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REVISTA BRASILEIRA DE GESTÃO E DESENVOLVIMENTO REGIONAL
V.22, N°4, Edição Especial 2026 | Taubaté/SP - Brasil | ISSN 1809-239x

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Gisela Castillo-Serrano[1] | Aurelia Flores-Hernández[2]

Received: 03/26/2026
Accepted: 07/11/2026

[1] PhD candidate in Education (UATx).
Tlaxcala – Mexico.
Email: castillosg1012@gmail.com

[2] PhD in Anthropology (ULaval).
Professor at the Autonomous University of Tlaxcala.
Tlaxcala – Mexico.
Email: aurelia.flores@uatx.mx

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the circumstances that limit or foster women's participation in university leadership positions. The premise stems from the fact that personal and family situations can intertwine in contradictory ways, hindering or driving promotion processes and placing women before decisions that often impact their own professional advancement. To understand these dynamics, the analytical category of the "glass ceiling" is used, understood as a set of invisible barriers framed by stereotypes, prejudices, and subtle forms of discrimination that condition or limit women's access and promotion to decision-making positions, even when they possess the required or even superior academic qualifications. Recognizing the personal and family sphere as a context where women face inequalities was made possible through a feminist methodology that guided the research approach. For this research, in-depth interviews were conducted with ten female academics holding administrative positions within a public university in central Mexico. The findings reveal that these academics' professional trajectories are intersected by obstacles that limit their retention and promotion within the hierarchical structures. Among the main obstacles are domestic responsibilities, caregiving duties, and motherhood. However, factors that promote their professional development were also identified, including family support networks, economic autonomy, and self-esteem, elements that contribute to their sustained participation in academic leadership roles.

Keywords: Gender. Higher Education. Glass Ceiling. Obstacles.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo analiza las circunstancias que limitan o favorecen la participación de las mujeres en puestos jerárquicos universitarios. La premisa parte de que ciertas situaciones personales y familiares pueden entrelazarse de manera contradictoria obstaculizando o impulsando los procesos de ascensos, y situando a las mujeres ante decisiones que, a menudo, impactan en su propio progreso profesional. Para comprender estas dinámicas, se retoma la categoría analítica del "techo de cristal", entendida como un conjunto de barreras invisibles enmarcadas en estereotipos, prejuicios y formas sutiles de discriminación que condicionan o limitan el acceso y el ascenso de las mujeres a cargos de decisión, aun cuando cuentan con preparación académica requerida e incluso superior. El reconocimiento del núcleo personal y familiar como escenario donde las mujeres enfrentan desigualdades fue posible a través de una metodología feminista que orientó la ruta de investigación. Para el trabajo de investigación se aplicaron entrevistas a profundidad a diez académicas, quienes ocupan algún cargo administrativo en la estructura de una universidad pública del centro de México. Los hallazgos evidencian que las trayectorias profesionales de las académicas se encuentran atravesadas por obstáculos que condicionan su permanencia y ascenso en las estructuras jerárquicas. Entre los principales factores obstaculizadores destacan la carga doméstica, las responsabilidades de cuidado y el ejercicio de la maternidad. No obstante, también se identifican factores que favorecen su desarrollo profesional, entre ellos, las redes de apoyo familiares, la autonomía económica y la autoestima, elementos que contribuyen a sostener su participación en espacios de liderazgo académico.

Palabras clave: Género. Educación Superior. Techo de cristal. Barreras.

INTRODUCTION

Women's access to higher education has become a core theme in academic debate and gender equality policies. Currently, even though enrollment indicators reflect that equitable levels of participation between men and women are maintained, empirical evidence indicates that women, in multiple fields, register higher levels of professional training than men (De Garay and Del Valle, 2012; Ordorika, 2015).

In contrast, it has been documented that, despite the progress made, significant inequalities persist in professional practice. For women, disparities continue to exist both in the distribution of training disciplines and in the labor expectations associated with their professional placement. In the Mexican context, women predominantly graduate from fields related to the social, administrative and educational sciences as well as those related to social services, while their presence in areas such as the exact sciences and engineering remains limited. According to Garrido and Tapia (2022), it is contrasting that although more women are graduating and receiving degrees in higher education, they encounter numerous obstacles when joining the workforce, such as lower pay levels, a greater presence in part-time, informal, and half-time jobs lacking social security or labor rights— in the tertiary and service sectors—and precarious working conditions.

Therefore, women's access to employment depends not only on their education or skills but also on cultural, organizational, and structural factors that condition their advancement. In this sense, the incompatibility between domestic and work responsibilities, along with male – dominated organizational cultures and gender stereotypes, explains the limited female presence in strategic positions (Hernández, 2024). Since the 1970s, there has been a sustained increase in women's participation in paid work—considered socially as "visible" work—as well as in political representation and business leadership positions, both in Mexico and internationally; however, this participation remains insufficient in terms of effective access to decision-making positions (Zabludovsky, 2007).

