

Majority, Yet Undervalued: Gender Inequalities in the Brazilian Public Sector

Majoritárias, Porém Subvalorizadas: Desigualdades de Gênero no Serviço Público Brasileiro

Mayoritarias, Pero Subvaloradas: Desigualdades de Género en el Servicio Público Brasileño

RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar as desigualdades de gênero no serviço público brasileiro, com ênfase na sub-representação feminina em cargos de liderança e nas distorções salariais. Trata-se de um estudo qualitativo, baseado em análise documental e bibliográfica, utilizando dados secundários do Anuário de Gestão de Pessoas no Serviço Público de 2024 e outras fontes oficiais. Os resultados indicam que, embora as mulheres componham a maioria do funcionalismo público, continuam sub-representadas em posições de poder, recebem salários médios inferiores e estão concentradas em áreas sociais e de apoio. Conclui-se que a persistência das desigualdades de gênero evidencia a necessidade de reformulação das estruturas institucionais, valorização de competências relacionais e ampliação do acesso feminino à liderança.

DESCRIPTORES: Equidade de Gênero; Administração Pública; Liderança; Mulheres; Política de Recursos Humanos.

ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze gender inequalities in the Brazilian public sector, with an emphasis on the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions and wage disparities. It is a qualitative study based on documentary and bibliographic analysis, using secondary data from the 2024 Public Service Human Resources Management Yearbook and other official sources. The results show that although women make up the majority of public servants, they remain underrepresented in decision-making positions, receive lower average salaries, and are predominantly concentrated in social and support areas. The persistence of gender inequalities highlights the need to reform institutional structures, value relational skills, and expand women's access to leadership.

DESCRIPTORS: Gender Equity; Public Administration; Leadership; Women; Human Resources Policy.

RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar las desigualdades de género en el sector público brasileño, con énfasis en la subrepresentación de las mujeres en cargos de liderazgo y en las disparidades salariales. Se trata de un estudio cualitativo basado en análisis documental y bibliográfico, utilizando datos secundarios del Anuario de Gestión de Personas en el Servicio Público de 2024 y otras fuentes oficiales. Los resultados muestran que, aunque las mujeres constituyen la mayoría del funcionariado público, siguen subrepresentadas en los puestos de toma de decisiones, reciben salarios promedio más bajos y están predominantemente concentradas en áreas sociales y de apoyo. La persistencia de las desigualdades de género pone de relieve la necesidad de reformar las estructuras institucionales, valorar las habilidades relacionales y ampliar el acceso de las mujeres al liderazgo.

DESCRIPTORES: Equidad de Género; Administración Pública; Liderazgo; Mujeres; Política de Recursos Humanos.

RECEIVED: 04/13/2025 APPROVED: 04/28/2025

How to cite this article: Carvalho ALM, Antloga CS. Majority, Yet Undervalued: Gender Inequalities in the Brazilian Public Sector. Saúde Coletiva (Edição Brasileira) [Internet]. 2025 [acesso ano mês dia];15(95):15580-15589. Disponível em: DOI: 10.36489/saudecoletiva.2025v15i95p15580-15589



Ariana Lana Moraes Carvalho

Master's student in the Postgraduate Program in Clinical Psychology and Culture at the University of Brasília

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9706-3440>



Carla Sabrina Antloga

Associate Professor in the Department of Clinical Psychology and the Postgraduate Program in Clinical Psychology and Culture at the University of Brasília (UnB).

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4105-6708>

INTRODUCTION

Although the presence of women in the Brazilian public service has grown significantly over the last few decades, this quantitative advance has not been accompanied by a structural transformation in power relations and institutional recognition. In a country marked by historical inequalities, the State should be an exemplary space for promoting equality. However, data shows that, despite being the majority among civil servants, women continue to be concentrated in entry-level positions, care areas and positions of lesser hierarchical prestige.⁽¹⁾

National and international literature on work, gender and public institutions has shown that gender inequality in state bureaucracies is not a one-off deviation, but a structural characteristic of organizations. Joan Acker⁽²⁾ has already argued that organizational systems are permeated by gender relations that shape not only everyday interactions, but also evaluation, leadership and advancement criteria. In Brazil, studies such as those by da Silva Reis and de Freitas⁽³⁾ and Migueis⁽⁴⁾ reinforce this diagnosis by pointing out how functional mobility patterns and the distribution of institutional tasks penalize female trajectories.

