Gender labor inequalities in the public sector: the interplay between policy and micro-politics

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to describe and explain women's labor participation in the public sector, particularly at the local level. The paper analyses the representation of women employees in the public sector through a case study of a city council in a mid-sized Spanish city. The authors delve into the extent of gender labor discrimination in public administration, exploring a diversity of situations, experiences, and perceptions of women workers in female, neutral, and male-dominated areas in the local administration.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors have applied a combined methodology of quantitative analysis based on an exhaustive analysis of the list of job posts, and qualitative analysis from the narratives of women workers in biographical interviews, in women-dominated, neutral and male-dominated areas.

Findings – The authors conclude by providing a clear description of women's representation in local administration. Despite the institutional efforts in applying gender equality norms and public policies in administration, employment and labor market, this article shows the persistent inequality in employment within the administration. The paper demonstrates that public administrations can be seen as gender regimes that tend to reproduce inequality by formal and informal dynamics. This inequality gender reproduction in a supposedly gender-neutral administration reflects discrimination in a labor market. The paper details phenomena relating to horizontal occupational segregation, glass ceilings, sticky floors, and the undervaluing of women's work, among other phenomena.

Practical implications – The administration should consider two essential factors that endanger gender equality: (1) the demonstrated regression of gender mainstreaming and the effects on women's employment as a consequence of the crisis, and (2) neoliberal governments and extreme right-wing parties (or neoliberal governments and extreme right-wing parties' support, as is the case with the current Andalusian regional government), whose agenda includes the fight against what neoliberal governments and extreme right-wing parties call "gender ideology".

Social implications – The gap between the effectiveness of gender legislation and actual working practices within the administration has been highlighted. This fact should be a wake-up call for the administrations to strictly comply with gender legislation, given that local administrations are the closest to the citizens. Future research should focus on changes to detect any regression and to prevent losing the improvements already achieved, which can still be very much strengthened.

Originality/value – This article helps to fill the gap in the literature on gender discrimination in the labor market, which often omits the public sector, especially in local administration, which is the closest administrative structure to citizenship respecting public policies. The article contributes to highlighting the need for an egalitarian labor market in order to achieve optimal performance, commitment and efficiency in egalitarian labor relations in local administration.

Keywords Local administration, Public sector, Gendered organizations, Women employment, Gender inequalities in labor market, Gender occupational segregation

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction
This article aims to shed light into the academic and political debate over women's representation in the public sector by focusing on the empirical study of a local administration. In July 2019, Rocío Ruiz, Minister of Equality, Social Policy, and work–family balance of the regional government of Andalusia (Southern Spain), denied the existence of a gender pay gap in the public sector. Accepting the ideas of their allied party of the far right, in her statement she asked universities for evidence regarding different salaries between men and women. Today, not only in Spain but also around the globe, important sectors of the population still neglect the existence of gender discrimination. In fact, the rejection of gender inequality is one of the key elements of conservative and far right political discourse. Research, however, demonstrates that gender inequality is a reality in different ambits, including public administration. Numerous authors, drawing on their research on gender, administration, and public policy have conducted empirical analyses, pointing out the difficulty in achieving true gender equity in those ambits (Alfama, 2015; Barrère Unzueta, 2008; Batista Medina, 2013; Chappell, 2010; Chappell and Waylen, 2013; Gelambí Torrell, 2015; Otero Hermida and Bouzas Orenzo, 2012; Huguet and González Marín, 2008).

In spite of the scientific progress in available knowledge on gender inequality, a literature review in the field of public administration reveals that there are significant topics that are still understudied. While there is a growing body of research on gender representation in political institutions and policing (Brown *et al.*, 1993; Conley and Page, 2017; Verge and Pastor, 2018; Johansson Sevä and Öun, 2019), women labor participation in the public sector remains much less explored.

This article aims to fill this gap by analyzing women's representation in a municipal administration. The article focuses on the case of a city council in a mid-size Spanish city. Although quantitative data cannot be generalized, the exploratory analysis will allow identification of the formal structures and informal practices and cultural representations that are intertwined, generating what Acker (1992) called an "inequality regime," which refers to gendered beliefs and values entangled with organizational structures to create stable systems of stratification based on gender, and that has been demonstrated to be a useful tool for pushing the scope of the intersectional approach (Healy *et al.*, 2019).

Drawing on a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques, the article sheds light into the formal and informal dynamics that produce and reproduce gender inequality in a particular administrative context. Although the article puts emphasis on qualitative research, which is more appropriate for the intersectional study of gendered beliefs and informal practices (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2016), quantitative research will help to contextualize the analyzed narratives. This type of analysis is paramount for informing policies aimed at promoting social justice and equity in the public sector.

