

Inequality that Produces Precarious Work: The Concentration of Income and Wealth also Shapes the Brazilian Labor Market

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Abstract The article analyzes the relationship between the high concentration of income and wealth and the formation of a labor market structurally marked by precariousness in Brazil. The central hypothesis argues that social inequality is not merely a byproduct of economic dynamics, but an organizing principle that shapes occupational morphology, encouraging the creation of low-productivity and poorly paid jobs. These are concentrated especially in personal services, notably where women and the Black population are most represented.

Keywords Social inequality. Labor market. Precariousness. Race and Gender. Brazil.

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1 Introduction

Social inequality occupies a central place in Brazilian social formation and has been widely analyzed under the dimensions of income, wealth, and access to social rights and public goods. However, specialized literature still frequently treats the occurrence of inequality merely as a phenomenon circumscribed to economic dynamics, technological progress, and the interactions between labor supply and demand. Although these determinants are fundamental, such an approach tends to obscure a central aspect of the Brazilian reality: the occupational structure is also conditioned by the high degree of income and wealth inequality that affects the pattern of social demand, productive organization, and job quality.

In this perspective, the purpose of this article is to show that inequality also has an impact on the economic structure and the occupations created, as the level of employment and the quality of job positions do not result solely from the dynamics of market forces, but also from a structure of social relations shaped by economic hierarchies, class privileges, political power, and racial and gender discrimination.

Our hypothesis is that the unequal distribution of income and wealth organizes the occupational morphology of the Brazilian economy, producing and reproducing a broad sector of low-productivity, low-paid, and precarious occupations concentrated in personal services. Thus, by influencing the organization of production, the modalities of service provision, and consumption patterns, inequality itself contributes to the generation and reproduction of a highly unequal and precarious occupational structure, strongly marked by hierarchies of class, race, and gender. In other words, the labor market not only reflects pre-existing inequalities but constitutes one of the primary mechanisms of their reproduction.

In the Brazilian case, the expansion of personal service activities observed in recent decades intensifies due to the process of premature deindustrialization, technological advances, the progressive increase in rentierism, and transformations in the demographic profile, marked by rising life expectancy and a sharp reduction in birth rates.

The article engages with the critical literature on structural inequality, the political economy of labor, and the economics of services, as well as approaches that emphasize structural heterogeneity and the centrality of labor in social reproduction. Empirically, it utilizes data from the PNAD (IBGE) - focusing on activity sectors, earnings, education, and occupational status - seeking to highlight how class, race, and gender inequalities are expressed both in restrictions on access and in the quality of jobs. Furthermore, considering that economic inequality in Brazil is even more acute when analyzing the dimension of wealth, recent data regarding the sharp concentration of wealth that characterizes the country will also be used.

2 Social Inequality and the Historical Formation of Brazilian Capitalism

Social inequality constitutes a structural and persistent feature of Brazilian social formation, deeply rooted in its history and in the specific forms of the constitution of capitalism in the country. Far from being the result of conjunctural dysfunctions or recent institutional failures, inequality in Brazil expresses a long-lasting pattern of social reproduction, spanning different political regimes, economic cycles, and institutional arrangements (Furtado 1994; Prado Jr. 1966; Fernandes 1975). Thus, the historical formation of Brazilian capitalism produced a labor market that structurally generates precarious work, marked by the racialization of labor in service activities.

The legacy of slavery occupies a central place in this process. Brazil was the last country in the West to abolish slavery and did so without implementing policies for the social, economic, or productive integration of the freed population. As Florestan Fernandes (1975) demonstrates, the transition to free labor occurred through explicit mechanisms of racial exclusion, which relegated the Black population to the most precarious forms of occupational insertion or to social marginalization.

The political choice to encourage European immigration and not incorporate the Black workforce into the incipient wage labor market that emerged during the heyday of the coffee economy (1870 to 1930) was sustained by racist and eugenicist ideologies that associated economic progress with the ‘whitening’ of the population and the supposed ‘modernization’ of Brazilian society (Schwarcz 1993). This process established, from the outset, a racial segmentation of the labor market, worsened by a culture of privilege and discrimination, the effects of which persist to this day.

