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Mojgan Khoshnam & Shadi Moshtaq

Abstract. This research aims to present a sociological analysis of female experiences in Iranian research institutions. While women work within established scientific systems, may not always adhere to formal structures; their professional journeys are often shaped by informal cultural and institutional influences that affect their social, cultural, and economic standing. By a phenomenological approach, the research explores how female faculty members perceive their interactions with colleagues, especially the gender-based aspects of these relationships. The findings show formal considerations and general cultural norms play a significant role in interactions between colleagues of the opposite sex. The study also showed that, male influence and dominance has caused women's extra efforts to prove their capabilities. Culture in all its dimensions, from organization, university, and popular culture, is one of the most influential factors on the lived experience of women in the academic environment. Other key themes include the difficulty of managing work and family life, gender-related stereotypes, and how age and cultural norms affect communication. The study highlights how organizational and cultural factors significantly impact the professional interactions of women in academia and shows how both institutional structures and individual actions contribute to creating fair and inclusive academic environments.

Keywords: Higher Education, Phenomenological Analysis, Lifeworld, Women in academia.

Introduction

Universities, as the cornerstone institutions of scientific advancement and intellectual development, are expected to function as dynamic and flourishing communities of scholars. More than sites of formal knowledge production, universities serve as complex social environments where informal dynamics, organizational culture, and personal interactions significantly shape professional experiences. As the focus of academic institutions increasingly shifts toward human-centered and inclusive practices (Townsend & Romme, 2024), the need to understand the subjective experiences of academic actors - especially those shaped by gender and social structures - has become more pronounced.

The university space is not merely defined by its institutional policies and formal procedures. Rather, it is also shaped by the interplay between those formal structures and the informal practices, traditions, and values of the individuals operating within it (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). It offers opportunities for new experiences, such as engaging with diverse individuals, expanding communication networks, enhancing scientific and managerial skills, establishing a presence in the scientific community, and engaging in conversations with experts from various fields. These are just a few examples of what faculty members experience in a university. These intersections affect how policies are implemented, how power is distributed, and how various actors—particularly women—experience academic life. In such contexts, attention to the informal sphere becomes essential for understanding how scientific work, collaboration, and social capital are negotiated in daily interactions (Becher & Trowler, 2001).

Therefore, in addition to their academic activities, their subjective experiences are also important as they shape their perception of the world; Understanding the subjective perspectives of individuals who are actively involved in universities is just as important as their objective behaviors. Delving into the attitudes and perceptions of faculty members towards their actions can help uncover, analyze, and comprehend other issues and concerns they may have. A vibrant, thriving community of scientists and professors within the university is essential, to advance in accomplishing scientific activities, creativity, and innovations (Farastkhah, 2015).

Literature Review

In sociological culture, the term lifeworld refers to ordinary and everyday life, as experienced by ordinary men and women (Abercrombie et al., 1991). Interactions are one of the most important parts of the lifeworld. According to Husserl, the lifeworld is a set of our intentions, interests, and habits; it is

the intuitive, experienced, and experiential world in which all human life and activities are formed (Husserl, 1970). In his view, all knowledge, assumptions, and certainties of man are constantly changing as a result of living in the world and coexisting with other people. The lifeworld serves as the background and basis for all activities, social, and cultural practices of humanity. Husserl also notes that the lifeworld is filled with various experiences about everything that exists in the world and, being based on experience, lacks any preconceived theories (Christias, 2019).

The concept of the lifeworld influenced the sociological phenomenology of Alfred Schutz; Schutz essentially built his sociological theory upon the lifeworld previously proposed by Husserl. Schutz divides his social lifeworld into two parts: the first part being the reality directly experienced in the moment, and the second part referring to the environment in which the lifeworld is formed, including all the facts, perceptions, activities, and actions that are unknown and undiscovered to the actors at the present time (Schutz, 1973) (Walsh, 1997). Schutz believed that understanding the mind of another could be achieved through social encounters, where people get to know each other through frequent face-to-face contact in physical presence. For this reason, he placed special emphasis on social interaction and interpersonal relationships of humans, focusing particularly on the characteristics and the what, how, and the role of human relationships in the world. Habermas expanded lifeworld with his own understanding and added the concept of "communicative action" to it. he generally focused on the informal communicative actions that take place in society, between friends and family members (Outhwaite, 2015). According to Habermas, the lifeworld is the realm of everyday experiences, collective conversations, cultural values, science, politics, and art. In the lifeworld, humans use cultural customs and traditions to construct identities, negotiate situations, coordinate actions, and create social cohesion. The lifeworld makes the existence of society possible by maintaining identities and motivations that are essential for institutional stability (Seidelman, 2013).

