

MULTIPLE ROADS TO GENDER EQUALITY: Exploring Organizational Conditions for Equal Opportunities among Brazilian Female Professionals

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality remains a pervasive issue worldwide, manifesting across economic, social, and political domains. Women earn less than men on average, with disparities stemming from career interruptions for childcare, shorter or more flexible working hours, and overrepresentation in administrative rather than managerial positions (Kemechian et al., 2023). Cultural, legislative, and social norms strongly influence organizational gender equality. Women entering male-dominated workplaces often navigate tensions between personal, professional, and social identities, and silence in response to discrimination can inadvertently sustain gender prejudice and hostile environments (Kemechian et al., 2023; Leal Filho et al., 2023). Gender, as a socially constructed concept, historically intersected with class in organizations, with managerial roles dominated by men and lower-level roles by women (Acker, 2006). Thus, contemporary diversity initiatives seek to address subtle discriminatory processes, complementing broader efforts to achieve equality of opportunity and outcomes for men and women (Fitzsimmons et al., 2025; Valduga et al., 2023).

Despite global recognition of gender equality as a fundamental human right, women remain underrepresented in political, economic, and corporate leadership. Globally, women occupy only 24% of parliamentary seats and 27% of managerial positions, although reforms such as gender quotas have successfully increased female political representation in some countries, including Costa Rica and several Latin American nations (Valduga et al., 2023). It is imperative, however, to consider that greater female participation has been linked to corporate governance, monitoring, and decision-making improvement (Brahma et al., 2021). Diverse scholars have already proved that female representation on boards is associated with less earnings management, reduced excessive risk-taking, and stronger corporate social responsibility (CSR) performance (Nascimento et al., 2022; Pinheiro et al., 2024), including higher stock prices and profitability (Valduga et al., 2023).

Brazil represents a particularly severe context for gender-based violence, intersecting with racial and socioeconomic inequalities. The country ranks fifth globally in femicides, with rates rising since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. On average, one woman is killed every four hours, corresponding to a daily rate of 4.3 female homicides per 100,000 women, nearly twice the global rate (McIlwaine et al., 2023). Comparisons with experiences abroad highlight the amplified challenges Brazilian women face, particularly those from marginalized groups (Kemechian et al., 2023). According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2024) in the survey entitled "Gender Statistics: Social Indicators of Women in Brazil", the presence of women in the labor market was 42.7%, while that of men was 57.2%. This data demonstrates that, despite significant representation in the labor market, it is still predominantly a male environment.

The transition from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) marked a major advancement in addressing gender inequality globally. SDG 5, "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls," explicitly includes the elimination of violence against women and girls under target 5.2 (McIlwaine et al., 2023). The goal builds on decades of UN efforts, including the establishment of the Commission on the Status of Women in 1946 (Leal Filho et al., 2023), and addresses multidimensional forms of discrimination, such as unpaid work, sexual and reproductive rights, and gender-based violence.

Despite these efforts, workplace gender inequality persists globally. Legislative measures, organizational initiatives to reduce pay gaps, and decades of academic research have produced only limited reductions in systemic disparities (Fitzsimmons et al., 2025). While SDG

16 emphasizes peaceful and inclusive societies and access to justice, challenges remain in effectively operationalizing measures to eliminate violence against women and girls (McIlwaine et al., 2023). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development underscores the need for multi-sectoral participation, short- and long-term measures, and indicators to track progress toward gender parity (Valduga et al., 2023).

The Critical Mass Theory offers a useful lens to study gender equality. The referred theory posits that when women reach a threshold within a group, board, or organization, their presence shifts from “tokenism” to meaningful participation, potentially enabling greater gender equality in decision-making and culture (Lefley & Janeček, 2024). This theory has been widely applied to contexts such as corporate boards, academia, and politics to argue that a “critical mass” of women is necessary for their voices to be heard and for gender-equitable outcomes to emerge. Achieving SDG 5 is therefore imperative to ensure that all individuals, regardless of gender, can contribute fully to social, economic, and political life, ultimately promoting a more equitable and sustainable world. Indeed, the Critical Mass Theory argues that gender equality requires more than just a symbolic presence; it demands a sufficient number of women to enable a qualitative change in professional and personal dynamics, culture, and outcomes (Pinheiro et al., 2024).

