

"What's up with this woman?" Challenges, achievements and empowerment of women in politics

"Qual é a dessa mulher?" Desafios, conquistas e empoderamento da mulher na política

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Abstract: Politics is one of the areas in which the marked under-representation of women is evident. Therefore, this article aims to analyze the main challenges and achievements of women in politics from the perspective of the theory of individual and social empowerment. The methodology follows content analysis of the transcripts of semi-structured interviews with elected and active women in the Legislative power in Brazilian politics. The results reveal challenges that permeate their experiences in the political trajectory, from their intention to enter this environment to their performance as elected officials. Despite the challenges, it was possible to verify the achievements expressed in the way the causes defended by elected women come to be perceived and respected, in the changes promoted regarding the use of public resources, and in the small transformations in the treatment they receive in the political environment.

Keywords: women; politics; challenges; achievements; empowerment.

Resumo: A política é uma das áreas em que se evidencia a marcante sub-representação feminina. Portanto, este artigo tem como objetivo analisar os principais desafios e conquistas de mulheres na política sob a ótica da teoria de empoderamento individual e social. A metodologia segue análise de conteúdo das transcrições de entrevistas

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semiestruturadas com mulheres eleitas para cargos legislativos e atuantes na política brasileira. Os resultados revelam desafios que permeiam suas experiências na trajetória política, desde a intenção de se inserir nesse ambiente até a sua atuação como eleita. Apesar dos desafios, foi possível verificar as conquistas expressas na forma como as causas defendidas pelas mulheres eleitas passam a ser percebidas e respeitadas, nas mudanças promovidas quanto à utilização dos recursos públicos e nas pequenas transformações no tratamento que elas recebem no ambiente político.

Palavras-chave: mulher; política; desafios; conquistas; empoderamento.

1. Introduction

According to the International Labor Organization (2020), the world needs to improve aspects related to women's work, as their economic and political empowerment contributes to gender equity. In Brazil, there is outstanding gender inequality in economic participation and political representation (Benigno, Vieira, Oliveira, 2021). In this sense, increasing the presence of women in traditionally male organizational environments can strengthen their representation, as social transformations are more effective if demanded through positions of power (Karawejczyk, 2013; Tosi, 2016). Thus, both political and academic debates have focused on the importance of women's participation in politics, as they have faced several challenges due to the barriers that oppose their insertion and permanence in politics (Bauer, 2015; Fernandes & Lourenço, 2023 ; Fernandes, Lourenço, Frohlich, Silva, Kai, 2020; Lee, 2018; Zakar, Zakar, Hamid, 2018).

When women occupy a position of power, these barriers are manifested mainly through judgments and stereotypes attributed to gender. Because of this, women are treated as too sensitive and emotional for leadership positions because, from the perspective of such stereotypes, a more aggressive positioning is expected from political representatives (Bauer, 2015; Biroli, 2010; Chikaipa, 2019; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fernandes et. al, 2020; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Johns & Shephard, 2007; Lee, 2018).

Faced with such a scenario, a growing body of literature has analyzed the existence of differences among female and male legislators, and whether such differences interfere with the acceptance and participation of candidates (Costa & Schaffner, 2018; Fernandes & Lourenço, 2023; Geys & Mause, 2014; Grant, Kesternich, Steckenleiter, Winter, 2018). In this scope, women's empowerment in politics is a relevant element in understanding the possibilities and limits that exist in encouraging both social and political participation (Becker, Edmundo, Nunes, Bonatto, 2004; Kleba & Wendausen, 2009; Vasconcelos, 2003) . Empowerment focuses on developing individual potential

and, at the same time, promotes the achievement of ideals at organizational and social levels (Eylon, 1998).

It is relevant, therefore, to study the perspective of women's empowerment in Brazilian politics, as Brazil occupies the 145th position among 235 countries surveyed in the ranking of female representation in congresses, published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2022). The 2022 elections demonstrate this low representation: the population of women in Brazil corresponds to 51.8%, however, only 302 women, or 17.8%, were elected in a universe of 1,696 elective positions corresponding to the sum of vacancies of the Lower house, the Senate, the Legislative Assemblies and state governments (Amaral, 2022).

Given this context, this article aims to analyze the main challenges and achievements of women in politics from the perspective of individual and social empowerment theory, with the help of semi-structured interviews and support from content analysis. The results of this research process reveal that challenges such as gender inequality, feelings of exclusion, lack of political support permeate the experiences of women's trajectory in party politics, from the intention of inserting themselves in this environment until their role as an elected official. However, despite the challenges, there is the existence of empowerment through achievements, such as increased respect for the causes they defend, the positive perception of the different way they use public resources and the small transformations in the treatment they receive in the political environment. Furthermore, in this research, it was identified that empowerment is also the reflection of a subjective process of self-awareness of one's importance as a woman in politics.

