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I Broke the Glass Ceiling, Now What? Overview of Metaphors to Explain Gender Inequality in Organizations

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper aims to identify and systematically summarize the relevant research on metaphors that are used to explain gender inequalities in the organizational context.

Design/methodology/approach: The researchers conducted a systematic literature review using bibliometric techniques and content analysis.

Findings: The systematic literature review identified a total of 1,269 papers in 688 journals written by 2,441 authors. The first paper was published in 1971 and the publication growth can be observed in the five decades analyzed. Gender in Management: An International Journal, was the journal that published most papers about this thematic. Michelle Ryan was the most influential researcher regarding the number of papers and citations she had. The content analysis performed with the 27 most influential papers showed four research streams (Metaphors; Gender and Leadership; Challenges, Stereotypes and Toxic Environments; and Gender in Academia). Concerning the metaphors explored in those papers, the glass ceiling is the most prominent. Furthermore, 26 kinds of barriers were identified regarding the challenges that women face in reaching positions of power.

Practical implications: The scrutiny of the metaphors and barriers enables access to what is being a hindrance to female progression in the organizational structure. Thus, this study may instrumentalize organizations and women to improve gender diversity practices in the workplace.

Originality/value: The value of the paper lays in the extensive literature review, using a bibliometric approach and content analysis.

Keywords: Gender; Inequality; Literature Review; Metaphors; Women's Careers.

Introduction

The current literature on gender inequality in the organizational context has focused on practices that help to create inequality; thus hiring, role allocation, promotion, compensation, and structuring are factors which create an unequal environment (Amis *et al.*, 2020). Despite some progress, organizations remain places of male-dominance (O'Neil *et al.*, 2008).

To explain the challenges that women face in organizations, the literature often adopts the concept of metaphors. In psychology, management, leadership, and gender literature, some predominant metaphors are being explored by scholars, such as *Glass Ceiling* (Dozier, 1988), *Queen Bee Phenomenon* (Staines *et al.*, 1974), and *Glass Cliff* (Ryan and Haslam, 2005). The metaphors improve the comprehension of individual and organizational behavior in creating a hostile environment and culture toward female workers at the same time as focussing attention toward these pressing issues (Smith *et al.*, 2012).

Women's job evaluation is still based on male patterns and thus, the theories and models to analyze their careers are derived from a male's career (O'Neil *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, it is important to understand the female career path, challenges, and aspirations. Furthermore, research on female careers has been frequently fragmented through a myriad of knowledge fields and research traditions (O'Neil *et al.*, 2008). Hence, integration and summarization of this research field would help to create organizational and public policies that could change the landscape for women in the workplace. In this sense, a literature review (Snyder, 2019; Tranfield *et al.*, 2003) is an appropriate solution as it provides a relevant evaluation of the available literature on a topic and it can offer some insights based on evidence to the relevant stakeholders.

Despite the presence of extensive works on these metaphors, there is a gap concerning a more systematic and holistic view of them. No systematic review that fully investigated the myriad of metaphors was found, and the publications that reviewed this literature have often focused on the comparison between two or three metaphors (see. Bendl and Schmidt, 2010, Carli and Eagly, 2016) or proposed a non-systematic review (see. Smith *et al.*, 2012). Thus, the research is often fragmented, and a systematic review of these concepts is needed.

To fill this research gap, this paper aims to identify and systematically summarize the relevant research on metaphors that are used to explain gender inequalities in the organizational context. To do so, a systematic literature review was conducted through bibliometrics and content analysis methods using data from the Scopus and Web of Science databases.

This paper provides both theoretical and practical implications. By organizing the fragmented literature, there is an opportunity to identify how it is evolving, and what the main results are. This information can provide insights into the development of new theories and a further understanding of the ones available. Besides this, gender disparity is a worldwide issue, and communicating the elements that constrain the development of women's careers can trigger important discussions for the development of public policies and new organizational practices to change the current unequal landscape.