The article is structured as follows. First, it includes a literature review on existing research about women's representation in public administration. Second, the article provides an overview of the Spanish gender equality legislation. Third, it explains the methodological approach of the research. Fourth, it provides a general overview of gender inequality in administrative units, bureaucratic levels, and occupational categories of the selected municipal administration. Fifth, the article analyzes the experiences and perceptions of a sample of female public employees of the city council under scrutiny. Finally, it discusses the main empirical results and implications of the research.

2. From representation theory to intersectionality in public administration research
Traditional analysis of women's participation in public administration has applied the perspective of representative bureaucracy, whose claims about social equity were initially

influenced by the US civil rights movement (Golden and Portillo, 2010). A common thread in the diverse interpretations of this theory is that public administrations should be representative of the multiple groups that form society (Kim, 1994). In most formulations, it includes gender, race/ethnicity, and class as well as other variables. Scholars have distinguished between "passive" and "active" representation of such groups. While the former refers to quotas for such segments of the population, the latter refers to the real content of policies in response to the needs and characteristics of such groups. As several studies have pointed out, "active" and "passive" representation can be closely related (Riccucci and Meyers, 2004). Page (2008), for example, has argued that more diverse groups tend to lead to better decisions.

Part of the literature has paid attention to the impact of the representation of diversity on different bureaucratic levels (Baumgartner *et al.*, 2020). They have argued that, since discretional power is very limited in bottom-level bureaucrats, the value of descriptive representation rests in equal access to employment. On the contrary, in the case of top-level bureaucrats, diversity is more clearly influential in policy-making (Meier, 1975). As Saidel and Loscocco (2005) have stated, gendered institutional contexts may lead to differentiated prioritizations and decisions. Along this line, Baekgaard and George (2018) have demonstrated how ethnicity, gender, and age affect recruitment preferences among politicians regarding candidates for top administrative positions.

Verge (2010, 2012), for instance, studied the informal rules that governed the access to representation positions in Spanish local political parties, which formally incorporated gender quotas after 2007. In spite of clear advancements in formal recognition, she highlighted the relevance of sexist organizational cultures in impeding female participation and women's agency in promoting female representation. Concerning the role of discourse in female participation, Nogueira (2009) found that women in power positions tended to develop a particular discourse that reflects the contradictions of the stereotyped expectations associated with their positions. In some cases, they emphasized their competences, neglecting the existence of discrimination; in other cases, they represented discrimination obstacles as the cause of the development of their personal competences.

In the ambit of local administration, research has mainly focused on political representation and political parties (Brown *et al.*, 1993; Conley and Page, 2017; Verge and Pastor, 2018; Johansson Sevä and Öun, 2019); a minor body of research has paid attention to public employees and administration managers. A study employing the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) data set revealed the persistence of a glass ceiling barrier that impedes women from being represented in top-level positions in municipal administrations (Reid *et al.*, 2000). In addition, a more recent study by Aguado and Frederickson (2012) highlighted the difficulties married women with children have in getting a city management job.

One of the limitations of representative bureaucracy theory is that is has tended to study the multiple disadvantaging characteristics separately. This limitation is precisely what intersectional theory has attempted to overcome. From this perspective, paying attention to how social categories and identities are overlapped and combined, it is possible to understand how power and domination work (Denis, 2008).

Within the intersectional approach, Acker's (1992) notion of an inequality regime has been used in order to analyze gender relations and discrimination in public administrations. According to her, organizational structures, practices, and beliefs distribute women and men into different tasks and positions, reproducing unequal gender relations. Her concept of gender regime has been demonstrated to be a useful analytical tool for examining the barriers to equality in organizations (Acker, 2006). In this sense, she affirms that positions held by women in organizations are usually subject to subordination by a masculine white hegemonic model, in which men are perceived as successful workers and natural leaders and their jobs associated with traditional male features and roles. Conversely, women's jobs are linked with traditional female characteristics and roles, and together with maternity, hinder the

possibility of promotion and foster the glass ceiling, as women are not perceived as desirable leaders (Acker, 2009). Following Acker's perspective, Alfama (2015) has highlighted the need for linking the literature about public policy with the gender perspective on organizations, proposing a model for analyzing administration-identifying gender bias both in organizational structure and policy practice. She puts emphasis on decoding the relationship between everyday micro-politics and the resulting public policies and services that they generate (Alfama and Alonso, 2015). She argues that gender inequality in an administration derives from the different roles attributed to men and women, access to decision-making, access to power resources, and a complex set of symbolic representations and informal practices, including relational and emotional aspects. The integration of all these elements in local analyses could shed light on both the study of discrimination dynamics and the identification of areas of intervention in the search for equity.