Research on gender and higher education has highlighted the multiple barriers that female academics face in advancing to higher-level positions. In this regard, Blázquez and Bustos (2013) and Buquet et al. (2013) examine the implications of women's absence in decision-making positions and document the complex and lengthy trajectory women have taken to assume leadership and leadership roles, highlighting the tensions and disruptions they face. However, despite legal and autonomy advances for women, structural, organizational, and subjective barriers persist, hindering the transition to effective empowerment. On this matter, Moncayo and Zuluaga (2015) and Hernández (2024) agree that the cultural dimension is crucial to understanding these inequalities since they involve factors that operate in an implicit and normalized manner. Key barriers include "the social role of motherhood, double workday, the absence of female leadership, and the euphemism of equality" (Moncayo and Zuluaga, 2015, p. 4)

To contribute to these reflections, the objective of this study is to analyze the personal and family circumstances that hinder or facilitate the professional trajectories of female academics who hold hierarchical positions at a public university in central Mexico. In particular, it focuses on how domestic work, the caregiving responsibilities and the experience of motherhood impact professional advancement when women occupy leadership positions; this study also aims to identify the personal and family resources that drive their retention and performance in decision-making positions. In this sense, the research questions are: How do domestic work, caregiving responsibilities, and the experience of motherhood condition the professional trajectories of female academics who hold

hierarchical university positions? And which support networks, personal resources, and family conditions act as driving factors in their retention and professional growth?

As theoretical support, the analytical category of "glass ceiling" (GC) is used, understood as the set of invisible barriers framed within stereotypes, prejudices, and subtle forms of discrimination that condition or limit women's access to and advancement in leadership positions. Likewise, the analysis incorporates the identification of personal and family resources that, based on the participants' experiences, drive their professional careers and allow them to remain in leadership positions.

THE "GLASS CEILING" AS AN ANALYTICAL CATEGORY

Within the framework of studies on gender inequality in organizations, during the 1970s, Marilyn Loden coined the term GC to account for the structural and symbolic barriers that limited women's participation in leadership positions (Lara, 2025). From this perspective, the GC is not an isolated or exceptional obstacle, but rather a network of practices, representations, and power relations that produce and reinforce the exclusion of women from decision-making spheres.

According to Linda Wirth (2002), the concept of the GC refers to "the artificial and invisible barriers, created by discriminatory attitudes, as well as organizational prejudices, that block women in their attempt to reach management positions" (p. 23). Based on this definition, GC is understood as a set of invisible or subtle barriers, difficult to detect, that hinder women's access to and advancement in various paid jobs, and can occur in different dimensions. In this sense, GC is introduced as a descriptive metaphor to refer to the invisible barriers that prevent women from occupying leadership positions. Over time, the concept was consolidated through its use as an analytical tool to explain the structural, cultural, and symbolic mechanisms of exclusion. Authors such as Mabel Burin (2008) point out that:

> This concept will be described based on its dual nature: in its objective aspect, as a discriminatory reality towards women existing in most labor organizations, and as a subjective reality that imposes halts and setbacks in women's career projects. (p. 76)

Therefore, the concept of GC should not be reduced to a mere organizational metaphor, but rather embraced in its full analytical breadth, recognizing its dual dimension. On the one hand, it allows us to understand that objective barriers operate from formalized structures—mechanisms,

norms, devices, and pre-existing networks that regulate the institution's functioning—; on the other hand, it requires considering those internalized or subjective processes that shape the expectations and decisions that impact women's career paths.

While Marcela Lagarde (1990) does not explicitly mention the concept of GC, her arguments are fundamental to understanding the obstacles women face in accessing and advancing to hierarchical positions. In this sense, the author defines patriarchy as one of the historical domains of male power sustained by diverse social formations. This is characterized by a generic antagonism linked to male dominance, which materializes in social and institutional structures that reproduce inequalities; by gender division, resulting from a historical competition for male validation and access to hierarchical spaces; and by machismo, which consolidates male domination by institutionalizing practices, norms, and representations that legitimize female subordination through socially imposed identities and duties.

From this approach, the GC should be understood as a contemporary expression linked to patriarchal structures, particularly within organizational and university settings, where hierarchies affecting women are presented under discourses of neutrality and merit that, moreover, continue to reproduce structural gender biases. Norma Blázquez (2008) acknowledges that differences persist in the proportion of men and women occupying leadership positions within academic and scientific institutions. Even in those where female enrollment exceeds male enrollment, executive roles are held by men. Consequently, women receive fewer recognitions and awards granted by the institutions to which they belong to.

