Degendering organizations? The emergence of postfeminist networks[1]

Degenerificando as organizações? A emergência das redes pós-feministas

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Abstract

Purpose: This article aims to present an initial analysis of a new form of collective action related to gender issues emerging in the Brazilian corporate world. It is based on an empirical investigation through two networks of women executives that aim to encourage gender equity in organizations. The analysis was structured based on the following research question: What is the potential of these networks related to gender equity led by executive women to degender organizations? The findings help to understand the complexity of this phenomenon, with its ambiguities and contradictions.

Originality/value: The originality of the article resides in the proposition of the concept of postfeminist networks to understand this new form of collective action for gender equity in the corporate environment. This concept helps researchers in Organizations Studies better understand moderate corporate feminism, reflecting and deflecting feminism.

Design/methodology/approach: Qualitative research of exploratory nature, whose investigation strategy was a multiple case study. Data collection occurred in two stages: documentary, and interviews. The interviews were with ten executives who lead and act directly in the management of two networks, both located in São Paulo, and aimed at increasing the representation of women in leadership positions in business.

Findings: The results show crucial limitations of these networks. They are related to a claimed distance from feminism and even a disdain for the feminist movement. They also do not consider the intersections between gender and other social markers of difference, such as race, class, and sexuality. Despite these limitations, this experience cannot be neglected. They represent a significant advance in individual strategies that women undertake to occupy spaces in the corporate world and those concerning affinity groups created by executive women within each company. These advances are even more critical in a business environment. There are typically very few women in upper management positions, and where male leaders have done very little in encouraging their presence in upper management.

Keywords: gender equity, degendering, executive women, postfeminist, networks

Resumo

Objetivo: Este artigo tem como objetivo apresentar uma análise inicial de uma nova forma de ação coletiva relacionada às questões de gênero que surge no mundo empresarial brasileiro. É baseado em uma investigação empírica em duas redes de mulheres executivas que atuam para incentivar a equidade de gênero nas organizações. A investigação foi estruturada a partir da seguinte questão de pesquisa: Qual é o potencial dessas redes relacionadas à equidade de gênero e lideradas por mulheres executivas para degenerificar as organizações? Os resultados ajudam a compreender a complexidade desse fenômeno, com suas ambiguidades e contradições.

Originalidade/valor: A originalidade do artigo reside na proposição do conceito de redes pós-feministas para a compreensão dessa nova forma de ação coletiva pela equidade de gênero no ambiente corporativo. Esse conceito ajuda os pesquisadores em Estudos Organizacionais a aprofundarem a compreensão desse tipo de feminismo corporativo moderado, que reflete e refrata o feminismo.

Design/metodologia/abordagem: Pesquisa exploratória de natureza qualitativa, cuja estratégia de investigação foi o estudo de casos múltiplos. A coleta de dados ocorreu em duas etapas: documental e entrevistas com dez executivas que lideram e atuam diretamente na gestão de duas redes, ambas localizadas em São Paulo, e têm o objetivo de aumentar a representatividade de mulheres em cargos de liderança nas empresas.

Resultados: Os resultados mostram limites importantes dessas redes. Eles estão especialmente relacionados a um distanciamento reivindicado com o feminismo e até mesmo um desdém pelo movimento feminista e também o fato de não considerarem as intersecções entre gênero e outros marcadores sociais de diferença, como raça, classe e sexualidade. Apesar desses limites, essa experiência não pode ser negligenciada, pois representa um avanço importante em relação às estratégias individuais que as mulheres empreendem para ocupar espaços no mundo corporativo, inclusive em relação aos grupos de afinidade criados por mulheres executivas dentro de cada empresa. Esses avanços são ainda mais importantes em um ambiente de negócios, como o brasileiro, em que há poucas mulheres em cargos de alta gestão no mundo corporativo e quase nada tem sido feito por lideranças masculinas para estimular a presença delas nessas posições.

