
Toward an understanding of gender logics in startups: A critical review

Rumo à compreensão das lógicas de gênero em startups: Uma revisão crítica

Manoel Bastos Gomes Neto

Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais

neto26bastos@gmail.com

Lucas Emmanuel Nascimento Silva

Universidade de São Paulo (FEA/USP)

lucasemanuel1998@gmail.com

Rebeca da Rocha Grangeiro

Université Paris Nanterre e Universidade Federal do Cariri (UFCA)

darochagrangero@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper undertook a literature review to discuss whether startups are as gendered as traditional organizations for women in middle management positions, and if so how. We worked on the assumption that characteristics intrinsic to their organizational structure, such as flexibility in the workload, horizontality of the organizational hierarchy, cross-functional collaboration, group mentality, cool culture, and family-friendly environment allow startups to escape from the gendered organization politics and practices and to mitigate the barriers faced by women. To investigate how the characteristics inherent to startups may exacerbate and/or reduce gender inequality at work, we collected women's experiences from previous empirical studies and analyzed them according to propositions based on six concepts (gendered organization, horizontal and vertical segregation, glass ceiling, queen bee phenomenon, firewall, and labyrinth). Findings showed that startups do indeed favor women's career development but still reflect a gender logic in their practices and structure. Our review went some way to compensating for the lack of discussion on gendered organizations and gender inequality metaphors in new organizational structures, which represent more flexible work dynamics, as a result of globalization and the development of information technology.

Keywords: Gender at work; Women in startups; New economy business model; Metaphors.

RESUMO

Este artigo conceitual realizou uma revisão da literatura para discutir se as startups são tão marcadas por questões de gênero quanto as organizações tradicionais para mulheres em cargos de gerência média e, em caso afirmativo, como isso ocorre. Trabalhamos com a suposição de que características intrínsecas à sua estrutura organizacional, como flexibilidade na carga de trabalho, horizontalidade da hierarquia organizacional, colaboração multifuncional, mentalidade de grupo, cultura descolada e ambiente amigável à família permitem que as startups escapem das políticas e práticas organizacionais de gênero e mitiguem as barreiras enfrentadas pelas mulheres. Para investigar como as características inerentes às startups podem exacerbar e/ou reduzir a desigualdade de gênero no trabalho, coletamos experiências de mulheres a partir de estudos empíricos anteriores e as analisamos de acordo com proposições baseadas em seis conceitos (organização de gênero, segregação horizontal e vertical, teto de vidro, fenômeno da abelha-rainha, firewall e labirinto). Os resultados mostraram que as startups de fato favorecem o desenvolvimento de carreira das mulheres, mas ainda refletem uma lógica de gênero em suas práticas e estrutura. Nossa revisão buscou compensar a falta de discussão sobre organizações de gênero e metáforas de desigualdade de gênero em novas estruturas organizacionais, que representam dinâmicas de trabalho mais flexíveis, como resultado da globalização e do desenvolvimento da tecnologia da informação.

Palavras-chave: Gênero no trabalho; Mulheres em startups; Modelo de negócios da nova economia; Metáforas.

1 INTRODUCTION

The women founders of startups face a double barrier in the job market (KUSCHEL et al., 2020). First, they have to act as entrepreneurs, which is regarded as a gendered activity (LIÑÁN et al., 2022). Second, some fields (e.g., technology) are traditionally occupied by men (HARDEY, 2019). By contrast, startups are flat organizations, and there is evidence that organizations with flatter hierarchies are more favorable to women's career development than hierarchical bureaucracies (SMITH-DOERR, 2004).

A startup can be defined as a new business based on team mentality, cross-functional collaboration, and a flat hierarchy (AHMAD, et al. 2024), in contrast to traditional gendered organizations (ACKER, 1990). Research has nevertheless suggested that organizations embedded in the new economy are also gendered (WILLIAMS et al., 2012), and it is therefore important to investigate these workplaces further, to identify the gendered occupational experiences of women employees, managers, top managers, and executives. In traditional organizations, gender inequality is institutionalized by standardized career ladders, job descriptions, and job evaluations (ACKER, 1990), whereas in new economy organizations, teams, career maps, and networking are the main mechanisms by which gender inequalities are reproduced (WILLIAMS et al., 2012).

