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ENTRE POLÍTICAS DE EQUIDADE E ESTRUTURAS EXCLUDENTES: MULHERES NA CARREIRA E NA GESTÃO ACADÊMICA

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze female representation in Brazilian higher education by examining women's trajectories from undergraduate enrollment to academic careers and management positions. The study addresses the persistent paradox between women's majority presence in higher education and their underrepresentation in institutional decision-making spaces. Methodologically, it adopts a quantitative and qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory approach, based on secondary data from the Higher Education Census (INEP) and the CAPES Sucupira Platform, covering the period from 2015 to 2024, as well as data on the coordination of interdisciplinary graduate programs in 2026. The analysis is grounded in key theoretical frameworks from gender and labor studies, including vertical and horizontal segregation, the glass ceiling, the leadership labyrinth, and the leaky pipeline. The findings reveal that, despite women's predominance among students and degree holders, their participation decreases progressively along the academic career, becoming particularly limited in management roles. Motherhood, scientific productivity standards, and the unequal distribution of care work emerge as structural factors shaping these inequalities. The study concludes that women's exclusion from academic leadership is not a result of insufficient qualifications, but rather of institutional arrangements and unstable public policies that perpetuate gender inequality, underscoring the need for more consistent and structural equity-oriented policies.

Keywords: Gender. Higher Education. Academic Management. Motherhood. Public Policies.

RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar a representatividade feminina no ensino superior brasileiro, acompanhando a trajetória das mulheres desde o ingresso na graduação até a ocupação de cargos docentes e de gestão acadêmica. O estudo parte do paradoxo entre a expressiva presença feminina na formação universitária e sua sub-representação persistente nos espaços de poder institucional. Metodologicamente, adota-se uma abordagem quanti-qualitativa, de caráter descritivo e exploratório, com base em dados secundários do Censo da Educação Superior (INEP), da Plataforma Sucupira (CAPES), referentes ao período de 2015 a 2024, e em dados sobre a coordenação de Programas de Pós-Graduação Interdisciplinares no ano de 2026. A análise é ancorada em categorias teóricas dos estudos de gênero e trabalho, como segregação vertical e horizontal, teto de vidro, labirinto da liderança e leaky pipeline. Os resultados evidenciam que, embora as mulheres sejam maioria entre ingressantes, concluintes e tituladas, sua presença diminui progressivamente na carreira acadêmica, sendo ainda mais restrita nos cargos de gestão. Destacam-se a maternidade, o produtivismo científico e a sobrecarga do trabalho de cuidado como fatores estruturantes da desigualdade. Conclui-se que a exclusão feminina na gestão acadêmica decorre menos da qualificação e mais de arranjos institucionais e normativos que reproduzem desigualdades de gênero, indicando a necessidade de políticas públicas mais estáveis e estruturais voltadas à equidade.

Palavras-chave: Gênero. Ensino Superior. Gestão Acadêmica. Maternidade. Políticas Públicas.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, Brazilian higher education has undergone an intense process of expansion and democratization, in which the female presence has been significantly consolidated, both in the admission and completion of undergraduate and graduate courses. Currently, women not only constitute the majority among university students, but also hold a significant portion of master's and doctoral degrees in various areas of knowledge. This advance, however, does not translate in a linear way into the occupation of teaching positions and, above all, in the instances of power and decision-making within universities, configuring a persistent paradox between schooling and female professional advancement.

Although the formal barriers to access to higher education have been largely overcome, gender inequality has shifted to more subtle and complex levels of the academic system. In this context, discrimination ceases to operate through explicit exclusion and begins to manifest itself through the horizontal and vertical segregation of careers, the naturalization of the sexual division of labor, and the symbolic construction of gender roles that condition different professional trajectories for men and women. Such mechanisms are widely discussed in the literature under the metaphors of the "glass ceiling", the "leadership labyrinth", and the phenomenon of the *leaky pipeline*, which describes the progressive dropout of women throughout their academic careers.

In the context of academic work, these inequalities are expressed particularly acutely. Although women have high levels of qualification, their presence decreases as one advances in the university hierarchy, concentrating in areas associated with care, teaching, and services, while men predominate in positions of greater symbolic prestige, institutional stability, and political-organizational power. Motherhood, double or triple burden, and the productivist model of scientific evaluation emerge as structuring factors for this rupture of trajectories, revealing an androcentric system that values unrestricted availability and disregards asymmetries in the distribution of reproductive work.

