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## **Gendering the Public Sector: Women's Status in Local Administrations. A Case Study from Spain**

By Eva Bermúdez-Figueroa<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Women's role in political representation has been deeply studied in the administration and political literature, but scarcely researched from an employment point of view. Furthermore, there is a lack of attention to public employment in administrations, specifically municipalities, which are the closest public level to the citizenry. We claim women's employment in public administration presents similar characteristics to private employment—occupational segregation, wage gap, glass ceiling—despite being a traditional niche of protected employment for women in Europe and globally. This fact is contrary to what might be expected, from a guarantor of equality in the public sector.

*Keywords:* gender and employment, sexual division of work, gendered administration, occupational segregation, public employment, reconciliation of family and work life

### **Introduction**

The position of women in administration has been a point of reference in gender studies as well as in administration and politics, always from the point of view of women as political representatives and focusing on the importance of women's presence in decision-making in the public sphere. However, not much research has been done on the distribution and representation of women as administrative employees, nor on administration itself as an employer, with the exception of military professions. The closest administration from the citizens' perspective is at the local level in terms of direct relationships with people's lives. The image it provides is the most immediate reflection of an administration. This research focuses on the case study of a local administration, a medium-sized municipality in southern Spain with approximately 700 employees.

The article is structured by making, first, a gender-based theoretical approach to the characteristics and organizational dynamics of labor at an institutional level in the administration, as well as a brief analysis of the socio-labor bases of inequality in the labor market. Likewise, a brief contextualization of the representation of women in the public sector in Spain in the different areas of territorial administration is presented. Further, this work tries to analyse the social and labor space occupied by women in a local administration through a quantitative analysis based on the relation of jobs in the administration itself, as well as in its outsourced services. The representation of women in the labor structures of the local body has been studied, making specific reference to vertical or glass ceiling segregation, horizontal occupational segregation, and other aspects relating to the occupational distribution of men and women in the local government. A qualitative methodology was used involving semi-structured interviews with workers from a local

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authority and its auxiliary companies that provide outsourced services to the public. From the narratives of these women, rich conclusions are drawn that directly connect with and reaffirm the theoretical aspects studied, revealing through critical analysis how the persistence of existing inequalities between men and women in the labor market is manifested in the private sphere as well as in the public sector.

### **Addressing Inequality in Organizations and Administration**

Patriarchal society and the organizations that arise as one of its by-products are imbued with sexual differentiation of work and characterized by gender roles that primarily mark patterns of relationships, processes, forms of work and, fundamentally, the distribution of and access to power resources. There is an extensive literature on how gender discrimination and the power relations that result from it are an essential component of organizational structures and organizational culture (Whitehead & Moodley, 2005; Osborne, 2006; Yates, 2011a; Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Sayers et al., 2015). In order to analyse the positions women occupy in organizations, it is first necessary to reflect on the different theoretical contributions that explain this subordination and the organizational dynamics and formal and informal norms sustaining them, and to connect them to broader social practices embedded in the patterns of differential socialization and the sexual division of labor typical of a patriarchal society. In this regard, many authors in the field of labor organizations and relations (Acker, 1990, 2006, 2012; Ledwith et al., 1990; Connell, 2006a, 2006b; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Kirton, 2006; Chappell, 2010; Kirton & Healy, 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2016) reflect on the origins and, especially, the survival and manifestation of gender inequalities in organizational environments.

### **Inequality and Employment Schemes**

Acker (2006) defines regimes of inequality as "the vaguely interrelated practices, processes, actions and meanings that give rise to class, gender and racial inequalities and maintain them within particular organizations." More specifically, they are manifested in

“...the systematic inequalities between participants in power and control over goals, resources and outcomes; in workplace decisions about how to organise work; in opportunities for promotion and interesting work; in job security and other benefits: wages and other economic rewards; respect; and pleasures at work and in working relationships” (Acker, 2006: 443).

The logic of the capitalist economic system and its mechanisms for maintaining the sexual division of labor from which it benefits are key elements in explaining the persistence of inequalities in institutions, especially in the labor sphere (Kubisa, 2016; Yates, 2011). The fordist commitment to maintaining the traditional gender roles of the breadwinner man and the care-giving woman continues to leave its mark on the models of differential socialization that are palpable in organizations. The structures of industrial relations have only reinforced women's status in the labor market, producing substandard wages and fewer labor and social security benefits: the man was the breadwinner, the worker, the masculine, and the primary subject of industrial relations (Forrest, 2007; Yates, 2011b; Kubisa, 2016).

