parent households. However, women's role as heads of households is also associated with vulnerability: a study conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Economics, affiliated with the Getulio Vargas Foundation, reveals that Brazil has more than 11 million single mothers, a number that increased by 1.7 million between 2012 and 2022. The study indicates that approximately 90% of these women are Black and that around 15% of Brazilian households are headed by single mothers (G1, 2023).

Most of these women live only with their children and without access to a support network, which intensifies their everyday challenges. This situation affects their participation in the labor market, as many face difficulties in reconciling domestic responsibilities with formal employment and therefore turn to informal work and, frequently, multiple jobs. In this context, discrimination also emerges as a significant obstacle, since, as Débora Silva states, "these mothers are often outside the labor market because employers do not want to hire a woman with a child, so they have to find ways to make ends meet." In addition, a large proportion of these mothers have lower levels of educational attainment, often as a result of early motherhood, which interrupts their educational trajectory at a crucial stage, limiting their professional opportunities and the accumulation of human capital (G1, 2023).

> Despite women's strong participation in the labor market, their integration into the world of work has been characterized by precariousness and by their concentration in the less formalized segments of the economy, where informal employment contracts are more prevalent and trade union representation is weaker. Therefore, considering poverty from a gender perspective requires taking into account aspects related to the sexual division of labor, which reinforces women's subordinate position within the productive sphere (Silva and Osterne, 2012, pp. 169-170).

These disadvantages experienced by women in society, particularly in the labor market, contribute to a scenario known as the "feminization of poverty," which, according to Berro (2008, p. 133), consists of:

> [...] a phenomenon in which women have, over the past decades and due to various social and economic factors, become poorer than men. It consists of an increase in the proportion of women among the poor or an increase in the proportion of people living in female-headed families among the poor. It is the growth of poverty among women over time. According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), a large proportion of households have been composed of women without partners, that is, a sole income provider. Regarding average household income measured in minimum wages, it can be inferred that, in female-headed households, household income is lower than that of households headed by a man with a spouse. Important international organizations support the idea that a growing proportion of those affected by poverty are women.

Another issue that supports this theory is that data from the 2022 IBGE Census show that, despite having higher levels of education, women earn, on average, nearly 20% less than men, with a monthly income of R$2,506 compared with R$3,115 for men. This difference persists across all levels of education and widens among those with completed higher education, reaching 37.5%. Although 28.9% of employed women have a university degree, compared with 17.3% of men, they remain at a disadvantage both in terms of wages and employment rates (Bolzani and Catto, 2025).

Gender wage inequality, however, is not distributed uniformly across economic sectors (Figure 2). IBGE data analyzed in 2024 reveal that women earn lower salaries than men in 82% of occupational areas in Brazil. Among the 20 major groups of economic activities, women earn less in 17 of them. The most significant disparity occurs in the Financial, Insurance and Related Services sector, where men earn an average of R$10,469.21, while women earn R$6,205.02, representing a difference of 68.7% (Miato and Macedo, 2024).

Figure 2 | Differences in income between men and women by economic activity.



Source: Miato and Macedo, 2024.

Strategic sectors for knowledge production and social development also present equally concerning disparities. In Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities, women earn 25.5% less than men. In Education, a predominantly female field that is essential for human capital formation, the difference reaches 23.2%. In Human Health and Social Services, women earn 23.6% less than their male counterparts (Miato and Macedo, 2024).

These data show that, even in fields of knowledge and sectors where women constitute the majority or possess high levels of qualification, wage inequality persists as a structural challenge. For women working in activities that are central to regional development and the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, such as science, teaching, and innovation, this disparity imposes material barriers that undermine their economic autonomy, their retention in scientific careers, and their ability to occupy decision-making positions.

Thus, the statistics reveal women's prominent role in Brazilian society, while also exposing the discrimination and inequalities to which they are still subjected. In light of this, it is incumbent upon public authorities to identify real situations of discrimination and inequality affecting women and to create conditions for the full exercise of citizenship in all public spaces. This task requires reflection and dialogue among public managers, researchers, and social movements regarding the formulation of public policies that incorporate gender mainstreaming, guided by a new framework of competencies, partnerships, and intersectoral action (Freire, 2008). In this context, scientific research assumes a strategic role in supporting the formulation of more inclusive public policies, demonstrating how knowledge can contribute to transforming social realities.