In view of this scenario, this article aims to analyze female representation in Brazilian higher education, following the trajectory of women from entering undergraduate studies to occupying teaching and academic management positions.

Although this study does not address the mapping of freshmen and graduates by sex at the regional level, it is essential to highlight the influence of sociocultural dynamics and territorial inequalities on the distribution of gender in undergraduate and graduate courses. Despite having national coverage, public policies that seek equity in education depend on local traditions and the available infrastructure to have an effective impact.

By articulating recent empirical evidence with critical theoretical framework, the article seeks to demonstrate that gender inequality in Brazilian universities does not result from the lack of female qualification, but from the persistence of organizational arrangements and institutional policies that are insufficient to ensure equitable conditions for permanence and professional progression. Thus, it contributes to the debate on gender equality in science, by highlighting the limits of current policies and indicating challenges for the effective transformation of academic management in the country.

This article is structured in four main sections, in addition to the introduction. Initially, the theoretical framework is presented, which underlies the central concepts adopted in the research. Then, the methodology section presents the approach and procedures used for data collection and analysis. Next, the results are reported and discussed in relation to published literature on the subject. Finally, the concluding remarks—which are by no means exhaustive—synthesize the main findings, identify the limitations of the study, and suggest directions for future research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The labor market in Brazil is characterized by multiple forms of social, economic, and political exclusion, which not only limit access to opportunities, but also perpetuate privileges among dominant groups, hindering social mobility and equality of conditions. The gender inequalities that are currently manifested are the result of the historical construction of patriarchal societies developed over time and continue to have repercussions on daily life, influencing labor relations and the opportunities available to men and women.

Until recently, in order to enter the public career, in several areas, women were subjected to sexist and androcentric admission exams, characterizing a form of invasive and embarrassing discrimination that included the exposure of their gynecological and obstetric conditions that had no influence on the work function (Herrera, 2019).

For Fernandez (2019), discrimination against women in the labor market manifests itself in several ways, standing out mainly in two aspects: wage inequality and occupational segregation by gender. The first can be classified as horizontal, when there is a concentration of women in certain areas or functions; or vertical, when there are barriers to women's advancement to higher positions or higher decision-making positions. In both, there is a direct relationship with the condition of women as those primarily responsible for domestic work and family care.

In turn, from the perspective of economists who propose to study the theory of human capital, the differences in remuneration between men and women are not due to an eventual unequal treatment in organizations, but rather to factors related to the human capital of each professional. Thus, the lower salaries of women would be related to a lower investment in education, less time working in the labor market, in addition to choices made by professionals, especially related to reproduction and family responsibilities (Moschkovich; Almeida, 2015).

Linked to patriarchal mechanisms, discrimination against the female gender in Brazilian education has also had profound economic and social effects over the centuries, limiting the autonomy of women in the country. These effects, resulting from exclusion and marginalization in educational environments, have resulted in significant restrictions on female participation in various social and economic spheres.

In higher education, the presence of women has evolved slowly since the nineteenth century, starting with the "permission" granted by Decree No. 7,247, of April 19, 1879, in its article 1, when it made "higher education throughout the Empire" free. Currently, the Brazilian scenario follows a global trend of increasing female participation in higher education enrollment indicators, reflecting advances that, although recent, are the result of a historical process of struggle for gender equality in education (Ribeiro; Vieira, 2023, p.3).

Gender inequality is based on a dichotomous structure that establishes roles in the public and private spheres, hierarchizing them. Men would be responsible for the public space with attributions related to productive work and family provision, while women would be responsible for the circumscription of the domestic sphere (Fernandez, 2019). Thus, professions related to "care" would be considered feminine, while those with greater visibility and possibility of ascension would be mostly male (Atães; Carneiro, 2025).

It can be affirmed, therefore, that discrimination in the educational field has changed the approach to the extent that it no longer occurs through the restriction of access, but is transferred to the interior of the system itself, in which discrimination begins to occur in the process of choosing careers, causing “ghettoization” by sex, giving rise to professional ghettos, with the definition of careers considered “typically feminine” (Ávila; Portes, 2009).

By establishing that certain types of work are more appropriate for women, a cliché is perpetuated that reinforces the idea that they cannot be seen as substitutes for men. Among the common justifications for this differentiation is the perception that women are physically more fragile, less intelligent, less rational, less reliable, less productive, or even less emotionally stable than men (Fernandez, 2019).

