

# “Ridin’ Down the Highway” - reflections on the trajectories of women professors in academia

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## Abstract

*(i) Purpose:* Inquiries addressing gender show that women evaluate their success in distinct ways, which tend to be different from those used by males (Dyke & Murphy, 2006). Academic women struggle to perceive themselves successful using the standard social criteria (Hoskins, 2010, 2012), a struggle that is even harder in predominantly male areas, which have rites, symbols and rhythms not built by/for women. Bearing this in mind, my purpose is to better understand how academic women perceive their success in Accounting academia in Brazil, a predominantly male area.

*(ii) Method:* In order to attain this goal, I examined the trajectories of four female successful Accounting professors in Brazil. I used a qualitative approach based on in depth interviews.

*(iii) Results or Discussions:* My analysis allows to conclude that, to the same extent they are successful considering the so-called objective success criteria (Hoskins, 2010), by deeply examining barriers and boosters they faced during their journey, we realize the cost paid utter to a “long way to the top” but the compensations make possible “ridin’ down the highway.”

*(iv) Contributions:* Objective success criteria imply failures, drawbacks or negative consequences to other dimensions of women's lives, which may lead to an undervaluation of women's success in academia, related to the idea of partial success. This study intends to contribute by identifying barriers and boosters to pursue an academic career in Accounting in Brazil, marked by women's low level of participation. Furthermore, specific policies and actions would help to change the current situation by reducing costs or challenging traditional criteria used to evaluate academic success, in the case of women and other non-hegemonic groups.

*Keywords:* women; career success; academic success; gender; Accounting

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1 Excerpt from the song “It’s a Long Way to the Top”, by AC/DC, TNT Album, December 1975, Written by Angus Young, Malcolm Young and Bon Scott.

## Introduction

The meaning of career success has been researched in diverse settings and time frames. More recently, studies have incorporated a quest for gender differences. Inquiries that build on career success also show that women evaluate their own success in very diverse ways than their male counterparts (Dyke & Murphy, 2006). Dyke and Murphy (2006) find that women place importance in balancing personal relationships and show no regrets after "making career choices based on their personal values" (p. 366). On the other hand, "although financial rewards were not the only measure of success that most men used, it was an important component of success" (p. 363). So, based on those results, it seems that men do stick with a more traditional concept of success while women put importance in balancing relationships, in their personal lives and workplace as well as in being recognized.

Research also demonstrates that academic women struggle to perceive themselves successful using the standard social criteria (Hoskins, 2010, 2012). Kate Hoskins (2012) states that female professors seem unable to refer directly to the word "success," instead preferring the word "accomplishment" (p. 100). My argument is this is a situation that could lead to an undervaluation of women's success in academia and that it also relates to a concept of partial success in which the objective academic success for women implies failures, drawbacks or negative consequences to other dimensions of their lives (Hoskins, 2010, 2012). She proposes a typology of success that considers three different categories of it: objective, relative and subjective. On one side, the objective career success "is one's realization or attainment of a predefined goal or target, for example, career progression," thus referring "to the attainment of generally acknowledged achievements such as promotion"; on the other hand, relative success, it "is understood relationally and comparatively" and that it "alters over time and changes relational to its context"; finally, subjective career success "is understood as a subjective process related to feelings and emotions" (Hoskins, 2010, p. 17).

Other important consequence of adding a gender lens to this discussion is the acknowledgment that women's struggles in assessing their own success can be even harder in predominantly male areas, whose rites, symbols and rhythms are not built by/for women (Lehman, 1992, 2012; Haynes, 2008; Silva, 2016; Casa Nova, 2014).

Brazilian accounting academia is my focus in this paper. Accounting academia in Brazil is a predominantly male area, considering both quantitative (figures or numbers)

and qualitative (public image of the profession) aspects (Casa Nova, 2014). But over the years this scenario has changed with a growing proportion of female students choosing to pursue a degree in Accounting. Because of this, Nganga et al. (2018) argue that a process of feminization of the Accounting academia was in place from 2004 to 2016 in Brazil. Because of this, the authors called attention to the "necessity of implementing actions and policies which could guarantee the attraction and retention of female talents in the Brazilian Accounting academy" (Nganga et al., 2018, p. 1).

Bearing this context in mind, I propose to better understand how academic women perceive their success in Accounting academia in Brazil. Or, a little wider, I aim to understand how they perceive their career trajectories, and, in so doing, I try to capture both "successes" and "failures."

To do this, I examine the trajectories of female Accounting professors in Brazil. They are few, but understanding their trajectories, the barriers they have faced and the opportunities they have, and mainly how they conceptualize academic success has a great importance. My analysis concludes that, to the same extent we could argue they are successful when considering the objective success category, by examining deeply the barriers and boosters they faced during their walk, we realize the cost they paid to achieve the top. We also become aware of the compensations<sup>2</sup> they have had to make it possible to continue "ridin' down the highway".

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: after this introduction, in the next session, the theoretical framework is discussed, allowing us to understand women in science and to pose the question about how to measure female success; then, in the sequence, I describe the methods adopted in this research, detailing the data collection and analysis process; ending up with the final considerations, also opening avenues for future research and implications for practice.

## 2. Theoretical framework

This research started with a personal reflection about the constant feeling of being somehow an alien element in my profession. Then, at the urging of a colleague, my first step was to conduct research to understand the presence of women in Science, in a broad view. I remember when I found out what is, to the best of my knowledge, the

<sup>2</sup> I am not referring only to financial compensations, but instead I use this word with the meaning of "something that counterbalances or makes up for an undesirable or unwelcome state of affairs" (Oxford Living Dictionaries). Therefore, once more I am building on the concept of partial success.

first paper discussing the presence of women in Science: Alice S. Rossi's (1965) piece entitled "Women in Science: Why so few," published in *Science*. So, in this theoretical framework, I begin exactly from the starting point of my research: discussing the first papers that deal with the issue of women and science.