According to recent research in the field of higher education scientific relations in the university environment have always been gender-based. Studies examining the presence of women in science and scientific professions have shown significant differences between men and women (Farahmand, 2003). It must be acknowledged that these differences have been so pronounced that for a long time, the presence of women in science was ignored. Only in the late 1970s experts begin to pay attention to the role of women in the field of science and research, conducting studies in this area (Blair, 1989; Rosser, 1990). The development of women's movement and the formation of studies in this field highlight the importance of gender issues in the development of science. Feminist critiques have shifted towards asking how women can be

treated fairly within science, rather than how science, deeply embedded in dominantly masculine forms, can be used for emancipatory and egalitarian purposes (Sandra Harding, 1986). Although these issues are relative, they can be considered because they influence the way women and men interact differently. In such situations, even if individuals possess many capabilities, women are still less present in the field. This gender-based division of labor poses a fundamental obstacle to collective work during scientific activities (Habibpour Gatabi and Ghaffari, 2011). It is important to note that the difference between men and women in communication style and social relations is a recognized issue (Kloch, 2000; Boguta, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial to consider the issue of gender in studies related to social interactions.

Studies about faculty's life-world can be divided into two categories: those that examine the presence of women in academic environments and communities and explore their activities despite existing gender conflicts. For example, Dastjerdi et al. (2021) examined the lived experiences of professors regarding work-family conflict. They classified the antecedents of work-family conflict into three main categories: personal, family, and career-related. Additionally, they categorized the consequences of work-family conflict into personal, family, and career consequences. Astegiano, Gonzalez, and Castanho (2019) have shown that women are promoted at lower rates than men (Bonowitz and Andel, 2020) and receive lower salaries than their male counterparts (Freund et al., 2016). Some studies have found that female faculty members also receive lower citation rates than men (Knobloch, Glynn, and Hughes, 2015). Razzaghi and Ghaedi (2016) demonstrated that women and men use language tools differently in communication, leading to the creation of distinct worlds for each group. This difference in language use confirms behavioral disparities between women and men in communication. Majidi Ghahroudi and SoltanMohammadi (2011) found that in conversations, men tend to focus on organizational discussions and issues related to independence, while women prioritize topics such as relationships and intimacy. Women are also less likely than men to seek leadership roles, often presenting their requests on behalf of the group rather than emphasizing personal aspects during conflicts.

The second group of studies has examined the social aspects of gender discrimination and how women face such situations and adapt to these conditions. Many of these studies have highlighted the issue of the duality of women's responsibilities at work and at home. For example, Razeghi Nasrabadi (2022) used a phenomenological approach to explore women's professional experiences. The study results showed that women often address their professional problems and difficulties within the organization, including adapting to dual roles at work and at home, at an individual level because organizational policies are generally ineffective for them. Sho-

ja Nouri (2015) investigated the impact of teleworking on working women and work-life balance, noting that working women often opt for telework due to the flexibility it offers in managing their dual responsibilities, making them more productive in both the workplace and home settings. Ebrahimi (2020) delved into the lived experiences of female faculty members in managerial positions. The research findings revealed that key themes in women's experiences included adaptability, self-efficacy perception, family support, ambition, and courage to navigate challenges between work and life. Toffoletti and Starr (2016) examined the challenges women face in balancing their professional responsibilities between home and the workplace. They discussed the adoption and implementation of work-life balance discourse among academic women, suggesting that this discourse could help establish equilibrium between these two environments. Rosa (2022) further explored the issue of women's career duality by analyzing personal and academic life in greater detail, concluding that policymakers should prioritize discussions on these matters. Dube and Nafirpi (2024) contended that resolving issues related to job duality would boost job satisfaction among women, consequently enhancing the quality of performance among female faculty members in organizations. They emphasized the need to address these issues more attentively. Another study conducted by Davis et al. (2022) highlighted those conversations about gender discrimination among faculty members can lead to increased stress, social isolation, and mental depression among organizational members. Female faculty members, particularly those in the career advancement stage, face significant challenges balancing their personal responsibilities, such as motherhood, which greatly impacts their scholarly output. Therefore, it is imperative for managers to enhance their support for female faculty members. A review of research conducted in various categories in Iran and abroad shows that no research has been conducted so far that has examined the lived experience of female faculty members in social relations in scientific institutions, especially research institutions.

