

WEAVING PATHS FOR POLICIES: AN INTEGRATED ANALYSIS OF THE GENDER EQUALITY FRAMEWORK

TEJIENDO CAMINOS PARA POLÍTICAS: UN ANÁLISIS INTEGRADO DEL MARCO REFERENCIAL DE IGUALDAD DE GÉNERO

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ABSTRACT: Introduction: The Gender Equality Framework for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Brazil, developed by the British Council, aims to promote gender equality through data collection and the implementation of specific action plans. This framework is significant as it addresses historical disparities in HEIs and fosters inclusive academic environments. Its necessity lies in the urgency to combat wage inequalities, harassment, and inequity in access and retention in STEM. In this context, the article analyzes the framework, its features, and its alignment with the Equality in Leadership for Latin American STEM (ELLAS) project, funded by the IDRC. **Methodology:** The study follows a qualitative and exploratory approach, based on a document analysis of the framework's guidelines and its connection to the objectives of the ELLAS project. Although the framework does not directly involve a population sample, its potential to guide institutions in collecting and analyzing gender equity data is examined. **Results:** The Gender Equality Framework does not present quantitative results but offers practical guidelines to create fair environments in HEIs, prevent harassment, and reduce wage gaps. Additionally, it contributes to the development of open databases for STEM, fostering greater gender equity. **Conclusions:** The study highlights that

implementing the framework faces challenges related to organizational culture and resistance to change. However, this instrument holds significant theoretical and practical implications by promoting rights and social justice. Future research could explore strategies to overcome these barriers and maximize its impact.

KEYWORDS: gender equality; higher education; public policies.

RESUMEN: Introducción: El Marco Referencial para la Igualdad de Género en instituciones de educación superior (IES) en Brasil, desarrollado por el British Council, tiene como objetivo promover la igualdad de género mediante la recopilación de datos y la implementación de planes de acción. Este marco es relevante porque aborda disparidades históricas en las IES y fomenta un entorno académico inclusivo. Su necesidad radica en la urgencia de combatir las desigualdades salariales, el acoso y la falta de equidad en el acceso y la permanencia en STEM. En este contexto, el artículo analiza dicho marco, sus características y su alineación con el proyecto Equality in Leadership for Latin American STEM (ELLAS), financiado por el IDRC. **Metodología:** El estudio sigue un enfoque cualitativo y exploratorio, basado en el análisis documental de los lineamientos del Marco Referencial y su conexión con las metas del proyecto ELLAS. Aunque el marco no implica una muestra poblacional directa, se analiza su potencial para guiar a las instituciones en la recolección y el análisis de datos relacionados con la equidad de género. **Resultados:** El Marco Referencial no proporciona resultados cuantitativos, pero ofrece directrices prácticas para crear ambientes justos en las IES, prevenir el acoso y reducir las brechas salariales. **Conclusiones:** El estudio destaca que la implementación del marco enfrenta desafíos asociados a la cultura organizacional y a la resistencia al cambio. Sin embargo, este instrumento tiene implicaciones teóricas y prácticas significativas, promoviendo derechos y justicia social. Futuros estudios podrían explorar estrategias para superar estas barreras y maximizar su impacto.

PALABRAS CLAVE: igualdad de género; educación superior; políticas públicas.

1. INTRODUCTION

The promotion of gender equality in higher education institutions (HEIs), in science, and in our society is complex and requires continuous efforts. According to Soares (2004), gender equality refers to the equality of rights, responsibilities, and opportunities among people of different gender identities. The importance of discussing gender equality lies in the promotion of human rights, health, and well-being, making it a matter of social justice (Fernandes and Neto, 2015).

In this context, the British Council developed a document that has become a Framework for Gender Equality in Higher Education Institutions (COUNCIL, 2022), aiming to address gender disparities in HEIs in Brazil. Launched in October 2022, this document represents a collaboration between Brazilian and British institutions, highlighting the importance of

diversity and equality in higher education. It provides practical guidelines, such as conducting self-assessment of organizational culture, effective communication, and institutional engagement to create more inclusive environments and combat harassment. The Framework's guidelines cover everything from developing data collection and analysis to creating measurable action plans, aiming to eliminate discriminatory practices (COUNCIL, 2022). The process includes prioritizing issues, developing plans, and implementing monitoring and evaluation strategies for actions. These guidelines are intended to equip higher education institutions in Brazil with the necessary tools to address inequalities, especially in areas such as science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine (STEMM).

