




“We Go through a Bit of Everything”: The labyrinth career of the professional trajectories of executive women

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Abstract

Purpose – The present study aimed to analyze the perception of executive women about the barriers experienced in their professional trajectory.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a descriptive and qualitative approach, 30 Brazilian executive women were interviewed and the data were analyzed through content analysis.

Findings – Obstacles in the advancement of women’s careers permeate sociocultural and organizational relationships, as well as family relationships. The results indicate that during their professional trajectory, executives face different barriers that configure their careers as a labyrinth. The coined term of “career labyrinth” is marked by the various (re)entries and instabilities promulgated by stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination and the use of oppressive resources of gender such as mansplaining, maninterrupting, bropropriating, gaslighting and harassment, which are perceived, silenced, negotiated and faced.

Practical & social implications of research – The study contributes to improving human resource management policies and practices by presenting the various obstacles that permeate the female professional path. The research can also reflect on actions in favor of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) proposed by the UN 2030 Agenda, specifically concerning SDG 5, which advocates for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

Originality/value – The study shows the urgency of building programs aimed at the professional advancement of women in organizations, especially in spaces historically occupied by men. It encourages reflections on human resource management policies that can promote gender equality in executive positions through practices that value and encourage the participation of women in organizational spaces, considering their possible particularities.

Keywords: Career, woman, barriers, stereotype, labyrinth.

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1 Introduction

The massive entry of women into the labor market was a socio-demographic phenomenon perceived after the Second World War. This phenomenon has expanded significantly in Brazil since the mid-1970s, and about 20 years later, Betiol and Tonelli (1991) detected that Brazilian women have been increasing their participation in higher education. The authors' observation is worth highlighting since personal and business investment in educational training is crucial for professionals to climb the corporate ladder.

Betiol and Tonelli (1991) and other researchers such as Mota et al. (2014), Baker and Kelan (2019), Cook et al. (2019), and Vieira et al. (2019), have pointed out that conquering prestigious hierarchical positions and better remuneration is a slow process. Notwithstanding, after 50 years since the expansion of women's participation in paid work in Brazil and their investment in educational training, they still work and study more than men but earn less (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2018; Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020), forming a scenario of explicit and persistent gender inequalities in the labor market. Such inequalities are aggravated due to the accumulation of productive and reproductive activities (Hirata & Kergoat, 2007), and, in this sense, motherhood has been used to partially explain the barriers women face in their professional lives (Carrieri et al., 2013).

Women are discouraged from questioning gender inequalities when trying to access the same opportunities as those offered to men due to the dissemination of meritocratic discourses in organizations. These discourses assume that the company's spaces are gender-neutral, and the positions are available to anyone who works hard to conquer them (Acker, 1990, 1992; Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020). This helps to explain why many women do not request special working conditions during pregnancy and breastfeeding, for example (Eccel & Grisci, 2011). However, women must make extraordinary efforts to achieve the same rewards and organizational ascension offered to men (Brett & Stroh, 2003).

Women's experiences in organizations indicate that to ascend hierarchically, individual will is usually not enough, although women themselves tend to defend neoliberal and meritocratic notions of success (Baker & Kelan, 2019). The literature reinforces the discourse of meritocracy based on personal effort without considering the historical-social contexts that resulted in different

obstacles faced by women even before they entered the labor market (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020). Such analyses show superficial results. They indicate that few women are in management positions but do not understand the barriers in their trajectory. However, authors such as Fraga et al. (2021) point out that female executives in privileged hierarchical positions – privileged both socially and economically – identify socially constructed barriers reflected in organizational policies and, consequently, in female ascension. Thus, the research question is: what are the barriers experienced by female executives in their professional trajectory?

This study analyzes the perceptions of female executives about the barriers they experience in their professional careers. Recurrently subtle obstacles have shaped the labor market and led to the low representation of women in executive positions. By presenting the various obstacles that permeate the female professional path, the study contributes to improving the areas of human resource management (HRM) and labor relations (LR). This research also aims to contribute to actions in favor of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) proposed by the UN 2030 Agenda, specifically concerning SDG 5, which advocates for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls (United Nations, 2023).

2 Contextualizing women's trajectories in the labor market

Several studies analyze the issue of gender in organizations. However, they focus on the differences between men and women to explain organizational results, such as in those of Gonçalves et al. (2019), Huang and Kisgen (2013), Amore and Garofalo (2016), Berger et al. (2014), Frye and Pham (2018), Grant and Taylor (2014), and Liu et al. (2014). This focus reinforces the male figure as the ideal worker, suggesting that women should adapt to the characteristics of the former, which are considered more efficient in the organizational environment. For instance, Grant and Taylor's (2014) study proposes that women change how they talk about their accomplishments to improve their leadership skills and obtain promotions. The same authors suggest that women adopt behaviors such as “speaking strongly,” “being succinct,” “controlling their movements,” and “having a voice” to convey confidence in the organizational environment.

Some studies (Abele, 2003; Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Cuadrado et al., 2015) praise female behaviors

accepted in management positions and say that women can exploit them as these are not characteristics found in men, for example, the female sensitivity to better understand people's feelings. Research and practice are permeated by two complementary and extremely harmful notions for women: i) there are natural (biological) characteristics associated with gender; ii) some of these characteristics, which are considered feminine, are not suitable for leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Nunes & Casaca, 2015; Brescoll, 2016). These perspectives show the prevalence of the understanding of gender as biologically acquired when born female or male. Contrary to this perspective, gender studies (Scott, 1995) have shown that, going far beyond biological sex, gender is a social, historical, and contextual construct (Fraga et al., 2019). In the workplace, the gender approach refers to a society's cultural and political historicity and represents a social distinction based on power relations and differences between bodies (Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020).

The current literature strives to present the organizational structure as a neutral space in which meritocracy guides the paths of professional ascension. Acker's (1990, 1992) research stands out among the studies criticizing this notion of neutrality, especially regarding gender. The author shows the construction of an organizational universe, with all its discourses and practices anchored in the image of a universal worker (man). Simplified comparisons between men and women do not, therefore, take into account that the organizational environment is built in a gendered way, almost always privileging male professionals, the manifestations of masculinities, and the people who reproduce these behaviors (Acker, 1990, 1992; Eccel & Grisci, 2011).

Apparently, neutral organizational practices shape work structures that inevitably reinforce gender inequality (Joshi, Son, & Roh, 2015) so that the totality of organizational structures and processes are based on men's experiences (Acker, 1990, 1992; Eccel & Grisci, 2011; Oliveira et al., 2009). The appreciation of masculinities to the detriment of femininities (considered innate characteristics of men and women), regardless of sociocultural contexts, favors privileges such as career progression (Eccel & Grisci, 2011; Sang & Calvard, 2019) and requires women to adopt the male model as a professional standard (Fraga et al., 2020).