How Metaphors Shape Women's Careers

The metaphors are useful to explain a social phenomenon as they contribute to structure the basic understanding of the world, providing new insights, catching and leading the attention to important issues (Smith *et al.*, 2012). The most popular is the *Glass Ceiling* (Carli and Eagly, 2016), which was first used in a publication in *The Wall*

Street Journal in 1986. The glass ceiling metaphor is used to illustrate the invisible obstacles that women face and that explains the low representativeness of women in senior positions (Dozier, 1988; Morrison and Von Glinow, 1990).

Recently, this phenomenon has been investigated in different contexts, such as academia (Roberto *et al.*, 2020), journalism (Rao and Rodny-Gumede, 2020), and mathematical applications to identify the gender imbalance (Ó Náraigh, 2019). The result of the glass ceiling is that women are kept in middle or low-rank jobs, resulting in stereotypes that women are more suitable for wifely and maternal roles (Rudman and Phelan, 2008) or not ambitious enough (Marry and Pochic, 2017) to get into leadership positions.

More recently, Carli and Eagly (2016) propose that the glass ceiling does not fully represent the current conditions of women, and state that *Labyrinth* is a more useful metaphor as it is more subtle and complex, being valid with a varying number of obstacles, and even being effective when the leadership conditions for women change. Regardless of the discussion, it is noted that these metaphors can help to better understand social phenomena and to shape social perception (Carli and Eagly, 2016).

Another phenomenon widely discussed in the literature is the *Queen Bee* (Staines *et al.*, 1974). This metaphor indicates that in a context where there is male dominance, women who achieve leadership positions become a barrier to the progression of other women (Derks *et al.*, 2011). There are other metaphors concerning the inequality in the gendered organization, such as *Glass Cliff*, which indicates that women are more prone to be promoted to leadership positions when the company is in a crisis (Ryan and Haslam, 2005, 2007). However, female CEOs are still more likely to be fired even when the company is going well (Gupta *et al.*, 2020).

Although these metaphors are useful to communicate the challenges that women face, some critiques have been made concerning them. Smith *et al.* (2012) state that the metaphors are not capable of shattering the glass ceiling, as evidence shows that female participation in leadership positions is still small. Nonetheless, it is relevant to notice that these discussions around the metaphors help to take the challenges that women face into mainstream research, and raise awareness that both public and management policies may reduce their impact.

Method

Planning the Review

The use of the literature review as a research method provides evidence-based results and insights into the analysis field (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, as the objective of the paper is to identify and systematically summarize the relevant research on metaphors that are used to explain gender inequalities in the organizational context, the use of the systematic literature method is appropriate and can contribute to further develop the body of knowledge available (Snyder, 2019, Tranfield *et al.*, 2003).

Bibliometric analysis allows the assessment of a large number of scientific papers from different scientific databases. Hence, it was considered relevant in investigating the extensive literature on metaphors. Furthermore, content analysis was used to deepen the understanding of the research and increase the data from the quantitative analysis provided by the bibliometrics.

This research followed the three steps recommended by Tranfield *et al.* (2003): planning the review, conducting a review, and reporting and dissemination. The first step was to establish the research questions of the study. They were defined to achieve

the objective of the paper. The questions, their quantitative or qualitative nature, and the methodology used to answer them are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Research Questions	Nature	Information Collected	Methodology
How has the research on metaphors that are used to explain gender inequalities in the organizational context literature has evolved over the years?	Quantitative	N. of papers; Papers by Year; N. of Authors; N. of Journals;	Bibliometrics
What and who are the current and most influential journals and authors?	Quantitative	Journal of the Paper; Author of the Paper;	Bibliometrics
What are the barriers to women taking leadership positions in the organizations?	Qualitative	Difficulties that women face to take a leadership position	Content Analysis
What are the current trends and topics being explored in the research on metaphors that explain the low representativeness of women in the organizational context?	Qualitative/Quantitative	Thematic of paper; Context being explored and metaphor being discussed	Content Analysis

Research Questions

Note. Figure elaborated by the researchers to establish the research questions and the information that would be collected from the papers.

