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Gender Barriers in Academia: Perceptions of Inequality in Professional Development among Female Academics in the Faculty of Education, University of Alicante, Spain

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Abstract: Spanish universities have been implementing gender equality policies for over a decade. The research presented here aims to determine the barriers and challenges perceived by female academics in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alicante. The study used a seven-point Likert-type scale survey consisting of 10 items, which were validated by specialists from different universities. One of the key findings was that often barriers have ceased to be seen as such and are understood instead as a normalized reality. Nevertheless, participants stress that women face greater barriers than men when it comes to reaching top-level positions; highlighting issues such as a lack of mentorship, delayed motherhood, experiencing sexist behavior and comments from male colleagues; and a lack of consensus around measures, such as reconciling work–life balance, as a means of largely eliminating the barriers they face in the university.

Keywords: gender differentials in academia; gender equality; barriers; education; university



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1. Introduction

In recent years, significant progress has been made in relation to equality between women and men in Spain. Moreover, women play an increasingly active role in society and public life. Yet, they are faced with a society in which institutional participation remains unequal [1]. We should not forget that higher education is a crucial institution for social change that includes the real achievement of equality between men and women, which is why it is necessary to understand and analyze universities, from a gender perspective [2].

Thus, the main aim of the present study was to discover how female academics in the Faculty at Education of the University of Alicante, Spain, perceive the gender inequalities they face, or have faced, over their professional career.

The phrase “glass ceiling” refers to the barriers that prevent many women—despite having the necessary personal and professional abilities—from reaching managerial positions, or positions of greater responsibility and power, and progressing within these [3]. This ceiling can be understood as a set of barriers from different sources, characterized as being invisible but solid, which interfere with women’s working careers [4].

An androcentric structure and understanding of the world have led to the exclusion of women from work and responsibility, relegating them to caring and domestic duties in the private sphere. The patriarchal social structure has, in many cases, led women themselves to participate in processes of exclusion, which is significant given that “there is no greater oppression than that in which the oppressed adopt the framework of the oppressor” [5]. In the case of women, the problem generally arises because they are in charge of domestic responsibilities and care for all members of the family, while at the same time they want to continue to progress in their professional careers and therefore, are confronted with unequal conditions compared to their male colleagues [6].

The recent literature generally conceptualizes the notion of the glass ceiling according to the different types of barriers involved [7–10]. For example, one of the most common

classifications draws a distinction between internal, external, and mixed barriers, whereby internal barriers refer to the person themselves, external barriers to society, and mixed barriers to a combination of personal and social barriers and influences [11,12].

It is important to note that the term “barrier” should be understood as a series of factors that prevent, complicate, impede, or fail to facilitate women’s professional development [13,14].

There are two main reasons to analyze and study the barriers to women’s professional development. The first is economic, since it is clearly vital to take advantage of all human resources in labor and economic terms, and indeed the incorporation of women into the labor force represents a historic milestone that has contributed to global economic growth. The second reason is social, specifically the need to analyze and study how, for women, gender brings with it a series of burdens in the personal, family, and work spheres [15].

The barriers facing women—and specifically female university professors and academics, in terms of their professional development—may be internal or external [3]. Yet, the classification of barriers as internal and external can be complex, which has given rise to the increasingly popular idea of mixed or interactive barriers: “The line dividing what is ‘internal’ and ‘external’ starts to blur so that the internal can also be seen as women’s integration of social attitudes into their world view.” [11].

The notion of internal barriers refers to the internalization and acceptance of attitudes by women that limit the attainment of equality, and that are directly related to socialization processes. These barriers are based on gender identity, with societal influence being key to their development [10]. Conversely, external barriers relate to elements or conditions present in a given society, organization, or institution—in this case the university—of which patriarchal culture may be a prime example [16]. These barriers emerge through our society’s traditional culture, in which the androcentric model predominates, placing man (in the sense of sex and gender, rather than of humankind) at the center of the world. Thus, this is a world—and therefore a society—created by and for men, in which women are excluded from organizations, as a result of men’s networks and the patriarchal relations perpetuated by men.