> In their professional lives, [women] face specific obstacles and difficulties stemming from both the models and practices characteristic of scientific institutions and sociocultural factors that limit the full development of women as a whole, among these, the assignment of domestic roles and family care stands out. (Blázquez, 2008, pp. 45-46)

This evidence indicates that academic trajectories are constructed differently for men and women, resulting in a lower female presence in the hierarchical levels of institutions. Discriminatory practices, both explicit and implicit, manifest themselves in the reproduction of gender roles and stereotypes that shape women's entry, retention, and advancement, as well as in an organizational culture that reinforces these inequalities through institutional regulations and practices, including hiring practices differentiated by gender, age, or marital status.

Thus, even when women have accessed higher education, possess sufficient skills and academic preparation, and even demonstrate recognized leadership capacities, there is no guarantee that they will be able to occupy high-level hierarchical positions of responsibility in organizations, whether in the educational, economic, administrative, religious, or political spheres. Therefore, this work will employ the GC as an analytical category to examine the invisible barriers that limit women's access and promotion to leadership positions at the Autonomous University of Tlaxcala (UATx), especially in administrative and academic decision-making roles.

THE BARRIERS OF THE "GLASS CEILING"

The limited presence of women in the highest positions of organizations highlights the existence of various obstacles that operate subtly and invisibly. In this context, several conjectures have been formulated regarding the so-called GC. First, it is not a matter of overt discrimination, but rather the presence of invisible barriers; second, these barriers do not disappear over time; and third, women's job performance is equivalent to that of men, so objective differences in job execution are not sufficient to explain the inequalities in access to the highest-ranking positions.

According to Díez, Terrón and Anguita (2009), the barriers limiting women's access to decision-making positions are linked to a historical and cultural tradition that associates them with the domestic and private sphere. Along the same lines, Larrieta, Velasco, and Fernández (2015) point out that gender roles and the unequal distribution of family responsibilities, as well as their effects on work-life balance, are key factors in explaining the low representation of women in positions of power. Similarly, Tomás and Guillamón (2009) and Gaete-Quezada (2015) identify, among the external barriers, the difficulty of reconciling work and family life, along with the persistence of gender stereotypes associated with leadership.

In this context, it is undeniable that domestic and care work has been historically feminized and socially naturalized as "women's issue." From this perspective, problematizing the idea that family, children, and caregiving tasks are obstacles to professional development requires making visible the cultural and institutional structures that produce and reproduce these tensions.

The barriers that constitute the GC can take various forms. The literature has proposed typologies that distinguish between social, organizational, and governmental barriers, as well as internal and external factors. However, these barriers—invisible, subtle, and naturalized—do not operate in isolation. Together, they not only limit women's professional trajectories but also contribute to their persistent underrepresentation at the highest levels of organizations.

In analyzing women's academic trajectories, merely identifying barriers would imply a partial vision focused on obstacles and the reproduction of inequalities. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the drivers and conditions that favor their professional development. In this regard, Chinchilla et al. (2006) consider the main drivers for women are motivation, training, psychological strength, and the value system. Tomás and Guillamón (2009) refer to internal barriers inherent in socialization processes, such as: "differences in the education of boys and girls, fear of failing to meet expectations of the female role, lack of role models, little interest in the traditional leadership style, or low self-esteem" (pp. 245-246).

Beyond the barriers, it is pertinent to consider the drivers, understood as those resources, strategies, and conditions that favor their professional development. Incorporating this dual perspective allows us not only to make visible the structural limitations they face, but also to recover their agency, as well as the ways in which they negotiate, resist, and advance in institutional contexts marked by gender inequalities.

METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSITION AND DESIGN

The study adopted a qualitative feminist methodology, following the propositions of Castañeda (2006), who places women at the center of the research process, recognizing them as producers of knowledge; that is, as knowing and knowable subjects based on their experiences situated in a specific cultural and historical context. Likewise, it was assumed that interaction among women is key to identifying everyday inequalities that, although manifested in diverse ways, share a structural gender basis and their effects, making them identifiable, especially when the participants and researchers are all members of the university, albeit in different positions. From this methodological perspective, the objective is not statistical generalization or the quantification of results, but rather to understand the significance of lived experiences, particularly within a context marked by a limited female presence in

higher-ranking university positions.

The interviews were recorded, with the participants' prior authorization, and fully transcribed; they were conducted at the interviewees' workplaces at agreed-upon times. Participation was voluntary for each individual. The thematic guide was structured around three axes: 1) profile of the female academics; 2) personal and family factors; and 3) institutional structure. The instrument was reviewed and endorsed by an internal academic committee, adhering to the ethical principles of beneficence and confidentiality in research.

Data analysis was conducted using both deductive and inductive coding. The former was based on the axes of the interview guide and the analytical category of the GC, whereas the latter allowed for the identification of emerging themes derived from the experiences narrated by the participants. Subsequently, the codes were grouped into two analytical categories: obstacles and drivers (Table 1).

