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The veiled battle in the identity construction of women in the Brazilian Air Force

A batalha velada na constituição identitária das mulheres na Força Aérea Brasileira

La batalla velada en la constitución identitaria de las mujeres en la Fuerza Aérea Brasileña

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ABSTRACT

Background: Identities are sources of meaning for individuals. They are shaped by specific features of the culture, groups, and environments in which people live, particularly through shared meanings. Identity constitution is also intertwined with the work environment, especially in non-traditional organizations where relevant disparities exist among workers, as in the case examined in this study: military women in the Brazilian Air Force (BAF).

Purpose: The objective of this study is to understand how military women construct their identities in their work context, considering motivational and environmental aspects.

Method: To achieve the following results, semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection technique. Fifteen military women serving in the BAF at various hierarchical levels were interviewed, and the data were examined using content analysis.

Results: The main results indicate that military women's identities are strengthened by motivation, a sense of belonging, and overcoming challenges, although gender-related barriers and manifestations of the glass ceiling persist within military careers.

Conclusions: Although formal equality has expanded women's participation, subtle barriers and gendered expectations remain, requiring women to continuously demonstrate their competence. The study contributes to the understanding of identity construction in male-dominated organizations and highlights the need for institutional policies that promote not only women's access but also their retention, recognition, and career progression.

Keywords: military women; identity; Brazilian Air Force; gender; military context.

RESUMO

Contextualização: As identidades são fontes de significado para as pessoas. Elas se caracterizam por conter particularidades presentes na cultura, no grupo e no ambiente em que o indivíduo está inserido, principalmente por significados compartilhados. A constituição da identidade também está interligada ao ambiente de trabalho, especialmente quando se trata de organizações não convencionais, nas quais há disparidades relevantes entre os trabalhadores, como no caso deste estudo, as mulheres militares da Força Aérea Brasileira (FAB).

Objetivo: O objetivo delineado para este estudo foi compreender a construção da identidade das mulheres militares em seu contexto de trabalho, considerando aspectos motivacionais e ambientais.

Método: Para alcançar os resultados a seguir, foram utilizadas entrevistas em profundidade como técnica de coleta de dados, entrevistando quinze mulheres militares que atuam na Força Aérea Brasileira em diferentes hierarquias, por meio de análise de conteúdo.

Resultados: Os principais resultados indicam que as identidades das mulheres militares são fortalecidas pela motivação, pelo sentimento de pertencimento e pela superação de desafios, embora persistam barreiras relacionadas ao gênero e manifestações do teto de vidro nas carreiras militares.

Conclusões: Embora a igualdade formal tenha ampliado a participação das mulheres, barreiras sutis e expectativas de gênero ainda permanecem, exigindo que as mulheres demonstrem continuamente sua competência. O estudo contribui para a compreensão da construção da identidade em organizações dominadas por homens e destaca a necessidade de políticas institucionais que promovam não apenas o acesso das mulheres, mas também sua permanência, reconhecimento e progressão na carreira.

Palavras-chave: mulheres militares; identidade; Força Aérea Brasileira; gênero; contexto militar

RESUMEN

Contexto: Las identidades son fuentes de significado para las personas. Se caracterizan por contener particularidades presentes en la cultura, el grupo y el entorno en el que se inserta el individuo, principalmente por significados compartidos. La constitución de la identidad también está interconectada con el entorno laboral, especialmente cuando se trata de organizaciones no convencionales, en las que existen disparidades relevantes entre los

trabajadores, como en los casos de este estudio, las mujeres militares de la Fuerza Aérea Brasileña (FAB).

Objetivo: El objetivo planteado para este estudio fue comprender la construcción de la identidad de las mujeres militares en su contexto de trabajo, considerando aspectos motivacionales y ambientales.

Método: Para alcanzar los siguientes resultados, se utilizaron entrevistas en profundidad como técnica de recolección de datos, entrevistando a quince mujeres militares que trabajan en la Fuerza Aérea Brasileña en diversas jerarquías, mediante análisis de contenido.

Resultados: Los principales resultados indican que las identidades de las mujeres militares se fortalecen por la motivación, el sentido de pertenencia y la superación de desafíos, aunque persisten barreras relacionadas con el género y manifestaciones del techo de cristal dentro de las carreras militares.

Conclusiones: Aunque la igualdad formal ha ampliado la participación de las mujeres, persisten barreras sutiles y expectativas de género, lo que exige que las mujeres demuestren continuamente su competencia. El estudio contribuye a la comprensión de la construcción de la identidad en organizaciones dominadas por hombres y destaca la necesidad de políticas institucionales que promuevan no solo el acceso de las mujeres, sino también su permanencia, reconocimiento y desarrollo profesional.

Palabras clave: mujeres militares; identidad; Fuerza Aérea Brasileña; género; contexto militar.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, women have been increasingly taking on professional roles in areas and organizations that were previously seen as entirely male-dominated, such as the military. In Brazil, for example, women's more active participation in these organizations began to increase significantly between the 1980s and 1990s (Guimarães et al., 2020).

However, alongside the active participation in all spheres of the labor market, women have also faced a series of obstacles in their occupations that are not experienced by their male colleagues. In light of these changes and their conditioning factors, it is important to understand the history and the elements that influence the development of women in organizational environments, especially in those from which they were previously excluded (Rocha et al., 2014).

Guimarães et al. (2020) argue that the inclusion of women in the Armed Forces has sparked debates about the relationships between security, defense, strategy, and gender constructs. More recently, a report highlighted a controversy regarding the participation of women in the Brazilian Army, in which the Attorney General's Office (AGU) defended restrictions based on "female physiology". The Prosecutor General's Office (PGR) contested this before the Supreme Federal Court (STF), arguing that there is no constitutional justification for preventing women from performing military roles. The Army argued that specific physical demands of combat, such as muscular strength and endurance, justify these limitations. This dispute extends to the Navy and Air Force, with the PGR questioning legal provisions regarding the entry of women into the Armed Forces (Ribbeiro & Albuquerque, 2024).