Palavras-chave: equidade de gênero, degenerificando, mulheres executivas, pós-feminismo, redes

INTRODUCTION

Research on gender, and more specifically, on genderizing organizations in the field of Organizational Studies, gained strength in the early 1990's. It can be characterized by two complementary approaches: 1. genderizing of management and organizational knowledge; and 2. gendered organizations. Calás and Smircich (1991), state that the authorial preponderance of men has resulted in a predominance of masculine thinking in organizational theories, including managerial functions. Furthermore, scholars of gendered organizations have argued that the organizational structure is not neutral on gender but constructed from masculinized assumptions.

Acker (1990) and Martin (1990), demonstrate that *job description* and hierarchical positions are masculinized, which causes a woman's ascension to become difficult. From this perspective, genderizing organization occurs from 1. behaviors allowed in certain types and levels of work; 2. symbols and images that reinforce masculine predominance in language, dress codes, press releases, etc. (Acker, 1990). It also occurs through male *taboos*, concerning the female body, especially during pregnancy when a false dichotomy between the demands of private life and those of labor is reified through discourses of "support" to pregnant women in organizations (Martin, 1990), sometimes endorsed by women themselves, as pointed out by Brunstein and Jaime (2009).

The Brazilian academic production on the subject can be characterized mainly by the concern about constraints of the ascension in women's careers and the creation of pragmatic strategies for confronting this challenge. The debate has focused on the proportional absence of women in top management positions and/or collective actions made to reduce this inequality (Andrade et al., 2014; Brunstein & Jaime, 2009; Jaime, 2011; Tonelli & Andreassi, 2013). Among these strategies, women's networks have arisen as an essential way of articulation (Pinto, 2003; Brunstein & Jaime, 2009). Although it has already been noted as an emerging strategy, little is written about it in academic literature. Given the developing nature of these experiences and their research, we led a case study through two networks located in São Paulo that intend to encourage gender equity in organizations. The focus of this study was to analyze the emergence of a new form of collective action related to emerging gender issues in the Brazilian corporate world. The study was built upon the question:

• What is the potential of these networks related to gender equity, led by women executives, to degender organizations?

The following sections look deeper into meaningful academic dialogues about gender, degender, and feminism. Following that, we attempt to contextualize how collective action aimed at gender equity has become an area of interest in the field of Organizational Studies. The methodological strategy adopted in the research is explained, and the data collection and analysis are examined. The findings are then presented and discussed. Subsequently, we propose the concept of postfeminist network (PFN) as an emerging strategy to promote gender equity in organizations. We argue that this strategy, although ambiguous and contradictory, has the potential to degender organizations. Finally, we consider this phenomenon to understand it better, inviting researchers to examine its potential for degendering organizations.

GENDER, GENDERED, DEGENDERING, AND FEMINISM

The analysis of collective action aiming to promote gender equity in the corporate world presented in this article starts with an initial understanding of gender and other concepts derived from it, such as the terms: *gendered* and *degendering*.

We started with some of the classical authors of gender theory, which emerged in the 1980's, in the wake of women's studies that marked the social sciences in the 1970's (Casares, 2006). It can be said that there are two primary efforts in this theory: 1. to denaturalize the behaviors considered as masculine and as feminine, proving that they are socially constructed; 2. to emphasize the relational and structural character of gender, highlighting that it is not only a question of investigating how relationships between men and women take place, but also to understand how they are structured in terms of power dynamics.

Gaylin Rubin (2017) defines the sex/gender system as a set of concepts by which biological sex is shaped by human social intervention. In turn, Joan Scott (1986) highlighted that the idea of gender needs to be understood as a constitutive element of social relations based on the differences that distinguish the sexes and, simultaneously, as a form of power relations between the sexes. Some explanations about this power relationship suggest its universal character. Sherry Ortner (1979) and Michelle Rosaldo (1979), denounced male domination, associating it with patriarchy and, in most societies, being responsible for the greatest value associated with male activities, which resulted in the establishment of barriers, and the exclusion of women on decisive activities.