## **Universal Male, Administration and Bureaucratic Neutrality**

Connell's conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) proposes studying gender relations in their interconnection with production, power relations, and affective relations, the axes on which models of femininity and masculinity are built. This model originally defined hegemonic masculinity as a configuration of social practices that legitimize, produce, and reproduce the relations of domination of men over women, and of certain men over others (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). These practices have political, economic, and cultural outcomes that materialize in men as visible holders of power in our societies, representing hegemonic views of masculinity. This coincides with Acker's (2006) analysis of the ideal of leadership in the collective imagination of organizations, and therefore of the general society in which it exists. These characteristics not only define the leader, but are also shared by the organizations themselves "such as strength, aggressiveness and competitiveness" (Acker, 2006:445). Acker argues that the general way of distributing work in organizations, despite having significant variations, is generally tailored to fit men, presupposing their absolute dedication to work without any need to reconcile work with family or organizational life, needs that are already covered by women (Acker, 2012; Healy et al., 2018). That is, men have no vital activity other than earning a living and being active in public spaces; this is the model of the ideal person integrated in an organization. By exporting this model to companies, administration, and trade unions, we obtain one of the first and most important causes of inequality for women in the workplace, which in turn generates multiple and complex processes of segregation.

In the analysis of public administration, it is essential to understand the foundation of gender differences in state bureaucracy. Numerous studies have analysed gender inequalities in public administration (Acker, 2012; Ahl, Nelson, Sundin, & Tillmar, 2010; Connell, 2006a, 2006b; Nasser, 2018; Stivers, 1995, 2002; Sundin & Tillmar, 2008; Whitehead & Moodley, 2005; Yates, 2011, among others), questioning bureaucratic neutrality as an aseptic axis of work organization and the public administration agenda based on stereotypically masculine characteristics. In this sense, and following Stivers (1993), Chappell and Waylen (2013) state that the emphasis on the importance of individuals being able to separate from themselves, from situations, and to act with "dispassionate objectivity" reflects an emphasis on traditional male traits. The opposing characteristics for men and women in general terms, and in a binary and exclusive way, make the neutral traits masculine: the gender-stereotypical male characteristics are, among others, rationality, strength, and competitiveness, in contrast with emotionality, sensitivity, passion, and collaboration, which are understood as female stereotypes. It is curious that in the very definition of traits that should be objectively neutral, characteristics such as rationality and competition, directly related to the male model, appear. Coincidentally, values such as sensitivity, passion, or emotionality, traditionally feminine traits, are seen as inappropriate or biased in the development of administrative activity or bureaucracy concerning politics and public affairs (Chappell & Waylen, 2013).

We make a distinction between the formal and informal rules and practices of institutions in order to consider the scope they have in structuring the experiences of men and women. Particular practices of action or rules can be considered neutral as far as the organization's involvement is concerned, but they have a direct effect as practices determined by gender—for example, setting meeting times or training schedules. If meetings or trainings are held in the evening, this will have a direct impact on many women's ability to attend due to their role as family caregivers. In the example of evening meetings, women would not participate as much as they should and, therefore, their voices would not be heard in the organization. Evening scheduling

would result in reduced training opportunities for women in the company or institution and, accordingly, in fewer possibilities of a job promotion as well as fewer opportunities to participate in positions of broader responsibility. The glass ceiling or the sticky floor can be explained, among many other factors, by such theoretically neutral practices, which are assumed to be valid by administrations, institutions, and companies.

### **Resistance to change in administrations**

The practical reality in administrations and the intention of political actors in the application of gender mainstreaming are very distinct. Research on EU policies (Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014) shows that individual and institutional resistance to such mainstreaming are interconnected, and multiple reasons for resistance were detected, ranging from a perception of lack of capacity or level of experience and knowledge to a shortage of adequate tools for those in charge of implementation. This leads to inaction and aggregation of passive behaviour. However, it is an institutional responsibility to provide tools for the implementation of an organizational gender perspective, which in turn demonstrates the low priority of gender gap measures in administrations as well as their institutional resistance to achieving gender targets. Mergaert and Lombardo (2014) target actors in higher positions in institutions whose decisions distribute resources. Let us not forget that there is significant vertical segregation both at the political and technical level in an administration, and women disappear as we move up the decision-making hierarchy. Finally, the authors state that an official institutional discourse in support of gender mainstreaming and the commitment to gender equality are still far from reality. One of the causes they cite is "the clash of patriarchal socialization norms at the individual level to preserve the gender status quo, with the institutional need to implement the gender approach, which ends up filtering out of the institution" (Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014:16).

