

Between knowledge and roles: trajectories of psychology professors working in the city of Itaperuna (RJ) amid multiple responsibilities and gender inequalities

Entre saberes y roles: trayectorias de docentes de psicología que actúan en la ciudad de Itaperuna (RJ) en medio de múltiples responsabilidades y desigualdades de género

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Gender.
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Although female participation in higher education has significantly increased, gender inequalities continue to impact women's access to and permanence in academic careers. These inequalities are manifested through work overload, challenges in balancing professional life and domestic responsibilities, and the devaluation of women's intellectual contributions. In this context, the present study aims to identify the tensions experienced by female Psychology professors in the city of Itaperuna, a city in the countryside of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), considering their multiple responsibilities as teachers, mothers, wives, and researchers. This is a qualitative and descriptive study conducted in three stages: a narrative literature review, data collection, and data analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight professors. For data analysis, Discursive Textual Analysis (DTA) was employed, in accordance with Moraes and Galiazzi (2020). Based on the collected data, three categories were developed that address gender dynamics in the academic field: "Between the visible, the invisible, and the 'being' in the margins", "Existence and resistance of women in a space built by and for men" and "Circles of support". Ultimately, the narratives of these women highlight the urgent need for academic restructuring and the creation of a more humanized university environment, one that embraces their full identities and acknowledges the specificities of the intense routines to which they, and many other women, are subjected daily.

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RESUMEN

Palabras clave:

Género.
Educación
superior.
Docencia.
Mujeres.

Aunque la participación femenina en la educación superior ha aumentado significativamente, las desigualdades de género siguen impactando el acceso y la permanencia de las mujeres en las carreras académicas. Estas desigualdades se manifiestan a través de la sobrecarga de trabajo, los desafíos para equilibrar la vida profesional y las responsabilidades domésticas, y la devaluación de las contribuciones intelectuales de las mujeres. En este contexto, el presente estudio tiene como objetivo identificar las tensiones experimentadas por las profesoras de Psicología en la ciudad de Itaperuna, una ciudad en el interior de Río de Janeiro (Brasil), considerando sus múltiples responsabilidades como maestras, madres, esposas e investigadoras. Se trata de un estudio cualitativo y descriptivo realizado en tres etapas: una revisión narrativa de la literatura, recopilación de datos y análisis de datos. Se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a ocho profesoras. Para el análisis de datos, se empleó el Análisis Textual Discursivo (DTA), de acuerdo con Moraes y Galiazzi (2020). Con base en los datos recopilados, se desarrollaron tres categorías que abordan las dinámicas de género en el ámbito académico: “Entre lo visible, lo invisible y el ‘ser’ en los márgenes”, “Existencia y resistencia de las mujeres en un espacio construido por y para hombres” y “Círculos de apoyo”. En definitiva, las narrativas de estas mujeres resaltan la urgente necesidad de una reestructuración académica y la creación de un entorno universitario más humanizado, que abrace sus identidades plenas y reconozca las especificidades de las intensas rutinas a las que ellas, y muchas otras mujeres, se ven sometidas a diario.

Introduction

The ways in which individuals experience working conditions tend to vary depending on social factors such as gender, race, and class, reflecting the socio-historical construction not only of public and private spaces but also of how these spaces are legitimized for some individuals over others (Antloga, Monteiro, Maia, Porto, & Maciel, 2020; Beauvoir, 1970; Beauvoir, 1967). Thus, the position of women in their professional trajectories is shaped by the sexual division of labor (Kergoat, 2009), which prescribes a distribution of roles and socially constructed spaces for each gender, grounded in established power relations (Bourdieu, 2010).

In seeking to correlate power relations with everyday inequities, Bourdieu (2010) highlights gender as a social construct that imposes performance expectations on both women and men, shaping their characteristics, ideas, and activities. Beauvoir (1967) further adds that these expectations, influenced by prevailing norms within a given time and place, directly affect the idealization of female and male roles in the labor sphere.

Within this framework, an androcentric worldview emerges, reinforcing the belief that men are naturally suited to occupy productive roles associated with intellect, leadership, and positions of public authority. In contrast, women have traditionally been assigned to the private realm, caregiving, and motherhood — in other words, the reproductive

sphere. Consequently, the social division of labor is founded on two fundamental principles: separation and hierarchy (Kergoat, 2009).

The principle of separation refers to the gender-based segregation of tasks. With respect to the principle of hierarchy, it presupposes that certain types of labor are more valued than others, specifically, work done by men is considered more prestigious than work done by women (Kergoat, 2009).

Nevertheless, it is essential to note that analyzing the division of labor cannot rely solely on the lens of gender inequality; it must also be approached through an intersectional perspective. Crenshaw (1991), a pioneer in the use of the term “intersectionality”, emphasizes that women’s experiences are simultaneously shaped by gender, race, and class.

For instance, a poor Black woman seeking paid employment outside the home is often perceived and portrayed as less capable, not merely because she is a woman, but also because she is subjected to racism and the negative stereotypes attached to it, along with class-based discrimination. These overlapping forms of discrimination exacerbate women’s suffering and hinder their access to the job market and various professional fields. From this intersectional perspective, white men remain at the top of the social hierarchy, followed by Black men, white women, and finally Black women, who occupy its lowest tier (Gonzalez & Hasenbalg, 2022; Gonzalez, 2020).

