Gender and Social Roles in Family-Owned Schools

Simone Porto Loureiro[I]
Terezinha Féres-Carneiro[I]

[I]Pontifícia Universidade Católica (PUC-Rio), Rio de Janeiro/RJ – Brazil

ABSTRACT – **Gender and Social Roles in Family-Owned Schools.** This study aimed to research the relation between gender and the management and caregiving activities carried out by the staff of family-owned schools, as well as to analyze how the gender issue has been addressed with students. Four schools in Rio de Janeiro were surveyed. Results were analyzed via content analysis. The analysis showed a strong centralization of caregiving responsibilities for young children in the hands of female employees. The discussion on gender issues with students was shown to rely on the Brazilian curricular guidelines and legislation so as to avoid potential resistance from some students' families.
Keywords: **Family-Owned Business. School. Gender. Social Roles.**

RESUMO – **Gênero e Papéis Sociais em Empresas Familiares do Ramo Escolar.** O objetivo do estudo foi investigar a relação entre gênero e as atividades de gestão e de cuidado exercidas pela equipe em empresas familiares do ramo escolar, assim como analisar como o tema gênero tem sido abordado com os alunos. Foram pesquisadas quatro escolas do Rio de Janeiro. Para análise dos resultados foi utilizado o método de análise de conteúdo. A análise dos resultados evidenciou que ainda há forte centralização dos cuidados com as crianças pequenas nas mãos das mulheres, funcionárias das escolas. A discussão sobre gênero com os estudantes demonstrou se amparar nas próprias diretrizes curriculares e na legislação brasileira, para não atritar com possíveis resistências de algumas famílias de alunos.
Palavras-chave: **Empresa Familiar. Escola. Gênero. Papéis Sociais.**

Introduction

The genders and social roles of people in their various groups constitute very relevant socio-cultural elements. These are historical constructions, permeated by economic and power relations, often in direct contradiction with scientific principles, whether from human and social sciences or natural sciences. Authors such as Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Elisabeth Badinter and Michael Kimmel – to name a few thinkers, from the mid-twentieth century to date – have brought these issues to light. The reflections, even considering only the works of the aforementioned authors, concern several aspects. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, one of the main precursors of this discussion in the mid-twentieth century, highlights in her work the secondary role imposed on women in the social milieu (Beauvoir, 1970). Accordingly, Friedan, in the 1960s, discusses the ideological ties that kept women in their role as "lady of the house" (Friedan, 2022). In turn, Badinter (1985) calls into question the socially-built notion of maternal love as something natural and instinctive. More recently, Kimmel (2022) argues that gender differences do not have much support in biology, but that the social overvaluation of such differences expands inequalities. All this only focusing on the iconic authors mentioned, as the diversity of themes and studies is even broader.

Gender-related concepts are transmitted from generation to generation, with the family being a social structure that forms subjectivities, a fundamental agent in this transmission (Kaës, 2001; Magalhães; Féres-Carneiro, 2004). The school, in turn, is also an institution of paramount importance in the process of primary socialization of the subjects (Berger; Luckmann, 1976), having, like the family, influence on the transformation or perpetuation of the social reality associated with gender issues. The curricular and legal frameworks determined by the State, to which school institutions, whether public or private, are subject, are important markers and key elements in this transformation (Cassiavillani; Albrecht, 2023). They can help educational institutions in facing the difficulties experienced when addressing these issues, such as the belief that education about gender and sexuality, in general, is solely and exclusively the responsibility of the families (Sepulveda; Côrrea, 2021).

At a time when, overcoming resistance, the LGBTQIAPN+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and transvestite, queer, intersex, asexual, pansexual, non-binary people and more) movement agenda is strengthened and occupies more space in society, there are issues of the feminist movement that still have not been overcome, which persist in various social dimensions, despite the tragedy of the perpetuation of injustices and misconceptions – as a most emblematic example, we have the staggering rate of femicide (Bragon, 2021), in conjunction with the equally tragic rate of homicides associated with transphobia and the LGBTQIAPN+ population (Souza, 2022).

