

Hairdos help to fight racism for Brazil's low-income women

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By Laura Bonilla / AFP, RIO DE JANEIRO

Jose Jorge de Carvalho, an anthropologist at the University of Brasilia, says that even though Brazil is held up as an example of harmonious racial diversity, it is actually "very racist."

"These hair salons are part of an effort to fight racism, to lift the self-esteem of black women of the working class," Carvalho said.

He deplored the use of irons to straighten hair, some of which are heated right over open fires and can "fry the hair."

As it stands, Beleza Natural says it styles the hair of 90,000 Brazilian women per month.

"This is the new middle class, producing for the new middle class," Marcelo Neri, acting minister of Strategic Issues, said in comments to AFP.

The incomes of blacks and mulattos grew more between 2001 and 2009 than those of other races — at 43 percent and 48 percent respectively, compared with 21 percent for whites, said Neri, Brazil's leading expert on the middle class.

However, the inequities are still howling. Whites in Brazil earn on average nearly twice as much as blacks.

"The lower middle class learned for a long time to live with little and now they have a little bit extra that lets them do what they want," Neri said.

Getting your hair done at Beleza Natural is affordable, but not cheap. It costs US\$38 dollars, which is 10 percent of the minimum monthly wage, and maintaining the look at home requires products that cost US\$25 a month.

Still, most customers pay in cash — yet another sign of the real increase in purchasing power of the new Brazilian middle class.

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