As previously stated, while the home and the responsibility for maintaining its “harmony” were conceived as the ideal life project for white women, Black women were relegated to subordinate roles, ranging from labor under degrading conditions to prostitution. Furthermore, Black women have been historically sexualized and excluded from the ideal of the wife, a role reserved exclusively for white women.

Given this, even as late as the mid-20th century, working outside the home posed a threat to white women’s femininity and their socially assigned privileges tied to economic dependence on their husbands. In this context, teaching was considered the paid occupation most closely aligned with motherhood, making it the “ideal” profession: a woman would leave home to care for other people’s children, as a nurturing mother-figure (Rago, 2022).

According to Almeida, Almeida, and Amorim (2022), this professional insertion was rooted in the belief that teaching was a “natural” role for women, an extension of their supposed innate ability to care. This notion gave rise to what scholars have termed the “feminization of teaching” (Louro, 2022, p. 449).

Hence, the entry and later predominance of women in teaching occurred largely due to male withdrawal from the profession, as men migrated to other careers offering better working conditions and status. Women, in turn, were left to “take what remained”, a dynamic that suggests “You can keep this; we have better options”. As a result, teaching children and adolescents became naturalized as women’s work and, during the early 20th century, was the only socially and culturally accepted path toward female professionalization.

However, when it comes to teaching in higher education, Almeida and Soares (2012, p. 557) emphasize a paradox: “(...) Since ancient times, men were the doctors, the scholars, the learned ones, the free thinkers; and women barely managed to learn to read and write, submerged in domestic and maternal duties”. So how could women, especially poor women, possibly lay claim to a space as complex and prestigious as higher education, a space historically built by and for male intellectuals?

In contemporary times, even within a post-feminist wave that encourages women to reach new academic heights, their trajectories remain shaped by a male-oriented career model. Inequality stems from the structure of the academic career itself, which demands full-time dedication, constant competition, and excessive productivity in research, conditions that

systematically hinder women’s advancement in the field.

In Psychology, a study by Cunha (2021) reveals that the daily lives of female psychology researchers are shaped not only by domestic and academic demands but also by institutionalized sexism within higher education institutions. Furthermore, through an intersectional lens, Black women’s academic trajectories are also disrupted by racism. These intersecting challenges contribute to vulnerability and both physical and emotional suffering, sometimes leading to women abandoning their scientific careers altogether.

Data from the Brazilian Higher Education Census show that women constitute the majority of faculty in private institutions, whereas men continue to dominate in public ones. In terms of racial and ethnic composition, 55.8% of faculty identified as white, 15.9% as mixed-race (*pardo*), 2.5% as Black, 1.0% as Asian, and 0.2% as Indigenous. Notably, 24.6% of respondents did not declare their race (Brasil, 2022).

It follows that investigating gender disparities in higher education teaching is essential, as these inequalities directly impact women’s academic experiences. Additionally, the predominance of white faculty members, alongside the underrepresentation of mixed-race and Black individuals, reveals an academic structure shaped by whiteness. As Ferreira, Teixeira, and Ferreira (2022) argue, governmental statistics underscore the need for intersectional analysis to fully understand the inequalities present in this context.

On a personal note, I approach this topic as someone shaped by a lineage of educators. As the daughter and granddaughter of schoolteachers, I grew up immersed in the educational environment. After finishing school, I would accompany my mother to her classrooms, blending in with other children and sitting in on faculty meetings. I witnessed firsthand the daily struggles and precarious conditions faced by education professionals. I observed mothers — unsung heroines — subjected to exploitative systems that consumed their time and forced them to juggle both visible and invisible labor.

As Ernaux (2023) suggests, writing grounded in lived experience becomes a way of avenging our people. This study, therefore, is constructed from the standpoint of a teacher’s daughter, a member of the working class, an admirer of the teaching profession, and as a tribute to my passion for education, despite its hardships.

In light of this context, based on the question “What are the main tensions faced by female Psychology professors working in private institutions in Itaperuna regarding academic permanence and advancement?”, the objective of this research is to identify the tensions faced by these women, considering their multiple responsibilities as teachers, mothers, wives, and scientists.

Method

This study adopts a cross-sectional, qualitative, and descriptive methodology, composed of a narrative literature review and field research conducted with the target population. According to Gil (2023), qualitative research, grounded in an interpretivist approach, enables the analysis of the research problem from the perspectives of the participants, allowing for a deeper understanding of social interaction processes. Regarding the descriptive nature of the study, Richardson (2017) emphasizes that this type of research aids in the characterization of specific populations or phenomena.

Accordingly, the research unfolded in three stages: a narrative literature review, data collection, and data analysis. The literature review was conducted using the SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online), PePSIC (Electronic Journals in Psychology), BVS (Virtual Health Library), and BDTD (Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations) databases.

The inclusion criteria for selecting materials were: (a) studies addressing the precarization of teaching work; (b) research discussing the career trajectories of female professors in higher education; and (c) studies analyzing gender inequality in graduate programs and academia. The exclusion criteria were: (a) publications not focused on the precarization of teaching work; (b) studies addressing women solely as undergraduate students; and (c) research conducted in international contexts.