Regarding contributions, this research allows the understanding and advance of the literature regarding women working in predominantly male organizations. It contributes to the expansion of studies focused on women in politics, considering their performance in multiple organizations of the political system (political party, commissions, formal organizations, among others), which follow distinct and unique guidelines. This dynamic, in a way, tends to interfere with their empowerment, as their political activity is strong in some organizations and weak in others. Furthermore, it is hoped that this study will encourage greater female participation in politics, by bringing into discussion points that are neglected by the government, political parties and the population in general.

2. Female empowerment

Empowerment is a relevant element in understanding the possibilities and limits that exist in encouraging social and political participation (Becker et al., 2004; Kleba & Wendausen, 2009; Vasconcelos, 2003). In this sense, empowerment consists of the act of having autonomy, in a mechanism in which both people and organizations have control over their affairs, destinies, skills and competencies (Fialho, Rosa, Gai, Nunes, 2018; Souza, Silva, Costa, 2022).

In the organizational context, empowerment focuses on developing individual potential while promoting the achievement of greater organizational ideals, going beyond a personal feeling (e.g. "I feel empowered today"). It is a process resulting from changes and individual inter-relational variables, such as: the quantity and quality of information at your disposal, the degree of trust received in a work environment, as well as the degree of responsibility that this person has in his position (Eylon, 1998).

In addition to being multifaceted, as a process, empowerment is dynamic, involving cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects. Its process can be presented based on dimensions of social life at different levels: individual, group and social. On a personal level, empowerment makes it possible to increase an individual's autonomy and freedom. And at a group level, empowerment is responsible for triggering reciprocal respect, as well as mutual support among group members, promoting a feeling of belonging, the existence of solidarity practices and reciprocity. Finally, social empowerment favors and enables engagement, co-responsibility and social participation from the perspective of citizenship (Kleba & Wendausen, 2009). Among the possibilities of analysis regarding empowerment, this article focuses on the individual and social levels.

Individual empowerment is related to the interpersonal and behavioral attributes of the person in their process of appropriating power (Ninacs, 2003). Individual empowerment can be developed from four perspectives (Ninacs, 2003). The first is self-esteem, which concerns the sense of identity, personal competence and self-confidence, helping the individual to build self-worth. The second perspective refers to critical consciousness, a reflective exercise by the individual aimed at the formation of collective, social and political consciousness. The third perspective is that of competencies, which are the capabilities created or improved by the individual to put their plans into action. Finally, the fourth, called participation perspective, occurs when the individual becomes

progressively involved in decision-making processes and also assumes the consequences of this greater participation.

From a social point of view, empowerment is a multidimensional process through which social groups develop strategies to achieve their goals in order to improve their own lives and those of other people (Gutiérrez, 1990; Page & Czuba, 1999). In this sense, empowerment involves political, structural, social and collective aspects regarding a specific population that has difficulties in accessing certain elements of power. Therefore, one of the circumstances in which empowerment needs to be strengthened is in the dynamics of women's work in political organizations, as discussed below.

2.1. Women in politics

In Brazil, since 1532, when the first Portuguese village was founded, elections have been held, but the right to vote for women began to be discussed in the country only around 1891. During this period, 31 constituents had signed an amendment to the draft Federal Constitution, giving women the right to vote, however, this amendment was rejected (Buonicore, 2009; Tosi, 2016). It was through the 1934 Constitution that Brazilian women had this right granted, as, for a long time, suffrage was not seen as a right but rather a privilege, generally attributed to the "political head of the family" (Cajado, Dornelles, Pereira, 2014).

Since then, even with the existence of quotas and other incentives, some studies have shown that women have faced a series of challenges not only when being elected, but also during the course of their careers, from the decision to join a party, including the intention to run for a political position, the electoral campaign, as well as the exercise of some position (Bauer, 2020; Schulz & Moritz, 2015).

In this sense, the understanding of female participation in politics requires, first of all, the awareness that almost no country in the world has a percentage of 50% of women occupying seats in its legislative houses (Paxton & Kunovich, 2003; Sacchet, 2018). Araújo (2010) points out that this fact is due to the existence of deep-rooted perceptions that postulate that power is aimed at men, which makes it difficult for other groups excluded from the political system to participate and motivate themselves. To give you an idea, in Brazil, data from the Superior Electoral Court (2023) indicate that the highest percentage of voters is made up of women (53% of the total), however, only 15% of the total number of political positions are held by them. Still, according to the same study, in

terms of candidacy, the highest percentage of women candidates in recent years was 34% of the total registered candidacy.

