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YOUNG WOMEN, “GLASS CEILING”, AND STRATEGIES TO FACE CRYSTAL WALLS

Mulheres jovens, “teto de vidro” e estratégias para o enfrentamento das paredes de cristal

Mujeres jóvenes, techo de cristal y estrategias para enfrentar las paredes de cristal

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ABSTRACT

Although the inequalities known as the “glass ceiling” are not a recent phenomenon in society, research addressing their effects still is. Studies show that scientists' interest in this type of inequality has been in evidence since the 1990s. Although research on mature women within organizations and the barriers posed by the “glass ceiling” effects are on the rise, there is still a theoretical gap about the obstacles young women, between 21 and 30 years old face. Based on qualitative research, carried out through semi-structured interviews with this group, we show that the “glass ceiling” and “crystal wall” effects can be felt even at the beginning of the career. Professional barriers, such as lack of experience, intensify gender inequalities and age discrimination in the selection process for internship or hiring. We conclude that young women adopt credibility strategies to deal with these difficulties.

Keywords | ageism, young women, gender inequality, glass ceiling, crystal wall.

RESUMO

Apesar de as desigualdades conhecidas como “teto de vidro” não serem um fenômeno recente na sociedade, as pesquisas abordando seus efeitos ainda o são. Estudos apontam que o interesse dos cientistas por esse tipo de desigualdade ganhou evidência a partir da década de 1990. Embora estejam em ascensão investigações sobre mulheres maduras nas organizações e entaves dos efeitos “teto de vidro”, ainda existe uma lacuna teórica sobre os obstáculos enfrentados por mulheres jovens, com idades entre 21 e 30 anos. A partir de uma pesquisa qualitativa, realizada por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas com esse público, mostramos que os efeitos “teto de vidro” e “parede de cristal” podem ser sentidos ainda no início da carreira. As barreiras profissionais, como a falta de experiência, intensificam as desigualdades de gênero e discriminação por idade nos processos seletivos de estágio ou efetivação. Concluímos que as jovens adotam estratégias de credibilidade para lidar com essas dificuldades.

Palavras-chave | etarismo, mulheres jovens, desigualdades de gênero, teto de vidro, parede de cristal.

RESUMEN

Aunque las desigualdades conocidas como techo de cristal no son un fenómeno reciente en la sociedad, las investigaciones que abordan sus efectos aún lo son. Los estudios muestran que el interés de los científicos por este tipo de desigualdad adquirió evidencia a partir de la década de 1990. Si bien las investigaciones sobre mujeres maduras en las organizaciones y las barreras de los efectos del techo de cristal están en aumento, todavía existe una brecha teórica sobre los obstáculos enfrentados por mujeres jóvenes, de entre 21 y 30 años. A partir de una investigación cualitativa a través de entrevistas semiestruturadas a este público, mostramos que los efectos del techo de cristal y de la pared de cristal se pueden sentir al inicio de la carrera. Las barreras profesionales como la falta de experiencia intensifican las desigualdades de género y la discriminación por edad en el proceso de selección para pasantías o contrataciones permanentes. Concluimos que las mujeres jóvenes adoptan estrategias de credibilidad para hacer frente a estas dificultades.

Palabras clave | edadismo, mujeres jóvenes, desigualdad de género, techo de cristal, pared de cristal.

INTRODUCTION

The effects of the so-called "glass ceiling" involve discrimination – based on gender as well as on other elements that are stronger at the top of the hierarchy than at lower organizational levels. Such effects represent an age, racial, or gender differentiation that is not explained by other relevant characteristics of the employee's job. According to research from the field of Business Administration, such biases tend to be aggravated over the years in the career of those affected by them (Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia & Vanneman, 2001).

Recent findings suggest that women face many challenges along their career paths. This means that the glass ceiling is a widespread phenomenon at various stages of their career advancement, not restricted to the top of the hierarchy. The barriers only get more severe for young women and involve access to the labor market. In 2012, the International Labor Organization (ILO) released a report that highlighted disadvantages for this age group compared to young men, such as higher unemployment rates, persistent wage gaps, and a greater share of informal employment (Elder & Kring, 2016a; International Labour Office, 2012). Moreover, in the Brazilian case, childcare can prevent or hinder women, especially younger women, from even entering the labor market (Silva & Teixeira, 2019).

Studies on this topic have expanded and enriched the research agenda regarding gender discrimination in the workplace. However, a gap still persists regarding the association between age, gender, and discrimination. In an effort to bridge the gap, in this article, we approach ageism and the glass ceiling by integrating the issue of age, gender, and challenges at the onset of a career.

In Brazil, several reasons justify the research and analysis of young women's professional beginnings. The first of these is the growing female participation in the labor market. Data from the Demographic Censuses of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, or IBGE) point out that, from 1950 to 2010, the female Economically Active Population (EAP) rose from 2.5 million to 40.7 million, raising from 13.6% to 48.9% the female activity rate (ratio between economically active population and working-age population), while the male rate fell from 80.8% to 67.1% (Alves, 2013). According to the IBGE (2010), the EAP comprises the labor potential that the productive sector can count on; it is the effective supply of labor in the economy. Despite the remarkable female participation in economic activity, it is possible to notice several signs of inequalities between men and women in the labor space, which is so highly valued by contemporary societies.

A lot of research sought to understand the obstacles posed to the success surrounding the trajectory of more mature women (Cepellos, 2016; Quast, 2011). Along these lines, however, there is a theoretical gap on the obstacles young women face due to gender when they begin their professional lives, which translated into a great opportunity for this article.

