

The maintenance of gender discrimination in the workplace as an institution: Brazilian's Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The paper aimed to analyze the habits and behaviors that demonstrate and promote discrimination against women in the work environment. As a theoretical lens, we used the Veblenian perspective, which understands that institutions are the way of thinking of men and that individuals have customs, habits, and behaviors that legitimize new institutions or corroborate existing ones. A descriptive-exploratory, qualitative case study analyzed the institution of discrimination against women in the work environment. It was possible to identify that there is a clear definition of the female and male work-space, configuring the sexual division of labor.

Keywords: Gender discrimination; Original institutionalism; Labor market; Sexual differentiation.

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El mantenimiento de la discriminación de género en el lugar de trabajo como institución: Estudio de caso brasileño

RESUMEN

Este trabajo tuvo como objetivo analizar los hábitos y comportamientos que demuestran y promueven la discriminación contra la mujer en el ámbito laboral. Como lente teórico se utilizó la perspectiva webleniana, que entiende que las instituciones son la forma de pensar de los hombres y que los individuos tienen costumbres, hábitos y comportamientos que legitiman nuevas instituciones o corroboran las existentes. Un estudio de caso descriptivo-exploratorio, cualitativo, analizó la institución de la discriminación contra la mujer en el ámbito laboral. Se pudo identificar que existe una clara definición del espacio de trabajo femenino y masculino, configurando la división sexual del trabajo.

Palabras clave: Discriminación de género; Institucionalismo original; Mercado de trabajo; Diferenciación sexual.

INTRODUCTION

The economic scenario presented a process of economic recession and a decrease in job vacancies, especially in last years, whit the pandemic. This affected men and women all around the world. In Brazil, this situation originates from many instabilities and errors in economic policies in the country, which had and increase since 2014 (Barbosa Filho, 2017). In 2021, with the steady increase in unemployment, women's space in the labor market fell from 57% in the early 2000s to 51.5%, returning to the 1970s level, when only a debate was envisioned about increasing women's space in the labor market (Statista, 2021).

Much has been made to conquer women's space in the public environment. However, research shows that equality obtained by the law does not guarantee equality in practice (Farah, 2004), "the implementation of special policies for women still faces cultural and political resistance" (Costa, 2005, p. 14, authors' highlight). Such resistances are secret and not evident but maintained and observed in the behavior of men and women (Colley, Williamson & Foley, 2020).

It is perceived that the rights conquered, public policies, and the laws may argue in favor of women but do not guarantee societal legitimation. Even after decades of some of these achievements, Brazil still carries cultural traits that refer to patriarchy, remembering that patriarchy occurred throughout history and is not natural to the human being and can be modified (Facio & Fries, 2005). According to Teles (2017), the practice of violence against women is present in all territories of the world, in any social class and ethnic-racial group, because it is tolerated by most of society, ensured by impunity by some laws, and understood as a phenomenon proper to human nature.

According to the institutional approach of Thorstein Veblen (1898), considered the theoretical founder of Institutional Economics with a focus on uses and customs, evidencing in his analyses of the individual, where it is possible to find a proposal for analysis for the lack of awareness about gender discrimination at work. Veblen (1898) understands that institutions are based on how men think, that individuals are not given and have customs, habits, and behaviors instituted and perpetuated by social groups to behave and face daily situations.

It is then assumed that the customs and habits of behavior adopted by individuals in the Brazilian labor market and social relations carry imperceptible attitudes that promote gender discrimination in work. Those attitudes and thoughts are not given as purposeful to the individual but by various cultural and social factors in which individuals perpetuate ways of acting that are not challenged by others, thus becoming an institutionalized behavior. As Veblen (1989a) states, whether it is suitable for an individual can become right for the entire group in which that one lives.

A gap was identified in the work of the area, with the absence of studies on how gender inequalities persist in the Brazilian work environment, despite the numerous policies and strategic initiatives aimed at promoting greater equality in the country. There is still resistance in the understanding of individuals about the importance of this agenda, issues that are already the focus of research in other countries but not in the Brazilian context (Colley, Williamson & Foley, 2020).

The argument between Thorstein Veblen's institutionalist theory and gender discrimination guides the research problem that orients this work: How do the habits and behaviors that institutionalize the discrimination against women in the workplace manifest from the perspective of Original Institutionalism?

In recent decades, considering studies from the 1990s, Thorstein Veblen's Original Institutionalism has been rescued by researchers to analyze the conditioning factors of human behavior in the economic and social sphere. His works have been a reference for reconstructing an institutional-based heterodox economic thought, as found in publications in the *Journal of Economic Issues and Evolutionary Economics*.

This research brings a new look at how the promotion and perpetuation of discrimination against women occur in the workplace. Through the Veblenian theoretical lens, the development cycle of institutions of gender discrimination was created, which occurs through the behaviors of individuals who act in a discriminatory manner because of the institutions of thought that are still very

much linked to structural sexism. Also, there are no other studies that look at the individual to understand his actions by performing a projection of such behaviors for the intuition of gender discrimination in Brazil. This article innovates with the theorization of Thorstein Veblen's postulates to discuss gender in the workplace, focusing on the behavior of individuals as a driver of the creation and maintenance of thought institutions. Thus, it is expected to contribute to studies on gender discrimination. The cycle presented here can serve as a basis for new studies and be applied in different work environments.

1. INSTITUTIONAL ECONOMY

The Institutional Economy originated at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, had as its primary founding author Thorstein Veblen (1898), followed by Commons (1931). This approach was concerned with performing a less mechanistic and accurate economic analysis, so institutionalists were concerned with social costs and benefits (Veblen, 1898).

For Veblen (1914), institutions are habits of thoughts common to the generality of men. To Conceição (2002, p. 82), an institution is the result of a present situation that shapes the future through a selective and coercive process, guided by the way men see things, which alters or reinforces their points of view. Habits, customs form institutions, and modes of thought materialized in practices legitimized by the community. They can maintain an institution or overcome it by creating new institutions. According to Veblen (1914), habits are inclinations acquired by the human being over time, which are shaped by the environment and transmitted by culture. Thus, it is perceived that those institutions are socially constructed, are forms of thoughts shared by a large group, and that over time they become instituted by society, creating an institution of thoughts.