Discussions about career and gender in the organizational literature have limitations, given that the concepts and theoretical models intended to be universal

are built for a standardized gender order (Acker, 1992). They do not fit the complexity of contemporary careers and new social and labor arrangements (Fraga et al., 2019; Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). The concept of career when in dialogue with that of gender shows a multidimensional and dynamic trajectory. This can present particularities for women and men (Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020) in alignment with other social markers such as sexuality, social class, race, and ethnicity (Fraga et al., 2019). It is based on the understanding that careers can be understood as trajectories occurring "[...] inside and outside organizations and are shaped both by people's actions and the context in which they live and work [...]" (Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020, p. 760) and are influenced by the socio-historical context. For analysis purposes, career and gender constructs are understood from a contextual perspective, susceptible to changes according to time and space.

Two of the discussions that enabled advances in studies on the career of female executives involved the "queen bee" (Derks et al., 2016) and the "glass ceiling" (Morgado & Tonelli, 2016) phenomena. The "queen bee" phenomenon has a derogatory name, referring to women who seek individual success in male-dominated work environments, adjusting to masculinities and distancing themselves from other junior women, consequently legitimizing gender inequality in the organization (Derks et al., 2016). These behaviors hinder the rise of other women more than help them and are considered a consequence of gender discrimination experienced by women in the work environment (Derks et al., 2016).

The "glass ceiling" phenomenon (Morgado & Tonelli, 2016) is considered an invisible barrier that prevents women from rising professionally (Ezzedeen et al., 2015; Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020; Mota et al., 2014). However, women often deny the difficulties they face, except when approached about their dilemmas between professional and personal life. Interviewees approached in different studies have manifested an anti-women stance or distanced themselves from any characteristic that might be considered feminine (e.g., Fraga et al., 2020).

In the 1990s, Betioli and Tonelli (1991) indicated two strategies for female executives to overcome the limits of the "glass ceiling": i) work in areas considered feminine, such as fashion, cosmetics, children's retail, and food; ii) invest in entrepreneurship – start their own businesses. In both professional directions, at least in part, it is possible to avoid barriers and competition with

men. However, even in feminized industries, i.e., where women constitute the majority, organizations tend to be managed by men, as they are considered “born leaders” (Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018). In family businesses, in which women inherit positions and have, in theory, more power to act, it is common for them to be assigned to secondary activities and support men, for example as secretaries and saleswomen (Grzybovski et al., 2002).

Eagly and Carli (2007) question the “glass ceiling” phenomenon, as it assumes that women have the same conditions as men to reach management positions, but when they get there, a preference for men emerges. The “glass ceiling” does not show all the complexity and countless challenges women face throughout their careers and even before entering the job market. Reconciling work activity with family responsibilities and caring for children are activities socially attributed to women (Hirata & Kergoat, 2007), impacting, for example, their professional trajectory. Therefore, women are not just rejected from executive positions; they also “disappear” at various times in their professional trajectory, which is a labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020) involving social, organizational, and family situations.

2.1 The different configurations of barriers preventing women’s advancement in organizations

Gender stereotypes are exposed as one of the main barriers to the professional growth of women in organizations (Gonçalves et al., 2019; Nunes & Casaca, 2015; Mota et al., 2014; Vieira et al., 2019). The naturalization of these stereotypes harms both women and men, but a hierarchy of privilege must be considered that orders these guidelines, above all, in the work environment. Women are often a neglected social group in predominantly male workspaces (Cheeseborough et al., 2020; Dresden et al., 2018; McLaughlin et al., 2012). However, when most of the professional field is made up of women, it is common for men to feel welcomed and valued (Fraga et al., 2020).

Gender stereotypes are based on a historical and cultural formation that dictates the appropriate way of being and acting, usually opposing the other (Duarte & Spinelli, 2019). From primary socialization in the family and at school, gender stereotypes are repeatedly taught and reinforced socially and by the media. In the organizational environment, simplified collective classifications, whether

positive or negative, understood here as stereotypes, are automatically associated with an image or individual characteristics (Tonelli, 2018).

Stereotypes shape conscious and unconscious biases and build bases for prejudice and discriminatory attitudes (Tonelli, 2018; Silva, 2010). Prejudice “[...] is characterized as an arbitrary way of thinking and acting, in the sense that it is exercised as a rationalized form of social control that serves to maintain distances and social differences between one subject and another or the/a group [...]” (Bandeira & Batista, 2002, p. 130, our translation). Regarding gender, prejudice is marked by sexist thoughts, which place women in a subordinate condition to men (Fraga et al., 2021).

Prejudice can be understood as imagery constructed in a derogatory way regarding a person or a group, motivating and justifying discriminatory attitudes or isolation (Borges & Peixoto, 2011). Discrimination emerges when prejudices denote distinction between people (Bandeira & Batista, 2002) and are put into action. Discrimination in the organizational environment can also be understood as informal norms established as rules, for example, considering whether individuals are good-looking during the hiring processes (Bandeira & Batista, 2002).

Another example is the case of Brazilian women abroad. They are sometimes the target of discriminatory actions based on stereotypes and prejudices developed around Brazilian culture (Fraga et al., 2021), which is associated with characteristics such as eroticism and sexuality, expressed in dress, music, and dance (Freitas, 2001; Gomes, 2013).

In the organizational environment, the context of prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination toward gender can lead to harassment. Moral harassment in organizations is characterized by repetitive attempts to disqualify a person (Freitas, 2001; Glina & Soboll, 2012), including causing suffering and making threats (Hirigoyen, 2001). It is defined as abusive behavior carried out repeatedly through gestures, words, or actions (Hirigoyen, 2001; Zapf, 1999), affecting the individual’s dignity, putting their job at risk, and degrading integrity in the workplace (Hirigoyen, 2001). According to Hirigoyen (2001) and Freitas (2001), humiliation and the consequent drop in self-esteem lead moral harassment victims to experience deep psychological trauma.

In workplaces, moral harassment often begins subtly or even through jokes, but it intensifies when

victims do not formally file a complaint (Freitas, 2001). It can lead to sexual harassment, which aims at sexual intercourse to avoid inconveniences in the working relationship (Freitas, 2001). Sexual harassment explains the difference between an invitation and a subpoena, as it is not just an embarrassing invitation that can be refused, however impolite it may be (Freitas, 2001).

