

Beyond stereotypes: the meaning of work for women in the Military Police of the State of Rio de Janeiro

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to understand the importance and the meanings of work for women working in the Military Police of the State of Rio de Janeiro. In-depth interviews were conducted with 23 female police officers, and their testimonies were subjected to content analysis. The results indicate that work has a high centrality in their lives, despite the difficulties faced – both those inherent to the police activity and those arising from working in a male-dominated occupation. Remuneration stands out as a valued result of the work, which ensures some comfort and financial independence. The prestige that this occupation confers to the participants is also important, in addition to the pleasure and sense of purpose for carrying out a job perceived as socially relevant. The study contributes to the literature on the meaning of work by bringing the perspective of a group of women working in a male-stereotyped profession. In that regard, it is worth highlighting that the obstacles faced by the police officers who work in this stereotyped career seem not to prevent the positive meanings associated with their work.

Keywords: Meaning of work. Women. Gender. Stereotyped professions. Military police.

Para além dos estereótipos: os sentidos do trabalho para mulheres da Polícia Militar do Estado do Rio de Janeiro

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é compreender a importância e os sentidos que mulheres atuantes na Polícia Militar do Estado do Rio de Janeiro atribuem ao trabalho. Foram realizadas entrevistas em profundidade com 23 policiais mulheres e seus depoimentos foram submetidos à análise de conteúdo. Os resultados indicam que o trabalho possui alta centralidade em suas vidas, a despeito das dificuldades enfrentadas – tanto as inerentes à atividade policial, quanto aquelas advindas de sua atuação em uma ocupação predominantemente masculina. Com relação aos resultados laborais mais valorizados por essas mulheres, destacam-se a remuneração recebida, por lhes assegurar algum conforto e independência financeira, o prestígio que esta ocupação lhes confere, o prazer e o senso de propósito por realizarem um trabalho percebido como socialmente relevante. O estudo contribui para a literatura sobre sentido do trabalho, ao trazer a perspectiva de um grupo de mulheres que atua em uma profissão estereotipada como masculina. Nesse sentido, vale destacar que os obstáculos enfrentados por estas profissionais em suas carreiras parecem não comprometer os sentidos positivos associados ao trabalho que realizam.

Palavras-chave: Sentidos do trabalho. Mulheres. Gênero. Profissões estereotipadas. Polícia Militar.

Más allá de los estereotipos: significado del trabajo para mujeres de la Policía Militar del Estado de Río de Janeiro

Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es comprender la importancia y los significados del trabajo para mujeres que trabajan en la Policía Militar del Estado de Río de Janeiro. Para ello, se realizaron entrevistas en profundidad a 23 mujeres policías y sus testimonios fueron sometidos a análisis de contenido. Los resultados indican que el trabajo tiene una alta centralidad en sus vidas, a pesar de las dificultades que enfrentan – inherentes a la actividad de la policía y derivadas de su desempeño en una ocupación predominantemente masculina. En cuanto a los resultados laborales más valorados por estas mujeres policías, se destacan la remuneración, que les asegura cierta comodidad e independencia económica; el prestigio que esta ocupación les confiere; el placer y sentido de propósito por realizar un trabajo percibido como socialmente relevante. El estudio contribuye a la literatura sobre el significado del trabajo al presentar la perspectiva de un grupo femenino que desempeña una profesión estereotipada como típicamente masculina. En este sentido, cabe señalar que los obstáculos enfrentados por estas profesionales en sus carreras parecen no comprometer los significados positivos asociados al trabajo que desempeñan.

Palabras clave: Significados del trabajo. Mujeres. Género. Profesiones estereotipadas. Policía militar.

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, men and women have been allocated to specific career fields regarded as “appropriate” for their respective genders (Borrowman & Klasen, 2017; Soares, Melo, & Bandeira, 2014). However, since the middle of the last century, changes in social roles have allowed women to increase their participation in the labor market, as well as their access to job segments traditionally dominated by men (Bruschini, 2007; Chies, 2010), such as the military (Cappelle & Melo, 2010; Ribeiro, 2018). Moreover, the deepening of the debate about gender issues, which has revealed its discursive and social construction character, has contributed to challenging gender stereotypes (Butler, 2019; Connell & Pearse, 2015), allowing men and women to claim spaces that were forbidden to them until recently.

However, the entry of female workers in segments deemed as male does not occur without difficulties and requires determination to overcome the imposed barriers, as well as strong motivation to carry out their activities (Ribeiro, 2018). As the literature on male-dominated occupations highlights, the obstacles faced by women working in these professions include managing and adapting their feminine identities in the context of existing expectations in “identity primers” (Dozier, 2017), obstacles to ascend in the organizational hierarchy (Cappelle & Melo, 2010; Pringle, Harris, Ravenswood, Giddings, Ryan, & Jaeger, 2017), distrust in their professional competence (Martin & Barnard, 2013), and gender discrimination and violence (Bishu & Headley, 2020; Ribeiro, 2018).