Amid these discussions, not only are women's physical capability debated, often suggesting that they might not meet the work demands, but their identities as women within the organizational context are also contested. In this paper, identity is understood as a process of meaning construction based on cultural attributes, which seeks to constitute meanings for the actors themselves and emerges from an identification process (Castells, 2021). Thus, identity is formed through social processes that are modified and reshaped by relationships and are produced by the interaction between the organism, consciousness, and the social structures experienced by the individual (Berger & Luckmann, 2023), as well as by motivational factors resulting from the environment in which individuals perform their activities. In this context, motivation is understood as what compels an individual to exhibit certain behaviors and attitudes in response to the circumstances they experience (Oliveira, 2017).

Although previous studies have addressed women's participation in the Armed Forces, gender inequalities in military institutions, and the barriers faced by women in male-dominated occupations (Guimarães et al., 2020; Santos et al., 2022; Neumann & Pagliari, 2024; Tait-Signal & Febraro, 2024), less attention has been given to how women themselves construct their professional identities within military organizations. In particular, few studies articulate the identity construction process with motivational elements and with the specific environmental conditions of military work, such as hierarchy, discipline, institutional norms, symbolic recognition, and gendered expectations. This gap is especially relevant in the Brazilian context, where women's presence in the Armed Forces has expanded, but their experiences of belonging, recognition, career progression, and legitimacy remain marked by formal advances and persistent informal barriers.

Given the above, this study aims to understand the identity construction of military women in their work context, considering motivational and environmental aspects. To this end, 15 military women serving in the Brazilian Air Force (BAF) in different positions were interviewed through semi-structured interviews, which were analyzed using content analysis. Considering that in Brazil military service is not mandatory for women, the BAF was chosen among the three Brazilian Armed Forces (Navy, Army and Air Force) because it has the largest female contingent.

This study contributes to the literature on identity in organizations by showing how professional identification is shaped in a historically masculine, hierarchical, and normatively regulated institution. It also contributes to gender studies in military contexts by revealing how women negotiate belonging, competence, recognition, and resistance in their daily work experiences. In practical terms, the findings may support institutional reflections on gender equality policies, career development, recognition, and the retention of women in military organizations.

2 IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION PROCESS

Identity, defined as the concept of the self, guides individual action (Machado, 2003). It can be understood as the result of the subjective construction of who a person was, is, and desires to become. Identity is a crucial element for understanding and explaining nearly everything that happens within and around organizations (Brown, 2020). Castells (2021) defines identity as a process of meaning construction based on cultural attributes, highlighting that it seeks to establish meanings for the actors themselves and emerges from an identification process.

According to Tajfel and Turner (2004), the identification process can be defined through three main components. The first component is the cognitive one, concerned with the subject's self-definition and how they attribute a sense of belonging to a certain group or social category. This group tends to express patterns, stereotypes, and prototypes that help the individual distinguish themselves from other groups. These characteristics include beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that constitute the process through which the individual identifies with the group (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Fernandes, Marques & Carrieri, 2010).

The second component is the affective one, focused on the emotional bond between the individual and the group. Individuals are recognized by the group based on their feelings of belonging to a social environment, highlighting their similarities, equivalences, intentions and a positive self-definition. If some characteristics affect them negatively, their tendency will be to withdraw from that group. When withdrawal is not possible, individuals may instead create mechanisms of acceptance of the group (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Fernandes et al., 2010).

The third component of the identification process is the evaluative one, linked to the value attributed to the group. Individuals attribute value according to how their social group is perceived by other groups. This perception can be positive or negative, revealing the value and prestige of the social group, and influences the motivation of its members (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Fernandes et al., 2010). The three components of the identification process are interrelated. This article argues that the identification process is related to intrinsic motivation in the development of an individual's professional life, as will be addressed in the following subsection.

2.1 Motivation and identity

Motivation is understood as “that which drives a person to adopt a certain behavior or attitude and, in the same sense, to undertake an action when facing a certain situation or circumstance” (Oliveira, 2017, p. 216). When it comes to motivation, self-determination theory, as proposed by Deci and Ryan (2002), makes an important distinction between two different motivational questions: “why” versus “what for”. “What is the goal of your activity and why do you want to accomplish that goal? What are the reasons that lead you to make the effort to achieve that goal?” In this context, self-determination theory holds that the self is formulated into identity through a tendency to develop toward higher levels of integration and organization. The energy required for this process is sustained by the satisfaction of three intrinsic and basic psychological needs (Appel, Wendt & Lima Argimon, 2011).

The first need concerns perceived personal competence, which is based on the need to feel fulfilled by effectively achieving desired results. Competence is related to cognitive development through adaptation and learning in the social environments in which individuals live. The second need is autonomy, understood as the need to experience processes arising from the exercise of will and psychological freedom, through a high potential for reflection and awareness, aligned with personal values in decision-making (Appel et al., 2011). Autonomy can be understood as a dynamic of a person's organic functioning in the world, and its full functioning is reflected in the harmonious engagement in activities that are manifested through physiological, neurological and phenomenological systems (Ryan, Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2019). The third need is relatedness, that is, the need to feel genuinely accepted and connected with other people. The need for relatedness is sustained by the establishment of social bonds in which affections related to responsibility, care, and the feeling of loving and being loved interact (Appel et al., 2011).