Despite the relevance of symbolic representations and practices in inequality regimes, most developments in the field of gender discrimination in the public sector are based on quantitative and formal analyses. It can be argued that experimental and quantitative methods are being used to study informal practices, such as volubility that is, the total amount of time spent speaking, which is strongly connected to gender (Brescoll, 2011) and discourse, such as the manner in which ideology influences manager decisions on gender (Carnahan and Greenwood, 2018). However, narrative and qualitative methods have been shown to be especially fruitful in the study of representations and practices in the ambit of public administration research (Bornis, 2011). For example, Maile (1995) underscored the gendered nature of managerial discourse, incorporating both "feminine" and "masculine" identities and resulting in different opportunities for men and women. In studying the application of pay and employment equity policies in New Zealand, Jones and Torrie (2009) argued that labor-market-level studies should be complemented with qualitative inquiry. In their case, the qualitative approach allowed an understanding of the complexities of the reasons behind the lack of effectiveness of such policies for older employees, which were related to lack of support, the gendered design of jobs, and intense workloads that created a bottleneck for women's access to top-level positions. In the same vein, Schilling (2015) has employed narrative biographical methods in order to study the meaning of work–life balance among German public employees.

Narrative research suggests that identity categories cannot be reduced to variables; instead, they should be understood as "doings, ongoing, context-specific displays" (Gooden and Portillo, 2010). Qualitative methods, in this sense, are the best tool for capturing people's understandings and framing of their experiences and their particular socio-cultural contexts, revealing their identities and how they are continually produced and reproduced. As Ashworth *et al.* (2019) have stated, better theorizations demand combining rigor with richness. This qualitative study of female employees' representations and experiences in a local Spanish public administration will attempt to combine rigor and richness in order to get a better grasp on the obstacles for gender equality in the public sector.

3. Overview of Spain's gender legislation: broad legislation, limited scope
The creation of the Women's Institute in 1983 is considered the starting point for the institutionalization of gender policies in Spain, followed by the four equal opportunities plans passed since 1988. The regional governments followed this model and developed their own gender equality agencies, together with some local governments. The EU's adoption of the concept of gender mainstreaming from the United Nations in 1995 [1] prompted EU members to include this strategy toward gender equality (Alfama and Alonso, 2015). This strategy "involves the integration of a gender perspective into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, regulatory measures and spending

programmes, with a view to promoting equality between women and men, and combating discrimination" (EIGE). The inclusion of gender mainstreaming in every public policy in Spain is mandatory and institutionalized, and not only determined by the transposition of European norms. In this sense, Bustelo points out the dual directionality of the influence on gender policies between Europe and Spain as not a unidirectional process from top to bottom (Bustelo, 2016). Zapatero's leftist government of 2004–2011 (PSOE) introduced major achievements in gender legislation, including the creation of the Equality Policies General Secretariat, an equality ministry (subsequently eliminated by a right-wing government, PP). Regionally, the main advances in gender equality have been introduced under socialist mandates, with some exceptions.

Spanish legislation includes compulsory equality plans [2] in all levels of the administration and specifically for municipalities. The Organic Law 3/2007, of 22 March, for the effective equality of women and men, in addition to many other matters, establishes the principle of equality in public employment and the equality measures in employment for the General State Administration and for public bodies linked to or dependent on it. It specifically enables the equality plans as an instrument to overcome inequalities in the public sector [3]. When this research was carried out [4], regionally in our case, the Administration of the Regional Government of Andalusia, its agencies, and other instrumental entities stated that they would develop employment equality plans every four years. These plans would establish the objectives to be achieved in terms of equal treatment and equal opportunities in public employment, as well as the strategies and measures to be adopted to achieve them, including measures for the reconciliation of work, family, and personal life, with specific measures on family and personal diversity [5].

Nevertheless, despite all the mentioned legislation, the actual fact is that in many cases those plans are not being fully implemented or consist of analyzing employment data by sex and some basic gender training for certain staff. In the same vein, other Spanish research located in municipalities, though focused in the local governments' fulfillment of the equality measures, understood both for public policies and equality plans applied to employment. In this sense, research conducted by Otero Hermida and Bouzas Lorenzo (2012) in 198 municipalities demonstrated that less than 55% had equality plans, and/or they were not endowed with enough funding, similar to the conclusions of other authors (Gelambí Torrell, 2015; Espí-Hernández, 2017; Lombardo, 2017b). They manifest the link between leftist ideologies and the willingness and commitment of municipalities to comply with gender mainstreaming (Gelambí Torrell, 2015; Bustelo, 2016). In this sense, economic crisis has been demonstrated as a powerful element for dismantling gender mainstreaming (Gálvez Muñoz and Rodríguez Modroño, 2012; Alfama *et al.*, 2015), not only but, specifically, on the local (Gelambí Torrell, 2015) and regional levels (Alfama and Alonso, 2015).

4. Data and method
This articles draws on a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, although it focuses on the qualitative/narrative analysis of the perceptions of female public employees. Quantitative data came from the list of posts of a Spanish city council in 2018. Since some of the information in that document was incomplete or outdated, it was triangulated with other documents published in the transparency portal of the municipal administration (list of positions of the city council in 2009; gender composition of political and workers' representation boards; and list of workers, collective agreements and gender equality plans of subcontracted firms). Data from these documents were analyzed by means of descriptive statistic procedures, focused on the frequency of a set of variables in relation to gender, such as degree of feminization/masculinization of administrative units, gender pay gap, and access to managerial hierarchic positions.