## 2.1 Women and science

Since 1965, when the seminal article by Alice S. Rossi (1965) was published, women absence (or small presence) in science has been questioned. Some points of her article refer to a time not too far from the feminist movements that, in the western society, sought to establish a new social role for women. Today, it is possible to think that the social context is very different and reflects the achievements of those feminist movements. Nevertheless, Rossi (1965) raises relevant questions to the advancement of women in science and conducts an analysis that seems applicable nowadays, posing that one of the challenges academic women face is still to conciliate family and work:

Most college-educated women in this country are married and living with their husbands and children. Whether we are interested in the status of women or in the needs of science or both, I do not think we can expect any appreciable increase in the representation of women in the top professions unless that fact is taken into account. As long as it is mostly spinsters or widows who are appointed or elected or promoted to a college presidency, a national commission, a senatorship, or a high post in a government agency or scientific institute, we cannot consider that a solution has been found to the problem of women's status in American society. Marriage, parenthood, and meaningful work are major experiences in the adventure of life. No society can consider that the disadvantages of women have been overcome so long as the pursuit of a career exacts a personal deprivation of marriage and parenthood, or the pursuit of happiness in marriage and family life robs a woman of fulfillment in meaningful work. (Rossi, 1965, p. 1197)

Nowadays in Brazilian academia, almost 60 years after Rossi's (1965) article, a movement called "Parent in Science" is posing the same question: how to balance academic career demands and family obligations? Conducting an open online survey, they found out that maternity leads to low productivity. By comparing productivity data (i.e. publication rate per year<sup>3</sup>) among female researchers with and without children, they conclude that the productivity of the former decreases after giving birth and only recovers four years later. For the women without children, the productivity follows a steady growing

<sup>3</sup> Is this not unfair to evaluate career success through this kind of measure, which is arguably heavily masculine?

tendency over the years (Andrade, 2018). The movement also conducted an extensive research, based on a web-survey answered by 1,182 academics (Parent in Science, 1998). In an open question, they gathered testimonials. One of the testimonials of an interviewee emphasizes that she was "afraid of not being able to continue in the graduate course" in face of the "high level of production required and that maternity certainly requires our time and dedication, which cannot be shared with work and research." The conflict among academic careers is clearly tied to the decision of not having children also because of the "complaint of my colleagues [who are] mothers."

I mentioned those decisions before, when I referred about partial success or to the concept of a type of success which implies failures or deprivations in other life dimensions. I also want to associate this concept of partial success with the feelings and difficulties that arise when living where you do not necessarily feel you belong, regardless of whether you are considered a successful professional or not.

In my literature review about the lack of women representation in science, a second piece caught my attention. As part of the section "My World," in the journal *Current Biology*, Christiane Nüsslein-Volhard published "Women in science - passion and prejudice," in 2008. Acting as a role model, being an exception in several environments, she affirms that her life was not easy, but the effect of the growing number of women in science is positive for those who are arriving now:

Open discrimination is now rarely encountered as a serious problem. It has not always been like that. In my early days, as representative of a small minority, I felt quite awkward, unprotected and often overlooked. (Nüsslein-Volhard, 2008, p. 185)

She also relates situations in which her competence was questioned because she was a woman. Her first experience with discrimination was when she tried to publish her thesis results, in relation to the decision of who the main author would be:

The project had been started by a rather fortuneless male graduate student and I had finished it producing all of the data. However, on the three-author letter to *Nature*, which I had written, I was made only second author. The graduate student, a good friend of mine, had a family — "he needs his career" was the comforting explanation. At the time, however, curiously enough, I even agreed to this! Such things as social considerations exerting an influence in assessing scientific contributions probably do not or at least should not happen anymore. (Nüsslein-Volhard,

2008, p. 185-186)

Those social conventions in science can still happen and affect the results of studies about authorship. They equally impact female professional recognition, career insertion and progression. Such aspects need to be highlighted in any research that proposes to examine the female presence in science by looking at authorship of journals' articles. Nevertheless, their impacts are objectively difficult to be addressed and measured, and we should consider not only changes in the order of authors but also other known phenomena related to the academic authorship as, for instance, ghost and honorary authorships.

Speaking from a privileged position in terms of professional success, Nüsslein-Volhard, Nobel Prize winner in 1985, geneticist and director of the Max Planck Institute, tell us that she has suffered different kinds of discrimination in her career. The situation of clear discrimination that Dr. Nüsslein-Volhard faced was during her post-doc. Her supervisor had the attitude of "giving women a chance" but at the same time making it clear that he expected them to fail because, a priori, women could not be great scientists – "there was no woman 'Einstein'" (Nüsslein-Volhard, 2008, p. 186). He believed, as she remembers, that in other careers women could excel, giving pottery as an example.

Even when Dr. Nüsslein-Volhard was nominated as the director of the Max Planck Institute, in 1984, she discovered that this position has never, before or after, been offered to someone with a space and budget so small:

But soon fate changed: Owing to very good working conditions and excellent students and postdocs my lab was very successful. Recognition came, which encouraged me to ask the president for an upgrade, and finally I was granted what my male colleagues had received without special merits. (Nüsslein-Volhard, 2008, p. 186)

Dr. Nüsslein-Volhard raises issues that, in her opinion, affect the interest of women in an academic career and proposes actions that could change how things are, like eradicating the lack of support and confidence of supervisors and directors, without creating protection against fair criticism, and maintaining the pressure level and challenge that all scientists need to develop their careers. She also highlights that often, due to a lack of self-confidence, women are shier, more modest and less convincing than their male colleagues with similar qualifications, a perception aligned with Sandberg's (2013) view. They are more likely to admit mistakes than men, a factor that is usually used against them and their

mistakes are less tolerable than their counterparts' since they are not protected by the male camaraderie and loyalty network (Nüsslein-Volhard, 2008), they are not members of the "old boys' club".