In the second stage of the literature review, references cited in the previously selected materials were also examined to identify additional relevant sources not found in the databases. Furthermore, seminal works on gender and intersectionality were included, such as those by Gonzalez and Hasenbalg (2022), Federici (2021), Gonzalez (2020), Bourdieu (2010), Kergoat (2009), Beauvoir (1970), and Beauvoir (1967).

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews. According to Minayo (2009), this method is effective in obtaining relevant information for research design, as it allows

participants to freely express their experiences and perceptions.

In compliance with ethical standards, this study was submitted to and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Centro Universitário Redentor/Afya on September 2, 2024. The Certificate of Ethical Approval is registered under number 69315423.3.0000.5648 on the Plataforma Brasil system.

Following approval, professors were invited to participate in the study via WhatsApp. Due to participants' availability and geographical distance, all interviews were conducted through video calls on the Google Meet platform.

Inclusion criteria for participation were: (a) holding a bachelor's degree in Psychology from an institution recognized by the Ministry of Education (MEC); (b) being employed as a faculty member at a higher education institution also recognized by the MEC and located in Itaperuna (RJ); and (c) identifying as a cisgender woman. Exclusion criteria included: (a) not having a degree in Psychology; (b) not teaching in a Psychology program at a higher education institution in the aforementioned municipality; and (c) not identifying as a cisgender woman.

The Informed Consent Form (ICF) was sent alongside the invitation to ensure participants were aware of the study's objectives, as well as potential risks and benefits. In total, nine professors were contacted, and eight agreed to participate. One professor did not respond to the invitation after three attempts (two via WhatsApp and one via Instagram) and was thus considered to have declined participation.

At the beginning of each scheduled interview, the researcher reiterated the content of the ICF, clarified any doubts, and requested participants to sign the form before proceeding. The interviews were conducted between September 24 and October 15, 2024.

As stated in the ICF, interviews were recorded using the researcher's cell phone, which was essential for later transcription. The average interview duration was one hour. After data collection was completed, the interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Word.

It is important to note that the transcriptions were non-naturalistic, focusing on the content of the interviews (Nascimento & Steinbruch, 2019). Hence, grammatical corrections were made, and filler words — such as “né” a colloquial Brazilian Portuguese expression similar to “right?” or “you know?” often

used at the end of sentences — were omitted when they did not serve any discursive purpose.

For data analysis, Discursive Textual Analysis was adopted, following the recommendations of Moraes and Galiazzi (2020). This method lies between content analysis and discourse analysis, enabling a hermeneutic interpretive process through three main

stages: unitarization, categorization, and development of analytical metatexts. The unitarization and categorization processes were carried out using Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. The overall data analysis process was summarized and systematized in Box 1. The categories should be understood as emergent, arising from a comprehensive and systematic examination of the research corpus (Moraes, 2003).

Box 1

Schematic representation of the process for constructing the final categories

Statements referred to	Initial Category	Final Category
Need to maintain two, three, or four jobs to ensure sufficient income		
Excessive extracurricular workload		
Unpaid additional work resulting from employment ties	Precarious teaching work	
Loss of free time due to teaching-related activities (lesson planning, reading, project advising, among others)		<i>Between the visible, the invisible, and the “being” in the margins</i>
Cognitive load and hardship in intellectual work production		
Guilt about managing time between work, family, and personal needs	Guilt over lack of time for non-work-related activities	
Postponement of personal and professional development projects due to professional demands	Personal desires and professional goals set aside	
Use of leftover time to care for oneself, children, and romantic relationships (or partners, as used in the text below)	Possibility of existing beyond teaching in the gaps of time	
Pressure for excellence and the impossibility of failure	Inability to fail	
The need to be better than men to occupy the same position	Superior performance as a validation strategy	
Questioning of knowledge when it comes from women	Devaluation of women’s knowledge	<i>Existence and resistance of women in a space built by and for men</i>
Difficulties in the teaching career while being a mother	Overload of being a mother and working professionally	
The hardening and distancing of women professors in order to remain in academia	Self-protection strategy in academic environments	
Report of harassment in the master’s program	Harassment	
Relying on the support of family members, partners, and friends	Support network	
Relying on another woman to perform domestic labor	Outsourcing of domestic labor	<i>Circles of Support</i>

In order to humanize the narratives, fictitious names were used instead of numbers to identify the teachers. The choice of these names was not random: each one was inspired by a woman who actively participated as a symbol of resistance throughout history, each in her own way. This choice reflects our commitment to recognizing the specificities and uniqueness of each individual's trajectory, as each one is more than just a number or a mere representative of a category; they are women with their own experiences and stories.

Below is a summary of the rationale behind each selected name: a) Bertha Lutz: a leader in the Brazilian suffragist movement, instrumental in securing women's right to vote; b) Carmen Lúcia: the first Brazilian woman to preside over the Electoral Justice and a Supreme Federal Court (STF) justice, known for her defense of human rights; c) Celina Guimarães: a teacher and the first registered female voter in Brazil, representing the achievement of women's suffrage; d) Maria da Penha: a symbol in the fight against domestic violence, who inspired Brazil's Law No. 11.340 of 2006, widely known as the Maria da Penha Law; e) Nísia Floresta: a pioneer in advocating for women's education and rights in Brazil; f) Olga Benário: a political activist and symbol of resistance against the Nazi dictatorship, remembered for her strength in the face of oppression; g) Patrícia Galvão (Pagu): a militant and writer, emblematic of resistance during the military dictatorship in Brazil; h) Rachel de Queiroz: a writer and journalist, one of the first women to be admitted to the Brazilian Academy of Letters.