Quantitative descriptive analyses helped define the context in order to understand the experiences and perceptions of female public employees in the subsequent narrative analysis. Women's narratives were collected using biographical interviews. The researchers conducted a total of 15 interviews with women of different profiles in order to represent the diversity of situations, experiences, and perceptions: public employees in feminized administrative units ($n = 9$), female union representatives in externalized firms ($n = 3$), and public employees in masculinized administrative units ($n = 3$). Two group interviews were held, and the rest were individual. The informed consent of the interviewees was recorded at the beginning of each interview. The number of interviews responded to theoretical saturation (Low, 2019): when information about experiences and perceptions began to be redundant, the researchers decided to stop conducting new interviews. In order to preserve the anonymity of the interviewed workers, their names have been changed by using a pseudonym, and specific data about their posts/areas were removed.

The interviews focused on six main topics: access to employment; perceptions of gender discrimination; gender equality plan of the city council/auxiliary firm; work–family balance measures; salary (pay gap); and bureaucratic hierarchy (glass ceiling). The transcriptions of the interviews were subject to categorical analysis, focusing on the main themes of interest in the research (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

Biographical interviews were not only a means for producing information, they became moments of reflection. When asked directly if they perceived discriminatory attitudes in the workplace, some interviewees seemed dubious; nonetheless, as the interview continued and answers became more concrete, they seemed more aware of, and some of them surprised by, differential treatment based on gender. This fact demonstrated the extent to which women's discrimination has been normalized and culturally legitimized.

5. Distribution of men and women in the municipal administration:
A quantitative overview
The municipal administration is structured around 17 departments (social welfare, trade, feasts, youth, economy and taxes, sport, education, employment, citizens' participation, equality, urban maintenance, tourism, mobility and security, housing, urbanism and heritage, presidency, and environment). The city council employed approximately 600 persons according to the list of positions of 2018. In addition, there were 4 public firms and 10 subcontracted firms that employed approximately 700 workers. Concerning professional categories of public servants, the Spanish administrative system is organized in categories A (higher education), B (vocational education), C (secondary education) and E (subordinate employees). There are also sub-categories, depending on responsibilities and salary. For example, top-level managers are category A2. Each municipal department is supervised by one A1 top-level employee (*Jefe de Servicio* in Spanish) and several A2/B managers (*Jefe de Negociado* and *Jefe de Sección* in Spanish).

The general distribution by sex in the municipal administration is relatively equal: approximately 55% men and 45% women. However, the quantitative analysis reveals the existence of vertical segregation (a glass ceiling), horizontal and sectorial segregation (a high concentration of women in departments and jobs generally associated with domestic roles) and transversal segregation (the overrepresentation of women in fixed-term and precarious positions).

As to vertical segregation, the analysis shows that there is a clear glass ceiling for women, since in all administrative units they barely have access to top-level managerial positions. Only 25% of top-level managers are women. In the following hierarchic degree (responsibility for services or equivalent [6]), men represent 90% while women account for only 10%. These differences result in a gender pay gap that is independent from academic degree and

professional training. Women are overrepresented in the lower professional categories as cleaners (group E according to the Spanish system) by 79% [7]. The occupations associated with women in general terms are related to low social valuation and low economic remuneration. For example, 93% of the cleaners and 70% of home help assistants are women. This reality evidences the existence of a gendered sticky floor tendency.

Along this line, 78% of the administrative tasks in all the departments are carried out by women. Women represent 80% of the employees in the category of administrative assistant. Moreover, the main representation of women in certain mid-level categories, in particular in the fifth top-level position, is related to the fact that these categories imply a major proportion of administrative work and lower decision-making power.

In addition, a strong horizontal occupational segregation can be found in specific occupations and departments of the city council. Departments and professional categories are totally or almost totally feminized or masculinized, a dynamic associated with traditional gender roles and stereotypes. For example, feminized departments are related to care-giving activities such as social welfare (in which 62.3% of social workers, 80% of social educators, 75% of instructors, and 100% of pediatricians are women). Other departments are clearly masculinized. This is reflected in the overwhelming majority of men in these departments. This is the case for the departments of presidency (83.3% men) and urbanism (64.5% men, and in which women have mainly administrative functions), but also in certain services (some of them externalized) in which male representation is above 90%: water supply (98%), urban buses (94%), local police (92%), and in which most women have administrative positions, and rescue and first aid (92%). In addition, in the street-cleaning service 76% of the workers are men.

Concerning occupations, traditional trades such as construction building, carpentry, electricity, and maintenance are strongly masculinized. In addition, some of its categories are plainly attributed to men: construction foremen and tradesmen (100% men), superintendent (85%), messenger (79%), police officer (90%), and civil engineer (67%). Gender disparities are more evident in municipal auxiliary firms, which provide externalized services. These firms tend to escape public regulation, and this is manifested not only in higher levels of labor instability, but also in greater expressions of gender inequality.