In addition to addressing this empirical gap, the present study makes an analytical contribution to ongoing debates in the sociology of education by illuminating how gendered academic cultures and informal power structures shape the lived experiences of female faculty members in Iranian research institutions. Specifically, by integrating the concepts of lifeworld, habitus, and symbolic violence, the study demonstrates how everyday interactions, such as informal networking, communication norms, and access to institutional resources, function as mechanisms through which gendered inequalities are reproduced and negotiated. This perspective highlights not only the structural constraints women encounter, but also the micro-level processes through which they exercise agency, adapt to institutional cultures, and navigate gendered expectations. In doing so, the study provides a contextu-

ally grounded but theoretically transferable framework for understanding gendered academic careers and the cultural dynamics of higher education institutions.

Research Questions

Understanding how faculty members, especially women, experience the social world of academia requires a shift toward interpretive, qualitative inquiry that prioritizes meaning over measurement. A phenomenological approach is well suited for this purpose. This study, therefore, focuses on the lifeworld (Lebenswelt) of female faculty members—defined as the everyday lived realities that constitute their social and professional worlds. It aims to uncover how these women interpret their interactions, how gender influences those relationships, and how broader cultural and organizational norms shape their academic experiences.

While the quantitative presence of women in higher education in Iran has increased significantly in recent years, little is known about their qualitative experiences, particularly regarding the social relations that characterize their daily work in research institutions. This study seeks to fill that gap by focusing not just on women's structural disadvantages but also on how they experience, interpret, and navigate those disadvantages through everyday interactions in the academic workplace. What are the most important meanings constructed through experiences of female faculty members' interactions and relationships?

- What statements describe the experiences of communication and relationships between female faculty members?
- What themes emerged from the experiences of communication and relationships among female faculty members?

Methodology

This study adopts a phenomenological research approach to explore the lived experiences of female faculty members in research institutions. Phenomenology, as a qualitative methodology, aims to describe and interpret the essence of individuals' experiences by focusing on how people perceive and make sense of phenomena in their everyday lives (Zahavi, 2012). By delving into subjective consciousness, phenomenology enables researchers to uncover the existential and often nuanced meanings of experiences as they are lived (Broome, 2011; Rashidian, 2022).

The phenomenological framework was chosen because it allows for a deep investigation into how gender, organizational norms, and culture shape the lifeworld (Lebenswelt) of female faculty members. This approach is par-

ticularly appropriate for analyzing subtle social dynamics such as power, exclusion, and informal interactions that are often underexplored in more positivist research traditions.

Participant Selection

Participants were selected through purposeful sampling, aiming for maximum variation to capture a diverse range of perspectives. Sixteen female faculty members were chosen from research institutes affiliated with the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology in Iran. These institutes specialized in the humanities and social sciences. Criteria for selection included variation in academic discipline, age, marital status, years of professional experience, and institutional affiliation.

The subjects of the study were chosen from female faculty members employed in research institutes under the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology of Iran. An effort was made to guarantee a wide range of diversity in selecting samples. Female faculty members with varying specializations, from different institutions, of different ages, marital statuses, and work experiences were interviewed. Four domestic institutions specializing in the humanities and social sciences were included in the study. A semi-structured interview was utilized to gather data. The data analysis commenced by concentrating on sentences, phrases, and key words. Important phrases were highlighted to extract and list meanings. Subsequently, more accurate interpretations were pinpointed through comparison of these meanings. Throughout the analysis process, concepts were organized and categories were formed by grouping phenomena or central ideas.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in person. This method provided the flexibility to explore individual perceptions while allowing space for participants to express their views freely. Interviews focused on participants' experiences of social interaction within their institutions, particularly in relation to gender, power dynamics, and informal networking. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The interviews were then transcribed for analysis. All identifiable information was anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis rooted in phenomenological principles. The process began with a close reading of transcripts, identifying significant statements, key phrases, and recurring expressions. These statements were coded and organized into meaning units. Through iterative comparison, these units were synthesized into overarching themes that re-

flect the essential structures of participants' experiences. Themes were developed inductively and refined through constant comparison and memo writing. Attention was paid to both shared patterns and divergent experiences among participants, in order to capture the complexity of gendered social interactions within research institutions.

Participant Profile

To ensure diversity in perspectives, participants were selected from a range of disciplines and career stages across research institutes affiliated with the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology in Iran. The selection process prioritized variation in age, years of experience, and academic fields within the humanities and social sciences. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic and professional background of the 16 female faculty members who participated in the study.

