



‘It Does Not Matter Whether You Are a Woman or a Man’: An Analysis of the Gendering of Human Resource Management Policies and Practices in Organisations

‘Não Importa se é Mulher ou Homem’: Uma Análise da Generificação das Políticas e práticas de Gestão de Pessoas nas Organizações

“No Importa si es Mujer u Hombre”: Un Análisis de la Generización de las Políticas y Prácticas de Gestión de Personas en las Organizaciones

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Abstract

Some companies claim to have human resource management (HRM) policies and practices aimed at promoting gender equality. However, policy neutrality and superficial measures do not contribute to creating equitable workplaces for women and men. This study aimed to analyse the gendering of HRM policies and practices in organisational settings. A qualitative descriptive study was conducted with 14 women of different ages working in various fields and organisations. It was concluded that, although formulated according to a logic of neutrality, HRM policies and practices are gendered, as they are structured around standards that privilege male career trajectories. The findings demonstrate that these practices implicitly reproduce gender inequalities, particularly in recruitment and selection, professional development, career progression, and parenthood policies. Furthermore, by disregarding historical and social inequalities, meritocratic discourse contributes to the normalisation of these asymmetries. The results highlight the need to critically examine not only explicit factors but also the subtle and silenced mechanisms that sustain organisational sexism, thereby fostering the development of more inclusive HRM policies and practices that are responsive to gender inequalities.

Keywords: gendering, policies and practices, human resource management, gender, women.

Resumo

Algumas empresas afirmam ter políticas e práticas de Gestão de Pessoas (GP) em prol de igualdade de gênero, contudo, a neutralidade das políticas e a superficialidade das ações não contribuem para a construção de espaços de trabalho igualitários para homens e mulheres. Este estudo teve como objetivo analisar a generificação das políticas e práticas de GP no ambiente organizacional. Para isso, foi realizada uma pesquisa qualitativa-descritiva, com a participação de 14 mulheres de diferentes idades, atuantes em distintas áreas e organizações. Conclui-se que as políticas e práticas de GP, embora formuladas sob a lógica da neutralidade, assumem uma condição generificada, sendo estruturadas a partir de referenciais que privilegiam trajetórias masculinas. Evidencia-se que tais práticas reproduzem desigualdades de gênero de forma implícita, especialmente nos processos de recrutamento e seleção, no desenvolvimento, na carreira e nas políticas de parentalidade. Ademais, o discurso meritocrático,

ao desconsiderar as desigualdades históricas e sociais, contribui para a naturalização dessas assimetrias. Os resultados apontam para a necessidade de problematizar não apenas os elementos explícitos, mas também os mecanismos sutis e silenciados que sustentam o sexismo organizacional, de modo a fomentar a construção de políticas e práticas de GP mais inclusivas e sensíveis às desigualdades de gênero.

Palavras-chave: generificação, políticas e práticas, gestão de pessoas, gênero, mulheres.

Resumen

Algunas empresas afirman contar con políticas y prácticas de Gestión de Personas (GP) orientadas a promover la igualdad de género; sin embargo, la neutralidad de las políticas y la superficialidad de las acciones no contribuyen a la construcción de espacios laborales igualitarios para hombres y mujeres. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar la generización de las políticas y prácticas de GP en el entorno organizacional. Para ello, se realizó una investigación cualitativa-descriptiva, con la participación de 14 mujeres de diferentes edades, que trabajaban en distintas áreas y organizaciones. Se concluye que las políticas y prácticas de GP, aunque formuladas bajo una lógica de neutralidad, adquieren una condición generizada, al estar estructuradas a partir de referentes que privilegian las trayectorias masculinas. Se evidencia que dichas prácticas reproducen desigualdades de género de manera implícita, especialmente en los procesos de reclutamiento y selección, desarrollo profesional, carrera y políticas de parentalidad. Asimismo, el discurso meritocrático, al ignorar las desigualdades históricas y sociales, contribuye a la naturalización de estas asimetrías. Los resultados señalan la necesidad de problematizar no solo los elementos explícitos, sino también los mecanismos sutiles y silenciados que sustentan el sexismo organizacional, con el fin de fomentar la construcción de políticas y prácticas de GP más inclusivas y sensibles a las desigualdades de género.

Palabras clave: generización, políticas y prácticas, gestión de personas, género, mujeres.

Introduction

Gender is a social, historical, and cultural construction rather than something biologically determined (Carrieri et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the distinction between men and women persists, as though their behaviours stemmed from an assumed biological nature. Consequently, non-conformity with socially assigned roles tends to result in social sanctions and discomfort (Fraga et al., 2020). The division of labour remains structured by gender stereotypes that associate women with the domestic sphere, assigning them responsibility for childcare and household management, while men are associated with the provider role and expected to place their professional lives at the centre of their priorities (Acker, 1990; Eccel & Grisci, 2011; Lee & Parpart, 2018).

According to Acker (1990), “the construction of divisions along lines of gender” (p. 146),¹ including divisions of labour and physical space, is one of the processes through which gendering occurs. Although the division of labour entails the segregation of spheres of activity, in which many women have assumed the responsibilities imposed upon them, this merely reflects their limited choices, as well as the acceptance and normalisation of divisions of labour within a patriarchal society (Schnurr et al., 2019).

The notion of gendering in organisational settings refers to the processes through which organisations (re) produce gender inequalities by means of their structures, practices, and everyday interactions (Acker, 1990; 2006). Gender is not external to organisational dynamics; rather, it is a constitutive principle that shapes how work and competencies are defined and who is regarded as the ideal person for a professional context. The literature shows that these processes are sustained by an assumption of organisational neutrality that universalises an image of the worker associated with masculinities while disregarding the social conditions that affect the trajectories of men and women unequally (Knights, 2019).