The subsequent structuring of the Brazilian labor market promoted by the processes of industrialization and urbanization was unable to break with that unequal and exclusionary pattern. Although the country built a relatively advanced legal-labor framework starting in the 1930s, inequality remained a constitutive element of national capitalism. Authors¹ indicate that Brazilian development was marked by the coexistence of economic growth, high income concentration, and precarious labor relations. Baltar (2003) shows that the effort of political elites to promote national industrialization was not matched by the same impetus to overcome social backwardness and the acute inequalities perpetuated since the colonial past. Industrialization and economic modernization were accompanied by the maintenance

1 Check Mattoso 1995; Pochmann 1995; Henrique 1998; Fagnani 2005.

of archaic social relations, heighten by periods of authoritarian governments, a precarious and partial Social State, an accelerated and ungoverned urbanization process, and the permanence of a large structural surplus of the labor force.

High land concentration drove intense internal migration flows throughout the 20th century. Between 1940 and 1980, approximately 39 million people migrated from the countryside to the cities, without the conditions for the productive absorption of this contingent, resulting in the expansion of informal work, underemployment, and the precariousness of living conditions in cities (Mello, Novais 1998, 581; Oliveira 1998). Throughout those four decades of intense migratory shifts, the country went through a period of great political instability, with seven coup attempts between 1946 and 1964, when a military dictatorship was then established. It lasted 21 years and consolidated a pattern of “conservative modernization” characterized by the combination of economic growth, political repression, and the deepening of social inequalities (Draibe 1993). Despite the high economic growth rates that reached an annual average of 11% during the “economic miracle” (1968-73) and were accompanied by employment expansion, unions did not have the right to organize freely, and collective bargaining was supervised by the State (Krein 2007). Consequently, in 1980, during the waning years of the military regime, social inequality had worsened significantly, while the wage gap and the heterogeneity of the labor market widened.²

Later, with the return to democracy and despite the advances established by the Federal Constitution of 1988 – which was noted for the universalization of social rights and the guarantee of individual rights – the restrictions imposed by the external debt crisis and the resulting derailment of the economic development process, combined with the advances of financial globalization and neoliberal ideology, imposed severe constraints on public policy action and the realization of the Social State enshrined in the Constitution (Fagnani 2005).

However, some years later, between 2003 and 2014, Brazil experienced an exceptional period in its historical trajectory, combining economic growth with a reduction in labor income inequalities. As pointed out by Manzano (2017), throughout three consecutive terms of labor-aligned government in the country, the Gini Index of labor earnings fell consistently, primarily due to the

2 Already in the 1980s, amidst the economic crisis and the democratic transition, intense union mobilization, expressed in massive strikes, was fundamental to containing the further deterioration of real wages and partially restoring the purchasing power of workers (Noronha 1991; Krein 2007; Baltar 2003). Were it not for the political effervescence of those years of struggle for the return to democracy, with the notable protagonism of social movements, inequality would very likely have reached even higher levels (Manzano 2017).

policy of real increases in the minimum wage, the advancement of labor formalization, and the relative strengthening of collective bargaining (Krein 2018). The increase in the minimum wage had a direct impact on the earnings of workers at the base of the social pyramid, contributing to the reduction of wage inequalities, even though, given the contingencies associated with the neoliberal macroeconomic architecture, there was no more substantive process of income redistribution, nor was the extreme concentration of wealth that characterizes the country reversed (Manzano 2017).

However, this positive moment at the beginning of the 21st century proved to be politically fragile and short-lived. Following the economic crisis of 2015-2016 and the ultra-liberal reforms implemented after the institutional coup of 2016 - especially the one establishing the public spending cap and the labor reforms of 2017 and pension reforms of 2019 - a reversal of that process was observed. According to IBGE data (PNAD 2025), the second half of the 2010s saw an increase in informality, with a drop in average labor income and greater wage dispersion, indicating a new cycle of deepening inequalities (FPA 2022; Manzano 2023).