Alice Canabrava, who was a pioneering academic woman at Universidade de São Paulo (USP) and probably in Brazilian academia, refers to this feeling of not belonging to the club when she describes her career advancement. After finishing her PhD, she became a natural candidate to the Chair (equivalent to the full professorship) of American History (Blay & Lang, 2004):

In that way, involuntarily, I emerged, in the eyes of my male colleagues, as a possible candidate to the effective provision of the Chair [full professorship] of American History [...]. Since then, the circle of subtle hostility started to draw itself to me with evidence, to anonymously get tighter in one or other occurrences in the academic routine without altering the appearance of superficial friendliness (Blay & Lang, 2004, p. 98).

In another excerpt of her interview, she had kept no reservations against colleagues who opposed to her career advancements (Blay & Lang, 2004):

I did not hold resentments in relation to those who opposed my ascension at the University. Excellent persons, they were immersed in their time and environment, exponents of a society prejudiced against women. Do not suppose that I have been the only target of discrimination: this reached to all women. In my case, the resistance provoked the development of all the processes. In other cases, this process was interrupted or did not even start, given the dismissal of the female candidate, even voluntarily or imposed by the circumstances (Blay & Lang, 2004, p. 104).

Specifically in the researcher's training, the literature emphasizes the role of the differentiated socialization of women, which allows us to assume that sometimes it is not easy to be admitted to the club (Austin, 2002; Kohlstedt, 1978). The literature also discusses the importance of having women in leadership roles, serving as models and inspiration for the young ones interested in an academic career (Kezar & Lester, 2009), and identifies phenomena that can stop the progression and success of women in their careers such as "glass ceiling" (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009) or the "stained glass ceiling" (Silva, 2016), "critical mass" (Etzkowitz et al., 1994), or conditions of the academic environment during their entrance into the field (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008). Experts emphasize the importance of developing policies that allow a better reconciliation among the several roles (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008; Kelly, 2006), and different choices in

view of generations (Kezar & Lester, 2009).

Finally, in terms of research, experts complain about the secondary role that has been offered to women in terms of their research interests (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011) and publication of their findings (Hart, 2006). A study carried out by a research group at the University of Washington showed that the participation of women in the publication of scientific articles is increasing in all areas of knowledge in the world (West et al., 2013). However, women still occupy positions of low status: few studies have a woman as single, first or last author (West et al., 2013). The study used the Journal Storage database (JSTOR), a digital library with more than 1,900 academic journals of several countries, and it covered the period of four centuries (from 1665 to 2011). Jennifer Jacquet, one of the authors of the study, said that although it is possible to affirm that "for the authors there isn't better time than now," women only represent 21.9% of all authors identified in the database, and 17% of authors with single authorship (Pierro, 2013). In articles with co-authors, the study showed that few women occupied the first and last positions in the list of authors, which in many areas indicate the main researcher, the advisor or the research group coordinator. In addition to it, the study showed that topics related to education, sociology and family are the most common topics in articles with women as authors and topics such as math, philosophy, and economic methods, the less common. The study did not include topics related to engineering, physics, and other areas underrepresented in the JSTOR database.

More recent surveys conducted by publishing houses have shown that the challenging context persists (Emerald, 2022; De Kleijn et al., 2020). Regarding bias women face in academia, the research outcomes state that: 57% of female academics have been discriminated; four times more female academics than male have been discriminated against in a professional setting; 44% female academics compared to 11% males feel they have been held back from progressing professionally because of their perceived gender (Emerald, 2022). Regarding publication patterns, women researchers author fewer publications, the percentage of women who continue to publish is lower and the average citation impact of men is higher (De Kleijn et al., 2020).

Research outcomes also indicate that women's work is not valued and that women are offered less prestigious roles, usually linked to teaching and administrative positions (Park, 1996), which influences their career progression. On the other hand, teaching and administrative position are more tied to women's expectations and interests,

once they offer the possibility to collaborate and directly influence others, being tied to an emphasis in relationship and care, suggesting "that women's success may be measured by a different yardstick" (Dyke & Murphy, 2006, p. 371).

## 2.2 How to measure female success?

Success is not easy to measure. What is, for some, a clear evidence of great success, for others can be evaluated as "no more than my duties" or "this was the minimum to be attained for someone in my position". Some will depend on external appraisals of their own success level, while others will only be looking at their inner self to evaluate achievement. Promotions, position, earnings, all are used as external criteria to measure success, but usually those criteria do not consider the cost paid to obtain that promotion, to reach that position, to earn that compensation. Unfortunately, sometimes, the price is so high that even what others may call success hardly feels like it.

The meaning of career success has been researched in diverse settings and time frames. More recently, studies have incorporated a quest for gender differences. Dyke and Murphy's (2006) "How We Define Success: A Qualitative Study of What Matters Most to Women and Men" explores women and men's definition of success, and its impact on their career progress. They find that women place importance in balancing personal relationships and show no regrets after "making career choices based on their personal values" (p. 366). The authors conclude "[f]or the most part, these women seemed quite comfortable with the tradeoffs they had made" (p. 366). On the other hand, "although financial rewards were not the only measure of success that most men used, it was an important component of success" (p. 363). So, based on those results, it seems that men do stick with the traditional concept of success, which comprises wealth, power, prestige and status, while women put importance in balancing relationships, in their personal lives and workplace, and in being recognized. When talking about tradeoffs in career, in general, men considered independence and leisure. Interestingly enough, the authors emphasize that "[e]ven men who consciously reject material definitions of success may still be haunted by not measuring up to the provider ideal" (p. 365), while for women "[p]erhaps because [they] are not

judged primarily about their ability to provide materially for their families, they feel less guilty than men in making career choices based on their personal values" (p. 366). Some burdens related to gender roles lie heavily on men's shoulders. We should consider that women often work a second (or third) shift, since they are traditionally the ones responsible for family care. This could be the factor reverberating in the importance women place in relationships. Finally, we need to acknowledge other research that has found results contradicting this no-regret feeling, thus reporting cases of women expressing regrets and a sense of loss or guilt as a result of the choices they made about their professional career, identified as the cost of their professional success. Hoskins (2010) calls attention to the fact that the cost of success can be gendered, paid as expense of family commitments, emphasizing "a dilemma facing many working women negotiating a balancing act among the demands of their careers and those resulting from the needs of providing care and domestic support for a husband and/or family (Mavin & Bryan, 2002)" (p. 138).