Some harassment situations are perceived through their perversity. Others are softened by dissimulation and weakening of the victim, as they occur silently or are coordinated by work colleagues (Freitas, 2001). Through a feeling of impotence, accompanied by isolation from peers or fear of job loss, the harasser's exercise of power is strengthened (Mendes et al., 2003). Collective confrontation is a way to avoid harassment in organizations because “[...] when you are alone, abandoned by others, it is psychologically much more difficult to bear injustice than when you have the complicity of colleagues [...]” (Dejours, 2008, p. 19, our translation).

Moral harassment regarding gender also emerges through phenomena denounced by feminist activism in social media, such as mansplaining, maninterrupting, bropropriating, and gaslighting (Jane, 2017; Solnit, 2017; Sweet, 2019). Mansplaining is when men presume to have more knowledge than women, generally expressing superficial opinions, even when women have more educational training on the subject (Solnit, 2017). Maninterrupting is when a man interrupts a woman and often repeats the same information, claiming the merits of the “new” idea (bropropriating) (Jane, 2017; Solnit, 2017). Gaslighting (Sweet, 2019) involves a man making a woman think she is wrong about a subject, directing her to doubt her reasoning and even her sanity. These phenomena are considered forms of harassment as women stop expressing their ideas and lose their confidence, potentially suppressing the victim. In counterpoint, these phenomena show men's self-confidence: “[...] doubting oneself, in a certain dose, is a good tool for someone to correct themselves, understand and progress – although doubting themselves, in excess, is paralyzing, and total self-confidence produces arrogant idiots [...]” (Solnit, 2017, p. 16, our translation).

Some subtle professional barriers are observed through stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination, mansplaining, maninterrupting, bropropriating, gaslighting, moral harassment, and sexual harassment, historically constructed and present in women's social, home, and professional daily life. The low self-esteem resulting from

these situations makes women doubt their ability and their place in society, becoming one of the explanations for gender inequalities in organizations.

3 Methodology

This is descriptive and qualitative research aligned with the perspective of understanding the meanings attributed by the participants to the situations and/or phenomena analyzed (Merriam, 2002). Following the characterization of Lima et al. (2012), for this study, female executives are those who act as president, vice-president, or director of a company and those occupying third-level and leadership positions with decision-making power, although subordinate to the vice-president or the board of directors. In the group of participants, there are both female business owners and those hired by companies who hold management positions.

The instrument for data collection is a semi-structured interview (Appendix A) based on the theoretical framework. The interview script comprises three main blocks: (i) profile and trajectory; (ii) being an executive woman (executive function, perception by society, behavior, executive routine, work and family, female executives versus male executives); (iii) executive work (work time, social media, performance, rewards and punishments, continuous learning to improve job skills, protecting the leadership position, future goals). Three pre-field interviews were conducted to analyze the adequacy of the questions, resulting in the removal of four repeated questions.

The interviews took place from July to October 2019, in person (three participants) and online (27 participants). Internet conversation tools offer the possibility of conducting individual interviews (Janghorban et al., 2014) since many interpersonal dynamics that characterize face-to-face interviews also occur in online interactions (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2016). All interactions with the interviewees were recorded with their consent, guaranteeing their anonymity and the use of the information collected only for scientific purposes. In total, the interviews lasted 31 hours and 18 minutes, averaging one hour and two minutes per interview. The interviews were transcribed into 659 pages.

The interviewees were selected based on the researchers' network and through the professional social media platform LinkedIn®. Women who held management positions were invited to participate. A heterogeneous group was gathered to obtain a diversity of perceptions

about the object of the study, considering aspects such as age, marital status, education, background, time in their current company, time in the job market, employees and business owners, and professionals operating in different companies in terms of type, size, and industry. From the first interviews, the researchers adopted the snowball technique commonly used in qualitative research, in which one participant recommends another person to be interviewed. Table 1 presents the profile of the participants (the names assigned are fictitious to maintain anonymity).

After transcribing the interviews (Milford et al., 2017) (Appendix B), the data were organized in the Max-Qda software, which helped organize the categories (Appendix C). The software was used only to improve the visualization and handling of the data. Therefore, the researchers were the main interpreters of the data (Milford et al., 2017).

The interviews were analyzed through content analysis (Bardin, 2016), which consists of discovering the essential meaning of the communication in three stages: a) pre-analysis, b) exploration of the material, and c) treatment, inference, and interpretation of results (Bardin, 2016). The data were organized into preliminary categories and later reorganized into a final category (Table 2).

4 Presentation and analysis of results

The reports of the executives participating in the research showed the persistence of stereotypes and prejudices that culminate either in discriminatory acts, common in their ascension trajectories, or in situations of mansplaining, maninterrupting, bropropriating, and gaslighting as a form of moral harassment and also in some situations of sexual harassment. Such experiences that occur in the context of organizational relationships can produce new barriers or reproduce existing ones in the labyrinths of a professional career (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020). The women's career labyrinth is formed of paths intersecting socio-cultural relationships and family arrangements that enhance or mitigate the impacts of the constraints to which they are subjected simply because they are women. The reports are presented in two categories: (i) stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminations; (ii) mansplaining, maninterrupting, bropropriating, gaslighting, moral harassment, and sexual harassment.

Considering the social construction of stereotypes that permeate prejudices and gender discrimination, and

consent to harassment in organizations, it is assumed that a woman's career cannot be understood only from an organizational perspective. The family and social arrangements that dictate the place, behavior, duties, and rights of women in society are reflected in the understanding of their professional trajectory. Based on the concept of “leadership labyrinth” (Eagly & Carli, 2007), “mobility in the labyrinth” (Fraga et al., 2019), and the aforementioned organizational, social, and family barriers, the term “career labyrinth” is used to analyze the trajectory of women when climbing the corporate ladder. The analysis of the category “the women's career labyrinth in the social, organizational, and family dimensions” concludes the study discussions.

4.1 Stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination

Gender stereotypes are continually reinforced socially and, consequently, in the workplace. Many of the reports link the activities of care and domestic chores to women, as shown by Celeste's statement: *“there were countless times when my husband stayed with our baby and I arrived from the flight at two o'clock in the morning and I could see in the eyes of the building's doormen that look of 'how irresponsible this mother is, arriving at two in the morning and the baby with the father. How absurd!'”* There are roles that are socially demanded of women (Betiol & Tonelli, 1991; Rocha-Coutinho, 2005), understood as natural aptitudes. This is because the understanding that reproductive activities are intended for women, while productive activities are the responsibility of men, is still rooted in society's culture (Rocha-Coutinho, 2005; Hirata & Kergoat, 2007).