Career models and organisational practices, historically based on men’s career trajectories, are therefore insufficient to capture the complexity of women’s experiences (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). This context also marginalises women and contributes to the persistence of gender segregation within organisations (Acker, 1990; Duarte & Gallon, 2022; Fraga et al., 2020). The profile of a thriving organisation and the image of a successful worker share characteristics such as strength, aggressiveness, and competitiveness, which are socially perceived as masculine (Acker, 2006; Fraga et al., 2020; Knights, 2019). Gendering can therefore be understood as a process through which seemingly neutral practices produce unequal effects, helping to preserve male privilege and reproduce gender inequality within organisations.

Gender inequality is objectively manifested in the persistent gender pay gap, even among men and women with equivalent levels of education (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2024). Furthermore, women’s underrepresentation in prestigious positions is frequently interpreted as the result of individual shortcomings rather than

¹ For the purposes of this article, all direct quotations from the original sources have been translated into English.

as an expression of structural processes of organisational discrimination (Acker, 2006). In this context, the opportunities available to women remain conditioned by gender stereotypes and expectations that constrain their professional trajectories (Schnurr et al., 2019). These inequalities are produced through both formal and informal mechanisms and have become increasingly subtle over time, making them more difficult to identify and problematise (Acker, 2006).

Although some companies claim to adopt human resource management (HRM) policies and practices aimed at women (eg, diversity programmes disconnected from core management practices, generic training, or benefits restricted to motherhood) these initiatives are superficial and neither address women workers' needs nor contribute effectively to their career development (Shortland & Perkins, 2020; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). Moreover, by disregarding the specific characteristics of gender inequalities, many organisations fail to promote substantive changes in workplace equity (Eccel & Grisci, 2011).

In many cases, such policies emerge in response to institutional, legal, commercial, or reputational pressures but remain limited to minimum compliance with these requirements, without challenging the organisational structures that produce inequalities. Parental leave policies are an example of this. Companies generally limit themselves to granting 120 days of maternity leave and five days of paternity leave – the latter recently extended to 20 days (Law No. 15,371/2026) – thereby reproducing gender asymmetries and disregarding both shared responsibility for caregiving and the well-being of newborn children, which requires the involvement of both parents.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyse the gendering of HRM policies and practices in organisational settings. Behind organisations' meritocratic discourse lie gendered HRM policies and practices that are frequently reinforced both socially and organisationally. This study seeks to demonstrate the need to identify and challenge not only explicit manifestations of inequality but also the implicit assumptions underlying misogyny and sexism (Knights, 2019). By exploring what is omitted and disregarded, the study intends to break the silence and develop new perspectives on gender equality within organisations (Lee & Papart, 2018).

This study also seeks to critically examine the promotion of gender equality in society, a theme encompassed by the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations [UN], n.d.). It is based on the premise that developing responses to a given reality first requires making that reality explicit and subjecting it to critical examination, which reinforces the relevance and significance of this research.

Gender inequalities and gendering in the labour market

The gender division is shaped by social constructions and is one of the processes that enable gendering (Acker, 1990; 2006; Heikkinen & Lämsä, 2017; Schnurr et al., 2019). In this regard, a stance of gender neutrality disadvantages women by offering them a limited range of career paths and restricted opportunities for professional advancement (Fraga et al., 2021; Schnurr et al., 2019). Meritocratic discourse based on supposedly neutral policies and individual effort disregards the historical and social disadvantages that have resulted in discrimination against minoritised groups and the distinct barriers they encounter throughout their careers (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fraga et al., 2021; Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020; Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018).

Although organisational discourse perpetuates the notion of an ideal worker with ostensibly neutral characteristics, these characteristics are shaped by socially constructed ideals of masculinity, including being objective, serious, persuasive, and minimally emotional (Acker, 1990; 2006; Duarte & Gallon, 2022; Eccel & Grisci, 2011; Fraga et al., 2020; Sheerin & Linehan, 2018). To remain in organisations and advance within them, women commonly adapt to norms and expectations that fail to account for their specific circumstances (Eccel & Grisci, 2011; Fraga et al., 2020). This may lead them to tolerate unequal situations, including being silenced, refraining from questioning decisions, and even experiencing harassment or discrimination (Acker, 2006; Duarte & Gallon, 2022; Fraga et al., 2020).

This process can be understood through the lens of ambivalent sexism theory, as women's continued participation in organisations is sometimes conditioned both by explicit forms of devaluation and by seemingly positive expectations that reinforce traditional roles and restrict their participation (Glick & Fiske, 1996; 2001). Remaining in an organisation and achieving professional advancement may therefore depend on accepting organisational dynamics that involve more than adopting particular behaviours. In practice, women are required to continually negotiate how they conduct themselves in order to be recognised as legitimate in the workplace and are often penalised when they depart from gendered expectations.

Career models are among the organisational structures based on men's experiences (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008), and their generic ideals do not reflect the complexity of women's careers (Fraga et al., 2020; Sheerin & Linehan, 2018; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). Professional trajectories therefore unfold differently for men and women, particularly in relation to family life and parenthood (Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008).

Understanding the main barriers women face in their careers is therefore essential, particularly given the gendering of HRM policies and practices and the need to achieve equitable conditions. From this perspective, motherhood is frequently constructed as a problem from an organisational standpoint, affecting not only women's continued participation in the workforce but also their opportunities to enter or re-enter the labour market (Carrieri et al., 2013).