From this standpoint, this paper aims to explore the early stages in the career of Brazilian women aged between 21 and 30 years old, with an academic background, mostly white and of high socioeconomic class, in an attempt to answer the following research question: what are the difficulties and opportunities faced by these women at the beginning of their careers? In view

of this, the specific objectives were: (I) to identify the influence of age and gender on hiring and retention in the organization; and (II) to verify the existence of specific behaviors required of young women by the organizations.

At the end of this assessment, therefore, we expect to understand the main barriers faced at this professional juncture, as well as the presence or absence of a connection between gender and age in the hiring and retention process of women within organizations. With this in mind, it is possible to ascertain the benefits of this research for companies, society, and for the scientific field, since its results may encourage inclusive human resources (HR) policies, as well as catalyze positive changes in public employability policies, thus contributing to more inclusive development of society. The paper is divided into six sections, including this introduction. In the second section, we conduct a non-systematic and non-exhaustive literature review on topics that make up its major theme. In the third, we present the methodological procedures employed, followed by a series of discussions, final considerations, and references.

THE GLASS CEILING PHENOMENON

The term glass ceiling was coined by Marilyn Loden in 1978, during a speech in the United States, to symbolically indicate a subtle and transparent barrier but strong enough to prevent the transition of women to higher hierarchical levels in the organizations where they work (Carvalho Neto, Tanure & Andrade, 2010). Several studies have indicated a number of barriers women face when trying to leverage their careers in the corporate world, among which we highlight the work of Morrison, White, White, and Velsor (1987).

More recent studies suggest that social inequalities are typically born within the domestic space, reflecting its cultural aspect. Subsequently, they find expression in the workplace, where there is a differentiated treatment for women, who predominantly occupy jobs with low pay and prestige (Pereira & Lima, 2017). In this scenario, female insertion in the labor market constitutes a difficult process, often coupled with segregation and discrimination (Galeazzi et al., 2011). Studies in the field of Business Administration about the glass ceiling phenomenon have linked HR practices adopted by organizations to the percentage of managerial or lower-level positions occupied by women (Dreher, 2003).

Changes in Brazilian managerial practices are not happening at the desired speed, despite being justified by the demand for competitiveness in the productive market (Kanan, 2010). To be sure, the greater complexity and dynamism of the environment in which organizations are inserted means that they also display a greater internal diversity. These changes may be positive, but they also give rise to contradictions, as exemplified by issues related to gender relations (Andrade, Cappelle, Brito, Neto & Boas, 2002). Gender corresponds to a social representation in which images, symbols, value systems, and references are construed in interactions with others, characterized by a broader historical-social context.

The literature on glass ceiling inequalities contains at least two strands that seek to explain the phenomenon's very existence. One of them emphasizes discrimination, and the other,

the behavioral difference between men and women (Coelho, 2006). The first addresses two forms of discrimination: so-called "preference discrimination", in which the employer prefers to hire a man over a woman, even though both have the same qualifications; and "statistical discrimination", which assumes the existence of a social stigma according to which women's productivity is lower than men's. The second strand emphasizes the behavioral difference between genders, claiming that women are more involved in non-market activities, such as household chores and/or caring for family members. As a consequence, companies would create less stable bonds with women, preferring to hire men. On the other hand, the more qualified and the higher the position a woman holds, the less severe the gender differentials are. Based on this position, the "glass ceiling" would only occur among those professionals who have not yet reached leading positions.

In addition to these aspects, there is a further aspect that, according to Serafim and Bendassolli (2006), considers female participation in management positions in large organizations not as a result of prejudice or discrimination but because of women's conflict between career and motherhood. Moreover, Bjerk (2008) demonstrates that the glass ceiling phenomenon may emerge from the difficulty of assessing skills. This happens because often, according to the author, the opportunity to signal their skills before entering the job differs between genders, which can reinforce the existing barrier.

Moreover, a differentiating element of the relationship between women and men in the organization is sexuality, coupled with the fear of its abuse. At least two prejudices derive from this. The first is related to the idea that the woman reached the top because she used her sexuality; the second assumes that she behaves like a man (Carvalho Neto et al., 2010). Often, when in leadership positions, women will try to adapt to male constructs, drawing on what men hold dear, seeking to speak more directly; they become desexualized, dress in color palettes ranging from gray to dark tones, and try to gesticulate less (Irigaray & Vergara, 2009).

In addition, they often work double or triple shifts (job, home, children/elderly/animals), overburdening themselves or decreasing their potential in the work environment (Pereira & Lima, 2017). Furthermore, Gomes (2010) identified that the candidate's physical appearance could influence the perception of his or her competence. In this context, gender stereotypes would be part of young female executives' professional and personal lives, thus generating overload and rendering the female identity multi-faceted. On the other hand, younger women have difficulty finding inspiring female figures since few of them occupy prominent positions. In order to excel in the job market, they need to specialize in their field.

Next, we will explore a link between the glass ceiling phenomenon and the difficulties faced by young professionals.

YOUNG WOMEN IN THE LABOR MARKET

Professional insertion is marked by graduating and searching for a job directly related to the degree earned. In essence, internships complement formal education and gain access to the

labor market (Rocha-de-oliveira & Piccinini, 2012). We are aware that this is a conception that does not reflect the reality of a majority of Brazilian youths, thus failing to account for possible intersectionalities. Therefore, we deem it implausible to universalize the social group of young women based on a class standard that is elitist, urban, cis, and mostly white (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991; Hirata, 2014; Kergoat, 2010). This would amount to rolling back the contributions that feminist theorists, especially from Black Feminism (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 2004; Gonzales, 2020; Hooks, 2015), have made to the notion of theorizing through situated knowledge, introducing terms such as intersectionality and consubstantiality. It is nevertheless important to note that the above social markers are still prevalent in our sample.