Results

The study sample comprised eight female professors, aged between 25 and 50. Of these, seven self-identified as white and one as Asian. Six participants were mothers, and six were in stable relationships. In terms of educational background, four held a master's degree, one was currently enrolled in a master's program, and the remaining three had completed postgraduate specialization courses. It is worth noting that the participants were at different stages in their academic careers, reflecting a diversity of professional experiences, which is consistent with the findings of Silva and Ribeiro (2014).

During the semi-structured interviews, participants were invited to recount their academic and professional trajectories starting from their undergraduate studies, including how they entered the teaching profession, what motivated them to stay in it, and the tensions they encountered throughout their

journeys. It is important to emphasize that this study does not aim to compare the participants' narratives nor to produce generalizations.

Accordingly, based on the interview data and as outlined in Box 1 of the previous section, the following final categories were established: "Between the visible, the invisible, and the 'being' in the margins", "Existence and resistance of women in a space built by and for men" and "Circles of support".

Discussion

Between the visible, the invisible, and the "being" in the margins

The narratives of the female faculty members are marked by movements encompassing visible work, invisible work, and the possibilities of existence in the margins. The intertwining that constitutes this category reveals that the daily life of the professors is not limited to activities performed openly, such as teaching scheduled classes. It also includes the responsibilities and tensions of invisible activities, such as out-of-class, intellectual, and domestic work, which leave space for personal experiences detached from the profession during "marginal" moments.

Regarding visible work, references to precarious labor conditions were recurrent among the interviewees, reflecting unanimously in the necessity of maintaining multiple employment contracts, accumulating extracurricular tasks, and participating in unpaid events and projects. For professors Olga and Celina,

(...) I perceive there is little appreciation. (...) For example, for me, it should count that I am there listening to that student, that the student has my WhatsApp contact and talks to me during the week, that on Saturdays and Sundays I am grading exams, thinking about work, thinking about a new didactic approach to teaching. (...) Maybe if I were well paid for this, I wouldn't have other jobs. Or, for example, I could work fewer hours in other jobs or dedicate less time to other things. (...) If the demand is high, the time is short, and the salary is low, at times it can become very stressful (Recording of Olga_10/02/2024_00:25:56).

There are demands that always come up, that are not related to classroom teaching: creating test questions, participating in projects, I don't know where from. (...) Unpaid work demands. So you have to participate in some event at God-knows-what time, on a Saturday at noon, and you are not paid for it. You get paid by the hour, but you won't get paid for that (Recording of Celina_10/11/2024_00:24:32).

Olga's statement denounces the devaluation of the teaching profession, which is not limited to Basic Education but extends to Higher Education. Her denunciation aligns with the contributions of Gemelli and Closs (2022), who state that precariousness has intensified due to the expansion of vacancies in higher education and the growing demand for efficiency and productivity aligned with market interests. Hourly-paid faculty, who often accumulate contracts in multiple institutions — and in Psychology, including freelance work — frequently receive insufficient remuneration for subsistence, forcing them to increase their working hours.

Concerning the unpaid work mentioned by Celina, it should be considered that, although not obligatory, it manifests passively. That is, if one opts out or is absent, the person tends to be marginalized, which may cause disadvantages later on.

Carmen, a woman with a consolidated career in the field, mother, and wife, complements that the class sizes are around one hundred students, an excessive number for a single classroom:

Today, classes are very large. So, imagine, you have to... And also, in my work routine, you have to stop, you have to read one hundred assignments, you have to give that attention (Recording of Carmen_09/24/2024_00:16:24).

In this context, although the professors strive to maintain the quality of their work, some aspects end up compromised, as additional effort is required, resembling a production line in grading assignments and exams. This is, at the very least, inhumane. Moreover, the professors find themselves in a paradoxical situation: they need to increase their workload to improve remuneration but must also manage huge classes, signaling the precariousness of faculty work in private higher education institutions.

Regarding invisible work, Rosa and Vieira (2023) point out that, under the capitalist mode of production, the appropriation of labor goes beyond physical effort, extending also to intellectual labor, where the demand for polyvalence and efficiency is equally intense. Silva and Ribeiro (2014) further add that in the academic world, scientific production has become the main currency of value, in other words, the more you have, the more you are worth. The following excerpt illustrates how this pressure manifests for faculty working in private institutions:

I feel very pressured. (...) Thankfully, I have these productions because of my students, who are wonderful. (...) I can keep my Lattes curriculum updated thanks to the students' production and the advisement I provide. So that alleviates some of my burden, but they want more now. So, there's a lot of demand. And sometimes it's not even paid demand. (...) I am already teaching, organizing myself, improving. (...) It's an internal demand from the environment (Recording of Patrícia_09/27/2024_00:35:57).

Professor Patrícia's contributions reaffirm how maintaining an updated Lattes curriculum is relevant in the academic scenario. However, this requirement is just one among many others: professors must prepare lessons, create exams, grade activities, advise projects, and also produce scientific work to enlarge their Lattes. Intellectual work, which is, to some extent, creative work, becomes just another item to be ticked off.