Regarding segregation, there was not a significant difference between men and women in the type of contract. According to the list of positions of 2018, 73% of male civil servants were tenured whilst 71% of female civil servants were tenured. Transversal segregation manifested more in the difference between men and women working reduced time. We did not have access to precise data, but the testimonies during the interviews revealed that women worked reduced time more often than men due to the unequal organization of care within the family group. In addition, the analysis of working conditions in auxiliary firms revealed that women tended to have more precarious contracts. The clearest example is the urban cleaning service, where all the women had part-time jobs (see Table 1).

After analyzing the quantitative data reflecting gender segregation and gender relations, we now turn to the women's narratives to show how they materialize in everyday working practices.

6. Perceptions and informal practices of gender inequality among public employees

6.1 Informal practices and the micro-politics of sexism
Although interviewed civil servants did not observe discrimination practices while accessing employment, most interviewed women have pointed out the existence of microsexism; that is, discrimination in the ambit of informal practices and symbolic representations. One example is the differential valuation of work based on gender: "Women's work in my department is

Main segregation data: women and men distribution (percentages)	Women	Men
General distribution	45	55
Glass-Ceiling		
Second level top professional categories (*Jefe de servicio*- manager)	25	75
Lowest professional categories (E group, for all the occupations)	79	21
Female-dominated occupations/job posts/departments		
Cleaners	93	7
Home help assistants	70	30
Clerk/administrative work/administrative assistant	80	20
Social workers	75	25
Social educators	80	20
Instructors	75	25
Pediatricians	100	0
Male-dominated occupations/job posts/departments		
Construction foremen and tradesmen (construction building, carpentry, electricity, and maintenance)	0	100
Presidency	17	83
Police- Superintendent	15	85
Police- Messenger	21	89
Police officer	10	90
Civil engineer	33	67
Urban Planning	35	65
Water Supply (Outsourced service)	2	98
Urban buses (Outsourced service)	6	94
Rescue and first aid	8	92

Table 1.
Authors' own
elaboration based on
data from the official
list of jobs of the city
council of El Puerto de
Santa María and
figures offered on the
Transparency
website (2019)

less valued than men's work" (Lucía, 38 years old, civil servant, Governance Department, interview conducted 3 April 2019). Several interviewees had experienced situations in which sexism has been expressed in differential treatment. For example, a female technician tends to be treated as a clerk:

> … when a person comes in [a room with several technicians] he/she thinks that I am an administrative assistant instead of a technician. You know. They ask me issues about files, and to my male coworkers they make other types of questions (Charo, 49 years old, civil servant, Urbanism Department, interview conducted 16 March 2019).

In interpersonal relations, several women have perceived that their points of view are less valued and expressed that they do not feel equally treated:

> Your opinion does not have the same value or is not objective because you are a woman. In addition, they shut you up gratuitously and directly because you are a woman. You see that men are not treated in the same manner. In their case, hierarchy is not so represented than in ours (Marisa, 54 years old, civil servant, Social Welfare Department, interview conducted 2 March 2019).

Differential treatment takes place in a subtle terrain by means of tone of voice, non-verbal communication, and other less explicit dimensions of social interaction. This, according to their testimony, manifests by means of several forms of paternalism:

> We note that in our current boss: the treatment he has with the other men is different from the one with women (…) the things he says about the other men is not the manner in which he considers us (Lucía, 38 years old, civil servant, Governance Department, interview conducted 3 April 2019).

On other occasions, men's superiority is more openly manifested. A top-level public manager explained it in the following manner:

> I had a double handicap: I was a woman and a young person. I had many problems in that sense; that is, nothing that I did, or the few things that I said that had to be done, were taken seriously. The man that was previously in my position, who was older, had to back me to let them realize that I was right (. . .) When he agreed with what I was saying then they noticed. The situation has not improved (. . .) On the contrary, I have to keep on trying to reaffirm everything I say again and again because they still do not take me seriously (Luisa, 37 years old, civil servant, Governance Department, interview conducted 26 March 2019).

6.2 The eternal problem of work–life balance
State regulations regarding work–life balance have been designed as a means for promoting gender equality in the labor market. In spite of its positive impact on women, due to the sexual division of labor in the family and the workplace, these measures tend to reflect the traditional role of women as caregivers. Several interviewed subjects declared having asked for work–life balance leaves in order to take care not only of their children, but also their parents, and even their grandchildren. One of the interviewees understood this fact as a "sacrifice":

> [Leaves] are asked by for women. I can only add that, similarly to attending to tutorship at the children's school (. . .) in case of a son's sickness, the mother is who takes care of him. It's not the father who stays at home. You're the one who is going to take a leave, or your holidays, to take care to this child that is sick and cannot go to school. You are the one who is going to sacrifice (Minerva, 43 years old, civil servant, Economy Department, interview conducted 15 March 2019).