In economic-financial terms and, specifically in relation to the professional setting, women's incomes, in general, are still lower than

those of their male colleagues, and top executive positions in corporations are still not very accessible to them. According to a survey conducted by McKinsey & Company (Castilho, 2020) with 700 companies in Latin America, only 11% of the executive positions are held by women. In recent years, companies have shown an increased commitment to promote the issue of diversity and the participation of women in business; however, the situation still depends on greater effectiveness of corporations, especially when hiring and promoting. As for effective equality between men and women in terms of income, Law No. 14,611 have been recently enacted on July 3, 2023, which provides for the matter and reinforces a more level practice in terms of salaries (Brasil, 2023).

In Brazil, according to a survey carried out in 2019 by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2021), men still have a greater share in the workforce: 73.7% are men and 54.5% are women in the group of people aged 15 years or more. However, the average number of weekly hours dedicated to caregiving and/or homemaking by people aged 14 years or older is higher among women: 21.4 hours per week on average in the women's group and 11.0 hours per week on average in the men's group. Also according to the same survey, in 2019 women had lower professional income: 77.7% of men's income (something equivalent to a little more than ¾ of men's income). On the other hand, in terms of education, Brazilian women on average have a higher formal education level than men: among the population aged 25 years or older, 40.4% of men, in 2019, had no education or had only incomplete primary education, while in this condition there was a smaller group of women, 37.1%. Regarding university education, in 2019 only 15.1% of men had complete higher education, while the percentage of women with this level of education reached 19.4%.

With the rise of the pandemic, other effects emerged in relation to the participation of women in the labor market: unemployment due to the economic crisis and the need to reconcile work with the more restricted family life due to the COVID-19 prevention-related protocols. According to a survey, in the USA, due to the pandemic, 865,000 women left the labor market or reduced their careers – a number that represented the ratio of 4 women for every male professional that left the labor market. According to the survey, the women's lower incomes and work overload at home were considered factors for this (Kinias; Rao, 2020). In other words, the numbers indicate unbalanced workloads between men and women.

In terms of university training, it is observed that, in the field of education, directly linked to school activity, in 2019, the percentage of women graduates from undergraduate programs was 75.6%, according to a survey conducted by the Anísio Teixeira National Institute of Educational Studies and Research (INEP, 2020). These numbers are, in a way, consistent with the tradition of women working in caregiving functions, as it is known that formal professional activities related to care and education were the first ones to have greater female participation. According to anthropologist Roberto DaMatta (1985), until the mid-twentieth century, the "world of the house" – as opposed to the "world of

the streets" – was practically the destination for women, and this view, in Brazil, was very evident.

However, it should be noted here, in relation to race and less favored social classes, that these groups of women – black (brown or black) and from less favored social classes –, in contrast, have always had to move away or were forcibly removed from their families to serve the productive order (Gonzales, 2020); without, on the other hand, having been spared from the prejudices that affected and still affect other women.

Thus, we can say that white woman from slightly more favored classes, until then, were prepared to play almost exclusively the roles of wife and mother. Marriage was a woman's major rite of passage into adulthood. Few professions were reserved for them: in general, professions related to taking care of the home, sick people, or children, such as teacher of the first school grades. The world of work was a male privilege, with the family income being the responsibility of men. Only after the social effects of World War II – among them notably the need for female participation in the world of work (especially in the countries directly involved in the war effort) and the invention of the contraceptive pill – did women, at least in terms of possibility, find themselves freed from the restrictive determinations contained in a more traditional conception of themselves (Loureiro, 1996).

As the social roles and the conception of femininity and what it means to be a woman are reviewed, the concept of masculinity and the social roles concerning men are also rethought (Nolasco, 1993). The very duality between femininity and masculinity is called into question in contemporary times (Altamiranda, 2022). Although, in families, the main role of giving care for the offspring still falls to women, it is also possible to observe a certain transformation of men's view of themselves in terms of their roles as father and caregiver; with regard to fatherhood, a view beyond the role, exclusively, of provider (Jesus, 2021).