### **Data and method**

This research focused on the study of a city council in a medium-sized town of 90,000 inhabitants in southern Spain. We combined a quantitative methodology for the analysis of secondary data on the council's workforce and its distribution with the qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with local workers. To gather the quantitative information, we analysed the data provided by the council on the entity's List of Jobs as well as information provided by the council's transparency pages regarding auxiliary companies and outsourced services. We carried out a quantitative analysis of the distribution of men and women in this administration by area of work, type of contract, professional category, occupation, and jobs held.

The qualitative analysis of women workers' narratives complements and enriches the numerical information, information that provides a clear picture of the sexual division of labor. The semi-structured interview was chosen for the flexibility it provides, allowing the examination of relevant aspects according to the interpretation of the people interviewed. Because of its significance, the interview is a privileged technique in the social sciences used in very different areas of research; it allows us to delve not only into concrete facts and experiences but also into the social representations, perceptions, and experiences of broader social groups. Given that most gender discrimination against women is not blatant and operates in a symbolic realm, this type of interview is a technique for capturing such discrimination. The interview is widely used in the area of gender studies and specifically for research on employment and labor relations (Cid Aguayo,

2012; Kirton & Guillaume, 2017; Kirton & Healy, 1999; Ledwith, 2012; Monteiro, Agostinho, & Daniel, 2015; Sanchez de Miguel, Lizaso, Larranaga, & Arrospide, 2015; Soni-Sinha & Yates, 2013; Wright, 2014; Yates, 2010; among others).

In our case study, we selected 20 women who belonged mainly to female-dominated areas: social welfare, cleaning, administration, and home care assistant. We also considered male-dominated areas or professional categories: outsourced services of public cleaning, general managers, chairs, and city planning, together with gender-neutral areas (youth, economy). The interviews focused on women workers' perceptions of attitudes about themselves or other female colleagues to women's work in their area, discriminatory attitudes, the development and valuation of their work, and the reconciliation of family and work life.

### **Contextualization of employment in public administration in Spain**

The public sector, not only in Spain but globally (Nasser, 2018), is becoming the largest employer of women because of the unique characteristics and guarantees of labor protection it offers. The state currently employs 56% women and 44% men in Spain. Given the variability of public administration distribution depending on the state's organization, we must briefly contextualise the composition of administrations in Spain and their territorial distribution. The areas are as follows: general administration, regional administration (with different competencies transferred according to the territory), provincial administration (diputaciones), and local administration (municipios).

In general terms, the employment generated by the public sector in all types of administration includes a majority of women (55.9%) over men<sup>2</sup> (*Boletín Estadístico del Personal al Servicio de las Administraciones Públicas*, 2019). In the autonomous communities (regional administration), the percentage rises to 69.3%, while in universities it is 47.4%. Local administrations, the object of our interest, employ 48.7% women.

The most feminized administrations would be the autonomous communities, primarily due to work in education and health, branches of activity with a high rate of feminization. In the case of non-university education, approximately 70% are women.<sup>3</sup> In the health sector, the figure is 80%. Similarly, 70% of the administration of justice is female, with three out of four jobs held by women. Despite this evident feminization, we find that women do not occupy prominent positions associated with high levels of responsibility and, therefore, higher pay and employment status to the extent that we could expect in a public organization.

Conversely, there are strongly male-dominated sectors such as those associated with security forces, where male dominance is 90%. Given this degree of masculinization, women with access to senior positions are in an absolute minority and are practically absent despite having been incorporated in these sectors for more than 30 years. The phenomenon is parallel in other militarized forces such as the civil guard (Guardia Civil), where women represent a mere 7.5% of the force. We find a similar exclusion of women in the national police (12%) and the local police, where 94% of employees are men, with women accounting for 6%. Delving into the analysis, we discover that the majority of the 6% are clustered in basic positions, in many cases in

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<sup>2</sup>We have taken the data contextualising the distribution of men and women in the Spanish public administration from the *Boletín Estadístico del Personal al Servicio de las Administraciones Públicas* (BEPSAP) Statistical bulletin on public administration service personnel, 2019 and 2018.