After the proposition of the research questions, the search terms were defined, considering the literature that discussed the metaphors which are used to explain gender inequalities in the organizational context (Smith *et al.*, 2012), they were: *Glass Ceiling*, *Glass Cliff*, *Glass Escalator*, *Glass Floor*, *Glass Walls*, *Velvet Ghettos*, *Concrete Ceiling*, *Glass Doors*, *Tokenism*, *Homosocial Reproduction*, *Homophily*, *Old Boys Network*, *Backlash Effects*, *Queen Bee Phenomenon*, *Career Tournaments*, *Matilda Effect*, *Leaky Pipeline*, *Firewall*, *Scissors Effect*, and *Labyrinth*.

Aiming to identify the reliability of the chosen search terms and to certify that the scrutiny would be as holistic as possible, the researchers sent them via email to two other researchers specialized in women’s careers and they evaluated whether the terms

were sufficient to cover this knowledge field of metaphors. Thus, as the peers indicated the adequacy of the search terms, the research proceeded to the next step.

Conducting the Review

To access the papers, the Scopus and the ISI Web of Sciences databases were chosen since they are the most important databases and cover a large amount of research (AlRyalat *et al.*, 2019). The extraction process occurred on April 22, 2020. It included all papers that were published until this date. Three steps were established to select the papers. The first one was the research field. Papers were selected from business, economics, psychology, and social sciences fields, since those areas are historically more concerned with the issues of metaphors that address gender inequalities. Then, papers in English were selected to assess the international literature. Finally, only articles and reviews that passed through peer review were selected, thus attesting to the quality of the data. The extraction process is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2.