Brazil has shown a growing commitment to promoting gender equality through public policies, through initiatives that aim to reduce existing gaps and guarantee women’s rights, seeking to create a fairer and more equitable environment for all. Despite representing the majority of undergraduate and postgraduate degree earners, women remain underrepresented in faculty and leadership positions, where male dominance persists.

Despite the difficulties, women have been the majority in postgraduate degree programs (Master’s and PhD) since 2004 and are awarded the majority of degrees in six of the nine major graduate areas (Capes), with the exception of a) Exact and Earth Sciences, b) Engineering, and c) Applied Social Sciences. In 2017, 21,591 doctoral degrees were awarded, 11,751 of which were for women, which represented 54% of the total. In 2019, the number of new PhDs increased to 24,280 and female representation rose to 55% (Fapesp, 2020).

In the field of institutional policies, there is an ambivalent movement in the regulation of the academic environment. The creation of the Bertha Lutz Platform, which integrates all Capes funding systems, represents a milestone in the instrument for monitoring equity, allowing the visibility of data on women’s trajectories and the application of fair funding criteria. However, the institutional security necessary for the permanence of these women faces normative instabilities.

A recent example of this scenario is the tension around the guidelines to prevent and address moral harassment, sexual harassment, and gender-based violence in graduate studies. Although Capes Ordinance No. 45/2026 has established fundamental guidelines for confronting this violence, its immediate repeal by Ordinance No. 49/2026 exposes the protection gap and the fragility of administrative guarantees[1]. Such shifting policy frameworks compromise the effectiveness of training actions and accountability instruments, essential to dismantle the culture of silencing that sustains the "labyrinth" traveled by the researchers.

The integration of the Bertha Lutz Platform into funding systems, although technically advanced, lacks a perennial normative support that ensures that reporting and confronting discrimination does not result in harm to scientific production or the functional progression of professors and students. Without permanent guidelines against harassment, the effectiveness of funding platforms as tools for equity becomes limited in the face of subjective and institutional barriers that segregate gender in senior university management.

The analysis of gender inequalities in higher education reveals that motherhood is one of the main factors of vertical segregation and dropout in academia, as demonstrated by data that point to a trajectory of symmetry between men and women until the birth of the first child, a point at which the paths diverge drastically in the configuration of the so-called "motherhood penalty".

A recent publication in the journal Nature brings international evidence indicating that, after motherhood, women are 29% less likely to maintain an employment relationship with universities compared to non-mother peers, while for men this reduction is only 14% (Kwon, 2026). In the Brazilian context, this disparity is even more pronounced, with women with young children being 38% less likely to occupy stable positions, and the withdrawal from academia often results in a definitive break with research and an average reduction of 12% in the income of researchers who move to other sectors

1 Capes Ordinance No. 45/2026, published on January 29, 2026, established comprehensive guidelines for the prevention and confrontation of moral and sexual harassment, gender violence, and other forms of discrimination in Graduate Programs, providing for educational actions, institutional training, creation of internal commissions, and accountability mechanisms. However, just four days later, on February 2, 2026, this regulation was fully revoked by Capes Ordinance No. 49/2026, without the presentation of justifications or substitute measures that would guarantee the continuity of the planned actions. This abrupt revocation raises questions about the motivations of the normative movement, especially because it occurred in a context in which Capes itself already had consolidated institutional structures, such as the Permanent Committee on Strategic and Political Actions for Gender Equity, aimed at proposing strategies for the promotion of equity and the confrontation of violence and inequalities in the context of graduate studies. As of the date of submission of this article, there has been no manifestation from Capes or new regulations on the issue.

(Fernandes, 2026).

The root of this inequality lies in the disproportionate distribution of care work, since, even in contexts of high gender equality, women assume almost five times more domestic responsibilities than men, which is directly reflected in the time of graduation in Brazil, where women take, on average, 4.3 years to complete their doctorate compared to 3.8 years for men (Andrade, 2022).

This asymmetry severely impacts scientific productivity, with a 31% drop in the production of mothers compared to fathers eight years after the first child, while male productivity remains unchanged, clashing with the androcentric model of academia that values the myth of "full-time exclusive dedication regimen". This metric punishes female researchers in the faculty re-evaluation and accreditation processes and in the competition for funding calls, consolidating the *leaky pipeline* phenomenon, evidenced by the 35% drop in the chances of obtaining stability in the first four years postpartum.

The absence of institutional support networks transforms the university into a hostile environment, sustaining the "glass ceiling" that keeps women as a minority in the upper strata of teaching and senior management, despite being the majority among doctorates.