Given the above, the increase in the participation of women in the Brazilian police forces deserves attention. Data collected in the 2010s show that the Brazilian military police had approximately 12% women officers back then, whereas in other corps such as the Fire Department and the Civil Police, this participation reached even higher rates (15% and 33% respectively) (Mourão, Lemgruber, Musumeci, & Ramos, 2016). The confirmation of the growing interest of women in working in this labor context motivated this research, which aimed to understand the centrality and the meanings that the female members of the Military Police of the State of Rio de Janeiro (PMERJ) attribute to their work. To this end, individual interviews were conducted with 23 female police officers working with this corps.

The research aimed to contribute to the literature on the meanings of work by analyzing a group of women working in a career field marked by gender stereotypes. Once we identified a gap in the literature, we sought to shed light on the meanings attributed to work by this specific group, which faces several challenges in their everyday work, which are specifically caused by gender (Bishu & Headley, 2020; Ribeiro, 2018; Ribeiro & Garcia, 2015; Williams, 2013).

Additionally, this study seeks to contribute to the debate on gender-stereotyped occupations, particularly those typically perceived as male, since discussions on this topic have focused on identity issues (Dozier, 2017), performance-related aspects (Kmec, McDonald, & Trimble, 2010; Williams, 2013), and the barriers faced by women working in male-dominated jobs (Bishu & Headley, 2020; Dozier, 2017; Kringen & Novich, 2018; Williams, 2013; Yates, Riach, & Johansson, 2018). Therefore, this study broadens the debate by analyzing the meaning that these professionals assign to their work in a clearly adverse context.

THE MEANINGS OF WORK

Since the pioneering work of Morse and Weiss (1955), research on the meanings of work has gained momentum as a result of studies by the Meaning of Working International Research Team (MOW, 1987). The study by the MOW group (1987) with workers in eight Western industrialized nations is a pivotal theoretical milestone and has exerted enormous influence over the agenda of Brazilian studies on the meanings of work (Bendassolli, Coelho-Lima, Pinheiro, & Gê, 2015).

According to MOW (1987), the meanings of work depend on the context, as well as one’s preferences, worldview, and degree of identification with the job in question. Also, the meanings of work are constructed through everyday work experiences and influenced by socioeconomic, political, and cultural circumstances. The research model constructed for that study involved the meanings attributed to work as well as their antecedents and consequences.

As for the meanings of work, the results pointed to the multidimensional nature of the construct, which consists of three primary components. The first is *work centrality* and the importance of work in one's life, which considers its involvement and prevalence in other spheres of life, such as family, community, religion, and leisure (MOW, 1987). The second component is represented by the *societal norms* regarding work, which allude to the psychological contract and comprise the rights and obligations that workers believe that their occupation or profession confers to them before the organization and society. Finally, the *work values* allude to what one aspires to obtain through their work and encompass aspects such as status and prestige, staying active, financial returns, social relations, service to society, personal interest, and satisfaction. Indeed, the results expected from one's work contribute to explaining why individuals are satisfied with what they do, why some situations are attractive to some and not to others, as well as the reasons why people work.

In line with the findings of the MOW group, Morin (2001) considers that meaningful work is done efficiently and generates results, is intrinsically rewarding, morally acceptable, a source of fulfilling human relationships, ensures security and autonomy, and keeps workers busy. Subsequently, Morin, Tonelli, and Pliopas (2007) categorized the sources of meaning in the individual, organizational, and social dimensions. In the first dimension, aspects such as satisfaction and remuneration emerged. In the organizational dimension, the sense of utility and the social relationships were highlighted, whereas working in a job that contributes to society was associated with the social dimension.

More recently, Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski (2010) identified that work meanings can have four sources, namely (a) the individual's self, (b) one's relationship with others, (c) the work context, and (d) spiritual life. The source associated with the individual refers to one's values and motivations for working, whereas the relationship with others suggests that social relationships are crucial for the meaning-making process. The work context comprises aspects related to work design and environment. Finally, the "spiritual life" leads the individual to perceive a specific occupation as a vocation.

Studies on the meanings of work in Brazil, which are predominantly based on the frameworks outlined by Morin and the MOW group, have investigated workers in a wide range of sectors and occupations. We can highlight, for example, research with workers in the creative industries (Bendassolli & Borges-Andrade, 2011), waste pickers (Silva, Brito, & Campos, 2020), higher education professors (Irigaray, Oliveira, Barbosa, & Morin, 2019), bank tellers (Silva, Costa, Freitas, & Salles, 2019), forensic experts (Rodrigues, Barrichello, Irigaray, Soares, & Morin, 2017), and correction officers (Siqueira, Silva, & Angnes, 2017). However, no study on police officers or other male jobs was found.