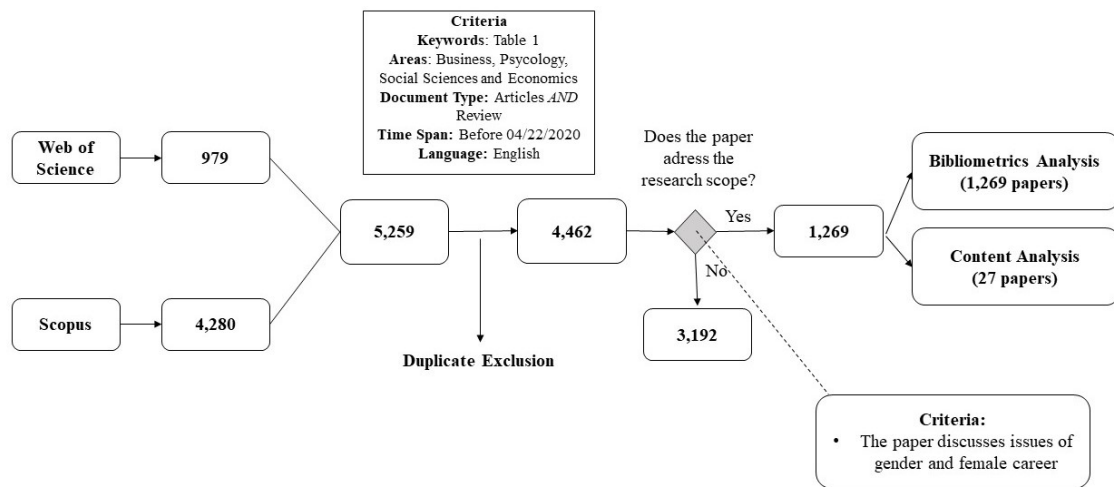
Extraction Process

Keywords	Database	Article + Review	Keyword	Database	Article + Review
Glass Ceiling	Scopus	919	Homophily	Scopus	1,179
	Web of Science	382		Web of Science	707
Glass Cliff	Scopus	67	Old Boys Network	Scopus	59
	Web of Science	126		Web of Science	11
Glass Escalator	Scopus	28	Scissors Effect	Scopus	4
	Web of Science	113		Web of Science	-
Glass Floor	Scopus	9	Backlash Effects	Scopus	105
	Web of Science	4		Web of Science	25
Glass Walls	Scopus	61	Queen Bee	Scopus	105
	Web of Science	15		Web of Science	49
Velvet Ghettos	Scopus	4	Career Tournaments	Scopus	3
	Web of Science	-		Web of Science	5
Concrete Ceiling	Scopus	16	Matilda Effect	Scopus	8
	Web of Science	5		Web of Science	1
Glass Doors	Scopus	36	Labyrinth	Scopus	765
	Web of Science	5		Web of Science	152
Tokenism	Scopus	335	Leaky Pipeline	Scopus	74
	Web of Science	237		Web of Science	21
Homosocial Reproduction	Scopus	14	Firewall	Scopus	546
	Web of Science	11		Web of Science	29

Note. Figure elaborated by the researchers

Given the large amount of data the extraction provided, each search term was excerpted manually, as the Scopus limit for export and viewing was 2,000 documents. The duplicated articles were excluded and the two databases were merged using the Bibliometrix Package in R (Aria and Cuccurullo, 2017). This resulted in 4,280 documents from Scopus, and 979 from ISI Web of Science. The merging of the two databases with the exclusion of the duplicates resulted in a total of 4,462 documents. The research framework is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3.
Research Framework



Note. Figure elaborated by the researchers

The 4,462 documents were exported into a .xlsx file to be opened using Microsoft Excel. They were then analyzed through a critical assessment of their titles, abstracts, and keywords. Papers that did not discuss issues of gender and female careers were excluded, resulting in a total of 1,269.

Bibliometric Analysis

Bibliometric and quantitative analyses were conducted of all papers to assess the evolution of the topic in question and to answer RQ1 and RQ2. The VOSviewer software was used to develop networks, and keyword network analyses were performed. Analyses were also carried out based on the year of the paper, leading researchers, and top journals.

Content Analysis

After the bibliometric analysis, a content analysis of the most relevant papers in the database was conducted. This analysis was chosen given its flexibility and applicability to a myriad of organizational phenomena. It followed the four steps presented by Duriau *et al.* (2007): data collection, text coding, content analysis, and

interpretation of results. Given a large sum of articles on the database, the number of 200 citations was chosen as selection criteria, resulting in 27 documents.

The analysis was carried out as follows: first, the texts were read and codes were proposed for each paper based on the purpose of the research and its theoretical foundations. This step resulted in 9 specific codes: *Backlash against women (1 paper)*; *Gender and Leadership Roles (10 papers)*; *Gender in The Negotiation Process (1 paper)*; *Gender in Academy (3 papers)*; *Gender Stereotypes (1 paper)*; *Glass Ceiling (7 papers)*; *Glass Cliff (2 papers)*; *Glass Escalator (1 paper)*; *Threatening Environment for Women (1 paper)*. After this first coding process, the codes were analyzed to find similarities between them. This resulted in the following codes: *Gender and Leadership (10 papers)*; *Challenges, Stereotypes, and Toxic Environment (3 papers)*; *Metaphors (11 papers)*; *Gender in Academia (3 papers)*.

The content analysis process identified the topics that are being explored by these relevant papers; the work context observed; the metaphor(s) presented; the field of knowledge; the main results, and their implications. The analysis followed the frequency counts, and the papers were summarized according to their codes. To answer RQ3, the second level of analysis was used (Duriau *et al.*, 2007), seeking to interpret the content on a deeper level. To answer RQ4, the first level was applied, using descriptive statistics to assess the trends and topics explored by the literature.