Accordingly, many women anticipate potential discrimination associated with pregnancy and parenthood and adopt self-protective strategies, such as refraining from requesting rights or specific working arrangements during and

after pregnancy (Eccel & Grisci, 2011). This behaviour is associated with the fear of being perceived as less committed, available, or productive, which may undermine their prospects for recognition and career progression. Rather than being merely an individual choice, it represents a response to an organisational context that explicitly and implicitly penalises motherhood, thereby reinforcing its construction as an obstacle to women's professional trajectories.

Companies therefore tend to perceive maternity leave and the presence of young children as women's problems that do not form part of men's realities (Carrieri et al., 2013; Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018), even when men are married, as most companies do not provide extended paternity leave. Some men who have access to this benefit choose not to use it because they i) fear possible adverse effects on their professional trajectories, such as losing recognition or opportunities (Lee & Parpart, 2018); ii) believe that caring for children is the mother's responsibility; and/or iii) feel exhausted by the new routine of having a baby at home and are unable to work at the same pace as before becoming fathers.

The absence of parental leave and support policies within organisations thus discourages and exempts men from assuming the responsibilities of fatherhood. This does not necessarily constitute direct discrimination but reflects an asymmetry in the expectations placed on men and women, whereby childcare is socially and organisationally associated with women. Organisational expectations surrounding fatherhood therefore contribute to the preservation of male privilege while reinforcing women's responsibility for, and disproportionate burden of, reproductive labour, thereby perpetuating inequalities in professional trajectories.

Some women do not recognise the prejudice and difficulties they encounter because gender inequality and discrimination have become normalised in both their professional and personal lives and are perceived as part of the ordinary functioning of social relationships (Sahgal, 2007). At the same time, many men fail to recognise the existence of discrimination against women, arguing that women have access to specific benefits (Sahgal, 2007). This process of normalisation is also reflected in the minimisation of everyday sexist practices, which are often interpreted as "jokes", contributing to their trivialisation (Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018). Moreover, although equal treatment in relation to men is demanded, the unequal allocation of social responsibilities is rarely problematised, nor are the class privileges that allow some women to outsource domestic and care work (Duarte & Gallon, 2022).

Another barrier women face is men's more limited openness to informal workplace socialisation, which constrains women's ability to develop professional networks (Eagly & Carli, 2007). These relationships can be understood as forms of social capital, the development of which is hindered by limited interaction between groups (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Informal networks are important because they provide subtle yet strategic information as well as support for achieving professional goals (Webber & Giuffrè, 2019).

In this context, predominantly male networks commonly reinforce exclusionary processes because men often participate together in social activities (eg, after-work gatherings, sporting activities, or leisure pursuits) that strengthen relationships and influence decisions, including referrals and promotions (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Sheerin & Linehan, 2018). By contrast, many women remain more closely tied to domestic and caregiving responsibilities after working hours, reducing their opportunities to participate in these informal spaces and, consequently, to access relevant social capital (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

The lack of neutrality in HRM policies and practices became more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women were affected to a significantly greater extent, particularly those with school-aged children, because of the increase in their domestic responsibilities (Clark et al., 2020). Additional tasks were incorporated into their routines, including full-time childcare, prompting them to reduce their paid working hours to manage family responsibilities (Clark et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2020; Feng & Savani, 2020).

New constraints thus emerged that affected women's professional performance and made balancing motherhood and a career more complex (Clark et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2020; Feng & Savani, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, women academics with school-aged children experienced a greater impact on their research productivity than their male peers, particularly in the context of remote working (Staniscuaski et al., 2021). This situation has produced lasting effects, with negative repercussions for women's professional trajectories and the reinforcement of gender inequalities in academia (Staniscuaski et al., 2021).

In this context, HRM policies and practices (eg, recruitment and selection, training and development, career management, compensation, and employment relations) may reproduce gender hierarchies by silencing or delegitimising women's experiences and thereby helping to preserve masculinised organisational standards (Lee & Parpart, 2018). Expanding women's professional opportunities therefore requires challenging the gendering of these practices and implementing HRM policies oriented towards gender equity as a necessary condition for reducing persistent inequalities in the labour market.

Methodological procedures

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive approach aimed at understanding the participants' experiences and perceptions of HRM policies and practices within their organisational contexts. This approach is appropriate for investigating complex social phenomena, such as gender dynamics within organisations, as it enables the exploration of meanings, interpretations, and practices. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide developed

in accordance with the theoretical framework (Ali, 2015; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Shortland & Perkins, 2020; Woodhams & Lupton, 2006). The guide comprised six sections: i) participant profile; ii) gender equality policies and practices; iii) recruitment, selection, training, job classification, compensation, career, and reward policies and practices; iv) pregnancy-related policies and practices; v) work–family balance policies and practices; and vi) the COVID-19 pandemic.

A total of 14 women participated in the study. They were aged between 23 and 52 years and worked in different organisational areas and at different hierarchical levels, including operational, technical, coordination, managerial, and senior management positions. The participants had diverse profiles in terms of marital status (single, married, and divorced) and whether they had children. They also worked in organisations operating in different economic sectors, including industry, finance, cooperatives, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and service companies. This diversity enabled HRM policies and practices to be examined through multiple experiences and organisational contexts, contributing to a broader analysis of gender dynamics in the workplace. The identities of the participating executives were protected using pseudonyms (Chart 1).