Casa Nova (2014), investigating the trajectories of female full professors in Accounting academia in Brazil, finds in their discourse also a reference to the challenge of conciliating their academic career with the family commitments and having children. She also retrieves in their interviewees a sense that mother roles are unique, there is no substitute for it. Additionally, balancing academic and family lives becomes even more difficult when the family cycles (marriage, having children, raising children) conflict with specific career phases, for instance marrying and pursuing a PhD, or entering the academy and having children. Thus, in different moments, an academic woman has to choose between attending her biological clock and attaining a publishing record in order to get tenure or to be promoted. In other words, she will have to attend to her biological clock and accept that career phases and mothering stages can happen in the same moment. Even if she decides to postpone her personal plans they might conflict. (p. 176-177). For sure, those decisions affect her career advancement, and they do not have the same effect in the careers of her male counterparts.

Silva (2016), researching Black women trajectories in higher education institutions in Brazil, proposes the

concept of stained glass ceilings to describe the barriers they faced. As the author reinforces, "being discriminated throughout their lives not only for being women, but also for being black and often poor, they are, through a process of psychological violence, denied their identity as professionals enabled to exercise their functions, especially in positions of power and prestige" (Silva, 2016).

Describing her own trajectory while pursuing the PhD, Silva (2019, p. 1) emphasizes that, "[i]n addition to the several social markers of difference I carry, as always, barriers to the new one have been erected for and on all sides". But she explains that she persisted, because "[w]hen you trust and feel the relevance of your project, you must defend it from the very conception, up to the offspring presentation, as I did."

Nganga et al. (2021) add another challenge to the women presence in Brazilian Accounting graduate programs: work-life conflict. Problematizing their experiences, the conclusions indicate that "women play multiple roles, relegate their personal life, make the decision to postpone marriage and motherhood or postpone the entry to a doctorate" (p. 13). The decision to prioritize PhD, instead of other life dimensions, led to suffering and a sense of abandonment. More than that, these testimonials reiterate that academia is not prepared to contemplate the particularities of women who seek to reconcile their personal, family, or professional lives.

Inquiries that build on academic career success examining women also show that in this setting they evaluate their own success in a very diverse way than their male counterparts. Kate Hoskins (2012), in her book *Women and Success: Professors in the UK academy*, states that female professors seem unable to refer directly to the word "success," instead preferring the word "accomplishment" (p. 100). She proposes a typology of success that considers three different categories of success: objective, relative and perceived. She explains each type of success in her typology as follows:

*Objective career success*

*Success is understood as one's realization or attainment or predefined goal or target, for example, career progression. It refers to the attainment of generally acknowledged achievements such as promotion. Objective success is a product of personal agency.*



*Relative career success*

*Success is understood relationally and comparatively. It is a precarious state of success that alters over time and changes relational to its context.*

*Subjective career success*

*Success is individual and personal and understood as a subjective process related to feelings and emotions. It also alters over time and context. (Hoskins, 2012, p. 17)*

When analyzing her proposal, I thought I had found a hint or maybe a path to better understand the female perception of success. Putting all categories of success she proposed together, we can realize why a female full professor is unable to refer to herself as being successful. Full professorship is a part of the objective career success category. Once she starts to compare herself to other full professors, she may find it can take longer to achieve this position (relative career success) or she had to sacrifice her personal life, giving up having children (subjective career success). So, in the end, when weighing it all in the life account balance, it does not feel like success.

On the other hand, Sheryl Sandberg (2013), who is the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, in her book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* says women "should be leaning in" (p. 118) and trying to self-promote themselves-, even considering that self-promoting women are disliked (p. 658), acting as the others and not being "the other" in the male-dominated workplace. She affirms that "career progression often depends upon taking risks and advocating for oneself - traits that girls are discouraged from exhibiting" (p. 213). For many, her advice can be seen as blaming the victim. I had mixed feelings when I first read her book: Why do we have to play a game for which we were not often invited to define the rules?

Hoskins' (2012) book is my main reference in approaching female and male academic career success. The question is that unfortunately women have been struggling in finding themselves successful using the standard social criteria, which is more related to the objective career success in Hoskins' typology. On one hand, those objective success criteria do not contemplate feelings and emotions associated with sacrifices made to attain success. On the other hand, when comparing their trajectories to male colleagues using relative success measures, they conclude the price is much higher and, usually, the progression and recognition take longer. This situation could lead to an undervaluation of women's success in academia and relates to the idea of partial success, referred to before,

in which the objective academic success implies failures, drawbacks or negative consequences to other dimensions in their lives.

Considering the theoretical framework which states women perceive success differently from men and building on previous research examining success in the academic setting, I examine trajectories of Brazilian women that achieved the top of the academic career in Accounting. In doing so, this study aims to understand how the traditional social criteria of success undermine women's achievements in academia, in an analysis based on their life stories, their decisions and motivations, the barriers and boosters they might have found.

### 3. Methods

I used a qualitative approach based on in depth interviews with former female graduate students of a top-ranked university in an Accounting graduate program that work in the academia to understand how they conceptualize success. Three (out of the four) female accountants at the time in Brazil were interviewed, as well as a student that held an important political elected position.

As noticeable in the testimony of Dr. Nüsslein-Volhard, from a life story emerge many experiences can reverse perspectives and expectations of other lives. I collected women's testimonies who want to tell their personal and professional trajectories, highlighting factors that had fostered and hindered their academic careers. The qualitative approach, according to Luttrell (2009),

[i]s defined by an effort to highlight the meanings people make and the actions they take, and to offer interpretations for how and why. Qualitative research is committed to participants using their own words to make sense of their lives; it places an importance on context and process; it rests on dialectic between inductive and deductive reasoning; and uses iterative strategies to comprehend the relationship between social life and individual subjectivities.