In turn, the international research network ELLAS, *Equality in Leadership for Latin American STEM*, through an ongoing project, aims to create and use interconnected open data from South American countries: Bolivia, Brazil, and Peru. According to Maciel *et al.* (2021), this project aims to contribute to the generation and use of comparable open data between countries to assess policies and interventions to reduce the gender gap in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). This data is essential to support policies and initiatives aimed at reducing gender disparities, focusing on promoting gender equity in leadership positions in universities, industries, and public institutions (ELLAS, 2023).

In this context, the Reference Framework, given its purpose, holds significant relevance and can complement ELLAS investigations, enhancing the identification of strategies for the practical implementation of gender equality efforts and addressing the need to overcome cultural and organizational barriers. Institutional culture in many higher education institutions (HEIs) in Brazil perpetuates gender inequalities, necessitating efforts to promote equal policies.

In this sense, the aim of this article is to analyze the Reference Framework for Gender Equality in Higher Education Institutions in Brazil, highlighting its main characteristics, approaches, and implications. Additionally, the article seeks to contextualize the Framework within the scenario of HEIs in Brazil, emphasizing its limitations and the resources required for its effective implementation, such as time, funding, and training. Finally, the analysis addresses the connection between the Reference Framework and the ELLAS project, underscoring the importance of this integration in promoting gender equity in STEM and supporting the formulation of effective policies.

This article adopts a sequential structure, commencing with this introduction and proceeding to sections dedicated to methodology, objectives, results, and discussions, culminating in the concluding remarks. The aim is to inform and prompt reflections and responses from readers, fostering a dialogue on the issues addressed.

2. METHODOLOGY

The conduction of this research adopts an exploratory study with a qualitative approach, and in this sense, we turn to Gil's perspective (2008) to follow the principles of this methodology.

The exploratory research with a qualitative approach, according to Gil (2008), involves a deeper understanding of social phenomena. Therefore, the choice of this research aligns with the theme, as the analysis of the Gender Equality Framework considers its potential impact on policies and society, particularly in promoting gender equality.

In data collection, we employed document analysis (Gil, 2008), as we will scrutinize the Gender Equality Framework and documents from the ELLAS project. Cellard (2008, p. 295) asserts that «written documents constitute an extremely valuable source for every researcher in the social sciences». This methodological choice is deemed necessary because the analyzed documents serve as formal records and narratives that echo the perspectives, commitments, and challenges faced in the pursuit of gender equity. Thus, document analysis emerges as a lens to unveil the complexities of these documents in achieving the objective proposed in this article.

3. RESULTS

The Gender Equality Framework for Higher Education Institutions in Brazil comprises an introduction, concepts, and two sections. Each of these parts addresses specific aspects related to promoting gender equality and collecting comparable data, namely: 1) The document begins with a «Letter to the Reader», introducing the purpose and importance of the framework, inviting readers to engage in promoting gender equality. 2) The «Introduction» provides an overview of the document, highlighting its relevance to higher education institutions in Brazil. 3) «Principles» presents the key principles underpinning the framework, encouraging institutions to adopt them in their policies and practices. 4) It explores the «Importance of Diversity in Higher Education and in STEM». 5) It emphasizes the importance of «Self-assessment» and team formation for this purpose. 6) It underscores the significance of «Communication, Consultation, and Engagement» to promote gender equality. 7) In «Development of Data Collection and Analysis», it addresses data collection and analysis as essential tools to understand and address gender issues. 8) It presents the «Effective and Measurable Action Plan» to promote gender equality. 9) «Terms, Definitions» and «Intersectionality» define relevant concepts for understanding the framework. 10) In «Sections 1, 2, and 3», the steps for introducing the institution to gender equality work, assessing the gender equality context, and developing a future action plan are detailed, respectively.

In this sense, we highlight some analyses of the Gender Equality Framework.