The three intrinsic needs mentioned above – competence, autonomy, and relatedness – are interdependent, and the development of one fosters the development of the others. These three basic psychological needs must be satisfied to promote individual's well-being and health, motivating them to perform certain activities (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Moreover, by meeting these intrinsic needs, individuals tend to achieve their own integration into the social environment in which they live, in a manner consistent with the cultural values in which they are linked. In this sense, an individual's motivation simultaneously involves the satisfaction of their intrinsic needs.

In this study, routines and norms, as well as advances and obstacles, are understood as central elements in the construction of military women's identities. In military organizations, hierarchy, discipline, physical training, behavioral expectations, standards of appearance, and institutional procedures do not operate merely as formal rules; they also define what is considered legitimate, appropriate, and valued in the professional environment. These elements may strengthen women's sense of belonging, competence, and professional recognition, but they may also require adaptation to standards historically associated with masculinity. Recent studies emphasize that military identity is not a single or fixed condition, but a complex process shaped by institutional culture, belonging, adjustment, recognition, and possible tensions between different identities (Heward et al., 2024). Thus, the advances achieved by women in military organizations coexist with informal barriers, symbolic resistance, gender stereotypes, and difficulties related to recognition, career progression, maternity, and legitimacy. In this sense, the obstacles faced by women are not only individual difficulties, but also expressions of organizational arrangements that affect how they construct their identities, negotiate belonging, and seek recognition in the military context. Studies on gender equality in military organizations show that resistance to change may operate through organizational principles, discourses, and practices that appear neutral but preserve masculine norms and limit institutional transformation (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024).

2.2 Challenges of women in male-dominated environments

When working in predominantly male environments, women face a series of challenges that are not commonly experienced by their male colleagues. Two phenomena are particularly relevant in the analysis of women's performance in organizational contexts: the glass ceiling and work-family conflict.

According to Steil (1997), the term “glass ceiling” refers to a subtle and transparent barrier that is nevertheless strong enough to prevent women from reaching higher levels in the organizational hierarchy. Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, and

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Vanneman (2001) highlight four points: inequalities associated with the glass ceiling represent gender or racial differences that are not explained by other relevant characteristics of the employee's job; these differences are greater at higher levels than at lower levels of the organization; such inequalities are also present in advancement to higher levels; and these differences and inequalities increase over the course of a career.

In practical terms, the glass ceiling occurs when women meet the requirements to advance in their careers, but informal criteria limit their access to leadership positions. In male-dominated institutions, this may appear in assumptions about family, availability, behavior, or suitability to masculine models of command. Thus, the barrier is not necessarily found in formal rules, but in everyday decisions such as nominations, evaluations, and recognition of leadership potential. In this way, the glass ceiling shows how organizations can reproduce gender inequalities even when they claim to value merit and equal opportunities (Alves & Bergamo, 2025; Luz et al., 2026).

In the Brazilian military context, this logic can be observed in the recent debate on women's access to certain Army positions. In 2024, documents related to this discussion referred to "female physiology" as a limiting factor for combat activities, while the Federal Prosecutor General's Office questioned the restrictions before the Supreme Federal Court. This example illustrates how gendered assumptions about physical capacity, availability, and suitability for combat may operate as barriers to women's full participation in military careers (Ribbeiro & Albuquerque, 2024).

Regarding work-family conflict, it can be defined as a role conflict in which the pressures of work and family are mutually incompatible, resulting in an incompatibility between personal and family life and creating significant problems in the organizational context (Grzywacz & Butler, 2008). The main sources of this conflict are time, pressure, and behavior: the importance attributed to one role determines the time dedicated to it, increases pressure, and may result in negative emotions such as tension and anxiety. Performing one role can mean sacrificing the other.

Falkenberg et al. (2020) argue that both work and family can be sources of satisfaction and conflicting demands, making it challenging to identify factors that reduce divergences between these domains. This conflict affects work attitudes and mental health, and can be harmful both for work and for the worker, as well as for the worker's family (Shaukat, Yousaf & Sanders, 2017).

In this context, patriarchy also emerges as a structuring element of gender relations, especially in institutions historically marked by hierarchy, discipline, and male predominance, such as military organizations (Pierik, 2022; Santos, Morais & Correia, 2022). This logic contributes to the naturalization of inequalities, stereotypes, and symbolic barriers that shape women's experiences and recognition in these spaces (Tait-Signal & Febbraro, 2024; Neumann & Pagliari, 2024).

Worldwide, about 20 countries (Australia, Argentina, Bolivia, Canada, Colombia, Denmark, France, Germany, Norway, Nicaragua, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, Romania, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, the United States, Uruguay, and Venezuela) have removed all restrictions on women serving as combatants in their Armed Forces. In Brazil, women have been allowed to serve as aviators in the Air Force since 2003. However, in the Army and Navy, they still cannot serve in combat positions (Gianinni, 2014). Additionally, women are exempt from compulsory military service in peacetime. Considering the Brazilian context, the BAF is the only branch that provides traditional access to military careers for women. These women are also subjected to physical, intellectual, and psychological tests to achieve these positions (Brasil, 2017).

According to statistical data, there are 10,800 women in the BAF. Of this number, 15% are permanent military personnel, making it the largest female military contingent in the Brazilian Armed Forces. The presence of women in the BAF dates back to World War II, when, in 1944, six female nurses joined the Aeronautics Reserve Force Nurses Cadre (QERA). This presence was expanded in 1995 with the authorization of women to enter the Air Officer Training Course, which enabled, in 2003, the training of the first 36 female aviators by the Air Force Academy (AFA) (Brasil, 2017).

Thus, the challenges faced by women in male-dominated environments cannot be understood only as individual obstacles, but as expressions of broader gender inequalities (Capriati, 2025; Santana, Oliveira & Jacintho, 2025). The glass ceiling, work-family conflict, patriarchy, and institutional barriers show how organizational structures can limit women's recognition, retention, and career advancement (Grzywacz & Butler, 2008; Alves & Bergamo, 2025; Luz et al., 2026; Pierik, 2022).