Gender mainstreaming can be defined as the idea of developing a framework capable of guiding a new understanding of competencies (political, institutional, and administrative) and holding public officials accountable for overcoming gender asymmetries within and across different spheres of government, thereby ensuring more democratic and inclusive governance with regard to women (Bandeira, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted using a qualitative-quantitative approach, structured into integrated stages that made it possible to understand the dynamics of women's leadership as heads of households in the neighborhoods of the Grande Tijuca region of the city of Rio de Janeiro. The study began with a literature review on gender issues in Brazil. Subsequently, secondary data were collected from the final results of the 2022 Demographic Census conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), available in the census tract database for the municipality of Rio de Janeiro.

To spatialize and analyze the intersections between women responsible for households, ethnic-racial issues, and social class, thematic maps were produced using geoprocessing techniques. The IBGE Census plugin in QGIS software, version 3.22, was used to extract variables related to the sex of the household head, the race/skin color of the household head, and the average monthly income of the household head. The methodological workflow comprised the following stages: (I) selection of the state of Rio de Janeiro and the municipality of Rio de Janeiro in the IBGE Census plugin; (II) extraction of census tables related to the variables of interest; (III) importation of census tract layers into the QGIS environment; (IV) selection of the census tracts corresponding to the neighborhoods of Grande Tijuca; and (V) verification and standardization of numerical fields for calculating proportions and producing thematic maps.

According to the Basic Questionnaire applied by IBGE in the 2022 Demographic Census, a household head is defined as a person aged 12 years or older whose responsibility for the household is recognized by the other residents (IBGE, 2022). Data aggregation was performed at the census tract level, maintaining the original spatial unit of the Census. The maps were produced using the SIRGAS 2000 reference system, at a scale of 1:25,000. Cartographic classes were manually defined based on the distribution of the observed data. Map legends present the value classes used for the spatial representation of the variables analyzed, with color gradations indicating the lowest and highest observed values. No automated scripts or additional plugins were used beyond the IBGE Census plugin and QGIS native tools for spatial selection, field calculations, and cartographic representation.

The data underwent cleaning and processing procedures, including verification of duplicate records, standardization of numerical formats, and verification of the sum of race/skin color categories in relation to the total number of women responsible for households. Quantitative analyses were based on absolute frequencies, proportions, and average income. Percentages were calculated in relation to the total number of occupied permanent private households in each census tract, while income values correspond to the monthly average reported by the 2022 Census. Since the objective of the study is descriptive and exploratory, no statistical significance tests were applied.

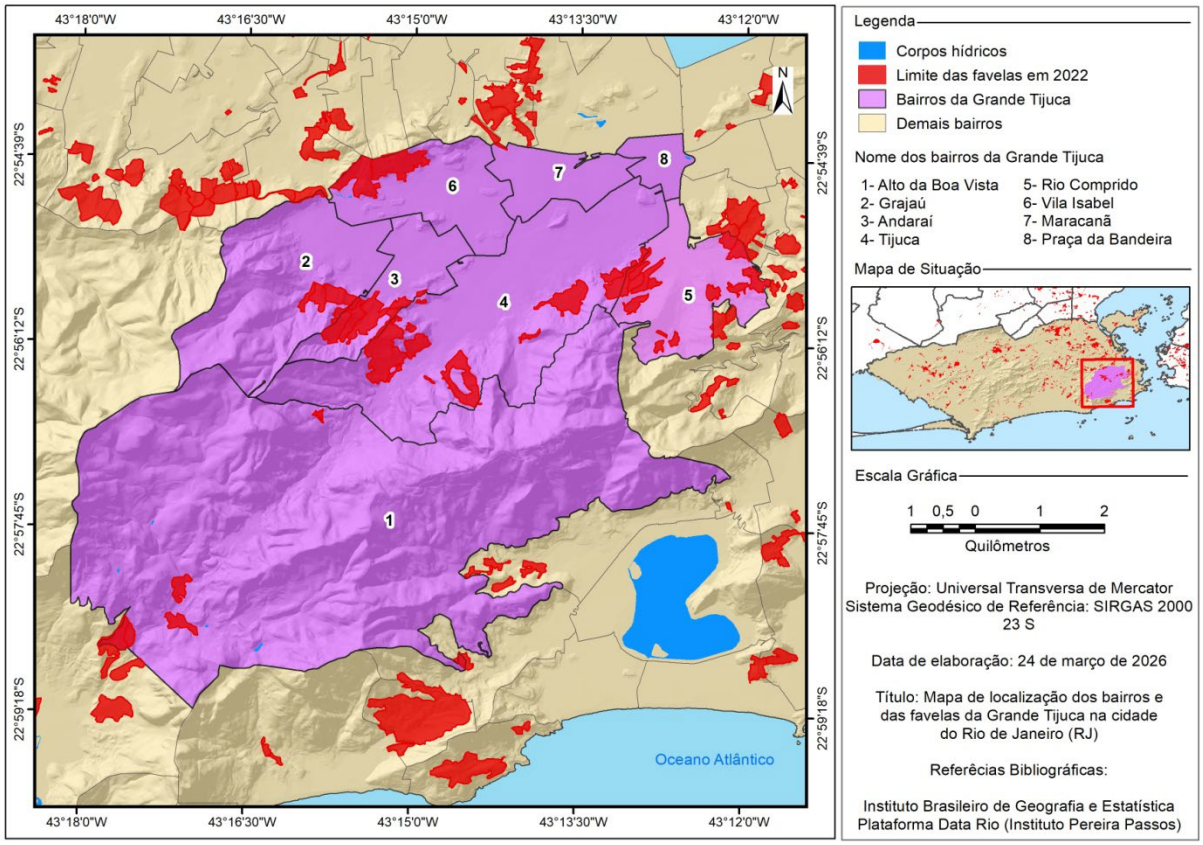
The final stage consisted of an integrated analysis of the data, combining the theoretical framework with cartographic and census evidence, which enabled the development of the research findings.