One factor that interferes with the participation of women in politics is the insufficient support of the parties, as well as little allocation of resources, especially financial, to their campaigns (Bauer, 2020; Fernandes & Lourenço, 2023; Homola, 2019; Rezende, 2017) . These are some of the points that demarcate inequality between men and women, the absence of rules and procedures that are effective in regulating and the equitable interaction of parties with their candidates, regardless of gender (Homola, 2019; Rezende, 2017).

This perspective requires the potential exercise of actions to change the conditions to guarantee greater representation of women in spaces of power and decision-making (Homola, 2019; Rezende, 2017). However, increasing female representation does not guarantee party support or approval of their projects, much less increases their propensity for re-election (Brollo & Troiano, 2016).

Despite significant changes in the political field, gender as a category in which social relations constituted by socially perceived sexual differences are analyzed (Scott, 1990) is still a criterion for society to draw inferences about people's traits, skills, beliefs and positions who are involved in this institution (Johns & Shephard, 2007). Some studies that verify the influence of women's presence in the political environment, however, demonstrate that their participation in this scenario generates significant changes, whether in relation to the thoughts developed there, the policies created or, alternatively, the way in which public money is invested. (Brollo & Troiano, 2016; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Costa & Schaffner, 2018; Fernandes & Lourenço, 2023; Fernandes et. al, 2020). Having established the connection between empowerment and the context of women in politics, the methodological procedures used in this research are presented below.

3. Methodological procedures

This research consists of a basic qualitative study. One of the central characteristics of a basic qualitative study focuses on the way in which individuals construct their realities in the face of interactions in their social worlds (Tisdell & Merriam, 2016). Thus, in this article, when talking about women active in the political field, mention is made of those who ran for political positions to act as senators, governors, mayors, councilors, state deputies, federal deputies and presidents. Only

women from the Legislative Branch were selected, as the participation of women in this political scenario is a topic that deserves further development in academia.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews from August to November 2019, guided by a script of questions based on the literature presented and the objective outlined. All eight participating interviewees signed the free and informed consent form in order to guarantee confidentiality, anonymity and authorization to use the data for the research. All interviews took place in the participants' work offices, being recorded and later transcribed.

The participants were identified with the names of goddesses from Greek Mythology who, in a certain way, represented the defense of their political causes, as shown in Table 01:

Table 01: Characterization of women active in politics participating in the research

Interviewee	Age	Education	Political position	Time dedicated to politics	Defended Causes
Hera: goddess of marriage, family, queen of the gods	56	High school degree	State deputy	3rd term as deputy 1st term as councilor	Family causes
Athena: goddess of civilization and wisdom regarding battle strategies	60	University degree	Councilor	1st term as councilor	Women's causes, as well as human rights, environment and security causes
Hemera: goddess who personifies the day and its light	43	University degree	Councilor	1st term as councilor	Ethical control of animals, control and restriction of animal trade, supervision and punishment for mistreatment, responsible ownership and free veterinary care
Artemis: protective goddess of animals	70	University degree	Councilor	2nd term as councilor	Public policies aimed at public health in the municipality, as well as animal causes
Nike: goddess of conquest and victory	44	High school degree	State deputy	1st term as deputy 2 terms as mayor	Causes focused on health, tourism, education, women's rights, children and adolescents
Métis: goddess of health, virtues, protection, prudence and cunning	51	University degree	State deputy	1st term as state deputy	Causes aimed at female representation in politics

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Gaia: represents Mother Earth and its generating potential	72	University degree	Councilor	6th term as councilor	Causes focused on culture, development, education, urbanism and senior citizens
Têmis: goddess of justice and guardian of human oaths and law	70	University degree	State deputy	3rd term as state deputy	Causes focused on education and resocialization

Source: The Authors (2023)

After organizing the transcriptions, their analysis was carried out, which was prepared using the Content Analysis technique as it allows the interpretation of subjective aspects relating to the content of the collected data (Saldaña, 2016). Following the protocol defined by Bardin (2011), the analysis was divided into three moments. The first referred to “pre-analysis” and consisted of organizing the data and initial conceptions regarding how to carry out the analysis itself. In the second moment, the researchers read the materials, coding and categorizing them, taking into account the literature, as well as emerging themes in the field. As a result, two dimensions of analysis were delimited: “challenges faced” and “achievements”, analyzed through the theoretical lens of individual (Ninacs, 2003) and social (Gutiérrez, 1990; Page & Czuba, 1999) empowerment.