Findings

Bibliometric Analysis

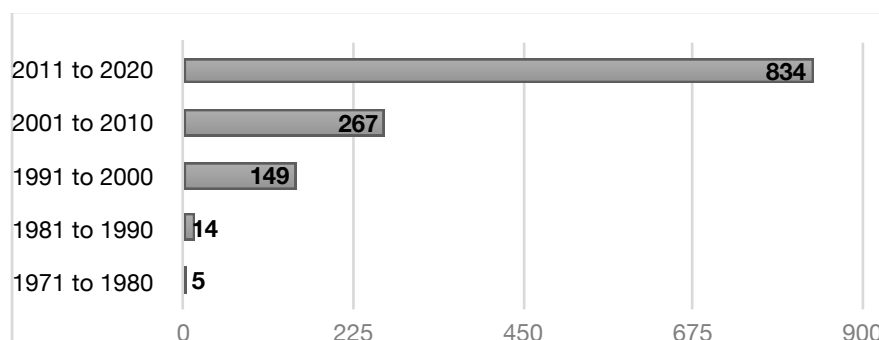
A total of 1,269 documents comprised the database. These papers were divided into 688 journals, by 2,441 authors and co-authors. The first paper was published in 1971 and was entitled “The Status of Women in the Profession: Tokenism” (Jaquette,

1971). It discusses the metaphor of tokenism, which indicates the challenges that women face when entering a male-dominated sphere. Given the low portion of women, they gain a status of tokens, which causes the negative influences they face on the job and the difficulty to have equal treatment (Zimmer, 1998). Jaquette (1971) reviewed the status of women in the political sciences. In the first ten years of research, four papers were published.

RQ1: How has the research on metaphors that are used to explain gender inequalities in the organizational context literature has evolved over the years?

Analyzing the decades, the period with the biggest number of papers is from 2011 to 2020, which indicates an increase in the interest of scholars to investigate inequality in the workplace. Figure 4 shows the research evolution.

Figure 4.
Research Evolution



Note. Figure elaborated by the researchers

Therefore, it is relevant to notice that the increase in the publication is a tendency once the topic remains important in social and academic fields. Until the date of the extraction from the database, 58 papers had already been published in 2020, indicating the growing tendency of the decade throughout last year. It is noticeable how this research topic has been accepted by scholars and continues to grow over the years;

impacting, and being impacted by women's progress to the top of the organizational hierarchy in their careers.

RQ2: What and who are the current and most influential journals and authors?

From the 688 journals that published the articles from the sample, 8 of them published 12 articles or more, as presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5.
Main Journals

Journal	N. of Papers	I.F	Journal Scope
Gender in Management: An International Journal (Women in Management Review)	67	1.206	Addresses a broad range of issues in the context of gender, management, and leadership advancing knowledge and practice in the field.
Journal of Business Ethics	20	3.796	Ethical issues related to business
Sex Roles	18	2.277	How gender organize people’s lives and their surrounding world
Gender, Work & Organization	15	2.273	Analysis of gender relations, the organization of gender and the gendering of organizations
Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion	14	1.280	Equal opportunities and its allied concepts, including inequality, inequity, disadvantage, diversity, and inclusion
Frontiers in Psychology	14	2.129	From clinical research to cognitive science, from perception to consciousness, from imaging studies to human factors, and from animal cognition to social psychology
Leadership Quarterly	14	5.631	Dedicated to advancing our understanding of leadership as a phenomenon, how to study it, as well as its practical implications
Gender & Society	12	3.058	Gender and gendered processes in interactions, organizations, societies, and global and transnational spaces

Note. Figure elaborated by the researchers

The eight journals publish papers about gender and inequality in the organizational context. Five of them have gender discussion as their core. However, it is important to notice that the discussion about inequality in the workplace has a fundamental impact in the organizational context, therefore, there is a need to widely explore these issues in business journals to present the result to managers and decision-makers.

The leading researchers who are discussing these metaphors to explain gender inequalities in the organizational context are presented in Figure 6. The main author,

considering the number of papers and citations, is Professor Michelle Ryan from the University of Exeter; she is concerned with issues of the Glass Cliff metaphor. Among the other authors, it is possible to notice that Glass Cliff and Queen Bee Phenomenon are the metaphors discussed by them with a more solid research base.