Business trips show that geographic mobility is critical for women's careers (Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020) since it is almost impossible to advance hierarchically without being on the move. Therefore, female executives must abdicate from domestic responsibilities socially attributed to them. Organizational barriers and social demands are present in the interviewees' statements, even if they have the financial conditions to outsource the housekeeping and childcare or have made family adjustments to balance these responsibilities: *“there's the issue of reconciling family life, which is natural for a woman. It's like you have a role with your family, at home, and you have a role with friends. I think every woman has to have this gift of being able to reconcile all of this”* (Lúcia). It is

Table 1
Participant profiles

Executive	Age (years)	Education/background	Current function	Company	Company's industry	Brazilian state	Monthly income (BRL)	Children	Marital status
Marta	51	Technologist in accounting, bachelor's degree in business administration, and MBA	South America country manager	Multinational 1	Chemical industry	São Paulo	46,000	1	Married
Rute	49	Degree in civil engineering and MBA in controllership	IT director	Multinational 2	Auditing and consulting	São Paulo	45,000	1	Divorced
Rosângela	44	-	Director	Domestic 3	Retail and department store	Rio Grande do Sul	-	1	Married
Augusta	51	Bachelor's degree in mining engineering and executive MBA	Sales director	Multinational 4	Chemical industry	São Paulo	43,000	2	Married
Inês	55	Bachelor's degree in economics, MBA (not specified), and specialization in finance	Financial and marketing director	Domestic 5	Door industry	Paraná	30,000	1	Married
Fátima	55	Bachelor's degree in psychology and specialization in organizational psychology	Human resource management director	Multinational 6	Agricultural products manufacturing	São Paulo	45,000	0	Single
Susana	49	Bachelor's degree in business administration, specialization in strategy in corporate finance, and master's degree in supply chain	Fleet and operations director	Domestic 7	Transport, storage, and distribution	São Paulo	26,000	1	Married
Branca	33	Bachelor's degree in public relations and MBA in business management	Human resource management manager	Multinational 8	Agricultural products manufacturing	Rio Grande do Sul	18,000	0	Married
Sandra	45	Bachelor's degree in psychology, MBA in process management, master's in business administration, and PhD in business administration	Human resource management executive manager	Multinational 9	Auditing and consulting	São Paulo	20,000	2	Legally separated
Alice	31	Bachelor's degree in business administration and MBA in project management	Director	Multinational 10	Communication	São Paulo	11,000	0	Single
Sara	37	Bachelor's degree (not specified) and MBA in human resources	Manager	Domestic 11	Private banking	Rio de Janeiro	9,500	1	Married
Eva	-	MBA	Human resource management manager	Domestic 12	Chair industry	São Paulo	25,000	2	Married
Joana	39	Bachelor's degree in pedagogy and business pedagogy, MBA (not specified), and specialization in sales management and psychopedagogy	Account executive	Domestic 13	Technology	Rio Grande do Sul	-	1	Married
Alda	43	Bachelor's degree in administration and tourism	Sales and operations manager	Multinational 14	Power generation	São Paulo	21,000	1	Legally separated
Daniela	41	Bachelor's degree in administration	Physician	Domestic 15	Shopping mall	Rio Grande do Sul	-	2	Married
Carla	37	Bachelor's degree in administration	Appointed position in government	Domestic 16	Agriculture and livestock	Rio Grande do Sul	13,500	0	Single
Célia	41	Bachelor's degree in administration	Coordinator	Domestic 17	-	Rio Grande do Sul	10,000	1	Married
Cora	44	-	Vice-president	Domestic 18	Pharmaceuticals	Espírito Santo	100,000	2	Married
Tânia	34	Technician in nursing and a bachelor's degree in social service	Sales and operations director	Domestic 19	Consulting	Minas Gerais	35,000	1	Married
Lurdes	62	Bachelor's degree in medicine	Co-owner	Domestic 20	Hospital healthcare	Rio de Janeiro	-	2	Married
Sônia	52	Bachelor's degree in law and specialization in business management in controllership and finance	Co-owner	Domestic 21	Retail, metallurgy, construction	Rio Grande do Sul	-	2	Married
Catarina	-	Bachelor's degree in social communication, specialization in advertising and marketing, MBA in executive marketing, and MBA in sales and negotiation	Co-owner	Domestic 22	Cosmetics	Minas Gerais	-	2	Married

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the research data (2022).

Table 1
Continued...

Executive	Age (years)	Education/background	Current function	Company	Company's industry	Brazilian state	Monthly income (BRL)	Children	Marital status
Regina	40	Bachelor's degree in business administration, master's (not specified), and PhD in business administration	Financial and administration director	Domestic 23	Consulting in education	Minas Gerais	25,000	1	Married
Carmem	43	Bachelor's degree in psychology and master's degree in organizational psychology	Owner	Domestic 24	Consulting	Rio Grande do Sul	-	1	Married
Celeste	63	Bachelor's degree in civil engineering and specialization in occupational safety engineering	Sales director	Domestic 25	Construction and real estate	São Paulo	-	1	Married
Elisabete	39	Bachelor's degree in administration, specialization in logistics, human resources, and sustainability	Co-owner	Domestic 26	Construction	São Paulo	25,000	0	Married
Clarice	61	Degree in civil engineering, specialization (not specified), master in engineering, PhD and postdoc research (area not specified)	Marketing director	Domestic 27	Education	São Paulo	-	2	Married
Vera	46	Bachelor's degree and specialization in medicine	New business director	Domestic 28	Health	São Paulo	-	2	Divorced
Lucia	44	-	Director	Domestic 29	Public administration	Rio de Janeiro	26,000	1	Married
Beatriz	42	-	Director of external relations and expansion	Domestic 30	Education	Rio Grande do Sul	-	2	Married

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the research data (2022).

Table 2
Categories of analysis

Initial categories	Main references/evidence	Intermediary categories	Main references/evidence	Final category
Stereotypes and prejudices	Domestic activities and care, motherhood, privacy, multiple roles, incompetence, ideal worker, age, reduced mobility	Discrimination	“I really liked your profile; my only issue is that you are a woman.” Then I said: ‘Is that a problem?’ And he replied: ‘Yes, you are engaged, and you are a woman.’” (Vera)	The women’s career labyrinth in the social, organizational, and family dimensions
Mansplaining	Explaining to a woman something she already knows	Moral harassment and sexual harassment	“Something nasty happened in São Paulo, by a manager of a company. He put his hand on my leg under the table. I got his hand, and ‘ahhh’ smacked it away.” (Beatriz)	
Maninterrupting	Interrupting a woman when she is speaking			
Bropriating	Taking credit for a woman’s idea			
Gaslighting	Making a woman doubt her sanity			

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the research data (2022).

noticeable how much the female executives emphasize the aptitude of dealing with multiple burdens as a natural gift.

In organizations, female executives are criticized for continuing to work or dedicate themselves to

organizational activities after becoming mothers, as if they are leaving behind their families. Eva reports this perception: “I have friends who have an office, and every time we’re together, they say: ‘Wow, corporate life is crazy.