Table 1. Participant Information (academic disciplines, years of experience, and age ranges)

Number	Discipline	Age	No. of years as faculty member
1	Social sciences	45	12
2	Higher education Management	45	15
3	Sociology	36	4
4	Laws	37	4
5	Political Science	39	8
6	Science and Technology policy	43	4
7	Information Science	41	8
8	Higher Education	33	10
9	Communication	43	10
10	Managements	55	19
11	Futurology	43	5
12	Managements	50	5
13	Communication	42	13
14	History	52	12
15	Linguistics	45	13
16	Science and Technology policy	41	12

Results

Thematic analysis revealed shared patterns in how gendered interactions, power dynamics, and institutional culture shape women's experiences in Iranian research institutions. Despite individual variation, five cross-cutting themes captured the core structures of their everyday academic lifeworld.

All the themes identified in this study center around the participants' perceptions of social interactions in the academic environment, particularly the informal, and often gendered, dimensions of these interactions. These themes illustrate how broader organizational and cultural forces influence women's everyday experiences in academia. The following sections present the major themes that emerged from the data, supported by direct quotes from participants to preserve the authenticity of their voices.

Theme 1: Male Power and Institutional Advantage (Inequality)

The loud voice of men in the organization and the subtle domination over women has made the acquisition of career platforms, positions, and status among men a lot easier. Participants described how "who belongs" within dominant male networks becomes taken-for-granted, reflecting gendered habitus that normalizes men's presence and marginalizes women. The concentration of news and projects among men, lobbying, and male trade-offs are examples of men's power and influence in research institutions that women of research faculty mentioned.

A female faculty member with 12 years of experience in research activities in the field of sociology believes:

> *Male faculty members who have high social relations can easily grow... Women will only watch their growth because they are not in the scope of their relations...When women are not connected to the power network that men have created, they do not enjoy its benefits, as if they are academically disadvantaged.*

Another faculty member who has been working in the field of management for 19 years and has also been a group manager says:

> *Even if men have a smaller role in collaborations, they are still seen more...The acquisition of positions by men leads to the distribution of benefits among their friends.*

Informal interactions are not always moments of happiness, laughter, and leisure; rather, sometimes due to differences of opinion or misunderstandings, faculty members may witness conflicts and annoyances. Even in conflicts, the organizational lifeworld treats men's emotional expression as normal, while women's is sanctioned, as a history faculty member noted:

Men shout freely, while if women raise their voices just a little, are accused by others. But despite all this, I will not back down and make my voice heard.

Participants frequently described what Bourdieu terms symbolic violence: the quiet normalization of exclusion that appears natural rather than intentional. One participant noted that men in senior positions "distribute resources among their male friends," facilitated by intimate male-only spaces such as smoking areas or informal gatherings. A faculty member from higher education described:

Women are survivors of men's lobbying. Men's trade-offs are numerous, and women are usually excluded from these types of interactions except in special cases. Even women who are lobbyists lag behind men due to problems such as being limited to staying in the evening. Similarly, a female faculty member in the field of information science and knowledge studies considers women's honesty to be a factor in being excluded from many conflicts.

Here, symbolic violence operates by making women's exclusion seem reasonable, tied to assumptions about their availability, honesty, or propriety.

Unfair division of labor also emerged. Participants described naturalized expectations, part of the gendered academic habitus, that women should take on more work, A management faculty member reflected:

If research work is defined jointly among individuals, it is impossible for men and women to shoulder the same amount of work. Men prefer to have scientific exploitation.

A female faculty member working in the field of information science and knowledge studies says:

When we divide work, the male colleague seems to want to give me a large part of the work, but I resisted. There is a kind of opportunistic view of women.

Theme 2: Gendered Costs and Risks of Informal Interaction (Social Interaction)

In some situations, women experience informal interactions with male colleagues as emotionally and cognitively taxing. This constant self-monitoring reflects a gendered habitus in which women feel compelled to regulate tone, gesture, and appearance to avoid misinterpretation within the academic lifeworld. A management faculty member explained that even harmless statements can be sexualized:

One should always be careful of all kinds of signals…Even a word uttered by a woman may be interpreted with sexual connotations.

This ongoing vigilance leads some women to prefer same-gender interactions as a form of protection and ease.