Table 1 | Categories of analysis and findings

Categories	Dimensions of analysis	Main findings
Obstacles	Domestic Burden	Female academics continue to assume the majority of domestic tasks, a situation that reduces the time available for leadership roles, research, and academic training.
	Caregiving Responsibilities	The care of daughters and sons falls primarily on women, who assume the organization of transportation, support with schoolwork, and daily household care.
	Exercise of Motherhood	Motherhood generates tension between social expectations associated with the concept of the "good mother" and the demands of academic work, a situation that, in some cases, forces female academics to postpone their professional projects.
Drivers	Family Support Networks	Support, especially from other women with household tasks and childcare facilitates the balance between work and family life, favoring the permanence of female academics in decision-making positions.
	Economic Autonomy	Having an independent income strengthens economic independence and decision-making capacity, while also expanding educational opportunities for their children.
	Self-Esteem	Self-confidence and self-assurance strengthen the exercise of leadership and help consolidate authority and legitimacy among colleagues and staff.

Source: Compiled by the author based on fieldwork data.

During the interpretation of the results, a cross-sectional comparative analysis of the testimonials was conducted to identify common patterns and particularities in the academics' experiences. Subsequently, the findings were interpreted through the women's testimonial narratives, conceived as a methodological tool that enables the reconstruction of their situated experiences and the identification of the structures conditioning their professional trajectories. From this perspective, Fernández (2018) argues that:

> Women's testimonies, as a theoretical and political tool, contribute to making visible the presence of certain subjects, their points of view, the place from which they construct their statements (whether of class, gender, ethnicity, age, and so forth) [...] these testimonial narratives that circulate other discourses, contested social meanings, the unspoken stories. (p. 62-63)

Therefore, the narratives were organized and systematized using analytical categories, ensuring interpretive consistency through the continuous review of transcripts and the cross-referencing of testimonies with the constructed categories. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted in an environment of trust that facilitated the construction of accounts regarding the personal, family, and institutional barriers and obstacles female academics face in accessing leadership positions. From a feminist perspective, these testimonial narratives were interpreted as a methodological resource that revealed the gender structures shaping and conditioning their professional trajectories within the university organization.

STUDY CONTEXT

According to UNESCO IESALC (2021), women occupy only 18 percent of university leadership positions worldwide. In Mexico, women represent only 8 percent of university presidencies (Marcos, 2023). Given that this study focuses on the Autonomous University of Tlaxcala (UATx), the scope of analysis is limited to state public universities, where women lead 11 of the 35 institutions in this category (Table 2). Within this context, it is pertinent to examine more deeply the conditions under which women attain and exercise leadership roles in higher education.

The analysis of the Gender Parity Index (GPI) indicates that the Autonomous University of Sonora reaches a 50/50 balance, positioning it as an ideal case. Meanwhile, the Autonomous University of Campeche exhibits overrepresentation with a GPI of 4.88; whereas, the Autonomous University of Puebla shows underrepresentation with a GPI of 0.20. This analysis suggests that, even though female rectors head these Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), it remains necessary to question: who is actually making the decisions?

Table 2 | Female rectors in Mexican state public universities

State Public Universities	Female rector	Period	*Percentage of participation by gender		
			W	M	GPI
South Region					
Autonomous University of Carmen, Campeche	Sandra Martha Laffón Leal	2022-2026	83	17	4,88
Autonomous University of the State of Quintana Roo	Consuelo Natalia Fiorentini Cañedo	2024-2027	44	56	0, 78
Central Region					
Autonomous University of Aguascalientes	Sandra Yesenia Pinzón Castro	2023-2025	67	33	2.03
University of Guanajuato	Claudia Susana Gómez López	2023-2027	31	69	0.44
Autonomous University of Querétaro	Silvia Amaya Llano	2024-2027	33	67	0.49
Autonomous University of Morelos	Viridiana Aydeé León Hernández	2023-2029	67	33	2.03
Meritorios Autonomous University of Puebla	Lilia Cedillo Ramírez	2021-2025 2025-2029	17	83	0.20
Western Region					
Michoacan University of Saint Nicholas of Hidalgo	Yarabí Ávila González	2023-2027	57	43	1.32
Autonomous University of Nayarit	Norma Lilia Galván Meza	2025-2028	62	38	1.63
Northwest Region					
Autonomous University of the West, Sinaloa	Sylvia Paz Díaz Camacho	2020-2024	44	56	0.78
Autonomous University of Sonora	María Rita Plancarte Martínez	2021-2025	50	50	1

Source: Compiled by the author. The percentage of women and men in the executive board reporting to the rector´s office, as well as the gender parity index, are taken from Meza, Ortega, and Villareal (2024).