Internal barriers are the barriers related to self-perception, examples of which could be the fear of not fulfilling expectations, the role of women according to socially ascribed gender roles, gender stereotypes, the lack of female role models for women, low self-esteem and low sense of self, a lack of interest in leadership, and over-adaptation to situations and behaviors [10]. Whereas, external barriers could be gender stereotypes, labor market segregation, labor discrimination, sexual and psychological harassment in the workplace, fewer opportunities for career development or promotion within an organization, an absence of policies to promote an improved work–life balance, and difficulty in achieving co-responsibility in the domestic and family spheres [11].

Despite the different gender approaches and perspectives used in other countries and studies, research has shown that gender inequalities in universities exist in the majority of countries [17]. In terms of the research on this topic, Acker and Dillabough analyzed the education faculties of the University of Ontario, Canada, over the period 1960–1990, examining how gender differences have influenced the career paths of female academics [18]. Additionally, Krefting conducted a study of North American universities that highlights a scarcity of female academics in top-level positions, since such posts were overwhelmingly occupied by men [19]. Similarly, studies carried out in the United Kingdom, for example, those by Bagilhole and Goode [20], Knights and Richards [21] and Ledwith and Manfredi [22], reveal a lack of parity in labor conditions, since the masculine organizational model prevails. A recent study was completed across nine universities in Vietnam, with the aim of finding the barriers that hinder women from becoming leaders. The study included 21 participants and revealed that the main difficulties encountered by women are work–life balance, the opinions of subordinates, social relations, and individual characteristics [17].

The position of women in academia has also been a subject of study in Spain, where research has found that as women progress in their academic university careers, the number

of women in positions of responsibility, and at management level, decreases. Particularly notable is the qualitative study by Lozano, Iglesias, and Martínez [23], which explores the perceptions held by female academics at the University of Alicante, in terms of their professional experiences with mentors and departmental networks.

It is not a question of increasing the number of female professors at universities, but of creating effective gender equality policies to eliminate existing barriers and exclusions, renovating and modernizing an institution, such as the university [24].

2. Materials and Methods

The present study was carried out using a mixed method approach that—as is widely known—uses a combination of different research methods or multiple methodological strategies to study and respond to questions around a particular topic. This approach is understood as the intentional combination of qualitative and quantitative research approaches [25], as a means to effectively approach a research problem [26].

2.1. Research Context and Participants

This research involved the participation of 17 female academics from the Faculty of Education at the University of Alicante, Spain.

The selection of the sample for this research was based on female teachers from the Faculty of Education at the University of Alicante (Spain). The Faculty of Education has female teachers from different areas of knowledge, such as general and specific didactics, school organization, and psychology. This faculty was chosen due to the fact that education studies are highly feminized, but as one moves up the employment pyramid, the number of women decreases; hence, our objective of investigating the barriers that female academics encounter in their professional development as teachers.

The low number or percentage of the sample is a result of this being a voluntary study, in which the participants had to sign a protection of data consent form, so not all female teachers in the faculty wanted to participate in this research.

Of the 17 participants, 11.7% (n = 2) were aged under 30, 23.6% (n = 4) were aged 30–35, 41.2% (n = 7) were aged 36–40, 5.9% (n = 1) were aged 41–45, 11.7% (n = 2) were aged 46–50, and 5.9% (n = 1) were over 60.

In relation to education levels, 35.2% (n = 6) of the participants had studied to master's level, 5.9% (n = 1) to an undergraduate level, and 58.9% (n = 10) had a doctoral degree.

The participants' subject area varied, with 5.9% (n = 1) from the area of sports science, 11.7% (n = 2) from psychology, 11.7% (n = 2) from the theory and history of education, 17.7% (n = 3) from didactics and school organization, 17.7% (n = 3) from experimental science, 17.7% (n = 3) from mathematics, and 17.7% (n = 3) from social science didactics.