It is worth emphasizing that the use of these techniques reinforces the role of spatial analysis as a tool to support public management and territorial planning, contributing to the formulation of policies aimed at addressing gender inequalities. Thus, the research aligns with the commitments of the United Nations 2030 Agenda by providing territorial evidence to advance Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which focuses on gender equality, as well as to the development of public policies that recognize and strengthen women's leadership within territories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Grande Tijuca region encompasses the following neighborhoods in the North Zone of the city of Rio de Janeiro: Alto da Boa Vista, Grajaú, Andaraí, Tijuca, Rio Comprido, Vila Isabel, Maracanã, and Praça da Bandeira (Figure 3).

Figure 3 | Location map of the neighborhoods and favelas of the Grande Tijuca region in the city of Rio de Janeiro (RJ).

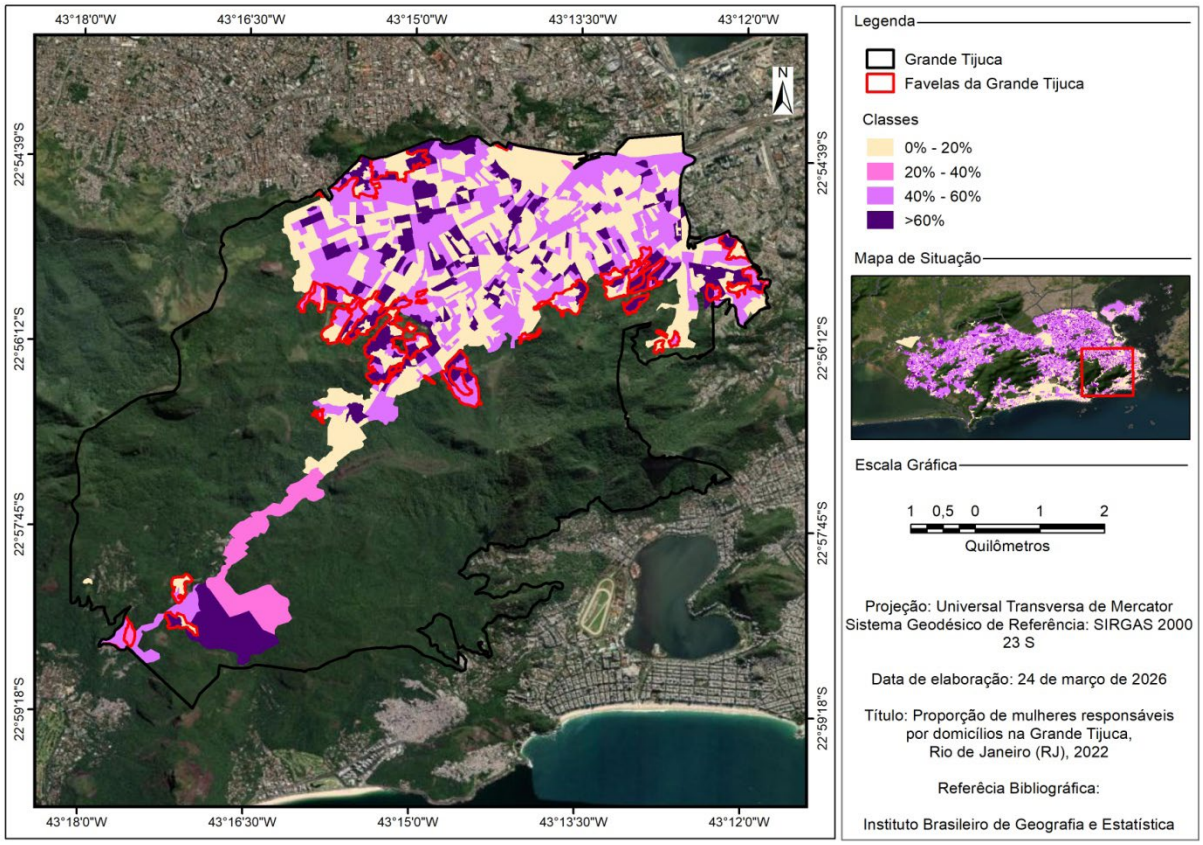


Source: The author, 2026.

Of the 58.52 km² occupied by the Grande Tijuca region, approximately 3.07 km² encompasses favela areas, including Morro da Formiga, Parque Vila Isabel, Morro dos Macacos, Morro da Liberdade, Arrelia, Salgueiro, Jamelão, and Morro do Andaraí, among others. According to data from the 2022 Demographic Census conducted by IBGE, this area has a population of 356,067 inhabitants and is a densely occupied region characterized by different social classes.

According to the 2022 Census data, in Grande Tijuca, of the 151,009 occupied permanent private households, 84,854 had women as household heads, representing approximately 56% (Figure 4). Of these women, 54,885 self-identified as White, 9,913 as Black, 59 as Asian, 19,977 as mixed-race (parda), and 20 as Indigenous.

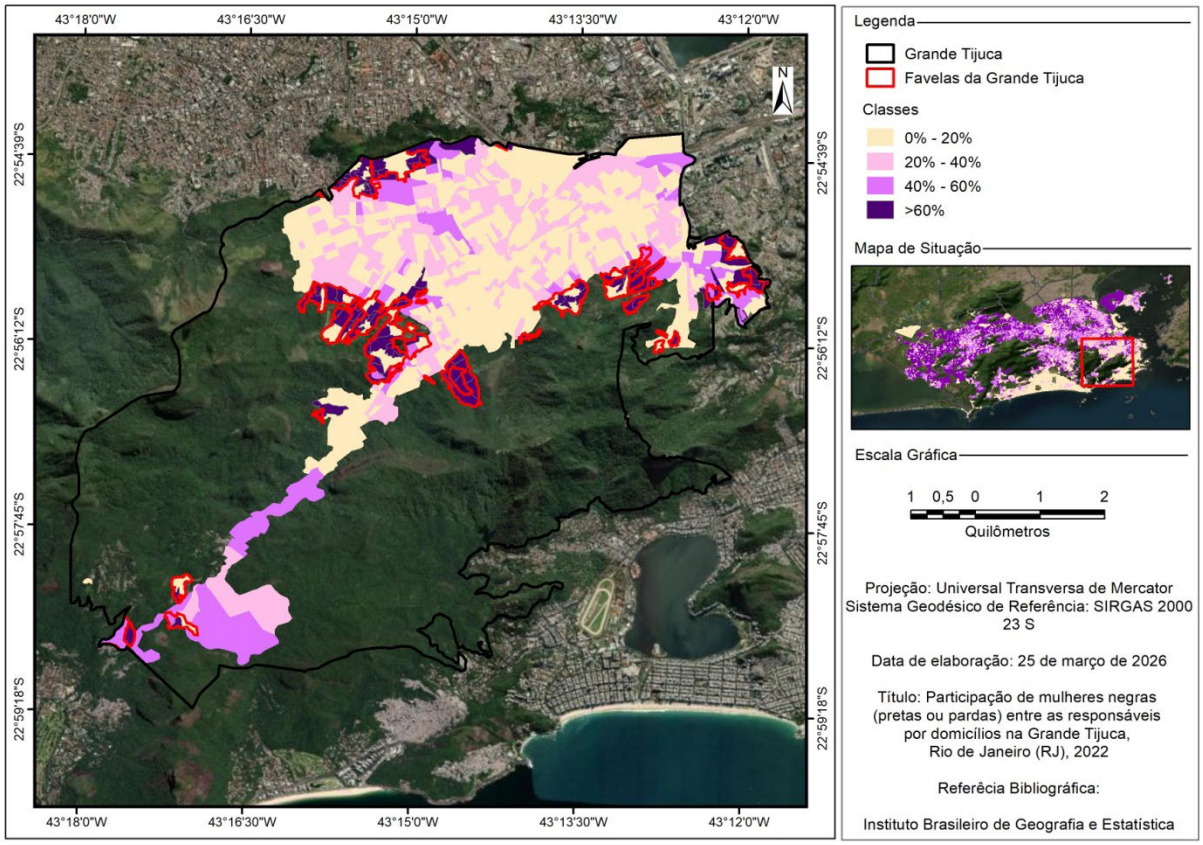
Figure 4 | Proportion of women responsible for households in Grande Tijuca, Rio de Janeiro (RJ), 2022.