When analyzing the composition of the Brazilian State's workforce, we find a central paradox: women are the majority in public service, especially in municipal administrations, but they continue to be underrepresented in management positions and in

the most valued careers. According to the Yearbook of Human Resources Management in Public Service⁽⁵⁾, this asymmetry reveals that formal equality is still far from being achieved as real equality. Such inequalities are not explained solely by individual factors, but by institutional arrangements that reproduce symbolic barriers and exclusionary practices.

In this article, we propose a critical analysis of gender inequalities in the Brazilian public service, focusing on the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions and the persistent wage inequality. The investigation will be conducted based on data from the Yearbook of Personnel Management in the Public Service⁽⁵⁾, prepared by the organization República.org, articulating recent empirical evidence with specialized literature on work, gender and public administration.

METHOD

This is a qualitative, descriptive and documentary study, developed based on the analysis of publicly available secondary data. The research was conducted remotely between February and April 2025, using as its main source the Yearbook of Personnel Management in the Public Service – 2024, prepared by the civil society organization República.org.

República.org is an institution dedicated to transforming personnel management in the public sector, based on data and evidence. The Yearbook brings together information from official databases such as the Continuous PNAD (IBGE), the Statistical Person-

nel Panel (PEP) and INFOGOV, organized with the aim of identifying inequalities, stereotypes and challenges of the workforce in the Brazilian State.

The inclusion criteria were documents and data panels with an analytical breakdown by gender, with national coverage and updated up to 2024. Data that did not allow for disaggregation by gender or whose methodologies were unavailable were excluded from the analysis. The population of interest referred to Brazilian public servants from the three spheres (municipal, state and federal), including permanent and commissioned positions. Data selection was guided by variables related to the distribution of civil servants by gender, career, leadership level, area of activity and average salary. Data interpretation was carried out through thematic analysis, associating quantitative results with critical scientific literature on gender, work and public administration. The information extracted was systematized in comparative tables and examined in light of the contributions of authors such as Joan Acker and scholars in the field.

As there was no collection of primary data, direct involvement of participants or use of sensitive data, the research is exempt from submission to the Research Ethics Committee, in accordance with the terms of Resolution No. 510/2016 of the National Health Council.

RESULTS

The most recent data on the profile of Brazilian civil servants reveal

important advances in the presence of women in the sector, but also highlight the persistence of institutional barriers to gender equality. In the first quarter of 2024, women represented 56.8% of the public sector workforce, with a majority especially in municipalities, where they made up 65.0% of active contracts. In the states, the distribution was relatively balanced (50.7% women), while in the federal government the female presence was substantially lower, with only 36.2% of contracts.⁽⁵⁾

This distribution highlights a feminization of public service in areas with greater decentralization and less decision-making power, according to the Yearbook of Human Resources Management in Public Service.⁽⁵⁾ Women are concentrated in areas such as education, health and social assistance, traditionally associated with care and, consequently, with less symbolic prestige and lower average pay.

However, despite their significant presence, women continue to be underrepresented in positions of institutional power. Data from the National School of Public Administration indicate that, although 45.2% of the workforce in the Federal Public Administration is made up of women, only 38% hold senior leadership positions and 43% are in middle management positions.⁽¹⁾ The underrepresentation is even more evident in Senior Management Advisors (SMA) positions: at the lowest levels (1 to 3), women make up 48% of those occupying them, but this proportion drops to 17% at DAS-6 level, the highest in the federal hierarchy.^(01; 05)

These structural inequalities are also reflected in pay. In 2022, women received, on average, 87% of the average salary of men in the federal public service, even in positions of similar complexity.⁽⁵⁾ This disparity is not justified by differences in qualifications or dedication, but rather by institutional factors that limit women's

advancement in more prestigious and remunerative careers.

Another important fact concerns the intersectionality between gender and race. Black women represent the largest group in the public service (29.3%), but they are also those who occupy, proportionally, the most precarious positions and those with the lowest salaries. While white women make up 26.8% of the workforce, black men represent 23.3% and white men, 19.2%.⁽⁵⁾ In the federal context, the majority of leadership positions continue to be occupied by white men, indicating the maintenance of exclusionary structures based on historical social markers.

These patterns reflect what Acker has already theorized as “gendered organizations” — organizational structures that produce and reproduce gender inequalities even without formal exclusion rules.⁽²⁾ This pattern is also reinforced by national studies that show how, in Brazil, women face specific barriers to their career advancement, even with higher levels of education.^(03; 04)

In short, the data show that the greater presence of women in public service does not automatically translate into equal access to power and institutional recognition. The so-called “glass ceiling” continues to operate in a subtle but effective way, limiting the possibilities for women to advance, especially those who belong to racialized groups. Gender equity in the Brazilian public sector is still a project under construction, which requires affirmative action policies, a review of promotion practices, and a cultural change in the organizational structures of the State.