<sup>3</sup>These data vary among autonomous communities, provinces, and other administrative levels, although a relative average is taken, following data from the 2019 BEPSAP.

administrative posts. This is due to the organizational and work profile of these corps, with the characteristics associated with the traditional male profile in terms of freedom of schedule, availability, shift work, and other factors (Gálvez Muñoz et al., 2015).

In the province of Cadiz, where our municipality is located, 58% of local public employment is men and 42% is women.

### **Quantitative representation of women in the municipality**

The general distribution by sex in the municipality is relatively equal; if we only look at the overall figures, approximately 55% are men and 45% are women. However, the quantitative analysis reveals that there is a clear glass ceiling for women, as at all levels they seldom have access to positions of greater responsibility. At the highest levels of decision-making and positions of responsibility, only 25% are women. The difference in the next hierarchical level is even more overwhelming since if we consider the heads of service or their equivalent in all areas of the municipality, the percentage of men rises to 90% compared to 10% of women. These differences are reflected in differentiated salaries in which the salary gap, regardless of qualifications and professional training, is palpable. This gap is not manifested in the legally established salaries, but is translated in the different amounts received in the form of salary supplements (night work, dangerousness, dedication, etc.) as well as overtime.

There is also strong horizontal occupational segregation in specific jobs and areas of the municipality as well as in specific occupations and categories. Some are totally or almost totally feminized or masculinized, a dynamic associated with traditional roles and gender stereotypes. As noted above, in feminized areas women are mainly represented in activities related to traditional gender roles. In the area of social welfare, 80% of social workers are women, as are 75% of social educators, and monitors and childcare workers are 100% women. Similarly, 78% of administrative tasks in all areas are performed by women. Women are over-represented in the professional categories of the lower status group, with 79% women. These positions, such as cleaning (93%) and home care assistant (70%), are almost all held by women and are associated with low social status and low pay and represent a clear example of *sticky floor*.

Other areas present an apparent male domination reflected in the overwhelming majority of men in the presidency (83.3% men) and urbanism areas (64.5% men), where women are assigned mostly administrative tasks. Concerning services provided by the municipality, which in no case fall below 90% male representation (including services provided by auxiliary companies), the following stand out: water services (98%), bus services (94%), local police (92%, and 5% women in administrative positions), rescue and first aid services (92%). Likewise, more than 75% in outsourced street cleaning and urban waste services (76%) are men. Gender inequality is more intense in auxiliary companies, which provide outsourced services, which are farther from public control and present greater instability in employment, factors that favour gender inequality.

As far as jobs are concerned, all the trades related to construction, carpentry, masonry, electricity, and maintenance are not only traditional male occupations, but are still the ones with the highest levels of male representation (foremen and white-collar workers are 100% men). Similarly, positions such as porters (85%) and orderlies (79%), as well as police officers (90%) or policemen (92%), and technical architect (67%), are strongly male dominated.

## **Symbolic representation of women: Women workers speak**

In general terms, most of the women interviewed in this study have perceived, and continue to perceive, discriminatory attitudes in their work environment. It is worth remarking that some of them were hesitant about or seemed not to be aware of this differential treatment when asked an open question about whether they perceived discrimination. However, as the interview progressed and more specific questions about particular aspects of their working lives were asked, the process of reflection began. They looked at details and experiences, both their own and co-workers', where sexism in the working environment and macho attitudes, personally or of their colleagues, their superiors, or even their dependents, became apparent. This phenomenon undoubtedly reflects the normalization of discrimination against women and the assumption of differences in treatment as something socially legitimate.

Thus, the situations reported by women workers could be framed in what Bonino (2004) defines as coercive micro-machismo, which implies the need to retain power through re-imposing or reaffirming dominance. This dominance can be expressed through an appeal to the superiority of male logic or to intimidation, communication sabotage, etc., or indirect micro-machismo such as paternalism, de-authorization, and devaluation, which contribute to the loss of women's autonomy, both in their own right and concerning third parties.