Faced with this diagnosis of exclusion, funding bodies such as CNPq, State Agencies, as well as Capes have proposed mitigation mechanisms: the extension of the deadlines for evaluating curricula for teachers on maternity leave and the revision of the calculation of productivity indicators to avoid penalties for conjunctural falls arising from motherhood.

Capes stands out for the creation of its Permanent Committee on Strategic and Policy Actions for Gender Equity and Intersectionality (CPEGI) in 2024. The Committee was established with the purpose of addressing gender asymmetries and other structural inequalities in the Brazilian academic-scientific environment. Its actions are organized into three central axes: the promotion of affirmative actions for underrepresented groups, support for motherhood and the appreciation of care, and the fight against harassment and gender violence.

Among its main proposals is the reformulation of the 2025–2029 Quadrennial Evaluation, with the recommendation to create the Diversity and Inclusion Indicator (IDI), aimed at monitoring the representation of women, black, Indigenous people, *quilombola* people, people with disabilities, and transgender people in the faculty and students, as well as the encouragement of epistemological

diversity through the valorization of non-Eurocentric bibliographies and knowledge from the Global South, indigenous, and Afrodiasporic.

In the field of motherhood, the Committee proposes the extension of the deadlines for curricular evaluation for teachers and students on maternity leave or adoption, in addition to the temporary exclusion of mothers with children in early childhood or with disabilities from the calculation of productivity indicators, avoiding penalties resulting from cyclical drops in production.

On another front, which still needs to be advanced, the Committee proposes to confront harassment: It recommends the adoption of mandatory awareness statements on harassment practices, continuous training programs, and, in cases of administrative sanction, the revocation of accreditation for the faculty members involved.

The proposals also contemplate valuing the social impact of science, encouraging its popularization among vulnerable audiences and the exchange of knowledge with traditional communities, including through the recognition of distinguished expertise. Finally, CPEGI works to expand the presence of women in Capes decision-making spaces and to promote technological and management adjustments that ensure the systematic collection of diversity data and the effective implementation of equity policies in development instruments.

The propositions are avant-garde, necessary and were built with the contribution of social movements and legitimate representations within the Committee. However, they are not yet institutionally protected.

Added to this at Capes are strategic initiatives such as the recent launch of the Aurora Program[2], which aims to institutionalize support for mother researchers and integrate the care dimension into development systems, as well as the Expansion of Parental Recognition (Ordinance No. 209 of May 8, 2026) [3] that seek to change a punitive evaluation system to a more equitable model that is consistent with the reality of contemporary science.

2 Launched by Capes through Ordinance No. 129, of March 25, 2026.

3 This regulation provides the legal framework for extending graduate scholarship terms in cases of maternity and paternity leave. The normative text ensures the continuity of the payment of the benefit during the period of leave, stipulating specific deadlines according to the nature of the event: extension of 180 days in cases of labor or birth for the mother, 30 days for the father, and 180 days in scenarios of adoption or legal custody, the latter subject to enjoyment by one of the parents. Additionally, the regulation extends protection to scholarship holders in cases of high-risk pregnancy, conditions that require leave due to risk to the fetus or prolonged postpartum hospitalizations, consolidating the instrument of social support for research.

METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive, exploratory, quantitative study carried out with data from the Higher Education Census (INEP) and the Sucupira Platform (Capes), in the period from 2015 to 2024, in addition to information on the coordination of *stricto sensu graduate programs*, from the year 2026 made available by the National Association for Interdisciplinary Research and Graduate Studies in Social and Humanities – ANINTER/SH.[4] The analysis is supported by theoretical categories consolidated in gender and work studies, allowing us to understand how institutional, cultural, and normative structures contribute to the maintenance of inequalities.

The data were collected on the INEP website, on the Sucupira Platform and in the Final Report of Activities of the Working Group on Equity and Reduction of Asymmetries in Graduate Studies of Capes, and after analysis were organized through tables using basic statistics resources, in order to present the distribution by sex, of freshmen, graduates and professors of undergraduate courses in all areas of knowledge, as well as of the coordinators of graduate programs in the Interdisciplinary area.

Considering the lack of consolidated public reports on the profile of coordinators of graduate programs in Brazil, which would enable the identification of the representativeness of women in management positions, it was decided to carry out an analysis limited to Area 45 of Capes (Interdisciplinary), whose data were available and accessible through ANINTER/SH.