In the state of Tlaxcala, Mexico, is located the UATx, an institution founded in 1976 with nearly five decades of history. Tlaxcala is one of the states with the lowest population nationwide. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI, 2020), its population is 1,342,977 inhabitants, 51.6 percent women and 48.4 percent men. The UATx is one of the main higher education institutions in the central-eastern region of the country. Currently, it offers 47 undergraduate degrees, 4 specialization programs, 38 master's degrees, and 12 doctoral degrees, totaling 101 Educational Programs (EPs); additionally, it has 8 research centers. The most recent records show an increase in enrollment for 2024 to 16,779 students. Data regarding the total of student composition (the sum of on-campus enrollment plus enrollment in Continuing Education courses) totals 23,770 students, of which 15,218 are women and 8,552 are men,64 and 36 percent, respectively (UATx, 2025).

Table 3 | Distribution of university executives at UATx by gender

Women 7	**Secretariats** Secretariat of Self-realization Secretariat of University Outreach and Cultural Dissemination Secretariat of Scientific Research and Postgraduate Studies **Divisional Coordination** Coordination Office of the Division of Social and Administrative Sciences **Faculties** Dean´s office: Faculty of Design, Art, and Architecture Dean's Office, Faculty of Dentistry Dean's Office, Faculty of Social Work, Sociology, and Psychology
Men 18	**Rector's office** Rector **Secretariats** Academic Secretariat Administrative Secretariat Technical Secretariat **Divisional Coordination Offices** Coordination Office of the Division of Basic Sciences, Engineering, and Technology Coordination Office of the Division of Biological Sciences and Health Coordination Office of Sciences and Humanities **Faculties** Dean's Office, Faculty of Basic Sciences, Engineering, and Technology Dean's Office, Faculty of Agrobiology Dean's Office, Faculty of Health Sciences Dean's Office, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences Dean's Office, Faculty of Law, Political Science, and Criminology Dean's Office, Faculty of Education Sciences Dean's Office, Faculty of Human Development Sciences Dean's Office, Faculty of Philosophy and Letters **Multidisciplinary Academic Units** Dean's Office, Multidisciplinary Academic Unit - Calpulalpan Campus Dean's Office, Multidisciplinary Academic Unit - San Pablo del Monte Campus Dean's Office, Multidisciplinary Academic Unit - Teacalco Campus
Women 3 **Men 5**	**Research Centers** Research Center in Biological Sciences Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Regional Development. Regional Analysis Center for Legal-Political Research Center for Educational Research Research Center in Administrative Sciences Research Center in Genetics and Environment Research Center in Animal Reproduction Tlaxcala Center for Behavioral Biology

Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the UATx (2025).

As shown in Table 3, women account for 28 percent of executive and administrative positions at UATx, compared to 72 percent occupied by men, highlighting an unequal participation in decision-making. Women are concentrated in the humanities, social sciences, and services, whereas men predominate in the rector's office, directorships, as well as in hard sciences, administrative, biological, and health sciences. Although these leadership spaces are key to institutional direction, women's involvement remains limited.

PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL PROFILE OF FEMALE PARTICIPANTS

In this institutional context, ten in-depth interviews were conducted with women who, at the time of fieldwork, held positions as faculty deans, department heads, secretaries, and program coordinators. Table 4 presents the personal and professional profile of the participants, providing context for the conditions that shape their academic trajectories. The average age is 42 years, ranging from 26 to 59 years. Although age is not a determining factor for reaching decision-making positions, its intersection with other variables can influence their career paths.

Table 4 | Personal and professional profile of female participants

	Age (years)	Place of birth	Marital status	Children	
				Number	Age
Female Interviewee 1 (I1)	59	Otro	Married	1	34
Female Interviewee 2 (I2)	53	Otro	Divorced	2	18, 23
Female Interviewee 3 (I3)	49	Tlaxcala	Married	2	17, 23
Female Interviewee 4 (I4)	43	Tlaxcala	Single	1	14
Female Interviewee 5 (I5)	41	Tlaxcala	Married	-	0
Female Interviewee 6 (I6)	41	Otro	Divorced	3	7, 9, 12
Female Interviewee 7 (I7)	38	Otro	Cohabitation	2	6, 19
Female Interviewee 8 (I8)	35	Otro	Married	2	6, 14
Female Interviewee 9 (I9)	32	Otro	Single	-	0
Female Interviewee10 (I10)	26	Tlaxcala	Married	-	0

Source: Compiled by the author based on fieldwork data.

Regarding their place of origin, four of the interviewees are from Tlaxcala, while the remainder come from other states. As for their marital status, five reported being married, one cohabitating, two divorced, and two single, showing a predominance of cohabitating partners. Furthermore, seven of the participants have children, with an average of two per woman, whose ages are primarily concentrated in childhood and adolescence, implying a greater demand on time and caregiving responsibilities; three women reported having no children. The majority presence of women with caregiving duties suggests potential tensions between domestic life and the fulfillment of their professional roles.

Female academics in middle and senior management positions within the university structure balance both administrative and academic roles related to managing undergraduate and graduate programs such as schedule organization, curricular review, faculty management, and student support. Eight of the interviewees serve in educational program positions centered on operational execution and the liaison with higher-level institutions, whereas only two have access to decision-making roles. Therefore, the presence of women in these spaces appears to follow a pattern of limited inclusion, in which power structures remain intact and continue to restrict their access and advancement to higher decision-making levels.