The progressive development that occurs in human institutions and the characteristics of men can occur through the natural selection of habits of thought (Hodgson, 2008). With each change of environment, individuals adapt to the new reality, whether positive or negative, and will have new habits from what the large group understands as appropriate. There will always be changes, and this process will take place differently as individuals perceive and react to such changes.

For Veblen (1987), man is not an immutable being but formed by habits that can shape behaviors. Behaviors may be biased to the point of configuring a pattern of collective action, which is repeated and becomes an institution over time. Thus, institutions are formed by habits, customs, and ways of thinking reflected in practices accepted and incorporated by a group or society. In Veblen's view (1987, p.165), mental habits are formed based on other knowledge and "mental habits

formed without any guidance by the discipline of daily life.” By the discipline of daily life, it can be understood that there are inborn instincts in human beings, being carried by them, assisting them in selecting their behaviors (Veblen, 1914).

Therefore, it is understood that institutions depend on the thoughts and activities of individuals (Almeida, 2007b, p. 25) in such a way that a particular way of thinking is taken by society, which decides to continue repeating it until the formation of a new institution or the change of an existing one.

Thus, Veblen (1914) describes how the new institutions occur and can be called the “institutionalization process.” The actions of individuals, as they behave and relate, are directly linked to the process of institutionalization. When behaviors and ways of acting are transformed, indicating a break with the conditions previously accepted by the whole, new institutions of thought are formed. This process is consolidated when most individuals consider these new behaviors legitimate to be followed (Veblen, 1914) by legitimizing a social group.

In the process of the institution, first, there are instincts, which determine the conduct of human beings (Veblen, 1914). Instinct is understood as nature and the way adopted innately by the individual who dictates how he will react to situations to achieve each specific goal. Since instincts are the primary form of the institution process, the sequence occurs through the formation of habits. Habits are natural tendencies of the human being acquired over time, influenced by the environment and culture. Behaviors are acquired through habits that are repeated in certain situations. After the behaviors turn into more frequent actions, society can take them as data and thus institutionalize them.

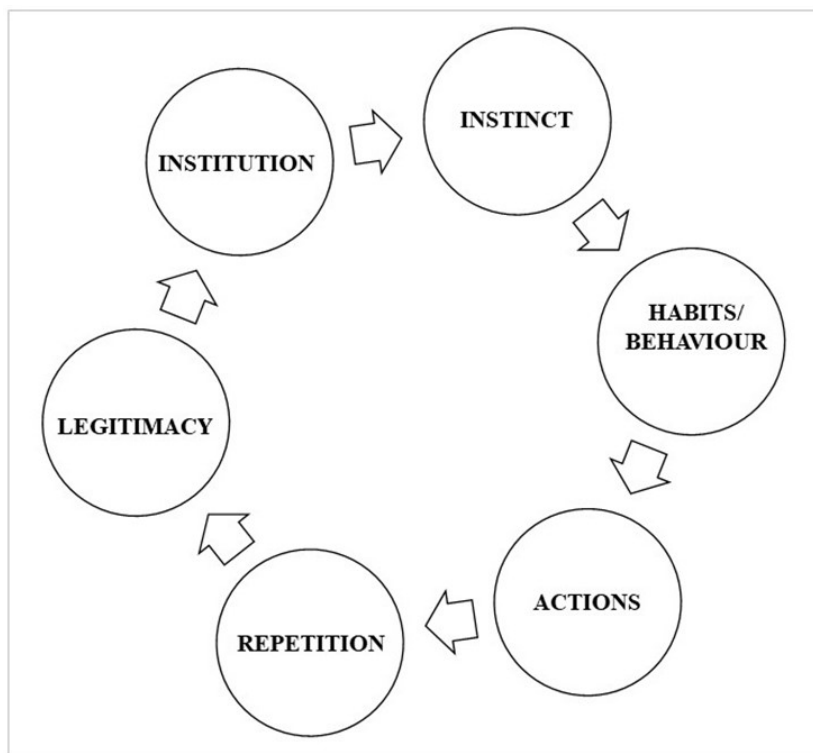
The process of institutionalization goes through the sieve of individuals, which can be understood by the bases of legitimation coined by Weber (2004), namely, legally sanctioned, morally governed, and culturally sustained – conceptually correct. Legitimation does not occur in an imposing way. The individual only legitimizes a model or thought according to their bonds. According to Fleck (2011, p. 283), “legitimacy comes from the degree of cultural support that sustains its organizational forms with content variations.”

To create a summary of the analysis of the Institutional Economy addressed here, Figure 1 is presented, which understands the path of the development of institutions based on Veblen’s habits and behaviors (1987).

Figure 1 is based on the process of “cumulative circular causation” coined by Veblen (1907) to explain the relationship of his theory with Darwinian theory. For Arend, Cario, and Enderle (2012, p. 113), cumulative causation is one of Veblen’s main theoretical propositions. It focuses on “analysis in the historical pro-

cess of change of social organization of which institutions are part.” This term is closely linked to the notion of cause and effect that cumulatively transform institutions. This process understands that an institution modifies the habits of individuals’ thoughts, which in turn are generalized to a large group of people or a society, legitimizing them and modifying the current institutions that would then modify the habits of thought and so on, *ad infinitum*.

Figure 1. Institution development cycle.



Source: Moreira, Carolina Fleck & Viana (2024).

It is understood that every place has a culture that shapes the habits and behaviors of individuals. However, these individuals already carry with them instincts that also influence behavior. From this, individuals take their actions based on instincts, habits, and customs, which, when repeated, become legitimized by society as a behavior accepted by any other person. The term “legitimation” is not treated by Veblen, this term was redeemed from Weber’s work (2004), but that makes sense when incorporated into the institution process. All these elements show the institution process, and the legitimation of institutions will always occur from the individual action that generates a collective action (Fleck, 2011). At a time when society legitimizes a behavior and then repeats it,

it is taken as an institution. Notably, not all established behavior has a human and socially just bias. On the contrary, it is argued that the social construction of institutions can strengthen discriminatory environments, as in the case of accepted and repeated gender discrimination by most of society for a long time.

It is also emphasized that cultural and institutional situations influence individuals because they do not simply create institutions. This process occurs cumulatively in which institutions gradually affect individuals (Dequech, 2002). Analogies can be created from Veblenian thought, bringing to the context of the 21st century regarding gender discrimination at work. At the same time, one can visualize the perpetuation, over the years, of gender discrimination in the work environment as an institution of thought that renews itself from generation to generation due to the maintenance of the same habits of thought. The way this process takes place will be better treated in the following topic and corroborated during the analysis of the results.

2. GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

Overall, the gender gap in education, employment, and health reach 31.4 percentage points (World Economic Forum – WEF, 2020), demonstrating that women still face inequality. Brazil ranks 92nd in the ranking of 153 countries evaluated, progressing three positions compared to the last report of 2018, reaching a gender gap of 30.9%, a figure close to the world average. “Political empowerment, or lack of that, represents the biggest drag on Brazil’s overall performance; with a score of 13.3%, the country ranks 104th in the world” (WEF, 2020, p. 30). It means that the public policies regarding women are mostly thought about and elaborated on by men, which makes it challenging to understand the issues and the actual effectiveness of the laws, further reproducing the inequalities between women and men (Abramo, 2004b).

Para Soares (2000), discrimination exists in a standard and habitual way in Brazilian society. Discrimination in societies is a harmful practice that harms those who are seen as different. Belonging to groups that are not following standard standards, and the “norm may be skin color, sexual option, religion, sex, social origin or almost any other mark imposed on individuals,” discrimination is practiced almost universally (Soares, 2000, p. 45).

One of the scenarios in which discrimination is most witnessed is in the work environment. The sphere of work is neither unifying nor egalitarian (Macêdo & Macedo, 2004). For Bruschini (1994), women have difficulties entering the labor market or are considered second-class workers who exercise a complementary occupation because they are still responsible for domestic work and child care and are always

at a disadvantage compared to men. The author adds that the main challenge for women is to fight for gender equality in the labor market and seek better protection of workers when the subject is reproduction. The “realization of motherhood is still a dilemma for women who want to pursue a professional career” (Scavone, 2001, p. 145), which reinforces the institution of discrimination against the female gender.

Discrimination between women at work results from the insistent sexual division of labor, when women continue to participate less in the labor market, receive lower salaries, and sustain higher levels of informality in labor relations (Alves, 2016) since the creation of the United Nations Organization (UN. For Hirata and Kergoat (2007), the sexual division of labor is shaped by historical and social factors, dividing the reproductive and productive spheres, and the activities of more excellent added value are male property as political, economic, and military functions. Gama (2014, p. 39) reaffirms the above by the mentioned authors, in “that sexual practices are social constructions, themselves results of historically given social relations.” The perpetuation of the sexual division of labor has traces of history and social relations.

For Santos (2010), the sexual division of labor is based on the physical characteristics of men and women and their innate abilities. Men are the majority in intellectual or heavy works that require strength, and women often perform jobs linked to the functions performed in the home. These characteristics are called gender stereotypes, which present “material and symbolic forces, because the values of sexist ideology materialize in practices and reproduce, influencing the behaviors and conceptions of the world of agents” (Santos, 2010, p. 118).

It is perceived that the sexual division of labor is reproduced by ideological issues and historical facts that began with the entry of women into the labor market and are perpetuated in the 21st century. Obviously, in the 21st century, women are seen differently. The feminist movement that gained strength in the 1970s highlighted women’s struggle for equal rights and more space in society. From this, the cause gained strength, and from the twentieth century, women enjoyed equal labor rights to men, but this is declared only in the laws, that is, in institutions formalized by the State.

There are government efforts on different fronts to promote gender equality, which is not yet in harmony with the actions of most of the people who make up Brazilian society. In reality, men occupy most jobs, have average incomes higher than women’s, work in better conditions than women, and participate little in household activities and care for others (IBGE, 2018).

Data shows that government laws and programs are not yet achieving the expected objectives, evidencing that discrimination against the female gender at

work is very present in individual habits and behaviors since institutional changes are slow. Thus, it is perceived that gender discrimination, in general, goes far beyond legal repairs and proposals of equality, autonomy, and confrontation. There are social and cultural traits of rooted behaviors have been repeated through generations, as Veblen (1987) exemplified when referring to the institutionalization process. Society, in most countries, has not yet taken off from the perception of the “woman of the home” (Montoya, Loreto & Teixeira, 2015), hindering the evolution of individuals to institutionalize a new thought about women in the labor market.

For Gama (2014), the separation of family and work environments placed working women as a “problem.” One of the effects can be examined in the naturalization of differences between men and women in the work environment. In agreement, Eveline and Todd (2010) affirm that the way the family institution is seen in capitalist societies even contributes to the pay gap. The family is still seen in the following order: the man is financially responsible, and the woman is responsible for the home’s well-being and the children’s.

This institutionalization of the “superior man” legitimized centuries ago is still identified today. Furthermore, from a reading based on Veblen’s postulates, it can be suggested that these understandings became a habit that creates behaviors, which are soon accepted by the influential group, repeated, and then legitimized, turned into an institution of thought. In this process, gender discrimination and the sexual division of labor flourish with greater intensity, even if undeclared. By seizing the forms of work, men legitimized women’s restriction to lower positions and low wages. Thus, cumulatively, this process was constructed and perpetuated over time.

Even though gender discrimination is still present in professional life, organizational environments are being constructed as neutral environments about such issues (Kelan, 2009), making it difficult to debate this problem at the organizational level. In this sense, Colley, Williamson, and Foley (2020) investigated whether resistance to gender equality can help explain the slow progress of this cause. The authors identified that in the Australian public service, middle-level managers have different levels of resistance and little willingness or inability to promote and operationalize actions for gender equality at work. The authors also identified no differences between men and women in the approach to the subject; this may be worrisome since women also demonstrate that they are not fully aware of a cause that directly interferes with their lives.

Women still suffer from discrimination, and the sexual division of labor is evidenced by several academic research and statistical research involving the po-

pulation (Santos, 2010; Gloves, 2014; ONU MUJERES, 2015; IPEA, 2017; IBGE, 2018; WEF, 2020; Colley, Williamson & Foley, 2020). Individuals do not identify themselves as being discriminated against by the female gender. However, in the workplace, this becomes even more pronounced. Actions are taken in an insightful way that individuals can institutionalize this thought and transmit it to go in their environment without total consciousness.