In terms of job category, 17.6% (n = 3) of the participants held the post of predoctoral researcher, 41.2% (n = 7) were teaching associates, 23.6% (n = 4) were assistant professors, and 17.6% (n = 3) were associate professors.

In terms of marital status, 5.9% (n = 1) of the participants were divorced, 35.3% (n = 6) were single, and 58.8% (n = 10) were married. With relation to children, 41.2% (n = 7) of participants did not have children. Of the 58.8% (n = 10) of participants who did have children, 10% (n = 1) had 3 children, 50% (n = 5) had 2 children, and 40% (n = 4) had 1 child. In relation to dependents, 11.7% (n = 2) of the participants had dependents in their care, and 88.2% (n = 15) had no dependents. Notably, 5.9% (n = 1) had both children and dependents under their care.

We did not ask for information on ethnicity, disabilities, or any other information beyond that already indicated. It is possible to understand, as a limitation of this study, that the answers obtained are to be understood as mainstream academic women.

2.2. Tools

This study was carried out using an ad hoc tool specifically designed to analyze participants' opinions and assessments of the barriers faced by female academics, which

was validated by experts from the University of Barcelona and the University of A Coruña. The first part consisted of open-ended questions relating to sociodemographic factors (age, education level, current place of work, area of specialization, current job category, marital status, age and number of dependent children, and number of dependents).

The second part consisted of 10 questions based on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = totally disagree, 2 = strongly disagree, 3 = disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = agree, 6 = strongly agree, 7 = totally agree), as this provides a higher level of statistical consistency than using a 4- or 5-point scale.

Answers to the Likert-type survey were analyzed using SPSS Statistics v. 25 for Windows, while answers to the open-ended questions were analyzed through the coding of responses. This qualitative analysis was carried out using MAXQDA software and a coding map was created based on the classification categories set out, which had been validated by experts in education and qualitative research.

2.3. *Procedur*

The first phase involved the initial planning of the research, during which the research topic was identified, together with the primary and secondary objectives and the research questions. A review of the relevant literature on external and internal barriers, the glass ceiling, and leadership, among other themes, was also carried out in this phase. In addition, a database was created containing data on autonomous communities, public universities, and social science didactics faculty staff. In the case of the University of Alicante, we selected, as a sample, the female teachers from the Faculty of Education at the University of Alicante, regardless of their area of knowledge. Thus, it was possible to extract relative and absolute data on faculty staff according to sex, autonomous community, and university. Likewise, the email addresses of social science didactics faculty staff were gathered, thus creating a database of contact details.

In the development phase, an initial draft of the data collection tool was developed, in this case the questionnaire. After some modification, the tool was created, and was then validated by two female experts from the University of Barcelona and the University of A Coruña. Certain aspects highlighted by the validators were modified, in order to reduce limitations and improve the tool. During this phase, the data collection tool (the survey) was shared with research participants via Google Forms.

In the final phase, results were obtained through quantitative and qualitative analysis. For the quantitative analysis, the program IBM SPSS Statistics 25 was used, while MAXQDA 2018 software was used for the qualitative analysis. The results were subsequently presented and discussed, and a series of conclusions were reached.

3. Results

In terms of the quantitative results, Table 1 shows that in relation to item 1, "As an institution, the university is a masculinized space", 23.5% (n = 4) of participants totally disagreed with this statement, 11.8% (n = 2) strongly disagreed, 5.9% (n = 1) disagreed, 35.3% (n = 6) neither agreed nor disagreed, 17.6% (n = 3) agreed, and 5.9% (n = 1) strongly agreed. The mean value for this item, on a scale of 1 to 7, was 3.29, the median was 4.00, and the mode was 4.

Table 1. Analysis of the results for item 1: “As an institution, the university is a masculinized space”.

Values	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency	Mean Value (from 1 to 7)
Totally disagree	4	23.5	3.29
Strongly disagree	2	11.8	
Disagree	1	5.9	
Neither agree nor disagree	6	35.3	
Agree	3	17.6	
Strongly agree	1	5.9	
Totally agree	0	0	

Source: Author’s own data.