3 The Persistence of Inequality and its Relationship with the Morphology of Occupations

Inequalities manifest themselves in a structural and multidimensional manner. The matrix of social inequality, formulated by The Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA), links social class, gender, race/ethnicity, age, and territory as structural axes that intersect and reinforce each other throughout the human life cycle and the history of nations (FPA 2022).

In the sphere of work, this matrix is expressed in income inequality, access to employment, the quality of occupations, and the coverage of social protection. Thus, class inequality remains a fundamental dimension, but its concrete manifestation is inseparable from the dimensions of gender and race - especially in a society like Brazil, marked by a slave-holding legacy and a culture of privilege that naturalizes social hierarchies and perpetuates itself through recurring discriminatory practices (FPA 2022).

The first structural form or manifestation of inequality concerns the distribution of income and wealth. Recent studies from the World Inequality Database (WID 2025), coordinated by Thomas Piketty's team, indicate that Brazil consistently ranks among the most unequal countries in the world, with a strong concentration of income at the top of the distribution: the richest 10% of Brazilians hold 59.1% of national income, while the poorest 50% hold 9.3%, placing Brazil as the 5th most unequal country in the world. However,

when considering wealth, the situation is even more severe. As seen in Table 1, Brazilians in the top 10% concentrate 70.1% of national wealth, while the bottom 50% hold only 2.4%.

Table 1 Income and Wealth Inequality in Brazil (2024)

Distribution Segment	Avg. Income (PPP €)	Share of Income (%)	Avg. Wealth (PPP €)	Share of Wealth (%)
Full Population	12,542	100.0	46,047	100.1*
Bottom 50%	1,167	9.3	1,105	2.4
Middle 40%	9,916	31.6	31,772	27.6
Top 10%	74,143	59.1	332,789	70.1
Top 1%	332,335	26.5	1,703,738	37.0

Interpretation: All values are estimated at per capita (full population) level. Sources and series: <http://wir2026.wid.world/methodology>

According to IBGE data (PNAD 2025), in 2024 the ratio between the real average monthly per capita household income of the richest 1% and the poorest 50% of the Brazilian population reached 30.5, highlighting the high degree of income concentration in the country. In the same year, the ratio between the income of the richest 10% and the poorest 40% was 13.4, confirming that inequality remains sharp even when comparing broader strata. These indicators reveal that income inequality in Brazil is not restricted to the extremes of distribution but permeates the entire social structure.

Regarding wealth distribution data collected by “FGV Social”, the average wealth of the top 1% of the Brazilian population reached US\$ 822,000 per capita, evidencing the high degree of asset concentration. This data aligns with the World Inequality Report 2026 (WID 2025), demonstrating that inequality in Brazil is not limited to current income but is deeply rooted in the distribution of accumulated wealth, which tends to be even more concentrated than income.

From a labor market perspective, inequality is expressed in earnings differentials, as shown in Table 2. In 2024, nearly 70% of the population aged 14 or older with earnings received up to two minimum wages (approximately US\$ 470 as of late 2024), revealing that the vast majority of workers are concentrated at the base of the distribution. In contrast, only 7.8% earned above R\$ 7,350 monthly (around US\$ 1,220.00), while very high-income strata are negligible: 0.16% received above R\$ 50,000 (approximately US\$9,000.00), and only 0.02% above R\$ 100,000 (around US\$ 18,000.00). These data indicate a deeply asymmetrical structure where the labor force is organized around low earnings, while a tiny minority concentrates

vast wealth, expressing the prevalence of a low-wage economy and the structural nature of class inequality.