Following advocacy, notably by the Parent In Science movement (Staniscuaski et al., 2021) — dedicated to supporting parents in science — since April 15, 2021, the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) allows maternity leave to be included in the Lattes curriculum, recognizing the effects of parenthood on scientific production (Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico, 2021).

According to Portuguese (2023), intellectual work cannot be compared to typical company work: a researcher does not simply sit in a chair to write an article at 8 a.m., take a one-hour lunch break, then return and finish the article (or book chapter, monograph, or similar) at 6 p.m. Intellectual production requires productive leisure and inspiration for writing, which may occur unexpectedly, without a timer or scheduled hours. It is work that takes time, involving constant writing and rewriting, rethinking methods, and reconsidering what is being done. Due to its particularities, it is often done outside scheduled class hours, and when performed under pressure to increase publications to feed indicators, it may result in a burden associated with intellectual work (Portuguese, 2023).

Furthermore, invisible work also encompasses domestic work. Patrícia offers an interesting analogy relating intellectual and domestic work:

Well, I think the hardest part is having a double shift. This is not just for us researchers who want to do a doctorate, for example, but having a double shift at any time is complicated because no one understands research as... just as the housewife is not valued, the researcher isn't either. These are

two completely different ends, two totally different types of work, but they share this invisibility of not being valued. So, everything that is not... I don't know how to explain, but it seems like it's not work. When you do your schedule, you are home studying, it seems like studying is nothing, just as housework is like nothing too (Patrícia_09/27/2024_01:04:40).

Patrícia's discourse demonstrates how, despite being distinct, both types of work share invisibility and lack of recognition. Federici (2021) contributes to this reflection by stating that when women are not paid hourly, the time dedicated to work becomes irrelevant in society's eyes. Consequently, the mismatch between effort and appreciation portrays the tensions women face in their academic and professional trajectories, showing that the burden of the double shift goes beyond the physical aspect, also affecting the recognition of their contributions.

Antloga et al. (2020) point out that the double work shift can negatively impact women's physical and mental health, besides reducing time available for self-care, proper nutrition, sleep, and leisure activities. Therefore, this additional load not only reinforces gender inequality but also limits opportunities for growth and permanence in academic careers.

From the interviewees' reports, it was observed that they take advantage of the "margins"—intervals between work contracts and short moments when they are not involved in extracurricular activities—to carry out personal activities such as leisure and spending time with children and partners. In the excerpt below, Carmen explains how this works in her life today, expressing that between one job and another, she picks up her child from school and that even in socially invisible work, the demands tend to fall more heavily on women:

(...) Today, I can be closer, take [my child] to school, pick up, have lunch together, anyway..., but now I have no one else. It's just me and my husband. So, I don't count on anyone's help besides him. (...) You can't unbalance, so to speak, the attention you have to give to family, to the children, to their education. That's also a responsibility that I think is not as demanded of men. It's much more demanded. (...) It's because the mother didn't cut the child's nails, the mother didn't see the clothes he was going to wear (Recording of Carmen_09/24/2024_00:12:59).

Similarly, Maria points out the use of time in the margins when talking about time with her son, as exemplified in the excerpt below:

(...) We are doing the best we can today. Like, today, for example, there are no classes, I will

be with him. Soon we'll go to a family party that we planned. (...) It's weekend, also during the week after ten p.m. It's this rush, let's put it that way, but at the same time with a feeling that it's flowing (Recording of Maria_10/15/2024_00:47:14).

Reflecting on motherhood and its impacts on women's careers, especially those of faculty members, involves considering that it is a condition that multiplies the demands related to reproductive labor and the different forms of mothering, present in the singularities of each mother-professor, elucidating unequal relations (Oliveira, 2023). For example, a single mother, as in Maria's case, has different experiences with overload.

Despite attempts to reconcile all responsibilities, the presence of guilt is noticeable: guilt for the need to juggle multiple jobs to guarantee income and quality of life and, at the same time, the absence of time to enjoy personal activities, time with children and partners (when applicable). In the interview with Nísia, she reports:

(...) We manage somehow, but it costs a lot: it costs your marriage, your hours, your weekends, your time with your daughter, it costs courses you can't take because you're involved with other situations. And it's a tough game because, at the same time I need to specialize to keep myself in this market, in this niche, I don't have time for that. The scale is always tipping more negatively, at least in my view (Nísia_09/26/2024_00:12:56).

According to Calmon et al. (2021), women tend to consider the reconciliation between professional and personal life as a determining factor for continuing their scientific trajectories. Moreover, motherhood and the challenges of reconciling it with the professional path are frequently cited as reasons that can lead to dropout or reconsideration of the academic career. Exemplifying the reasons why she has not yet entered a doctoral program, the faculty member Celina states:

For example, the doctoral issue is not here. How am I going to go to Rio, two or three times a week, be away? I have colleagues who manage it, I can't because, at the same time I want to be a mother, but I want to be a mother who I think can give a deserved childhood (...) which is having the mother nearby. So, we stay in contact. But we who study development, study theories, we are stuck, I feel in a very complicated position to provide support and at the same time fulfill myself as a woman, as a person (Recording of Celina_10/11/2024_00:05:53).

As a psychology professor, Celina understands child development issues but, as a woman and mother, she finds herself in a “catch-22” This further confirms the difficult balance between professional and personal life. Additionally, the excerpt allows us to understand that, as a mother, she worries about her daughter, willing to put her professional desires second to dedicate herself to her child.