In relation to item 2, “There are greater barriers for women than men when it comes to reaching top-level positions (reconciliation of work–life balance, time, dedication, circles of power, etc.)”, Table 2 shows that 23.5% (n = 4) of participants totally disagreed with this statement, 5.9% (n = 1) strongly disagreed, 11.8% (n = 2) disagreed, 5.9% (n = 1) neither agreed nor disagreed, 17.6% (n = 3) agreed, 5.9% (n = 1) strongly agreed, and 29.4% (n = 5) totally agreed. The mean value for this item, on a scale of 1 to 7, was 4.24, the median was 5.00, and the mode was 7.

Table 2. Analysis of the results for item 2: “There are greater barriers for women than men when it comes to reaching top-level positions (reconciliation of work–life balance, time, dedication, circles of power, etc.)”.

Values	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency	Mean Value (from 1 to 7)
Totally disagree	4	23.5	4.24
Strongly disagree	1	5.9	
Disagree	2	11.8	
Neither agree nor disagree	1	5.9	
Agree	3	17.6	
Strongly agree	1	5.9	
Totally agree	5	29.4	

Source: Author’s own data.

In relation to item 3, “There are no more barriers for women than for men as members of university faculty”, Table 3 shows that 23.5% (n = 4) of participants totally disagreed, 17.6% (n = 3) strongly disagreed, 11.8% (n = 2) disagreed, 5.9% (n = 1) neither agreed nor disagreed, 11.8% (n = 2) strongly agreed, and 29.4% (n = 5) totally agreed. The mean value for this item, on a scale of 1 to 7, was 3.94, the median was 3.00, and the mode was 7.

Table 3. Analysis of the results for item 3: “There are no more barriers for women than for men as members of university faculty”.

Values	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency	Mean Value (from 1 to 7)
Totally disagree	4	23.5	3.94
Strongly disagree	3	17.6	
Disagree	2	11.8	
Neither agree nor disagree	1	5.9	
Agree	0	0	
Strongly agree	2	11.8	
Totally agree	5	29.4	

Source: Author’s own data.

In relation to item 4, “I have faced barriers to promotion over the course of my academic career”, Table 4 shows that 41.2% (n = 7) totally disagreed with this statement, 11.8% (n = 2) neither agreed nor disagreed, 23.5% (n = 4) strongly agreed, and 23.5% (n = 4)

totally agreed. The mean value for this item, on a scale of 1 to 7, was 3.94, the median was 4.00, and the mode was 1.

Table 4. Analysis of the results for item 4: “I have faced barriers to promotion over the course of my academic career”.

Values	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency	Mean Value (from 1 to 7)
Totally disagree	7	41.2	3.94
Strongly disagree	0	0	
Disagree	0	0	
Neither agree nor disagree	2	11.8	
Agree	0	0	
Strongly agree	4	23.5	
Totally agree	4	23.5	

Source: Author’s own data.

In relation to item 5, “Women are not as skilled as men in managing areas, departments, vice-deanships, deanships, vice-chancellorships, or chancellorships”, Table 5 shows that 94.1% (n = 16) of participants totally disagreed with this statement, while 5.9% (n = 1) strongly disagreed. The mean value for this item, on a scale of 1 to 7, was 2.18, the median was 1.00, and the mode was 1.

Table 5. Analysis of the results for item 5: “Women are not as skilled as men in managing areas, departments, vice-deanships, deanships, vice-chancellorships, or chancellorships.”.

Values	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency	Mean Value (from 1 to 7)
Totally disagree	16	94.1	1.06
Strongly disagree	1	5.9	
Disagree	0	0	
Neither agree nor disagree	0	0	
Agree	0	0	
Strongly agree	0	0	
Totally agree	0	0	

Source: Author’s own data.