We therefore undertook a literature review to discuss whether startups are as gendered as traditional organizations for women in middle management positions, and if so how. Our review went some way to compensating for the lack of discussion on gendered organizations and gender inequality metaphors in new organizational structures, which represent more flexible work dynamics, as a result of globalization and the development of information technology (MICKEY, 2019; POGGESI et al., 2020). Furthermore, as startups can be analyzed as social processes that are dependent on their context (SPENDER et al., 2017), analyzing the role of gender in these new organizations not only makes this role easier to understand within the organizations themselves, but also entails a secondary analysis of social shifts in gender meaning over the years.

2 GENDER AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The theory of gendered organizations can help us understand the historical persistence of discrimination, segregation, submission, and exclusion of women in organizations. They are at least partially responsible for the division of labor and for wage differences between men and women and are places where gender images are created and reproduced. The gender logic permeates occupations, hierarchies, and management practices, being deeply intertwined with work relations within organizations (ACKER, 1990).

So-called *gender-neutral organizations* assume that their jobs are abstract and their employees are disembodied and de-gendered. However, ACKER (1990) argued that organizations are gendered systems, thereby helping to shape relationships in complex organizations. Organizational gendering processes favor male supremacy in this environment, as men can fulfill the postulated requirement of complete availability, allowing them to pursue a linear career path to the top of the organizational hierarchy, whereas women find themselves following more circuitous career paths (WOLFRAM, et al., 2020). The lifework balance is disadvantageous for women, as work and organizations are still built on the separation of career and private life, with career prevailing over other spheres of life (CARRERI et al., 2022).

Acker (1990) therefore argued that the transformation of the female reality would

require a radical redefinition of work and labor relations, such the rhythms of work were adapted to the rhythms of life itself, the hierarchy was abolished, and each type of job was divided equally between men and women. These features, which the author viewed as utopian, seem to be present, albeit incipiently, in the new organizational models.

As a result of globalization and technological advances, the world of work is undergoing major transformations. The organizations that embrace these transformations belong to the new economy, and one of their main features is the replacement of a vertical hierarchy with a flatter one organized in networks. Networks, as opposed to more bureaucratic hierarchies, foster opportunities for women's advancement, as they make the organization more flexible, transparent in its decisions, and collaborative (SMITH-DOERR, 2004). One such challenge to the traditional organizational logic comes from startups, which are organizations in their initial stages that have an innovative, technology-based business, and a high degree of replicability and scalability (AHMAD, et al. 2024).

Startups have a novel organizational structure, and therefore novel organizational behaviors and strategies (SPENDER *et al.*, 2017). Because they value innovation and creativity, they are less bureaucratic. Employees form teams to carry out specific projects and work closely with each other in a friendly environment where they can take on responsibilities that do not necessarily correspond to their job description (FREEMAN; ENGEL, 2007). The friendly startup context is characterized by an informal dress code and a cool culture that allows alcoholic drinks during working hours (MICKEY, 2019). Furthermore, research has shown that these family-friendly environments tend to benefit women (SMITH-DOERR, 2003).

Despite changes in the world of work, gender inequalities persist so researchers may therefore have to look for gender inequalities in hidden aspects, informal practices, rules, and norms (KUSCHEL *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, the problem of legitimacy for women is present not only at the organizational level (practices, rules, and norms) but also at the institutional and individual levels (KUSCHEL *et al.*, 2020). For instance, regulatory agencies and resource providers are reluctant to accept women as empowered entrepreneurs, which is why female startups directors are so rare (BALACHANDRA *et al.*, 2019). Thus, even if the organizational logic has been transformed in the new economy, organizations are still gendered (WILLIAMS *et al.*, 2012).