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However, this perspective was opposed to approaches, such as Moore's (1999, 2005), which, without denying the importance of analyzing gender inequalities, emphasized the need to give up an "a priori" that can diminish the understanding of how these inequalities are structured in specific scenarios. She warned that social research must account for the enormous variability in local gender understandings. By this, she meant that human cultures have multiple discourses of gender, contradictory and conflicting, operating in specific contexts. Furthermore, although hierarchically ordered, such discourses are subject to historical change. It is necessary to keep in mind, as Rubin (2017) does, that even if the sex/gender system is not immutably oppressive, it will not disappear without opposition.

This makes way for two more terms associated with gender: gendered and degendering. As for the first term, we believe it has already been made clear. It is a question of understanding that societies, as organizations, are often structured based on gender. In other words, they are marked by cultural conceptions associated with the sexes, something very different from an implicit biological determinism (Casares, 2006). A concrete example of this is the lower symbolic value attributed to a job performed by women. The second term is associated with distinct and possibly contradictory efforts to overcome gender as a structuring category of social relations. Such a program can be summed up in a statement made by Marilym Strathern (1979, p. 148): "The revolution is not about winning the privilege of males, but rather in eliminating the distinction". The word revolution here refers to another remark, made by Rubin (2017, p. 55): "The sex/gender system must be reorganized through political action". With this, we enter the issue of feminism.

Evans (2006) points out that feminism can be considered a social movement that emerged in post-Enlightenment Europe, having significant contributions to changes in women's social situation and perception of themselves. The author suggests that the history of feminism is usually divided into two major waves. The first wave extends from the middle of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, while the second wave began in the 1970's. The struggle marked these two phases for the right to control one's own body, voting, education, work, and equal remuneration. In addition to these two waves, Evans (2006) adds a third wave: which began in the 21st century. At this moment, in addition to the continuity of many of the previous struggles, new agendas are brought that question the idea of a unified feminist movement.

Along these lines, Calás and Smircich (1999) and Giddens (2012) argue that feminism has manifested itself from differentiated approaches, with

agendas that preach from the restructuring of societies and organizations to the total deconstruction of capitalism and patriarchy. The main theoretical feminist approaches that have emerged over time were the liberal, radical, psychoanalytic, Marxist, socialist, poststructuralist, and post-colonialist, summarized in Table 1. It is worth mentioning that the emergence of each approach occurred as a response to the constraints of the others. Although they appear to be independent and differentiated, their boundaries are unclear (Calás & Smircich, 1999, p. 277).

Table 1

Main feminist theoretical approaches

Theoretical approaches	Synthesis
Liberal	Shaped by the liberal political ideal that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it argues that individuals are considered autonomous beings, endowed with rationality; conceives the idea of gender from the notion of "sexual class", that is, relative to the condition of women as an oppressed class (Calás & Smircich, 1999).
Radical	It arises from the dissatisfaction of feminists with the subordination of women to men and with the domination widely supported by right-wing policies of the 1960s, and it does not see evidence that women can be liberated from sexual oppression through reforms or gradual changes (Giddens, 2012).
Psychoanalytic	It denies biological determinism through Freudian interpretations of gender and sexuality (Flax, 1990).
Marxist	It observes the construction of identities through social and labor practices, relating power and sexuality, which are intertwined in the relations between capital and labor, and argues that men, as a group, dominate and control women as another group (Calás & Smircich, 1999).
Socialist	The traditional Marxist approach gives rise to Socialist Feminist Theory, which was consequently influenced by radical and psychoanalytic theories; in this approach, the patriarchal system remains the basis of inequalities (Scott, 1986).
Poststructuralist	It rejects the notions used to explain gender inequality (patriarchy, race, or class) as something essentialist (Beasley, 1999).
Third world/(post) colonialist	It challenges gender relations and Western feminist approaches; and argues that heterosexual white feminists from middle and high class developed countries and is not accessible to all women (Rabay, 2008).