In relation to item 6, “Women and men do not share the same leadership characteristics”, Table 6 shows that 70.6% (n = 12) of participants totally disagreed with this statement, 5.9% (n = 1) disagreed, 5.9% (n = 1) neither agreed nor disagreed, 5.9% (n = 1) agreed, 5.9% (n = 1) strongly agreed, and 5.9% (n = 1) totally agreed. The mean value for this item, on a scale of 1 to 7, was 2.18, the median was 1.00, and the mode was 1.

Table 6. Analysis of the results for item 6: “Women and men do not share the same leadership characteristics”.

Values	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency	Mean Value (from 1 to 7)
Totally disagree	12	70.6	2.18
Strongly disagree	0	0	
Disagree	1	5.9	
Neither agree nor disagree	1	5.9	
Agree	1	5.9	
Strongly agree	1	5.9	
Totally agree	1	5.9	

Source: Author’s own data.

In relation to item 7, “I have not had a mentor (adviser/guide) during my academic and professional career”, Table 7 shows that 41.2 % (n = 7) of participants totally disagreed with this statement, 5.9% (n = 1) strongly disagreed, 11.8% (n = 2) disagreed, 11.8% (n = 2) neither agreed nor disagreed, 5.9% (n = 1) agreed, and 23.5% (n = 4) totally agreed. The mean value for this item, on a scale of 1 to 7, was 3.29, the median was 3.00, and the mode was 1.

Table 7. Analysis of the results for item 7: “I have not had a mentor (adviser/guide) during my academic and professional career”.

Values	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency	Mean Value (from 1 to 7)
Totally disagree	7	41.2	3.29
Strongly disagree	1	5.9	
Disagree	2	11.8	
Neither agree nor disagree	2	11.8	
Agree	1	5.9	
Strongly agree	0	0	
Totally agree	4	23.5	

Source: Author’s own data.

In relation to item 8, “I have delayed motherhood for my professional career”, Table 8 shows that 35.5% (n = 6) of participants totally disagreed with this statement, 5.9% (n = 1) strongly disagreed, 5.9% (n = 1) neither agreed nor disagreed, 11.8% (n = 2) agreed, 11.8% (n = 2) strongly agreed, and 29.4% (n = 5) totally agreed. The mean value for this item, on a scale of 1 to 7, was 4.06, the median was 5.00, and the mode was 1.

Table 8. Analysis of the results for item 8: “I have delayed motherhood for my professional career”.

Values	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency	Mean Value (from 1 to 7)
Totally disagree	6	35.5	4.06
Strongly disagree	1	5.9	
Disagree	0	0	
Neither agree nor disagree	1	5.9	
Agree	2	11.8	
Strongly agree	2	11.8	
Totally agree	5	29.4	

Source: Author’s own data.

In relation to item 9, “I have experienced sexist or chauvinistic behavior from male colleagues”, Table 9 shows that 52.9% (n = 9) of participants totally disagreed with this statement, 5.9% (n = 1) strongly disagreed, 5.9% (n = 1) disagreed, 11.8% (n = 2) agreed, 11.8% (n = 2) strongly agreed, and 11.8% (n = 2) totally agreed. The mean value for this item, on a scale of 1 to 7, was 2.94, the median was 1.00, and the mode was 1.

Table 9. Analysis of the results for item 9: “I have experienced sexist or chauvinistic behavior from male colleagues”.

Values	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency	Mean Value (from 1 to 7)
Totally disagree	9	52.9	2.94
Strongly disagree	1	5.9	
Disagree	1	5.9	
Neither agree nor disagree	0	0	
Agree	2	11.8	
Strongly agree	2	11.8	
Totally agree	2	11.8	

Source: Author’s own data.

In relation to item 10, “Reconciliation of work–life balance would not remove barriers faced by female academics”, Table 10 shows that 17.6% (n = 3) of participants totally disagreed with this statement, 5.9% (n = 1) strongly disagreed, 17.6% (n = 3) disagreed, 5.9% (n = 1) neither agreed nor disagreed, 17.6% (n = 3) agreed, 17.6% (n = 3) strongly agreed, and 17.6% (n = 3) totally agreed. The mean value for this item, on a scale of 1 to 7, was 4.24, the median was 5.00, and the mode was 1.