In the light of Smith-Doerr (2004)'s finding regarding the benefit of horizontal hierarchies for the promotion of gender equality, all the while acknowledging the persistence of gendered organizational systems despite the transformations brought about by the new economy (WILLIAM *et al.*, 2012), our **first proposition** is that *the less bureaucratic organizational structure of startups, combined with the fact that they value innovation and creativity, make them more favorable to gender equality.*

3 GENDERED BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The gendered logic of organizations imposes barriers to the insertion of women in socially established male positions, as well as their rise to positions of command and responsibility. These barriers refer to two types of occupational segregation: horizontal and vertical (CHARLES, 2003). *Horizontal segregation* classifies work positions according to gender, such that jobs that involve caring, feeding, and maintaining interpersonal relationships are perceived of as feminine, while manual labor, which requires physical strength and relationships with things, is seen as masculine. As a result, some areas of activity are almost exclusively male domains, because even in cultures with equality, gender ideologies have a lasting effect on the occupational structure (CHARLES, 2003).

In both masculine and feminine professions, men are overrepresented in the higher status positions. This *vertical segregation* is characterized by male supremacy and the belief that men are more capable than women of assuming positions of power and authority. Women who aspire to ascend hierarchically therefore suffer from this type of segregation, which can be alleviated by strengthening the principles of equality, reducing discrimination, and implementing support structures that make work and family obligations compatible (CHARLES, 2003). Given the above, our **second proposition** is: *there is gender parity in startups regardless of both hierarchical level (vertical segregation) and domain (horizontal segregation)*.

Describing and characterizing these barriers can help us to explain the causes and consequences of gender inequalities in the highest positions of the organizational hierarchy (FANIKO *et al.*, 2018). The barriers identified in the academic literature have different origins (men, women) and types (horizontal, vertical). The barrier entitled *glass ceiling* emerged in the 1980s (DOZIER, 1988) and has been the dominant metaphor when it comes to contextualizing the challenges faced by women seeking promotion in organizations (CARLI; EAGLY, 2016). It refers to an invisible, but difficult to overcome, barrier that prevents women from reaching the highest positions in the hierarchy of organizations (FOLKE; RICKNE, 2016). The further up the hierarchy, the stronger the sex discriminatory barriers (FOLKE; RICKNE, 2016), hence the positions at the top of the hierarchy are still mostly occupied by men, who create strong enough networks to establish a male culture that prevents women from entering this environment (COOK; GLASS, 2014). Their behaviors, habits, and dialogues are also obstacles to female entry what ensure that this context remains unchanged (Folke; Rickne, 2016). Thus, our **third proposition** says that *transparency in management careers, allied with cross-functional collaboration, weakens the glass ceiling and favors women's ascension in startups*.

The *Queen bee* phenomenon refers to women who take on male characteristics and prevent the rise of other women to leadership positions (FANIKO *et al.*, 2016). This suggests competitiveness among women and presents an extremely negative image of women who reach senior positions in organizations. However, scientific studies of the metaphor have not solely identified the characteristics of the women themselves as responsible for the emergence of the queen bee phenomenon, instead stressing that the organization also plays a fundamental role in this regard (see FANIKO *et al.*, 2017). The strong male influence on decision-making positions and the unequal treatment of men and women also contribute to the emergence and development of this phenomenon (DERKS *et al.*, 2011).

Women identified as queen bees exhibit three typical behaviors: i) they do not identify with women who either occupy positions at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy or are at the beginning of their careers; ii) they adopt typically masculine characteristics and have similar ways of dressing, speaking, and relating to subordinates; iii) they behave in a way that legitimizes the status quo (FANIKO *et al.*, 2018).

It is believed that those who exhibit these behaviors do so because of the countless difficulties they have experienced throughout their careers (FANIKO *et al.*, 2018). Assuming that competitive and male-dominated organizations favor queen bee behavior, our **fourth proposition** is: *the team mentality in startups favors cooperation between women and self-identification, thus reducing the likelihood that they undermine their female colleagues' careers*.