Interviewed women commented that there is a lack of information and information channels on work–life balance and gender equity in the municipal administration. Their main source of information is co-workers who have previously had similar experiences. It is, hence, through informal communications with co-workers or a worker from the department of personnel that they get information.

In feminized departments there tends to be more information about and acceptance of work–life measures. In these departments, women tend to support each other, filling in for the work of other female co-workers and making use of greater flexibility. As one employee stated: "We are mostly women here. And if one has to leave the job immediately, because there is a call from the school: "Don't worry. I will do it for you" (Marisa, 54 years old, civil servant, Social Welfare Department, interview conducted 2 March 2019).

Along this line, another interviewed women highlighted the mutual aid among women in their departments, something understood as evidence against the sexist claim about women's competiveness:

> I would like to make a plea for the myth that women are unable to work with other women. This is something absolutely false here. Here all women work very well with other women, and with men (Luisa, 37 years old, civil servant, Governance Department, interview conducted 26 March 2019).

Concerning the manner in which making use of work–life measures affects women negatively, only a few women perceived that some male co-workers criticized women for it.

> I have seen differences because, maybe, a female co-worker is sick, and is frequently on leave of absence, and she has also children with certain health issues, so she is sometimes on leave. So yes, I have heard some cutting comments on her by some men (Charo, 49 years old, civil servant, Urbanism Department, interview conducted 16 March 2019).

In other cases, women do not experience reproaches from their male co-workers, but can observe they are sometimes exhausted due to the need to assume the work in case of working

time reductions by women. Some interviews perceive that the responsibility here is in the management of the city council for not hiring new workers.

From the 20 women interviewed in the 15 interviews, only one said that she had one male co-worker who reduced his working time or used to claim leaves to take care of children or elders. However, all of the women said that their male co-workers had children. Most of the municipal workers that use work–life balance measures, such as flexible shift and working time reduction, are women. Some interviewees had a clear feminist vision, and suggested that men should assume the role of caregivers and make an effort to reconcile work and family:

> I have a female co-worker that has a little daughter and clocks in later, and then she works in the afternoon to compensate (. . .) Men, no. None of them does it (. . .) I think that it is a mistake of women, because we are demanding "Balance! Balance! Balance!' But it is them who have to say: "Hey! I have to balance' (Luisa, 37 years old, civil servant, Governance Department, interview conducted 26 March 2019).

6.3 Glass ceiling and gender pay gap
Part of the contents of the interview addressed equity in relation to pay, responsibilities, and distribution of jobs. Concerning pay, interviewed women manifested that there is an absolute equity in the city council. According to their view, pay depends exclusively on professional category, as established by collective agreements and labor laws. However, some subjects mentioned that work–family balance has a direct negative impact on salary and opportunities for promotion (hence, on the pay gap):

> Well, the person that reconciles work and family has less income and less contribution [to the Social Security]. So, clearly, the fact that women are always [the ones] who employ working time reduction to take care of their children can have an impact on the long term. And in a promotion. But it is true that we work here in a different manner than the private firm, and this is less evident here (. . .) inequalities are less evident (Marta, 58 years old, civil servant, Employment Department, interview conducted 15 March 2019).

When interviewed specifically about salary supplements such as risk and overtime, some recognized that certain forms of payment are unequal since men can benefit from them more than women can. For instance, one female worker affirmed that, differently from her male co-workers, she could not work extra hours. She defined it as a "luxury" that she could not afford because she had to take care of her children:

> Men have it easier than us to work extra hours. I never thought about extra hours. I had to work hard in the mornings because I could not afford the luxury of coming here in the evening. It was extremely hard to organize with my children during the morning, imagine having to come here and do extra hours. It was virtually impossible for me (Carla, 36 years old, civil servant, Social Welfare Department, interview conducted 15 March 2019).

Regarding the pay gap, some women argued that it is difficult to recognize because you have to see beyond the formality of the collective agreement:

> For example, here in the city council there is a supplement that certain people have for their dedication, and this supplement is given mainly to men. If you make a study, you would find differences. (. . .) there are differences that even our co-workers are unable to see (Althea, 41 years old, civil servant, Social Welfare Department, interview conducted 15 March 2019).

The opportunity to promote in the administrative hierarchy is another critical point, according to some of the interviewees. Rosa, for example, showed her frustration for the difficulties in achieving a promotion in contrast to the men in her unit:

> Once I sent a letter to personnel saying that professional promotion was a right (...) Women are condemned to certain activities in this city council. Everywhere there is mobility, but in my department, only men have been promoted. The few men that have worked in this department have had a professional career. John [pseudonym], who entered after me, for example, is today head of a department (Rosa, civil servant, 60 years old, Social Welfare Department, interview conducted 30 March 2019).