I stay with my daughter because she's my priority.' So it's like you're always confronted, 'how can I not care about my daughters?'" In the imagination and social judgment, it is up to the middle or upper-class mother to choose not to work, if possible, or, at least, not to work intensely, and it is positive for her career to be something secondary (Betiol & Tonelli, 1991).

Such demands are not commonly made on men since expectations regarding the exercise of fatherhood are very different from those related to motherhood (Fraga et al., 2020). Unlike the expectations toward a mother, the father is not required to take full care of the children or to choose to leave work to spend more time with the family. This perspective is anchored in Brazilian legislation, which does not provide for prolonged paternity leave, overloading women with the care of children after pregnancy. Although there are exceptions, it can be considered that men do not collectively claim these rights because they would not bring them relevant social or organizational benefits. Also, it would probably mean barriers to their development and professional advancement, just as it does for women.

The construct of the male figure as an ideal worker (Eccel & Grisci, 2011) underpins gender prejudice. Unlike the stereotype, which can be a positive or negative perception (Tonelli, 2018), prejudice is the derogatory construct (Borges & Peixoto, 2011) that women cannot be in executive positions, as Cora reports: *"it's really difficult to negotiate with a man. They look at you with that look of incapacity: 'Is she really capable?'"* Prejudice is, therefore, marked by sexist behavior, placing women in a subordinate condition to men (Fraga et al., 2021).

The interviewees reinforced the idea that *"my work has to be successful. I think it still hurts a lot for a man to see a woman delivering results"* (Susana). This occurs because female executives are carrying out activities in culturally masculine terrain (Corrêa & Carrieri, 2007), in which some attributes associated with femininity are seen as socially and culturally inappropriate for leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Nunes & Casaca, 2015; Brescoll, 2016). Marta reports that *"when they promoted me, he [the company's owner] called me and told me that I was the only woman in the entire company as CEO. Then he said: 'I hope you won't be the last.' By 'won't be the last' he meant: 'don't do anything wrong. I'm giving a chance to a woman.'" Female executives who reach the top of their careers are elevated to a special and unique condition, as*

they assume a position that does not correspond to their natural aptitudes (Fraga et al., 2020).

Society still builds an identity based on the distinction of different roles attributed to men and women, delimiting the fields in which women can work (Dejours, 1999). Sandra's testimony corroborates this context: *"As a partner, we [women] have only 12% of the company. I think that when you're in this place, people say, 'wow, she's f***ing good' because it's a very masculine place, a culture where it's hard to move beyond the male stereotype."*

Therefore, women need to follow well-institutionalized paths to obtain good results (Bowles, 2012), constantly improve their skills, perform multi-functions, and make more effort to obtain the same rewards as men (Brett & Stroh, 2003): *"it's still a struggle, a fight for space where you still have to prove [yourself], it seems that you have to work harder than if you were a man"* (Lúcia). Formal qualifications are a means for women to try to match men in the organization (Betiol & Tonelli, 1991; Bruschini & Puppini, 2004; Vieira et al., 2019), as Regina reports: *"she has to be well-informed, study a lot to be able to keep her rightful position. First, the multi-burdens she has in life, and second, there's still the prejudice when she sits at the conference table, and it's a woman who will preside."*

Characteristics based on (biological) essentialism are widely disseminated in management studies and reinforce the construction of leadership stereotypes in organizations, differentiating what is or can be accepted and expected from men and women. Being a female manager usually means being sensitive (Abele, 2003; Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Cuadrado et al., 2015), representing a certain fragility, never failing to take care of how you look, being delicate, showing dedication to the home and the family. When these characteristics are associated in a derogatory way as a means to differentiate (Bandeira & Batista, 2002) women and men, prejudices are reinforced (for example, women are fragile; therefore, they do not know how to be rigid in a negotiation; the woman is responsible for home care, so she always prioritizes family care over work).

Prejudice is subtly grounded and justified by the woman's age. More and more young women are struggling to move up the career ladder, and when they reach their goal, they still have to deal with people's disbelief, as Tânia reports: *"I'm young; there are many people who have been there longer, I'm a woman in a predominantly male industry. Within our industry, we're only recognized by showing results."* A woman is never the right age to be in the job market: at 20, she is too young; from 30 to 40 years old, she is

of reproductive age; at 50, 60 years of age, she is getting old, out of date, and needs to be replaced. For example, to justify Inês's place in the company, the ideal worker (man) appears as the protagonist:

I suffered when I joined 26 years ago as a director and always looked younger than I am. So, people came to speak with the financial director. I showed up and introduced myself. Then the client would say, “Oh, I want to talk to the president, then.” I called the president; then the person started talking to the president, who said, “no, she’s the one you have to talk to.” It happened many times (Inês).

Due to stereotypes and prejudices, executives are faced with discrimination simply because they are women: “I’ll give you a very simple example: there are companies that don’t hire my company because they know it’s a women’s company” (Elizabeth). Gender discrimination in the organizational environment occurs when prejudices are put into action. Vera’s report addresses a hiring process in which she participated, with the interviewer making it clear that being a woman was “a problem” for the company:

“I really liked your profile; my only problem is that you are a woman.” Then I said: “ah, is that a problem?” And he said: “yeah, you’re engaged, you’re a woman, I’m between you and another guy. I liked you more than him.” Then I said: “and why the problem?” He said: “because you’re going to get married, you’re going to get pregnant, and you’re going to leave me in the lurch.” I said: “how long do you want?” I negotiated with him and said: “is five years good?” I stayed at the company for six years and committed to staying for five years without getting pregnant. I spent five years taking medication, I talked to my boyfriend, got married, and traveled; when he [my husband] bothered me a lot, I bought a dog and had no children. And when I left the company the following year, I stopped taking medication and got pregnant.

Reports show that discrimination is not practiced exclusively by men. Women also reinforce the macho structure, as observed in Carmem’s report: “I think this issue of pregnancy also interferes a lot. I think this is something that gets in the way, and I, many times, when recruiting, thought about it too.” Fraga and Rocha-de-Oliveira (2020) point out that the biological relationship between women and motherhood engenders points of immobility, given that,

in the different dimensions of the labyrinth of the female career (such as society, organizations, and family), being a mother is seen as an impediment to their dedication to work.

Female hormonal issues are also used to give preference to men in the organizational environment. Carmem’s report elucidates: “there are the inconveniences that women also confirm when they say, ‘oh, I’m not going to work today because I have PMS.’ An executive does not have PMS; there is no time for PMS; you choose what you want.” Female “inconveniences” are not desired and must be suppressed so as not to disturb good organizational performance. It is understandable that someone else is chosen to take their place if women expose such issues. Women must, therefore, resemble the ideal worker, formed of masculinities, to be able to access, maintain, and thrive in the organizational environment.