Table 2 Persons aged 14 or older with income by selected monthly effective nominal income brackets (Brazil 2024)

Income Brackets (in R\$)	Absolute Numbers	Share (%)
Up to 2 Min. Wages (2,824)	96,231,226	68.77
Over 2,824 to 5,000	26,190,682	18.72
Over 5,000 to 7,350	6,557,198	4.69
Over 7,350 to < 50,000	10,728,203	7.67
50,000 to < 100,000	189,734	0.14
100,000 or more	32,966	0.02
Total	139,930,008	100.00

Source: Annual Continuous PNAD Microdata/IBGE. Prepared by André Krein

A second dimension of Brazil's severe inequality is its racial character. Even in periods of economic growth, Black workers present systematically lower average earnings than white workers, in addition to higher exposure to unemployment, informality, and low-skilled occupations. As demonstrated by the IBGE household survey (PNAD 2025) the average earnings of Black women and Black men correspond to approximately 59% and 76%, respectively, of the average earnings of the total employed population, highlighting the persistence of a structural pattern of racial discrimination that has remained virtually stable since the beginning of the series in 2012.

A third dimension of inequality concerns gender. Despite the increase in female education - in 2024, the net higher education enrollment rate was 25.1% for women and 19.1% for men - and recent institutional progress, such as the 2023 Pay Transparency Law, women continue to earn less than men. As demonstrated by IBGE data, women earn, on average, about 20% less than men. Paradoxically, this inequality tends to intensify at higher education levels and in higher-skilled occupations. Among directors and managers, the gap exceeded 28 percentage points, and among science professionals and intellectuals, it reached 35 percentage points (Teixeira, Saliba 2024).

In summary, social inequality in Brazil is not a residual or transitory phenomenon, but a structural element of its historical formation and capitalist development pattern. Although specific public policies have partially mitigated its effects in certain periods, class, race, and gender inequalities continue to decisively organize access to work, income, social protection, and citizenship. It remains clear that the world of work is one of the primary vectors for the production and reproduction of social inequalities in Brazil.

4 Job Creation and Economic Dynamics

The relationship between economic growth, development styles, technological patterns, and income concentration in Brazil is characterized, on one hand, by the existence of an elite with immense power to consume private services and a large, permanent structural surplus of labor. On the other hand, there is a vast mass of low-income workers, dispossessed of property and with precarious access to public goods, who depend on selling their labor in low-cost services for survival. In essence, income concentration itself drives the demand for personal services; high-income families hire a wide array of attendants ranging from domestic workers, nannies, drivers, and caregivers to “personal service” professionals such as consultants, interior designers, and specialized organizers.

This phenomenon is not unique to Brazil but is a characteristic of capitalism since the mid-20th century, as the occupational structures of industrialized economies shifted toward service activities. Within the academic debate, authors such as André Gorz (2003), Segal (2020), and Delpierre (2022) have noted similar processes in core economies, where economic elites convert social exclusion into private convenience, purchasing their own leisure time by hiring marginalized masses for precarious and low-paid services. However, while this appears to be a general trend in advanced capitalist economies, the Brazilian case is significantly more severe due to two distinct and complementary reasons.

The first reason concerns the conservative nature of peripheral economic modernization which, despite the exceptional vigor of the industrialization process, coupled with the legacy of slavery, has historically left the majority of the population on the margins of citizenship. This created a perpetual reservoir of available and very cheap labor - what Jessé de Souza (2006) termed the “*ralé estrutural*” (structural rubble) - to serve the personal demands of affluent families and perpetuate the symbolic domination facilitated by their economic status.

The second reason is the premature nature of the deindustrialization process, which occurred before the productive structure reached maturity or sophistication. This led to a hypertrophy of personal service activities, in contrast to the deindustrialization observed in mature economies, where the transition involved a greater share of highly qualified, high-value-added service activities such as R&D, design, engineering, and financial consulting. Consequently, it is no coincidence that in a comparative study measuring social inequality by the “right to command the labor of others”, Paul Segal (2020) found Brazil to be the most extreme case. Thus, in the Brazilian historical context, a service sector has developed disproportionately, characterized by low

wages and reduced productivity, contributing little to value addition and having limited effects on economic dynamics.