3 METHODOLOGY

The research strategy adopted was a qualitative study with an inductive approach (Tisdell et al., 2025). Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews in August, September, and October of 2019. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, starting from an initial contact established by the researcher with a member of the Brazilian Air Force. Interviews were conducted online and, in some cases, in person in Curitiba, Paraná, without formal institutional mediation.

The interview script was developed to guide data collection on the identity construction of military women in the BAF, including open-ended questions about professional trajectory, identification with the career, meanings attributed to work, training, and challenges in the military environment. The interviews were conducted in person with participants living in Curitiba and online with those from other locations. All interviews were recorded using the researcher's mobile phone, after signing the informed consent form, and were manually transcribed verbatim, totaling 12 hours and 25 minutes of recordings

Frohlich, Lourenço, Silva, Fernandes & Souza – The veiled battle in the identity construction of women in the Brazilian Air Force and 185 pages of transcription. The audio files and transcripts were stored in the researcher's Google Drive, in a password-protected folder with restricted access, observing ethical procedures related to privacy, confidentiality, and data protection. The profile of the interviewees is presented in the following table:

Table 1
Profile of the Participants

Respondent	Age	Year of entry	Position in the Institution	Hierarchy
R1	21	2019	Flight Controller	Third Sergeant
R2	38	1999	Intendency	Major
R3	27	2003	Flight Controller	Third Sergeant
R4	38	2001	Intendency	Major
R5	28	2012	Aeronautical Information	Third Sergeant
R6	25	2015	Flight Controller	Third Sergeant
R7	36	2002	Intendency and Commander	Major
R8	24	2017	Flight Controller	Third Sergeant
R9	28	2012	Material stockist	Third Sergeant
R10	30	2012	Intendency	Third Sergeant
R11	34	2003	Pilot	Major
R12	37	2003	Pilot and Commander	Major
R13	35	2003	Pilot	Major
R14	32	2008	Flight Controller	Third Sergeant
R15	36	2003	Pilot	Major

Source: Research Data.

The interview transcriptions were analyzed using content analysis technique, following Bardin (2011) protocol. The analysis was divided into three distinct stages. In the first stage, called “preanalysis”, the data were organized and initial ideas were developed to guide the subsequent analysis. In the second stage, the material was read again and the content was coded inductively, allowing recurring meanings, patterns, and emerging aspects of the field to be identified. These codes were then organized into categories and interpreted in dialogue with the literature. As a result of this process, four context units were defined: “The military women”, “Motivations for work”, “Routines and norms”, and “Advances and obstacles”.

In the dimension “Military women”, the context units “Breaking patterns” and “Sense of belonging” were delineated. In the dimension “Motivations for work,” the context units “Personal competence”, “Social contribution” and “Professional position” were included. The dimension “Routines and Norms” comprised the context units “Adaptation”, “Training”, and “Resilience”. Finally, in the dimension “Advances and obstacles”, the context units were “Professional recognition”, “Strengthening aspects”, and “Challenging aspects”. These elements have a direct impact on the development and consolidation of the identification process of women in the military world and increase the motivation that contributes to the construction of military women’s identity, through the strengthening of their identity, as shown in Figure 1:

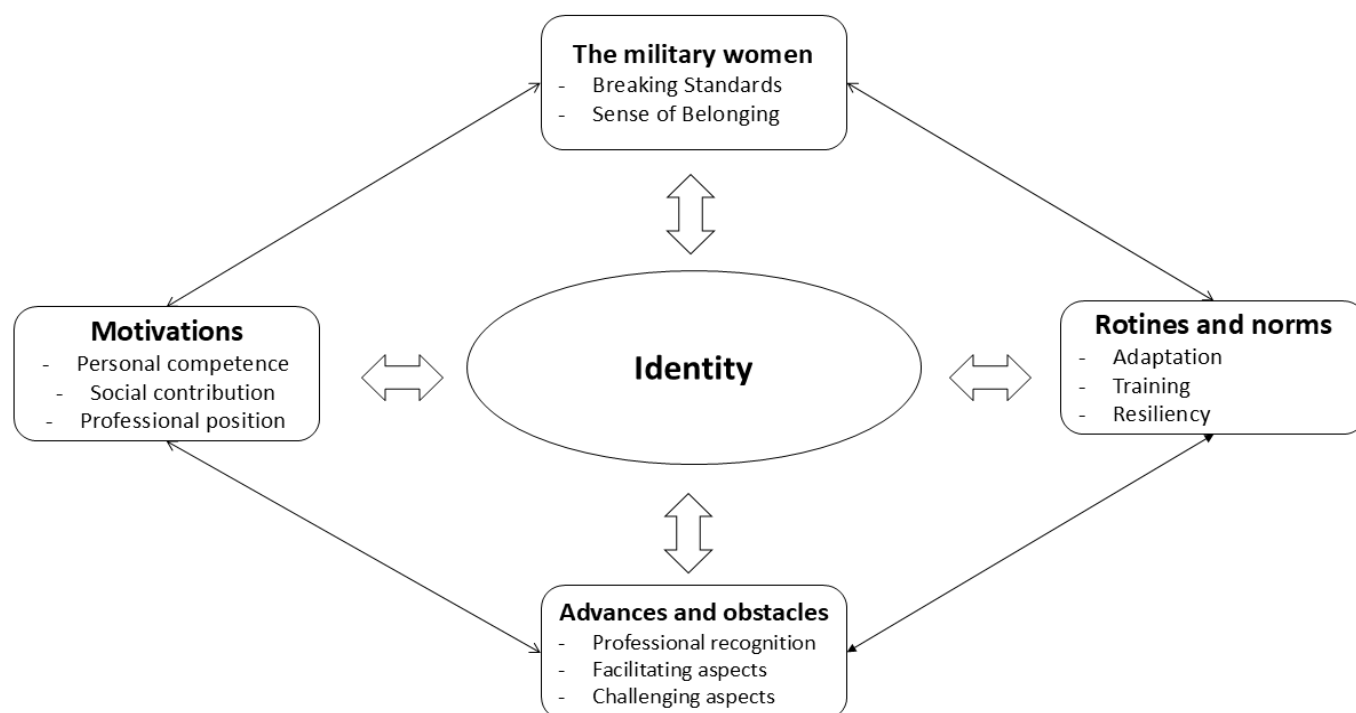


Figure 1. Analytical model of the identity formation of military women
Source: Prepared by authors