Chart 1

Profile of the interview participants

Interviewee	Age	Position	Children	Marital status	Organisation
Ana	47	HRM manager	Yes	Married	Processed food industry
Maria	31	Operations manager	No	Married	Financial institution
Fernanda	23	HR analyst and Diversity Committee coordinator	No	Single	Cooperative credit system
Isadora	46	Vice-Chair of the Board of Directors	Yes	Married	Metal structures industry
Priscila	52	HRM coordinator	Yes	Divorced	Energy cooperative
Carla	25	Design Effectiveness coordinator and Diversity Committee leader	No	Single	Home appliance manufacturer
Juliane	35	Vice-Rector	Yes	Married	HEI
Cristina	23	HRM analyst	No	Single	International freight transport company
Antônia	41	Supplier development project manager	Yes	Married	Vehicle manufacturing industry
Caroline	28	Maintenance engineering manager	No	Married	Agricultural equipment manufacturing industry
Bruna	26	HRM analyst and diversity analyst	No	Single	Digital bank
Isabel	37	HRM coordinator	Yes	Married	Agricultural equipment manufacturing industry
Antonela	32	HRM manager	No	Single	Beverage manufacturing industry
Gabriela	51	Information Technology director	Yes	Divorced	Consulting and auditing firm

The interviews were conducted online between August and December 2021. All interactions with the participants were recorded after their express consent had been obtained at the beginning of each interview. Participants were assured of anonymity and of the ethical and scientific use of the information collected. The interviews were conducted remotely because of the social distancing measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, using communication platforms such as Zoom®, Skype®, and WhatsApp®. Participants were recruited through the researchers' personal networks using snowball sampling based on referrals until data saturation was reached. Saturation was identified during fieldwork when the information provided by participants began to recur.

It is important to acknowledge the researchers' positionality and the influence of their presence in the field. The researchers themselves are situated within the gendered context under investigation, which shapes their perspectives and the direction of the research during both the interviews and data analysis. At the same time, methodological care was taken to avoid influencing the participants' responses by maintaining appropriate analytical distance. The researchers acknowledge that their positionality not only influenced the study but also enabled access to dimensions that might not have emerged with a different researcher, particularly a man, including silences, pauses, expressions of discomfort, and normalised accounts. Notably, many of the examples reported by the participants were so commonplace in women's everyday lives that recalling them required little conscious effort; rather, they reflected situations of inequality that occurred across different contexts and women's accounts.

Notably, participants sometimes became aware of the implicit sexism embedded in their own statements. Their accounts therefore demonstrate how women themselves may internalise gender inequalities. This indicates that the researchers were not merely collecting data in the field but were participating in a process through which information emerged and was recognised during the interviews. Women's experiences are neither given nor fully formed; they are shaped by gender relations that often become visible only through the relationship established during the interview

and through the account narrated at that particular moment. The interview itself thus became a space in which these experiences could be reorganised, named, and even questioned.

Interviews were conducted with managers and employees from different organisational areas to capture their perceptions of HRM policies and practices. Managers were interviewed because of their knowledge of companies' structures, policies, and practices, while employees provided accounts of their own perspectives and experiences regarding these policies and practices (Azungah, 2018). The interviews were examined using content analysis conducted in three stages – pre-analysis; exploration of material; and treatment, inference, and interpretation of findings (Bardin, 2011) – to generate analytical categories.

The study's theoretical framework (Ali, 2015; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Shortland & Perkins, 2020; Woodhams & Lupton, 2006) provided the basis for identifying gender-related policies and practices. This information was initially categorised according to the relevant HRM policies and practices. Five a priori categories subsequently emerged (Chart 2). These categories were discussed and reviewed by the authors to ensure that they met the criteria of mutual exclusivity, homogeneity, relevance, objectivity, reliability, and productivity (Bardin, 2011). The categorisation process was supported by MAXQDA, version 2020, which facilitated the visualisation and management of the information.

Chart 2

Categories analysed

Initial categories	Final category
Recruitment and selection policies and practices	Gendered HRM policies and practices
Job classification, compensation, and career policies and practices	
Training and development policies and practices	
Parenthood-related policies and practices	
Policies and practices following the COVID-19 pandemic	

Results and Discussion

The analysis of findings was organised around five initial categories of HRM policies and practices: i) recruitment and selection; ii) job classification, compensation, and career; iii) training and development; iv) parenthood; and v) the COVID-19 pandemic. Such categories culminated in the analysis of final category: gendered HRM policies and practices.

Recruitment and selection policies and practices

The participants reported that recruitment and selection policies and practices, although presented as neutral, incorporate biases that tend to favour men. The interview questions used in recruitment processes were not standardised, resulting in different approaches towards male and female candidates. Moreover, absence of a structured protocol reduced control over interview content, allowing different questions to be asked of men and women and consequently reproducing gender asymmetries in the selection process. Companies may therefore ask women questions about their personal and family lives because women are routinely held responsible for household and family care (Acker, 1990; Eccel & Grisci, 2011; Lee & Parpart, 2018). Because these responsibilities are not socially attributed to men (Acker, 1990; Eccel & Grisci, 2011; Lee & Parpart, 2018), companies generally do not ask male candidates such questions, reinforcing the gendering of the selection process. Although this practice is considered unlawful because it constitutes discrimination, selection processes continue to reflect explicit and implicit biases arising from the gendered division of labour. Maria described this experience as follows: "I was asked whether I had children and whether I was single or married."