DOMESTIC SPHERE, CAREGIVING RESPONSIBILITIES, AND THE PRACTICE OF MOTHERHOOD

The analysis of the narratives shows that women's academic trajectories are shaped by a constant tension between the demands of the professional sphere and the domestic and caregiving responsibilities. In this research, female academics recognize the existence of obstacles that limit their promotion and retention in senior positions. They consider that balancing family and professional life involves challenges and costs that are not always resolved in their favor. In this sense, co-responsibility between family and work requires an equitable distribution of domestic and caregiving tasks. In the domestic sphere, it implies greater involvement of men in these activities; while in the public sphere, it demands the commitment of the State, the market, and educational institutions to balance work and family life through co-responsible actions.

With the purpose of identifying the interviewees' daily routine, their domestic tasks were investigated. The results show that all of them carry out caregiving and household chores: food preparation, cleaning, and doing laundry. These activities are combined with their academic work, which results in extensive and exhausting workdays that negatively impact their health and well-being. On average, the daily routine reaches 17.7 hours, with only 6.3 hours dedicated for rest, starting their activities between 4:00 and 5:00 a.m. and concluding between 11:00 p.m. and midnight.

In the professional sphere, female academics dedicate an average of nine hours a day to work; however, those in higher-level positions work shifts of between 11 and 12 hours. Some—especially younger academics—combine administrative and research functions, which increases their workload. Even though the time dedicated to domestic and caregiving tasks varies according to marital status, relationship dynamics, the age of their children, and support networks, their organization and management fall on women. Evidence shows that even when holding a coordination position, female academics directly face household demands. Therefore, they not only contribute to the family's financial support but also assume responsibility for caregiving and household management. While paternal absences are usually socially justified, in the case of women, they are subject to persistent questioning.

In most cases, they take charge of their children's activities: school responsibilities (homework, school meetings, purchasing supplies, supporting the creation of models/dioramas, and so on.), transportation, and food preparation (breakfasts, packed lunches, and dinners).

> My day starts at 5:00 a.m. [...] I cover all the needs almost entirely by myself; we eat out because I don't have enough time, and waiting to eat until 5:00 p.m. is too late for the children. So we go back home and I support them with school-related tasks; sometimes they stay at home doing homework while I go grocery shopping for next day or do whatever is needed. The evening is spent taking care of everything they need, as well as house cleaning as much as possible. My day ends around midnight. (I6)

Additionally, laundry, house cleaning, and shopping for food and supplies are among the multiple tasks that female academics routinely perform. In some cases, they point out that the father "sees the children" on weekends, which coincides with leisure time rather than the demands of daily work.

> On weekends, the children go with their father, so on Saturday I dedicate myself to cleaning the house while they are away, and sometimes when I don't finish, I continue on Sunday, uniforms, preparing everything for the week, going grocery shopping and if we're lucky, sometimes on Sunday afternoon we go to the movies [...] because we don't have enough time to go anywhere else. (I6)

The cohabitation style directly impacts the workload. Their relationship corresponds to what Trost and Levin (1999) describe as commuter marital or cohabiting relationship or living apart together, characterized by one partner staying home while the other is away for work or academic reasons. In this context, the husband resides in another state and only lives with the family three days a week, which reduces daily support and forces the female academic to assume the organization of the household and caregiving responsibilities almost exclusively

> It's a bit complicated, it was really hard for me; my husband has been in Mexico City for almost two years now. At first, we shared the chores, but for me, the first year was extremely chaotic because I had no organization, it was a matter of figuring it out as I went, but my parents have been a huge help. (I8)

Overall, the analyzed cases demonstrate that domestic and caregiving responsibilities fall disproportionately on women, even when they participate in the professional sphere and contribute to family support. The limited involvement of partners reinforces this inequality, increases their overall workload, and shapes their career trajectories by restricting the time available for training, research, and advancement to higher-level positions. In some cases, the pursuit of higher income implies a temporary separation from the partner, which intensifies the almost exclusive assumption of caregiving by women. Consequently, increased income translates into an overload that leads to personal and professional burnout, as well as higher expenses for domestic services, family support, and transportation.

> When my mother lost her job, I asked her: 'How much were you paid at school?' She told me the amount, and I said: 'Well, I'll pay you that money, but help me around the house, with the meals, and the children.' So I pay her, and she helps me out a lot. (I8)

Motherhood should not be considered, in itself, a barrier to accessing executive positions; however, it is essential to analyze the level of partner involvement in household and family care. In this regard, Díez, Terrón, and Anguita (2009) point out that:

> It is not that women shy away from executive positions; rather, men shy away from family responsibilities, which consequently forces women to intensify their double workload if they take on a leadership role in an educational institution. (2009, p. 31)

It is a fact that the presence of young children demands greater attention, time, and dedication to direct caregiving tasks, which can extend women's daily workload. Nevertheless, the routine of female academics with teenage children is also complex. The following narrative illustrates that they remain attentive to their children's activities, starting their day very early to manage household chores, directly take on responsibility, and ensure their family's well-being.