In this scenario, although women currently occupy a greater space in the public sphere, they still dedicate more attention to family demands than men (Souza & Carvalho, 2023), a situation that becomes clear in another excerpt from Celina’s interview:

After I became a mother, everything changed. And even though I denied it, oh, it’s a shared role, everyone should raise children together... I have a great partner, it will be divided equally, no. For me, it hasn’t been, (...) there are demands that only we, well, only we can meet, and socially too. I don’t know if it’s my issue, rushing things and taking on tasks, but this being a woman and a mother, I realized, yes, I have been harmed” (Recording of Celina_10/11/2024_00:05:02).

It is clear that, even having a strong support network and a husband who actively helps with childcare, there is an unequal burden, and starting from a meritocratic viewpoint is unfeasible since the balance clearly tips toward women. Gender inequalities in academia manifest when a faculty member, mother, and researcher has less time to “expand” her Lattes due to childcare responsibilities. According to analyses by Souza and Carvalho (2023), these concerns are rarely part of men’s daily lives, who exhibit more immediate and individualistic attitudes, principles that sustain the academic environment and will be addressed in the next section.

Beauvoir (1967) adds that the burdens of marriage and motherhood remain heavier for women than for men, making it clearly more difficult for a woman to reconcile the role of worker and family life. Even today, attempts at reconciliation may result in the hardship of female existence.

The tensions between reconciling visible work, invisible work, and being in the margins are even more intensified by Itaperuna being an inland municipality. Professors who wish to specialize in Psychology must seek master’s and doctoral programs in major urban centers. The nearest cities offering such specialization opportunities in the academic field are Santo Antônio de Pádua, home to the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF), and Campos dos Goytacazes, which houses UFF Campos and the Universidade Estadual do Norte Fluminense Darcy Ribeiro (UENF).

However, these institutions offer only interdisciplinary programs, such as Education, Social Policies, and Cognition and Language, none of which are specific to Psychology (Brazil, 2024). The need to travel makes this situation even more burdensome, as professors would have to allocate time not only for commuting and attending classes but also for dedicating themselves to the specialization, often sacrificing the time margins they have for themselves and their families.

Based on the narratives presented in this section, it is observed that the sexual division of labor, widely present in various social spheres, also perpetuates itself in the scientific field, reflecting gender inequalities in Higher Education. The interviewed professors, all of whom hold multiple employment ties, experience tensions in balancing their various responsibilities, which affects both their scientific output and professional advancement, such as their availability to pursue *stricto sensu* graduate studies. In the case of faculty members who are also mothers, it is undeniable that motherhood, combined with the lack of adequate public policies and the traditional model of labor division, interferes significantly with their academic trajectories (Reis & Antunes, 2023). In the narratives of Nísia and Celina, it becomes evident that motherhood hinders academic progression, requiring a restructuring of plans and prompting them to reconsider their choices.

Existence and resistance of women in a space built by men for men

As discussed in the introduction of this study, Brazil’s socio-historical construction has been marked by the segregation of spaces defined through markers of gender, race, and class (Beauvoir, 1970; Davis, 2016; Louro, 2022). In this context, women’s participation in academia is permeated by various tensions. The participants’ accounts indicate that their conditions of existence in this space are closely linked to the impossibility of failure, the relentless pursuit of superior performance as a means of validation, and the constant confrontation with the devaluation of female knowledge. Moreover, these accounts emphasize the burden imposed by motherhood and paid work, the necessity of emotional self-protection within academia, and experiences of harassment, which point to the institutionalization of sexism.

At first glance, when asked about gender prejudice in the field of psychology teaching, some participants stated that they did not perceive any prejudice against them as women. The excerpts below illustrate their narratives:

The psychology environment does not provoke that. At least, that's what I perceive. Whether as students or professionals, practicing some activity... So, I believe that because our profession and our science are so female-dominated, prejudice is very... well, I think it is very, very punctual (Recording of Rachel_09/25/2024_00:06:17).

No, I wasn't disadvantaged, not really. After all, I didn't compete with many men. There weren't many men applying. Maybe that's why I didn't feel at a disadvantage. (...) I didn't have trouble getting a job because I am a woman. Nor did I have difficulty entering a master's program for being a woman (Recording of Patrícia_09/27/2024_00:05:51).

Cunha (2021) highlights that although psychology is predominantly female, it is essential to understand the specificities of women working in this field. The predominance of women in psychology reflects not only a preference but also the historical insertion of women into public care and assistance professions — such as nursing, early childhood education, and naturally, psychology (Louro, 2022).

Indeed, because it is a field characterized by a female majority, a discourse of care, and attention to individual singularities, overt discriminatory speech and behavior may be less present than in STEM fields, which are more male-dominated, where gender prejudice and discrimination are often more visible (Cunha, 2021).

Nevertheless, tensions related to gender inequality manifest in subtler ways, such as the impossibility of failure, the constant expectation of excellence, and devaluation of female knowledge.

And we're heavily pressured — you're pressured from every angle; you're a mother, you have to be the best mother, you're a professional, you have to do much more to be recognized, that's very important. It's a reality in which you can't slip (Recording of Carmen_09/24/2024_00:34:50).

Carmen's incisive remark demonstrates how women are expected to be infallible, performing almost as embodiments of Wonder Woman. Meanwhile, men are often seen as perpetual learners, "boys", and every time they make a mistake, no matter how serious, they are granted allowances, the opportunity to try again, to start over. After all, they are still learning, aren't they?