This process can be synthesized in the following chain:

- i. Backward, unsophisticated, and underdeveloped productive structure
→ Inadequate and insufficient to absorb the entirety of the available workforce;
- ii. Concentration of income and wealth
→ Promotes a social fracture that organizes labor exploitation circuits outside the sphere of capital accumulation – that is, it drives the exploitation of servile activities;
- iii. Development of a mass of workers in subsistence conditions who find no place in the sphere of capitalist accumulation
→ Workers who submit to servile, cheap, and precarious activities, crystallizing a social structure marked by class privileges;
- iv. Expansion of personal services intensive in cheap, racialized, and feminized labor
→ Generation of a broad set of low-wage occupations, high informality, and reduced social protection;
→ Women and Black people are concentrated in the most vulnerable positions of the labor market;
- v. Reinforcement of income, race, and gender inequality
→ Feeds back into the unequal pattern of production and consumption, as well as the occupational structure itself.

The explanation for this historical process is rooted in economic, social, and institutional factors. As analyzed by Baltar (2003), the formation of the urban labor market in Brazil was shaped not only by incomplete industrialization and high income concentration – both of which limited the expansion of stable employment – but also by the absorption of the available workforce into poorly structured tertiary activities characterized by low wages and high turnover. These arrangements tend to operate outside of long value chains and exhibit weak technological incorporation, thereby reinforcing flexible and informal modes of contracting. The author demonstrates that, historically, the expansion of urban employment in Brazil has been driven less by the generalization of protected wage labor and more by the multiplication of service occupations with low institutionalization, particularly during periods of economic stagnation or crisis. This pattern is not residual; rather, it is functional to the reproduction of an unequal economy, as it sustains differentiated consumption patterns without altering the underlying structure of income distribution.

Furthermore, economic inequality is articulated through social and racial hierarchies that condition who occupies these precarious positions. Quadros (2026) demonstrates that even when social mobility

occurs, as seen during the PT (Workers' Party) administrations, discrimination against upwardly mobile Black individuals takes place within a highly hierarchical space where Black and some mixed-race populations face symbolic, institutional, and occupational barriers. In this sense, inequality does not merely generate precarious jobs but organizes them along lines of class and race, naturalizing relations of subordination. Finally, the role of institutions, particularly the State, is paramount, as the persistence of inequality is associated with selective and incomplete labor regulation. While certain segments are protected, vast areas of the labor market remain devoid of social rights or are deliberately deregulated, as evidenced by the labor reforms beginning in the 1990s. Across different historical moments, the State's inability to universalize social protection standards has resulted in a structurally heterogeneous labor market in which precariousness ceases to be transitory and is instead reproduced as the norm (Baltar 2003).

In summary, the structural fragility of the national development model and the persistence of low income fuel a cycle of informality that affects about 40% of workers, concentrating them in survival and low-productivity occupations. This scenario is aggravated by racial and gender inequalities, which confine women and Black people to the most precarious positions, causing the labor market to act as a reproducer of social hierarchy, underpinned by historical prejudice and discrimination. Ultimately, this segmentation blocks economic growth and prevents the formation of a virtuous cycle of innovation and national development.

5 Occupational Structure: Recent Transformations

The analysis of the sectoral structure of employment reveals that the Brazilian labor market is largely dominated by the services sector, which accounts for approximately 70% of all employed persons. Between 2012 and 2025, there has been stability in industrial employment, a decline in agricultural occupation, and the consolidation of the service sector as the primary absorber of the workforce. It is important to highlight the sector's heterogeneity, driven by the expansion of social occupations, particularly in the fields of health, caregiving, and personal services (PNAD 2025)

An analysis by occupational groups also reveals significant shifts in the employment structure. Service workers and shop and market sales workers - the largest occupational group - increased their share from 18.4% in the third quarter of 2012 to 21.8% in 2025. This represents a 34.4% growth in the number of people employed in this category. This performance was only surpassed by the growth of members of the armed forces (48%) and professionals in the sciences

and intellectual fields (58%), segments which possess very different dynamics regarding qualification and remuneration.

In contrast, skilled industrial workers, operators, and related occupations grew by only 9% during the same period. This indicates a process of relative loss and a shift of employment toward service activities, which are generally more heterogeneous and characterized by higher turnover and informality.