DISCUSSION

An analysis of the composition of the Brazilian civil service allows us to understand that gender inequalities in the state sector do not arise only

from the absence of inclusive norms, but above all from the persistence of institutional structures that naturalize asymmetries of power and prestige. The majority presence of women in social areas and in spheres with less decision-making visibility reflects the internalization, by public institutions, of logics of sexual division of labor already consolidated in the private market. As already pointed out by Acker⁽²⁾ Public and private organizations not only reflect but also produce gender in their daily structure.

These findings are in line with previous studies that show that the presence of women in bureaucracies is not, in itself, a guarantee of institutional transformation. Meanwhile, da Silva Reis and de Freitas⁽³⁾ argue that women's access to the world of work — even in the most educated segments — continues to be conditioned by social gender expectations, often incompatible with the requirements of leadership positions. This tension between “presence” and “power” was recently updated by Migueis⁽⁴⁾, by demonstrating that policies to promote diversity, although relevant, still clash with an organizational culture that devalues female skills and imposes veiled barriers to career advancement.

As Machado reinforces⁽⁶⁾, these barriers are often invisible, but they persistently structure institutional daily life. The author highlights that subjective promotion criteria, informality in choices and the requirement of continuous availability penalize female trajectories and contribute to the naturalization of exclusion at the highest levels of power.

This criticism is echoed in Hirata's analysis⁽⁷⁾, which identifies the maintenance of a patriarchal logic in the organization of work, even in formal contexts of equity. The author demonstrates how the sexual division of labor remains as a structuring axis of inequalities, updated by new forms of management and control. Hira-

ta also proposed, in a previous work, the notion of a “new sexual division of labor”, in which women’s insertion in institutional spaces occurs without the effective redistribution of responsibilities.⁽⁷⁾

Reis, Bastos and Antloga⁽⁸⁾ add to this debate the perspective of women’s illness in public service, pointing out that the overload and versatility — required and naturalized — generate significant impacts on mental and emotional health. Women’s work continues to be constructed under the sign of selflessness, and is rarely valued institutionally.

These empirical findings are reinforced by recent institutional diagnoses, such as those presented by the Movimento Pessoas à Frente⁽⁹⁾, who identify the persistent presence of a “concrete ceiling” in the federal public service. Despite the growing presence of women in public careers, women still occupy a significantly smaller proportion of senior leadership positions, especially in strategic areas of the State. The report shows that recruitment and promotion structures still favor historically male profiles, with selection criteria that value permanent availability, informal networks, and leadership styles traditionally associated with men. This asymmetry not only restricts women’s functional advancement, but also perpetuates the logic of undervaluing relational, communication, and care skills — often associated with women — in institutional management practices.

Based on feminist critique of labor, Hirata and Kergoat⁽¹⁰⁾ propose understanding the sexual division of labor as a historical and relational construction, marked by gender hierarchies that permeate both the productive and reproductive spheres. For the authors, gender inequality cannot be addressed solely through formal inclusion measures — it is necessary to transform the symbolic and material structures that sustain the separation between

“male work” and “female work.” This division, although constantly reinterpreted, remains central to the organization of work and the reproduction of inequalities in public and private institutions.

This point is reinforced by Santos et al.⁽¹¹⁾, who, when analyzing the profile of female entrepreneurs in Brazil, identified that many build independent careers as a strategy to escape the exclusionary structures of formal work. Although this is the case for the private sector, the findings apply to the public context, revealing a common pattern of invisibility and devaluation of female skills. Therefore, the data and specialized literature converge on the conclusion that gender inequality in public institutions will not be overcome by specific measures. A structural movement of change is necessary, which alters the evaluation criteria, the valued leadership styles and the personnel management policies, in order to create real paths of advancement and recognition for women in the State.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze gender inequalities in the Brazilian public service, with an emphasis on the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions and wage distortions between men and women. Based on the analysis of secondary data and specialized literature, it became clear that, although women represent the majority of the workforce in various spheres of public administration, their presence does not translate into hierarchical recognition, equal pay or real opportunities for professional advancement.

The persistence of these inequalities reveals that the advances achieved in recent decades have been essentially quantitative, without, at the same time, a qualitative transformation of institutional structures. Women continue to

be concentrated in areas linked to care and direct service to the population, which have historically been undervalued both symbolically and in terms of wages. In addition, they face multiple, often invisible, barriers, ranging from informal promotion criteria to institutionally legitimized and markedly masculinized leadership styles.