Among the Brazilian studies on women's meaning of work, the papers by Silva and Cappelle (2015) and Pereira, Paiva, Santos, and Souza (2018) on prostitutes and the one by Spinelli-de-Sá, Lemos, and Cavazotte (2017) on financial market professionals stand out. As for Spinelli-de-Sá et al. (2017), although the financial market is a predominantly male environment, the authors' analysis did not emphasize this aspect; this study, on the other hand, deals precisely with the meanings of work in male-dominated professions, so the next section deals with the conceptual aspects of this second axis.

WOMEN IN MALE-DOMINATED OCCUPATIONS

Although women have long been in the labor market in occupations typically regarded as female, such as maids, seamstresses, and midwives (Beauvoir, 2016), it was from the 1970s onward that emerging labor and cultural arrangements allowed women to join professions that had hitherto been male strongholds. In the case of military careers, however, this insertion did not happen until the 1980s (Ribeiro, 2018). The "gender revolution," characterized by the entry of women into traditionally male career fields (England, 2010; Trotter, 2017), has increased and diversified women's participation in the paid labor market, even in the face of the still widespread belief that men and women have distinct interests and abilities, in addition to biological differences (Ceci, Ginther, Kahn, & Williams, 2014).

Contrary to the perception derived from this “revolution,” Acker (2012) analyzes gender-discriminatory processes and establishes that inequality and exclusion of women in the workplace stem from myriad aspects, namely organizational structures that reinforce gendered patterns for occupations, salaries, hierarchies, and power distribution, as well as the organizational culture, which is imbued with symbols and stereotypes that manifest gender-segregation systems, and everyday interactions characterized by relations of domination and/or subordination between men and women.

Soares, Melo, and Bandeira (2014) add that the presence of women in typically male careers has been rather scarce. Moreover, as Hirata (2018) points out, women have no access to the same professions as men and are limited to a restricted number of activities. Kergoat (2019) coined the term “separation principle” to refer to the distinction between male and female work. Women continue to be concentrated in allegedly female occupational niches, which indicates an inherent sexist tendency in professional choice and the insertion of women in the labor market (Carli, Alawa, Lee, Zhao, & Kim, 2016; Hatmaker, 2013). The sexual division of labor or occupational segregation by gender (Borrowman & Klasen, 2017) renders various occupations stereotyped.

Studies on the performance of women in male-dominated careers suggest that their challenges go beyond those faced by men in analogous situations (Williams, 2013). National and international studies with female police officers point out that women usually occupy administrative and less prestigious positions, make numerous concessions regarding their appearance, and omit physical and mental disorders to neutralize the stigmas associated with them (Cappelle & Melo, 2010; Kringen & Novich, 2018; Yates et al., 2018).

The fields of engineering, law, and medicine are also stereotyped, both by the numerical predominance of male professionals and the formation of gendered “ghettos.” Hatmaker (2013) states that engineering has a higher contingent of men in most countries, and Lombardi (2017) adds that female engineers who have been successful in their careers attribute it to the appropriation of masculine ways of being, aimed to safeguard their protection and survival. In the legal sector, although the percentages of men and women are not as discrepant (Martins, 2017), the practice is characterized by the sexual division of labor, as female lawyers are subjected to inferior working conditions compared to their male peers and typically hold fewer leadership positions in large firms (Pringle et al., 2017). In medicine, women are concentrated in subfields associated with the act of “caring,” such as pediatrics and gynecology, whereas men usually opt for areas where aggressiveness, assertiveness, and quick decision-making are required, such as surgery, orthopedics, and traumatology (Scheffer, 2020).

Williams (2013) argues that the biggest barrier for women in certain occupational fields is discrimination, which prevents them from being hired and promoted and is also manifested through bullying, sexual harassment, sabotage, or other forms of hostility perpetrated by their male counterparts. Furthermore, women typically give up their trajectory in male-dominated careers to pursue professions regarded as “more suitable” to their gender (Martin & Barnard, 2013).

In short, women working in male-stereotyped careers must overcome obstacles to enter, occupy and socialize in more valued spaces (Bishu & Headley, 2020; Cappelle & Melo, 2010; Kringen & Novich, 2018; Williams, 2013; Yates et al., 2018). However, there is a lack of studies addressing the meanings these workers assign to their jobs, which is a pertinent question given the barriers they must face in the professional sphere. The following section addresses aspects related to the work in the PMERJ aiming to broaden the understanding of the challenges inherent to women’s performance in this segment.