The methodological approach, defined from the data available for analysis, does not intend to represent the entire national undergraduate and graduate system, but to offer an empirical exercise on the occupation of vacancies by women. The Interdisciplinary Area is an analytically relevant field due to its institutional heterogeneity and its discourse historically associated with innovation, transversality and diversity.

In this sense, the presentation of the tables sought to show, in a concrete way, how gender inequalities are also manifested in institutional spaces that, in theory, would be more permeable to equity, reinforcing the argument that, although women are the majority in undergraduate

4 The National Association for Interdisciplinary Research and Graduate Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities (ANINTER/SH) is a Civil Society entity that brings together Graduate Programs belonging to Chambers I and II of the Interdisciplinary Area of Capes, created in 2011 to represent such programs with Capes and other institutions of interest to Brazilian graduate studies in the areas of Human and Social Sciences.

courses, female underrepresentation in academic management is a structural phenomenon, and not restricted to traditional or conservative areas.

Because this is an analysis of secondary data that does not allow the identification of subjects, it was not necessary to submit the study to the Research Ethics Committee (REC).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In recent decades, a process of feminization of higher education has been observed. Women today represent the majority among freshmen and graduates of undergraduate courses, a process driven by the development of inclusive public policies and the struggle for equal opportunities and overcoming historical barriers (Carvalho; Auad, 2025).

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of the number of freshmen in undergraduate courses by sex, between 2015 and 2024, with a predominance of women throughout the analyzed period, with an average of 57.3% of the total number of freshmen.

Table 1 | Number of undergraduate students by sex, between 2015 and 2024

YEAR	WOMEN	MEN
2015	1,613,062 (55.1%)	1,309,338 (44.8%)
2016	1,654,449 (55.3%)	1,332,187 (44.6%)
2017	1,782,874 (55.2%)	1,444,032 (44.7%)
2018	1,933,260 (56%)	1,513,068 (43.9%)
2019	2,072,133 (57%)	1,561,511 (42.9%)
2020	2,147,284 (57%)	1,618,385 (42.9%)
2021	2,317,274 (58.7%)	1,627,817 (41.2%)
2022	2,840,645 (59.7%)	1,916,312 (40.2%)
2023	2,967,096 (59.4%)	2,027,096 (40.5%)
2024	2,994,997 (59.7%)	2,015,616 (40.2%)

Source: Prepared by the authors with data from INEP (2026).

By way of comparison, between the 1940s and 1960s, women represented, respectively, 18.96% and 25.15% of university students, indicating that universities were mostly male environments. In the two subsequent demographic censuses, however, the number of women enrolled in universities increased significantly, with a percentage of 42.46% in 1970, and 49.19% in the 1980s (Ribeiro; Vieira, 2023).

The distribution of women in the various areas of higher education historically reinforces the academic culture of gender places, that is, most women occupy spaces in the social sciences and humanities and men in the spaces of exact and technological sciences (Fernandes, 2026). Higher education careers considered typically feminine are associated with care, teaching, and service activities, in general, training with lower social prestige and lower incomes than areas with a male predominance (Ricoldi; Artes, 2016).

Ávila and Portes (2009) point out that, although the choice for certain undergraduate courses is far from being a conscious and deliberate act, since it is the result of a symbolic power structure, it is necessary to consider that women are failing to choose certain courses by their own choice and not because they are being driven to do so by a false consciousness. The choice is an ambivalent conduct when it comes to the definition of careers and family planning.

In 2018, women aged between 25 and 44 years and with complete higher education represented 21.5%, while men with the same level of education were 15.6%. This phenomenon was observed in most regions of the world, with an increase in female representation in managerial positions. In addition, women continued to be the target of expectations related to their role as wives and mothers, and it is up to them to reconcile, in a satisfactory and unharmful way, these different functions with work (Trebien et al., 2021).

For women who enter higher education and face double or triple workdays, the challenges are immense to reconcile professional, academic, and family responsibilities. This overload directly impacts their ability to remain and function fully in the academic environment. The accumulation of functions, which often involves taking care of the house, children, and work, requires a significant effort, making the university path even more challenging (Souza; Dornelas; Barbosa, 2022).