Another gendered aspect of recruitment and selection concerns the composition of the candidate pool considered for vacancies. Although organisations claim to adopt neutral criteria, such as not specifying explicit gender restrictions in job advertisements, the unequal distribution of applications is used as evidence of supposed equity, disregarding the structural conditions that produce this asymmetry. As Ana explained: "None of our job openings states that we only want men. We allow everyone, women and men, to compete equally, but depending on the vacancy, more people of one gender apply than the other." In this context, the greater presence of men in selection processes is normalised, even though it is related to women's historically delayed entry into the labour market and to persistent dynamics of discrimination and occupational segregation. It is therefore pertinent to consider measures that extend beyond the formal notion of equal opportunity, such as affirmative action aimed at increasing women's participation, particularly in senior positions.

Moreover, some organisational areas have historically been characterised by the predominance of men, especially those associated with attributes such as physical strength, technical expertise, or leadership, which are socially linked to masculinities. In these contexts, men are more prevalent in selection processes. This is not a neutral occurrence

but the result of social and organisational constructions that restrict women's access to and continued participation in these spaces. Organisations may also implicitly reinforce this dynamic by directing recruitment and development opportunities towards profiles aligned with these expectations. This situation is illustrated by Isadora's statement: "Although the company is a male-dominated environment, filled with men because of the physical strength involved, there are some women." Consequently, this configuration affects women's own perceptions of their opportunities for entry and advancement, contributing to more restricted expectations regarding career progression because they do not perceive themselves as belonging to or being recognised as legitimate within these spaces.

These stereotypes extend across different areas of the labour market. Engineering and industry, for example, have traditionally been perceived by society as male domains, resulting in a scarcity of women in these sectors (Daniel, 2011). Some participants nevertheless emphasised that their companies offered women employment opportunities in these areas. Antônia explained: "There was a time when the company was requesting only women's CVs, but in some situations we have difficulty because there simply aren't any. Our field is process engineering." However, the company failed to consider that women have historically lacked opportunities in these fields because they are predominantly occupied by men. As a result, even when women apply for these positions, they are often passed over. Carla described this situation as follows: "We work in industry, and we know that this is a field in which women have historically had no place. Many women do not even try to pursue a career in industry because they think, 'It'll be me against a man, so I won't even try.'"

Women therefore not only possess less social capital but also participate in organisational processes in which they do not believe they are capable of competing for particular positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007). This occurs because men's self-esteem is reinforced by the positions they have historically occupied in society, leading them to believe that they are the natural candidates for these vacancies (Solnit, 2017). The Instituto Ethos' indicators corroborate this context: women account for 60% of interns but hold only 13% of management positions.

Hiring criteria also constitute a gendered process because companies sometimes fail to specify the requirements candidates must meet to be hired, leaving the decision to the responsible manager. The manager may then select the candidate they "consider best" based on their personal opinion, allowing subjective criteria to influence the decision. Juliane explained: "There is also the matter of instinct and perception, who I want on my team. Each coordinator has their own working style and the autonomy to select people to work with them according to the profile they consider most appropriate." The company therefore has no control over the assumptions or criteria underlying the hiring decision.

The participants' accounts indicate that recruitment and selection policies and practices are gendered and sustained by a discourse of neutrality that, despite appearing impartial, operates to reproduce male privilege and place women at a disadvantage (Fraga et al., 2021; Schnurr et al., 2019).

Job classification, compensation, and career policies and practices

Absence of job classification, compensation, and career policies can limit women's advancement in the labour market. These policies and practices provide guidance for professional development, enabling employees to progress to more stable and better-paid positions, regardless of the organisation's size. In this context, companies without structured job classification, compensation, and career plans or formal performance appraisal systems tend to apply inconsistent criteria when determining remuneration.

Absence of such structures reduces the availability of measurable and documented information on which to base decisions, leaving room for subjective judgements. Consequently, these decisions remain concentrated in managers' discretionary authority. Maria's account illustrates this situation: "The manager decides what the percentage increase will be. Can it be the same? Yes, it can! It's entirely relative. If the manager wants to give one person an increase of x and another person an increase of two x because they think one performs better, the manager makes that decision. There's nothing very formal."

For these reasons, pay disparities commonly arise from the absence of structured policies that guide and systematise appraisal and remuneration criteria. The participants stated that salaries are formally determined according to the position, regardless of gender, as Antonela explained: "We have a salary scale for each position. A manager here and a manager in Rio receive the same salary. It isn't based on gender; it's based on the role itself." Empirical evidence nevertheless shows that women continue to earn less than men on average within organisational settings, suggesting the existence of asymmetries that extend beyond formally stated criteria (IBGE, 2024).

When job descriptions are considered, remuneration tends to be equivalent, particularly because labour legislation upholds equal pay for the same work. Men and women may initially join a company on the same salary; however, because men tend to have an advantage in promotion decisions, women ultimately remain in lower-paid positions. Pay disparities become apparent when employees' length of service is considered: men and women who joined the company at the same time and have the same educational backgrounds no longer occupy the same hierarchical level and consequently receive different salaries. It is therefore necessary to assess whether men and women are given equal promotion opportunities so that their remuneration can increase equitably.

From this perspective, promotion policies and practices contain biases that favour men because of pre-existing gendered processes. Employees apply for vacancies, and managers promote those whom they consider the best

candidates based on their personal opinions. Consequently, the company has no control over the criteria underlying promotion decisions. Without such control, managers may make promotion decisions based on favouritism or personal relationships. They may also deny someone a promotion because of personal disagreements or even simple dislike. Stereotypes surrounding motherhood may also influence women's promotion prospects, resulting in preference being given to men. Within organisations, individuals tend to benefit from or collaborate with people who share their interests and resemble them, relationships that are fostered through after-work socialising (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Sheerin & Linehan, 2018; Webber & Giuffrè, 2019). Maria's account illustrates this process:

The bank has its own platform, where all vacancies throughout Brazil are advertised, and any employee who meets the requirements can apply for any position they want. That's how it works in theory. In practice, however, I noticed a great deal of favouritism among particular groups. In some situations, I felt that vacancies were posted on the system purely because of internal politics and that the people who would fill certain positions had already been chosen. Some promotions occur because an employee is close to the manager.