Another factor limiting informal cross-gender interactions is the pervasive fear of moral scrutiny. A single faculty member shared:

> *I had been single for a long time and was more exposed to gender stigmas, so I limited my interactions. In our society, a single woman of advanced age is often viewed differently.*

Even married women described similar pressures:

> *Even greeting someone twice requires observing certain social norms.*

Here, symbolic violence is evident in how women internalize the risk of gossip and adjust their behavior to avoid potential moral judgment, effectively narrowing their interactional space within academic life. Concerns about privacy, religious norms, and the moral comfort of the other party also pushed some women toward segregated interactions.

Popular culture and organizational norms shape what is considered "appropriate" interaction between men and women in research institutions. Women described the need to constantly manage boundaries, open office doors, formal tone, controlled body language, to avoid violating gendered expectations embedded in the institutional lifeworld.

One higher education faculty member reflected:

> *If I want to greet you or sit or walk with you, I have to keep all kinds of formal considerations in mind so that others do not judge.*

Fear of organizational gossip and cultural and protective considerations cause interactions between male and female colleagues in the academic environment to take on a different form. As one faculty member in the field of cultural policy noted in various situations:

> *There are several actions involved in communicating with a colleague of the opposite sex: less joking, not laughing, the distance we stand from each other, body language, the format of the conversation, which should be more classic and formal. For example, two female and male colleagues who are also single cannot stand and talk for a long time, otherwise organizational gossip is likely to occur.*

These accounts show how gendered organizational habitus and protective norms limit spontaneity, reinforcing segregated patterns even when professional collaboration is valued.

Theme 3: Work–Family Conflict and Temporal Exclusion (Temporal Exclusion)

Participants repeatedly emphasized the tension between professional expectations and family responsibilities. Women described carrying a disproportionate mental load, which reduces their ability to participate in informal evening meetings where key decisions and collaborations often occur a temporal form of symbolic exclusion. A faculty member in the field of communication sciences who has been working in this field for 19 years, is married and has a child, says:

> *I have a limit on the hours I can be at the institute...Men stay until 9 pm...Women have multiple responsibilities and have to manage all of them at the same time.*

These constraints shape opportunities long before formal decisions are made.

In addition to the hours of attendance at work, many participants also experienced limitations in interaction outside the organization for women, such that they were deprived of some informal interactions, co-worker gatherings, and one-day outings outside the organization or day trips out of town due to pregnancy, having a small child, and maternal duties. As one female faculty member with two children said:

> *Once, everyone went on a vacation. I didn't go because I was pregnant. This trip was supposed to create a friendly relationship between colleagues, but I was deprived because of my pregnancy. I think a lot of benefits are distributed in this kind of vacation and a lot of sparks for collaboration are formed in this way.*

Here, the gendered structuring of time - rooted in broader social habitus around motherhood - creates unequal access to professional relational capital, further limiting women's social and scientific visibility.

Themes 4: Gendered Boundaries in Social and Professional Communication (Social Interaction)

There is a tendency among faculty members to observe gender boundaries in interactions for various reasons and motivations. In some informal and casual interactions between faculty members, the topics of conversation and exchange of opinions among colleagues change according to gender. Sometimes male faculty members discuss their financial and career issues, investments, and such in the company of other male colleagues, and female faculty members also raise issues with female colleagues that they rarely discuss with their colleagues of the opposite sex, such as household matters, exchanging opinions about raising children, educating children, or illness. Participants described how gender organizes conversational topics, emotional

comfort, and trust, revealing the gendered micro-structure of the academic lifeworld. As one cultural studies faculty member explained:

> *Men establish closer interactions with each other by feeling more intimate with each other and calling each other by first names, and women, due to their greater intimacy and having more topics to discuss, form their own interactions. A number of people pursue scientific and research topics with their colleagues of the opposite sex and other topics with colleagues of the same gender.*

These patterns are not rigid, but they shape who feels seen and who remains peripheral in academic social spaces.

Several participants described hiding illness, especially reproductive or gender-specific health issues, to avoid being judged or exposing personal vulnerabilities. One participant stated:

> *Men stand in the middle of the room and talk about their illnesses in detail during greetings, but if I have an illness, I hide it. I don't even use my workplace insurance for fear of being exposed, especially when it comes to issues like miscarriage, pregnancy, etc.*

This illustrates symbolic violence in its clearest form: women censor their own needs to preserve legitimacy within a gendered professional field.

Participants noted that age influences the amount of gendered scrutiny they face. Older women often experience more relaxed boundaries, while younger women face heightened judgment and caution.