Table 2 | Number of graduates in undergraduate courses by sex, between 2015 and 2024

YEAR	WOMEN	MEN
2015	708,200 (61.4%)	444,258 (38.5%)
2016	719,429 (61.4%)	451,531 (38.5%)
2017	733,634 (61%)	467,511 (38.9%)
2018	765,306 (60.5%)	499,472 (39.4%)
2019	725,508 (59.3%)	497,731 (40.6%)
2020	766,736 (59.9%)	512,019 (40%)
2021	809,196 (60.9%)	518,129 (39%)
2022	782,561 (60.7%)	505,074 (39.2%)
2023	819,892 (59.6%)	554,897 (40.3%)
2024	793,161 (59.4%)	540,827 (40.5%)

Source: Prepared by the authors with data from INEP (2026).

As observed in Table 2, the number of women who complete undergraduate courses is higher than the number of men, a fact that demonstrates significant advances in female participation in university education. This scenario highlights the relevance of public policies and government programs at multiple levels, as well as the initiatives promoted by the educational institutions themselves to favor women's university permanence.

But the university is still perceived by students as a hostile environment, in which the barriers to permanence and completion of the course are aggravated by the lack of support, especially for those who are mothers. Data on motherhood during the academic period are limited. Even so, research indicates that the absence of a family support network, responsible for assisting in the tasks of caring for children, and the lack of institutional support from the university are factors that make it difficult for mothers to remain in the undergraduate course (Dos Santos Costa et al., 2023; Herrera, 2019).

> Students who become mothers throughout their academic career experience several challenges to reconcile these two roles, such as: physical and emotional exhaustion, not having a family support network that helps with the care of the child, and not having a university support network. In the face of these difficulties, their permanence in the undergraduate program is compromised (Dos Santos Costa et al., 2023, p.2).

In academic professional life, the situation is no different. The difficulties for women present themselves in multiple ways at the institutional level: vertical concentration, horizontal concentration, and contractual segregation. The academic career is characterized as a process marked by formal and

informal requirements that end up preserving male codes, cultures, and traditions. Femininity is then constructed from stereotypes that reinforce the maintenance of prestigious positions under male dominance (Atães; Carneiro, 2025).

For Bourdieu (2010), male domination is so rooted in people's unconscious that it is not perceived. Thus, without a critical stance that uncovers violent and dominant forms of injustice, such a situation can never be effectively addressed. Therefore, only political actions, which understand all the effects of domination to change the collective consciousness, can serve to promote greater equity in gender relations.

The unequal forms of insertion and permanence of male and female professors in the academic career is well documented by the literature and reveals the existence of patterns of inequality in at least two senses. In the first, there is a concentration of female professors in some areas of knowledge; and in the second, they are in a smaller proportion in the highest positions of the career, that is, in positions associated with better salaries and greater academic prestige (Moschkovich; Almeida, 2015). The data indicate that gender inequality in Brazilian higher education is no longer located at the entry point, but in the mechanisms of selection, permanence, and ascension.

While women are directed to functions that privilege care for others, often for symbolic reasons, men are taken to the highest hierarchical positions in organizations. This is such a naturalized situation that many people, including women themselves, end up replicating paternalistic and discriminatory ideas against themselves without realizing it (Gontijo; Melo, 2017).

For Atães and Carneiro (2025), the path to progression in the teaching career is characterized by a set of mechanisms that feed what is called by the literature the *leaky pipeline*, a metaphor that describes the progressive and subtle decrease of women throughout the academic and professional trajectory, especially in the areas of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics).

Table 3 shows the number of professors, women and men in higher education between 2015 and 2024. The data show a reduction in the representation of women when compared to the number of women entering and graduating in higher education, with an average of 46.7% of professors in the period analyzed.

Table 3 | Number of professors in undergraduate courses by sex between 2015 and 2024

YEAR	WOMEN	MEN
2015	152,892 (46%)	179,402 (53.9%)
2016	152,580 (45.9%)	179,402 (54%)
2017	152,946 (46.2%)	177,691(53.74%)
2018	154,367 (46.4%)	177,615 (53.5%)
2019	154,334 (46.7%)	176,005 (53.2%)
2020	147,108 (46.7%)	167,276 (53.2%)
2021	144,179 (46.9%)	162,725 (53%)
2022	145,667 (47.2%)	162,737 (52.7%)
2023	147,235 (47.4%)	162,947 (52.5%)
2024	151,147 (47.6%)	165,842 (52.3%)

Source: Prepared by the authors with data from INEP (2026).

A situation like the current one was observed between the 1960s and 1970s. In 1960, women represented 18.43% of the total number of professors, a percentage that rose to 29.25% in 1970. At the time, when comparing the increase in the percentage of women in the faculty with the growth of women as students in the Brazilian censuses, it was noticed that there was no increase in the number of female professors in the same proportion as in students. In 1970, women accounted for 42.46% of students, while they occupied only 29.25% of higher education teaching positions in Brazil (Ribeiro; Vieira, 2023).