Within such dimensions, Bardin (2011) points out the existence of context units whose purpose is to encode data so that it is possible to understand the existing specificities. Thus, in the dimension “the challenges faced” the context units were outlined as “lack of party support”, “battle for space”, “demonstration of skills”, “challenges of individual empowerment” and “challenges of social empowerment”. In the “achievements” dimension, the context units were: “election”, “approved bills”, “perceived changes”, “achievements aimed at individual empowerment” and “achievements aimed at social empowerment”.

After this stage, we moved on to the third and final moment of the analysis, which consisted of inferring and interpreting the contents of the interviews in order to achieve a critical and reflective analysis regarding what was exposed there. In this last process, the researchers carried out an analysis together in order to debate different points of view about the data and literature worked on and, in this way, reach a consensus that constituted the final analysis.

4. Analysis and discussion of results

4.1. Challenges faced

According to Rezende (2017), there are a series of challenges to women's political representation such as the distribution of resources, the performance itself, among other aspects. Schulz & Moritz (2015) and Fernandes & Lourenço (2023) argue that there has been great progress in female representation in politics since mandatory participation quotas were implemented. But, even with the existence of quotas, the vast majority of political parties are unable to meet them.

[...] the party doesn't recognize the importance of women, so, therefore, it doesn't give you money, it doesn't give you television time, it doesn't give you the opportunity to try to debate [...] they choose a group, usually of only men...and that group is supported in all these ways of opening doors, understand? [...] they let you participate, but they don't promote you in the election, in any sense [...] they don't help [...] I don't know if they don't get in the way [...] but they don't do anything for the female candidate (Atena).

The above confirms what was discussed in the study of Homola (2019), in which the author states that parties act more responsively to the preferences of men than women in terms of their general actions. As a result, the process of electing a female candidate is even more challenging than the one faced by their male counterparts, as the party's support is lower, or even nil. It is important to highlight that women represent almost half of the total of members in Brazilian political parties, totaling 46% (TSE, 2022), however, what is notable is that, despite such representation in such organizations, the percentage of candidates is low.

In addition to challenges faced within the various organizations of the political system, another point raised by the respondents was the existence of conflicts regarding roles socially assumed by women. The problem mainly refers to conflicts between personal and professional life. In this sense, Têmis reported feeling that everything in politics occurs naturally, however, she realized that some aspects of her personal life needed alignment so that it would be possible to expand her insertion conditions in the political space:

[...] Another thing that affects a woman's emotions in politics, which she has to know how to do, is to win first at home, because there's no point in her getting involved in politics and her husband backs out, they end up in divorce, blame it on politics [...]

.] has nothing to do with it, I always advise: win over the father or mother or husband or 'boyfriend' at home, and win over the children too, because even winning over is difficult even when they are older, but when they are small...they require more of your presence (Têmis).

Still from this perspective, Métis also highlighted her difficulties in reconciling personal activities with her demands as a deputy. She reported that, having been in this environment for several years, from the beginning she knew the 'paid' price, even reporting that such issues 'weighed' in deciding whether to apply or not: "I thought if this was worth it, if it was worth giving up this role as mother".

What is noticeable is that the process of women empowerment who choose to enter politics is impacted by the interference of individual variables perceived by them (Eylon, 1998). Due to the future in politics being somewhat unclear, full of challenges and uncertainties regarding the way in which professional activities will be developed in the organizations they operate, it is clear that questions regarding their competencies and participation in the process of appropriation of power are recurrent, making them doubt their own potential.

However, as their activities progress and they gain power not only in parties, but also in elected positions in other organizations of the political system, such obstacles are faced. The battle reveals itself to be a daily effort, since after the election, these women are faced with another difficulty: The need to gain space to give relevance to the agendas they defend in this predominantly male environment:

[...] I have several friends, I am part of a group on WhatsApp that are women councilors in Brazil, for our cause, and they said that they face many difficulties in legislative houses in gaining their seats because it is an environment where men still predominate, where there is a certain prejudice, but we also see the issue of women voting for women, there hasn't been much work on this in society so that women can vote for other women to represent them (Hemera).