Therefore, it remains to be understood how – in 21st century Brazil, in professional settings that are more traditionally associated with women, such as schools – social changes related to gender roles are being reflected. In the case of the family-owned schools, these reflections should possibly be present in the narratives that circulate in the two institutions involved: family and school. And, consistently with this perception, the objective of this study was to research the relation between gender and the management and caregiving activities carried out by the staff of family-owned schools, as well as to analyze how the gender issue has been addressed with students. This work was conducted through broader research on cultural traits and narratives of family-owned companies in the school sector, whose method will be described below.

Method

Four schools located in the city of Rio de Janeiro or in neighboring municipalities were studied. The schools surveyed serve the middle strata of the population and have quite different sizes, in terms of number of

employees and students, and profiles, in terms of segments served: two of them work exclusively in the preschool and elementary education and the other two work from preschool to high school. Despite the convenience for qualitative research, with small groups, with greater homogeneity in terms of the profiles of the institutions, it was not possible to find schools available to participate in the study concentrated in the same educational segments or with approximate numbers of students or employees. The post-pandemic period, with its numerous challenges to the economy, may have been one of the factors hindering the researcher in seeking institutions available for the study. The pandemic was a frequent excuse for refusals to participate in the survey. In the future, new studies may broaden the scope indicated by this research.

The first of the schools studied (School 1 in Table 1, to be presented below) was formalized as an institution in the late 2010s. It is managed by two couples, who founded it motivated by the interest in educating their children, at the time still in early childhood, based on pedagogical principles that were different from those they found in schools available in the vicinity of their neighborhoods. The school serves the preschool segment, also including the nursery phase. In pedagogical terms, the school is positioned as not having a specific line, but fundamental elements, based on valuing ethnic and cultural diversity, anti-racist education, free play, and children's closer relation with nature.

The second school surveyed (School 2 in Table 1) began its activities managed by the current family in the early 1990s (before that, it had other owners). It was established, at first, by two sisters, whose mother was a teacher. Of the initial pair of sisters, only one continues in the management of the school. A pedagogue, she is the main leader of the school, with her husband as a partner and administrative support. The school declares itself to be socio-interactionist and operates in preschool and elementary school.

In turn, the third school studied (School 3 in Table 1) was founded in the 1950s by the parents of the current principal and main leader of the school. The family's motivation in founding it was to provide a quality school for their child, since the neighborhood where it is located, at the time, had no alternatives. The mother of the current principal, now deceased, was the main leader of the organization and a major reference for the institution for decades. Today, the school has the third generation of the family working in the school. The institution defines itself as socio-interactionist and operates in the three segments: preschool, elementary/middle school, and high school.

Finally, the fourth school of the survey (School 4 of Table 1) was founded in the late 1960s, by a young entrepreneurial immigrant who established it, at the time, with partners, after purchasing a small school. Today the group has several school units, with the third generation of the family working in the group. The founder continues as the main leader and reference for the institution, which also operates, like School 3, in the three segments: preschool, elementary/middle school, and high school. The institution declares itself to be socio-interactionist in pedagogical terms.

Table 1 – Profiles of Schools and Respondents

School	Founded or initially managed by a family	Segments and No. of Students	Staff	Respondents	Age and sex
1	Late 2010s	Preschool (48)	26	Female Partner Manager (married to one of the male partners) (E1)	F (40)
				Male Partner Manager (married to one of the female partners) (E2)	M (42)
				Female Partner Manager (married to one of the male partners) (E3)	F (40)
				Male Partner Manager (married to one of the female partners) (E4)	M (59)
2	Early 1990s	Preschool (45) Elementary up to 6th grade (45)	20	Female Principal and Partner (was sister's partner/ currently husband's partner) (E5)	F (59)
3	Late 1950s	Preschool (78) Elementary (346) Middle school (238) High School (147)	196	Male General Principal Partner (son of the founders) (E6) Female Coordinator (granddaughter of the founders) (E7) Assistant Principal (E8) Preschool Supervisor (E9)	M (69) F (38) M (60) F (46)
4	Late 1960s	Several units Preschool (1000+ students) Elementary (3000+ students) Middle school (2000+ students) High School (1000+ students)	1262	Founding-Partner Principal (E10) General Unit Manager (E11) Director of Shared Services (E12) Commercial Manager (E13) Technology Director (nephew of the founder) (E14)	M (75) F (60) M (44) M (58) M (48)

Note. F = female, M = male.
Source: prepared by the authors.