When we talk about intersectionalities and consubstantiality, there are multiple possible ways to approach the discussion, from the articulations between gender and race, and gender and class, to the integrated view between gender, race, social class, and sexual orientation, among others. From the Anglo-Saxon perspective, the works of Crenshaw (1994), Davis (2016), and Bilge (2020) should be mentioned. From a Brazilian perspective, one might refer to the works of Gonzalez (2020), Hirata (2014), and Ribeiro (2018), among others, that mobilize the categories of race, gender, and geographic location to explain wage inequalities or differences regarding unemployment.

The term intersectionality was first used in 1980 by African-American jurist Kimberlé W. Crenshaw to designate the interdependence of the power relations of race, gender, and class. Its origin goes back to the Black Feminism movement of the late 1970s, whose collective critique turned radically against white, middle-class, heteronormative feminism (Davis, 2016). Thus, the intersectional approach goes beyond recognizing the various systems of oppression based on the categories of sex, gender, sexual orientation, class, race, ethnicity, age, and/or disability. The social system operates within these categories and is postulated in the interaction, production, and reproduction of social inequalities (Bilge, 2009). According to Crenshaw (1994), the concept of intersectionality is related to the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape multiple dimensions. For the author, it is not possible to look at the dimensions of race or gender separately when trying to understand how sexism and racism affect the lives of black women. She further points out that there are many ways in which race and gender intersect, shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against black women. Importantly, there are other authors who use distinct concepts and approaches, such as the notion of consubstantiality and coextensivity, as articulated by Kergoat (2010) since the 1970s-1980s.

According to Hirata (2014), Kergoat's (2010) idea of consubstantiality was elaborated in terms of articulation between sex and social class, and further developed in terms of imbrication between class, sex, and race, which configure the three fundamental and transversal social relations. Crenshaw (1994) starts from the intersection between sex and race, and Kergoat (2010) starts from the intersection between sex and class, bringing theoretical and political implications with significant differences. Despite these differences, a point of convergence between both is the proposal of non-hierarchization of forms of oppression. Another point worth mentioning is that Kergoat (2010) uses the sexual division of labor to refer to the material basis of social gender relations.

Therefore, in this paper, we make an intersectional analysis of groups that, even though they experience "glass ceiling" inequalities, still benefit from social relations that generate inequality.

The entry into the labor market can be very disturbing for young people; their anguish intensifies at the beginning of their professional lives because the less practical experience they have, the less self-knowledge they will also have about their "tastes, skills, values, and expectations, essential elements for making decisions about their professional careers" (Braga, 2012, p. 69).

In addition, the idealization of a self-image and a career history to be built converges to the image of the young person as a unique and self-determined being, capable of defining their own destiny, an agent of transformation, and a successful professional (Matheus, 2011). However, understanding that all young people do not easily achieve such stereotypes is a great challenge for those entering the labor market. Especially when we consider intersectionalities, a significant portion of the young population is deprived of access to the training activities that some companies tend to treat as a basic feature for entering this market.

The State's legal approach to internships highlights the need for these to retain their pedagogical aspects, a concern that is justified when the function assigned to the intern tends not to prioritize their professional training (Rocha-de-oliveira & Piccinini, 2012). That said, to fully grasp the moment of entry of young people into working life, it is necessary to observe both individual and institutional aspects, as well as the context in which they are inscribed (Dubar, 2001). In this sense, the economic situation, the demographic and occupational structure, and the level of training/technological and industrial development all have a bearing on this entry.

Given the current economic situation and the introduction of new technologies, the labor market has become more competitive and selective, excluding a growing number of young people (Camarano, Pasinato, Arruda, & Lovisolio, 2001). And again, internships are losing their original pedagogical function, becoming one more source of competition (Rocha-de-oliveira & Piccinini, 2012). In fact, there is a great expectation that young people born after the 1990s are familiar with technologies, adaptable, and enthusiastic. However, the stigma of ageism remains at the same time, reinforcing the youth image as irresponsible, vulnerable, and impulsive (Chan et al., 2012).

In this context, it is important to note that women at all stages of life are more likely to experience prejudice, especially those related to age and sexuality (Duncan & Loretto, 2004). The main empirical findings related to female youth unemployment are related to the fact that the roles of women in this age group outside the home remain limited to a much greater extent than that of young men. As for education, an overall trend is seen of an increase in women's educational attainment relative to men's, as women achieve on average a higher level of education than men (IBGE, 2018b). Even though they are in greater numbers among people with a higher education degree, they still face inequalities in the labor market in relation to men, as shown in data published by IBGE, *Estatísticas de gênero: Indicadores sociais das mulheres no Brasil* [Gender Statistics: Social Indicators of Women in Brazil].

Worldwide, over 76% of inactive, non-student youth are female. The gender gap in youth labor underutilization exists in all regions but is larger in less developed countries, such as some in the Middle East (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territories, and Tunisia) and

those in North Africa. Having children serves as a factor encouraging employment for young men, but has the opposite effect on young women. Less than one in two young mothers work, while among young fathers, the ratio is more than four in five (Elder & Kring, 2016b). Latin America and the Caribbean still have the largest increase in female labor force participation rates among the young and adult population. From very low levels in 1991, Latin American female labor force participation rates (15 years and older) have risen from 53.7% in 2014 to slightly above the global average (50.3%) and are on par with developed economies. According to the ILO report, one of the reasons for this is the decrease in family responsibilities and pregnancy of young Latin American women. When compared to young women in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, those in Latin America indicate one of these two factors (helping the family or pregnancy) as a hindrance, while Sub-Saharan Africans indicate both (Elder & Kring, 2016a).