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In Brazil, at least three moments played a prominent role in the history of feminism (Alvarez, 1998; Pinto, 2003). The first moment was mainly focused on winning the right to vote. That struggle occurred through collective actions carried out at the turn of the twentieth century, lasting until around 1932. Pinto (2003) points out two major currents during this period. The first current is named "well behaved", including women from the middle class and higher education. Bertha Lutz was one of the prominent leaders responsible for creating the Brazilian Federation for Female Progress and the Female University Union. The second current can be associated with radical or Marxist feminism (Calás & Smircich, 1999; Giddens, 2012). It was formed by anarchists, workers, and unionist women.

The second wave began in the 1960s and focused on resisting military dictatorship. During this time, Brazilian women encountered international feminism through travel or literature, or, in the case of some, while in exile. This second period extended until the country's re-democratization, began in 1985, and was formed by intellectuals, professors, and liberal professionals, mostly engaged in human and social sciences. They led various studies focused on violence against women and women's health (Pinto, 2003).

The third movement of Brazilian feminist history emerged in the late twentieth century, in the 1990s, and was characterized by a much more multifaceted context. Alvarez (1998) points out that Latin American feminism is configured in this period as a heterogeneous, polycentric field in which different discourses around the meanings of feminism and its political strategies coexist and compete. Both Alvarez (1998) and Pinto (2003) stress that Brazilian feminist movements have extended beyond the groups and organizations that constituted their original *locus*. The spaces in which women who claim to be feminists act have multiplied. The streets, self-reflection collectives, and popular education workshops were expanded to non-governmental organization (NGOs), political parties, parliaments, international organizations, the media, and social networks.

It is interesting to note that, in highlighting this expansion, they do not include the corporate world as another space in which women have carried out feminist action. Perhaps this is due to the recent nature of this phenomenon.

COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR GENDER EQUITY IN THE CORPORATE WORLD

Even though the promotion of gender equity became a global social concern and was included in the Millennium Development Goals (Agenda

2000-2015) and the Sustainable Development Objectives (Agenda 2016-2030) for 193 Member States of the United Nations (UN), gender inequalities in the corporate world are an indisputable reality in Brazil. According to a survey by the Ethos Institute (2016), women represented only 31.3% of middle management, 13.6% of top management, and 11% of the corporate board in the 500 largest companies operating in the country. The representation of black women is even less. They occupy only 1.6% of middle management. In top management, their presence is reduced to 0.4%, totaling only two professional black women out of every 548 directors, black and non-black, of both sexes. Depending on the efforts of the men who occupy leadership positions in these companies, this situation will not change rapidly. Only 12% of these corporations declared to the Ethos survey that they have policies with goals and actions planned to encourage women in top management positions. Most of them (68.4%) admitted that they do not have measures for this purpose, while 19.6% acknowledged having only punctual actions.

As those data are accessed, the scientific production about gender inequalities progresses in the field of Organizational Studies in Brazil. The debate has occurred with the following scope: management skills and styles; the relation between manager and subordinate; careers and barriers to professional growth; salary differences between men and women; work and family balance; and generational differences (Cappelle et al., 2007; Fleury, 2013). It has also been emphasized that gender concepts and meanings are associated with economic and professional activities, with consequences for the careers of men and women (Jaime, 2011). The most commonly used indicators have been the salary difference between men and women and women in leadership positions compared to men (Bruschini & Puppin, 2004; Fontenele-Mourão, 2006; Kanan, 2010; Jaime, 2011). The most commonly cited causes for gender inequalities are: 1. lack of experience and opportunities; 2. career inadequacies; 3. stereotypes; 4. obstacles in the workplace; 5. women's lack of interest, who prefer to dedicate their time to other activities (Reszecki, 2001). In this context, the search for better qualifications of women has been understood as an important way to face disadvantages in hiring compared to men (Kanan, 2010). However, in addition to this type of individual effort, the emergence of collective actions through the creation of affinity groups is currently observed as a strategy for coping with the gender inequalities in the corporate world.