The *firewall* metaphor take ownership from the computer science term (BENDL; SCHMIDT, 2010). The technical term refers to a tool that prevents the entry of malware into the system. The firewall metaphor therefore concerns the virtual walls erected by people who have created a given system and who have the power to allow or deny the entry of outsiders,

depending on whether they have similar characteristics to those of the group or system in question (BENDL; SCHMIDT, 2010). To enter the system, an outsider must crack the code created by the manager. This discriminatory code may concern sex, age, education, ethics, or social background, and may change over time or according to the context. The flexibility of this code means that i) the firewall metaphor can be adapted to modern organizations characterized by greater empowerment and flexibility; ii) code may be even more obscure to outsiders; and iii) the organization's network is key to accessing the code. Given the characteristics of this firewall metaphor, thus our **fifth proposition** is that *a lack of physical barriers in the workplace and a flexible organizational culture allow women to become part of informal mixed networks, which in turn facilitate their access to the codes that will allow them to advance their career.*

The barrier called *labyrinth* refers to gender segregation or exclusion that begins when women first choose their area of professional activity and persists throughout their career (CARLI; EAGLY, 2016). The labyrinth metaphor, coined by Eagly and Carli (2007), does not refer to a single and homogeneous type of barrier that is only erected at the lowest or highest levels of the career path. Rather, it refers to several complex obstacles that women may face over time in their job trajectory, which is often characterized as *winding* (CARLI; EAGLY, 2016). The labyrinth also symbolizes the pitfalls that women face professionally, and which can result in the waste of female talent. Just as some paths may lead more directly to leadership, others may lead nowhere, or to dead ends, meaning that people stagnate at a certain level, and may even abandon their chosen career. The metaphor suggests that advancing one's career is difficult, but not impossible than persistence in the face of mistakes and obstacles is also essential to reach a leadership role (EAGLY; CARLI, 2007). Given this, our **sixth proposition** is that *women do not perceive as many diverse and complex barriers erected by gender bias when working in startups as they do in traditional organizations.*

4 METHODS

To achieve the objective of this study, we took a theoretical path, analyzing whether typical startup features necessarily give rise to a gendered organization and how relationships with male counterparts, customers, and with gendered institutions, impact women's professional experiences in startups.

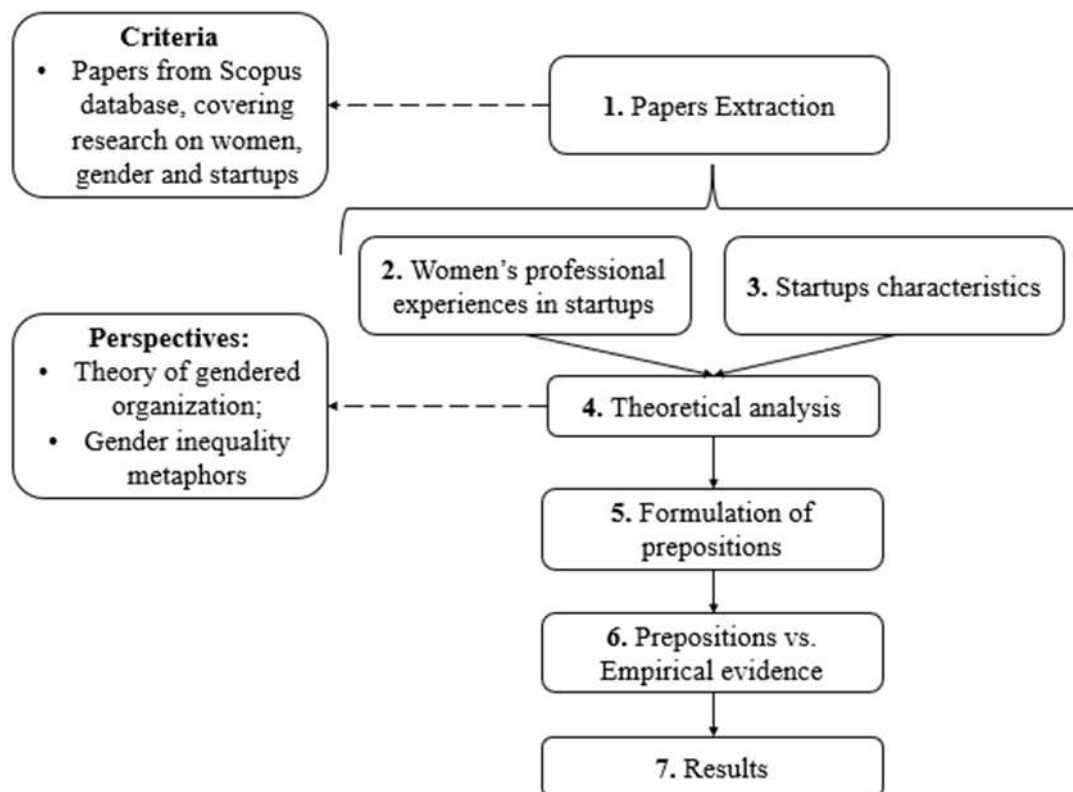
We gathered, through reading, information about women's experiences and analyzed them according to propositions based on six concepts (gendered organization, horizontal and vertical segregation, glass ceiling, queen bee phenomenon, firewall, and labyrinth). The reflective and critical discussion of this conceptual study is based on the articulation of authors central to the debate on traditional gender organizations and gender metaphors, such as Acker, Faniko, Carli, Eagly, and others, with contributions that engage with contemporary organizational models, especially those linked to the so-called new economy, such as startups.