Thus, age discrimination must be kept in perspective when reconciling different generations in the same work environment. Only in doing so can one ensure a work environment where all generations are embraced for the talents they bring (Riklenn, 2016).

Next, we will explore parallels between the factors of age discrimination and youth.

AGE, YOUTH, AND AGEISM

Age is one of the three main dimensions of interpersonal characterization, along with gender and race. It is a significant social indicator capable of signaling expected behaviors, status, power, and responsibilities in different age groups (Abrams, Russell, Vauclair & Swift, 2011). When used as a social category, age can become unfavorable for specific age groups (Gil, 2014). As a result, in 1969, the term ageism was coined by Robert Butler, designating a form of prejudice or discrimination against or in favor of an age group (Berger, Mailloux-Poirier & Madeira, 1995). This trait tends to reinforce social inequalities, affecting mainly older women, poorer people, or people with mental health disorders (Barnett, 2005).

Initially, the term was tied to negative attitudes and/or beliefs toward the elderly (Nelson, 2002). It was later recognized that it could also be directed at younger people, which broadened the definition to encompass discrimination against any age group. It is worth noting that age discrimination predominantly affects older groups, although young people are not immune. The underlying idea of ageism is based on myths and stereotypical attitudes about the age of workers that can be easily refuted (Davey, 2014).

What is it, then, that makes age discrimination occur in the workplace? Often, HR practices tend to stereotype and generalize attributes, skills, and abilities based on age. Age can also be a quick and cheap variable for merit evaluations, such as compensation practices based on seniority in the organization. Furthermore, there is a preference for middle-aged people and a tendency for mature managers to recruit people like them (Davey, 2014) over very young or elderly people.

Given the context of this research, we understand it is necessary to analyze ageism as applied to youth. In this vein, we contend that the definition of "youth" is not precise enough to pinpoint a specific age group. Thus, by youth, we shall understand here the transitional phase

between puberty and adulthood (Michaelis, 2020), limited by the attainment of social maturity (Gil, 2014). In other words, it corresponds to the period in which the person goes through a process of individualization and detachment from the family, building their future with their own resources (Calvo, 2005). However, for the purpose of circumscribing the specific group of people to be surveyed in this study, the term youth shall refer to individuals who are between 21 and 30 years old (Sá, Lemos, & Cavazotte, 2014).

When it comes to ageism, young people are associated with negative stereotypes: vulnerable, impulsive, individualistic, and naive (Chan et al., 2012). Consequently, many adults do not trust them or even distrust some of their abilities, and there is a certain disdain from older employees within the workplace, for example (Beaton, 2016). On the other hand, there are stereotypes and attributions that praise the younger person, especially in the professional sphere: motivation, creativity, innovation, adaptability, and especially technological skills (Beaton, 2016; McGregor & Gray, 2002).

Another expression of ageism stems from different age groups working together. In this context, it is common to see a competition between groups that seek to mitigate threatening characteristics in the dispute for organizational spaces (Loth & Silveira, 2013).

There are physical expectations about what it means to be young, mature, or elderly and, in this respect, we notice an expression of ageism especially directed at women, in their physical aging process (Ayalon, 2013). In Western societies, for example, youth is highly valued, and women are more prone to discrimination (Duncan & Loretto, 2004; Fineman, 2014), experiencing disadvantages in that regard earlier than men (Fineman, 2014).

Furthermore, negative treatment of young women is generally perpetrated by older co-workers. The justifications include arguments such as “too young to be promoted”, “too young looking”, “too young to hold a certain position”, “younger people are less intelligent/capable when faced with work challenges”, “they are less trustworthy” (Duncan & Loretto, 2004). While men may face age barriers with regard to wages, benefits, or restrictions at work, women may perceive these barriers when it comes to promotions, the way they are treated, and negative attitudes due to their age.

Finally, it is also important to point out that many studies explore age bias involving mature women (Cepellos, 2016; Duncan & Loretto, 2004; Quast, 2011). However, relatively few of them focus on the obstacles faced by young women, most notably those by Duncan and Loretto (2004) and Snape and Redman (2003). Thus, there remains a theoretical gap, which the present investigation aims to narrow.

Below, we present the methodological procedures used in this study.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

We conducted qualitative research that made it possible to deepen the understanding of the glass ceiling phenomenon (Flick, 2009; Vergara, 2005).

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, recorded when consented by the interviewees (13 cases), facilitating the transcription for further analysis. In the remainder, when

consent for recording was not given (two cases), notes were taken during the interviews. A vast bibliographic research was also carried out, which helped create a script that was coherent with reality and aligned with the objectives of the study. This allowed us to validate and deepen the issues raised by the interviewees (Godoy, 1995).

Then we started the data collection: 15 interviews with young women, ranging from 21 to 30 years old, mostly white and of high socioeconomic class, who had attended or were attending an undergraduate course and, at the time of the interview, were active in the labor market (the profile of each one is described in Exhibit 1). They are identified by pseudonyms in order to safeguard their anonymity. It should be noted that the research goals and script were approved by the Ethics Committee of the researchers' educational institution.