Brunstein and Jaime (2009) defined this phenomenon as collective actions in which minority groups and/or people historically discriminated against and excluded from power positions, prestige, and remuneration in
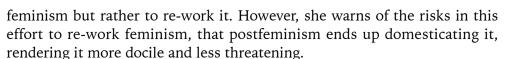
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organizations seek to offer emotional support and promote their members' careers. It is an agency capacity that arises when a common purpose engages and gathers different people. It results in a structure composed of people or organizations interconnected by one or more types of relations and sharing common values and goals. Such a structure can provide access to important social, political, and professional resources (Giddens, 2012).

In the corporate world, these networks have mainly arisen due to the difficulty of women ascending to higher positions in the hierarchy of companies. The mobilization of professionals for the exercise of collective actions has been increasingly realized and is established to overcome barriers reducing gender inequalities while conditions of equity in the business increase (Brunstein & Jaime, 2009; Tonelli & Andreassi, 2013). This does not mean that the existence of this arrangement leads to a profound transformation of gender relations in the corporate world. However, it is an undeniable fact that women have been engaged in collective actions to open possibilities of their career development in a context characterized by asymmetries (Brunstein & Jaime, 2009).

The ambiguous character of collective action for gender equity in the corporate world undertaken by executive women has been pointed out by the Organizational Studies literature. According to Lewis (2014), instead of exploring women's organizational experiences solely in terms of exclusion connected to a dominant masculine norm, researchers should make efforts to assess how women are now being included in contemporary workplaces. Billing (2011) also challenges the definition of women primarily as victims of male's norm. She argues that it is necessary to interpret women's organizational experience as variable, complex, and contradictory.

For Lewis (2014), the concept of postfeminism allows us to understand the complexity and contradictions of this phenomenon. This is because this notion incorporates a sense of fracture and fragmentation in the project of feminism, moving away from the vision that women share a standard set of experiences. She emphasizes that understanding postfeminism in such "post" terms means emphasizing its pluralistic and anti-foundational tendencies. In her literature review, she argues that postfeminism cannot simply be equated with a denunciation of, or a non-identity with, feminist politics. There may be a repudiation of "excessive" feminism while accepting and promoting, in such spaces as work organizations, more moderate feminism.

In summary, from her perspective, postfeminism is not against feminism but about feminism that reconsiders and makes a clear shift in its categories and questions. To phrase it another way, it does not seek to supersede

feminism but rather to re-work it. However, she warns of the risks in this effort to re-work feminism, that postfeminism ends up domesticating it, rendering it more docile and less threatening.

This ambivalent character of the collective actions to promote gender equity at work carried out by executive women is also underlined by Mavin and Grandy (2019). They use the notion of moderate corporate feminism. According to them, women leaders at the top of organizations are critiqued in Gender and Organizations Studies for diluting feminism, ignoring gender inequalities, discrimination, and male domination. So, moderate corporate feminism is seen as a gender "trumping class" in which women talk with others in management about their obstacles such as sexual harassment and unequal incentives. Nevertheless, the persistent rarity of women who hold senior positions in companies illustrates why their experiences are imperative for feminist futures. They argue that these executive women act in a contradictory space. On the one hand, they are privileged to occupy positions of significant organizational power and high salaries. While on the other hand, they are still a minority, and their privilege is fragile and unstable.

According to Mavin and Grandy (2019), women leaders in the corporate world acknowledge and challenge the pervasive power dynamics embedded in various organizational structures. Moderate corporate feminism can be seen as a kind of resistance. However, it can also be understood as a conservative effort attached to individualism, merit, and choice. Furthermore, these individualized, mainly white middle-class women can stay away from solidarity and common goals towards their personal initiative to improve their career prospects in the corporate world. They also may render other women (black, lesbian, transgender) voiceless. This does not mean that they should be vilified by the feminist movement. Instead, their experiences need to be understood in their complexity and ambiguity. Their paths reveal postfeminist double entanglements. They both acknowledge, often implicitly, feminism while simultaneously rejecting it. Briefly, moderate corporate feminism reflects and deflects feminism. Those remarks guided our analysis of a new form of collective action related to gender issues that emerge in the Brazilian corporate world.