In this manner, the third and last step consisted of the treatment, inference and interpretation of the semi-structured interview content, aiming at a critical and reflective analysis of the collected data. In this step, researchers triangulation was carried out: the lead researcher participated in the entire process, while another researcher had access to the audios, transcripts, and the documents obtained during the collection period. The objective of this step was to enhance the reliability of the method through different analyses, interpretations, and perceptions of the phenomenon. The following sections present the analysis of the interviews and the discussion of the results.

4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

4.1 The military women

Women have increasingly occupied professional spaces in jobs previously considered entirely male, such as the military. For example, in the Brazilian Armed Forces there are 28,000 women in their ranks, and about 10,800 of them serve in the BAF (Brazil, 2017). Another relevant aspect regarding the BAF is that it was the first branch to allow women to serve in combat positions (Gianinni, 2014).

In this context, according to the participants in this research, being a woman and serving in the military represents a break with the social and professional expectations of the environment in which they live, since, in their view, common sense does not expect women to identify with this career path. Hence, recognizing oneself as a “military woman” is one of the primary issues for the cognitive identification process (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), as it marks a sense of individual identity and contributes to answering the question: “who am I as a woman and as a professional?” (Machado, 2003). In this sense, R5 reports:

I was the first military woman in my family, the first woman of my friends, among the children of those close to me, because, despite having a lot of contact with militarism, with military people, there were no girls where I live, there were only military boys. So it was different; even now it still is a little bit, because when you say you are military, people are like: “ah, are you military?!” because men have their hair cut, they don't have a beard, they have a military face; women don't have a military face, it's different (R5, Sergeant).

This perception reveals that military identity is still symbolically associated with masculine attributes, making women's presence perceived as unusual or unexpected, even when it is formally accepted within the institution. When asked directly about what it is like to be a woman in a military environment, the respondents indicated that they feel fully included as professionals, without any distinction of their capabilities in relation to their male colleagues. This feeling refers to the affective perspective of their identification process (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), since their sense of belonging to the group of military professionals is reflected in the idea of professional parity, as R14 reports:

So, as I told you, I find it very gratifying when we see people valuing you for being a woman and for serving in the military, because even though we are women, when we are in training school they make it very clear that there is no difference for them [...] you are going to face several challenges, and sometimes for a woman it's not that simple, it's not that easy. But I really like it, I don't have words, because I am passionate about my profession, I love putting on my uniform, I love coming to work and going out and being recognized (R14, Sergeant)

The uniform emerges not only as a professional symbol, but also as an element of belonging and legitimacy, reinforcing the affective dimension of identification with the military career. It is noteworthy that the identification process as a military woman is permeated by intrinsic motivations related to the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, which will be explored in the following subsection.

4.2 Motivations for work

Regarding the motivational aspects, R11 highlights the professional responsibility that military women carry for being women. She emphasizes how much they need to demonstrate their competence on a daily basis and how they feel responsible for opening spaces so other women continue to have the opportunity to pursue a military career and reach positions of command.

R11 was part of the first class of women aviators. She is one of the pioneers in this field. For her, this responsibility turns into motivation to continue overcoming barriers and conquering spaces, a fact that aligns with Castells (2021), who argues that identity is understood through reflexive socialization processes in the search for a self-referential based on experiences and transformations, as R11 explains: *“I have been seeing and living these changes in my whole professional life, and this is challenging and motivating, it is good for me”* (R11, Major). In this case, motivation is not restricted to individual achievement, but also assumes a collective meaning, since her trajectory is perceived as contributing to the retention and advancement of other women in the institution.

Another aspect is highlighted by R12, who emphasizes the social contribution that the BAF makes to society, particularly through risky missions and the opportunities that the institution provides to its personnel:

Today in the role that I am in, I feel very motivated, mainly by learning, I think that the teaching part for me is dazzling, [...] new horizons open up, there are phases and each phase is a different motivation. When I was on patrol, the search missions were also very motivating, I had the opportunity to help other people who might be in an unsafe situation, at risk. The organ transport missions were also motivating [...] and knowing that you are going to save someone's life is very cool. These stages, these attitudes make me very fulfilled. [...] The structure that the BAF offers is also a differentiator in the current national scenario, no doubt about it! (R12, Major).

Her motivation is strongly connected to the social purpose of military work, suggesting that professional identity is also constructed through the perception of usefulness, responsibility, and contribution to society. These accounts clearly demonstrate gratitude for the aspects that military life offers. The elements highlighted in their motivations play a crucial role in shaping the meanings within the identification process (Castells, 2021). By examining their motivations, we identified key factors that connect them with the profession and contribute to the construction of their sense of identity, primarily through their experiences and the meanings they share within the military context.