Members of the families that owned the four schools, some of their principals and managers participated in the survey as respondents. The number of participants was defined based on the size of the schools and their staffs. The respondents were those indicated by the top leaders of the schools. Table 1 contains more details on the profile of schools and respondents. The subjects interviewed, in order to better ensure confidentiality in relation to their identities, were named as E1, E2, E3, E4, and so on up to E14, with the letter F or M (female or male) next to them, as indicated in Table 1. The exact years the schools were founded were also omitted to better preserve the identity of this group of companies.

In a first contact with those in charge of the schools, we asked them to complete the biographical form. This document contains characteristics of the school: year of foundation; segments of activity (preschool, elementary school, middle school, high school); pedagogical line; size (number of students and employees); corporate configuration; number of family members working in the school, their positions and kinship relations with the founders of the school. After identifying in each school the key people available for the survey, we conducted interviews following a semi-structured questionnaire. The questionnaire, focusing on narratives, included the following thematic categories: culture (premises, values and artifacts of culture, such as myths and rites); generational transmission; power relations and gender.

Due to the pandemic, the interviews were conducted online through the Zoom platform (recordings were made using the platform and stored securely on the researcher's personal computer). The duration of the interviews was, on average, about 45 minutes each. The interviews occurred in a 10-month period, between the late 2021 and the early 2022. The research project was evaluated and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the university where it was conducted. Participants gave us consent to record the interviews and signed an Informed Consent Form.

We adopted careful measures to keep the partipants' data confidential and preserve their identity. All pieces of equipment, applications or materials in physical or electronic media used or generated by the research was treated with care in relation to security and confidentiality, thus seeking to avoid undue leaks of respondent information. And, as required by Brazilian regulations, the collected material will be archived for a minimum period of five years, being, during this period, under the responsibility of the researcher.

Analysis and Discussion of the Results

For analysis of the collected material and interviews, we used the categorical content analysis method, as defined by Bardin (2016). Several categories emerged from the content analysis. Considering the objective of this study, we will present and discuss the following categories: (1) "gender and the care of young children" and (2) "talking about gender."

With regard to the first category, the school – especially preschool and the elementary school – is traditionally a female professional setting. Caregiving professions are those that – in a traditional view of femininity – have been associated with women throughout history (DaMatta, 1985; Loureiro, 1996). The present study still found significantly this pattern in the percentage of female share in the number of employees of the schools surveyed: School 1 – 85%; School 2 – 90%; School 3 – 74%; School 4 – 70%. The respondents' statements also reflect this situation.

[…] some 73 or 75 [percentage of female workers in the school]. If you take into account the first phase of basic education, whether preschool or elementary school, most teachers are female, female teachers. The assistants are women too, I, I have mediators to assist students with difficulty in… those who need assistance, you know? Special needs, only there I have 17 mediators who are women (E6 - M).

When you think about what nowadays is called middle school, the thing already starts to be rebalanced a little bit, but there are more women too. You see, in a leadership position… I've seen many, I don't even remember how many women I put there in a leadership position […] yeah, because in our school, in positions of… leadership [men], it's me [name of the pedagogical director] is the pedagogical director, then… if you want to talk to him it will be a pleasure, and teacher [name of the coordinator] is the high school coordinator (E6 - M).

No, in fact, maybe I have never thought about it [gender policy for the school staff], because I think it's so natural, right?! As you said, we have many more women than men, right? On the contrary, sometimes it is… we would like there to have more male teachers, other male teachers too. You see… I remember there was a year, a student… he was very happy, you know?! That student impressed me, he said: damn, I'm finally going to have a male teacher [laughs]. When he got to middle school, you know?! And I had never realized that, you know? Maybe for the student the… no, there was one in physical education, okay, but it wasn't that teacher inside the classroom, right? That teacher who will actually teach, who will use the blackboard, who will give a test, that will answer their doubts, that will be there with them. So I think that, I don't know, to me it's much more the opposite, right? Yeah… starting in middle school and high school, do we have more male teachers? We do, but I remember that I was impressed by this turning point, you know?! A 5th grade student who was going to the 6th grade, being very happy to have a male teacher, because from preschool to elementary, when it comes to teachers inside the classroom I never saw a man, only women, only women. So, I don't know, maybe for me it's even the opposite, why not have men, right? As a teacher, right… in elementary school? (E7 - F).