Gall et al. (2007, p. 31) relate qualitative and quantitative approaches as different epistemological assumptions about the nature of scientific knowledge and how to achieve it. That is, depending on the assumption set that the researcher assumes, he or she will be led to one type of research. Using a qualitative approach, I expected to obtain evidence to analyze the specific impacts, to identify factors that might influence the insertion, presence,

permanence and ascension of women in Accounting academy in Brazil.

The interview guide was based on the literature review. The literature review included different theories that support the study about the women presence in academia. The interview guide was also oriented by my personal and professional experience as well as my own history. The interview guide was reviewed by a group of specialists in qualitative research. No pilot interview was conducted and the same interview guide was used throughout the field research. The interviews were developed in depth with accounting female full professors, that is women occupying the top of the academic career in a predominantly male area.

When I started my research in 2014, I looked to the top ranks in Accounting and I found out that again women have been there since 1998, when we had in Brazil the first female full professor. And they kept coming, achieving full professorship in the public universities that are the most prestigious in Brazil. We had back then in Accounting four female full professors in Brazil. These four women held the top of the academic career in an area in which there were about 508,000 accredited professionals in the Federal Accounting Council, 41% of women; 21 graduate accounting programs, with 262 permanent professors, of which 25% were women (CAPES, 2012; CFC, 2013); and more than 1,000 undergraduate programs being offered, in which 58% of the enrolled students were women.

Table 1 summarizes updated information about Brazilian female full professors in Brazil, to the best of my knowledge, including their names, institutions as well as the year they became full professors.

**Table 1** – List of Brazilian female full professors in accounting

Name	Institution	Year
Ilse Maria Beuren	Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina	1998
Nena Maria Geruza Cei	Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo	2004
Araçeli Cristina de Sousa Ferreira	Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro	2006
Sônia Maria da Silva Gomes	Universidade Federal da Bahia	2009
Maísa de Souza Ribeiro	Universidade de São Paulo	2010
Clea Beatriz Macagnan	Unisinos	2012
Adriana Maria Procópio de Araújo	Universidade de São Paulo	2015
Maria Naiula Monteiro Pessoa	Universidade Federal do Ceará	2016
Sirlei Lemes	Universidade Federal de Uberlândia	2016
Marcelle Colares	Universidade Federal do Ceará	2017
Fátima de Souza Freire	Universidade de Brasília	2017
Silvia Pereira de Castro Casa Nova	Universidade de São Paulo	2019
Sandra Ensslin Rolim	Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina	2019
Márcia Martins Mendes de Luca	Universidade Federal do Ceará	2020
Tânia Cristian Azevedo	Universidade Estadual de Feira de Santana	2021

Three of the four female full professors in that period in Accounting were interviewed, as well as one assistant professor that had an important politically elected position. In doing this, I used the objective success criteria as proposed by Hoskin (2012).



All interviewees agreed on being recorded and the recordings totaled 262 minutes. After transcribed, the interviews resulted in 92 written pages, as shown in Table 2. To protect their anonymity and guarantee confidentiality, but at the same time given them a name, I used pseudonyms from the Brazilian Women Pioneers in Science CNPq's project<sup>4</sup>.

**Table 2** – List of interviewees

Interviewee Pseudonym	Research area*	Position	Recording duration
Aida Espinola [L1]	Chemistry	Full-time professor	51:00:00
Therezinha Lins de Albuquerque [L2]	Psychology	Political elected position	75:00:00
Danuncia Urban [L3]	Biology	Full-time professor	92:38:00
Niede Guidon [L4]	Archeology	Full-time professor	44:15:00

Note: \*Research area of the scientist whose pseudonym was taken.

As a procedure to identify relevant topics or categories and to assure that no relevant aspects were omitted, while one researcher transcribed an interview, other researchers reviewed and highlighted the relevant passages. I made the final revision. Based on an interview transcript analysis, individual trajectories were grouped in terms of common or diverging points, indicating strategies of survival, confrontation or circumvention of the faced barriers.

After the transcription and revision processes were completed, the document with the highlighted passages was sent by email to each of the research participants with an Informed Consent Term. In the message, the participant was told that: the interview transcripts would be used only for academic research; the highlighted passages were judged related to the research topic, with greater possibility of inclusion; data and names mentioned during the interview would be in the research only if they were of public domain; regardless the fact that agreeing in participate and in having the interview record could be understood as an implicit consent, it was very important signing and returning the informed consent back.

Afterwards, another message was sent with an excerpt of the paper as an example of how the interviews' excerpts would be quoted in the final writing. In this message, the participants could decide if they prefer being identified when quoted or not. If they prefer not being named, a code system would be used instead of the names. Almost all interviewees agreed with interview transcript. In two cases, they raised a concern about colloquial speech

and asked to correct some terms and informal talk. In general, many took advantage of the opportunity to reinforce the research relevance and to acknowledge the innovative character "of such different kinds of historical report, within a research topic about female gender, to a different investigation". The only one that did not respond to this message had her interview included in the analysis because I consider the formal consent important but not mandatory, once I had the implied consent.

The final step encompassed the data analysis following the theoretical framework chosen in the literature review. Based on the interview transcriptions, the individual trajectories of female full professors were aggregated in convergent and divergent points, which allowed to 1) identify the motivations they had to pursue an academic career - the boosters, 2) identify barriers they encountered in their trajectories and, 3) determine how they conceptualize their success.

Given the limitations in length (word limit) and considering its relevance, more emphasis is placed on analyzing the last category, the conceptualization of success. As stated by Van Maanen (1998, p. xxv) "there are probably rules for writing a persuasive, memorable and publishable qualitative research article but, rest assured, no one knows what they are". In the analysis and discussion, a more interpretivist idea was sought, starting with a collage of the interview excerpts, as a way to preserve the voice and experience of the women who participated in the research.

## 4. Analysis and discussion

For this research, barriers are obstacles that obstruct the way and hinder the walking, preventing movement or access, and provoking the postponement of plans, abdication and sacrifices. On the other hand, boosters open the way and propel those women in directions sometimes not even expected or craved. They are like trampolines or slingshots, causing an acceleration of walking, encompassing opportunities, supports. Identifying boosters and barriers is somehow a different approach but still inspired in the idea of glass ceiling, or glass walls, or glass cliffs, hence based on identifying factors that function as barriers and affecting the entrance, permanence and advancement of women in academia. Here, I am adding the idea of boosters that can compensate or counterbalance the barrier effect.