Source: The author, 2026.

The spatial distribution of the proportion of women responsible for households reveals heterogeneous patterns that reflect important dimensions of urban socio-spatial inequalities. The highest proportions tend to be concentrated in specific census tracts, many of which are associated with areas of greater social vulnerability, located near or within favela areas. However, this concentration becomes even more evident when analyzing the spatial distribution of Black women (Black or mixed-race) among those responsible for households, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5 | Proportion of Black women (Black or mixed-race) among those responsible for households in Grande Tijuca, Rio de Janeiro (RJ), 2022.

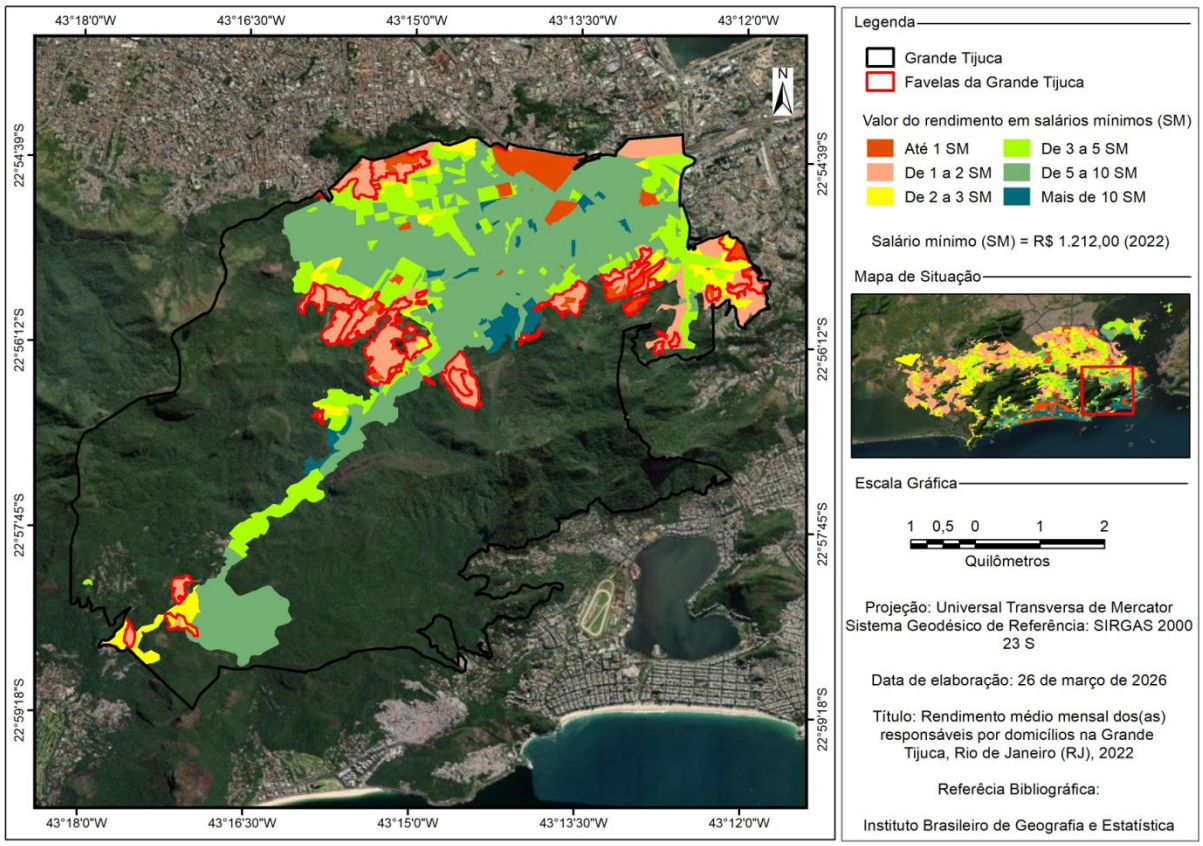


Source: The author, 2026.