This account shows that promotions are based on referrals, which prevent other employees from having a genuine opportunity to compete for the position. Promotions provide opportunities to gain experience and develop a career within an organisation. However, when a company does not offer all employees such opportunities, women begin their professional trajectories facing barriers (Eagly & Carli, 2007), demonstrating the gender disadvantages that exist within organisations. Cristina described this context as follows: "It's normally based on a referral. The company doesn't usually open an internal selection process for a vacancy."

Accordingly, promotion policies and practices also reflect a discourse of gender neutrality while perpetuating gendered processes within the organisation. They fail to provide the conditions women need to advance in their careers and therefore hinder their professional progression (Fraga et al., 2021; Schnurr et al., 2019). The lack of structure in these policies makes it more difficult to pursue equality and pay equity because performance appraisals and job classification, compensation, and career plans are essential processes for evaluating each employee's potential within an organisation.

Training and development policies and practices

Seemingly neutral yet gendered processes also emerge in training and development policies and practices. Some training sessions may be completed at home through companies' online platforms so that they do not affect employees' work performance during the day. Ana explained: "The manager has a very heavy workload and doesn't want it to take place during working hours. We invite people [to complete it at home]." This arrangement disadvantages women because most of them must attend to household tasks and childcare after returning home. Men, by contrast, are not always expected to fulfil these responsibilities and may therefore devote more time to the training provided by the company (Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018).

A more equitable division of reproductive labour increases the time available for women to devote to productive work. Antônia illustrated this context: "One thing I did differently this year was ask my husband for help. I said, 'We need to take turns.' My husband also works for the company. 'We need to take turns; I need your help,' because I'd always wanted to be 'Wonder Woman', taking everything on without complaining." Nevertheless, women sometimes internalise socially constructed gender roles and assume personal responsibility for reconciling professional and domestic demands without questioning the asymmetrical distribution of these tasks. In this process, inequalities become normalised, while male privilege remains largely unexamined. This context sustains meritocratic and supposedly neutral organisational discourses that disregard these structural differences and ultimately favour men's career advancement.

This situation therefore becomes a barrier to women's careers because participating in organisational training and development activities is important. The more effectively employees engage with training, the more tangible their results are likely to be, potentially increasing their promotion prospects. Moreover, many promotions are conditional upon completing specific training programmes or specialist courses outside the workplace.

HRM policies and practices are therefore interconnected. When a company adopts a gendered policy, it consequently reproduces male privilege across other policies. Women are thus placed at a disadvantage throughout their professional trajectories and do not receive the same opportunities as men, who are already socially privileged. Companies that claim to make no distinction between genders are nevertheless taking a position, as their lack of support constitutes a gendered policy shaped by a patriarchal culture that typically privileges men (Acker, 1990; 2006).

Parenthood-related policies and practices

With regard to parental leave, policies and practices that support greater gender equality are rare. Organisations generally provide only the statutory minimum: 120 days for women and 5 days for men. Some companies participate in the Empresa Cidadã programme as an additional benefit. Administered by the Brazilian Federal Revenue Service, the programme grants tax benefits to companies that extend employees' maternity and paternity leave. It allows maternity leave to be extended by 60 days and paternity leave by 15 days. Some companies, however, require women to actively

choose the extension. Carla explained: "The law guarantees 4 [months], with another 2 [months] if the company chooses to provide them. We make the full 6 months available, but the mother has to tell us that she wants them."

Although some companies frame extended leave as a benefit, it is not necessarily perceived as advantageous in practice. Antônia's account demonstrates this:

When I was pregnant, my immediate manager pressured me to continue working. A few days after my child was born, the company joined the programme providing 180 days of maternity leave. However, I had to write a handwritten letter requesting the extension, and I wasn't sure what to do. My manager was trying to convince me to return within 4 months. I didn't receive any support with this kind of issue, so when I was expecting my second child, I was uncertain again.

In this context, maternity leave is perceived as a barrier to women's careers (Carrieri et al., 2013; Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018) because women must remain away from work for four months, potentially creating difficulties regarding temporary replacements and promotions. Men, by contrast, are not expected to take leave, either legally or socially. Although a company may claim that it does not treat pregnant and non-pregnant employees differently, it nevertheless considers the period for which pregnant employees will be absent. Ana explained:

We have nothing that would either restrict or favour them in this regard. If someone is pregnant and wants to apply for a vacancy, it's up to the manager to decide whether they want that person and whether they think she has potential: 'She'll be away for 4 months on leave, but that's fine; I'll secure the position for her.' Being [pregnant] doesn't prevent her from participating in the process [...] It's more a question of whether the manager thinks the team can manage without her for that period.

When extended leave is presented as an individual choice rather than an established institutional policy, many women choose not to use it in full because they fear that a longer absence may adversely affect their professional trajectories. Antonela's account illustrates this situation: "Some [women] returned after 4 months, while others requested the extension, but there is a great deal of fear surrounding their return."

Some women relinquish part of their maternity leave as a strategy to avoid possible career disadvantages. This decision frequently entails prioritising professional demands over personal life, revealing the pressure to meet organisational expectations of uninterrupted availability and performance. Carla's account reinforces this dynamic: "Unfortunately, I know women who gave up their maternity leave and focused entirely on their careers because they were afraid of putting their careers at risk."