4.2 Mansplaining, maninterrupting, bropropriating, gaslighting, moral harassment, and sexual harassment

Not long ago, a woman who worked outside the home was the target of slander (Freitas, 2001). The more successful she was, the more it led to the interpretation that she had subjected herself to inappropriate situations to get hired. Slander and insinuations about women aim to destabilize them in the process of ascension and allow the harasser to find a free way to assume leadership positions in organizations.

Moral harassment in companies can start subtly, either through innuendos or derogatory or disguised comments, which show a lack of concern for respect and call into question the competence of the female executive for the position (Freitas, 2001). Over time, the process often advances beyond the individual level. In the presence of others, the aggressor constrains and manipulates a person or a group, causing the deterioration of relationships in the organizational environment (Freitas, 2001; Glina & Soboll, 2012). Cora’s account reflects situations of this type and suggests the practice of gaslighting (Sweet, 2019), which leads the victim to doubt their reasoning and even sanity: “in situations of harassment, we go through a bit of everything. There was a meeting I went to in São Paulo that was so heavy that when I left, I went to the bathroom, I was crying, crying, crying, I was out of it, I was crazy, I had no idea where I was.”

The main purpose of the aggressor is to keep the female executive dependent on him, subjecting her to frustrations that prevent her from becoming aware of the process as a whole (Freitas, 2001). Branca reports a gaslighting situation in which the men had previously held discussions and made decisions without her presence. Then, they brought the decisions to the meeting in a way in which she could not follow the discussion's reasoning, making her doubt her abilities:

Men have conversations like this: we're at the meeting table, and, working in the industry, the majority of the table will always be male. And they started commenting on a specific point of view, that they developed a perception like this and that, and I didn't know what they were talking about. And I found myself in some situations saying: "no, hold on, so, you guys share your perception here because, after all, we're here at the table, everyone has an important role in this process, and if only you have this point of view and we don't know about it, there's something wrong." So this caused much discomfort at first, but it was necessary.

Some companies do not practice any intervention or code of ethics to ensure the resolution of situations of abuse of power. Others encourage competitiveness among their executives to improve organizational performance (Corrêa & Carrieri, 2007). This context favors the frequent occurrence of the maninterrupting phenomenon (Jane, 2017; Solnit, 2017), as Beatriz reports: *"I've had situations where a meeting table is full of men, sometimes, just me as a woman, of me starting to speak and 'bang' they started talking and cut me off as if I didn't exist."*

The aggressor tries to crush the female executive so that he feels good, with higher self-esteem, and demonstrates his power. He seeks appreciation and approval and tries to fulfill this desire by harassing women (Freitas, 2001). The phenomena of gaslighting, mansplaining, maninterrupting, and bropropriating (Jane, 2017; Solnit, 2017) can be considered as part of a set of resources and practices of moral harassment since the opinion of female executives is ignored, their ideas are "stolen," they are induced to question their sanity, and their place in the organization, sometimes being interrupted while speaking as if what the other person has to say is more important. These phenomena are discriminatory communication resources that negatively impact women's self-esteem, autonomy, and freedom of opinion and expression. They

form a scenario that leads women to doubt their ability, throwing them off balance and paralyzing them (Solnit, 2017). This catalyzes other barriers in female careers (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020).

Episodes of harassment are, countless times, confused with praise or courtesy or treated as such by the aggressors, who attribute a wrong interpretation to the victims. An example is inappropriate invitations, which are psychologically harmful to women (Hirigoyen, 2001). At the same time, they can be considered a subpoena, a form of blackmail, because if they are refused, there is a price to pay (Freitas, 2001). Alice reports situations like these: *"It happened many times when I received compliments, comments, or unnecessary invitations. This gets repetitive, and sometimes the person makes a comment, and you're like, 'is that a compliment?' We start to get apprehensive when we receive a [compliment]."* Within these limits, it is difficult to separate moral harassment from sexual harassment, given that both are manifestations of extreme sexism and the devaluation of women as workers with equal value to men and deserving of the same space and respect. Confusing communications, malicious praise, and the feeling that their professional performance is diminished by being a woman strengthen the pre-existing barriers in the rise of women in the executive career.

Anchored in the power relationship that usually favors moral harassment, narcissistic abuse undermines self-esteem and creates a propitious space for sexual harassment (Freitas, 2001). The perception of sexual harassment was also manifested in the female executives' reports, as shown by Beatriz: *"Something nasty happened in São Paulo, by a company manager. He put his hand on my leg under the table. I got his hand, and 'ahhh' smacked it away."* As this study was carried out with Brazilian female executives, it is important to evaluate the influence of Brazilian culture and its peculiarities, such as sensuality and hyper-sexualization of the female body; affectionate, warm interactions; the habit of touching others (Freitas, 2001). There is *"[...] that look that's also a little more sensual, but also again, I really didn't let it mix with my focus, get in the way, I mean"* (Celeste). Harassment situations can degrade work relationships and often cause illness, jeopardizing permanence in employment (Corrêa & Carrieri, 2007; Hirigoyen, 2001). Most female executives say they remain silent for fear of losing their jobs.

As explained by Acker (1900, 1992), given the false notion of organizational gender neutrality, the production and reproduction of masculinities (Eccel & Grisci, 2011;

Fraga et al., 2020) are constantly endorsed as natural to the market – aggressive, goal-oriented, competitive. Much more than good performance, an assertive posture and a strong voice are imperative to occupy spaces (Bowles, 2012; Grant & Taylor, 2014), reaffirming male behavior as essential to rise in the organization, as Marta comments: *“I didn’t experience prejudice because I never acted like a woman. People even joke that I have male software and female hardware.”* Rosângela emphasizes the same profile: *“I see myself as a woman with a load of testosterone. If you look at the management level in the company, we’re all strong women. You won’t find Barbies in the sense of people being all dolled up.”* Thus, they become colder, harder, and more insensitive, which are characteristics attributed to men, thus reproducing the organizational discourse that men are the ideal workers (Eccel & Grisci, 2011; Fraga et al., 2020).

The interviewees are not supportive of other people who experience situations of harassment (Dejours, 2008), showing the blocking of any attempt to change reality (Mendes et al., 2003), as Rute reports: *“because I grew up listening to this kind of stuff and still didn’t care, that created a shell. Because, in a way, it helped me develop my career, but at the same time, I think it leaves the individual hard – or less sensitive to the cause.”* Corroborating Baker and Kelan (2019), female executives, despite facing unfair treatment and numerous barriers to accessing opportunities, compared to their male peers, tend to replicate the neoliberal notion of success – whoever works and perseveres long enough will reach the top, regardless of gender. By individualizing gender inequalities, female executives also minimize other women’s difficulties or blame them for not overcoming them and moving on.