The publications we analyzed were extracted from the Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases, using the search terms "women" OR "gender" AND "startups" in the title, abstract and keyword fields. The inclusion criteria were studies that addressed the experiences of women in the context of startups, especially those that presented empirical data. Academic productions in English, Portuguese, French, and Spanish were included.

The bibliographic selection was guided by the relevance of the works to the fields of Applied Social Sciences and Economics, with special attention to contributions that support the analysis of gender relations in contemporary organizations. No time frame was used to exclude publications, allowing for a more comprehensive and historical analysis of the topic. Central studies on metaphors were also researched to aid in the analysis of the works found. The

literature review flowchart is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Theoretical review



The construction of this study is divided into seven main stages: The first stage consisted of extracting scientific articles indexed in the databases and with available access. Subsequently, the selected articles were examined for descriptions and analyses of the professional experiences of women in startup environments. It should be emphasized that this stage was not linear; the authors conducted further searches and extractions as necessary. In parallel, the studies were analyzed for the structural and cultural characteristics of the startups.

The information obtained in the previous stages was subsequently subjected to theoretical analysis considering two main perspectives: Gendered organization theory and metaphors of gender inequality. Based on the theoretical analysis, theoretical propositions were formulated. The developed propositions were then compared with the empirical data identified in the reviewed articles, seeking corroboration, contrast, or expansion. The final stage consisted of synthesizing the results obtained, organizing the main findings.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that the academic background of the authors of this work, in the fields of Administration and Organizational Psychology, and the theoretical readings accumulated throughout these careers were decisive elements in defining the frameworks used and formulating the reflections presented. This formative basis directly influenced the choice of concepts mobilized and the way in which the categories of analysis were constructed throughout the essay.

5 DISCUSSION AND REFLECTIONS ON THE PROPOSITIONS

The organizational structure of startups allows its members to feel free to take on challenging and complex tasks, without the need for the leader to command or impose these tasks. Thus, the startup can be a space in which women take on characteristics that are socially linked to men, such as being assertive (DERKS *et al.*, 2016) and taking responsibility, without necessarily expecting their superior to entrust them with a challenging activity. In this sense, the way startups organize themselves allows for the creation of more equal spaces that favor female performance.

Furthermore, startups are known for their flexibility in terms of working hours and place of work. Some people can work from home, and there is no obligation to work fixed hours, thus allowing women to manage their allocation of time to work versus the private sphere dimensions that are closely intertwined in women's lives (O'NEIL *et al.*, 2008). Startups therefore tend to adopt a less bureaucratic organizational structure, in order to foster innovation and creativity. This type of structure allows women to achieve a worklife balance, and empowers them to take responsibility and be more assertive, thus favoring gender equality, confirming our first proposition.

Empirical evidence indicates that startups are a more friendly environment for women. However, statistical data show that women are in a clear minority among startup founders (STEFANUTO, 2023; KAMBERIDOU, 2020) mainly in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) field (Kuschel *et al.*, 2020). Data from the Brazilian Startup Association (Abstartups, 2023) confirms the underrepresentation of women in Brazilian technology companies. Women represent 41.9% of employees and only 19.7% of startup founders in the country. Data from the Startup Landscape: Female Leadership (Liga Insights, 2024) report, prepared by Liga Ventures, shows that only 22% of the investment volume raised by startups in 2023 went to companies with female leadership.