> Most days I get up at 4:00 a.m., because my daughter starts school at 7:00 a.m., and I drop her off, I have my life organized: by that time I have to prepare lunch, leave some breakfast, which everyone can then add to as they like and also make my own breakfast, because I arrive here [at work] at 7:00 a.m. (I3)

The dilemma between professional life and family becomes complicated for female academics; their long working hours and the exhausting nature of the tasks they are committed to demonstrate some of the obstacles they face.

> I used to drop my daughter off at school at 6:45 a.m., I had to get up at 5:00 a.m., prepare breakfast for both of us, iron my clothes, do all those chores between 5:00 and 6:30 a.m. My mother took care of subsequent activities, such as making meals and looking after my daughter. (I4)

As observed, domestic chores are hard to leave behind. While school-aged children demand more attention, these responsibilities extend throughout motherhood, even into adolescence. In this sense, caregiving acts as an invisible barrier, as society implicitly assigns women the responsibility for domestic work and extended motherhood.

The interviewees express a constant interest in their professional development. However, this journey is not exempt from obstacles and setbacks that put strain on their aspirations. An emblematic case is that of an academic who was recognized for a period in the National System of Researchers (SNII); however, after her first evaluation, she lost this distinction. Despite her interest in rejoining, time passed and she was unable to achieve it. Her daily activities and responsibilities have contributed to her perceiving this goal as increasingly distant and hard to reach.

> My time is predominantly dedicated to caring for my young children because they are small; I take care of everything alone. Naturally, if I didn't have all that responsibility, it is very likely that I would be fully engaged in research, which demands full-time dedication. For me, having my first child was a very severe state of shock; it impacted my performance in research, and my productivity fell severely because obviously my time was absorbed by it. Then came the second one, and then the third, and they came right after another, all three are very close in age. I became very depressed because I had many professional plans that I simply saw were not being achieved, and that have not been achieved. (I6)

Caregiving burdens intensify when children are very close in age, as the demands for attention and upbringing are concentrated within the same period. Often, female academics accept leadership positions as a strategy to supplement their income as teachers. Some express interest in joining the SNII, while others aspire to pursue doctoral studies; however, their workload and personal circumstances limit the realization of these projects.

> Giving up an academic professional project right now has been very hard for me; above all, having to postpone starting my doctoral studies has been a source of great frustration for me. This year I tried to work through that emotionally because I gain nothing by torturing myself, I can't start right now because my partner started his doctoral studies. (E7)

The persistence of a rigid sexual division of labor continues to reproduce inequalities by making domestic work invisible and concentrating this burden disproportionately on women. In this sense, Blázquez and Bustos (2013) point out that women with professional training and economic contributions require adequate support for both family and workplace to manage their responsibilities. Nevertheless, female academics maintain aspirations for personal and professional growth, whether through continuing postgraduate studies or re-entering the SNII, seeking higher income, recognition, and advancement in research. However, in some cases, these projects are postponed as the professional careers of their partners are prioritized.

FAMILY SUPPORT NETWORKS, ECONOMIC AUTONOMY AND THE STRENGTHENING OF SELF-ESTEEM

In this section, it is necessary to point out that the performance of female academics in leadership positions is usually sustained by support networks, generally composed of other women. Likewise, as a motivating factor, an improvement in income is identified, along with recognition and the importance of strengthening self-esteem as a key resource for their professional development. In this sense, during the workday, the support of some academics' mothers proves essential for childcare.

> Fortunately, my blessed mother exists; thank God she supports me a lot with him [referring to her young son] and also with the older one [...] they arrive and go eat at their grandmother's house, so if either of them gets sick, they stay with their grandmother. (I8)

Even some female academics without children are preparing to take on that responsibility alone or with the help of other women. In the case of Ana, who was pregnant at the time of the interview, and whose husband lives in another state during the week owing to work circumstances, she plans to organize herself as follows when the baby is born:

> Since he [her husband] is basically not here, I will have the baby all week, but my parents will support me especially my mother, who is completely willing to help. Otherwise, I was telling my husband, one option is to find a daycare center to support me with care, and another is to find a nanny under my mother's supervision; but my mother is fully prepared and willing to support me. (I10)

Building networks and forming alliances among women is essential for female academics to take on decision-making roles; however, these dynamics show that it is women who continue to sustain these efforts. In the opinion of most of the women interviewed, receiving a salary is satisfying because it gives them a sense of freedom and independence.