Therefore, gender discrimination can be understood as a cumulative historical process of habit transformation in institutions. However, according to Veblen (1914), social developments will happen, and individuals in social interactions will present new understandings. At this point, optimism flourishes, determining in social evolution the role of cooling discrimination against the female gender to the point that in the future, women will no longer suffer from prejudice and may enjoy the same rights as men in practice.

4. CASE STUDY SCENARIO

Studying the Brazilian context is essential considering that the country has geographical and cultural diversity, adding to different levels of development and income disparities between states (Tai & Bagolin, 2019). Within this context of diversity, we chose to carry out the study in a region seen as culturally conservative, a region in which gender discrimination in the labor market may be rooted in local culture. This region in the south country, more specifically in the State of Rio Grande do Sul-Brazil, is a city in the interior.

The company chosen for the application of the research represents an essential role for its region, with several units distributed in the State and responsible for the employment of almost a thousand people, with employees in the most diverse areas, contemplating the three hierarchical divisions of a company, strategic; tactical; and operational. The supermarket Mercados do Sul (fictitious name) has peculiarities as it is a family run company and has been in the market for more than 40 years. These factors motivated the choice of this company, besides having a contingent of men and women working together.

The company's units follow a structural standard common to any supermarket, with different product sectors, ranging from hygiene to food products in general, also as butchers and bakeries. Knowing that institutions do not change quickly and that there is a path to be traveled until there is a complete change, the company Southern Markets in its more than 40 years of history, has turned into various points and forms of thought. However, due to its long historical burden, old habits and behaviors may have been maintained, and new ones have emerged throughout its existence.

With this, the company can sometimes present advances and setbacks in terms of gender relations at work. Such statements about the company are possible due to preliminary studies and formal observations in the company's units that externalize such behaviors.

Other supermarkets have similar characteristics, but the choice was influenced by the fact that the company is local and by having a family command, mixing generations of different ages and conceptions about business management. Another fact is the company's recognition in the region, often the gateway for young people into the labor market. Moreover another relevant reason was the receptivity to the research.

Due to 14 units in the company, located in different cities, and the time available for the research, it was possible to perform the study in only three of these units. The reduced number of units is no less relevant, nor does it affect the study, since the three stores studied are the largest units of the company, covering a more significant number of employees and sectors. In addition, in a qualitative study, it is also essential to appreciate the possibility of ensuring the in-depth cases and the quality of the research results.

4. METHOD

The present research was characterized as a descriptive-exploratory study, which made it possible to describe the characteristics of the phenomenon studied through a new theoretical perspective, in this case, the institutionalization of discrimination against the female gender in the work environment. We chose qualitative research because it has characteristics that allow the deepening of the analysis of the phenomenon, enabling the detailed investigation in the search for understanding the object studied (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994). This approach allowed different processes that helped deepen the research due to the breadth of qualitative research.

The method chosen for the execution of the research was the case study. It is defined as "the case study as an intensive study of a single unit to understand a larger class of (similar) units" (Gerring, 2004, p. 342). For Yin (2015), the case study is suitable for studies that intend to research contemporary events. Also, according to the author, data collection should use multiple sources of evidence. Therefore, data were collected through non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documents provided by the company under study, enabling "a greater variety of historical and behavioral aspects" (Yin, 2015, p. 124).

The chosen scenario, which has been previously reported, proposes an exciting discussion on gender issues since it has many employees enabling the rela-

tionship between men and women in the workplace. What may be positive for the construction of gender equality or, on the contrary, depends on the type of relationship the organization preaches.

The research subjects were male and female workers with more than three months of work on-site and from different sectors of the company, being possible to interview individuals of strategic, tactical, and operational levels. For the protection of the interviewees, their names were not revealed. During the analyses, the reference to the interviewee happened through codes. The interviewee was named by the initial letter of the sex, M for male; F for female; and a number referring to the order of the interviews. It was decided not to distinguish the interviewees by the unit in which they worked since there were no significant differences between the statements that justified a separation.

The research data were collected from August to November 2018 from 37 interviews, nineteen interviews in unit I, eleven interviews in unit II, and seven interviews in unit III, of which 27 were female, and 10 were males. The predominance of women concerning the men interviewed is due to the focus of the study. It was essential to highlight the female opinion on the discrimination of women at work, however, not ruling out the male view. The men collaborated, so the study did not only obtain one perception of the context. The disparity of interviewees from the units of the company was due to the saturation of the content of the interviewees' statements.

Approximately 20 hours of observations were obtained between the three units, and documents were collected regarding the company's history, job descriptions, and documents on hiring over time. The observations were made only by one of the authors and made at alternate times and days to have the broadest possible scope on the behavior of employees and because there are work shifts, enabling a broad view of all working conditions and relationships. All points that were considered relevant for the understanding of the theme were recorded in the field diary.

Jointly, the information and data collected were used to perform the data triangulation as recommended by Yin (2015), making the study results more accurate and convincing due to the basis of the findings in different data sources. Triangulation functions as an analysis process in which all types of evidence sources should be used to corroborate a result. If the analysis process does not involve the three data sources chosen by the study, there is no triangulation.

For data analysis, we chose to adopt the content analysis technique, following the assumptions of Bardin (1977). The categorization of the analyses was duly determined a priori. First, a topic was created to describe the scenario of the

research and the respondents, followed by six categories of analyses based on the study's theory: I. Instincts; II. Habits and Behaviors; III. Actions; IV. Repetition; V. Legitimation; and VI. Institutions. Each category addressed a stage of the institutionalization cycle, according to Veblen.

5. SEARCH RESULTS

5.1 CHARACTERIZATION OF RESPONDENTS

According to the characterization of the participants interviewed: of the 37 interviewees, 27 were women and ten men. Ages range from 18 to over 60, with young people in their first job and others 30 years or older in the company. On the level of education, the majority had completed high school and were not studying for higher qualifications. Two interviewees had completed higher education; one of the company's directors and a human resources analyst, both in tactical-level positions. Regarding the participants' marital status, 44.44% of the women are married, 44.44% are single, and 11.11% are in a stable union. Men, on the other hand, 60% are single, and 40% are married.

The different organizational levels interviewed 25 women and seven men who worked at the operational level, two women and two men at the tactical level, and one at the strategic level. The composition of the interviewees reflects the general organization chart of the units surveyed by the company Mercados do Sul and the positions per sex at the operational level total 54.88% of female employees and 45.12% men. At the tactical level, women have 10.71% of positions and men 89.28%, considerably reducing female participation, and even more at the strategic level, where women occupy only 11.11% of positions and men make up 88.88% of positions.