WOMEN’S WORK IN THE PMERJ

The military police can be considered a “male ghetto” that incorporates well-defined contours, including sexual segregation and a regulatory context deeply characterized by power and gender relations (Cappelle & Melo, 2010; Queiroz, Paiva, & Lima, 2019). For Mourão et al. (2016), the figure of the policewoman carries numerous negative connotations, since characteristics commonly attributed to women, such as a greater inclination for care, for example, are opposed to the police officer stereotype, which is associated with strength and forcefulness.

According to Donadio and Mazzotta (2009), this segregation becomes manifest in a clear division of tasks, in which women are assigned administrative functions whereas men are assigned to carry out ostensive patrolling. The total female staff working with the PMERJ reaches 10%, but only 40% of this portion performs operational activities. Most of them are assigned to administrative activities since these tasks are regarded as more appropriate for women (Minayo, Souza, &

Constantino, 2008; Ribeiro, 2018). According to Cappelle and Melo (2010), those who wish to serve in key police operations face numerous obstacles, including the requirement to renounce behaviors deemed as “feminine” to be perceived as capable by their peers. Also, the authors point out that most women who break this pattern are victims of discrimination and sexual harassment at the workplace.

Therefore, the performance of women in the PMERJ is characterized by practices that result in gender inequality, hostility perpetrated by their male coworkers, and discrimination, which manifests in the form of sexist jokes and the belittlement of female professionals. Moreover, sexual harassment, commonly perpetrated by officers and enlisted personnel, makes the relations between different hierarchical levels deeply conflicting (Ribeiro, 2018).

Besides gender conflicts, the work routine in the PMERJ is characterized by other aspects that are worth mentioning. Minayo et al. (2008) point out that the working hours are usually long, exposing police officers to extreme physical and emotional stress. The health problems associated with the stressful environment they must face on daily basis include insomnia, body tremors, obesity, and premature aging, in addition to depression and aggressiveness episodes. In turn, the poor working conditions for police officers range from operational precariousness and wage gap to the obsolescence of vests, vehicles, equipment, and weapons (Minayo et al., 2008). These adversities, in turn, reinforce the relevance of understanding the meanings that female PMERJ police officers attribute to their work.

METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

Considering the subjective nature of the research object, we chose to conduct a qualitative and interpretive study. This choice is justified by the notion that investigating social phenomena and experiences requires the appreciation of the meanings attributed by the individuals who are directly involved with them. In other words, we understand that social reality is an emergent process, resulting from individual experiences (including the researcher’s) who are part of the “concrete” world (Vergara & Caldas, 2005).

To achieve the research objective, 23 in-depth interviews were conducted to identify the meanings attributed to work by female police officers working with the Rio de Janeiro Military Police (PMERJ). This specific corps was chosen due to the researchers’ interest in the universe of military corporations as well as accessibility issues. The access to the participants first occurred through a contact from one of the authors’ personal network. Later, other subjects were referred to through snowball sampling, as they belonged to the personal and professional network of the first participant (Noy, 2008). The interview script included questions on topics such as their personal and professional trajectories, their perceptions about their work with PMERJ and what it means to be a policewoman, the reasons that led them to choose that job, the centrality of their careers compared to other spheres of their lives, and the meanings they attribute to work.

The interviews lasted an average of 40 minutes and were recorded with the consent of the participants. Most of them were conducted in person; however, due to the participants’ availability or preference, seven of them were conducted by telephone. Subsequently, the content of the interviews was transcribed verbatim to allow content analysis (Prior, 2014). The analysis categories were based on the theoretical framework developed by the MOW group (1987), whose work, besides being seminal, continues to influence research on the subject, both in Brazil and worldwide (Bendassolli et al., 2015; Manuti, Curci, & Van der Heijden, 2018).

Box 1 presents the profile of each participant, whose names have been changed to ensure their anonymity. Their ages range from 29 to 40. As for schooling, 17 have completed higher education, two hold post-graduate degrees, and the four remaining ones completed high school, which is the minimum requirement to join the PMERJ. Regarding their marital and family status, ten participants are single and 13 are married, and more than half have children. Finally, as for the socio-economic profile, most claimed to come from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Among the participants working with the PMERJ, 13 hold administrative positions in the battalions and the others work in tactical street operations, such as patrolling risk communities or operating the Pacifying Police Units (UPPs) in various slums and shantytowns in the city of Rio de Janeiro. It is worth pointing out that all of them have participated in tactical operations at some point in their careers, which granted them the opportunity to engage in risky activities.