Figure 6.
Main Authors

Author	Papers	Citation	University	Research Focus
Ryan, M	14	1,381	University of Exeter	Glass Cliff
Ellemers, N	11	631	Utrecht University	Queen Bee Phenomenon
Haslam, S	9	1,203	University of Exeter	Glass Cliff
Glass, C	8	326	Utah State University	Glass Ceiling and Issues of Leadership
Derks, B	7	352	Utrecht University	Queen Bee Phenomenon
Cook, A	7	324	Utah State University	Glass Ceiling and Issues of Leadership
Kerr, B	6	125	University of Arkansas	Women and Minorities in Public Sector Organizations
Powell, G	6	289	University of Connecticut	Gender, Diversity, and Work-Family Issues in the Workplace

Note. Figure elaborated by the researchers

The popularity of the Glass Ceiling (Carli and Eagly, 2016) can be noticed by the number of papers found featuring this metaphor (see Figure 2), and also by analyzing the topics studied by the main authors. While the Glass Ceiling is present in the work of many of them, metaphors like Glass Cliff and Queen Bee are investigated by restricted groups of researchers of which some are highly productive and frequently cited, such as Ryan and Haslam for Glass Cliff, and Ellemers and Derks for Queen Bee Phenomenon.

Concerning the topics that were explored by the literature, a co-occurrence of keyword network analysis was performed. This was done so using all the keywords, and resulted in five keyword clusters. The criteria to select the keywords were the ones with

(blue) includes the discussion on the Glass Ceiling as a challenge that women face to progress in their career, therefore, equality is harder to reach since there are obstacles that keep women in middle and low positions in the organizational structure.

Content Analysis

The 27 papers were divided into 4 sections (Metaphors; Gender and Leadership; Challenges, Stereotypes, and Toxic Environment; and Gender in Academia). The following metaphors were discussed in 27 papers: Glass Ceiling (15 papers), Backlash Effects (3 papers), Glass Cliff (2 papers), Glass Escalator (2 papers), Tokenism (2 papers), Labyrinths (1 paper), Leaky Pipeline (1 paper) and Matilda Effect (1 paper).

Regarding the methodological procedures, the following methods were identified: Quantitative (14 papers); Literature Review (5 papers); Theoretical (4 papers); Qualitative (2 papers); and Quantitative and Qualitative (2 papers).

The suitability of women leadership roles was the focus of the papers' analyses (Rudman and Glick, 2001) and most of them presented the challenges that those women face in achieving a position of power, such as being assigned to a precarious position (Ryan and Haslam, 2005) and hurdles they must face throughout their career (Probert, 2000; Rossiter, 1993; Ragins *et al.*, 1998; Lyness and Thompson, 2000).

The samples investigated were mainly from the United States (10 papers), Sweden (2 papers), Norway (1 paper), United Kingdom (1 paper), and Australia (1 paper). Some publications investigated more than one country at once, such as Arulampalam *et al.* (2007) which investigated 11 countries from the European Community, and Reynolds (1999) which examined 180 nations with autonomous governments from the 5 continents.

RQ3: What are the barriers to women taking leadership positions in the organizations?

Reading the papers, 22 barriers were found regarding the challenges that women face in achieving a leadership post in an organization. These were: Systemic Barriers; Lack of Significant General Management Experience; Women not in The Pipeline Long Enough; Men Stereotyping and Preconceptions; Exclusion from Informal Networks; Inhospitable Corporate Culture; Lack of Representativeness in the Corporate Director Position; Promotion Policies; Compensation Practices; Behavioral Double-binds; Gender and Communication Styles; Gender-based Stereotypes; Preferred Leadership Styles; Women and Power; Old Boys Networks and Maintaining the Status Quo; Tokenism in Top Management Circles; Lack of Cultural Fit; Difficulty Getting Developmental Assignments; Geographic Mobility Opportunities; Resistance to Women's leadership; Demand of Personal Life; and Under-investment in Social Capital.

RQ4: What are the current trends and topics being explored in the research on metaphors that explain the low representativeness of women in the organizational context?