Based on the above, this study aimed to analyze the organizational conditions that contribute to equal opportunities for women compared to men in the workplace among Brazilian female professionals. To this end, a crisp-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (csQCA) was applied to examine how organizational conditions (harassment experiences, reporting channels, women’s leadership encouragement, gender equality projects, CSR practices, CSR reporting, and organizational size) interact to shape pathways ensuring equal opportunities for women in Brazilian workplaces.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Gender equality in organizations is conceptually grounded in Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) and Equity Theory (Adams, 1963). Social Role Theory posits that societal expectations shape the behaviors and professional roles considered appropriate for men and women, often resulting in structural and cultural barriers that limit women’s access to leadership positions. Equity Theory complements this perspective by emphasizing the importance of fairness in the distribution of resources, recognition, and opportunities, suggesting that employees evaluate their work experiences in terms of perceived equality compared to others.

Applying these theoretical lenses, organizational conditions such as leadership encouragement and gender equality projects emerge as essential mechanisms for promoting perceived equality (Munive et al., 2023). On the one hand, Social Role Theory suggests that entrenched expectations often prevent women from aspiring to or being selected for leadership positions; active encouragement and targeted programs disrupt these normative patterns (Schneider & Bos, 2019). On the other hand, Equity Theory reinforces this, indicating that when organizations invest in leadership development and equality initiatives, women are more likely to perceive that opportunities, recognition, and resources are fairly allocated, enhancing their sense of inclusion and career potential (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018).

Diverse initiatives, over the years, have been imposed to firms in order to guarantee gender equality within the workplace and, as consequence, improve the perceived equality. Reporting channels, encouragement of women in leadership, gender equality projects, CSR politics, CSR reporting, organizational size, among other variables, emerge as influential mechanisms for promoting perceived equality (Wu et al., 2023). Even that, while some women successfully navigate these privileges, others remain silent, inadvertently perpetuating gender prejudice and sustaining hostile environments where efforts toward equality are marginalized (Kemechian et al., 2023).

The Critical Mass Theory (Lefley & Janeček, 2024) emphasizes that women's representation must reach a threshold to generate meaningful change in organizational dynamics. When a sufficient proportion of roles are occupied by women, their presence not only challenges gender stereotypes, but also strengthens perceptions of fairness and equitable opportunity. By using the core idea of the Critical Mass Theory, this study addresses different conditions to analyze their impact of organizational factors towards equal opportunities given to women compared to men. In other words, the critical mass is considered the organizational-level condition that makes the fairness and role-expectation theories become reality.

3. METHOD

The research, in methodological terms, adopts a descriptive approach, an applied nature, and a design based on a survey, with the collection of primary field data. A survey was conducted through an anonymous questionnaire, remotely distributed via the Google Forms platform, employing both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The selection of participants followed a gender-based criterion, disregarding factors such as social class, profession, and age. The questionnaire, developed with a focus on small, medium, and large companies and their influence on women's lives, was available for responses from May 27, 2025, to June 13, 2025.