The analysis also revealed that the intersection between gender, race and class reinforces the reproduction of inequalities, affecting black and peripheral women even more severely. The lack of policies for retention, appreciation and promotion with an intersectional focus deepens the mechanisms of exclusion and invisibility of these trajectories within public institutions. Even with normative initiatives aimed at promoting diversity, the results are still insufficient to reverse a structural pattern of exclusion.

A limitation of this study is its dependence on secondary and aggregated sources, which makes it impossible to deepen the analysis around the subjective experiences and micro-institutional mechanisms that operate in the daily practices of public management. Qualitative studies, focused on listening to female civil servants and analyzing the internal dynamics of recruitment, evaluation and promotion, can contribute significantly to the deepening of the theme.

Future research can also explore comparisons between sectors, careers and federative spheres, as well as investigate the effects of affirmative gender and race policies in the long term. Impact assessments of these policies, as well as critical analysis of institutional discourses on equity, are important ways for the public service to move forward in a concrete way towards a more fair, representative management that is committed to equal opportunities for all people.

REFERENCES

1. Masson P, Viana R. Além do teto de vidro: o desafio da equidade de gênero e raça no serviço público federal. Escola Nacional de Administração Pública – Enap; 2025 Mar 20 [citado 2025 abr 13]. Disponível em: <https://www.enap.gov.br/pt/acontece/noticias/desafios-de-acesso-das-mulheres-no-servico-publico-federal-brasileiro-uma-analise-de-genero-e-raca>
2. Acker J. Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender Soc.* 1990;4(2):139–58.
3. da Silva Reis S, de Freitas PA. (Des)igualdade de gênero no mercado de trabalho: uma questão de direitos humanos. *Rev Direito e Liberdade.* 2021;23(3):201–20.
4. Migueis AC. Medidas de promoção de diversidade no funcionalismo público estão funcionando? [Internet]. São Paulo: Sociedade Brasileira de Direito Público; 2022 [citado 2025 abr 12]. Disponível em: <https://sbdp.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Anna-Carolina-Migueis-Medidas-de-promocao-de-diversidade-no-funcionalismo-publico-estao-funcionando.pdf>
5. Campagnac V, Pessanha AL, Frias P, Sales AP. Anuário de gestão de pessoas no serviço público 2024 [Internet]. Rio de Janeiro: República.org; 2024 [citado 2025 abr 12]. Disponível em: <https://republica.org/publicacoes/anuario-de-gestao-de-pessoas-no-servico-publico-2024>
6. Machado N. Barreiras invisíveis: uma análise dos desafios na progressão da carreira feminina no serviço público. 2024.
7. Hirata H. Gênero, patriarcado, trabalho e classe. *Trab Necess.* 2023;21(45):1–13. Disponível em: <https://periodicos.uff.br/trabalhonecessario/article/view/59654>
8. Reis MP, Bastos JA, Antloga CS. Uma análise sobre trabalho e adoecimento feminino. *Saúde Coletiva (Barueri).* 2025;15(94):15341–56.
9. Movimento Pessoas à Frente. Mulheres no serviço público brasileiro: recomendações para o acesso, ascensão e permanência nos cargos de liderança [Internet]. 2024 [citado 2025 abr 13]. Disponível em: <https://movimentopessoasafrente.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/mulheres-no-servico-publico-brasileiro-recomendacoes-para-o-acesso-ascensao-e-permanencia-nos-cargos-de-lideranca.pdf>
10. Hirata H, Kergoat D. Atualidade da divisão sexual e centralidade do trabalho das mulheres. *Política & Trabalho: Revista de Ciências Sociais.* 2021;1(53):22–34. Disponível em: <https://doi.org/10.22478/ufpb.1517-5901.2020v1n53.50869>
11. Santos NM, Antloga C, Carvalho ALM, Andrade MBD, Guimarães LMS. Brazilian entrepreneur: integrative review of publications about the profile of the female brazilian entrepreneur. 2021.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS, FINANCIAL OR TECHNICAL SUPPORT, DECLARATION OF FINANCIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND/OR AFFILIATIONS:

This work was funded by the Federal District Research Support Foundation

(FAP-DF) and the National Council of State Research Support Foundations (CONFAP), through the Mobility Confap Italy Call 2023, Notice No. 71/2023.

The authors declare no conflict of financial interest and/or affiliations.