The interviewees' statements reveal that military women identify with and connect to their work through their professional roles. For instance, R2's account illustrates how she takes pride in being the only Major in her sector. Despite not occupying a conventional position, she feels respected and heard by others: *"I think it's sensational [...] that I am the only Major [...] I don't feel slighted at any moment for being a woman. One nice thing about our career is the role; I am a Major, and a Major reaches up to the General Officer"* (R2, Major). This statement indicates that hierarchy may function as a source of legitimacy, allowing women to be recognized through rank and professional competence, even in a historically masculine environment. Therefore, it can be seen that the reasons why women are motivated in the military profession are also the reasons why they identify with the exercise of their profession, in terms of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, as highlighted by Deci and Ryan (2002).

4.3 Routines and norms: adaptation, training, resilience and glass ceiling

Women became part of the military environment in Brazil only in 1981, with the creation of the Female Air Force Reserve Corps. However, it was only 14 years later that their participation increased and they became part of the Air Force Academy (AFA). Accounts of drastic changes in routine, norms and procedures were expected; however, what emerged was even more interesting.

Among the routines and norms, R10 and R11 point out that, in addition to the existing rules regarding personal presentation in uniform, there has been a process of adaptation aimed at women: *"women don't have beards...so we would have things like, for example, hold your hair back, don't dye it in a different shade than your natural color, avoid using too much makeup, you can't use dark nail polish, you have to keep your nails short [...] the concept in general wants you to be discreet, always"* (R11, Major). These norms show that adaptation to military life also involves the regulation of the female body and appearance, requiring women to align themselves with institutional expectations of discretion, discipline, and uniformity.

The procedures, especially those involving training and physical development, are similar for men and women. According to the interviewees, there is little or almost no perception of differences, which led one of them to state: *"No matter how macho the environment is, you have more equality in the military environment than in other organizations"* (R1, Sergeant). In this sense, R11 highlights that the procedures are based on the premise that *"if you got in, you got in because you wanted to, and now you adapt"*, emphasizing that women in the BAF are there of their own volition and that the organization expects them to adapt to certain procedures.

The interviewees also highlighted the processes of training and adaptation. They emphasized that training is a progressive process and the work required to achieve results – especially the physical ones – is carried out collectively. In this context, R2, a Major, recalled her experience in jungle survival training: *"We went through challenging moments that we couldn't even believe. One that was very hard was surviving in the jungle. It was five days; this was the only time that men and women were separated in the four years of the academy. It was five days, eight women, two parachutes, two machetes, and a rifle; that was all we had to survive"* (R2, Major). These experiences reveal that competence is constructed and proven through bodily endurance, especially in situations where women need to demonstrate that physiological differences do not prevent them from meeting military demands.

Regarding the physical training period, R6, a Third Sergeant, pointed out that there is an adaptation phase that consists of 40 uninterrupted days at the training school, during which everyone has to wake up at 4 a.m. and go to bed at midnight. Despite the physical effort required, she notes that what she found most difficult was having to deal with the physiological and biological differences between men and women. When describing her experience in the survival tests, she mentioned the case of women who had their period for five days in the jungle: *"Imagine staying for five days like this"*

Frohlich, Lourenço, Silva, Fernandes & Souza – The veiled battle in the identity construction of women in the Brazilian Air Force without taking a shower... these are situations that we have to be strong to endure, not that we are special because of this, but we don't know ourselves and have no idea of our strength" (R6, Third Sergeant).

Among the procedures, routines and norms highlighted by the interviewees, only one applies exclusively to women in the BAF. This rule is specific to female pilots and states that, if they are pregnant or suspect they may be pregnant, they must inform their superiors or commanders, and flying is not recommended. This is due to the risks involved in certain types of flight. R11 pointed out that, in these flights, there are greater demands on the body and its capacity to withstand the maneuvers performed. Thus, women must sign a term of responsibility committing themselves not to fly while pregnant or from the moment a pregnancy is suspected, in order to avoid putting their own lives at risk, as well as the lives of the flight crew.

According to the reports, it was possible to verify that, as stated by Brown (2020), the identity of women in the BAF is defined as they come into contact with the meanings, values and ideologies of the organization and its social groups. By analyzing the routines and norms that exist within the organization, as well as the adaptation processes of these women, it is possible to perceive identity as one of the elements responsible for guiding individual action (Machado, 2003) and for shaping the events within the organization studied (Brown, 2020).

An important point of reflection is that, even when asked explicitly about routines and norms, the women participating in the research highlighted their experiences not through detailed descriptions of their positions or everyday tasks, but by focusing on episodes they considered remarkable throughout their careers. Through these accounts, the three components highlighted by Appel, Wendt, and Argimon (2011) regarding basic intrinsic psychological needs can be observed. In particular, the relevance of "perceived personal competence" stands out, highlighting the differences experienced at this stage of their training in relation to their male colleagues. In this regard, there is a positive perception of the challenges faced, which subsequently functions as a motivational factor for these women's performance in the military environment.

When R1 pointed out that the military environment is, in her words, "macho", she emphasized the existence of "equality" from her point of view, and this perception was reinforced by other interviewees as well. Here, it is important to question whether this equality really exists, or whether it is something illusory, concealed, and based on the transparent barriers characteristic of the glass ceiling conceptualized by Steil (1997). The issues mentioned regarding pregnancy are recognized as fully justifiable in light of health-related risks, and differences in treatment under such circumstances are considered appropriate. However, the interviewees' accounts underscore that, even with the inclusion of women in military organizations, they are still prohibited from occupying certain positions within the organization. This allows us to affirm that the glass ceiling exists and prevails when the performance of women in higher positions in this organizational scenario is brought to the agenda, as also discussed by Cotter et al. (2001). Therefore, it is important to distinguish operational equality, related to daily tasks and training, from institutional equality, related to access, recognition, career progression, and the occupation of higher positions.

4.4 Advances and obstacles

The space for women's participation in the BAF has expanded due to their professional military development and continuous processes of institutional opening. Through the women's narratives, it was possible to perceive signs of egalitarian aspects, while at the same time identifying constraints that indicate the need to advance in other achievements.