A 45-year-old faculty member observed:

> *A lady who is older in our institution may call some men by their first names, but for younger women this is definitely a problem.*

Another explained:

> *If I were younger or single, there would definitely be changes in my interactions with men. But now it doesn't matter to me because they are my children.*

One participant explicitly linked age to symbolic violence:

> *If a woman reaches an advanced age and is no longer in competition, they may feel free to compliment her because they have no sense of competition with her. But if she is young and exposed to competition, they are very careful not to compliment women.*

Theme 5: Resistance, Resilience, and Gender-Neutral Aspirations (Agency and Resistance)

Many participants point to the lack of sexism despite their scientific status, healthy and gender-neutral interactions in scientific environments, the absence of gender boundaries, and the low impact of gender on the develop-

ment of friendly interactions with other colleagues. These instances reflect moments where the dominant habitus is disrupted, allowing for more egalitarian professional relationships. As one faculty member says in this regard:

> *I feel that the men in our group have reached a maturity...a person who is at a higher level scientifically does not involve the gender factor. This gender difference is very rarely seen in scientific environments.*

Another emphasized:

> *In scientific spaces, relationships are much healthier. There are people with a more humane mind in our professional group. We got lucky in this case*

These "islands of equality" demonstrate women's ongoing search for environments where competence outweighs gender.

The use of symbolic violence and the attempt to deliberately ignore, look down on women as the second sex and from above in various situations have been the lived experiences of a number of female faculty members. A 52-year-old faculty member believes:

> *They try to not praise you....Men generally achieve high positions with less effort. Women need to try twice as hard to succeed because they are constantly told they cannot do it.*

As a 39-year-old faculty member states in a similar experience:

> *In academic discussions, they look down on women and are very careful not to praise you. They feel that only they know.*

Another faculty member points out the extra effort women make to prove their capabilities and believes that sometimes these views are applied by women to women:

> *We women have to try twice as hard to prove ourselves to others. Men don't have this problem. When a man finds a position, it seems like he is completely accepted among them. Not everyone is looking to quickly see the outcome of his work and put it under the microscope.*

These accounts highlight how women navigate and subtly resist gendered hierarchies, maintaining professional presence even under conditions of symbolic diminishment.

Discussions

This phenomenological study extends debates in the sociology of education by showing how gendered academic cultures and informal power structures shape women's everyday professional experiences within research institutions. The findings demonstrate that gender inequality in academia

is reproduced not primarily through formal rules, but through the informal practices, symbolic boundaries, and cultural expectations that govern academic interaction. This directly contributes to broader debates on gendered academic careers by showing how women's limited access to informal academic space, such as spontaneous collaborations, intellectual communities, and trusted networks, translates into differential access to academic capital. In this sense, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on gendered academic careers by illustrating how institutionalized male privilege becomes embedded in routine interpersonal relations, thereby shaping women's access to academic capital, recognition, and opportunities for advancement.

Drawing on Bourdieu's framework, particularly the concepts of habitus and symbolic violence, the analysis reveals that male dominance operates as a taken for granted symbolic order that legitimizes the marginalization of women. Women's accounts show how the masculine academic habitus normalizes expectations that women must continually prove their competence.

This imbalance not only leads to a pattern of scientific exploitation but also fosters a culture in which women's capabilities are systematically diminished. This illustrates symbolic violence in practice, where gendered inequalities become misrecognized as neutral professional judgement. The study adds nuance to these debates by illustrating how symbolic violence unfolds not only in formal assessments but also in micro-interactions, shaping emotional climates characterized by vigilance, anxiety, and reputational risk.

Consistent with Bourdieu's theory, our findings highlight a systemic neglect of women's contributions and a prevailing bias that privileges men's activities within academic institutions. Bourdieu famously remarked that "there is always room for an empty mustache," underscoring how men are often advanced based on their gender alone, while women must exceed expectations, often requiring superior credentials and more privileged backgrounds to attain equivalent positions. This unspoken double standard fosters chronic feelings of anxiety, tension, and emotional distress among women, revealing the subtle mechanisms of symbolic violence and the invisible domination that shape their professional lives.

Within scientific communities, women are often required to exert disproportionate effort to demonstrate their competence across various professional stages and interactions. The persistence of this pattern suggests that academic habitus itself is gendered, privileging dispositions historically associated with men, such as constant availability, assertive presence, and access to unregulated temporal resources.