Exhibit 1. Table of interviewees

Interviewee	Sociodemographic variables (age/color/social class)	Home state	Type of organization	Position	Educational background
Alice	23/Yellow/Upper	São Paulo	Pharmaceutical industry	Intern	Business Administration
Anita	23/White/Upper	São Paulo	Bank	Analyst	Business Administration
Aurélia	30/White/Middle	Minas Gerais	Cooperative	Sales Executive	Agronomic Engineering
Elizabeth	23/Black/Middle	São Paulo	Consulting	Intern	Civil Engineering
Emilia	24/White/Upper	Minas Gerais	Consulting	Analyst	Agronomic Engineering
Francisca	23/White/Upper	São Paulo	Law firm	Intern	Law
Gabriela	25/White/Middle	Minas Gerais	Consulting	Intern	Environmental and Sanitary Engineering
Helena	21/White/Upper	São Paulo	Construction	Intern	Civil Engineering
Iracema	21/White/Upper	São Paulo	Multinational Digital Security Company	Intern	Business Administration
Lúcia	24/White/Upper	São Paulo	Beverage industry	Manager	Publicity and Advertising
Madalena	22/White/Upper	São Paulo	Automotive industry	Intern	Environmental Engineering
Maria	24/White/Middle	São Paulo	Consulting	Intern	Biochemical Engineering
Marília	21/White/Upper	São Paulo	Bank	Intern	Business Administration
Tereza	21/White/Middle	São Paulo	Bank	Intern	Business Administration
Vitória	22/White/Upper	São Paulo	Food industry	Intern	Psychology

Source: Data collection.

The criteria used to define the social class category of the interviewees are in accordance with the figures established by the IBGE (2021). Social class is understood as the grouping of people who have similar social status according to several criteria (Santos, 2008). The economic criterion was taken into account for the stratification of the research subjects, based on the "Minimum Wage Ranges" (IBGE, 2021). At the time of data collection, incomes were divided into five ranges, from A to E. Later, in the analyses, we considered an upper class those interviewees

whose family income fit into social class A, declaring an income above 20 minimum wages. In the same way, we attributed the term middle class to the interviewees whose family income fit into social classes B and middle C, whose income was between 10 and 20 minimum wages, and whose family members worked or provided services directly to the richest groups. The color and gender criteria were based on the interviewees' self-declaration and self-identification.

For data analysis, we used the thematic analysis technique, which, according to Campos (2004), consists of three phases. The first is the preliminary investigation of the data, aiming to recognize the context and mobilize "impressions and orientations without a commitment to systematization" (Campos, 2004, p. 612) – after that, complex signs and conclusions become apparent. The second phase consists of the choice of "units of meaning", which provide indications of the answers to the research question/purposes in line with the theoretical base. It is important to point out that there are two possible origins for the units of meaning: aprioristic (when the researcher already has a predefined category) and non-aprioristic (when the interviewees' answers call for the creation of a new category) – the latter used in the present work. Finally, in the third phase, subcategorization is carried out, with relevant themes and meanings, but encompassed by a larger theme.

As the creation of the units of meaning was non-aprioristic, inductive and abductive reasoning were important in interpreting the data and mobilizing the literature. First, inductive reasoning was useful to the study because it allowed theoretical insights to be observed from the iterative categorization of the data. This allowed for greater transparency in the procedures of generalization of the findings, while particular characteristics of the data that prevent broad generalization, such as sociodemographics, were accounted for. Consequently, abductive reasoning provided a useful theoretical framework for the study as its findings were checked and compared with the literature. Thus, the interpretation of the data and more generic explanations of the results supported the emergent theorizing process during the analysis (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013).

As a result of the thematic analysis, we have: "The beginning of the career", "Ageism by the organization", "Internalizing ageism", and "Credibility strategies", as well as the sub-themes derived from them, all identified in Exhibit 2. From the integration between the topics, it was possible to address the question underlying the survey, as well as to achieve the goals outlined in the introduction.

Exhibit 2. Themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
The beginning of the career	The issue of gender
	The issue of age
Ageism by the organization	Ageism and the gender issue
	Influence of physical appearance
Embracing ageism	New or old young woman?
	Credibility strategies

Source: Data analysis.

RESULTS AND ARGUMENTS

The obstacles imposed on women's careers reinforce the glass ceiling phenomenon. The results of this investigation support the idea that there are subtle barriers faced by women in the labor market.

The beginning of the career

For the interviewees, the entry into the labor market was a period of anguish, especially in the first stage, since the internship selection processes have become more competitive and demanding (Rocha-de-oliveira & Piccinini, 2012). According to many of them, the search for the first internship was long, stretching over a full year. Such a situation added psychological pressure, due to personal expectations and demands from parents and colleagues. Madalena and Gabriela, for example, stopped sharing with others their progress in the selection processes to avert a greater emotional overload. For both, during the recruitment process, the prerequisites are many and specific, which generates discomfort, as Madalena described:

[Companies] want you to have experience without offering you this experience, [...] they look for that kind of people who have already done an exchange program and things like that. Particularly the big companies.

Moreover, the lack of experience means that the younger demographic has not yet developed its self-knowledge about "tastes and skills", which renders this moment even more delicate (Braga, 2012). In this scenario, the competition for the first job vacancy tends to be fierce, while factors such as gender and age are highly relevant.

The issue of gender

Studies and statistical data point out that, notwithstanding the fact that women have on average more years of study than men, the average earnings of those who work are 24.4% lower than those of men (IBGE, 2018a). Furthermore, a hierarchical narrowing of female participation in organizations is also noted. As attributions of leadership and command increase, the proportion of women decreases (Ethos Institute & Ibope Inteligência, 2010). In this sense, although there are signs that the major inequalities between genders are less critical than in the past (Scherer, 2008), the labor market is still defined by male standards (Abramo, 2007).

As for the level of difficulty faced by a man and a woman in this professional phase, the surveyed women diverged. More than half of them stated that the "starting point" could be unfair for women in comparison to men. Exemplifying such a statement, Anita said:

Sometimes you even have more qualifications, but the guy is taken more seriously [...] He naturally sounds more assertive in what he says.

For positions closer to technology areas, Elizabeth felt that this kind of behavior from recruiters was recurrent:

You could see it in the order the meetings were held, who was invited to speak in the group dynamics, and how the interviewers conducted themselves in the interviews... All attention was focused on men.