- a) The Gender Equality Framework for Higher Education Institutions in Brazil encourages academic institutions to identify inequalities, challenges, and opportunities for women's progression in STEM through a participatory and transparent self-assessment process. This process involves the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, the identification of priorities, and the development of specific action plans. The Gender Equality Framework provides guidance and tools for conducting this self-assessment, which should engage all stakeholders, including students, staff, institutional leaders, and community members. These individuals can

- actively participate by sharing their experiences, perspectives, and feedback during the self-assessment process. Moreover, they can identify challenges and opportunities related to gender equality in the institution, collaborate in setting priorities, and support the implementation of action plans resulting from the self-assessment. This approach promotes an inclusive culture and values diversity.
- b) The Gender Equality Framework's approach goes beyond addressing wage equality; it also aims to eliminate harassment and barriers that have historically hindered women's progress. The document highlights that entrenched exclusionary practices pose obstacles to the careers of women, particularly women who are Black, Indigenous, quilombolas, and from other underrepresented and historically marginalized groups. This suggests the presence of systemic and historical obstacles that have disproportionately affected women.
 - c) The Gender Equality Framework employs the acronym EDI, representing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. It fosters a culture of self-reflection related to these concepts and establishes a work culture focused on gender issues. This approach is evidence-based, utilizing qualitative and quantitative data collected during the implementation of the Gender Equality Framework guidelines. The data encompass information on gender, race/color, age, disability, and professional/student roles within the institution.
 - d) It is important to note that the acronym EDI is adopted by various organizations, such as the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM), whose initiatives align with these principles, featuring a dedicated council named DEI - Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ACM, 2023). Addressing these concepts involves considering a variety of individual characteristics, extending beyond the gender aspect.
 - e) The relevance of the Reference Framework extends to its ability to provide a structured guide for implementing measures in HEIs. By offering specific guidelines, the Framework facilitates the identification of areas for improvement within the academic environment and guides the definition of practical strategies for promoting gender equality in STEM.
 - f) It is relevant to note that the Framework adopts the terminology STEM, which stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine. This same acronym is used by the Athena Swan Charter, an internationally recognized framework for promoting gender equality in higher education institutions (HEIs) that inspired the Reference Framework. Originating in 2005 with the purpose of encouraging and recognizing commitment to advancing women's careers in these areas, the Athena Swan Charter served as a reference for the aforementioned Framework.

However, the adoption of the Framework's recommendations may encounter resistance in terms of management and organizational culture. Institutional culture in some HEIs in Brazil often favors structures and practices that perpetuate gender inequality, and changing this culture requires concerted efforts.

Its implementation also requires resources such as time, funding, and training. Cultural change and the adoption of more inclusive practices demand investments in terms of staff training and development, as well as the allocation of financial resources to make the proposed changes feasible. Moreover, the need for time to assimilate and internalize these transformations is a dimension to be considered, emphasizing that profound changes in promoting gender equality do not occur instantaneously but rather as a result of continuous and sustained commitment over time.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to analyze the Reference Framework for Gender Equality in Higher Education Institutions in Brazil, developed by the British Council, in promoting gender equality, especially in STEM fields.

The analyses highlight various ways in which the Reference Framework can contribute to the formulation of policies aimed at gender equality, aligning with the goals of the ELLAS project. Comparable data collection, the development of specific policies or action plans, the promotion of an evidence-based self-reflective culture, wage equality, and combating harassment are aspects emphasized in this analysis. Moreover, the Framework can provide contributions to the ELLAS *database*, as its guidelines can serve as records of a specific dataset for ELLAS (Berardi *et al.*, 2023), leveraging the Framework and strengthening the ELLAS platform.

The practical implementation of the Reference Framework, in turn, may face challenges in each organization, including organizational resistance and the need to overcome cultural barriers. Effective management of these challenges is necessary to ensure the success of the Framework, as well as the implementation of broader policies. These points can only be further analyzed with the use of the Framework by HEIs, followed by a study of the obtained results.

In terms of funding and initiatives to support gender equality, the fact that the British Council developed the Framework emerges as an initiative that provides guidance capable of positively impacting academic culture. Additionally, on their official website, they offer workshops and training to institutions in this regard. In turn, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), which funds ELLAS, invests in research in developing countries to promote sustainable and inclusive environments. When a project of this magnitude is financed by major institutions, there is a commitment to addressing inequalities. These funds are always welcome, especially when directed towards initiatives aimed at improving the representation of women in STEM and creating more inclusive environments in general.

We conclude that promoting gender equality in higher education institutions, science, and society requires persistent efforts, reflecting a commitment to ensuring rights and contributing to social justice. The Gender Equality Framework in Higher Education Institutions, developed by the British Council in collaboration with Brazilian institutions, emerges as a relevant tool to address gender disparities in the academic context through practical guidelines.

Initiatives like this and ELLAS underscore the importance of addressing historical barriers that limit women's progress in certain areas. However, its implementation faces challenges related to cultural resistance and the need for resources, emphasizing the urgency of a continuous commitment to effect significant changes in favor of gender equity.

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