In this sense, the participants commented on the difficulties relating their performance, and one of the reasons that prevents them from carrying out their activities equally, despite under-representation, is the existence of stereotypes and the need to prove their skills (Chikaipa, 2019; Ragins & Winkel, 2011; Renner & Masch, 2019):

They assume that if you are a woman, young and pretty, you are stupid [...], if you are blonde, even stupider. So, they test, test and you have to prove that you are good, with good arguments that you know what you are doing and that you are intelligent. Above

all, if they suspect that you are not intelligent [...] they will finish you off (Artemis).

It is clear that although there are incentives for women to participate in the political sphere, politics is not a place where men and women share the same opportunities. And, when it comes to critical situations, Artemis highlighted the existence of obstacles created by colleagues themselves: "they try to belittle you, belittle your cause [...] say that your cause is ridiculous, is less necessary [...]." This report is compatible with the findings of Chikaipa (2019), in which it is identified that active women in politics are generally portrayed based on gender stereotypes, and not based on their political actions.

Hera highlighted the existence of discrimination against women, as a force that is perpetuated from generation to generation. Her statement reveals that often, the context of discrimination and prejudice creates fear among women when making decisions and in their positions, as they may not be well accepted: "you won't be accepted everywhere [...] it's a question of you arriving, positioning yourself and things changing in that scenario." (Hera).

Métis highlighted that even though changes are taking place, it is still a "very sexist environment, in which we need to fight daily to be able to gain a place in the middle." (Métis). This shows that the dynamics of the political environment, despite women inclusion, is still very masculine, which contributes to the systematic exclusion of women (Bauer, 2020; Lee, 2018; Miguel & Feitosa, 2009; Zakar et al ., 2018). The respondent also highlighted that she does not think this occurs due to prejudice or intentionally, but rather as something resulting from the culture of the environment and the country. It is interesting to mention that previously, when questioned about the existence of prejudice, the respondent had stated that she did not perceive prejudice from her colleagues, a fact that highlights how deep-rooted such issues are: "it is difficult to explain, I live with them in a calm way" said Métis. It is noted that the interviewees suffer discrimination in the political environment, however, they do not associate this discrimination with a conscious practice, but with something inherent to the traditionally masculine space in which they are inserted.

Furthermore, when working in predominantly male environments, women are expected to take more brutish and aggressive positions due to the ideal of gender stereotypes for political positions. Thus, it can be seen that even though they were elected

in the same way as their male colleagues, women are seen in a pejorative way, as too sensitive and emotional to occupy political positions (Bauer, 2015; Biroli, 2010; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Johns & Shephard, 2007).

It is possible to affirm that the gender of the political representative leads to society's expectations regarding their traits, skills, positions and beliefs (Araújo, 2010; Johns & Shephard, 2007; Miguel & Feitosa, 2009). Therefore, the female gender is associated with the stereotype of caring and sensitive people, whose characteristics are the opposite of what is expected of a political candidate: that they are more decisive and aggressive (Bauer, 2015; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Given the context, it can interfere with their perception of power, leading them to choose strategic personal elements to conduct their practice and actions in politics.

In the following report, the prejudice of men and women themselves is highlighted as one of the reasons why there is still difficulty in filling quotas. The finding converges with the results of the study by the Tribunal Superior Eleitoral (2023) which indicate that, even though the number of women voters is the highest percentage among Brazilian voters and they have the capacity to exercise popular sovereignty, they do not do so. The reports reveal other challenges regarding quotas, approval of laws and changes they have already noticed in politics:

There is a male chauvinism, when it comes to approving a law that benefits men, not here, but in the Council, but to provide this parity, it is a discussion that goes a long way. Each woman who enters is one less man, there is a whole story that comes with it, it is not a change that comes from one day to the next. It is gradual, but you need to be participating to show that you can (Métis).

Violence against women... and I talk about patrimonial, psychological and physical violence, but I also talk about other types of violence that exist and I can tell you that what happens to women in politics is violence, it is bullying and it is a crime [...] simply because you are a woman (Hera).

It is clear that there are several challenges on the way to integrating women into the political environment. These challenges, according to Araújo (2010), Bauer (2015), Lee (2018) and Zakar et al. (2018) are not only the result of prejudice and other historical issues rooted in the system, but, especially, because they are still a minority in organizations of the political sphere that hold elected positions. In this context, the positions and struggles of elected women are questioned more frequently than those of male colleagues.

It is in this turbulent scenario of women's insertion in the political sphere that the process of empowerment is catalyzed, whether they are still candidates or already elected. When seeking to enter the political sphere, women face a series of challenges, such as those mentioned: lack of party support, work-family conflict, the need to prove their skills and intimidation by male colleagues.