Consistent with these findings, previous studies indicate that women seeking recognition and continued participation within organisations attempt to align their trajectories with dominant norms. These norms reflect male career models characterised by the centrality of work and the disregard of reproductive demands (Eccel & Grisci, 2011).

Against this background, there is a substantial difference in the paternity leave offered by companies. Most participants reported that their organisations provided only the statutory minimum, which corresponded to five days when the interviews were conducted. Some mentioned slightly longer periods, although these remained considerably shorter than maternity leave. Law No. 15,371/2026 extended the possibility of paternity leave to up to 20 days. Although this represents progress, the legislation does not eliminate the existing asymmetry. As Antônia emphasised: "The company extended paternity leave to 20 days, and we see that as a very important initiative, but it should be the same length [as maternity leave] because fathers can also care for their children."

Maternity and paternity leave therefore constitute gendered policies because they assign different responsibilities to women and men based on historically constructed "social agreements" rather than promoting gender equality. By institutionalising a gendered division of care, these policies reproduce a discourse of apparent neutrality within organisations that, in practice, reinforces traditional roles: women are assigned primary responsibility for childcare, while men are assigned the role of financial providers.

From this perspective, fatherhood is not subject to the same demands, either socially or organisationally, while the extended leave granted to women contributes to preserving their primary responsibility for care. Maria described this context: "I once witnessed one of my managers refusing to hire someone because she was young and newly married. These exact words were used: 'She'll get pregnant soon, go on maternity leave, and it'll be too much trouble.'" This situation demonstrates how maternity leave, when associated exclusively with women, can become a marker of discrimination in hiring processes by activating stereotypes that link motherhood to organisational costs and risks.

When this policy is not accompanied by measures promoting shared responsibility for care, its very existence may therefore reinforce exclusionary practices and disadvantages for women. This dynamic also produces subjective effects, generating insecurity regarding motherhood and professional trajectories. Antonela emphasised this point: "These obstacles create a great deal of fear among women: fear of becoming pregnant, of being away and people managing without them, of someone else being found to replace them. Fear of making career decisions."

Responsibility for raising children is thus regarded as resting entirely with mothers, as Antonela noted: "The childcare allowance is available to working mothers, but not to fathers who have children." This assignment of responsibility becomes evident when companies make family-related benefits, such as childcare and school allowances, available only to women.

Even when organisational policies seek to support motherhood, such as flexible working hours or specific benefits, women do not always use them. This occurs because using these benefits may be perceived as placing them at a disadvantage in their professional trajectories, particularly within organisational contexts that value unrestricted availability and uninterrupted productivity. Antonela's account illustrates this dynamic: "While a woman is breastfeeding, we have a policy allowing her to leave up to two hours early for a certain period, but no woman has ever chosen to do that. They prefer to use the designated room if they need to express milk."

Accordingly, the non-use of such benefits cannot be interpreted as an individual choice detached from its context. Rather, it constitutes a response to an organisational environment that implicitly penalises motherhood. Many women therefore avoid exercising these rights because they fear encountering prejudice, having their commitment questioned, or compromising their opportunities for advancement (Eccel & Grisci, 2011). Furthermore, by interpreting the lack of uptake as a lack of interest, organisations fail to critically examine their own practices, thereby preserving policies that, although formally inclusive, do not produce meaningful changes in working conditions.

This lack of support therefore reflects gendered policies. Historically, the labour market has regarded the ideal worker as a man and has considered only men's needs. Consequently, whenever a company operates through a gendered policy, it indirectly privileges men (Fraga et al., 2021; Schnurr et al., 2019). Because of this context, many women fear that becoming pregnant will harm their careers, as motherhood may sometimes mean relinquishing their professional lives and vice versa (Hirata & Kergoat, 2007).

Policies and practices following the COVID-19 pandemic

The gendering of HRM policies and practices became more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women became more overburdened, as they had to reconcile remote working with domestic responsibilities (Staniscuaski et al., 2021). However, despite being aware of this burden, companies did not implement policies to support women during this period. Carla emphasised: "because of the pandemic, because of the mother's workload, no, what we prioritised was employees' quality of life. Not necessarily whether someone is a mother or father; it wasn't a case of thinking, 'you're a mother, you're doing a double shift within your own home' – no."

The findings show that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, women were disproportionately affected by the intensification of domestic and caregiving demands, which compromised their continued participation in the workforce and their professional trajectories. Despite this scenario, most organisations did not implement specific policies that took these inequalities into account; instead, they adopted generalist measures that disregarded the different realities faced by men and women. This dynamic is illustrated by Ana's account: "I myself had someone on my team whom I ended up losing. She asked us to suspend her employment contract so that she could stay at home with her children."

Absence of gender-sensitive policies contributed to women's departure from the labour market, reinforcing existing inequalities. This finding is consistent with studies indicating that women, compared with men, were more severely affected during the pandemic (Clark et al., 2020; Staniscuaski et al., 2021), particularly because of the burden associated with reproductive labour. In this regard, organisational policies formulated according to a logic of neutrality, by disregarding gender-specific circumstances, reproduce and intensify inequalities whose effects extend into the post-pandemic period and have a long-term impact on women's professional trajectories (Staniscuaski et al., 2021).

The pandemic further exposed the gender division imposed in both the public and private spheres, as women felt greater pressure to simultaneously meet work demands and care for their children (Clark et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2020; Feng & Savani, 2020). Antônia captured this reasoning in her account: "women are entering an emotional spiral of exhaustion. I stayed at home with my children during lockdown, so all the uncertainty generated a great deal of anxiety, a great deal of distress." Women were thus placed under considerable pressure to take responsibility for household tasks. Meanwhile, their spouses continued to carry out their professional activities, demonstrating the male privileges embedded in gendered policies and practices.