We can therefore conclude that there is vertical gender segregation in these organizations (BERGER; KURCKERTZ, 2016). They are also in a minority in middle leadership or non-leadership positions in STEM entrepreneurship (POGGESI *et al.*, 2020). The nature of the startup's business activity also seems to influence the numbers of women founders and those who work in other positions within these organizations, as there is empirical evidence of gender segregation in jobs that require digital and technological skills (HARDEY, 2019), characterizing horizontal segregation (CHARLES, 2003). Our second proposition is thereby not true, as gender parity cannot be said to exist in startups regardless of hierarchical level and domain.

Our third proposition was that transparency in career development processes combined with intersectional collaboration between functions reduces the glass ceiling in startups. Results reported by Mickey (2019), who compared the development of female careers in organizations in their startup phase and later as a public institution, indicated that cross-functional collaboration allied with transparency allows women to show their abilities in different domains, and to see what they need to do to develop their careers and how long it will take to achieve their goals. Flexible work roles contribute to gender equity once they neglect the gendered work division (SMITH-DOERR, 2004). The present review examined whether startups are gendered organizations for women in middle leadership positions, and if so how. Given that cross-functional collaboration furthers women's careers (MICKEY, 2019), we concluded that the characteristics of startups tend to reduce the strength of the glass ceiling for women, thus allowing us to confirm our third proposition.

It is nevertheless important to emphasize that the literature about women entrepreneurs and the glass ceiling they face mainly focuses on the funding that is fundamental for the prosperity of their businesses. In these cases, men are clearly privileged compared with women, in terms of the amount of funding they receive (KANZE *et al.*, 2018).

The reward structure of startups contributes to a group culture where individuals feel that they belong to the organization, while at the same time perceiving it as belonging to everyone. These feelings bring professionals closer together and create the promise of equality around career opportunities, especially for women (MICKEY, 2019). The closeness and feeling of equality between professionals regardless of gender reduce the display of female behavioral strategies in male-dominated groups, like the adoption of stereotypically male behaviors and physical and psychological distancing from other subgroups of women (DERKS *et al.*, 2016; FANIKO *et al.*, 2016). The fact that everyone feels comfortable taking on responsibilities that will help the group achieve a goal, even if this assignment does not correspond to their job description (FREEMAN; ENGEL, 2007) makes the work context more egalitarian. When gender stereotypes are softened (be it masculinity related to power and authority, or the association of a woman's failure with a gender characteristic, in comments such as “see, she didn’t succeed, because she’s a woman”), the behavior of distancing oneself from other women as a way of disassociating one’s image from all the negative sex-related stereotypes (DERKS *et al.*, 2011) becomes unnecessary. In these environments, women come together and sometimes even form groups to provide mutual support and share useful ideas for private and professional life (HARDEY, 2019).

Startups therefore differ from traditional, male-dominated organizations that favor the emergence of so-called queen bees among women who manage to reach high leadership positions (Faniko *et al.*, 2016). We therefore believe that the group culture in startups and the promise of equality between careers reduce the queen bee trait of nonidentification with other groups of women, thus allowing us to confirm our fourth proposition.

However, it is worth mentioning that the culture of STEM startups perpetuates the gender stereotypes this historically male-dominated domain (HARVEY, 2020). In the context of technology startups, Hardey (2019) sought to identify the role of gender in tech cities, which are clusters of technology companies (HARDEY, 2019). These clusters are major drivers of innovation, and consequently home to a myriad of startups. In this environment, dominated by male professionals, women still feel that they are perceived according to their gender and often need to adapt to the male culture (HARDEY, 2019). These clusters historically occupied by men in organizations, which Hardey (2019) describes as a microcontext for tech culture, require women to modify their characteristics so that they are more like those adopted by the privileged gender in the institution. This behavior can be observed in women who adhere to the queen bee notion (DERKS *et al.*, 2016; FANIKO *et al.*, 2016). Accordingly, in startups with a strong STEM profile, token women may display queen bee behavior.