Women who referred explicitly or implicitly to the glass ceiling saw sexist prejudice about women's abilities as a key factor. In addition, they argued that training activities offered by the city council used to be in the evening, or even on weekends. Women, who tend to assume family responsibilities, used to find it extremely difficult to attend training. As one female worker stated:

> Look, in relation to promotion I have always seen that men will always have it easier because we have to do a lot of courses, and women already find it difficult to come here during the morning to work (...) many courses are in the afternoon, many are on weekends. I have renounced trainings during the weekends (Carla, 36 years old, civil servant, Social Welfare Department, interview conducted 15 March 2019).

Thus, female public employees are aware of the lack of opportunities to be promoted in the professional hierarchy. They are able to explain why men are more concentrated in top-level administrative positions.

6.4 Perceptions on collective action

Finally, the interviews addressed the participation of female civil servants in feminist collective actions. The objective was learning to what extent women workers identify with feminist politics and organizations. To this end, interviewers asked about the subjects' experiences and points of view about the Women's Strike of 2019. On March 8, 2019, Spanish trade unions and feminist organizations called for a general strike demanding gender equality. The purpose was to show the invisible and essential work of women. However, only a few of the interviewees supported the strike. According to them, only 13 women workers (out of approximately 260 women employees) of the city council went on strike. Some interviewees showed surprise at the lack of mobilization of female workers in the municipal administration: "I see my female co-workers as very passive. I was really shocked the other day [8 March strike] in the city hall. Only a few women' (Carla, 36 years old, civil servant, Social Welfare Department, interview conducted 15 March 2019).

Those who took part in the strike and protests perceive the need to demand women's rights, and feel sorry for the lack of participation, which they perceive as proof of a setback in the ambit of gender equality. In 2019, women could choose to strike for 2 h, as called for by mainstream unions, or for 24 h, as called by for radical trade unions and feminist organizations. One public worker expressed her dissatisfaction with collective action in the following manner:

> I have supported the strike. A 24-hours strike. It is true that there was a stoppage of 2 hours this year (...) But I needed to go on strike for 24 hours and I did it. I think that the city council has not supported the strike. I have the impression that we are giving steps back in women's rights. This is my impression this year, because I wanted to go on strike for 24 hours (Althea, 41 years old, civil servant, Social Welfare Department, interview conducted 15 March 2019).

The lack of support for feminist collective action will probably be related to the reality of female public workers reflected in this research. During the interviews, at the beginning they were not completely aware of the discrimination practices and dynamics in their workplace. As the interview went on and the questions addressed more specific issues, they became more aware of the subtle mechanisms through which inequality operates. The concealing of gender

discrimination processes contributes to the reproduction of disparities, fostering the normalization of inequality and a differential socialization.

7. Discussion and conclusions

This article has analyzed gender representation in the municipal administration of a city council in Spain. Since access to employment follows strict meritocratic procedures, in which it is not possible to introduce a gender bias in a direct manner, the statistical analysis of frequencies in the lists of posts shows that there is certain balance between men and women (55 and 45% of the staff, respectively). However, a deeper analysis of the posts reveals that there are significant gender inequalities in the structure and functioning of the municipal administration under scrutiny. The analysis has shown the existence of a clear glass ceiling blocking female public employees from accessing and being promoted to top-level positions, as stated by Acker (2009), and also confirms other research on public administration workers (Reid *et al.*, 2000; Alarcón-Garcia and Mayor, 2018).

In addition, frequency measures show that there is strong horizontal occupational segregation. Women tend to concentrate in certain units (such as social welfare), and lower bureaucratic levels (group E in the Spanish system), and occupational categories (administrative assistant, cleaner, and home help assistant). In contrast, certain administrative units and occupations are clearly masculinized. This is the case, for example, of the department of urbanism, the local police, and the presidency as well as the categories of construction building, carpentry, electricity, and maintenance. Occupational segregation reproduces and reinforces traditional gender roles. The analysis has also included auxiliary firms, which reproduce gender disparities in an even more marked manner, in line with research confirming the negative gender impact of outsourcing public services on women's employment (Kirton and Guillaume, 2017).

Quantitative data demonstrate that the city council is a gendered institution, and, following previous research, this is expected to have an impact on organizational decisions, prioritizations, and the lived experiences of its male and female workers (Saidel and Loscocco, 2005). As Acker (2006) has stated, studying organizations as gender regimes allows us to recognize those experiences, practices, and informal rules that govern social behavior and are articulated with formal and bureaucratic structures and procedures. The article followed Alfama's (2015) proposal of identifying gender bias both in organizational structure and everyday micro-politics and practices. The qualitative/narrative research, drawing on biographical interviews, helped to analyze micro-sexism—that is, the discrimination that takes place by means of informal practices and symbolic representations about genders.