### ***Undervaluing women's work***

Interviews with women workers<sup>4</sup> have identified many examples of this type of practice: as Sofia states: "The work of women in my area is valued less than the work of men" (Sofia, a worker in a male-dominated area). This is demonstrated in the following testimonies:

"It is perceived. Of course, it is. When you give your opinion, your opinion is not as valid or objective because you are a woman. Or when it comes to telling you to shut up, they do it freely and directly because you are a woman. Because you see that with men the treatment is more equal, the hierarchy is not so marked, and yet with women it is. We have noticed this in several of our colleagues in all areas (Marisa, a worker in a female-dominated area)."

Differentiated treatment is developed on a subtle terrain through tone of voice, non-verbal communication, and other less explicit dimensions of social interaction; through different forms of paternalism, undervaluing of women's work, mansplaining, and forms of hierarchical relationships with women. A woman worker in a high position explained this:

"There is no real equality, directly. There is a prevalence of men over women and I tell you, ...like horrific verbal violence (...) because I don't know if the verbal violence or the condescension is worse, I've been told that too (...) They tell you "wait, I'm going to explain it to you" and I don't know what is worse, to be treated like that or to be treated with condescension ... we are doing our job and that's it (Ana, a worker in female-dominated area)."

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<sup>4</sup> The quotations will be contextualized only by citing a name and female-dominated, male-dominated, or neutral, areas to protect the identity of the informers.

They also point out that relations between men are more horizontal. In some cases, these are subtle perceptions, such as this case, where there was only one man in the area: "You noticed a certain value, that the man was valued more because he was the only man there. Not verbally, not in a very manifest way, you'll see... these are subtle things" (Ainara, a worker in a feminized area).

"You can see the boss now, the way he treats the other man if he is different from the women (...) He doesn't speak badly of us, but the way he treats us and the way he considers the things he says, with the other man, is not how he considers us. (...) The work of women in my area is valued less than the work of men (Lucia, a worker in a female-dominated area)."

On other occasions, there is a clear statement of superiority by men in their working relationship with women or in the work they do. Here, macho behaviour is shown openly.

"I see a super differential treatment concerning men. I had a partner who had not worked at all for many, many years. But he was shielded. When I brought it up in a meeting, the manager patted me on the back and said: "XXX, I expect a lot more from you," And in a team, if one doesn't work, the other works more (Eva, a worker in a female-dominated area)."

As regards the form of access to a job, women have entered it either by competition, or by merit-based competition, participating in job exchanges. When asked about the composition of the selection team at the time of their entry into the public body, the majority of respondents said that the teams were mainly men. In the cases discussed there were some prominent examples of male-dominated selection boards or committees, even at the different stages of the competition or examinations, in which women did not even participate.

"I passed two selection processes. The first was an interview, and the selection board was all men (...) I had interviews [with people ranging from] the area manager to the personnel manager and the representative of [the] workers' board, and they were all men. And then, when the civil service exams were held, they were all men except for one woman. And also, the trade union representatives were all men; the professional who came for the civil service was a man. All of them, except one representative of the town council; seven to eight men and only one woman (Luisa, a worker in a female-dominated area)."

### ***Wage gap and glass ceiling: Two sides of the coin***

The narratives concerning women workers' pay, positions of responsibility, and job distribution are clear regarding formal pay equity. In administration, all staff are paid according to their professional level as established in their contracts, collective agreements, and legislation. However, at the same time, they refer to differential salary payments due to the use of work-life balance measures by women and not by men:

“The wage difference is not because one amount is being set for women and another for men. The same amount is set, but at the end of the month, or at the end of the year for certain circumstances, the man is paid more than the woman. There is a bonus for dedication, but this bonus falls more heavily on a majority of men, if you compare it to that same category (Althea, a worker in a female-dominated area).”

As the municipality is a public employer, municipal workers feel more protected than those in private enterprise. Nevertheless, those that recognise women mostly use work-life balance measures, which have adverse effects on opportunities for promotion and result in the presence of the glass ceiling and the salary gap. Delving into different perceptions of supplements in salaries such as dangerousness or overtime, some have considered that particular types of supplements or forms of payment are indeed unequal, as one group can benefit and another one cannot. Again, the disadvantaged group consists of women:

“In my case, if I have to do extra hours [she is asking for compensation for the hours off, not financially], I ask for a break because of the need I have to take care of the family. (...) I have had to manage the holidays and adapt them to the needs of both my daughters and my elders. This reduction in working hours also has a financial impact on your salary (Josefa, a worker in a neutral area).”