To “break” the power system that is symbolically held by the male figure, women see the need to reflect and adapt their behavior, gathering strength and resources for the good of the causes they defend (Pinto, 2012). This reflection is closely related to the constitution of their empowerment (Ninacs, 2003), since women recognize that their representation is constantly threatened by the patriarchal and sexist context. In turn, the adaptation of behaviors resulting from learning the exercise of political praxis helps these women build their empowerment, especially in their self-esteem (Ninacs, 2003), refining their identity conception about the meaning of being a woman and the value of being a woman in politics.

Furthermore, still in relation to the empowerment process, there is a social change in the collective skills creation when women begin to face the challenges catalyzed by the political environment. The inspiration and participation of more people involved in this process, and also in expanding knowledge of these challenges, contribute to the search for changes, even if they are far from a reality of equal rights among the subjects involved (Bauer, 2020; Lee, 2018 ; Miguel & Feitosa, 2009; Pinto, 2012; Zakar et al., 2018).

Strategies for tackling challenges related to power inequalities and disadvantages in society basically seek to go against what reflects the social challenges of women in politics. What women face daily when seeking significant transformations in an essentially bureaucratic and conservative environment is also the result of a historical context related to power and the empowerment process (Atkinson, 1999; Pinto, 2012). This empowerment process in a social context is interpreted by the interviewees “as a great power game” (Hemera); and “a daily fight for rights” (Métis), which reinforces the aspects focused on collective competencies and the search for transformations highlighted in the empowerment process theory.

4.2. Achievements

When asked about their trajectories, all respondents highlight that they consider them achievements, as they were elected without effective support from the parties to which they are linked, had laws approved and effectively represented the population. In

each interview, the respondents talk a little about their projects, which are mostly focused on public health and the specific causes each of them defends. At this point, it is possible to verify the four perspectives of individual empowerment (self-esteem, critical awareness, skills and participation) highlighted by Ninacs (2003). When highlighting their achievements, therefore, the sense of self-worth, reflexivity regarding their actions, the perception of their own competencies and the consequences of their participation in the political scene are more clearly seen.

When asked, however, about the achievements that stand out most in her daily life, Gaia highlights the emotional nature involved in such a process: "The greatest positive emotions occur when you manage to solve a problem, the greatest frustrations come when you cannot [...] the problem for us is the challenge and, I have to solve it, I have to fight for them (the population)." With Gaia's report, we understand what Pinto (2012) explains regarding the fact that the power perception brings with it awareness about one's own behavior and the ability that a person has to influence the daily lives of others. Here we have the guidance outlined by the author regarding increasing strength and resources not only for oneself, but for communities (Pinto, 2012).

The interviewees highlighted that they perceive strong and latent prejudice throughout their political career and in the environments of City Councils and Assemblies. They also notice aspects of changes in behavior from their male colleagues regarding treatment issues and in relation to the positions they had towards the causes they defend. As an example, councilor Hemera, a defender of the animal cause, highlighted that the animal cause was the reason that made the population elect her. In her opinion, the agendas to be defended by her need to be consistent with her purpose in the city council: "I have never felt repression from other colleagues, but sometimes they say 'woof-woof' or something like that".

In her view, Hemera reported that she did not believe such comments were derogatory but rather in a joking tone. "But then, in the last session of that year, a little dog appeared at the plenary door [...] and she wouldn't leave. That day, several councilors sent messages to the group, calling me, sending a photo 'A visitor came for you, someone here came to visit you'." The councilor stated that, according to her perception, since she started the discussion about animal causes, they were no longer invisible to other participants in that organization: "perhaps they had never had this care, protection, love, empathy, compassion perspective and that's what I said throughout the year and I thought:

'in the first session that year I had to ask permission to talk about an animal and in the last one they looked at that little dog" (Hemera).

Artemis, who also works on the same cause as respondent Hemera, but in another city, reported a similar situation. Furthermore, she notices changes in behavior in relation to what she defends: "there were two or three who looked at me crossly and, the turning point, the crux of the matter was that they were like, 'What's up with this woman?!'" (Artemis). She stated that at the beginning of her career she was heavily criticized for going against culturally accepted issues in her city, and that today she sees greater acceptance in relation to her projects: "when we have a session to approve a law, the plenary is full [...] I think they had a flea behind their ears like 'ah, I think this cause isn't a silly thing' as they, in their ignorance and simplicity, thought it was" (Artemis).