Our fifth proposition was that the cool culture and physical proximity in the work environment allow women to become part of informal mixed networks, which in turn facilitate their access to the codes that will promote their careers. Startups are organizations with a physical structure that allows employees to work closer to one another, which enhances their communication. Moreover, the cool culture in startups increases interaction between workers.

In startups, employees dress in a way they feel comfortable, and there is no dress code, in contrast to traditional organizations. Furthermore, there is food and alcoholic beverages available to anyone who wants to take a break and have a drink, play guitar, or enjoy a game of table tennis. The bar space is usually frequented on Friday happy hours or when the group completes a major project and wants to celebrate. All go together, the informal dress code, free

food and alcohol, and the *work hard, play hard* watchword create the cool culture (MICKEY, 2019). They increase communication between workers in different positions and the chances of women learning the code in order to enter the system and advance their careers. We therefore propose that the cool culture in startups benefits women who need to know the codes in order to pursue their career path, thus confirming the fifth proposition.

Even women who recognize the potential benefits of socializing with coworkers know that they have to be very careful, in order to avoid triggering sexual harassment by men (MICKEY, 2019). Moreover, the play hard mentality is more suited to young men and women workers, as they have enough time to devote to it. Organizations in the new economy therefore have gendered practices that differ from those in traditional organizations (WILLIAMS *et al.*, 2012).

Women working in startups have been found to encounter several types of barriers. In spaces where male ideology predominates, such as technology startups, sexist comments are tolerated as part of the organizational culture, and women are seen as technically incompetent, while men are perceived of as strong, skilled and technically gifted. Opportunities for female professional advancement are therefore reduced (HARDEY, 2019). Even though there is less prejudice from peers (organizational level) in nontechnological startups, prejudice is still perceived in their interactions with customers, suppliers, and investors (KUSCHEL *et al.*, 2017). Investors' gender biases can be extremely damaging to women, as access to funding is crucial to a startup's success and growth across all its development stages (WELSH *et al.*, 2016; KANZE *et al.*, 2018). Male ventures are better financed than female ones by angel investors or venture capitalists (MALAGA *et al.*, 2018), and men receive more funding than women (KANZE *et al.*, 2018). Concerning investments, the female advantage is limited to crowdfunding, that is, low-value funding where female stereotypes such as being careful and reliable encourage investors to choose projects founded by women (JOHNSON *et al.*, 2018; MALAGA *et al.*, 2018).

Another type of barrier takes the shape of exclusion from male or mixed relationship networks, particularly those that provide access to foreign capital (KANZE *et al.*, 2018; KUSCHEL *et al.*, 2017). Women's social networks are important as a support structure for women working in startups and, more specifically, in predominantly male environments. However, they have their limitations and do not offer support in the amount women need, as female groups restrict and further isolate women (HARDEY, 2019, MCADAM *et al.*, 2019). That said, the sixth proposal of this study was refuted, as women who work in startups perceive different types of barriers along institutional, organizational, and individual dimensions (KUSCHEL *et al.*, 2020) that are imposed on them throughout their careers.