Box 1
Participants' profile

N	Name	Age (In years)	Level of education	Tenure (in years)	Current position	Family status
1	Helena	31	Bachelor of Physical Education	4	Administrative tasks	Single One child
2	Mônica	35	Graduate Degree in Criminal and Procedural Law	7	Administrative tasks	Divorced One child
3	Desirré	40	Unfinished Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration	19	Administrative tasks	Divorced Two children
4	Paula	31	Bachelor of Letters	3	UPP Patrolling	Married
5	Mariana	35	Bachelor of Public Safety	5	Administrative tasks	Single
6	Gisele	34	Bachelor of Business (Human Resource Management)	4	UPP Patrolling	Single
7	Isadora	33	Bachelor of Laws	6	Administrative tasks	Single
8	Alana	38	Bachelor of Physiotherapy	15	Administrative tasks	Married Two children
9	Fabiana	32	Bachelor of Public Safety	7	School Patrolling	Married One child
10	Rosa	37	Ph.D. in Sociology	15	Administrative tasks	Widowed Two children
11	Patrícia	32	High school graduate	7	Tactical Patrolling in Hazardous Areas	Single
12	Heloisa	37	Bachelor of Public Safety	12	Administrative tasks	Married Two children
13	Maria	34	Bachelor of Letters	5	Administrative tasks	Single One child
14	Carolina	34	Unfinished Bachelor's Degree in Social Work	5	Administrative tasks	Single
15	Francisca	35	Bachelor of Laws	15	Street Patrolling	Married One child
16	Ângela	31	Unfinished Bachelor's Degree in Laws	6	UPP Patrolling	Married
17	Diana	35	High school graduate	7	Legal Procedures Patrolling	Married One child
18	Natália	33	Bachelor of Physical Education	6	Administrative tasks	Single One child
19	Viviane	39	Bachelor of Letters/Bachelor of Laws	6	Administrative tasks	Married, Two children
20	Rafaela	29	Bachelor of Public Safety	6	UPP Patrolling	Single
21	Bianca	30	Bachelor of Laws	3	UPP Patrolling	Divorced One child
22	Tamires	36	Unfinished Bachelor of Science in Nursing	6	Administrative tasks	Married Two children
23	Fernanda	32	Bachelor of Physical Education	5	UPP Patrolling	Married

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The analysis and discussion of the data collected in the interviews about the meanings of work attributed by the military policewomen were structured in the following categories: work centrality, societal norms, and work values, according to the propositions of MOW (1987). Besides being in line with the objectives of this study, this theoretical framework proved to be adherent to the content collected in the field, which reinforces the relevance of this model.

Work centrality in a context of adversity

Regarding the relevance of work in the lives of these policewomen, it is worth noting the high degree of centrality attributed by all participants (MOW, 1987). For some of them, the exercise of their occupation occurs uninterruptedly, thus resulting in the impossibility of “disconnecting” from work, even when they are off duty. This, in turn, points to their strong involvement with their work.

There’s no way we can disconnect from the police because we are officers 24 hours a day. For instance, if I go out with my daughter to do something, I’ll keep my gun at all times, you know? It’s a part of us (Bianca).

I can’t disconnect from my work. I can take off my uniform and leave the battalion, but did I quit being a police officer? No, I can’t do that! There was a police incident in the beauty salon once when I had to run out and ended up in front of the shopping mall, with my hair covered with aluminum foils because some guy came into the salon and stole a cell phone that was sitting on the counter. So, you find yourself in such situations 24 hours a day (Alana).

The issue of vocation present in the speech of several respondents also helps to understand what makes work so central in their lives. Vocation is associated with the respondents’ admiration for the police activity since they were young girls.

I think I’ve always been inclined towards this problem-solving thing. It has to do with my vocation and admiration for law enforcement (Fernanda).

I’ve always liked it [although] nobody in my family was a cop. None of my friends were officers, but I’ve always identified [with it]. I’d look at them and think “I’m going to be a cop.” And I did. And when I was a child, there weren’t many women in the corps. That’s when I first saw a woman in uniform and thought: “That’s what I want to be” (Fabiana).

I’ve always dreamed of becoming a police officer. Since I was a kid. I’ve always wanted that and focused on achieving it (Juliana).

According to most respondents, being a policewoman also seems to point to the appropriation of a specific ethos and, maybe that is why they are proud, and their performance crosses the boundaries of regular work.

My mother says: “You look like a sergeant in this house, but you’re no sergeant when you’re in here... Look how you talk to the kids.” No matter how much you set a limit, the incorporation of the job is so strong that you end up taking the police with you everywhere (Rosa).

This means everything for me, you know? Everything. I get stressed, pissed off, I fight, I swear, but I’m very proud of my uniform. I’m very proud of going out there and working every day (Isadora).

The foremost importance attributed to work by the respondents becomes even more relevant if we consider the numerous difficulties they must face in their routine. They reported inadequate conditions caused by budget limitations and other operational issues faced by the PMERJ, such as the precariousness of the arsenal and the lack of organization in team management (Minayo et al., 2008).