5.2 ANALYSIS OF THE DEVELOPMENT CYCLE OF INSTITUTIONS

This paper proposed a new way of observing the discrimination of the female gender in the work environment. Through the Veblenian theoretical lens, the development cycle of institutions was created. In this sense, the research tried to observe the existence of the cycle in practice and whether it could be observed empirically. Figure 1 was brought into the theoretical framework, which showed the stages of the institutionalization process according to Veblen (1987).

To this end, during the following topics, the six stages of the development cycle of institutions will be addressed (Figure 1), showing from the data analysis how discrimination against women may be present in the actions and unpretentious behaviors of the company's employees—maintaining and reinforcing gender inequalities in the workplace.

5.2.1 STAGE I – INSTINCTS

The primary form of the institutionalization of collective thoughts is the innate instincts of the human being (Veblen, 1914). Instincts help select behaviors in the face of some situation and are shaped by the social and cultural context in which individuals live. Some points were determined to help identify instincts promoting discrimination against women in the work environment. To analyze this issue, we understand, as instincts, the preconception that women are biologically different, taxed as the “fragile sex,” and from this, would be treated differently at work because they are women. That individual would characterize women’s work from the “natural attributions to the female sex.” That comes from a patriarchal culture in which women were prepared to take care of the home, husband, and children and, therefore, should be delicate and helpful.

In instincts, it was possible to perceive and identify that it is instinctive of the human being to separate men and women and understand that the sexes are different and therefore would have different attributions. The F6 interviewee gives the first signs of treatment differentiation in the workplace: *“because they treat in the same thing just as I told you that when they have to carry something they obviously will not choose a woman right (laughs), they will choose one of the guys.”* The interviewee F36 is convinced of the lower biological condition of the woman and justifies *“because the strength of a man is much greater than that of a woman even if we do not want to, but it is true (laughs).”*

Men notice the same condition; however, they argue that the differentiation of work by physical characteristics, in this case, force, occurs as a form of protection for women. The male position of protecting women reflects the representation of the family organization, and the “old family model” predicted that men should protect the family (Negreiros & Féres-Carneiro, 2004). With this, the man instinctively believes that he should protect and care for the opposite sex. As in the speech of the interviewee M32, who believes that there are sectors in which women should not be: *“carries weight so I think I should not go in that sector woman, but for their sake right not because they could not do that, but to protect her more.”* This position is not exclusive to men and can also be observed in the statements of some women interviewed, as perceived in the speech of a company’s deputy manager (F37), *“so we try to protect the woman, but it is in the sense that she does not carry weight.”* Reinforcing the notion that there is no predominance of male instincts that promote differentiation and that women have similar thoughts.

This thought was also corroborated by the human resources manager (M29), who understands that *“(...) the woman is for certain things she has much more whim than men so some functions they are feminine right (...)”* and highlights the

position on characteristics seen as feminine. The division of the world of work between men and women is based on the notion that women have characteristics and qualities that are exclusively feminine and different from men, thus supporting their way of inserting them into productive work and reinforcing inequality between the sexes (Daniel, 2011).

These reports, together with the other data collected, corroborate the identification of the first stage of the institute development cycle. Therefore, in this case, instincts refer to the differentiation of biological characteristics of women to men, being an instinctive behavior of employees in work relationships. The next topic will be analyzed whether such instincts can be consolidated in habits and behaviors practiced by employees of the company daily to the point of reinforcing the discrimination against women in the workplace.

5.2.2 STEP II - HABITS AND BEHAVIORS

According to Veblen (1914), habits are natural tendencies of the human being (originated by instincts) influenced by the environment in which they live and transmitted by culture; on the other, behaviors are acquired through habits that become frequent in the conduct of individuals. According to Veblen (1914), this is a natural process with no exact definitions for each point. Events are occurring and transforming or reinforcing the thoughts of individuals who are institutionalized in the form of behaviors.

For the analysis of habits and behaviors, the notion that women generally occupy functions that require manual, delicate, and care work was determined as a practical example for observing this stage. Hirata (2009) states that men have qualifications and women's qualities, for both habits and behaviors, in this case, will be identified through the attributions of the position and the sex of the occupant of this position.

It begins by revealing that there is a notion of evident separation between men and women during selection and recruitment, according to the speech of the employee (F6): *"Overall I think when we go there to do the interviews and stuff, I think they even separate there by them right by their order by their criteria."* Corroborated by the speech of the person who performs recruitment and selection, who mentions that there is a priority for men in some positions and women for others. The interviewee (M29) makes the situation even more notorious with his speech, *"even a sector that we decided is to have only women working on it because of the whim because of the dedication until the woman has for some things."* This notion is also evidenced in the organization's documents that show the structuring of positions and observations made in the company's units. The

format verifies that women are predominantly at the base of the hierarchical pyramid and in positions requiring more excellent manual dexterity and care.

The notion of “position of woman” and “position of man” is institutionalized. All employees mentioned this issue during their interviews. It indicates that the company created the so-called female and male “ghettos”, which according to Bruschini and Puppini (2004), are the areas of the dominance of one of the sexes. The separation of positions by sex is strongly marked in the conduct of the company, and the F28 interviewee had her request to change her role, from a female sector to a male, ignored *“even wanted to be stock keeper, but here in the company is more for men.”*

In the researched company, the hierarchization of men to women and biological differentiation are strongly present in behaviors, attitudes, and discourses. It is a practice of the company evidenced and followed by everyone who works there. This perception can be considered discrimination against women because, according to Daniel (2011), this notion promotes the differentiation of positions in the labor market. This system that feminizes or masculinizes the positions results from social and cultural construction and is rooted in the behavior of the company’s individuals. Because of this, the fact that the employees do not explicitly identify discriminatory behaviors but demonstrate it in the evidence of their behavior that it occurs imperceptibly. With this, it is fulfilled with the second stage of the development cycle of institutions in which it was possible to empirically verify the habits and behaviors of individuals who promote discrimination against the female gender in the work environment.