No, funny, we don't think about that, eh [staff composition in terms of gender]? No, I tell you that I also elect who is in charge, eh? Below me, it's… that was never an issue that worried us, but let's see, traditionally the high school coordinator has always been a man, you know? […] Oh, do we prefer a man in high school?! I don't know, I don't know if that has any influence, but, you see, all the other coordinators are female. We truly focus on women to care for young children. (E8 - M).

Yeah, that's because education has this more feminine characteristic, right? I think women start there with that dream of being a teacher there, back there since they are young, then they go to teacher training and then gradually climb positions within education. Men, usually, in turn were teachers in high school, middle school… the opportunities are… extremely limited for guys who attend teacher training, you know? And want to teach in elementary school. I even had an employee who worked with me, recently until last week, he… his dream was to teach children – in elementary school, early childhood education – he never had the opportunity, because some school managers are full of prejudice, precisely because of the issue of men teaching young children, you know? Up to about 8, 9 years, guys usually teach from the 5th grade onwards and… I saw him wanting a lot to get into this area, more pedagogical. Then, we had a selection process for assistant supervisor, he participated in this process and was approved. So, that's not what he wanted, but he's quite happy, there is this… negative side of education as well (E12 - M).

However, despite the persistence of this pattern of male absence in early childhood education and in elementary school, there is still a certain movement in the search for flexibility in the roles related to the care of children aged under 10 years in families (Jesus, 2021) and, also, in schools. Although the presence of conducting teachers up to the end of elementary school is rarer, there is male presence in complementary subjects, such as music or computer science. This situation was described by one of the respondents in the following excerpt.

Look, in the part of, of early childhood education at [School Name] in general, there is no professional… there is a male music teacher, a male computer teacher, yeah… not a main teacher, but in state and municipal schools you can find many. I know a group of male teachers who work in elementary school, because from middle school

onwards it is normal, you know? (E11 - F).

Also, according to the respondent, in public schools, whose access is through a public selection process, the male presence in the initial grades is probably more frequent. This segment of schools was not part of the institution profile researched by the present study. However, as is known, in the public sphere, as per the Constitution in force in Brazil (Brasil, 1988), public selection processes need to guarantee the possibility of access to employment for male and female Brazilians.

In line with the flexibility of the roles related to the care of young children, this movement is quite evident in the account of the respondents from one of the schools. As can be seen in the following reports, this movement also seems quite conscious and intentional; it is important to note that, of the group of schools surveyed, this institution was the one that positioned itself in a less traditional manner in all aspects (not only in relation to gender issues).

[…] Parents and teaching staff interact much more nowadays [after the advent of schools in which parents are partners], as parents stayed all day at school. This meant a major gain for [child's name]. He says he feels extremely privileged to have had the opportunity to follow the development [of the child], within this dynamics, you know (E1-F)?!

[…] And so when you talk, especially about early childhood education, there is already a very marked gender place because of a historical construction due to caregiving, right?! So educators, when we say, uhm… uhm… We will hire educators, and there are many more women than men in this process. So our concern today, in relation to gender, is… is to be able to address the importance of men in care. Because this is already very strong, it is already very marked within our composition, you know?! […] So our goal, when we talk about gender, is to discuss it, including with families. There are several types of controversies and insecurities regarding men's occupation in this space. We seek to promote an education that brings men to this space of care for young children, you see?! […] The two educators, the two men, the two interns are black men [school professionals]. Which is a little more challenging, right?! Because, beyond men, in early childhood education, eh?! There's Black men, you know?! Which is this representation of dangerous men in our society, right?! (E1-F).