4.3 The women’s career labyrinth in the social, organizational, and family dimensions

The interviewees mentioned several elements that make women question their place in the organization, their ability to occupy an organizational position, and their desire to grow and compete with men. Although she blames women for this situation and does not analyze the social imposition of men as the ideal workers, Carmem exposes this context: *“Women may get it [the job position], but these women also didn’t go there to get it, there’s discrimination, it exists because the woman doesn’t go after it either, because socially she’s the poor thing, she’s the weaker*

sex.” The interviewee does not realize that prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination, mansplaining, maninterrupting, bropropriating, gaslighting, and harassment define a woman’s place in society and imply low female self-esteem, which prevents her from seeking opportunities. Ruth speaks of the moment she realized this context:

When I read that book, I said: “that’s it!” She [the author of the book] spoke a lot of truth because she said: “I don’t know why a woman has that thing when they invite her to take on a position she keeps questioning whether she is prepared for it. Do you think men do this? Not at all! A man would actually be there, selling himself; even if he’s incapable, he would say that he’s the best”.

Women have been taught to be submissive to men, not to earn more than them. Those who question these assumptions by breaking stereotypes and prejudices experience social, family, and organizational difficulties. As Cora reports: *“I suffered a lot. You have to be very firm, very determined, and secure, and you have to be able to show that because at all times, we women are questioned and tested in our ability to lead.”*

Many women doubt their ability because, even though they are better educated than men (Betiol & Tonelli, 1991; Bruschini & Puppini, 2004; Vieira et al., 2019), they face many obstacles to climbing the corporate ladder. Rute comments that, in her company’s area of operation, there are many women specifically studying this degree, but their CVs do not reach her:

You ask for a CV in the technology area, and you’ll get many more men than women. As much as you ask the recruiter [for CVs from women], and we hire a company to do this, it’s not an internal bias, it’s not. But [this situation] is crazy, you know why? If you look at the statistics of women training in technology, it’s very high! You have many technology programs where more than half of the class is female.

Reports show that many women get lost in their career labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020), which implies fewer CV submissions, especially when it comes to important positions socially or organizationally. While men usually follow a trajectory in a straight and ascending line, women’s careers are experienced in a labyrinth, disoriented by curves and interruptions, which causes many of them to stop somewhere along the way (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira,

2020). It is as if men and women started from the same point. Men follow their linear trajectory with fewer impediments because the male responsibility, culturally, is to focus on their career in organizations. However, in the labyrinth-like female path, at each turn, women have to deal with the stereotype of responsibility for household chores, someone maninterrupting and undermining their self-esteem, and reflecting on motherhood. Several women are left behind, leaving few who find their path through the labyrinth.

The career concepts in the literature emerge from studies based on male experiences (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). These career concepts do not reflect the complexity of female trajectories because, due to stereotypes, prejudices, and historically constructed social discrimination, men and women experience different forms of insertion and permanence in the labor market (Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020).

The results show that the female trajectory to reach high management positions can be analyzed as a long labyrinth (Figure 1), full of curves, with several barriers. Although men may face obstacles in their paths, the meaning of work for them is centered on maintaining the power they have gained, while women seek independence and self-actualization, which have been socially denied to them for a long time (Betoli & Tonelli, 1991).

The obstacles faced by women to move up the career ladder are permeated by sociocultural relationships (machismo, sexism, prejudice, discrimination, naturalization of harassment, limited freedom, mansplaining, maninterrupting, bropropriating, and gaslighting) and organizational relationships (comparisons with and lower remuneration than male peers, the glass ceiling, practices that privilege men or overvalue masculinities, the myth of meritocracy, gender neutrality, lack of representation, and restrictions on business travel), and by family relationships and arrangements (marriage, motherhood, and unpaid domestic and care work). These barriers (re) occur and (re)organize themselves at different points in the labyrinth, showing that a barrier is not exclusive to a given relationship but that they mutually influence each other and take on new forms at each curve.

The barriers in the labyrinth direct the success of the female executive career to those who have resisted enough or those with a trajectory with more permeable barriers. The labyrinth-like trajectories of female executives – sometimes disoriented – highlight the difficulties encountered in their careers, marked by (re)entries and instabilities caused by prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination, mansplaining, maninterrupting, bropropriating, gaslighting, and harassment – moral and sexual – which are perceived, silenced, negotiated, and faced.

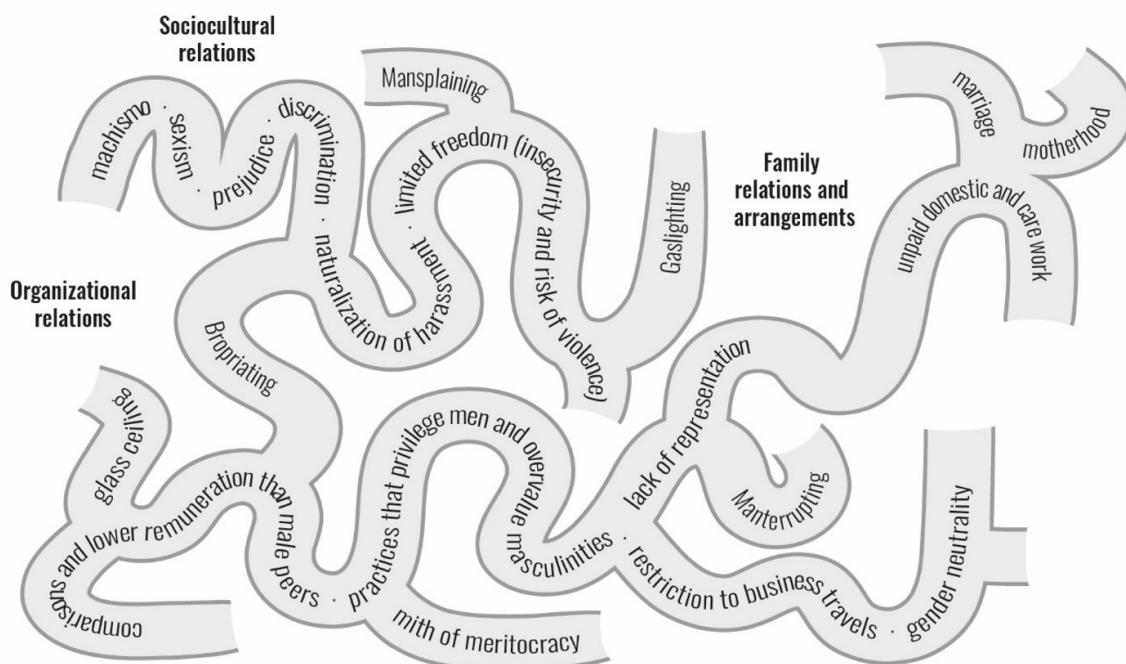


Figure 1. The women's career labyrinth

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the research data (2022)

5 Final considerations

This study analyzed the perceptions of female executives about the barriers experienced in their professional trajectories. It corroborates the assumptions of Eagly and Carli (2007) when they question the “glass ceiling” phenomenon because it does not show the complexity of a woman’s career in the labor market. The results obtained here show that women are the target of stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination, and harassment that constitute barriers to the development of their professional trajectory. Thus, female executives need a lot of determination not to disappear during their work life, which may be compared to a labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020).