Table 4 presents data on the number of women and men coordinators in the Interdisciplinary area of Capes, by region of Brazil, with a noticeable reduction in the number of women when compared to the number of professors. The percentage of women in coordination positions in the analyzed sample is 42.66% in Area 1 and 29% in Area 2. The Southeast is the Brazilian region with the highest percentage of women in coordination positions of Interdisciplinary Graduate Programs in Area 1 (52%) and the North in Area 2 (60%).

Table 4 | Number of coordinators of Interdisciplinary Graduate Programs, by gender/region in 2026

PPG BY REGION	WOMEN COORDINATORS		MALE COORDINATORS	
	Area 1[5]	Area 2[6]	Area 1	Area 2
North	14 (38.8%)	3 (60%)	22 (61.1%)	2 (40%)
Northeast	18 (32.7%)	4 (25%)	37 (62.2%)	12 (75%)
Midwest	8 (44.4%)	2 (33%)	10 (55.5%)	4 (66.6%)
Southeast	39 (52%)	9 (23.6%)	36 (48%)	29 (76.3%)
South	17 (41.4%)	8 (36.3%)	24 (58.5%)	14 (63.6%)
Total	96 (42.6%)	26 (29.8%)	129 (57.3%)	61 (70.1%)

Source: Prepared by the authors with data from Capes (2026).

A study conducted by Moschkovich and Almeida (2015) at the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP) identified that male professors are significantly more likely than their female colleagues to occupy the boards of colleges, institutes, and positions on the university council. Regarding the Office of the President/Chancellor and the Provost Offices/Vice-Chancellors, the chances of men are even greater, which demonstrates the difficulty that women face in occupying positions that accumulate greater university power.

Across all professional fields, male representation consistently increases at higher levels of career advancement. The phenomenon became known as the metaphor of the “glass ceiling” and has as associated factors, among others: the stereotypes that society forms about women, the scarcity of opportunities for women to form management experience, hostile business cultures, women’s obligations at home, their lack of initiative and leadership spirit (Fernandez, 2019).

For Henderso, Ferreira and Dutra (2016), however, “glass ceiling” as a barrier to women’s ascension is an outdated term, given that many women have already reached the top of organizations. The “labyrinth”, on the contrary, would be more appropriate, demonstrating that barriers are not absolute and that higher hierarchical positions are attainable although they require effort.

5 Social Sciences, Cultures, Humanities and Politics and Territory Development.
6 Engineering, Technology and Management.

In public educational institutions, the underrepresentation of women in management positions is greater when compared to private ones. There is a false sense of equity when insertion in the labor market occurs through public competition. Although they are the majority among those with doctorates, women are a minority, especially among the best contracts, on a full-time basis in exclusive dedication, which demand higher levels of dedication and offer the highest salaries (Atães; Carneiro, 2025).

In some institutions, it is verified that women are placed in prominent positions, in a practice known as "inclusion showcase" strategy, where the choice is not made only for their competence, ability and title, but to meet a market demand for diversity and inclusion of minorities (Herrera, 2019).

For Gontijo and Melo (2017), little by little, women have been expanding their insertion in the labor market, being considered professionals of great competence in the most diverse areas. However, it is also true that, in general, women have a slower professional ascension and for this to happen, it is necessary to show better performance than men.

A study conducted by Henderso, Ferreira, and Dutra (2016) identified investment in education and training as a fundamental aspect for the advancement of women in leadership positions. By seeking qualification and professional improvement, women were able to strengthen their skills and increase their competitiveness in the labor market. Another point that proved relevant was the need to adapt to the predominantly male organizational environment, which involved understanding internal dynamics, adjusting behaviors and communication strategies, and establishing relationships of trust with colleagues and superiors. Finally, the presence of a mentor was seen as a determining factor for women's professional development.

Although the studies cited show that women in leadership positions improve career opportunities for other women, Gomes Neto, Grangeiro, and Esnard (2022, p.4-5) point out that the need to adapt to a predominantly male and competitive organizational environment can cause women who ascend in their careers to present "behaviors that hinder, rather than help, other women to develop professionally". In this phenomenon, called "queen bee", they are particularly "more critical of the commitment and skills of their co-workers, collaborate directly in maintaining barriers to the ascension of other women, and are less favorable to gender equality opportunity programs".