[…] at the top of my head, I think our first male educator was an educator who was a philosopher who was gay and some parents were ecstatic, they thought it was wonderful and other parents, "Is that right? Are you gonna put a man to change my daughter's diaper?", you know? Yeah, and we, "Man, look, do you want to reinforce this, this idea that care is a female function or do you want us to expand it?", you know? This is a, it's a place of trust. Trust, so, trust us that we are bringing this discussion to, in order to broaden our view […] yeah, not to stereotype the, the, the person responsible for care, you know?! To think that that's a feminine thing, that I think this is one of the aspects of machismo… that it, it has…, it has very big impacts, you know?! Like, the father abandons because his role is not to caregiving, he goes to work and the mother will… anyway, and then we have like… this awful scenario of Brazil, right?! (E2-M).

[…] I don't think I had ever changed a diaper in my life except for [child name], you know?! And, and appropriating care in not just changing diapers, you know? It's clipping the toenail, changing [underwear], buying [underwear], taking to the pediatrician, alone, you know? And then you arrive at a, a pediatrician office or a, a parent-teacher meeting at school and you as a man in other institutions, people look or think, like, "look, he's gay, soon his husband will come here to pick him up." Or

it is a, it is something strange, like in offices, and such… (E2-M).

Yeah. No, we don't have that [a more formalized gender policy]. It is one of the ways, right?! That still needs to be improved, right? […] of course we don't have any prejudice, you know? We have a very diverse range, right?! Of genders […] and we can have more too, right? It's also a matter of opportunity, right? We're not that big, are we? […] But we, too, gave preference, so, at some point, we included males, as educators, too, right? Because that's another, it's another stigma… (E4-M).

A certain degree of flexibility in relation to men playing roles of those who can take care of young children is something that, as seen in the highlighted statements, appears in recent research results (Jesus, 2021). Although the function of giving care for the most vulnerable in the family (children, the elderly, people with disabilities) falls more to women (IBGE, 2021), men have increasingly appropriated the role of caregivers for their children. Companies and the Brazilian State, in turn, following this trend, have discussed the best distribution of benefits so men and women can rebalance their professional and personal tasks, including those related to parenting. The possibility of extending the duration of paternity leave is an example of that (Brasil, 2016a; Brasil, 2016b). Schools, within the same social context, more or less intensely, more or less consciously and intentionally, also participate in this movement.

If the role of teacher or caregiver of children – especially young children, in preschool and elementary school – is still something under construction for men, on the other hand, from middle school, as well as in pedagogical activities, the participation of men in the support of school administration and management is already quite consolidated. As seen above (DaMatta, 1985; Loureiro, 1996), in traditional terms, the obstacles regarding access to the world of work, in activities in general, affected women more. In fact, as researches indicate (Castilho, 2020), men continue, even today, with greater chances of professional advancement. This issue of differences between men and women regarding career progression was not the object of study in the present research, nor was it mentioned in the interviews. The larger number of female employees in schools may already ensure a significant percentage of female leaders in these institutions. In any case, it was quite evident in the schools the male participation in other diverse activities (different from those providing direct care for young children), including in leadership roles. This can be observed in the following accounts of respondents.

No, he, he goes there twice a week, more or less… […] he goes there twice a week or so to solve all the practical problems, you know? Practical, he is responsible for all of the company's purchases, uhm… all of the work, maintenance, he budgets, he does all this part of… he does not, he is not totally associated with the pedagogical matter […] he is a person who provides me with structure for the school to work, you know?! He provides me with its… physical structure, let's say (E5-F).

And with each passing year, the school grew and when resources were lacking, my father would cover for that, this difference between income and expense was… he would cover for that (E6-M).

[On leadership positions held by men and women] we have the principals […] who are leaders, right?! […] Below these principals, we have pedagogical and operational supervisors who are leadership positions… still within leadership positions, […] we have those in charge of maintenance, they are the guys who take care of the

infrastructure, works and it is… cleaning, maintenance as a whole. Here in the administrative department, we have a people manager and a general manager, we have [IT director name], who is the IT director, we have [purchase manager name] who is the infrastructure and purchase manager […]. We have an accounting manager, you know?! Who takes care of all the company's accounting […], but women dominate the leadership positions (E12-M).