Metaphors

The papers revolve around the Glass Ceiling (see. Morrison and Von, 1990; Lyness and Thompson, 1997; Reynolds, 1999; Cotter *et al.*, 2001; Albrecht *et al.*, 2003), Glass Cliff (Ryan and Haslam, 2005, 2007), Glass Escalator (Williams, 1992; Cotter *et al.*, 2001), the Backlash Effect (Rudman and Phelan, 2008), and the Labyrinth (Eagly and Carli, 2007)

The Glass Ceiling metaphor has been explained by theories postulating differences, discrimination explanations, and systematic barriers (Morrison and Von,

1990). The results of the papers about the glass ceiling showed that women often have less authority, receiving fewer stock options, less international mobility (Lyness and Thompson, 1997), and lower wages than men (Albrecht *et al.*, 2003; Arulampalam *et al.*, 2007). This phenomenon was also analyzed in the political landscape (Reynolds, 1999). Thus, the Glass Ceiling was identified as a gendered phenomenon and couldn't be observed with racial inequalities between men (Cotter *et al.*, 2001).

In female-dominated fields, men, especially white men, hold an advantage in promotion, a phenomenon called Glass Escalator (Williams, 1992, Maume, 1999). To Eagly and Carli (2007), the Labyrinth is a metaphor more appropriate than Glass Ceiling to explain the challenges that women face to take a leadership role.

The presence of women on boards is relevant because it brings new values and outcomes to the organization (Torchia *et al.*, 2011, Terjesen *et al.*, 2009). However, women are often hired for precarious leadership positions, reinforcing the women's image as disqualified for the position (Ryan and Haslam, 2005, 2007; Rudman and Phelan 2008).

Gender and Leadership

Gender is relevant to leadership as it can shape the assertiveness of men and women, their job evaluation, their influence, and their probability of becoming leaders (Ridgeway, 2001). Regarding this probability, men and women face different paths to achieve leadership positions, the latter facing more barriers (Lyness and Thompson, 2000).

Previous research showed the increase of women in the corporate board, whereas the increase in CEO positions was not highlighted (Daily *et al.*, 1999). Although diversity in the board is important (Terjesen *et al.*, 2009) and can increase

innovation (Torchia *et al.*, 2011), the organization needs to be held accountable for the corporate practices that help to reinforce the inequality present in CEO roles, such as promotion and compensation practices (Oakley, 2000).

Despite the prejudice that female leaders face for not being considered as having “what it takes” to be a leader (Rudman *et al.*, 2012), some women achieve this status and highlighted some strategies to do so: constantly exceed performance expectations; develop a style that men are comfortable with; seek difficult or high visibility assignments; have an influential mentor; and network with influential colleagues. The barriers they faced to get to the top were as follows: lack of significant general management experience; women not in the pipeline long enough; men stereotyping and holding preconceptions; exclusion from informal networks; and inhospitable corporate culture (Ragins *et al.*, 1998).

Challenges, Stereotypes, and Toxic Environment

The male-dominated environment can propose challenges for women’s performance (Inzlicht and Ben-Zeev, 2000) and the stereotypes imposed on women help to perpetuate the gender issues in the organization. The lack of women in high leadership roles and the image of men as agentic poses a challenge for women to negotiate salaries and activities. The outcomes of negotiating are different for women because they have less access to power and status, thus reinforcing the glass ceiling in the organization (Stuhlmacher and Walters, 1999). Even when women show leadership agentic behavior, they suffer a backlash, because women are not supposed to be agentic (Rudman and Glick, 2001).

Gender in academia

The academic community is a place where knowledge is created and reproduced, thus building citizens that think critically and contribute to build a better society. However, the underrepresentation of women in science is an issue that needs to be addressed (Rossiter, 1993). This systematic undervaluation of women in science (also in literature, history, and medicine) helps to perpetuate those fields as male-dominated and the accomplishments of those women are often thought of as male ones (Rossiter, 1993). The undervaluation of women in science can also trigger an underrepresentation of women in STEM (Blickenstaff, 2005). The lack of role models and representativeness (Rossiter, 1993) contributes to women's scarcity in science (Blickenstaff, 2005).