Table 1 - Inequality Theories in the Startup Environment

Startup features	Propositions	Metaphor/ Theory	Situation	Argument
Less bureaucratic structures that value innovation and creativity	Less bureaucratic organizational structure of startups, combined with the fact that they value innovation and creativity, make them more favorable to gender equality	Gendered organizations in the new economy	Confirmed	Flexibility in the role and job description transforms the notion of the abstract job, which perpetuates assumptions about gender and excludes women. Flexibility in working hours and place of work are advantages for women; who can then manage their working time and the private sphere
Flatter hierarchy	There is gender parity in startups regardless of hierarchical level and domain	Vertical and horizontal segregation	Refuted	Low female representativeness on startup boards. Women are a minority in STEM startups, at both boardroom and middle leadership levels
Transparency allied to cross-functional collaboration	Transparency in management careers, allied with cross-functional collaboration, weakens the glass ceiling and favors women's ascension in startups.	Glass ceiling	Confirmed	Women can show their abilities in a different domain, and at the same time know what they have to do to develop their career and how long it will take to achieve their goals. Flexible work roles contribute to gender equality once the gendered work division has been abandoned.
Team mentality	Team mentality in startups favors cooperation between women and self-identification, thus reducing the chances that they will undermine their female colleagues' careers	Queen bee phenomenon	Confirmed	The proximity and feeling of equality between professionals regardless of gender reduce the manifestation of female behavioral strategies in male-dominated groups, as distancing from other women.
Physical proximity in the work environment and cool culture	Lack of physical barriers in the workplace and flexible organizational culture facilitate women access to the codes that will allow them to advance their career	Firewall	Confirmed	The physical structure and cool culture of startups increase interaction between workers, thereby allowing women to become aware of the codes needed to advance their careers.
	Women do not perceive as many diverse and complex barriers erected by gender bias when working in startups	Labyrinth	Refuted	Barriers between women and their financiers, suppliers, and customers and of becoming part of male networks

6 FINAL NOTES AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

In the present study, we asked whether startups are as gendered as traditional organizations for women in middle leadership positions, and if so, how. We adopted an approach whereby we analyzed different startups features that might explain the gender inequalities women experience at work. More specifically, we analyzed startup features in relation to the theory of gendered organization, horizontal and vertical segregation, and four barriers popularly referred to as the *glass ceiling*, *queen bee phenomenon*, *firewall*, and *labyrinth*. This allowed us to formulate six propositions about whether and how startups (re)produce gender inequalities.

These six propositions were analyzed in the light of the available literature on women in startups, although none of the articles we reviewed explicitly referred to these metaphors, so we made an effort to reflect about the barriers to female participation in startups in light of the glass ceilings, firewalls, labyrinths, or queen bee in startups.

We were thus able to confirm that startups are gendered systems because they impact and are impacted by a socially gendered system that continues to place obstacles in the path of female employees. Nonetheless, by virtue of the fact that these organizations have a very different structure from traditional ones, they offer a more favorable environment to women than traditional businesses. Their cross-functional collaboration, team mentality, job description flexibility, and transparency all favor women's career paths, making them feel comfortable giving their opinion, be assertive, and thus become leaders faster and younger in startups than in traditional organizations (MICKEY, 2019).

Despite this more favorable context for women employees, managers, top managers and executives in startups, female entrepreneurs still have to contend with a strongly gendered system. They can encounter difficulties with suppliers, funding, and clients, and it can be even worse if they work in historically male-dominated areas such as STEM (KUSCHEL *et al.*, 2017, HARDEY, 2019), meaning that they have to endure a doubly gendered system (KUSCHEL *et al.*, 2020).

Acker (1990) concluded that a new theory should be developed as a consequence of organizational changes in the workplace, while Williams *et al.* (2012) argued that even with such changes, gender disparities persist, and it is important to observe when an organizational structure and practices reproduce discrimination. However, there have been few gender studies in this environment. The theme is a recent one, and most authors have concentrated on the funding and/or economic value of startups led by women (TOBIASIEWICZ, 2019). There is therefore a need to investigate this area further.

For instance, taking the metaphors as their theoretical starting point, researchers could investigate the barriers encountered by women who work in startups and by those who have created one, examining the similarities and differences between these two situations. It is also relevant to identify whether women who work in startups are aware of barriers and gender discrimination in their daily work. Although startups are generally technology- and innovation-based, their business activity is not limited to technology and can involve work in a myriad of areas. It is therefore useful to examine the status of the work women perform in different kinds of startups and investigate, for instance, whether the technology sector is more unequal than others.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its analysis of the structure of startups, a type of new economy organization that presupposes an environment of innovation and creativity, and in its analysis of gender and startups, which shifts the focus of discussion from barriers regarding funding to other organizational and individual barriers. From a practical perspective, it highlights the role of new organizational models in perpetuating gender disparities and proposes reflections and actions to transform the practices that maintain male supremacy. Finally, we hope to have shown the relevance of investigating these spaces, in order to identify the opportunities and challenges to women in this new organizational logic and stimulate further theoretical discussion on gender and startups.

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