The testimonies of the interviewed female public workers showed that most of them had experienced and perceived differential treatment and differential valuation of their work. In addition, interviewees highlighted that current work–family measures are positive for them, but since most of the workers who make use of these measures are women, it enhances gender discrimination. Apart from the aforementioned informal agreements between workers, the only additional measure for reconciliation of work and family life established by law is the possibility of compensating care time in the same working day or in successive working days, on an occasional and temporary basis, subject to prior agreement with the employer [8]. They also suggested that flexibility measures and leaves of absence due to work–time balance frequently have a negative impact on co-workers, and can have an impact on the working environment. Furthermore, they had little or no knowledge about the compulsory prevailing equality plan for municipality staff, in line with the aforementioned literature demonstrating the lack of implementation of this relevant equality instrument at the local level. This fact is closely related to the limited scope of the broad gender equality legislation in Spain, as we

have discussed above, and as manifested in the obligatory compliance with the elaboration of equality diagnoses and plans in all public administrations.

The narratives of the interviewed female public workers also reflected their perception about the existence of a glass ceiling and a gender pay gap at the workplace. In some cases, informants were not initially aware of these issues, but as the questions formulated by the interviewers became more concrete, they tended to be more explicit about gender biases in the municipal administration. Interviewees highlighted their frustration regarding obstacles to promotion and the existence of salary complements that tend to benefit male employees.

Finally, the analysis paid attention to the support of female employees for feminist collective action, in particular the women's strike that took place several days before the interviews were conducted. Only a minority of the women went on strike and had a militant feminist ideology, nonetheless they all were aware of the existence of gender inequalities and the need for progress regarding equity. However, the low participation in this strike is arguably due to the historical lack of autonomy of the feminist movement in Spain and the fact that women's interests have been represented and organized mainly by trade unions and political parties, rather than by civil society (Lombardo, 2017a). Nevertheless, the first national feminist strike in Spain in 2018 was a resounding and unexpected triumph based on the functioning of social networks. It must be acknowledged that the ability of all feminist political and social actors to call for the strike led traditionalist and conservative political parties (Ciudadanos, PP) to adopt a public stance in support of the strike, labeling themselves as feminist (Campillo, 2019). In the words of Lombardo:

> While the EU and Spain's austerity politics has pushed the gender regime in neoliberal and conservative directions, feminist contestations of conservative gender ideologies, joint anti-austerity struggles with civil society, and women's resistance to "go back home" have so far supported the maintenance of a public gender regime in Spain. (Lombardo, 2017b, p. 225)

In conclusion, a review of the literature on gender representation in public administration reveals that there are very few analyses, especially in employment. This article has attempted to fill in this gap by providing a clear picture of women's representation in one Spanish city council. It demonstrates that public administrations can be seen as gendered regimes that tend to reproduce inequality by formal and informal dynamics. Qualitative analysis of the perceptions, experiences, and subjective experiences of female public workers contributes to complementing the analysis by identifying underlying informal practices and symbolic representations that tend to produce and reproduce gender inequality. This type of research has a twofold merit: it increases our knowledge of the unexplored field of women's representation in public administration, and it has nourished the self-reflection of the female public employees interviewed in the study, helping them to increase self-awareness and empowerment.

On the other hand, the gap between the effectiveness of gender legislation and actual working practices within the administration has been highlighted. This fact should be a wake-up call for the administrations to strictly comply with gender legislation, given that local administrations are the closest to the citizens. Particularly, administrations should consider two essential factors that endanger gender equality: (1) the demonstrated regression of gender mainstreaming and the effects on women's employment as a consequence of the crisis, and (2) neoliberal governments and extreme right-wing parties (or their support, as is the case with the current Andalusian regional government), whose agenda includes the fight against what they call "gender ideology". For this reason, future research should focus on changes to detect any regression and to prevent losing the improvements already achieved, which can still be very much strengthened.

Notes

1. Platform for Action of the United Nations, Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995.

2. The III Plan for gender equality in the General State Administration and in the Public Bodies linked to or dependent on it has recently been approved, upgrading and deepening into equality measures for the administration, but has not been implemented yet.

3. Organic Law 3/2007, of 22 March, for the effective equality of women and men, article 64th.

4. According to the Royal Legislative Decree 5/2015, of 30 October, this approves the revised text of the Law on the Basic Statute of the Public Employee.

5. Law 12/2007, of 26 November 2007, for the Promotion of Gender Equality in Andalusia (art. 32).

6. Including here the supervisor of the local police and the boss consultant lawyer, who have an equivalent position in the bureaucratic hierarchy (reflected, for example, in similar salary complements).

7. Although apparently the E group, the one in the lower bureaucratic level, can seem masculinized, the data conceal a high proportion of women (80%), in contrast to 20% of men, if we include the workers from auxiliary firms. Thus, it can be said that this group, which is the one with a lower valuation and salaries, is clearly feminized.

8. Explicitly mentioned in the transitional provisions 1st and 2nd of the El Puerto de Santa María City Council's labor agreement 2008, prevailing collective bargaining agreement.

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