In view of this, a barrier is established preventing these young women from signaling their skills, thus hindering their chances of getting the position and, consequently, entering the labor market (Bjerk, 2008). On the other hand, it was also verified that there is a concern on the part of organizations to encourage and even actively seek female employees, as pointed out by Anita:

In some interviews, they said that the manager would even prefer a woman because we usually have better communication with customers.

The companies' motivations for increasing the number of female employees are distinct: pressure from investors (as told by Marília) and company goals (in Tereza's case). At the same time, institutions that already have a higher number of women hold meetings and discussions about gender inequality. In this context, Emília's perception of the trend is interesting: "I see that young people strongly agree, it's just that many people think they are giving an advantage to someone who didn't deserve it, you know?" – she says, referring mainly to male leaders, who are against the policy of actively recruiting female employees.

The issue of age

In fact, there is a close relationship between entering the labor market and the age bracket. Often, the interviewees associated the internship period with the implications of their age. According to Anita's perception, companies also associate youth with internship positions. So, even though being in this age range may be an opportunity for those looking for an internship, it is also a hindrance for those looking for analyst and management positions. Helena said she believes that companies prefer people who have never worked before, so as to be molded by the institution. Francisca raised a hypothesis: "There is an expectation from the bosses about the baggage I bring from college". And this was an advantage of her hiring.

In addition to all the social aspects of work, the first job is a milestone for young women. It provides them with a certificate of independence and emancipation that the mere coming of age was not enough to accomplish. Marília pointed out:

I don't regret at all that I started working at an early age. I grew as a person because now I have my money, I have responsibilities, and I have to answer to my superiors. I think I have evolved more than my colleagues, who are starting their internships now.

But even though the interviewee said that her parents had come to respect her decisions a lot more, she emphasized that the job did not offer her quite as much autonomy as it did her boyfriend.

Ageism by the organization

Based on the interviews, it was possible to confirm that the ageism displayed by companies directly impacts young women. In this research, all the participants said they had felt some kind of discrimination because of their age. In contrast, the positive impact was not perceived by all. Thus, we could recognize several forms of expression of ageism. Anita, despite being almost a graduate and having had a great performance in the internship at the organization where she worked, was not hired because she was only 21 years old, which made her question herself:

Why am I at a disadvantage if the guys are the ones who are late? It is not me who is late! I am here with all the skills you need. Why do I have to compete at a disadvantage because these people are at such an age?

Elizabeth said she believed that the main driver for ageism is the prejudice revolving around the thesis of the inexperience of young people, who wouldn't know how to deal with adverse situations. In this sense, Iracema's remark summarized the feeling of most of the interviewees:

I think that, because I am very young because I am just entering the market, everyone has some reservations.

According to her, sometimes older bosses "don't understand the way younger people work and so they can't help people develop in the best way". Thus, the difficulty in reconciling the styles of different generations can even hinder the professional growth of those who are still starting out, which is in fact a challenge for companies.

A different situation was experienced by Maria, who, during her internship year, was discriminated against several times for being 24 years old and the oldest among her fellow interns. Not a few times she hear phrases like: "Wow, your leader is only one year older than you!"; "You are too old for an intern"; "You will never be a manager in six years and your managers are 30, which is only six years older than you".

Ageism and the issue of gender

The interviews showed us that there is an association between ageism and gender. In cases like Gabriela's, the justification given for selection processes that stated a preference for men was something like this:

You will work on the factory floor, you will have to work with men all the time, and they are bricklayers. It is difficult to reconcile a young girl with bricklayers, especially if she is calling the shots.

For Marília, it was noticeable how afraid her bosses were to delegate basic tasks to her because she was a "little girl" (in her words) and the youngest on the team. On the other hand, she said, her bosses "put a lot of pressure on her", which was positive at times, but hindered her development.

According to Aurélio, young women of the same age and position as men need to provide more proof of their capabilities by presenting better quality work to get the same recognition. On this issue, Gabriela said that the impact of gender is lessened as relationships are established with younger people (whether customers or bosses).

Influence of physical appearance

It became evident from the survey that there was a correlation between young women's appearance and ageism. Anita declared:

You already have the issue of being a woman, but when you are young I think it gets a thousand times worse because we have a younger face [and] we take care of ourselves more. So I feel – and I felt much more before – that some people saw me almost as a child in the company, you know?

Lucia added: "I think age doesn't make that much difference for men and women. But I think appearance does".

Another interesting case is that of Vitória, who, at the time of the interview, worked in HR. During a selection process, a 45-year-old candidate expressed great surprise, even asking her if she was the one doing the interview, in a tone of "astonishment and disdain", she said.

Anita also said that, because she was short and very smiling, people saw her as even younger, which she considered bad since the client might not feel safe being assisted by her. In Iracema's case, however, people's distrust was due to her beauty.

In this context, Elizabeth said she believes that appearance and clothing are fundamental for building an image in the work environment. Such perception was confirmed by the experience of Madalena, who had to send a photo of herself as a requirement for a selection process, configuring a situation of ageism – youthfulness and physical appearance as evaluation criteria (North & Fiske, 2012).

Internalizing ageism

According to Mutran and Burke (1979), older people have identities that set them apart from middle-aged people but bring them closer to young people. Both old and young people see themselves as less useful and powerful than middle-aged people.

In addition to showing that the feeling of uselessness was experienced by both old and young, the survey also indicated that the perception of the self as useless is triggered by feelings of loneliness in older people and the lack of participation of younger people in the labor force. Such a perception also reinforces age discrimination in groups that are stigmatized by a portion of society and stereotyped in the workspace.