Gendered HRM policies and practices

The gendering of HRM policies and practices within organisations not only privileges men, who are associated with the figure of the "ideal worker," but also produces prejudice and barriers for women (Fraga et al., 2021; Schnurr et al., 2019). Women's opportunities are thus constrained by gender stereotypes and expectations that shape the distribution of occupations (Schnurr et al., 2019). This dynamic is evident in the interviewees' accounts, which associate industry and manual labour with men's work, while administrative functions and the HRM field are, in turn, linked to women. These perceptions are shaped by generalisations that homogenise men and women according to supposedly natural attributes, such as strength, competitiveness, emotionality, or patience, contributing to the reproduction of stereotypes and the persistence of gender-based occupational segregation.

Socially constructed gender stereotypes give rise to challenges and recurring forms of prejudice against women in the labour market (Schnurr et al., 2019), sustaining practices such as harassment, discrimination, exclusion, sabotage, disparaging "jokes," mansplaining, and maninterrupting. Moreover, women's speech tends to be delegitimised or given less weight, particularly in cases of harassment, in which the veracity of accounts is often questioned or responsibility is

placed on the victims themselves. This pattern reflects an asymmetry in credibility between men and women, whereby men's word tends to be more socially legitimised.

In addition to the more overt forms of prejudice that women encounter in the organisational environment, there are also many subtle and concealed forms of prejudice that women do not always recognise. Priscila noted: "you can't say it doesn't happen. In some actions it does happen, but it's concealed, nothing conscious or explicit." Much of this concealed prejudice is understood by women merely as "banter." According to Caroline: "sometimes we hear certain comments, some jokes, usually from men." Antonela's account also supports this picture, noting that "sometimes they say, 'I hadn't realised that could hurt someone, or that this comment could be sexist, because to me it had always seemed normal.' Sometimes we hear it, but we don't say anything."

Prejudice is minimised and interpreted as "banter," which contributes to its normalisation and makes it more difficult to recognise as a form of sexism. As Antônia noted: "you can't blame the person; it's how he was brought up; he comes from that sexist world." Although such justifications continue to be invoked, wider access to information is placing pressure on this normalisation, meaning that responsibility for change cannot be placed on women, nor can they be expected to bear the pedagogical burden of confronting these practices. In this regard, the organisation, as a social actor, plays a central role in promoting a more equitable environment and in problematising gendered dynamics.

According to the research findings, companies structure their HRM policies and practices around logics of neutrality and meritocracy that disregard the effects of the historical and social inequalities faced by women. This supposed neutrality tends to privilege the male gender, given that the parameters of what is considered "normal" or ideal in the labour market are anchored in stereotypes associated with men (Acker, 1990; 2006). Adherence to a decontextualised meritocratic discourse thus contributes to the reproduction of inequalities and to the persistence of gendered organisational trajectories.

Final considerations

The organisational environment claims to be gender-neutral, upholding the idea that workers should be conceptualised as universal subjects. However, within organisational logic, workers are expected to devote themselves exclusively to their jobs, without other responsibilities affecting their performance, as such external obligations would render them unsuitable workers (Acker, 1990). This can be understood as a clear manifestation of the division of labour and the segregation of social and organisational activities, whereby women are positioned within the private sphere, while men are associated with the public sphere (Heikkinen & Lämsä, 2017; Schnurr et al., 2019). In this regard, it is important to note that divisions of labour and physical space operate as processes that perpetuate gendering.

The findings showed that companies' HRM policies and practices are shaped within a gendered context. This context, which places considerable emphasis on the notion of gender neutrality, manifests itself across all types of HRM policies and practices, including recruitment and selection; training and development; positions, salaries, and career structures; promotion and remuneration; and practices related to motherhood. These policies therefore become gendered because, by treating women and men in an apparently equal manner, organisations reproduce historically unequal patterns that privilege men.

The findings also revealed that companies' meritocratic discourse is biased because it is based on assumptions of neutrality and individual effort, while disregarding the discrimination experienced by women and their historical and social trajectories. In this context, the existence of specific structures and mechanisms that exclude women, together with the predominance of organisational practices aligned with masculine standards, demonstrates the persistence of gender inequality in companies and society more broadly, as organisations reflect the social dynamics within which they operate.

This research is expected to contribute to women's career advancement and the promotion of equality in organisational environments. There is a scarcity of studies in both Brazilian and international literature that specifically address the gendering of HRM policies and practices, which reinforces the relevance of the present study in drawing attention to this gap. Furthermore, the study contributes to understanding the realities experienced by Brazilian women, as most gender research reflects the realities of other countries (Carrieri et al., 2013).

One limitation of the study concerns the profile of the interviewees, which showed little diversity in terms of social markers, particularly those related to ethnic and racial factors. Future studies should therefore analyse how HRM policies and practices are gendered in relation to different social markers, given that organisations, particularly in the Brazilian context, are spaces historically characterised by social inequality.

It would also be valuable to conduct studies comparing organisations that have implemented structured affirmative policies with those operating under a discourse of neutrality, examining concrete differences in their effects on women's careers. Another possibility would be to monitor the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's professional trajectories over time in order to investigate whether the observed impacts have persisted or changed. Finally, incorporating the perspectives of male managers and employees may contribute to understanding how organisational decisions are made and how gendered discourse is reproduced or normalised within companies.

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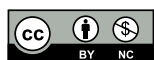
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