From an earnings perspective, inequalities are stark. In 2025, the average income for service and retail workers was R\$ 2,509.21 (~US\$ 503), significantly lower than the overall average for employed persons (~US\$ 631.30) – representing only 72% of the average income. The situation is even more critical for Black women within this group, whose average income did not exceed R\$ 1,760.53 (~US\$ 317). This reveals an intersection of gender, race, and occupational status inequalities. These data confirm that the expansion of service-sector employment has been accompanied by a sharp relative decline in income and a concentration of Black women in the most precarious positions.

Domestic work in Brazil is a heterogeneous category encompassing everything from general services and personal care for children, the elderly, and pets to roles such as cooks, drivers, security guards, and gardeners. Quantitatively, the sector employed 6 million people in 2012, decreasing to 5.87 million in 2022 – a 2% reduction. This movement contrasts with the total labor market, which grew by 9.7% during the same period. Currently, the category represents 5.9% of all employed persons, having fluctuated between 5.3% in 2020 and 6.8% over the last decade.

The occupation is deeply marked by social inequalities, as 91.4% of those employed are women and 68% are Black. These figures highlight the persistence of the sexual and racial division of labor, concentrating historically vulnerable groups in roles often associated with lower prestige.

A significant reconfiguration is also taking place within the sector. While traditional “generalist” domestic services declined by 16% over ten years, there was explosive growth in specialized occupations, such as in-home personal care (157%), cooking (118%), security (97%), and childcare (33%). Today, caretakers for individuals and children account for 22% of the total category, reflecting demographic shifts like population aging and the “commodification of care” by high-income families.

From an income perspective, precariousness remains a constant. In 2022, the average monthly income for domestic workers was only 38.7% of the national average, a proportion that has remained stagnant since 2012. Although the average hourly income reached 51.9% of the general average, the data shows that specialization has not been accompanied by wage appreciation or substantive improvements in working conditions. Ultimately, the sector remains

a primary mechanism for the reproduction of gender and racial inequalities in Brazil.

6 Structural Precarization: Informality, Self-Employment, and Platforms

6.1 Informality

Informality, as measured by the IBGE (PNAD 2025), has shown a growth trend among both men and women over the last decade. In the fourth quarter of 2015, 39.7% of employed men were in informal positions. Among women, the informality is around 40.7%.

In absolute terms, while the total employed population grew by 11% between 2015 and 2025, the number of informal workers increased by 19%, revealing that employment expansion occurred mostly through unprotected ties. This movement had a disproportionate impact: among women, the growth of informality was 28%, more than double the rate observed among men (13%). This result demonstrates that increased female labor force participation has largely occurred through unstable occupations linked to personal and care services – jobs that are poorly paid and lack access to social protection, thereby reinforcing existing structural inequalities.

6.2 Self-Employment

Self-employment has historically been concentrated in activities related to the provision of personal and domestic services, a trend that has intensified in the last decade, especially due to the aforementioned expansion of care services. Among the 20 largest occupations in this category, there was a 56% growth between 2012 and 2025, indicating that these services are primarily provided through autonomous work without employment ties, reinforcing individual initiatives.

The highest growth occurred in occupations typically linked to services and direct provision to families and companies: specialists in beauty treatments and related fields (25%), car, taxi, and van drivers (88%), door-to-door salespersons (47%), and motorcycle couriers (85%). These activities are frequently characterized by low social protection, unstable earnings, and long hours, often associated with digital platforms and the transfer of business risks to individuals.

This pattern reinforces the trend toward the individualization of labor relations and the expansion of occupational forms that, while increasing access to work, deepen informality and economic

vulnerability. This has particularly severe impacts on women and the Black population, perpetuating inequalities.

In a comparison between 2012 and 2020, among occupations that had more than 500,000 workers with formal contracts, a significant drop in formal employment is observed over the decade. The largest reductions occurred among shop assistants and store clerks (-14%), security guards (-18%), car, taxi, and van drivers (-39%), and, even more sharply, among construction workers, such as masons (-53%) and elementary building construction workers (-70%). These are occupations traditionally associated with low and middle wages which, in the formal sector, guarantee access to labor rights, social security protection, and some income stability.