> Well, to be honest, it feels great it's a freedom that's really hard to achieve or earn, first because the conditions under which you make a living aren't always the best... suddenly, you have to take on anything out of necessity, and I mean anything because you end up doing all kinds of work. Now that I can say I've had a few years of financial stability, I feel more at peace and am able to make medium-term decisions, plus you get used to it and get your children used to it too. (I7)

As they explained, the income they earn from their assigned work responsibilities allows them to decide how to spend or invest their money, which in turn strengthens their economic autonomy. Having this economic capacity not only has an impact on their personal lives but also on their families, as it enables better living conditions and access to opportunities, especially for their children.

> We women didn't have access to it [referring to money], so now that I can experience it personally, that I can buy a house, that I can buy a car, and that it's mine and that I earned it through my own hard work and the education I received, that allowed me to see that women really can have everything we want. (I4)

The perception of having their own income is linked to greater stability and future security. From this perspective, economic autonomy becomes an element that not only promotes their well-being but also motivates and drives their aspirations for advancement within the hierarchical structure.

> Starting a family business, thinking that we were going to better off financially, that my daughter would have better opportunities, thanks to that, she went on an exchange program to the U.S., and I continued to pay for her ballet lessons and her English certification. These are things that I have ultimately invested in, and I know that my daughter and son will be okay. (I7)

In summary economic autonomy stands out as a key element in women's academic trajectories, as it not only impacts the personal sphere but also favors decision-making within the family environment. Although this resource favors their retention and motivates their advancement, its scope is limited in the face of structural inequalities that condition access to higher-ranking positions.

Unlike the identified obstacles, the interviewees do not report a fear of success; on the contrary, they emphasize that self-esteem is a resource that has allowed them to face complications and favors their performance in the workplace. Self-esteem is expressed in the ability to make

decisions, earn respect among colleagues, and project confidence when holding positions of responsibility. One of the participants points out: “even if you aren’t aiming for a leadership position, you must have self-esteem; that allows you to have confidence in yourself, and that will allow you to do more things without fear” (I2).

In institutional contexts where gender stereotypes about leadership persist, women face greater demands to demonstrate competitiveness, assertiveness and control. In this sense, the projection of confidence assumes a central role, not only as an individual quality, but as a strategy that impacts the legitimacy of their authority and how their decisions are perceived by others.

> Yes, if one projects insecurity, then others notice or perceive it... and image, I believe, is also important, as it is what gets perceived within the organization [...] when one projects organization, when one projects confidence, some of the decisions you make will directly impact the proper functioning of the area where you are located. (I9)

Self-esteem implies self-confidence, security, and the ability to project a body and aesthetic image that reinforces one’s positioning. These elements contribute to women perceiving themselves as capable of holding a decision-making position. Conversely, insecurity and fear can lead staff under their supervision and their peers to question or disrespect their decisions.

> Of course, one radiates confidence or the opposite; there are people who perceive your fear, your anxiety, your indecision. There are very opportunistic people everywhere; they test you, they evaluate you, they watch you closely, they put you to the test, and so if you hesitate, if you hesitate, well obviously that is fresh meat for a whole lot of things. (I7)

The findings demonstrate that, far from disappearing or diminishing, gender inequalities are reconfigured and reinforced within the academic sphere. Guil (2007) points out that invisible and subtle barriers generate constant tension between productive and reproductive work. Although female academics employ strategies such as building support networks, strengthening self-esteem, and seeking economic autonomy, these fail to fully counteract the structural inequalities that persist in the organization of academic work.

CONCLUSIONS

The obstacles faced by female academics are mainly related to the contradictions of balancing family, professional, and work life. In the first place, the need to prioritize among these spheres intensifies when assuming teaching, administrative, and, in some cases, research duties, particularly for those who belong to or aspire to join the SNII, which demands and motivates spending time on research. Dedication to daily household activities deprives them of time to achieve their professional goals.

In this context, there is agreement on significant subjective effects, such as feelings of guilt, remorse, and the perception of failing to fulfill family roles, especially when it comes to the care of young children. These emotions are associated with the inability to attend school activities or participate in recreational spaces, not eating meals as a family or eating in a hurry, not taking them to extracurricular activities, or leaving them home alone. Altogether, trying to fulfill their caregiving responsibilities means for women “trying to always be present”, fulfilling what society has imposed as “being a good mother”. Furthermore, the overload resulting from the search for balance between different spheres leads to high levels of stress and, in some cases, the need to seek psychological support. This situation is aggravated by the minimal participation of partners in caregiving tasks, which limits the possibilities for advancement and retention in higher-ranking positions.

Finally, the postponement of personal and professional projects such as pursuing further studies or taking on new job opportunities appears as a recurring theme in contexts where gender mandates that penalize the non-fulfillment of traditional roles persist. In some cases, a lack of confidence or self-esteem can also operate as a factor that inhibits advancement toward higher-ranking positions.

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FUNDAÇÃO DE APOIO À PESQUISA,
TECNOLOGIA E INOVAÇÃO





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