5.2.3 STAGE III – ACTIONS

According to Veblen (1987), discrimination is effective through dignified and unworthy functions, worthy functions are those endorsed with elements of prowess and achievement, and unworthy functions are related to daily and less valued functions (Veblen, 1987). Typically, worthy or valued functions are related to men and those unworthy to women. The act of realizing habits and behaviors in a company’s day-to-day actions ends up institutionalizing the notion that women occupy, in most cases, functions that are less valued and paid less. Thus, for this stage, the actions will be verified through women’s positions and whether there is a wage difference between men and women occupying the same position.

We analyzed the positions and those who occupy them. It was possible to affirm that women are the majority at the operational level, the lowest hierarchical level, being rare women at the tactical and strategic levels. The F30 interviewee justifies the fact that there are few women in senior positions: *“if it occurred naturally, in fact to this day we have a girl that she is training to be head*

of the store and in the future a sub or manager, but in the past, we had a certain resistance on the part of the board.” Suppose, in higher positions, the distinction between women and men is also confirmed. In that case, it can be affirmed that the company is organized in what Yannoulas (2013) calls Vertical Segmentation of Occupations. This segmentation occurs when women are excluded from higher hierarchical jobs, valued and with higher salaries, reflecting a vertically segmented “occupational pyramid” (Oliveira & Yannoulas, 2016, p. 199).

Precisely because of the appreciation of these positions, the absence of women is noted because, according to Hirata and Kergoat (2007), the most valued and prestigious works are of male exclusivity. According to the data collected, it is not necessary to specify whether there is a wage difference between occupants of the same position. However, there are indications that this does not occur in the company.

The workload is extended and not very flexible in positions held chiefly by women. As there are scales of work, there are difficulties in reconciling work with studies by the conflict of schedules. Thus, some interviewees reported that there are no opportunities for professional growth within the company, as they cannot qualify for other positions. Thus, the company’s organization keeps women in positions with little expectation of growth and consequently in less valued roles (Abramo & Valenzuela, 2016).

The company’s actions determine the positions of men and women in the work environment. With this, the third stage of the institution process, the actions, were identified in the company study case. There are conducts and behaviors naturalized by the company, which were taken by its employees and applied through actions in the labor relations, reflecting the theoretical construction based on Veblen. The process of the institution of discrimination against women at work is present in this company, and the next topic addresses the fourth stage of the institutionalization process, the act of repetition.

5.2.4 STAGE IV – REPETITION

Every society, social group, and business organization has a predominant culture that shapes the behavior of the individuals who participate (Veblen, 1988). Even if individuals have their traits, the dominant culture can influence their acts so that, even unconsciously, individuals react according to the large group. As actions become natural before society, many people begin to repeat these actions.

For the analyses of this topic, we used the notion that when discriminatory actions against women are repeated in the daily life of the company occurs, what is called symbolic violence. For Teles (2017), violence against women is a direct violation of women’s human rights because it is loaded with a naturalized notion of women’s inferiority, remaining through society’s complacency. Thus,

the fourth stage of institutionalization will be observed through facts that harm women by favoring men. For example, when a job opportunity is a withdrawal of an employee for the benefit of another employee, this is being configured as symbolic gender violence in the workplace.

This question was soon noticed in the first interview held, *“one time came up a vacancy for poster edition that then I joined I am interested because I did magisterium and I like these things then, but then at the time a guy told me not we want a man because he can help in the truck”*(F1). This event not only does not consider the employee’s qualification but also takes up the issue of biological differentiation since man could be helpful in another function that requires physical strength.

Some employees reported that they feel underrated within the company, little heard, and devalued by men, as demonstrated by the report of the interviewee F20 *“When you will ask for something when you will complain about something that they do not give you much attention (...) you are embarrassed because you are going to ask them for something, and they will not listen to you”*. Here the interviewee referred to her manager, who is male. Considering gender inequalities, Biroli and Miguel (2014) indicate that one of the most critical limits of the institutions in force in society occurs through the naturalization and reproduction of asymmetries and relations of domination. Women are still vulnerable in a society that has instituted gender differences.

Another disturbing report of discrimination was brought by the F23 interviewee, who noticed that the company does not like it when its employees become pregnant and that there is a particular prejudice against hiring feminine. *“To them, they talk when the woman gets pregnant, they talk a lot (...) they talk here (...) that they do not call because of this”* (F23); in his speech, there are insinuations that there is prejudice with the hiring of women by the fact of being able to get pregnant. Furthermore, it is reinforced with another speech *“The child is not a problem does not prevent the woman from working right, but there are people who abuse and who use the child as a pretext right to miss to give a certificate for the last and then ends up harming itself according to this, but not that it is something general so understood, but some punctual cases”* (F30). It is attested with these reports that *“for women, the experience of work always implies the combination of these two spheres, either by the connection or by superposition”* (Bruschini, 2006, p. 332). Moreover, this fact plagues only women; hardly a man will have problems having children.

All the actions reported in this topic demonstrate that these “phenomena are proper to human nature”, are instinctive, and occur cumulatively, according to Veblen (1988). Thus, the fourth stage of the institution process was evidenced

in the case under study. It was empirically verified that during the institution process, the actions become recurrent and, with this notice, symbolic violence against women, in which they end up harming themselves in the work environment or feel uncomfortable with some situations just because they are women.

5.2.5 STAGE V – LEGITIMATION

The institutions, already existing or new, pass through the acceptance of individuals, and behaviors must be legitimized by the people and followed daily (Veblen, 1914).

This topic will be worked with the concept of legitimation, which has its bases coined by Weber (2004); it can be inscribed that legitimation does not occur positively, only according to the individual's bonds. The legitimation of instincts that have become habits and behaviors, materialized in actions and repeated by individuals, will be understood through observing the predominant existence of men in high positions of power. It is understood that those in the positions of most significant power are also those who will make decisions regarding people management policies and other skills related to employees. Directly influences the type of actions taken in favor of gender issues in the workplace.

In male perception, discrimination has been in times past, and there are currently changes in the company. The interviewee M14 points out, *"woman to me... so... they have all equality within the company (...) today the changing occurred, I know"*. Interviewee F15 observed: *"I do not want to lie to you, but they are all men. I think the management and sub-management are more for men. It is more directed to man (...) It is bad because I could give a woman a chance"*. It is unanimously the perception that there are differences in the occupation of senior positions within the company, which is corroborated through the analysis of documents and by the researcher's observations. However, this perception is taken more by female employees than on the male part because the female part suffers from this behavior, with identification with the other person of the same sex.