In contrast, during the same period, there was a strong expansion of self-employed occupations, especially among those that grew to include more than 100,000 workers by 2020. Notable increases include retail workers (80%), door-to-door salespersons (165%), car, taxi, and van drivers (93%), motorcycle couriers (53%), hairdressers (35%), beauty specialists (25%), cooks (56%), and, even more intensely, street vendors and food service workers (183%). The explosive growth of telephone salespersons is particularly striking - expanding more than a thousand times - signaling significant changes in commercial intermediation patterns and labor organization centered around e-commerce. Work mediated by e-commerce is organized through a fragmented chain of activities, combining digital technology, outsourcing, and flexible hiring practices.

The loss of formal positions in mass occupations was not compensated for by higher-quality jobs, but rather by activities marked by income instability, a lack of social protection, greater exposure to economic risks, and the transfer of labor costs to the worker. Thus, even though some of these occupations show quantitative growth, it is an expansion associated with precarization rather than an improvement in living conditions.

From a distributive perspective, this movement tends to widen social inequalities, as it deepens labor market segmentation between an increasingly narrow core of protected jobs and a broad base of workers engaged in low-wage, high-turnover activities with weak social security coverage. At the same time, it weakens collective labor regulation and wage bargaining mechanisms, contributing to the compression of average incomes and increasing social vulnerability, particularly among workers with lower education levels and those who have historically occupied more precarious positions in the labor market.

7 Occupational Morphology, Race, and Gender: Evidence from the 20 Largest Occupations

An analysis of the 20 largest occupations by sex and race [tab. 3], based on microdata from the IBGE national household sample survey (PNAD 2025) for 2012 and 2025 (third quarter), corroborates the article's central hypothesis: income inequality, interacting with racial and gender hierarchies, acts as a factor in shaping Brazilian occupational morphology. The data highlight the persistence of structural segmentation in the labor market, where unequal opportunities for entry are systematically reproduced over time.

Table 3 Largest 20 Occupations by Ethnic-Racial Profile and Gender – Q3

Indicator	Black Women	White Women	Black Men	White Men
Main Occupation	Domestic workers (20.7%)	Clerks (12.1%)	Construction Workers (12.2%)	Retail Workers (8.3%)
Precariousness*	54%	45%	48%	40%
Main Changes (2012-2024)	-17% in domestic workers	-32% in domestic workers	-6% in Construction Workers	-35% in Construction Workers
Presence in Education	5.50%	5.60%	0.90%	3.60%

Source: IBGE/PNAD-C Annual. Authors' own work. (*) Percentage of people employed in jobs classified as precarious according to criteria of informality and income

Black women remain heavily concentrated in occupations linked to domestic work and care services. In 2012, general domestic services already constituted the main occupation for this group, with 3.1 million Black women employed. In 2025, despite an absolute reduction to 2.6 million, this role remains the predominant occupation, followed by shop assistants/saleswomen and cleaning workers. Together, these three occupations accounted for more than 5.2 million Black women, corresponding to approximately 42% of the group's total. In proportional terms, 18% of employed Black women were in domestic services in 2025, compared to 11.4% of white women – a difference of 6.6 percentage points that clearly expresses racial segregation.

Among Black men, there is a concentration in manual, physically demanding, and higher-risk occupations associated with low wages and high informality. In 2025, the main occupations for this group were bricklayers, elementary construction workers, and farmers, which together totaled more than 4.1 million people, corresponding to 25.8% of all employed Black men. In comparison, white men had significantly lower participation in these activities: bricklayers, farmers, and elementary construction workers represented only 19.5%

of their group, evidencing a racial division of productive labor that reserves the most precarious and insecure positions for Black men.

White women, in turn, show greater occupational dispersion. In 2025, their main occupations included general office clerks, domestic services, and shop assistants. Although they are also present in precarious activities, there is a greater relative insertion in administrative and educational roles. Clerks represented 13.1% of employed white women, compared to 8.6% of Black women, and participation in elementary school teaching, while similar between the two groups, reveals a symbolic differential in access to occupations with greater social and institutional recognition.