In view of these two experiences, it appears that the action of the councilors in relation to the cause for which they work can be considered a strategy of social empowerment, which impacts and transforms society in the objective outlined by them, since their action brings visibility to the animal cause (Gutiérrez, 1990; Page & Czuba, 1999).

When discussing the law's approval and specific aspects of the causes she defends, Têmis highlighted another point of view regarding the achievements, highlighting that they should be aimed at the population and not at personal aspects: "I never looked at my navel, I think. that the state, federal deputy, whoever they are, they are employees of people who elected them" (Themis). Têmis's report is in line with that exposed by Eylon (1998), for whom empowerment focuses on the development of individual potential, but can also go beyond a personal feeling, bringing with it perceptions that highlight individuality and awaken critical consciousness.

According to Ninacs (2003), empowerment, even from its individual perspective, develops through collective, social and political consciousness. At the same time that the person begins to have perceptions about their skills and transforms their plans into actions, they also begin to get involved in decision-making processes and reveal the results of this new positioning.

This individual process has repercussions in the social empowerment field as women's actions in politics create collective competencies that can be shared with other interested parties. In this way, it is possible to identify the expansion of women's representation in politics through the inspiration of other party groups, with the possibility

of resulting in their effective participation (Pinto, 2012). From this perspective, it appears that as more women make up the political scene, more significant changes are brought into focus, particularly with regard to the investments made. As highlighted in the report by respondent Têmis, however, these investments must have the purpose of improving the entire public network and the population in general (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004).

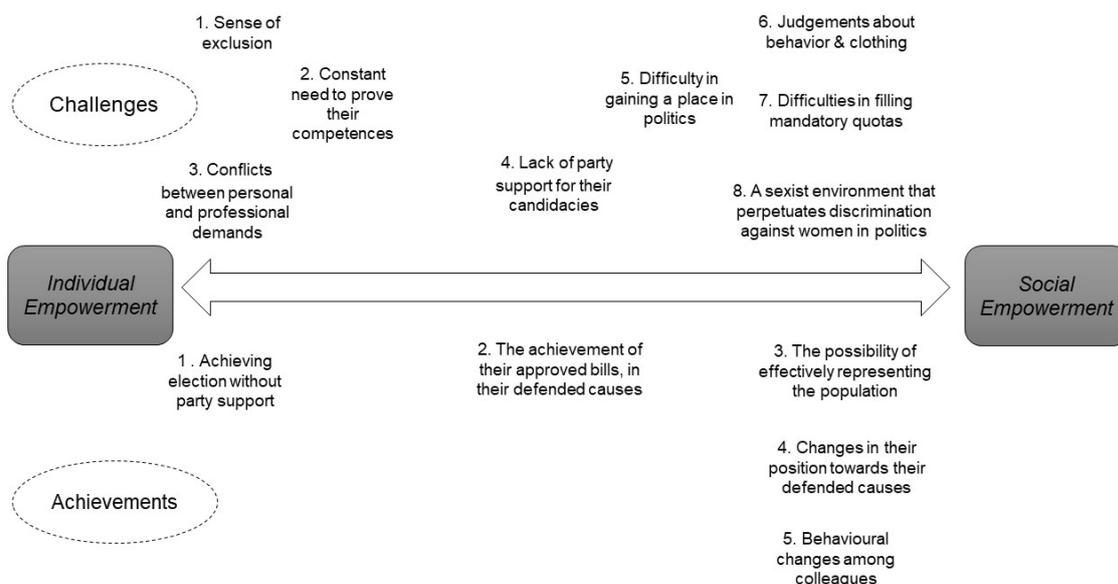
It is concluded, then, that the main achievements highlighted by these women revolve around the fact that they managed to get elected through their own efforts. Currently, they have gained new opportunities to represent specific and collective causes. Considering that these causes are often neglected, the approval of laws in their benefit also stands out as an achievement.

In the interviewees' trajectory context, it is clear that while some have been involved in politics for more than a decade, others entered it recently. With this, it was possible to verify differences in positions regarding what they consider as achievements, but also as challenges. The main change that women veterans in politics notice is the treatment change. Even in face of many setbacks, challenges and prejudices, women consider their colleagues' and also from part of the population behavior change in the City Council, Assembly or parties towards them and their causes to be an achievement.

4.3. Summary of results

The results of the discussion regarding the challenges faced and the achievements achieved by elected women, at the level of individual and social empowerment, are summarized in Figure 01.

Figure 01: Summary of results



Source: The authors (2023).