Percentages above 60% are concentrated in specific census tracts, forming more clearly defined clusters, particularly in the favelas of the region. This configuration suggests the existence of territories in which the racial dimension is expressed more intensely in the organization of family structures and in the distribution of the population. Conversely, census tracts with lower percentages (up to 20%) appear more dispersed and encompass more central portions of the region, indicating a less concentrated presence of Black women in these areas. Between these two extremes, the intermediate classes (20% to 60%) occupy most of the territory, revealing a gradual transition in the racial composition of women responsible for households.

The overlap between areas with a high proportion of women responsible for households and the location of favelas highlights the importance of an intersectional approach, in which gender, territory, and social class are understood as interconnected dimensions. In this context, Figure 6 presents the spatial distribution based on the average monthly income of household heads, which in Grande Tijuca in 2022 ranged from R$0 to R$22,195.23.

Figure 6 | Average monthly income of household heads in Grande Tijuca, Rio de Janeiro (RJ), 2022.



Source: The author, 2026.

Gender inequalities become evident when comparing income averages: census tracts where women are the household heads tend to coincide with lower income levels. This pattern is particularly evident in census tracts associated with favelas and their surrounding areas, where incomes of up to three minimum wages predominate. Conversely, areas with higher income levels, especially those with averages above five minimum wages, tend to record lower proportions of women responsible for households and lower participation of Black women. These census tracts generally correspond to higher-value areas of the region, highlighting the persistence of socio-spatial inequalities structured through the intersection of income, race, and gender.

The observed distribution points to a process of feminization of household responsibility that is simultaneously racialized and territorialized, in which areas with lower income levels and a higher concentration of Black women responsible for households are not randomly distributed but rather follow a logic of socio-spatial segregation, frequently associated with the settlement of hillside áreas with limited access to urban infrastructure.

In this context, women's leadership, particularly among Black women, takes on an ambivalent character. While it highlights persistent inequalities, it also reveals the central role these women play in maintaining and sustaining urban territories. To a great extent, they are the ones who sustain everyday social life in adverse contexts, occupying a fundamental position in regional development, even though they often remain overlooked by public policies.

As argued by Castro (2001), analyzing the feminization of poverty requires an understanding of the structural complexity of the system, since women's greater social vulnerability reflects the intersection of systems of subordination, such as class, race, and gender. This intersectional perspective highlights the need for affirmative action policies aimed at reducing discrimination based on political and cultural identities, such as gender, race, age, and other social identities.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The growing presence of women as household heads, although reflecting important social and demographic advances, is associated with dynamics of socio-spatial inequality that continue to shape the urban territory. The analysis of data from the 2022 Demographic Census confirmed that more than half of the households in Grande Tijuca are headed by women, a percentage higher than both the national and state averages. However, this predominance is not evenly distributed across the territory. The highest concentrations occur in census tracts characterized by greater social vulnerability, particularly in favela areas and their surroundings. When the participation of Black women among household heads is considered, these inequalities become even more evident, reinforcing the relevance of an intersectional approach to understanding urban structures.

The census tracts with the highest proportions of women responsible for households and of Black women coincide with those with the lowest average monthly incomes. This association reveals a process of feminization of household responsibility that is simultaneously racialized and territorialized, reflecting historical patterns of socio-spatial segregation and economic exclusion. Thus, the female leadership observed cannot be interpreted solely as an indicator of autonomy or empowerment, but must be understood in its ambivalent dimension, marked by an overload of responsibilities, labor precariousness, and limited access to opportunities.

This leadership remains largely overlooked by public policies, which often fail to effectively incorporate the mainstreaming of gender and race into their actions and planning processes. Therefore, territorialized public policies are necessary, capable of recognizing the specificities of urban spaces and the inequalities manifested at different spatial scales. The use of spatial analysis has proven to be a fundamental tool for highlighting these inequalities, contributing to a more accurate understanding of urban realities and providing evidence to support public planning and management.

Finally, the results demonstrate that the identified socio-spatial inequalities constitute concrete barriers to regional development by restricting access to income, urban infrastructure, services, and social protection. Thus, policies that disregard the intersection of gender, race, and territory tend to reproduce and deepen existing asymmetries, compromising not only the well-being of communities but also the capacity to promote equitable and sustainable regional development.

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