Likewise, women must consistently perform at peak levels. It's almost a "prove you deserve to be here" scenario, "show that you know what you're doing; one success is not enough, it has to be every single day".

This pressure is directly linked to the gender-stratified nature of social spaces and the legitimacy of women occupying them (Kergoat, 2009), which necessitates a constant struggle for recognition and validation of female-specific contributions.

Beyond overt expressions, inequality also appears in more implicit ways. Olga exemplifies this in everyday teaching:

When a professor is a man and enters the classroom, a certain authority is already assumed. The notion that he masters this knowledge is taken for granted. But when it's us, women, there's a sense of: well, prove what you know. Tell me what you're doing here. Let's see if you really know what you're talking about (Recording of Olga_10/02/2024_00:11:17).

According to Silva (2023, p. 183), modern science constructs a scenario in which "(...) the male body stood for intellectuality, while the female body stood for motherhood." Thus, society perceives knowledge as legitimate when it comes from a man, whereas a woman, associated with domestic care (Bourdieu, 2010), must constantly prove herself.

Furthermore, maternal overload and engagement in multiple roles (work, education, and caregiving) recur. Literature indicates that, to avoid disrupting their academic careers, some women opt not to have children. For those who do, tensions include extended career timelines and exhaustion due to role accumulation; female faculty with children take longer to advance (Protetti & Souza, 2023; Silva & Ribeiro, 2014). In a male-centric career model, the choice often becomes mother or scientist (Silva & Ribeiro, 2014), as Bertha illustrates:

It involves research; we work like everyone else works — it's very hard to reconcile with a personal life, with family, with motherhood. Very hard, very hard. I... that's why I joked: I can't do that badly with a boyfriend; imagine a woman with children, a family, marriage, motherhood... The free time you have is used for studying, for research; rarely for leisure. So it's a life where you have to really love doing this. It's a life where you will give up a lot, and you have to choose this, choose to be this (Recording of Bertha_09/25/2024_00:27:36).

Silva and Ribeiro (2014) argue that women who remain in academia often harden themselves to persevere. Schiebinger (2001, p. 152) adds that "(...) abandoning the trappings of 'femininity' is generally necessary for a woman to be taken seriously as a scientist, and often important to avoid unwanted attention to her sexuality". Here, the trappings of femininity can be any emotional trait that distances

one from the emotional and necessitates emotional fortitude as self-protection. Recalling a former female professor, Nísia says:

I saw women overloaded and whose personal lives had collapsed. All my professors... all divorced. [...] She was dust, someone — she was a reference in her family, but she carried much pain. That's when it hit me: to be where she was, she had to give up so much personally. And I thought: how cruel. Why can't we have both? And then, when I looked at her, I saw her as an inspiration, but I thought: I can't lose the other side? And today I live the same. I need to renounce the other side, balance a thousand plates to handle one that's still insufficient... I want to be a university professor who knows what she's doing and owns herself. Who lives, who dreams, who plans, who accomplishes. But I didn't want to lose the other part. The part of dreaming, affection, romance... I often felt them hardened. They were very hardened women and I didn't want to lose that (Recording of Nísia_09/26/2024_00:51:43).

As she expresses, the image of a professionally successful woman is often associated with the renunciation of the “other side” of life — dreams, emotions, leisure, and romance. Nísia's observation echoes Celina's earlier dilemma: a “catch-22” for women.

Pressured to be good professionals, good wives, and good mothers — to ensure “nothing is lacking”, while shouldering all expectations — women frequently find success at the expense of emotional wellbeing and balance in other life areas, ultimately bearing the marks of frustration in confronting the impossibility of a desired horizon.

This reflection prompts the question: why can't one have both sides? Until when, in order to be respected, will women have to conform to a persona shaped by masculinities that valorize strength, rationality, and objectivity as the only legitimate traits? The imposition of an identity that suppresses women's complexity, emotional vulnerability, sensitivity, and pursuit of balance between professional and personal spheres calls into question the structural foundations that perpetuate entrenched gender stereotypes.

Similarly, reports of academic harassment illustrate why some women avoid positioning themselves, in certain contexts, within the limits of the “feminine” stereotype. Though this experience occurred outside Psychology, the victim recounts it during her attempt to enter a master's program in Engineering, a predominantly male field. Bertha's account highlights women's vulnerability to objectification and devaluation in male-dominated environments like STEM. In her words:

I remember I cried. All day I was very upset by it, devastated. I felt I had wasted six months, believing I was showing my best, and in reality I was just another one of the countless girls who went through something like this. Some gave in, others didn't. Knowing I was tested in that way, it's...heartbreaking (Recording of Bertha_09/25/2024_00:17:56).

Silva, Araújo, and Andrade (2024) emphasize that harassment is intrinsically tied to power relations and is frequently perpetrated by men against women. This behavior includes insinuations, threats, intimidation, unwanted physical contact, blackmail, and sexual requests, none of which occur with the woman's consent. The consequences are profound, affecting psychological well-being (anxiety, insecurity, depression, anguish) and somatic health (insomnia, eating disorders, tremors), as well as disrupting professional and personal functioning, exemplified in Bertha's trajectory.