The women’s career labyrinth permeates sociocultural relationships (machismo, sexism, prejudice, discrimination, naturalization of harassment, and limited freedom), organizational relationships (comparisons with and lower pay than male peers, the glass ceiling, practices that favor men or overvalue masculinities, the myth of meritocracy, gender neutrality, lack of representation, and restrictions on business travel), and family relationships and arrangements (marriage, motherhood, and unpaid housework and care activities). It is noteworthy that mansplaining, maninterrupting, bropropriating, and gaslighting phenomena permeate all these relationships, often leading women to give up their careers even before entering the labor market. It is not rare for male friends, partners, and family members to discredit a woman’s ideas, discouraging her from investing in a career.

The episodes reported showed that labor relations are weakened due to gender disparity and violence against women, manifested either subtly or perversely. Although there have been advances in society and organizations regarding the presence of women in the labor market, changes in organizational policies and practices to promote gender equality are crucial as well as a socio-responsible and strategic element. Therefore, organizations must create policies and practices to offer women clear possibilities to climb the corporate ladder (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Bowles, 2012). Such policies have to be regularly reviewed since, despite the advances, the results are not even close to promoting gender equality among executives (Bader et al., 2018; Bibi, 2016; Dawson et al., 2015; Shortland & Perkins, 2020).

This study contributes to the literature with four results: (i) the concepts of mansplaining, maninterrupting,

bropropriating, and gaslighting, frequently exposed on social media and in the media, are rarely defined and analyzed in articles about gender. By scientifically exploring such concepts, this study gives visibility to these forms of harassment; (ii) the women’s career labyrinth exposes the differences in career development for male and female professionals, despite many studies insisting on analyzing their trajectories as if they were equal. By exposing the social, organizational, and family dimensions and how they are interwoven, the difficulties of “being a woman” and how the woman’s trajectory is marked by complex paths and barriers that arise even before entering the labor market are highlighted; (iii) the barriers are analyzed from an (in)visible and (im)measurable perspective. Often, studies on the inclusion of women in the labor market discuss concrete barriers, such as “not having a university degree” or “not receiving CVs from women.” The analysis from the perspective of the career labyrinth makes it possible to understand why women are unable to finish their undergraduate degrees or why they do not apply for a promotion. This analysis emphasizes the social constructs that hinder women’s careers even before they enter the labor market; (iv) the naturalization of some barriers in the female career comes from the hyper-sexualization of Brazilian women.

This study contributes to the organizational literature by highlighting the maintenance of limits imposed on women, which are reinforced by stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination, and the naturalization of harassment. Female executives face constant discrimination at the same time as they reproduce gender stereotypes and prejudices that perpetuate the idea that masculinity and femininity contain different attributes and only those corresponding to one are desirable in spaces of power.

Female executives who have reached management positions and therefore have financial resources to meet social and family demands that are often relegated to women must challenge the neoliberal and meritocratic organizational discourse. This is a form of resistance to male hegemony in the organizational environment, a hegemony that undermines female ascension to management positions. This study contributes to the areas of human resource management and labor relations, exposing the fragility of such relations and how the false notion of meritocracy perpetuates the privilege of organizational ascension for a small group of people. Neutral theoretical approaches neglect the preponderance of social markers of inequality in the history of Brazilian society that reveal

the privileges granted to men, white people, heterosexuals, and individuals from the upper classes.

Although the victims of moral and sexual harassment are mostly women, men can also suffer such abuse, especially when they are part of a minority group: Black people, the elderly, homosexuals, and immigrants, for example. Adherence to desired masculinities becomes a condition to access privileges and limits the possibilities for men and women who do not reproduce them (Eccel & Grisci, 2011; Sang & Calvard, 2019). Although this study does not discuss the discrepancies that jeopardize the ascension of minorities – in general – on the corporate ladder, discriminatory and harmful practices perpetuating this scenario should always be avoided. Therefore, it is crucial to stress that organizations must promote an egalitarian environment that respects differences so that all people are recruited, evaluated, rewarded, and promoted in a fair, ethical, and inclusive manner.

The researchers were unable to conduct further interviews to deeply explore some of the elements that emerged during the study, which is a limitation of this study. The interviewees' different labor contracts (self-employed, employed, appointed position in government, owner) is also a limitation of the research. These conditions may imply different perceptions and conflicts of interest, influencing responses when the interviewees intend to spare the company or colleagues from looking bad in embarrassing situations or preserve the sense of merit in their personal trajectory. Another perceived limitation was the concentration of interviewees in the South and Southeast regions of Brazil, although not all of them were born in these regions.

The research presented peculiarities of the Brazilian context observed in the episodes reported, particularly the influence of cultural factors and the hyper-sexualization of the woman's body. These elements may significantly contribute to gender studies and should be better explored in future research. Notably, the interviewees were all white women, which is a social marker suggesting they faced fewer barriers and had particular perspectives in their career labyrinths. Thus, further studies should explore the experience of female executives considering social markers such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, and social class.

The privileges obtained by certain groups in organizations are also related to the issue of masculinities and femininities, which must be further studied as these aspects reproduce prejudices and stereotypes that somehow normalize harassment practices. Finally, the impact of

work intermediated by digital platforms for women is an issue to be further studied. Future research should explore the influence of this form of work as a way of mitigating or concealing discriminatory attitudes, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Individual meetings held over the internet changed labor relations during the pandemic and may be spaces of discriminatory attitudes – considering they occur outside the organizations' premises. The effects of these changes and the new labor dynamics in this context must be studied and better understood.

The analysis of relationships in the work-leisure interface during the COVID-19 pandemic is also relevant. The circumstances that forced companies and individuals into remote work brought specific challenges to women's routines, especially those who need to balance professional activities with childcare and household chores, thus accentuating the barriers in their career labyrinth.

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