With regard to the analytical technique, the study employed csQCA. The csQCA is a research methodology that uses set theory and Boolean algebra to analyze how different combinations of conditions lead to a specific outcome (Pan et al., 2022). In this study, the csQCA aimed to identify necessary and sufficient organizational conditions that contribute to equal opportunities for women compared to men in the workplace among Brazilian female professionals. Due to its ability to understand how different variables, or causal conditions, the technique was relevant to achieve the research goal. Survey responses were calibrated into binary sets (yes = 1, no = 0), with missing values treated as NA and excluded from the analysis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data were collected using a non-probabilistic and convenience sampling method, focusing on Brazilian female professionals. The final sample comprised 98 valid responses. Participants were generally between 27 and 32 years of age. In educational terms, respondents held a higher education degree, and the majority identified as white women. Of the total, 63% reported not having children, regardless of their marital status. It is worth mentioning that the analysis of the participants' professional positions indicates that the majority hold the role of analyst (32%, n=31). This is followed by assistants (12%) and auxiliaries (9%). Other categories include professionals in the health sector (7%), coordinators (6%), and those in administration/management (4%). A smaller proportion of respondents reported working in information technology (3%), as entrepreneurs (3%), or as service attendants (3%). The remaining portion of the sample was distributed across a wide variety of other occupations.

Results from csQCA technique can be found in Table 1. Findings indicate six sufficient paths regarding equal opportunities for women to be achieved in different organizational Brazilian settings. Raw and unique coverage indicates that each path covers about 6.67% of the cases (equal distribution across paths). It can also be affirmed that the solutions perfectly predict the outcome within the dataset, as the consistency is equal to 1 across all paths. Finally, regarding solution coverage, six paths together explain 40% of the cases.

By analyzing Table 1, different interpretations can be drawn. In Path 1, for example, the absence of harassment suffered (▲) combined with the presence of witnessed harassment (●) is associated with equal opportunities. In Path 6, the absence of harassment suffered (▲) and the presence of a reporting channel (●) combine with the absence of leadership encouragement (▲) and CSR politics (▲). In both Paths 1 and 6, the absence of harassment emerges as central,

suggesting that preventing and managing harassment is a prerequisite for women to perceive equality at work. This finding is consistent with research showing that harassment undermines women’s job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and career progression (Fitzsimmons et al., 2025; Kemechian et al., 2023). Effective reporting mechanisms and zero-tolerance policies have been identified as crucial not only for protecting women but also for retaining them and enabling their advancement (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018).

Table 1 – Equal opportunities given to women compared to men in the workplace

Condition	Path 1	Path 2	Path 3	Path 4	Path 5	Path 6
Suffer harassment	▲					●
Witness harassment	●	▲	●			
Reporting channel	▲			●	▲	●
Encouraging women in leadership		▲	●	●	●	
Gender equality project						▲
CSR politics					●	▲
CSR reporting				▲		
Size	●	▲	▲			●
Raw coverage	0.0667	0.0667	0.0667	0.0667	0.0667	0.0667
Unique coverage	0.0667	0.0667	0.0667	0.0667	0.0667	0.0667
Consistency	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Solution coverage	0.400					
Solution consistency	1.000					

Note: ● = central condition present; ▲ = central condition absent; empty cell = condition not included in the path. Source: authors.

Encouragement of women in leadership appears as a condition in multiple solutions (Paths 2, 3, and 4), reinforcing its role as a facilitator of equality. This resonates with Social Role Theory, which highlights that entrenched gender expectations often discourage women from pursuing leadership roles (Eagly, 1987). Active organizational support, through mentoring, succession planning, or formal leadership programs, disrupts these patterns and signals that women’s advancement is both valued and possible. Moreover, from the perspective of Critical Mass Theory, such encouragement is essential for moving beyond tokenism; when women reach a critical threshold in leadership, their presence transforms organizational norms and decision-making processes (Lefley & Janeček, 2024). Thus, the recurring presence of leadership encouragement in the csQCA solutions suggests that organizations cannot achieve gender equity without deliberately fostering women’s representation in influential roles.

CSR politics and reporting appear in Paths 5 and 6, though less consistently than leadership and harassment variables. These findings indicate that CSR initiatives can play a supportive role by legitimizing equality agendas and embedding them into organizational strategy. Prior studies have shown that firms with stronger CSR practices are more likely to implement diversity policies and achieve reputational gains tied to gender equality (Pinheiro et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2023). However, CSR alone is insufficient; without tangible mechanisms addressing harassment or leadership representation, CSR risks being perceived as symbolic rather than substantive.