The fact that only men occupy the highest positions rests on a very shallow justification and is taken by prejudice about the place of women in society. The interviewee F21 believes that to be a boss, there must be the availability of time *"the person has to have a schedule available right because who works in the super-market the workload for those who are the boss is well pulled."* The interviewee F37 also perceives this *"the big differential is as I tell you the manager, for example, he has to come early he has to open the market (...) there are things that unfortunately within the market that sometimes the woman cannot keep up with but it is not by her inability under any circumstances"*. The two speeches say more than the abo-

ve in their content. For both women, the justification that color responds to the fact that women do not assume higher positions is the lack of more time available. The notion of the double or triple female journey is based on the discourses, which, even obtaining its obligations with paid work, does not give up the obligations of the private, domestic sphere (Gama, 2014) and therefore could not reconcile the two functions well. The notion that women have obstacles to their careers contributes to the increase in discrimination and the notion that women are unsuitable or problematic workers. With this, it can be affirmed that in the supermarket chain Mercados do Sul, some behaviors and habits differentiate men's and women's functions. They allow actions that determine the jobs that are less paid and lower than women and repeat them, causing differentiation of treatments that sometimes harm women for the benefit of men, legitimizing such conduct, resulting in male dominance in the company's senior positions. To this end, it is understood that the fifth stage of the process of institutionalization of discrimination against the female gender is presented in this case study.

5.2.6 STAGE VI – INSTITUTION

Man is social, has habits and behaviors, and acts according to his specifications (Veblen, 1898b). Unlike other species, human beings can reason and choose conduct to be followed, however, thought institutions have the power to regulate behaviors and habits (Rutherford, 1998). In this sense, even with the free will of individuals, some institutions shape the behaviors, habits, and actions of men and women.

During the previous topics, a cumulative logic of steps was outlined. Several situations with the same pattern of behavior that can trigger an institution of discrimination against the female gender were described. At each stage, new evidence corroborated the hypothesis that there is discrimination against women in the work environment, based on the theoretical argument constructed in this study, based on Veblen (1988).

In the understanding of the authors based on gender theory and institutional theory, the culmination of institutionalization of gender discrimination is to observe the presence of the sexual division of labor. The sexual division of labor is a form of division produced by social relations between men and women. Its main characteristics are the allocation of men to productive work (public sphere) and women to reproductive work (private sphere) and the understanding that the works of more excellent social value are specific to men (Kergoat, 2003). For the observation of the sexual division of labor, the criterion was to identify a clear understanding of a given and organized work system to divide men and women in different positions in the work environment.

To start the analysis of the institution of discrimination against the female gender, first, there is the speech of an employee who has been working for about five years in the company: *"I have gotten used to it. I can tell you already has that convenience understands already has that system from the beginning I have been getting used to"* (F2). Her speech makes it clear that the company has a "system", or norms of behavior, and that it feels accustomed to what is given.

The "system" is strongly institutionalized, and this can be perceived from the speech of interviewee M18. His discourse shows that the positions are structured separately according to the sex of the employees. *"The customers today know that the area the distribution of employees is not only men right even the customer even he knows that he will arrive at a supermarket and will come across the exit of the supermarket when paying for his purchases he will come across the service of women right"* (M18). In his speech, M18 describes where women are positioned by the job characteristics and that customers are used to this structuring. Easily some lines express the notion of differentiation between the sexes, *"when you take an employee always you aim so is like so as is the sector is destined already that there is already intended law"* (F21, our griffin); *"I think I do not know if it is their thing anymore if I do not know why even but there is enough chauvinism in the middle of it for sure"* (F23); and also the human resources analyst's account *"as I explained to you right that the issue of care even we give preference for women the issue of the heaviest work, so we give priority per man would never put a woman in the warehouse"* (F30).

The main characteristic of the sexual division of labor pointed out by Ker-goat (2003) that divides the private sphere from the public, the first befitting women and the second to men, as evidenced in the discourses presented earlier. However, these women, who perceive the difference in treatment and the allocation of positions, still suffer from a culture that has not fully incorporated this advance. It is established that women occupy the positions that are still linked to the domestic sphere, where they perform delicate, manual, and careful tasks. Moreover, the man, seen as a provider of the home, belonging to the public sphere, occupies those positions related to "being masculine," that is, "being active, strong, powerful" (Brochado Junior & Souza-Leite, 2016, p. 193).

It is perceived that it is common sense within the company to understand that women are the main ones responsible for domestic activities. Indifferent to the position held by women, they understand that the tasks with the house and children are feminine attributions. The men interviewed felt embarrassed when asked about their participation in the responsibilities of the house but confessed that they are not very participatory, claiming that they work long outside the home. Women also work all day, but it would be unusual if a woman gave that same justification.

The double function, better known as the woman's double working day, is seen as admirable in other people's eyes. *"Because the woman she has a very decisive character very firm also right she has a very great dynamic right because she attends the work, she ta there attends her work at home husband children also right"* (M18). It is noted that it is natural to assign household tasks to women, but in no interview were there questions or mentions of the absence of males in performing these functions. However, some interviewees reported having the help of their husbands at home or interviewees who claimed to be assisting in domestic activities. A positive factor for gender relations, demonstrating that there are movements of change if it were not for the fact that women believe that they were "lucky" to have the help of their husbands at home, as mentioned by some interviewees.

Thus, it is perceived that the attributions of the private sphere fall totally on the woman who has direct consequences in the work relations. It is common sense to understand the notion of women as the sole ones responsible for the home, reflecting on the structuring of the positions of this company. Jobs requiring strength or needing to be at the forefront of a sector are not understood as suitable for women because they were not created from this perspective. However, even if women and men are biologically different, it cannot be said that women would not have the strength for specific jobs or characteristics to occupy high-level positions. Moreover, men would not have the ability to be kind, organized, and delicate for specific functions. The historical-cultural process that shaped the behaviors of men and women is what determined the type of behavior acceptable to both, and breaking this paradigm will still take some time.