In fact, up to that point, ageism seemed to be a prejudice unrelated to the individual who suffered it. However, interviewees such as Tereza, Francisca, Vitória, and Gabriela brought to light a scenario in which young women themselves are harmed by reproducing prejudices and stereotypes based on what others think about their age.

Tereza, for example, in her interaction with trainees seven years older than her, reproduced the stereotypes attributed to her:

I feel that because I am younger, sometimes I am not mature enough to handle the responsibilities.

Vitória and Iracema, on the other hand, who shared the same feeling, considered that this attitude may have hindered their professional development. According to Iracema:

Sometimes, on account of me being very young, having started working there at the age of 19, and given the fact that there are people who have already been in the market for so long, I get a little insecure about giving my opinion.

The impact on individuals of age as a social indicator and typifier is thus evident, affecting not only the way society views them but also their own personal expectations and assumptions (Gil, 2014).

A new or an old young woman?

The interviews gave us the opportunity to observe that some factors may alter the experience and perception of youth. One of them is linked to the intersectionality between age and territorial region. Geographic location as an intersectional factor is particularly interesting in view of the demographic and economic significance of the city of São Paulo (a huge metropolis). Considering such contrast, people who do not live in São Paulo may have had fewer opportunities for access to cultural and educational assets throughout their lives. This has a bearing, for example, on entering the job market and moving up in organizations at ages considered "normal" or "expected". Gabriela, who is from Minas Gerais and moved to São Paulo, said:

Before I came here, I thought I was relatively young, but here people already treat me as an old lady, even at 25 years of age. They say: "You need more responsibility"; "It was not the time for you to be in an internship"; "You should have been hired by now".

Another factor that may influence the conception of youth, when linked to the organizational context, is age norms. In addition to Gabriela's observation, we identified in several interviewees the fear around the idea of "being old for an internship". This indicates that there is an expectation regarding the age of someone who will occupy this position in the organization. In this sense, Vitória's comments summarize the roots of this feeling:

In Brazil, we suffer a lot because the older [young] people end up not having many opportunities.

In this context, the oldest interviewee (Aurélia) said she felt relieved that many people tend to assume she is younger. In addition, she said she felt more strongly about the pervading ageism at the beginning of her career, and age was not an issue at the time of the interview. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that Lucia (24 years old and the youngest among the interviewees) revealed that she preferred people not to know her age: "I want people to even think I am older". Moreover, like other interviewees, she also stated that age ceases to be a barrier when the person proves their commitment and maturity, the latter being a very relevant factor. However, according to the young women, such credibility is more easily earned in the internal environment of the company than in the relationship with customers.

Credibility strategies

Aiming to minimize the impacts of age and gender on their professional performance, the interviewees have mentioned what we will call "credibility strategies", which seem to have helped them.

Gabriela believes that the fact that she is young, single, has no children and lives alone has contributed to the organization's belief that she "would cancel her personal life to have a professional one". As a result of a similar perception, Lucia's boss planned her marriage and pregnancy for after reaching a certain career level, since she knew that her development after these decisions would be impacted – Lucia and Aurélia intended to do the same.

Helena, who would graduate at 22, showed concern about her age. She considered herself too young and felt that if she did not continue studying, she would lag behind, a process she believed would not happen to a man of her age. Emília, Marília, Alice, and Elisabeth had to routinely offer proof of their professionalism and in-depth knowledge, always exceeding expectations. It is as if they were saying, according to Alice: "You can trust me, even though I am an intern, I understand what I am doing!" Thus, it is important not to make too many mistakes, because "if something goes wrong, they will blame you".

Finally, Lucia and Anita told us that they have even changed their physical appearance to look older. Lucia pointed out: "Even if unconsciously, when I have an important meeting, I try to wear heels, more mature clothes, so as not to look like I'm young. Men don't need to worry about that, but I do". As for Anita, addressing her great discomfort with this prejudice, she revealed:

In some meetings I have worn glasses on purpose and changed my look: I put my hair up in a bun, wear glasses, a shirt, a more serious outfit, you name it. And it works, you know? I don't know if I felt more confident this way or if people also took me more seriously.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our work indicates that the glass ceiling phenomenon, although it can be felt by the interviewees at the beginning of their careers, does not explain specificities related to two social markers, age and gender. In this sense, this article brings an empirical contribution by demonstrating that ageism, usually associated with older people (Barnett, 2005), when tied to gender, does not occur exclusively among mature executive women (Cepellos, 2016; Quast, 2011), but also among young women.

The women interviewed perceive that, compared to young men, they are overlooked during selection processes, are taken less seriously than their male peers, need to prove greater ability to be recognized, and are seen as more immature and insecure. Therefore, because of the negative treatment and attitudes due to their age, young women have greater difficulties also when entering the labor market, and not only during later stages of career advancement, as pointed out in the literature (Duncan & Loretto, 2004).

We suggest, accordingly, that the glass ceiling, a term commonly associated with gender disadvantages at the top of the hierarchy (Cotter *et al.*, 2001), may also be present quite early in women's professional life, including in the selection processes for internships. In this phase, a major barrier concerns gender inequality, since recruiters tend to prioritize male candidates, making it difficult to signal women's skills – especially in selection processes for areas in which the male presence is greater. After this stage and the effective hiring, the barriers become different and the issue of ageism stands out, either on the part of the company or on the part of the young woman herself. Therefore, it can be assumed that young women experience disadvantages during the process of professional insertion, and not only during professional ascension, as studies often show (Coelho, 2006). This finding makes the gender and age inequality faced by women even more troubling, and it must be relentlessly tackled within organizations.