Among white men, the concentration in commercial activities, heavy transport, and skilled agriculture stands out, as well as their presence in occupations requiring higher educational and institutional capital, such as law and inventory supervision – roles practically absent among Black men within the top twenty occupations. This pattern indicates greater relative access to positions with autonomy, stability, and better earnings, even within a labor market broadly marked by precarization.

Based on these data, three central morphological patterns can be identified: 1° Racial Verticality: White individuals tend to occupy roles with greater autonomy and recognition, while Black individuals are concentrated in subordinate positions. Among men, for example, 16.8% of whites were in commerce and skilled transport occupations, compared to 12.4% of Blacks; 2° Gender Horizontality: This is expressed in the concentration of women in care and service activities and men in productive and logistical occupations; in 2025, 20.7% of Black women were in domestic services, an occupation virtually non-existent among Black men; 3° Intersectional Precarity: This places Black women at the top of the vulnerability hierarchy: 62% of Black domestic workers did not have a formal contract (*carteira assinada*), compared to 54% of white women.

Altogether, the data indicate that Brazilian occupational morphology is deeply structured by income, race, and gender inequalities. Black women remain overrepresented in domestic and care services; Black men in more insecure manual labor; while whites of both sexes access occupations with relatively higher levels of stability and recognition. This configuration is neither natural nor transitory, but historically constructed and politically sustained. It operates as a system of social labor allocation that reproduces privileges and disadvantages, relying heavily on occupations that require low schooling and offer limited possibilities for social mobility, reinforcing the cumulative and self-reproductive nature of inequality in the Brazilian labor market.

This configuration particularly clearly expresses the specificity of Brazilian society, in which social reproduction is historically secured

by sustaining a vast pool of low-cost personal services that function as the silent foundation of economic and social organization. Brazilian capitalism is thus structured around a dynamic that systematically transfers the responsibility for the daily maintenance of life to families, while simultaneously keeping the costs of this reproduction low through the precarization of labor. By relegating a significant portion of care and life-maintenance tasks to the private sphere and informality, the State limits its scope of action and reinforces the reproduction of class, gender, and racial inequalities.

The predominance of women – who are majorly Black – within personal services and domestic work highlights that women's integration into the labor market occurs largely through occupations that socially reproduce these roles under conditions characterized by instability, low wages, and a lack of rights. In this sense, while capital is structurally dependent on reproductive labor, it simultaneously disorganizes, devalues, and renders it invisible. Therefore, the persistence of an occupational structure based on poorly remunerated services does not represent a vestige of backwardness; rather, it constitutes a functional component for the reproduction of a prosperous yet unequal economy, which is sustained precisely by the differentiated exploitation of time, bodies, and the labor power of a specific segment of the working class.

8 Conclusions

As we have sought to demonstrate throughout this article, social inequality in Brazil acts as the primary organizing axis of the labor market, shaping an occupational morphology based on historical hierarchies of class, race, and gender, rather than being a mere reflection of the economy. Alongside a backward and unsophisticated productive structure, the extreme concentration of wealth in the hands of a tiny elite fosters a pattern of accumulation centered on rent-seeking and a consumption pattern geared toward low-productivity personal services. This results in the “servilization” of a vast portion of the population which, deprived of public goods and property, accepts degrading wages. This scenario is exacerbated by the country's slaveholding roots, which perpetuate the marginalization of Black workers and women in precarious and high-risk roles, creating structural barriers that resist even increases in education levels and maintain the market as a mechanism for the reproduction of privilege.

Currently, this structure of exclusion is deepened by rising informality and the expansion of work mediated by digital platforms, which transfer economic risks directly to the worker and weaken collective bargaining power. The study indicates that the growth of e-commerce and delivery services has consolidated labor vulnerability

as an inherent trait of contemporary Brazilian capitalism. Finally, it is concluded that merely redistributive reforms are palliative; truly overcoming this cycle requires a major transformation of the current productive model, frontally combating racial and gender discrimination to transform work into a right of citizenship and ensure truly universal social protection.

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