[...] Sometimes you engage in close contact with well-armed bad guys, but you don’t have a good gun or good ammo. The guns jam because they’re badly maintained. The police have no patrol cars, they’re falling apart, and so are the weapons. The officers often find their guns jamming in the middle of a shootout. So, it’s all very difficult. I think that working in the police today is a very embarrassing situation because we don’t even count on the support of the government, you know? (Maria).

Moreover, the areas outside the battalions where the police operate, such as the UPPs, do not offer adequate working conditions in terms of hygiene and safety, exposing women officers to all sorts of risks and reinforcing the gender barriers strongly present in the profession.

I didn't have a period for three years until I was able to adapt to the working conditions (Fernanda).

Geez, it's complicated. It's a macho universe [...] They're testing you all the time. They think you aren't capable, that you can't do it. "Oh, no woman can do that. We'd better find someone else; we'd better find a man to do it." It's like the saying goes, we have to take the bull by the horns every day (Desiree).

In the literature discussing the barriers faced by women in male-stereotyped jobs (Cappelle & Melo, 2010; Donadio & Mazzota, 2009; Pringle et al., 2017), it is noteworthy that the policewomen access to higher positions in the hierarchical structure is hindered.

[For example,] in last year's entrance exam for new officers, there were 100 vacancies, but only five of them were for women. That's absurd. What's the difference? What can a man do that a woman can't? The training course is exactly the same. Why is it different when it comes to the entrance [process]? (Isadora).

Policewomen also appear to be discriminated against in professional spaces that go through an "elitization" process to the extent that the women's presence would imply their devaluation.

Even during the training course women are distrusted. They think that if a woman can complete the training course, the overall level must be too low. So, precisely because of this, we hardly see a woman pass the entrance exam for special operations or the riot squad, which are the best prep courses. And sometimes, when they get in, men usually put a lot of pressure on them to prevent them from completing the course [...], because there's an idea that if a woman can pass it, it must be because the level is too low (Gisele).

Some of the participants claim to have renounced behaviors deemed as "feminine" to be respected by their peers (Cappelle & Melo, 2010), which reinforces the understanding that the police activity is "typically" male (Borrowman & Klasen, 2017).

I had to mature and give up some of my girly ways. I've had to become a "little dude" so that things wouldn't turn too sour for me. You end up having to let the environment shape yourself, so it gets easier to work together. It's a bit manly in here [...] so you've got to adapt (Heloisa).

Last year, I was out on a patrol, and they kept staring at me and mocking and laughing at me, you know? Just because I'm a woman. So, we had to behave differently. There's no other way around. You have to show them that you're not a woman. You're there as a man. You know what I mean? (Isadora).

The access to a gender-stereotyped career seems to take a heavy toll on these women, whose everyday professional life is characterized by frequent bullying and sexual harassment incidents and even consummated acts of sexual violence (Ribeiro, 2018; Williams, 2013).

You arrive at the unit, and everybody stares at you. "Oh, she must be ready to mingle?" This happens in all companies, but it's a bit over the top at the police force, everything is more extreme.

They were teasing and hitting on me, like "There goes another one!" I've heard of several harassment cases, cases of... [Silence]. But we keep quiet about it. Women are still afraid to address these issues. So, what happened to me, I mean, I think they've done it with many others before and nothing happened to them. [...] Harassment in the force is very typical (Maria).

When analyzed together, these women's accounts highlight the centrality of the police activity in their lives and the various difficulties they must face in their everyday performance as female police officers. In turn, these difficulties largely derive from the fact that they work in a male-stereotyped occupation, which corroborates evidence found in the literature (Bishu & Headley, 2020; Kringen & Novich, 2018; Yates et al., 2018). However, judging by their speeches, the many barriers they must face every day cannot seem to discourage them from performing their duties, nor do they compromise the positive meanings they attributed to their work.

Social norms: when duties overshadow rights

MOW (1987) argues that social norms refer to the idea that every job brings along rights and duties. In the participants' accounts, the sense of duty, which is strongly associated with police activity (Minayo et al., 2008), was often underlined:

I'm the kind of person that if I come across a problem anywhere, I'm going to be the first to draw up my gun and say "Okay, let's check that out"(Fabiana).

So, when my partners and I take guns or drugs off the streets, I'm serving myself and my family, ain't I? We are the very beneficiaries of the service we help to provide (Francisca).

I really like that, you know? To protect and to serve [...]. I like to work with the tactical group because that's when we come into closer contact with society. It's where you feel useful and fulfill your military police function (Bianca).