Table 10. Analysis of the results for item 10: “Reconciliation of work–life balance would not remove barriers faced by female academics”.

Values	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency	Mean Value (from 1 to 7)
Totally disagree	3	17.6	4.24
Strongly disagree	1	5.9	
Disagree	3	17.6	
Neither agree nor disagree	1	5.9	
Agree	3	17.6	
Strongly agree	3	17.6	
Totally agree	3	17.6	

Source: Author’s own data.

4. Discussion

Overall, there was no majority opinion as to whether the university is a masculinized space or institution. However, the values indicated a tendency towards the perception that the university is not a masculinized institution. The most common value was neither agreeing nor disagreeing (Table 10), which could be understood as a direct result of women playing an increasingly active role in society and public life, in recent years (if we consider, for example, how in recent years more and more positions of management, responsibility, and power have been occupied by women) [1]. Another possible interpretation is the lack of awareness; the normalization of gender inequality in the university, thus making it invisible [27].

Additionally, this relates to the statement on whether there are greater barriers for women than for men in reaching high-level positions (work–life balance, time, dedication, power circles, etc.), for which the participants demonstrated total agreement (Table 3). The barriers facing women, specifically female university professors and academics, in terms of their professional development, can be seen as either internal or external [10,28,29]. Despite the complexity of classifying barriers in this way [2], internal barriers can be seen in the form of gender stereotypes, or a lack of female role models for women. On the other hand, external barriers are evident in factors such as labor discrimination, sexual and psychological harassment at work, fewer opportunities for career development or promotion within an organization, and the absence of policies promoting the reconciliation of work–life balance [11,30].

We did not find a majority opinion for the idea that there are more barriers for women than for men, as members of the university faculty. Furthermore, almost half of the participants strongly agreed with this idea, and another large part of the participants strongly disagreed. The same applied to the idea that female teachers have faced barriers to promotions over the course of their academic career. The majority of the sample strongly disagreed with the idea, but a large part of the participants strongly agreed and totally agreed with the statement. Despite not considering the university to be a masculinized institution, that is, such as in the past when university was an institution created by and for men, the female academics taking part in this study did stress that women face greater barriers than their male counterparts. For example, when it comes to attaining top-level positions, positions of power related to management, and responsibility and leadership, such as the management of knowledge areas, or the coordination of studies. Additionally, they face greater barriers in the professional field, as it requires greater availability and dedication to reach professional levels such as full professors, contracted professors, or

senior professors. Female academics do perceive barriers—understood as a series of factors that prevent, complicate, impede, or fail to facilitate women’s professional development—such as double working hours, maternity, work–life balance or time management [14]. Barriers are perceived in relation to promotion and access to top-level jobs, but not so much in terms of the perceived barriers faced by men and women as faculty members, at levels with less power and responsibility, even though women have the same capabilities as men to comprehensively manage areas, departments, vice-deanships, deanships, vice-chancellorships, and chancellorships (Table 5). Patriarchal social structures have in many cases led women themselves, to participate in processes of exclusion, where the oppressed adopt the framework of the oppressor, as mentioned above [5]. For this reason, it is notable that while women do not perceive there to be barriers to their professional development, they do indeed emphasize having had to delay motherhood in order to prioritize their professional career (Table 8), a lack of female role models in universities to inspire or offer support, together with a normalization of sexist or chauvinistic attitudes, among male colleagues (Table 9).

We observed that almost all of the participants completely disagreed with the statement regarding the idea that women are not as skilled as men in managing areas, departments, vice-deanships, deanships, vice-chancellorships, or chancellorships. Moreover, this statement is directly related to the statement regarding the idea that women and men do not share the same leadership characteristics, which the participants also strongly disagreed with. It is not the case that women do not have the cognitive abilities, management skills or leadership skills that make them worthy of being in positions of power; it is a question of gender and is directly related to a woman’s own capacity for reproduction, and to the historical and cultural traditions that women have lived through, with the female gender being in charge of household chores [4,28,31]. Men have not had to live with these traditions and have been able to develop fully in the job sector. The glass ceiling refers precisely to the barriers preventing many highly personally and professionally capable women, from reaching managerial roles, or positions of greater power and responsibility [3].