<sup>4</sup> For those interested in knowing more about Brazilian Pioneers Women in Science, please refer to: <http://www.cnpq.br/web/guest/pioneiras-da-ciencia-do-brasil3>

#### 4.1 Decision to pursue an academic career

The reasons and motivations to pursue an academic career reflect many diverse situations and contexts. For one of the interviewees, it was the effect of financial resource needs, while she was attending the master and the PhD programs, and difficulty to conciliate with her job in a company. So entering the academy was part of a gradual process, in which the teaching activity was not secondary anymore but a central position. It was also a perception consequence that academic work brings the possibility of training, helping, collaborating with and integrating people. She states that

Teaching was a financial need, in the start. After that, I left my job in the company, and I kept only teaching, until I finished my master. Then, I thought that the PhD was there, so close: Why not do it? I did my PhD while already aware that I would dedicate myself to academic life. I identified myself with academic work. What made me identify myself was the possibility of training people, of bringing knowledge, alternative pathways for those that are looking for them. [...] And it is not only teaching, but also helping. To collaborate, I am not only collaborating with the student who is there, in the classroom, in that period, but also with all the people who are around. [L4]

This aspiration of contributing is in the speech of another interviewee, who also had previous work experience in private companies before starting her academic career, besides the understanding of financial sacrifice needs, thus complying with the binomial abdication-long life learning.

Understanding that academic life requires a long-term learning commitment and abdication, those are things that you must do. And I'd rather be happy than run for material, financial gains. Thus, if you can conciliate and do both, it is great. But dealing with contributing to people's development, I think that this is what motivates and incentivizes me the most. [L1]

It was exactly this perception of having a small financial retribution that postponed the idea of pursuing an academic career for another interviewee. However, when she was attending a certificate program, during the presentations and seminars she had in the classes, she found herself as a professor.

It was interesting to perceive that teaching could be great. I found myself teaching and my colleagues started saying: "You could teach!" And I began to teach my colleagues, those with difficulties [...] Then a hiring

process opened and a faculty member told me: "You talk about Accounting Theory" - I like Accounting Theory very much - "You can study this topic. We will have a hiring process. Why don't you apply?" [L2]

Finally, the limitation of the professional life in a company, where everything is already done and little remains to be completed, and the questioning of her condition to conciliate professional and teaching activities were the leading factors of the interviewees to dedicate fully to the academic life. Again, the recognition that a financial sacrifice had to be done.

I was at that time in charge of [position] in [company name] and I worked from morning to night. And it lacked something else, besides the routine in the company. And then I started working just two nights teaching in higher education. And in the sequence came this question about: "You are not as dedicated as you were before. What is happening? Are you not satisfied?" And this was very important. And then, in the company, they transferred me to another unit and I thought effectively what I wanted to do: "If I want to enter the academy, why would I accept this transference, if am I just starting in my academic career?" The institution where I was working [name of the institution], where we had a goal of restructuring the undergraduate program [...] Therefore, it was a very important moment, but it was mandatory having people in charge of the program. And then, I made my choice, between academia and a professional life in a company. [...] But I had some time to prepare myself financially. Financially it was a difficult decision, because my salary was reduced to one quarter. But the complaint, the dissatisfaction that I was feeling, gave me no condition to remain where I was. Everything comes completely defined in a company. The rules are already settled. You do not participate in the discussion of those rules. I thought that was bad for me. I was just a rule follower, being able to agree or not. And in the academy, you have a space for creation. [You have an] autonomy. And I think that you have the challenge of building, because I was in an institution where everything was to be done." [L3]

#### 4.2 Barriers and boosters

When entering the academic career, those women faced many barriers and challenges. The referral to an place predominantly masculine in the area was a constant, although the challenges perception implied by that situation was quite particular. The challenges were not about the recognized Accounting professional stereotype.

As you see, historically, our profession was more masculine. I think it is changing now. But, historically, it

has always been predominantly masculine. And, I think, because of our culture, "machismo" predominates. And, sometimes, when I told [people] I was studying accounting, people stared at me shocked and replied: "You haven't any of the characteristics of an accountant". [L1].

In another moment, they led to male work environments with leaders and students.

So, in [name of the institution], in the master program, when I entered as a faculty, they were all men and for a long period I worked only with men. All the top positions were masculine. It is the first time we have a female vice-rector [...] And in relation to the PhD students, we have, even in the master program, we have more men than women. [L3]

It led to situations in which the interviewees were often the only woman in a meeting. In those occasions, not agreeing with the group implied in having to go through a whole process of previous planning, preparation and positioning because of the difficulty in having a voice and in being given the opportunity to talk.

When I do not agree with something - all our program coordinators are men -, I am the only woman in the group. And we held monthly meetings with the pro-rector of research. I understood that I should be well prepared for the meetings, thus I always read all the material to be discussed in the meeting. At last, after I had spoken, the return was hard. In other words, in the group, you will only have the opportunity of speaking once. For men, the return [or having another turn] could happen. They impose themselves somehow. They interfere. We, women, are too respectful. Now, others are talking, and then your turn won't come. Thus, if you have the opportunity to talk, use it well, because you can have no other chance. [L3]

In another speech, special circumstances seemed to determine respectful climates and welcoming places, such as the fact of leading a younger faculty group or starting a project with that group.