The respondents' statements reinforce the findings of Minayo et al. (2008) that, as far as a certain moral and professional conduct is concerned, the police activity and its associated processes are inseparable from a way of living and thinking, which contributes to forging the profile of workers capable of fulfilling their duty and meeting society's expectations. Besides the sense of duty, moral rectitude is also highlighted by Isadora: "I take immense pride in knowing that I've always kept my slate clean. I've never been corrupted. I've never been involved in wrongdoings." Participants attributed an exceptional value to serving society and doing so with moral rectitude.

However, aspects concerning the rights of these workers were not mentioned in the reports, which leads us to wonder if this is due to the numerous concessions made by the policewomen every day to neutralize the stigmas associated with them. Possibly, these women feel intruded in a predominantly male environment and, therefore, believe they have less legitimacy to claim their rights (Cappelle & Melo, 2010; Kringen & Novich, 2018; Yates et al., 2018).

Work values: financial independence, prestige, and purpose

According to the interviews, the results of the police activity that the respondents value the most are remuneration, which ensures them a certain degree of material comfort and financial independence; the prestige of performing a socially recognized job; and the sense of purpose stemming from serving society.

Indeed, the participants achieved financial independence and a dignified life for themselves and their families soon after they joined the corps and this factor emerged with a particular frequency in the participants' accounts. Many chose a career as military police officers because of the financial stability associated with public service. Even though they must face numerous obstacles in their everyday routine, such achievements please them and keep them motivated.

My work means everything to me. Everything I've accomplished in life has been through my work. [...] Could it be better? Yes, it could, but it's not. I've been through thick and thin to keep my job because it's what supports me and my family (Desiree).

It's my survival, it's how I get the money to buy good things for my daughter... It's how I manage to pay for her health insurance and a private school. [...] Are there particularities like every other job? Yes, there are. Are there negative aspects? Yes, there are. But I love what I do (Fabiana).

It has given me independence. I have a nice house now; I don't live in the slums anymore. I live in a nice place with my son, he goes to a private school, he's got his stuff, as much as he can get. And, deep inside, I like that. What the police have given me is my independence and I'm very grateful for it. I can see that those above me enjoy a better reality, and this encourages me even more (Natalia).

According to Kergoat (2019, p. 293), “[...] paid work remains the basis of female autonomy” and, in this sense, the police activity seems to offer a possibility of emancipation. Since there is no wage gap between men and women in this and other public service positions, the choice for this career was possibly influenced by the prospect of earning an attractive remuneration since most of these women come from low socio-economic backgrounds.

The second relevant finding refers to the social prestige that such an occupation confers to them. Indeed, many participants highlighted how proud their parents, grandparents, children, and husbands are of their work as policewomen. For Francisca and Alana, being admired by their beloved ones is a vital source of professional inspiration that also mitigates their career’s inherent obstacles.

[...] [They’re] proud to know that their daughter is a police officer, that their daughter is a sergeant. They [her parents] say it with a certain pride. I see a lot of that in my daughter too. She tells her schoolmates that her mother is a policewoman, and she wants to have a uniform too. And she actually has one! I had it made for her because she wanted to dress like me (Francisca).

My grandmother loves that. Having a granddaughter in law enforcement is the pride of her life. Every time she sees me in my uniform, she says, “Oh, Lord, I’m so proud of you” (Alana).

Bianca’s statement illustrates how much the general population admires the participants. The enthusiasm showed by the children when they patrol the streets is a source of satisfaction for them and increases their identification with their career.

It’s very rewarding. Children often give me a thumbs up when I’m out patrolling. There have been situations, like during the Olympic Games, when a child wanted to take a picture with me and say they wanted to be like me when they grew up. Once a child asked me for an autograph. So, that’s the most beautiful thing. I don’t think I could do anything else in life (Bianca).

Perhaps the prestige the participants enjoy for working as military police officers is relevant because it indicates they have earned a place in a male-dominated career field that is difficult for women to access (Hirata, 2018). In other words, perhaps the perception of prestige stems precisely from the fact that this is a gender-stereotyped activity.

Finally, the sense of duty or purpose associated with their activity is yet another valued outcome. According to the participants, their work as military police officers is noble, rewarding, and of great utility to the population, as the following statements illustrate. It is worth noting that the feeling of serving society (MOW, 1987; Rosso et al., 2010) is mentioned by officers working in street operations and those involved in administrative activities as well.

My job means a lot to me. The police routine is very good for me. I feel super important here at the battalion. I’m not saying that I’m irreplaceable, or that I’m better than anyone else, but my presence here is worthy. I can see things happening here. If an officer needs a vehicle, I can do my best to release that vehicle. I can help a lot of people just by doing my job (Rosa).

Every day that I go to work, I’m making a difference in someone’s life. I can prevent a car from being stolen when I’m walking the streets. We once came across a woman who was giving birth downtown. I dragged her into the police car and drove her to the hospital. It was amazing because that woman could have fallen ill, have complications during labor, or even died, but once she was taken to the hospital, her child was born, and everything turned out perfectly. I can go around busting bad guys, but I drive the girl who’s in trouble to the hospital, too (Diana).