The majority of the participants chose the “totally disagree” value for the statement regarding the presence of a mentor (adviser or guide), during their academic and professional career (Table 7). This result shows that they have improved, compared to other studies, in terms of their professional experiences with mentors and departmental networks [23].

Participants revealed that they agree, strongly agree, and totally agree to the statement regarding having delayed motherhood for their professional career (Table 8). This is where the need to analyze and study how gender for women entails a series of burdens (in the personal, family, and work spheres) is specifically shown [15].

On the other hand, a large part of the sample totally disagreed with the statement regarding the idea of experiencing sexist or chauvinistic behavior from male colleagues, although there were still women who agreed, strongly agreed, and totally agreed with this idea (Table 9). This result showed that external barriers based on gender discrimination, or sexual or sexist comments, still exist in an institution such as a university [11,27,31], although not in the vast majority of cases.

Similarly, there is no clear opinion as to whether the reconciliation of work–life balance is a possible means to mitigate these barriers, although some of the participants found themselves agreeing, strongly agreeing and totally agreeing with this statement (Table 10). In the case of women, it is they who are responsible for domestic responsibilities and the care of all family members, while at the same time they want to continue to progress in their professional careers, which makes it very difficult for them to balance work and family life [6].

5. Conclusions

Here we present the conclusions of the research carried out. Firstly, despite perceiving fewer difficulties in relation to professional development—as seen in participants sometimes denying that problems exist—in most cases, it was found that female academics

continue to encounter barriers that relate directly to the gender roles and stereotypes imposed by the patriarchal system. An example of this are barriers relating specifically to delayed motherhood and work–life balance, and sexist or chauvinistic workplace relations or attitudes [27,31]. These barriers reveal how female academics cope in environments imbued with gender roles and stereotypes, as mentioned above.

Therefore, it is important to pause and reflect critically on how, in most cases, female academics themselves normalize the barriers they face; for example, delayed motherhood or sexist comments from their male counterparts, seeing these barriers to be an outcome or characteristic of the profession itself, rather than as internal and external barriers [4,27,31].

Secondly, it was found that although female participants perceive that they have the same capacity as their male colleagues in all cases (Table 5), half of them also perceive barriers due to the fact that they are women (Table 3), as well as some sexism (Tables 4 and 9) and feel that work–life balance measures do not reduce these barriers (Table 10), similar to other studies [4].

Thirdly, if the goal is really to achieve a fairer, more equal society, and specifically to achieve this within academia, it is crucial that there are female role models in positions of power, responsibility, and management, who offer an impetus, model, and mentorship to female academics working at a lower level. This would show the new generations of female academics clear evidence that the glass ceiling can be broken [4,29,32,33].

This study includes an analysis of the perception of the barriers encountered by female lecturers in different areas of knowledge in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alicante, and how this affects their professional development and promotion. It also provides an analysis of the current situation at the university, in terms of gender and, above all, the perception of women who work in the education sector and are role models and mentors for new generations of female academics, and doctoral students [13,34].

One of the possible limitations is the small sample size, although we stress that we are analyzing subjective issues, of perception on the part of the academics, and that is the value of the study. This limitation will be taken into account in our future research, by expanding the sample or using other data collection techniques.

This article did not set out to provide a clear assessment of the barriers facing female academics in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alicante, Spain, but rather to demonstrate and analyze how female academics perceive that institution, in terms of the difficulties and barriers they face in the workplace. We recognize the university as a reflection of today's society and at the same time as a space for democratic dialogue, in which it is necessary to continue contributing to gender equality through gender analysis in all areas of the university.

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