However, a path of change may already be flourishing in the supermarket chain, it is not yet taken by all employees, but it brings hope for a more egalitarian environment. The interviewee F36 understands that *"We lived in a more macho world right we still have a little let us not say it is over 100% right, but now I do not know... already comes from education already being created a more open head ... now it seems that ta easier for them to accept"* and proceeds *"of course, there is one and another that still sometimes do not know we do not know what kind of environment is created thing so has from time to time has some sexist positions so but taking in general, so they accept well."*

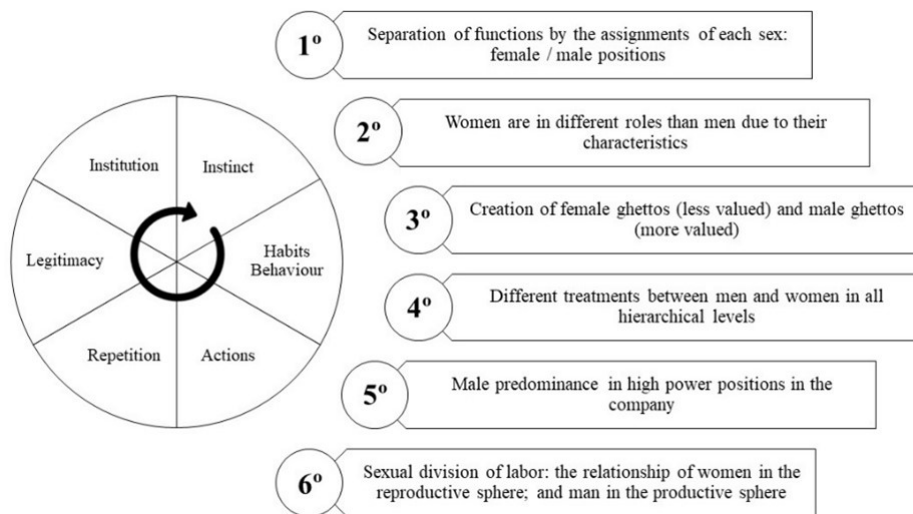
That said, when it comes to discrimination against women at work as an institution, it is known, according to Veblen (1898), that institutions change, transform, and evolve. Thus, the evolution of societies, their thoughts, and the adoption of new behaviors that confront the current situation of women in the labor market leave room to believe in a better future without discrimination.

With this last topic, the description of the development cycle of an institution, the sixth stage of the institution process, is concluded with the identification of all

elements of institutionalization that feed the discrimination of the female gender in the work environment. In practice, it was noticed that the behaviors maintained and repeated were legitimized and instituted through the observance of the sexual division of labor. Closing the cycle, being empirically demonstrated that individuals maintain ingrained behaviors that come from a culture socially constructed over time and overflowed in the work environment, impairing the reach of gender equality in the country. In other words, the company could be only a reflection of what is in society, and it can be inferred that women do not suffer discrimination in the company's environment but in the general labor market.

Figure 1 was recreated and brought into the theoretical framework to summarize what was presented in this analysis. Now, Figure 2 is composed of practical examples, observed in the daily life of the company studied, of how the institutionalization process manifested itself in the social relations among employees of the Southern Markets network. Thus, Figure 2 briefly shows what was observed in each stage of the institutionalization process in a practical case.

Figure 2. From theory to practice – The institutionalization of gender discrimination in the company Mercados do Sul.



Source: Moreira, Carolina Fleck & Viana (2024).

FINAL DISCUSSIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

In this research, the concepts of Veblen's institutional theory were applied to explore the understanding of employees of a supermarket chain in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, about gender discrimination in the work environment and how behaviors perpetuate this social problem.

It first presented contributions to the theoretical field since it was possible to theoretically create and empirically test the existence of a cycle of stages of the institutionalization of discrimination against the female gender in the work environment through a micro-social analysis that understands individual behaviors. The findings highlighted the ingrained behaviors in the working environment which perpetuate women's discrimination. A relevant fact was to be able to identify that such behaviors are not identified by the individuals who make them in a naturalized way, and there is still no distinction between male and female behaviors. That is, women also promote the difference between the sexes. It was also evidenced that these veiled behaviors, which are profoundly and imperceptible, corroborate the discrimination of women and the maintenance of a macho culture.

When thinking about how an institutional environment is maintained or transformed from the results of the individuals thinking habits, it is concluded that collective actions influence this process. Humans are taken by their instincts, as Veblen (1897) states, which select their way of acting. However, their instincts may already be shaped by the local culture, by inheritances of ancestors, which make up the society in which they live. In this sense, most social relations are shaped by thought institutions (Veblen, 1988).

In general, this behavior observed in the research environment transcends the limits of the work environment, and the differentiations between genders are perceived in all public and private spaces. The research noted that individuals behave in a discriminatory way but do not notice that such behavior can further promote discrimination against women.

It also contributes to the description of how the cycle of the institution of gender discrimination took place in the case studied, which may encourage further studies to verify the same cycle in other contexts. Veblen stated that there is the instinct to understand biologically different men and women in the environment of the studied company, so they are understood as responsible for different social roles, and these differentiated roles led us to understand that there are spaces for men and women's in the work environment, concretizing the cycle of gender discrimination, culminating in the sexual division of work. Thus, it is considered that discrimination against women in the work environment is institutionalized in the company.

From a feminist theoretical perspective, this differentiation could not occur because it promotes gender discrimination. The equality gap is still considerable in Brazil (WEF, 2020) and conforms to what was observed in the research. There are still resistances and maintenance of thoughts that hinder the closure of this gap. From the perspective of Veblenian Institutional theory, it was understood that cycles of thought habits could be reinforced and maintained for

long periods. Behaviors perpetuate ways of thinking and behaving in the face of social problems, as in this case. A cycle of how this process takes place and is maintained in the day-to-day of individuals can be observed.

The study's limitations are the lack of balance between the number of interviewees in the units visited and the non-participation of a more significant number of people in the strategic sector. At times, the receptivity obtained in the units brought some barriers since managers (all men) made it challenging to perform the research by not participating in the interviews and not facilitating the participation of other employees, claiming that they could not leave for it 10 minutes from their work. It is also observed that this analysis occurred in a single environment. It cannot be extended to other contexts, and there was no consideration, in the analyses, of the intersection between gender, class, and sex. A fact that does not diminish the relevance of the findings but instead points to a fertile aspect of research that considers such categories of analysis and contributes to the advancement of the feminist debate through a new perspective in the academic environment.

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