In general, women do not perceive explicit inequality in the work processes, but some situations highlighted in their narratives expose subtle circumstances that may reveal conditions that are simultaneously (un)equal. When asked about the recognition of women in the military environment, some of the interviewees reveal that there is equality but not recognition, while others find it difficult to answer because it is still something in process. This distinction between equality and recognition is relevant because it suggests that formal inclusion does not necessarily imply symbolic recognition or full legitimization within the organization.

Each military woman expresses a particular way of understanding recognition in the military environment: R4 understands that recognition lies in small institutional gestures, such as tributes on Mother's Day, command options for women, and encouragement for women to enter the military world. R5, on the other hand, perceives little recognition, feeling that a man's orders are obeyed without resistance, whereas a woman's orders are subjected to scrutiny or validation processes by other men. R6 understands that prejudice as opposed to recognition is more related to the differences in hierarchy than to gender differences. R13 understands that, despite achievements in terms of equality, some older military men still have difficulties in dealing with women as equals. Finally, for R11 and R12 there is little recognition, given their perception of the lack of understanding about the needs surrounding maternity.

Thus, this set of perceptions shows that the recognition varies between the limitations associated with being women – considering social burdens and gender stereotypes – and the few gestures of everyday recognition that they encounter in their work routines. Therefore, there is a constant interaction between barriers produced by work-family conflict and gender conceptions that reinforce the glass ceiling at work (Steil, 1997; Cotter et al., 2001; Falkenberg et al., 2020), while, at the same time, military women articulate their intrinsic motivation (Ryan et al., 2019; Appel et al., 2011) to construct their

There are still some obstacles [...] I perceive these differences [...] in this sense, about recognition, I cannot affirm clearly that there is recognition. But there is a demand [...], a standard; it is as if they expected that the woman would not comply with the norms, would be in shape carrying backpacks, carrying rifles, and, despite being a woman, would be able to do everything. So it's like this, there is the prejudice that assumes you will not be able to do it (R13, Major).

The prejudice described by R13 operates in an anticipatory way: women are not judged only by their performance, but also by prior expectations that question their capacity before action takes place. Among the positive aspects listed by the female soldiers – such as social prestige (R2), satisfaction in working (R4 and R6), and the possibility of career growth (R10) –, it can be seen that these elements strengthen their identification with the profession and mark their representativeness in an environment considered masculine, as highlighted by R2:

So I love serving in the military, my brother is military, I went to military school, I love the Army, but in the Air Force, being close to aviation, I had the opportunity to fly in two fighter planes, and other aircraft, as in the academy we flew in helicopters, transport aviation [...]. Every time we are close to this, it is very good; for me it is routine, but people are so passionate about this that I think it is a great privilege to work close to it (R2).

Gradually, women have conquered other spaces through recognition of their professional performance, which helps to mitigate disrespectful situations. However, there are still critical situations in the interviewees' trajectories that, over the course of their careers, trigger reactions and regulate their ways of acting. In most of the responses, these critical moments were related to the burden of being a woman, revealing the phenomenon of work-family conflict (Shaukat et al., 2017; Falkenberg, 2020;), the vulnerability of not being able to oppose military personnel with the highest hierarchies, or moments when they feel a lack of credibility for being women, revealing the frequent challenge posed by the glass ceiling phenomenon (Steil, 1997; Grzywacz & Butler, 2008).

Military organizations tend to be institutions prone to bullying through legitimate acts of depersonalization and disempowerment, and the disciplinary nature of harassment can be seen as an element of Darwinian selection, in which the strong stand out. In this context, the military women interviewed share some of the most critical elements in their professional trajectory. R5 reported moments in which female credibility is questioned when not endorsed by a male colleague, in addition to situations of moral harassment. R8 stated that women need to impose themselves and be firm all the time. R10 recalled moments in which their intellectual capacity was underestimated. R2 reported doubts about women's word, as an issue related not only to gender but also to the person's character. And, R13 described an emergency during a flight as the most critical moment, due to the nervousness and tension involved and the technical and professional learning that this situation provided.

From these perceptions it can be verified that the military profession presents technical and professional challenges that are permeated by the emphasis on derogatory social conceptions of the female gender (Falkenberg et al., 2020). At times, this calls into question women's words and decisions in the military environment, as verified in R2's narrative: *"I would say that today the culture is that it tries to treat it seriously... I won't say that it has never happened; that is, it is impossible to say it won't happen now with any of my colleagues or one of the subordinate girls"* (R2).

Finally, it was verified that the identification of military women contrasts with some perceptions of negative aspects in their trajectories in the military institution, which present themselves as challenges to be overcome. The women highlight as challenging aspects: the obligation to be available all the time at the barracks (R2); the issue of hierarchies, which can be positive for the performance of activities but can also be negative depending on the profile of those in charge (R4); stability, which is a positive point but can become negative when it leads to accommodation on the part of some people (R6); the fact that women often have to submit to situations in which they are misunderstood and go through times when they are not taken seriously (R10); and, finally, the lack of understanding about maternity and the fact that family time is almost always determined by work (R11). Maternity emerges as one of the points where the supposed neutrality of military norms becomes more fragile, since institutional expectations of availability and dedication may conflict with socially assigned family responsibilities.