Organizational size also appeared variably across the solutions, sometimes present, sometimes absent, indicating that size is not a determining factor on its own. This suggests that equality is less a matter of scale and more a matter of internal practices and culture. This aligns with Acker’s (2006) argument that inequality regimes exist across all types of organizations, regardless of their size, and only deliberate policies can challenge them.

In summary, the results demonstrate that equal opportunities for women in the Brazilian context arise from multiple sufficient configurations rather than a single determinant. Harassment prevention and reporting mechanisms, encouragement of women in leadership, and CSR practices operate in different constellations to shape women’s perceptions of fairness and

inclusion. These findings confirm that gender equality is multidimensional and context-dependent, aligning with prior research on intersectional barriers and organizational diversity (Fitzsimmons et al., 2025; Valduga et al., 2023). At the same time, the recurrence of leadership encouragement across multiple paths provides empirical support for Critical Mass Theory, reinforcing the idea that women's meaningful participation in organizations depends on reaching a threshold of representation capable of influencing culture and decision-making.

5. FINAL REMARKS

This study aimed to analyze the organizational conditions that contribute to equal opportunities for women compared to men in the workplace among Brazilian female professionals. The analysis of survey data from 98 Brazilian female professionals using csQCA revealed that equal opportunities for women compared to men in the workplace arise from multiple sufficient configurations rather than a single determinant. The absence of harassment, the presence of reporting mechanisms, and encouragement of women in leadership emerged as the most consistent factors across solutions, while CSR initiatives and gender equality projects appeared as complementary but less decisive conditions. Organizational size showed an ambiguous influence, suggesting it is not a determining factor on its own. From the findings, theoretical and practical contributions can be offered.

Theoretical contributions lie in the integration of Social Role Theory, Equity Theory, and Critical Mass Theory within a configurational approach. The results illustrate how these perspectives can be combined to explain women's workplace opportunities: harassment prevention and reporting reflect fairness (Equity Theory), leadership encouragement challenges entrenched gender norms (Social Role Theory), and the recurrence of leadership promotion across multiple paths underscores the importance of achieving a critical threshold of representation (Critical Mass Theory). In doing so, the study advances theoretical discussions by demonstrating how gender equality is best understood as a product of interacting organizational conditions rather than linear cause-effect relationships.

Practical contributions include offering organizations multiple actionable pathways to promote gender equality and achieve the SDGs, especially SDG 5. The findings suggest that policies should prioritize zero tolerance for harassment, create effective reporting channels, and foster women's leadership representation. CSR initiatives and equality projects can strengthen these efforts, but their effectiveness depends on being embedded in broader organizational cultures and practices. Given that the sample was composed exclusively of Brazilian female professionals, the study reflects the realities of a context marked by high rates of gender-based violence, persistent pay gaps, and cultural norms that reinforce traditional gender roles. This makes the findings especially relevant for Brazilian organizations and policymakers, highlighting the urgency of developing robust mechanisms to protect and empower women in the workplace. At the same time, the Brazilian setting may differ significantly from other national contexts, meaning that while the insights are directly applicable to Brazil, they should be generalized cautiously to other countries.

In this sense, despite the ideal consistency of the solutions (1.000), the total coverage reached only 40%, revealing that more than half of the cases were not explained by the conditions analyzed. This limitation points to the existence of other relevant factors not addressed in this study, such as pay equity policies, mentoring programs, or sector-specific characteristics. Even that, the findings highlight that workplace gender equality depends on both preventing discriminatory practices and fostering institutional support for women's leadership.