Despite the massive female presence in schools, always greater than 70% in the institutions surveyed, it is possible to observe, in the respondents' statements, that male individuals seem to experience no difficulties to be assigned positions in management planning and support departments in schools. Participation in essentially pedagogical activities, from middle school onward, is also quite common. The survey found male principals (senior leadership) with a background in pedagogy. According to these findings, as described above, access to the world of work, and even to top executive positions, is not a problem for men in terms of gender. As mentioned above, almost 90% of executive positions, according to a survey by McKinsey & Company (Castilho, 2020), are held by men. Their challenge in the school setting seems to be assuming the care for younger children. And, accordingly, there is a very evident correspondence with what happens in the family context in general: although there is, in the context of contemporary families, more flexibility as to the roles played by men and women in the household setting, care for young children still substantially falls to women (Jesus, 2021).

As for the second category to be approached in the present study – "talking about gender" –, a relevant point when discussing gender issues concerns who is responsible for addressing and educating on this subject: family, school or both institutions. Assuming that this is a broad and fundamental subject in the development of individuals and that the two institutions are the main formal education providers, it is easy to conclude that both must be committed to this role of also addressing gender issues. The point then shifts to the limits of how they will be approached. And, in the case of schools, the discussion about these limits is situated between what is to be mandatorily addressed, in compliance with curricular guidelines or legal provisions, and what can be understood by families as an invasion of the private sphere, that is, what can be considered by the students' families (ultimately, school clients) as something to be treated exclusively within the scope of the families' own values and beliefs. The following accounts address the subject and show how each school deals with these limits.

[On talking about gender with students] Yes, there is because I work with values; you know?! So working with values we have proposals all year round, you see? And, also, within Ethics and Education in the 6th grade, eh? […] these are issues related to society's problems, right?! And when they come up too. We have, for example, this helps because uh… in the syllabus, in the fifth grade, for example, when you are addressing the reproductive system… you are, you are, uh, uh, uh the class… the children get very agitated, you know?! So you have to work on this, you have to work within the truth, the real that exists yeah and how should we deal with it? With no prejudice, right?! Yeah… I'm an extremely inclusive person, I don't admit prejudice inside my school, I say: I don't admit bullying inside my school, you know?![…] I have students who have two mothers, no problem at all, you know?! And so, uh… I

can do this type of work and our eyes are very attentive to parallel conversations, we intervene when there is some, some problem of uh… when some student is showing prejudice against the other, we bring the subject into the classroom, we have stories about prejudice, we tell stories to them, you know?! Children's stories, to relate… we have a good collection at school on these topics, you know?! About the values, the themes, so we bring them to school, okay?! We can't afford not to bring them, right?!(E5-F).

All these subjects, if it's in the light of knowledge, of course we discuss them with the students. If it's in the light of knowledge, if necessary… a, a debate with a teacher as mediator. What do we ask of our employee, our teacher? That they, if necessary, that they allow it…, that they conduct this debate. Because… the teacher's opinion… at this time, I think it is very much the responsibility of the family, you know? About politics, sex, religion… if it's in the light of knowledge, of course we will address it, but I don't, I don't call the family to talk about that, I don't call students to talk about that. Because these are controversial issues and I, I have to respect what others think, right? I have, I have, parents who are of the same sex, I have everything… and all this we respect, there is no problem, but everything in the light of knowledge, you know? If necessary within a content, within a context, we will… The teacher will evoke this debate inside the classroom. Because sometimes students, they are not prepared [audio cut] … and then you really have to mediate, you have to, you have to have been trained too, also passed on to students over the years. Sometimes it becomes a very fierce thing and, depending on the family, depending on what the student told them at home, things will complicate a little. So, I'll tell you, when knowledge is necessary, the teacher will, will mediate that, yeah (E6-M).

[When asked about talking about gender issues at school]. No, we don't go into that, we accept the student if they have a birth certificate where their name is Julia, but they don't, they want to be called… by another name, then we: Oh, what is the other name to be included in the school register? We put that there in the documents. There is a law that supports this and that's it. But we work a lot on the part of respect, you know?! [School Name] works with a lot of projects that try to develop this part of respect, you know?! Liking yourself, liking the other, liking your neighbor, but not something declared. […], but, when it comes to gender, like: oh, you can't… there is no such policy. Especially because when you work with a lot of people like us, with [says the number of students], there are many families. Of all kinds, so we have to always seek a middle ground in everything […] (E11-F).