When it comes to gender disparities in the academic context, research shows how it is important to investigate the household impact on women's life. Besides developing equality initiatives, organizations need to identify how this domain affects the life of women and help to perpetuate those disparities (Probert, 2005).

Discussions and Conclusions

Research Implications

Notwithstanding some changes in the organizations, the workplace shows reminiscences of the gendered organization (Williams *et al.*, 2012). The investigation of those social and organizational-constructed barriers that women face on a daily basis has resulted in the research stream of the metaphors (Smith *et al.*, 2012). The relevance of this research lies in the fact that they can better explain, represent, and show the reality of women in the workplace (Smith *et al.*, 2012).

This paper extends the literature available on those metaphors that show how gender disparities are perpetuated in the organization, and how women's careers are

shaped by summarizing the main findings and bringing together the results that this field is presenting. The research was conducted using two of the largest databases of scientific research and included 20 metaphors, increasing the coverage of the research and capturing more of the available literature. The joint application of some bibliometric techniques and content analysis strengthen this research's results. To the extent of the researchers' knowledge, no other research introduced a systematic overview of those metaphors.

The results showed that there is still a great focus on the Glass Ceiling metaphor. However, critique has been explicitly focused on the fact that the glass ceiling may not be the best to explain the current status of women in the workplace (Carli and Eagly, 2016, Bendl and Schmidt, 2010) or does not fully work in reducing the gap of women in senior positions (Smith *et al.*, 2012).

This overuse of the Glass Ceiling metaphor can prevent the reader from fully understanding other issues that can improve the understanding of gender, such as its intersectionality with race, sexuality, and class (Williams *et al.*, 2012), since the Glass Ceiling is considered a gendered phenomenon (Cotter *et al.*, 2001). Furthermore, new configurations of organizations such as new business and startups might have new features that support women to achieve leadership positions, but imposing new barriers in other ways, thus, the use of other metaphors may be a better fit to understand the female career.

The corporate context prevails in the studies, except for in some scientific (see. Rossiter, 1993, Probert, 2005) and political environments (see. Reynolds, 1999). All other papers focus on women in middle and senior positions in the companies. The authors of the main papers still focused their research on the USA and Europe, however

in other countries with higher indicators of inequality, especially developing ones, gender could play a bigger role and thus be a useful context to bring new insights to this discussion (see. Alhadhrami *et al.*, 2018). The effects of culture in gender issues have to be considered when investigating these metaphors, and further research could, for instance, investigate the existence of these metaphors in overlooked countries and thus advance the understanding of the factors and consequences that these discriminatory practices bring to the lives of women. Finally, the scholars concerned with those metaphors need to explore intersectionality by expanding the discussion on race, sexuality, and class.

Practical Implications

This research contributes by critically assessing the available research on metaphors that are used to explain gender inequalities in the organizational context and providing a guideline of journals and authors who are advancing the field. Furthermore, the content analysis supports the presentation of the main topics and of the discussions that the authors are introducing.

Still, the inspection of those metaphors and barriers enables companies and women to identify the practices that create and reproduce gender inequalities. It is important to revisit the organizational practices and assess what is being a hindrance to female progression in the organizational structure. Diversity is relevant to the company and can add more value to the business, thus it should be considered a priority.

Suggestions for Future Studies

Despite being able to answer the research questions, this study has limitations. The citation criteria were chosen to select papers for content analysis, so further research could use metrics that privilege both experienced and early career researchers

and select papers considering other factors, such as the sector investigated or specific metaphors to enhance the understanding of this phenomenon. Another limitation concerns the use of one language to search, so using more than English could extend the reach of the study. Research must advance in analyzing different cultures, exploring metaphors other than Glass Ceiling, and other professional careers, such as women in arts, politics, or health jobs. Future research could also propose the integration of the studies in meta-analyses.

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