The narratives reveal that the interviewees entered the military with a view to stability and financial employment, whether they joined to take advantage of the opportunity of a competitive examination or chose a military career for symbolic and affective reasons – such as admiration or a childhood dream –, as well as for the prestige obtained from the image of being a woman and military or from the influence of military men in the family. Such perceptions feed personal motivation mainly through the intrinsic psychological need related to the self-perception of competence for the job and through the need for relatedness, in which women feel part of the military world even in the face of social barriers (Appel et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 2019). In this way, maintaining motivation stimulates and strengthens women's predisposition toward the identification process with military identity. Thus, the identity of military women is constructed within a contradictory space:

5 CONCLUSIONS

Since the insertion of women into the labor market, this previously male scenario has become a space of increasingly constant change and of challenges that differ from those seen until then. These changes have brought with them debates about performance and about the influence that culture, social structures, and organizational structures have on women's experiences, identity, and motivation to remain in such contexts, since these are spaces where bonds, symbols, and meanings are created (Machado, 2003; Brown, 2020; Castells, 2021).

In light of the particularities that may be present in organizational dynamics, identity stands out. By placing identity on the agenda, individuals seek answers to the question “who am I?”, especially in relation to their daily experiences (Machado, 2003, Castells, 2021). However, in this article, it is argued that the constitution of identity and the identification process occur, among other ways, according to the motivation that individuals may have in relation to their work activities (Oliveira, 2017).

Thus, the objective of this study was to understand the identity construction of military women in their work context, considering the motivational and environmental aspects. To this end, using a snowball sampling strategy, 15 women serving in the Brazilian military were interviewed, reporting their experiences and perceptions about being a “military woman”.

Through the interviews, the researchers gained deeper insights into the field. Officially, opportunities are presented as equal for both men and women. However, as the interviews progressed and the conversations became more intimate, it became evident that there are obstacles hindering the achievement of complete equality in the military. There are still remnants of a structure which is entirely male-oriented, and, in light of this, it can be seen that women in military careers feel a constant need to prove themselves competent. The women highlighted their identities as military women and also as professionals. It was seen that they are often faced with the need to prove that they can perform the same activities as men – in the case of aviation, focusing mainly on flying an aircraft.

Situated within such a structure, the women who participated in the research emphasized that they feel they need to prove these things not only to their superiors but also to their colleagues, even when they occupy the same hierarchical level. Even with the understanding and awareness of these differences, there is also the perception that these “tests” are a “necessary side effect” for more women to enter and remain in this type of organization and to be respected in environments previously considered non-traditional for women.

Therefore, the findings show that the construction of military women's identities occurs between formal inclusion and an ongoing need for recognition. Although the interviewees report feelings of belonging, professional pride, motivation, and competence, their narratives also reveal that the military environment continues to reproduce gendered expectations, informal barriers, and standards historically associated with masculinity. Thus, being a military woman involves not only performing professional duties but also constantly negotiating legitimacy, proving competence, adapting to institutional norms, and seeking recognition in a space where equality is formally affirmed but not always fully experienced in practice.

As a theoretical contribution, this article examines identity construction by considering intrinsic aspects – related to the personal motivations of each professional –, and extrinsic aspects – related to individual's social and organizational contexts. This duality provides a holistic view of the phenomenon of identity development, especially when one seeks to understand identification processes in environments that are not welcoming to a certain gender, as in the case examined here of women in the Brazilian military context. Beyond the understanding of female identity, the findings also problematize the military organizational model, indicating that formal equality does not eliminate gendered norms, informal barriers, and male-centered standards of legitimacy. Thus, the study suggests the need for public and institutional inclusion policies aimed not only at access, but also at retention, recognition, and career progression for women in military organizations.

The practical contribution lies in the attempt to reduce negative categorizations and prejudices in this environment, especially regarding the predominance of the male presence and the patriarchal history embedded in militarism and in contemporary society. This study opens avenues for public management and society to reflect on the importance of the role of women in the military environment. Furthermore, this research can contribute to women further expanding their spaces and to advancing the discussion of gender in military organizations, including issues related to LGBTQIA+ identities.

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APPENDIX – INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEWER'S RECORD

Date of the interview:

Duration of the interview:

RESPONDENT'S BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Respondent's name:

Age:

Educational background:

Area of work within the Brazilian Air Force (BAF):

Date of entry into the institution:

Employment arrangement or period of service in the institution:

IDENTIFICATION WITH THE MILITARY CAREER

- 1) Please tell me a little about yourself, considering your personal and professional trajectory up to your entry into this organization and the position you currently hold.
- 2) What motivated you to join and remain in the Brazilian Air Force?
- 3) How do you currently identify with or feel connected to your work?
- 4) What is your work routine like?

MEANINGS ATTRIBUTED TO WORK

- 5) What does working as a military woman in the Brazilian Air Force mean to you?

ENTRY AND TRAINING IN THE MILITARY ENVIRONMENT

- 6) What was the training process like for you to become qualified to perform your duties in the military environment?
- 7) Did you feel that you needed to undergo a period of adaptation to the military environment? What was this process like?
- 8) Are there institutional rules and regulations specifically directed at women in the military environment? If so, what are they?

ADVANCES AND BARRIERS

- 9) In your opinion, is being a woman valued in the military environment?
- 10) Are men and women treated differently in the military environment?
- 11) In your opinion, does the organization provide any type of support specifically related to women in the military environment?
- 12) Have you ever faced a critical situation because you are a woman?
- 13) Could you identify some positive and negative aspects of working in the Brazilian Air Force?

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José Antônio Puppim de Oliveira (UCL)
José Carlos Barbieri (FGV-EAESP)
José Carlos Lázaro da Silva Filho (UFC)
José Célio de Andrade (UFBA)
Luciana Marques Vieira (UNISINOS)
Luciano Barin-Cruz (HEC Montréal, Canada)
Luis Carlos Di Serio (FGV-EAESP)
Marcelle Colares Oliveira (UFC)
Maria Ceci Araujo Misoczky (UFRGS)
Mônica Cavalcanti Sá Abreu (UFC)
Mozar José de Brito (UFL)
Renata Giovinozzo Spers (FEA-USP)
Sandra Maria dos Santos (UFC)
Walter Bataglia (MACKENZIE)