Despite achieving comparable academic milestones, such as earning doctoral degrees, women remain underrepresented in senior academic positions. West and Curtis (2006) highlight that men continue to dominate high-

er-ranking roles, with the number of female associate professors consistently trailing behind their male counterparts. Furthermore, research by Hill, Corbett, and Rose (2010) indicates that gender bias persists even when men and women present identical qualifications and credentials; men are more likely to be hired and promoted into scientific and professional roles, suggesting that merit alone does not guarantee equal opportunity for women in academia.

The theme of men's scientific exploitation of women further contributes to the persistent underrepresentation of women as equal scientific collaborators in academic publications. This aligns with global findings on gendered authorship hierarchies and reveals how women's lifeworlds, shaped by dual responsibilities and institutional expectations, affect their capacity to negotiate authorship credit. When they do participate, they are frequently relegated to secondary authorship positions, reinforcing their marginal status in scholarly output (West et al., 2013; Mauleón & Bordons, 2006; Cole & Zuckerman, 1991). This reflects what Bourdieu (1983) describes as an anthropocentric and symbolic construction of gender, in which male and female bodies are socially and biologically inscribed with unequal roles.

Despite dominant patriarchal structures, participants also highlighted instances of constructive interactions. These experiences show that the academic lifeworld is not uniformly oppressive; rather, it contains relational spaces where gendered expectations are temporarily suspended. A critical underlying factor is the habitus of faculty members, their ingrained dispositions, and ways of relating, formed through their social positioning and professional culture. The academic habitus, as shaped by broader institutional and disciplinary norms, can either reinforce or challenge gendered assumptions This finding contributes to debates on institutional culture by illustrating how habitus can be both reproductive and transformative.

Female members of the academic faculty, in accordance with Bourdieu's perspective, believe that individuals within the scientific institution who share a common field possess a unique habitus that sets them apart from other fields. The habitus of academic faculty members, shaped by their social environment and structured in relation to the field of science, does not readily accommodate gender-appropriate interactions and communication (Bonowitz, 2010). Thus, the presence of this habitus among both female and male academic faculty members appears to be a significant outcome of social reproduction. It is essential to clarify that Bourdieu's concept of habitus differs from a mere habit. Regardless of how accustomed an individual may be to a particular practice (such as viewing women through a gendered lens), they are compelled to adapt their behavior in specific social settings (such as within the scientific institution as a member of the academic faculty), which Bourdieu refers to as habitus. Habitus encompasses a combination of

ingrained habits derived from social structures, as well as acquired dispositions that influence an individual's actions in diverse social contexts (Fakouhi, 2015).

Considering these considerations, many female faculty members participating in this study perceive interactions between male and female faculty members within research institutions and universities to be influenced by popular culture. Formal considerations and general cultural norms play a significant role in interactions between colleagues of the opposite sex. Examples include maintaining open doors during interactions with colleagues of the opposite sex as per formal culture, conducting interactions with colleagues of the opposite sex in meeting rooms, exercising caution in relationships by respecting established boundaries, considering the gender culture of the organization, being consistently vigilant, and being mindful of the system's perspective on interactions between men and women. These are among the key themes that faculty members contemplate in their interactions with colleagues.

Furthermore, the analysis of this study's findings suggests that the culture within higher education institutions, encompassing their values, norms, beliefs, assumptions, and everyday practices, is deeply intertwined with broader societal influences. This supports sociological arguments that universities function as "contact zones" where macro-level gender norms become enacted and negotiated in daily professional interactions.

All themes emerging from this study reflect female faculty members' interactions with colleagues, highlighting the relational nature of gender inequality. By situating work-family conflict within academic interactions rather than domestic life alone, the study foregrounds how temporal deprivation functions as a gendered academic disadvantage.

Globally, the discourse surrounding women's dual responsibilities, at home and in the workplace, remains pervasive. Scholars such as Hochschild (1989) and Vasil (1993) have referred to this phenomenon as the "second shift," where domestic responsibilities are stacked on top of professional obligations, leading to reduced scientific productivity and hindered career progression. In this light, adopting negotiation-oriented cultures may help redistribute symbolic power and create more equitable conditions.

To address gender inequities embedded in institutional culture, one promising pathway is the cultivation of a "negotiation culture", as proposed by Bergquist and Pawlak (2007) in their six-culture typology of academic organizations. A negotiation culture emphasizes open confrontation, equitable dialogue, and fair bargaining, particularly in situations where the interests of management and faculty (or staff) conflict. Strengthening such a culture within academic institutions can contribute to more inclusive, responsive,

and equitable environments, where the needs and contributions of all members - regardless of gender - are acknowledged and valued.