REFERENCES

- Acker, J. (2006). Inequality Regimes. *Gender & Society*, 20(4), 441–464.
- Adams, J. S. (1963). Towards an understanding of inequity. In *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67, (5), 422–436.
- Brahma, S., Nwafor, C., & Boateng, A. (2021). Board gender diversity and firm performance: The UK evidence. *International Journal of Finance & Economics*, 26(4), 5704–5719.
- Eagly, A. H. (1987). Sex differences in social behavior: A social-role interpretation. In *Sex differences in social behavior: A social-role interpretation*. (pp. xii, 178–xii, 178). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Fitzsimmons, T. W., Yates, M., & Callan, V. J. (2025). Leading for gender equality. *Australian Journal of Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03128962251338335>
- IBGE. (2024). *Estatísticas de Gênero - Indicadores sociais das mulheres no Brasil*. <https://www.ibge.gov.br/estatisticas/multidominio/genero/20163-estatisticas-de-genero-indicadores-sociais-das-mulheres-no-brasil.html>
- Kemechian, T., Sigahi, T. F. A. C., Martins, V. W. B., Rampasso, I. S., de Moraes, G. H. S. M., Serafim, M. P., Leal Filho, W., & Anholon, R. (2023). Towards the SDGs for gender equality and decent work: investigating major challenges faced by Brazilian women in STEM careers with international experience. *Discover Sustainability*, 4(1), 11.
- Kossek, E. E., & Buzzanell, P. M. (2018). Women’s career equality and leadership in organizations: Creating an evidence-based positive change. *Human Resource Management*, 57(4), 813–822.
- Leal Filho, W., Kovaleva, M., Tsani, S., Țircă, D.-M., Shiel, C., Dinis, M. A. P., Nicolau, M., Sima, M., Fritzen, B., Lange Salvia, A., Minhas, A., Kozlova, V., Doni, F., Spiteri, J., Gupta, T., Wakunuma, K., Sharma, M., Barbir, J., Shulla, K., ... Tripathi, S. (2023). Promoting gender equality across the sustainable development goals. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 25(12), 14177–14198.
- Lefley, F., & Janeček, V. (2024). Board gender diversity, quotas and critical mass theory. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 29(2), 139–151.
- McIlwaine, C., Ansari, M. R., Leal, J. G., Vieira, F., & dos Santos, J. S. (2023). Counter-mapping SDG 5 to address violence against women and girls in the favelas of Maré, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. *Journal of Maps*, 19(1).
- Munive, A., Donville, J., & Darmstadt, G. L. (2023). Public leadership for gender equality: a framework and capacity development approach for gender transformative policy change. *EClinicalMedicine*, 56.
- Nascimento, A. C., Prado, N. B. do, Belli, M. M., Gaio, L. E., & Lucas, A. C. (2022). The influence of gender diversity on market value: A comparative study between European and Latin American companies. *Contabilidade Vista & Revista*, 33(1), 195–217. <https://doi.org/10.22561/cvr.v33i1.7114>
- Pan, Q., Luo, W., & Fu, Y. (2022). A csQCA study of value creation in logistics collaboration by big data: A perspective from companies in China. *Technology in Society*, 71, 102114.
- Pinheiro, A. B., do Prado, N. B., Batistella, A. J., Ribeiro, C. D. M. de A., & Mazzioni, S. (2024). From zero to Hero: effect of gender diversity on corporate social performance in Brazil. *International Journal of Manpower*, 45(5), 984–998.
- Schneider, M. C., & Bos, A. L. (2019). The Application of Social Role Theory to the Study of Gender in Politics. *Political Psychology*, 40(S1), 173–213.
- Valduga, I. B., Lima, M. A. De, Castro, B. C. G., Fuchs, P. G., Amorim, W. S. de, & Guerra, J. B. S. O. de A. (2023). A Balanced Scorecard Proposal for Gender Equality and Sustainable Development. *Sustainability*, 15(19), 14384.
- Wu, X., Yin, R., & Zhou, Y. (2023). Exploring How Corporate Social Responsibility Achieves Gender Equality in the Workplace from the Perspective of Media Image. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 23, 700–707.