Fernandes (2026) points out that women who choose an academic career after the birth of children may have impaired productivity, in general, reducing their scientific production during the first years of their children's lives. In addition, women with young children are 38% less likely to occupy stable positions in all areas of knowledge.

The image of the professional who dedicates herself exclusively to her career, without personal distractions, such as childcare, associated with the myth of meritocracy as the main responsible for academic excellence and the vertical organizational hierarchy are strongly responsible for the production and reproduction of gender inequalities in the university environment. Despite the increase in affirmative policies that aim to increase the representation of women, an organizational structure and culture that favor male superiority still prevail (Gomes Neto, Grangeiro and Esnard, 2022).

To become an academic manager, it is necessary to break paradigms to qualify, produce scientifically and, subsequently, have the necessary prominence, both academic and political-institutional, to be nominated and/or elected by their peers to occupy the position. Many managers point to the lack of time as an important barrier to professional ascension (Herrera, 2019).

Regarding the impacts of regional factors on the equity of female representation in undergraduate and graduate courses, the literature consulted in this study points out that, in contexts of high socioeconomic vulnerability, the early insertion of girls in domestic work and motherhood makes it difficult to continue studies and professional qualification. On the other hand, economically developed regions favor the search for academic degrees, which offer greater stability and financial return.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: AN OPEN DEBATE

The results presented in this study show that the significant female participation in the admission and completion of undergraduate and graduate courses in Brazil is not accompanied by a proportional rise of women in the teaching career and, above all, in academic management positions. Although they constitute the majority among students and graduates in various areas of knowledge, women remain underrepresented in positions associated with greater institutional prestige, stability and decision-making power, which reveals the persistence of a university model that operates through veiled and socially naturalized mechanisms of exclusion.

The empirical analysis confirms the presence of the *leaky pipeline* phenomenon, in which the female trajectory suffers progressive ruptures throughout the academic career. In this process, the impact of motherhood, the overload of care work, and academic productivism stand out as central criteria for evaluation and functional progression. These elements demonstrate that gender inequality is no longer located in access to higher education, but in the organizational structure of universities themselves, which continues to value exclusive dedication and ignore the social asymmetries that cross the lives of female researchers.

In the field of public and institutional policies, an ambivalent scenario is observed. Initiatives promoted by funding agencies that began to consider motherhood in the calculation of productivity indicators, as well as the launch of the Bertha Lutz Platform and the Capes equity programs, represent important advances in the recognition of gender inequalities and in the production of data capable of guiding affirmative action. However, the normative instability, exemplified by the rapid repeal and vacuum of guidelines aimed at confronting harassment and gender-based violence, exposes the fragility of these instruments and limits their effectiveness as permanent mechanisms for institutional transformation.

This study has limitations that should be made explicit: the use of secondary and aggregated data restricts the analysis of individual trajectories and highlights the absence of systematized information that allows for more refined crossings between gender, race, ethnicity, social class, and region, especially with regard to the occupation of academic management positions. Likewise, the scarcity of official statistical indicators on motherhood, care, and scientific productivity prevents

a direct and longitudinal measurement of the effects of the birth of children on the functional progression of women. Furthermore, the article did not delve into the structural differences between public and private institutions of higher education, particularly regarding the invisible barriers that operate in contexts of open competitive selection processes for tenure or by direct hiring.

These limitations point to a relevant agenda for future research, which includes conducting qualitative studies with professors and academic managers, deepening intersectional approaches, and expanding comparative analyses between public and private institutions. It is also necessary to longitudinally evaluate the impacts of equity policies implemented by funding agencies, in order to understand their real effects on permanence, progression, and occupation of spaces of power.

From the point of view of public policies, the findings reinforce the urgency of institutionalizing motherhood support networks in the university environment, including permanence policies for students and faculty mothers, such as daycare assistance and flexibility of academic deadlines. It is also evident the need to adopt affirmative policies aimed at university management, with parity criteria in positions of political appointment, such as pro-rectories and directors, as a strategy to mitigate the so-called “glass ceiling”. Finally, a critical review of the productivist model that guides the academic career is required, with the incorporation of professional sustainability indicators that consider periods of maternity leave and the structural impact of domestic and care work on scientific production.

Without the structural integration of gender equity and the centrality of care in university evaluation and management models, the Brazilian university tends to reproduce an institutional labyrinth in which female excellence is widely recognized in discourse but systematically blocked in practice.

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