In summary, empowerment does not represent, itself, a moment or a fact that occurred in each woman's personal life or in the social environment in which they live, but, rather, a process that is constituted both individually and socially. This happens because empowerment is the result of a self-reflective exercise by legislators and is stimulated and crossed by different situations experienced in social and power relations.

Thus, as they are closely linked, the individual and social processes of empowerment are represented in Figure 1 as two poles of a continuum, along which the challenges and achievements identified and reported by the women interviewed are allocated. It is noteworthy that the experience of negative experiences (here represented by "challenges") are part of the empowerment process, as well as positive experiences (placed as "achievements"), revealing the transformative nature of the events experienced by the interviewees and by society.

In the individual empowerment field, the main challenges recognized by political representatives have been their exclusion feeling, the need to prove their skills and work-family conflicts. And, despite constantly experiencing these problems, women recognize their own election as an achievement, even if carried out without the financial or organizational support from the parties they are part of. This achievement tends to strengthen women's morale and, consequently, their empowerment.

In the middle of the empowerment continuum, the lack of party support for women in politics and the difficulty in finding space in this sphere are elements that appear to be individual challenges, but are also social problems, as they have roots in Brazilian sexist and patriarchal culture. In turn, the achievement of laws defended by women and then approved by the Legislative Branch, is considered a victory placed more at the center of the empowerment continuum, as it portrays both the personal reach of the representatives and a contribution to the achievement for the social well-being.

Finally, in the field of social empowerment, challenges related to the cultural scenario that lead to gender prejudice and discrimination against women in Brazil were identified, such as: judgements about women's dress and behavior in politics; difficulties in filling the mandatory quotas for women in political parties; and the sexist environment of the Legislative Branch. Fortunately, significant achievements have been identified in this social empowerment process, including women's election, as an effective way of representing the female population; and positive changes in the positioning and behavior of male supporters towards the causes defended by these women.

5. Final considerations

This article aimed to analyze the main challenges and achievements of women elected and active in politics from the perspective of the theory of individual and social empowerment. It is possible to perceive elements of the constitution of the process of women's empowerment in the political system. It was identified that women's challenges begin with the receptivity of parties, which aim to comply with the 30% quota rule for female candidates, often indicating a lack of support that leads women to seek their own strategies in the electoral campaign process.

Prejudices are perceived on their male colleagues' side, who outline strategies to prevent women from entering and remaining in politics. Such strategies can be represented by constant judgments related to their attitudes, leading them to feel the need to prove their skills and demonstrate their capabilities. Political activity brings consequences to these women for their personal lives, with emphasis on the difficulties of reconciling legislative work with family life.

In this context, the challenges faced when analyzed from the perspective of individual and social empowerment, represent tensions in the political environment that allow representing, at the same time, difficulties and opportunities to expand women's role in politics. Thus, from the point of view of individual empowerment, related

challenges are identified: the feeling of exclusion, the need to prove their skills, and tensions in the conflict between personal life and professional life.

As the analysis extends to the process of social empowerment, it appears that the challenges take on a collective perspective, that is, they exert influence or impact on the collective of women in politics. Such challenges can be represented by the lack of party support, difficulty in gaining space in politics, judgments about their behavior and clothing, difficulty in filling quotas, discrimination and male chauvinism.

If, on the one hand, women involved in politics face challenges in their careers, on the other hand, their insertion in politics represents resistance against patriarchal and sexist culture, which results in both personal and social achievements. Firstly, the fact that they were elected through personal effort, without support from the party, represents that in society there are favorable spaces for both support for change and for women to act in positions of power. Their performance in Assemblies and City Councils also represents changes in the way certain causes are assessed, and how the approval of bills is neglected. This dynamic reveals the impacts of empowerment on the trajectory of women's political activity, as well as the greater social and political visibility of issues related to public health and animal causes, for example.

In this sense, the achievement identified under the lens of individual empowerment is related to the fact that women were elected without party support, in a personal effort. And, when analyzing the reported achievements, bringing them closer to the perspective of social empowerment, the approval of laws and the social scope of the causes defended by them are identified, as well as changes in the behavior of fellow politicians. The achievements seem simple, but in the lived context, which establishes resources and dynamics for women's performance in politics, they are unique and relevant in social change, as well as in the scope of women's role in power.

In future research, it is considered important to expand the scope in the areas of Administration and Organizational Studies in order to analyze women's experiences in predominantly male organizational contexts. Furthermore, there is the need to expand studies of subjective elements that emerge from the trajectory of women in politics, such as, for example, their emotions. Finally, it is suggested that research be carried out to investigate the identity constitution of women active in the political context.

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