Despite the wide debate on the need to talk about gender in schools (Sepulveda; Côrrea, 2021), the above statements demonstrate the importance of objective (curricular and legal) references and show how sensitive the subject is, in practice, to be addressed in the daily routine of school institutions. Although there is recognition of the need to build, in social relations, respect for diversity, as well as in society, the theme is still controversial in schools and requires care in being approached. As previously seen, Cassiavillani and Albrecht (2023) reinforce the importance of legal support so education professionals have security to address the issue in schools. According to the authors, current legislation already determines that issues related to sex education, such as gender issues, are addressed in schools; however, the various political contexts experienced in Brazil after redemocratization have impacts, sometimes progressive, sometimes conservative, making it difficult to consolidate more systematic and effective practices in school institutions. In the interviews of the survey of the present research, from which the above statements were excerpted, it is possible to perceive that the curricular

and legal apparatus is an important guiding thread so institutions have security in addressing this subject with their students.

Final Considerations

Discussions about gender issues and social roles that people play or may play are still far from being pacified in contemporary society, where a situation of ignorance and stereotypes still prevails. Schools, as agents involved in the socialization process of children and adolescents, are situated in a strategic position for eliminating prejudices and valuing diversity. Fulfilling this role depends, in large part, on understanding the mechanisms involved in the perpetuation of mistaken beliefs about the subjects' differences and singularities in terms of their sexual identities and orientations.

Based on the perceptions obtained by research with this group and profile of schools – family businesses –, it is reasonable to assume that, to some extent, they reflect values of the family that established them, and, more than that, that they reflect values and contradictions present in the society of which they are part. And it is understandable that it is of paramount importance for the very survival of schools, as companies, to have synergy between their culture and values, as well as those of their students' families. However, on the other hand, in order to truly be agents of social transformation, they need to create internal possibilities for reflection on and criticism of the very cultural elements of this society of which they are part.

Regarding the division of roles between genders, based on our results, we can observe, in the researched group, that there is still a strong centralization of the care for young children in the hands of women, school employees. On the other hand, we also observed spaces that have already been consolidated for men in roles in management, management support or even as investing partners in schools. However, the wind of change can also be observed in the training of leaders (some with training in pedagogy), in the reflections and in some examples of male participation in caregiving for young children. The space for flexibility of gender roles in this universe of schools seems to be precisely this: the greater participation of men in activities that involve more direct caregiving for young children (preschool, elementary school).

The discussion about gender with students, in turn, based on the group of schools surveyed, is supported by the Brazilian curricular guidelines and legislation, which unequivocally indicate non-discrimination in terms of gender diversity (Brasil, 1988). The students' own context – including the curiosity of those who discover the world and themselves in all aspects – also proves a driving force to foster discussion on the subject. And, accordingly, the counterpoint may be the very group of students' families, with their particular, sometimes more traditional, views on gender diversity and the social roles they play or may play. The students' families, as previously mentioned, are clients of the school institutions and these, in turn, depend on such clients for the survival of their business. Fostering open dialogue with children and their families

on gender issues, with their various nuances and aspects, is a necessary but sensitive task. However, important social advances, in terms of gender diversity and equality, depend on the success of this endeavor.

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Simone Porto Loureiro holds a PhD in Psychology from the Graduate Program in Clinical Psychology at the PUC-Rio Department of Psychology. She is a managing partner of Narrativas Psychology Consultancy and Clinic and director of ABRH-RJ (Human Resources Association - RJ).
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4372-7579
E-mail: simoneploureiro@gmail.com

Terezinha Féres-Carneiro is a teacher at the Graduate Program in Psychology, PUC-Rio. She holds a postdoctoral degree in Family and Couple Therapy, University of Paris V, Sorbone, 1988. She holds a PhD in Clinical Psychology, PUC-SP, 1981.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0564-7810
E-mail: teferca@puc-rio.br

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