In short, even in the face of numerous obstacles, the police activity seems to have meaning for these women insofar as it safeguards their subsistence, grants them a relative social prominence, and provides them with a sense of accomplishment because it allows them to provide a service they deem as socially relevant.

FINAL REMARKS

The respondents' accounts revealed the centrality of the police activity in their lives. Despite the numerous difficulties associated with inadequate working conditions and the chauvinistic culture cultivated in the corps, typical of a gender-stereotyped profession (Minayo et al., 2008; Ribeiro, 2018), these policewomen portray their experiences in a positive and even inspiring way. The high degree of work centrality also emerges from the challenges they face to disconnect from their job and by the constant reproduction of police language and posture outside of their work environment and hours, which pervades across their family and social lives.

Among the valued work results, the achievement of financial independence and the possibility of ensuring a more comfortable life for themselves and their families stand out. This aspect may be related to the social background of the respondents, which is characterized by financial struggles and professional insertion. Indeed, it is noteworthy that most of them are the primary economic support for their families. Also, the emphasis on the independence achieved through work indicates a feminist aspiration, since, in addition to the desire to overcome material hardships typical of their socio-economic backgrounds, these women also revealed their wishes to achieve greater autonomy and self-determination (Kergoat, 2019).

The analysis also revealed that the social prestige associated with the police activity reflects the pride among the participants' family members as well as recognition by their communities. In this sense, it is worth inquiring whether this admiration is because they work in a male-dominated occupation and, therefore, regarded as superior (Williams, 2013). In other words, earning a place in a blatantly masculine territory may have contributed to the construction of a masculinized, "superior" self-image. Although this assumption cannot be confirmed, some respondents' speeches point to a positive self-image through association with masculine stereotypes.

Finally, the policewomen also emphasized their pride and joy in performing socially relevant work, because of the safety that patrolling offers or how they can help people in various situations. The social contribution and the police activity may explain their perception of meaningfulness as well as their families' admiration, which, in turn, also reinforces the positive meanings they attribute to their work.

In short, these aspects contribute to the centrality of the police activity, even in the face of the setbacks that come along with working in a profession that is challenging for all and that pose difficulties for women in particular, because it is dominated by men and fosters an essentially chauvinistic culture. This finding brings two contributions to the debate about the meanings of work.

The first concerns the perception of the meanings of work by women working in gender-stereotyped professions. Although the barriers faced by them could jeopardize these meanings, this study has revealed that, despite the adversities, police activity is perceived as central in the lives of these workers.

The second contribution concerns the apparent paradox of the unfavorable conditions of a given job and its meaningfulness. On the one hand, this can be explained by the nature of the activity in question, which is charged with a sense of duty (Minayo et al., 2008) and portrayed as vocational by some respondents; and, on the other hand, by the joy derived from earning a place in a male-dominated field that did not allow the entry of women until recently (Hirata, 2018; Williams, 2013). Also, mission, overcoming, financial independence, and achievement may explain the high degree of centrality of work for these professionals. However, it is worth noting that the current literature on the meanings of work does not deepen the discussion about the paradox between adverse working conditions and work centrality and appreciation.

This study also contributes to the literature on male-dominated occupations as it has revealed the strong identification of these professionals with their work. This finding broadens the debate on these occupations since the deleterious effects on the women working in them tend to be emphasized (Cappelle & Melo, 2010; Kringen & Novich, 2018; Pringle et al., 2017; Yates et al., 2018). In this sense, we may consider that the obstacles faced by policewomen in a gender-stereotyped career are not enough to empty the identification and positive meanings associated with their work; on the contrary, facing adversities seems to amplify these meanings.

Moreover, despite the stereotypes associated with this and other occupations, there are no male or female jobs, but rather jobs quantitatively dominated by one gender or the other. In other words, there are no gendered vocations, only labor spaces historically delimited as typical of a certain gender. In this sense, this study contributes to the critique of stereotypes and joins the ranks to create an “agendered” world of work.

Among the limitations of this research, we highlight that no interviews were conducted with high-ranking female members of the PMERJ. Due to the sample selection, the perceptions of these professionals were not examined since they could bring to light aspects related to their leadership positions. Thus, we suggest that future research explores the meanings attributed to work by women occupying command positions in the PMERJ since the experiences and challenges faced by this specific group may take on different contours. Another aspect to be addressed in future studies concerns the identity construction process of policewomen in their work environment, which is clearly gender-stereotyped. Perhaps the various obstacles experienced by policewomen in such an adverse context will prove to be relevant and allow the emergence of new insights into this phenomenon.

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