Finally, the data reveal that gendered academic cultures also contain spaces of agency. Women exercise resistance through solidarity and strategic negotiation. These "hopeful zones" illustrate the plasticity of gendered structures and offer insight into how institutional habitus may gradually shift through everyday acts of resistance.

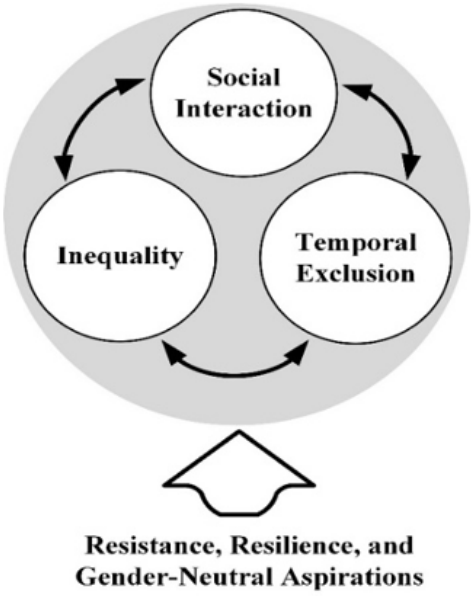

Figure 1: Life world of female faculty

Conclusion

The conceptual framework drawn from the themes of this study reveals a complex system of gender relations that shape women's lived experiences in educational and academic settings. Rather than simply describing gender inequalities, the framework offers an analytical account of how gender inequality is reproduced through the interaction of institutional structures, cultural expectations, and everyday academic practices. Central to this system is the persistent presence of male dominance and institutional privilege, embedded not only in formal hierarchies but also in informal networks that influence presence, authority, and access to opportunities within academic institutions.

These networks function as subtle mechanisms of symbolic power, shaping who is recognized, whose contributions are valued, and whose voices are

amplified within academic settings. In this way, symbolic violence operates through everyday academic interactions, often appearing as neutral professional judgment while subtly reinforcing gender hierarchies. Thus, women's everyday professional interactions involve a wide range of gendered costs and risks. Experiences such as self-monitoring, reputational vulnerability, gossip, and gendered expectations influence how women navigate academic life and shape their sense of belonging within the institutional world of university life.

The findings also show how inequality is maintained through the temporal and relational constraints embedded in academic culture. The intersection of professional responsibilities and family commitments creates forms of time deprivation that limit women's participation in informal networks, collaborative activities, and leadership opportunities. Time, in this sense, emerges as a gendered resource in academic institutions. Limited access to meetings, conferences, or informal brainstorming after work hours may reduce women's access to influential academic networks, thereby reinforcing existing inequalities in recognition and career advancement.

At the same time, the findings suggest that academic environments are not simply defined by dominance and exclusion. Within these constraints, women exercise forms of agency that challenge and negotiate gendered structures. Participants described strategies of solidarity, mutual support, and strategic negotiation that allowed them to overcome institutional barriers. Mentoring relationships, supportive departmental cultures, and inclusive leadership practices create what could be described as "promising zones" within academic institutions—spaces in which gender hierarchies can be challenged and more equitable professional relationships can emerge.

Taken together, the model developed in this study illustrates a dynamic system in which structural inequality, everyday interaction, and temporal constraints operate simultaneously to shape gender relations on campus. Male dominance and institutional privilege remain deeply embedded in the organization of campus life, yet these structures are continually negotiated through interpersonal relationships and collective practices. The model thus portrays campus gender dynamics not as a static hierarchy but as an evolving landscape characterized by a constant tension between reproduction and transformation.

This study contributes to the sociology of education and gender studies by demonstrating how institutional norms, cultural expectations, and interpersonal practices interact to maintain gender hierarchies in campus settings. More importantly, it demonstrates how symbolic power operates through everyday academic practices and influences cognition, participation, and career paths. By highlighting the lived experiences of female faculty members, this study offers a theory-based and empirically informed

perspective on how gendered academic cultures persist and how they are gradually changing.

These insights suggest that addressing gender inequality in higher education requires more than formal reforms to educational policies. Meaningful change depends on changing the informal practices, symbolic boundaries, and relational dynamics that structure everyday university life. Universities seeking greater gender equity must therefore pay attention not only to representation and access, but also to the cultural and interpersonal conditions that shape university participation and recognition. By highlighting these dynamics, this study provides a context-based yet analytically transferable framework for understanding and addressing gendered university cultures in diverse institutional contexts.

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