Support circles

By naming this category “Support Circles” we aim to highlight that despite the previously mentioned difficulties and tensions, the academic journey becomes possible through networks of support and the outsourcing of domestic work. It is important to emphasize that these networks comprise friends, partners, family members, and colleagues.

Unanimously, the participants underscored at various points in their interviews how crucial a solid support network has been for them. Below are key excerpts that exemplify this:

In addition, during meal times, she's [the housekeeper] preparing everything. She prepares food for everyone, cleans the house, and does the laundry. She does, let's say, most — or perhaps all — of the household chores that I would never be able to handle (Recording of Maria_10/15/2024_00:13:28).

At the same time, I didn't want to abandon my career, my profession, and I received incredible support from my husband regarding that... Because my first thought when my daughter was born was that I would quit teaching, because it's something that holds you captive and demands many hours. The classroom is wonderful and time flies, but what you need to do before and after class takes a lot from you. And my first thought was: I'm going to quit teaching. He said, “No, you're not going to quit teaching. It's your dream, and you just achieved it”. (Recording of Nísia_09/26/2024_00:12:18).

Considering the numerous obstacles these women face in their academic trajectories, emotional

and affective relationships emerge as pivotal for full development, functioning as support networks and motivators in sustaining such demanding careers (Cunha, 2021). Souza and Carvalho (2023) further assert that building routines aligned with efforts to manage overloads typically relies on supportive networks that enable the reconciliation of academic, domestic, and family demands.

When such a network is solid and understanding, it allows women to balance academic pressures with domestic and familial responsibilities without emotional and physical exhaustion becoming insurmountable. Conversely, when that network is lacking or absent, many women are forced to choose between professional aspirations and personal responsibilities — a situation particularly pronounced among Black women and those with low income (Silva, 2023). The participants' narratives make it clear that without adequate support, their academic journeys would be even more arduous.

Where are black women?

A central question during data collection was: where are Black women? Of the eight participants interviewed, seven self-identified as White and one as Asian. This fact alone invites reflection on the structural forces that exclude Black women from academia, particularly from teaching roles in private higher education.

The absence or invisibility of Black women in this space is not coincidental but rather the reflection of a long-standing historical and social process. Gonzalez and Hasenbalg (2022) assert that Black people have historically been relegated to subordinate positions, with restricted access to roles of prestige and higher remuneration. Davis (2016, p. 25) further notes that "(...) the enormous space that labor occupies today in Black women's lives reproduces a pattern established during the earliest years of slavery." Thus, the sexual and racial division of labor materializes when Black women occupy the "remnants" of the labor Market, precarious roles with low pay and little recognition.

hooks (1995), addressing intellectual labor, argues that scientific racism has historically contributed to the exclusion of Black women from intellectual labor. In this context, scientific intellectuality was construed as an almost exclusively male and White domain, associating knowledge with the White male and deliberately excluding Black women from knowledge production. As a result, higher education teaching, a field that confers intellectual

prestige, remains structurally illegitimate for Black people, especially black women.

Crisóstomo and Reigota (2010) add that for these women, the struggle for belonging in academia involves continuously proving their professional competence while also confronting racial prejudice and discrimination, requiring double the effort to earn respect and professional recognition.

Therefore, one might ask: Where are black women teaching Psychology in private higher education in Itaperuna? The answer is clear: they are not present. They were absent from this study's corpus because their paths are systematically blocked before these spaces are even reached.

Final considerations

We conclude that reconsidering the academic space, historically shaped by a male-centric and exclusionary model, reveals that women must not only navigate multiple roles and ties but frequently renounce their individuality, which is expressed only in the margins of time. The paths traversed by these women are far from linear; they are fraught with tensions between imposed standards of excellence and lack of time due to labor precarization, between career aspirations and the responsibilities of being both a mother and a worker.

As Souza and Carvalho (2023) emphasize, the presence of these women in academia is far more than a symbolic victory, it is an act of resistance. It stands against deeply entrenched structures that privilege models of productivity and success disconnected from the diverse and complex realities of women's lives. Each fragment of narrative presented here bears witness to the daily struggle, the burdens they carry, and their attempts to "do it all" within a system that neglects human limitations and the plurality of lived experiences.

In this sense, the construction of an equitable academic space that values and understands women's experiences must be more than an academic aspiration: it is an ethical and political imperative. Notably, institutional support or incentive policies were never mentioned. The institutions demand top-tier professionals with high academic qualifications, but insist that these women manage everything on their own.

We also highlight that the lack of nearby *stricto sensu* postgraduate programs in Psychology in the municipality of Itaperuna poses a significant barrier. After all, how can women already employed locally,

with young children, uproot themselves for specialization in urban centers — without any assurance of academic success or economic sustainability upon completing the program? Investing in such a career is akin to nurturing a plan from scratch in a system that devalues both academic and domestic labor in Brazil.

Finally, we denounce the exclusion of Black women from academia and call for affirmative actions and institutional policies aimed at promoting equity. Their voices were absent from this study because Black women are simply not represented in Psychology faculties within private higher education institutions in Itaperuna. The question remains: for whom is an academic career even a legitimate space?

Ultimately, these women's narratives invite us to rethink the meaning of academic work and professional life, urging us to foster a logic in which reconciling personal and professional spheres is not a burden, but rather an acknowledgment of the essential and humane dimensions in all our trajectories.

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