Theoretical contributions: from crystal wall to the glass ceiling

When examining the literature on the “glass ceiling”, we observed that research is less attentive to the obstacles faced in the workplace by young women, aged between 21 and 30, and at the beginning of their careers, with more frequent analyses dealing with the ascension of their careers in their maturity. This is an unresolved theoretical issue in the literature, but of paramount importance, since social data has shown the extent to which women face inequalities in the labor world compared to men, even when they have higher levels of education (IBGE, 2018b). Consequently, these obstacles can be seen both at the beginning of the career and throughout

the professional trajectory. However, research findings in the literature on the "glass ceiling" have mostly shown that women in organizations/corporations have difficulties reaching management positions, and these difficulties are usually not explained by factors such as competence and quality at work, but by social markers (Cepellos, 2016; Cotter *et al.*, 2001; Quast, 2011).

Our results indicate that at the beginning of their careers women may face barriers like the "crystal wall". These walls are transparent, have a crystalline structure, and at first, a glance may appear light and thin, but they are strong and resilient enough to take time to break down.

Differences: the crystal wall is different from the barrier known as the "glass ceiling", because in the former there is a negative association between gender and age, leading to stereotypes of inexperience and immaturity of young women. In addition, situations of guardianship and loss of autonomy were reported by young women in the category "incorporation of ageism". Our concept of "crystal wall" reflects this condition: unlike the amorphous substance of glass, crystal can solidify and be perceived to convey a higher standing, triggering in young and upcoming women insecurities in relation to their peers, because they feel that others are superior. Like a wall, instead of a ceiling, these barriers are at the bottom of the hierarchy in organizations, not at the top. Glass is characterized as an amorphous solid, it solidifies quickly, and its particles lose mobility before they become orderly (Branco, 2014), which justifies the comparison to the journey of women in high positions and ascending careers. Thus, when they reach a high level in terms of vertical leverage of positions, they quickly lose mobility in their careers. Crystal, on the other hand, is characterized as a crystalline structure, having an ordered arrangement of elements, its particles slowly combine into regular and stable shapes, showing that these barriers can be difficult to recognize because they are confused with the lack of experience of young women at the beginning of their careers.

Similarities: both concepts address the disparities endured by women in their work environments, thus indicating gender issues. The two concepts operate just like social barriers that prevent women from being promoted, either at lower levels (crystal wall) or at the top of management (glass ceiling).

Our study points out that women at the beginning of their careers face crystal barriers, a phenomenon repeatedly observed and reported by the interviewees, with frequent obstacles being associated with two social markers, age and gender. These walls are translucent, made of fine and durable material, justifying the "superiority" of the peers with whom the young women are competing. It is possible to see who is on the other side of the crystal, to admire them, but they internalize the idea that it is not feasible for themselves to be on the other side. These superiorities are justified by age, appearance, gender, and ultimately lack of experience. Thus, crystal barriers justify that, while ageism is generally associated with older people (Barnett, 2005), when coupled with gender, it does not occur exclusively among senior female executives (Cepellos, 2016; Quast, 2011).

Drawing from this study, therefore, it was possible to ascertain the existence of a link between discrimination by youth and gender, which maximizes the pressure on the interviewees at the beginning of their professional lives. And, although they acknowledge initiatives by companies to increase the number of female employees, they still feel compelled to show greater competence

and efficiency to compete with men. Thus, they look for mechanisms to defend themselves from discrimination, such as using more assertive language, wearing more masculine clothes (like shirts), shades of gray, high heels, glasses, and hairstyles that will make them look older. In addition, physical appearance becomes a negative aspect when the professional is seen as too young or too smiling. A great obstacle arises in hiring and, particularly, in reaching higher positions, something that does not happen with the same intensity among men of the same age and position, according to the interviewees.

These findings reflect another contribution to the literature, indicating that physical expectations are directed especially toward women in the aging process (Ayalon, 2013). However, according to the interviews undertaken for this research, we saw those young women also adopt strategies to deal with their appearance, but in the opposite direction: they use artifacts to look older and, consequently, reduce the impressions of immaturity. These women, just like the older ones, are victims of ageism in the organizational context.

Another contribution to the literature is associated with the evidence gathered in this study suggesting that the concept of "age" is quite elastic, even within the 10-year range represented by the interviewees – all of whom are considered young by definition. This seems to occur because several factors may contribute to the fact that the conception of youth is different for each individual. The geographical region of origin, for example, can impact the perception of age, since cities differ in terms of population, economy, culture, and access to job opportunities. Age norms, i.e., the expected age to hold the internship position, can also lead to a distortion of what youth means, even considering chronological age. Regionality also affects other markers related to the age group, such as concerns for tenure, promotion, and motherhood.

In addition to the theoretical contributions, this research offers as a practical contribution the possibility of fostering reflection about the performance of managers and professionals in the HR area, so that they pay attention to gender and age discrimination against young women during selection processes and in other entry positions in organizations. Thus, one can consider that young women would possibly have their inequalities reduced with respect to age and greater possibilities of competition with other candidates, having the opportunity to demonstrate their professional skills.

Despite the demarcation by age and gender, our work clearly has limitations related to issues of race/color, class, and geographic location. Nevertheless, we believe that it offers a starting point for studies aimed at learning more about the barriers faced by women in the labor market. In addition, another limitation of the research frame involved the non-inclusion of men and HR professionals who could provide additional insight to the study. Ultimately, we believe that these limitations may inspire future research.

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AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

Luisa de Moraes Beltramini and Vanessa Martines Cepellos worked on the conceptualization and theoretical-methodological assessment. The theoretical review was done by Jussara Jéssica Pereira. Data collection was coordinated by Luisa de Moraes Beltramini. Data analysis included Jussara Jéssica Pereira and Vanessa Martines Cepellos. All authors were involved in the writing and final review of the manuscript.