I think I did not perceive any difference because a great part of the faculty was younger than I. This creates a difference, they always treated me with all due respect, both men and women. Even though there aren't many women in our department - in that time almost all were men. [...] I did not feel any typical situation of disrespect, of disagreement or lack of commitment because I was a woman. [L4]

So, in the first institution I worked for, it was interesting. And when we are all together, there are no stars, we hold each other and work for the cause. It is a reality. And then I think it was great, we kept learning with each other, we

went on idealizing situations, we fought through each situation. [L3]

Despite all that, it is an recognized place as having a very particular dynamic, with special codes and ceremonies that imply the possibility of a differentiated insertion and socialization. It is the old boys' club

So, technically it is not, because I see everyone as professionals. But there is a different environment. When you are in women's group, the discussion topics will be different from a men's group. Then, you learn to deal with many things that you do not especially enjoy, for instance, this kind of talking: "Do you enjoy [talking about] football?" "No, I do not enjoy football." All men enjoy talking about football. I think this, within boundaries. I never faced disrespect in those groups. But men's talking is men's talking. [L4]

Another aspect I had to learn how to deal with was the brevity of the discussions. Men have no patience for long meetings [...] You have to be very objective. You go to a meeting, and you have to bring: "It is this. I thought about this. And we are deliberating about this." Other ideas and points of views could emerge, but if you bring nothing ... [L3]

Sometimes, participating in this "club" implies understanding that the same code or rule does not necessarily apply to two distinct people. Identical attitudes could be interpreted in very particular ways.

I see it like this, when you impose yourself, when you use your authority in some situation, it's interpreted as PMS [premenstrual syndrome] and not as the usual attitude of a professional who does not agree with that situation. I still see this. I think that this prejudice still exists. In other words, a man is allowed to lose control any moment. A woman, if she loses control, it is a consequence of her period and not of a human being that in one moment does not agree with something. This I still can see. [L3]

It also implies, still, a certain dress code to avoid differentiation and to facilitate inclusion in the group, to be treated as equals.

One other thing is that I still think it is strong [is that] the dress code makes you better or worse included in the group. Dressing too femininely separates you from the group. In other words, it seems like you have to dress accordingly with the tribe to be respected to have the same value. [...] Hence, I think [you have to have] this care. Depending on the meeting I was going to, I would dress very similarly to the tribe to go to work. That means, thus, I get equal. I won't dare wearing a skirt to a meeting where I will face predominantly the masculine

gender. [L3]

The unwelcoming environment is also pointed out by Silva (2016, 2019) in researching the experience of Black women in higher education institutions. Based on that, she proposes the concept of stained glass ceilings (Silva, 2016), in which gender and race intersect in reinforcing barriers for women's advancement. Because of this, and additionally, she shows the need for persistence and belief in one's own project (Silva, 2019) as a way to circumvent these obstacles, which lead to the postponement of plans, abdication, and sacrifices.

In the opposite direction, dressing like a man is a strategy used to give visibility to women's issues and to make aware that there is a level of professionalism that needs to be respected.

As a woman, I always had this care. Then they ask: "Why do you dress like a man?" [I do that] Exactly to give visibility to the special look women must have. Even in this process, when we started, sometimes someone said: "Wow, she is pretty!" I had to be assertive. One must understand that there has to be professionalism there, because otherwise ... [L2]

And then comes the additional challenge of conciliating the academic career with family life, with having children. There are too many plates spinning in the air to be balanced, in parallel with the understanding that there is a unique role of motherhood that needs to be attended to.

In your personal life, a mother is irreplaceable. You can have an excellent husband, but the mother role has to be filled by the mother. Then, participating in events that demand absence is complicated. Even when it is possible, it is not easy. Even though my husband and son understand deeply, I think that balancing it all is too complex. Now, looking back to my trajectory, 90% of my colleagues were men. The few women I could talk too had problems similar to mine, in relation to being divided between professional life, academic life and personal life. The challenge of being divided between business life and teaching... That ended up being more teaching. I think this is it. [L4]

The issue resonant with the work-life conflict as proposed by Nganga et al. (2021), when analyzing PhD students trajectories. Another point to reflect upon is the social role assigned to women and reproduced here as "mother is irreplaceable". For this reason, the Parent in Science movement is defending having motherhood registered

on CV Lattes and considered in tenure and promotion (Staniscuaski et al., 2021). It is urgent, as proposed by the authors, that "funding agencies and universities should consider maternity leave as a career break and create strategies to circumvent its negative effect in the evaluations of researchers' productivity" (Staniscuaski et al., 2021, p. 1). Evaluation of what is called "motherhood (parenthood) penalty" will be then improved, once the information was available and properly taken into account.

### 4.3 At the top

This topic was inspired by one interviewee's answer when questioned about her first thought after being declared full professor. She concluded her reflection about that moment saying it was the recognition by the peers, a moment of crowning and added, in the end, when she asked herself about her next goal: "There has to have another [goal], I am looking [for it]". To which I answered: "But this is the top, I do not know where you can go from there." The exact words with which she answered me were: "It is, but this top arrived too soon, it's not so high, I need something else, I need something more" [L4].

This was the tonic that I found in those women I interviewed and who arrived at the top. They had the impulse of the permanent search for challenges and for attending calls, be them from institutions, as from other organisms, or from the area. In all that they said, I could perceive a sense of ownership and accountability. They posed themselves as an active part in the process of surpassing the challenges.

In parallel, they offered advice for those women to come. The first advice was about the necessity of reflecting about the meaning of being an educator, of educating. The second advice was about the importance of having passion for what one does and for doing it with excellence. The third advice was to respect your own values. And the last advice was keep your reference, the basis that comes from your family, that will be your support in all situations you will face during your life.

### 4.4 Delimitations

The outcomes of this research are bound to the area it refers to and to those who participate in it. Diverse results could have been attained if more cases were included as, for instance, associate professors, or professors working in private higher education institutions. Besides this, the research was conducted in Brazil, a country with a specific

socio-economic context and culture. When considering a huge country like Brazil, we should acknowledge that we have many "Brazils," with quite distinct regional cultures. And we must consider that those women who participated in this research came from only three of the five regions Brazil has, and from only three states. Considering interviewees from other states and regions could lead to very diverse perspectives and to significant lessons to be learned. Also, only female full professors were interviewed. Although I can state that the motivations, boosters, barriers and expectations can be related to their condition, I can't affirm that men do not also share them partially or totally. Only by interviewing women and men could I possibly have the counterfactual that allows me to affirm what are the challenges, barriers and boosters exclusively pertaining to "womanhood". It is relevant to consider the interviewees' experiences, opinions, perceptions and to know more about each person's views. However, a greater number of interviewees could lead to a broader possibility of comparison, contrast and could result in a stronger identification of potential convergences or divergences in the responses. Being supported by only four interviews, the analysis could be strongly influenced towards the opinions and perceptions of a single person. Finally, interviewing only full professors means talking only to those who succeed. A very different picture could arise in a research with women that somehow "were back on the road".