The example of overtime and who can do it is telling. The next worker interviewed recognized that, unlike the men she worked with, she was unable to work overtime. She described it as a "luxury" she could not afford because she had to care for her children:

“To do overtime, men have it easier (...) than we do. I could never do overtime. I would kill myself [rushing] in the morning because I could not afford to come in the afternoon. I had enough of that, in the morning I had the children half fitted in, so imagine coming in the afternoon and doing overtime. It was practically impossible for me (Carla, a worker in a female-dominated area).”

There was evidence that reinforced the shortage of women in positions of responsibility. The testimonies analysed reflect that some women perceive that opportunities for promotion and advancement in the administrative hierarchy are unequal for men and women. The following extract, from a female worker in a feminized area, explains this:

“I once wrote to staff saying that professional promotion was a right. ... Women are condemned to certain things in this town hall. And elsewhere there is mobility, but in my area only men have been promoted. The few men [in] the area have had professional careers. X [name of a male co-worker], who entered years after me, for example, is a manager now (Rosa, a worker in a female-dominated area).”

Prejudices about women's skills and the possibility of reconciliation are often perceived as critical factors in the glass ceiling. Interviewees pointed out that the training offered by the entity, or the training available in general, is usually in the afternoon hours, even on weekends. The fact

that women bear the most significant family responsibilities means that they are less available during these times. This is the story of a woman worker in a feminized area:

“Look, when it comes to promotion, I always see that men will have it easier, because afterwards you have to do many courses, and women have a hard time coming in the morning, you know? I have not done many, many courses (...) Many are in the afternoon, many courses are on weekends. I have given up courses at weekends because of my family (Carla, a worker in a neutral area).”

Thus, the social norm whereby women have the primary responsibility for family care is identified as the major obstacle to the possibility of promotion. Women show that they do not have a real opportunity for promotion, which is why the senior positions that require the highest degree of responsibility and, consequently, better pay are generally performed by men. One highly positioned worker told us that "There are high-level meetings and maybe it is normal that there are thirteen of us, and there are twelve men and me." Furthermore, she described how the few women who have higher positions in decision-making are questioned by their peers and subordinates in terms of their authority and competence through aggressive and unkind emails, or by directly trying to avoid the guidelines given by women superiors.

“I had to defend myself, especially in email violence. In our area [she holds a high position], we have a lot of pressure. Of course, because they are women [women workers] and suffer daily. It doesn't happen with other man workers in the area. [Two of the women resigned] because it is much work, also if you add the violence that comes from other areas it is already a burden that is unbearable for some people. But even so, I had to bring attention to the mayor's office, and as far as I know nothing has been done (Ana, a worker in neutral area).”

### ***The big obstacle: The reconciliation of family and work-life***

The labor measures for the reconciliation of family and working life are formulated for the integration of women into the work space under equal conditions with men. Unfortunately, these measures, despite their positive effects and their intention, confirm and configure the social and family role played by women in general terms—the assumption of family burdens and care—forming a clear example of the role of caregivers and the persistent separation of sexual roles in the worlds of work and family. In fact, some interviewees refer to all the occasions in which they have had to ask for work-life balance hours not only for their daughters, but also for their fathers or even for their grandchildren:

“Family reconciliation is not only for children but also for adults, and I had to ask for a reduction in the number of hours I worked because of my father's and mother's illnesses ... but I also had to deal with this problem, taking care of both my daughters and my elders, who were my parents (Minerva, a worker a female-dominated area).”

Information about work-life balance measures seems to be transmitted through informal communications among women or by workers in the personnel department who have so far been responsible for informally explaining these measures to those who expressly request it.

In the most feminized areas, there seems to be a higher level of acceptance and use of work-life balance measures, and even support for female colleagues who request them. Thus, the practices of sorority and self-organization of women are part of the informal distribution of work. In this way, they are organized and structured among themselves, covering themselves according to their needs and fulfilling the hours they need to compensate for, thus being more adaptable and flexible in making work and family life compatible. As a woman worker says: "No, but here we are mostly women. And if one has to immediately leave because she is called by the school, [another says] 'Don't worry, I'll do it.' We organise ourselves" (Marina, a female worker). This phenomenon is also confirmed in other interviews, as shown in the following extract concerning working relationships among women and countering general statements in which women are said to establish competitive relationships or "to be the most macho for other women." The interviewee contradicts this idea, and states:

"No, not in my area, in my area there is no discrimination in that sense [there is a majority of women]. ... Furthermore, I wanted to break the myth that women do not work well with other women, which is absolutely false here. In other words, all the women who are here work very well with each other, and with the men, at least in my service, they do work well (Rosa, a worker in a female-dominated area)."