#### 4.5 Window and Mirror

Emily Style (1996) wrote a powerful play calling attention to the need for curriculum to function both as a window and as a mirror, so that it can reflect and reveal most accurately both a multicultural world and the student herself or himself. She states that "if the student is understood as occupying a dwelling of self, education needs to enable the student to look through the window frames in order to see realities of others and into mirrors in order to see her/his own reality reflected (Style, 1996, p. 35). As our gender is socially constructed (Scott, 1995), and it is also performed in a social context (Butler, 2006), trying to integrate a male vision in this research, I asked a male colleague from another knowledge area to read it and comment. He held some points mainly when reading the results. I decided to reproduce all the comments, exactly in the way he wrote them, adding a brief description to

clarify which excerpt he was referring to:

- (1) Being the only woman in a meeting: "I agree that in a scenario where 'machismo' dominates, women will have a hard time to have their voice heard. However, what you describe here sounds like a problem that both men and women face."
- (2) When identical attitudes could be interpreted in very particular manners: "Regardless of gender, it is not easy to go against the crowd. It sounds like the community she is a member of is either very sectarian in favor of men, or her perception of interpersonal issues is biased towards a gender conflict."
- (3) Following a dress code to avoid differentiation and to facilitate the inclusion in the group: "It seems this work also for men. Conversely, my guess would be that women might have more flexibility on clothing in formal meetings. I agree that the clothing tradition may be awful. It is just not clear to me how this became associated with a gender issue."

## 5. Final Considerations

Based on the interview transcriptions, the individual trajectories of female full professors were aggregated in convergent and divergent points, which allowed myself to 1) identify the motivations they had to pursue an academic career - the boosters or compensations, 2) identify barriers they encountered in their trajectories - the costs. To the same extent we could argue that my interviewees are successful when considering the objective success category, by examining deeply the barriers and boosters they faced during the walk we could realize, the cost they paid to achieve the top and the compensations they received that make possible ridin' down the highway.

The main objective of this research was to examine the trajectory of former female graduate students that are now full professors from different perspectives: understand their decision to attend graduate programs, their motivation to enter in the academy and their career progression.

Based on their trajectories I aimed to identify convergent and divergent points that allowed to infer fostering and hindering forces in their careers, forces that I called barriers and boosters. Behind those barriers and boosters, I believed we could find evidence of intervening factors that might help to understand the presence, permanence and the advancement to key positions of women in Accounting academy in Brazil.

On one hand, I tried to identify how they overcame the barriers. On the other hand, it was also important to know the boosters which helped them to succeed in their careers. Success was defined as attaining full professorship. So, I used an objective success criterion of Hoskins' typology, "understood as one's realization or attainment or predefined goal or target" and related "to the attainment of generally acknowledged achievements such as promotion" (p. 17). Additionally, I proposed the idea of partial success, considering that achieving objective academic success entails failures, drawbacks or negative consequences in other domains of women's lives. The barriers I identified based on their discourses were:

**Professional stereotypes.** The profession has been historically masculine, male-dominated. Women do not correspond to the professional stereotype or image.

**Work environment.** Participating in a male-dominated area, those women reported an almost totally male work environment and even being divided among masculine leaders and students.

**Opportunity to talk and to be heard.** Women's underrepresentation in the Accounting academy led them often being the only women in a meeting and finding difficulties in posing their opinions, having a voice and being given the opportunity to talk.

**Old boys' club.** The male-dominated environment was recognized as having very particular dynamics – special codes and ceremonies, social behaviors, dress code, expectations that differ among men and women – and to whom they had to adapt or to overcome.

**Professionalism.** Being regarded as a professional could imply using strategies related to dress code or previous preparation for meetings, in order to assure being heard or being respected.

**Difficulties to balance personal, family and professional life.** Sometimes there are "too many plates spinning in the air" and an understanding that women carry the unique role of motherhood. And this point has been stressed since Alice Rossi's claim in 1965. The result may end up being that "women still can't have it all" (Slaughter, 2012). So, we can conclude that many women have been struggling in finding their ways and still feel like they're fishes out of water being judged by land-dwellers' standards.

As boosters, trampolines or slingshots that opened the way and propelled those women in directions sometimes

not even expected or craved, they reported:

**Special circumstances.** Special circumstances such as leading a younger group or starting a new project seemed to determine respectful climates and welcoming places.

**Work Nature.** The feeling that academic work brings opportunity to train, collaborate and connect with people.

**Discovering a new vocation, talent and skills.** The reasons and motivations to pursue an academic career were diverse and occurred in very distinct situations, ranging from a financial need while getting a PhD to an invitation to teach or to start a new project in an institution. Once in the academy, for all of them, a faculty became central.

**Challenging environment.** Participating in an institution where one can contribute, create instead of just following norms and rules, may justify why they accept many sacrifices.

The four female professors' trajectories, recounted by some of them, could raise awareness about how they succeed in achieving the top rank in their career. Our reflection upon the cost they paid, the barriers they faced, the boosters they benefit from would support the development of actions and policies to attract and retain them.

#### Implications for practice

This study intends to contribute to the improvement of this scenario identifying and addressing specific policies and actions that might help change the current situation, marked by women's low level of participation. The findings may also contribute to the analysis of women's status in the university in other areas of knowledge, particularly those related to business, as well as to foster other studies.

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RIDIN' DOWN THE HIGHWAY - REFLECTIONS ON THE TRAJECTORIES OF WOMEN PROFESSORS IN ACADEMIA

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