Additionally, we were interested to learn whether these conciliation measures penalized in any way the women who requested them. By penalizing, we mean having a negative impact, whether from a working point of view, through a worsening of formal or informal working conditions, obstacles to the performance of subsequent work, or social ones such as criticism from the environment, both male and female. Although there are no complaints from colleagues, they highlight an added problem: the entity does not adequately cover sick leave or the reduction of working hours by hiring more staff. This fact results in a more significant workload for the rest when someone requests these measures, so they tend to be unwelcome.

"In the end, the work falls to others because the company does not cover this absence ... in the end, the entity wins. The person gets some money taken away; as I say, he charges a little less, but he is doing the same service with fewer hours, and besides, the pressure falls on the other people (Ana, a worker in a neutral area)."

Quantitative data confirmed that only two men in the entire municipality (about 700 workers) had made use of their right to reduce their working hours to care for minor children. As the following testimony indicates, social assessments of the same event are judged differently depending on whether the protagonist is a man or a woman. In this testimony, we appreciate how the worker herself tries to show a justification for the macho behaviour of her colleagues. She understands that they are not acting with a direct wrong intention, but they are indirectly encouraging unequal attitudes.

"There is a man who did take a leave [reduction in working hours for minor care]. They called him to go and pick up his children from school, and everyone seemed to support him and [wish] him well ... because he is a man, and, look how well! ..."

Now his partner said that in another woman [this situation] looked different because she is a woman, and [women] always go to pick up their children from school. In fact, they encourage him, and not her. ... They say to her, "Can't your mother pick up your children?" not in a bad way, but deep down it's not the same thing (Africa, a worker in a female-dominated area)."

As has been demonstrated above, women are the ones who mostly use work-life balance measures such as flexible timetables, reductions in working hours, or unpaid leave for the care of dependents. Some interviewees expressed a clear feminist vision, claiming that men should assume the role of care and try to reconcile:

"Men, no. Men don't do that... I think that's a woman's mistake. Because we are the ones who are saying: conciliation, conciliation, conciliation! But they [men] have to be the ones who start saying: "Hey, I have to reconcile" (Ainara, a worker in a female-dominated area)."

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this paper, we have analysed the distribution of women workers in a local administration in quantitative and qualitative terms. In both analyses, we have seen how, although the administration has legislation and rules regarding employment and recruitment that are strictly complied with, inequality continues to pervade the daily practices and relations established between women and men. The sexual division of labor is pronounced in the administration, which continues to reproduce occupational segregation and the glass ceiling despite advertising itself as the guarantor of gender equality in access to and permanence in public work. Resistance to change continues its expression in the treatment and differentiated valuation of women's work and skills, which are still identified with care work and perceived as less legitimate in performing in certain positions. We also demonstrated that the double burden of working women is perceived as the major obstacle for promotion and partially explains the salary gap. In this sense, the bureaucratic neutrality of the administration should be questioned if those who have access to high decision-making positions and can access better salaries (via training for promotion or overtime) are mostly men.

The administration, therefore, despite institutional efforts and the implementation of public policies on gender and employment, fails to transform the model of hegemonic masculinity and behaves as an organization with gendered positions and hierarchies.

The analysis confirms the transmission of roles and stereotypes linked to the presence and dominance of the public sphere. There is a socializing axis of care, normalizing the presence of women in health service, education and family, and service to others. These axes of socialization have their perfect correlation in the labor market in both public and private sectors even though public employment is highly protected and has less visible and subtler wage inequalities. Municipalities and local administration structures, despite being an implementer of equality policies and an instrument for accomplishing the goal of equity, participate in, reproduce, and foster gender inequalities in the labor market. This research becomes essential in uncertain times when we are witnessing the rise of extreme right-wing ideologies that deny women's inequality on a global level and seriously jeopardize the rights achieved through many generations of women in the struggle for equal life opportunities.

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