METHOD

This study, which aimed to analyze the emergence of a new form of collective action related to gender issues in the Brazilian business world, started from the following research question:

- What is the potential of these networks related to gender equity led by executive women to degender organizations?

To answer this question, we surveyed two networks that operate to increase the representativeness of women in leadership positions in business. The criteria to select these two experiences were: 1. to have objectives in compliance with the interest of the study; 2. to be based in the city of São Paulo; 3. to enable their access to data collection.

Because it focused on two units of analysis, the research strategy used was the multiple case study (Yin, 2003; Berg, 2007). We divided the research into two steps: 1. data collection and analysis through two networks out of printed and digital documents (websites, newsletters, newspapers, magazines, and folders); and 2. data collection and analysis through semi-structured interviews with members of those networks. This type of interview is recommended to focus on a particular subject. We used a script with the primary questions, which could be complemented with other questions based on the progress of the interview. Thus, the interviewees could speak freely without being conditioned to the standardization of alternatives (Quivy & Campenhoudt, 2013). The studies were conducted separately in each of the networks through reports generated individually, and the analytical data were cross-referenced. The design of this multiple case study used the logic of replication, in which the procedures adopted were the same for each case (Yin, 2003; Berg, 2007).

Table 2 presents the characterization of the networks studied.

Table 2

Characterization of networks A and B

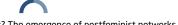|	Net A	Net B
Purpose	Promote female leadership to achieve gender balance in leadership positions.	Promote the excellence of Latin American professionals, improve the economic condition of women in Latin America, promote women's leadership in the corporate environment, and contribute to women's empowerment.
Starting date	Between 2013 and 2014.	
Head office	The city of São Paulo and connections in Brazil and abroad.	
Members	About 100 women in Brazil (30% foreign and 10% participate on its board).	About 100 members (women and men) in Brazil and abroad.

(continue)

Table 2 (conclusion)

Characterization of networks A and B

	Net A	Net B
Technologies	Both networks make heavy use of information and communication technologies (ICTs)	
To join the network	It is necessary to have: Complete undergraduate course, approximately seven years of professional experience, fluent English, and fill out the registration on the global network website.	Through invitations. It is necessary to be in a position of power and decision in some organizations and to have international experience.
Partnerships	Higher education institution; global consulting and research firm; other organizations in Brazil and abroad.	Higher education institutions; communication vehicles; male business leaders.
Main actions	Events focused on skills development and networking, mentoring and entrepreneurship programs, and the dissemination of good practices by companies focused on gender equality.	Events to mobilize male leadership; dissemination of studies and research and support to companies in the development of programs and policies for gender equality.

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the documents from networks A and B.

For the definition of the interviewees, our criterion was strategic; that is, we interviewed executive women who lead and operate directly in the management of the networks. In most cases, we conducted the interviews in person in the companies where the executive women work. Five executives from network A and five from network B were interviewed, and the conversations lasted an average of 40 minutes. Due to work commitments, there were difficulties in reconciling the executives' agendas with the scheduling of the interviews. In addition, the time horizon of analysis was short (about one year), limiting the number of interviewees.

All participants occupy top management positions (as directors or vice-presidents) in companies. They have higher education and post-graduate level, and one has a master's degree. All speak fluent English, and more than half have international experience. The university education of the interviewed group is quite varied and goes through typically feminine areas such as Language and Literature, Human Resources, and Social Communication, but includes others such as Law, Business Administration, Accounting, Economics, and Engineering. Eight are Brazilian, and two are European, with a length of stay in Brazil between three and six years. Their ages range

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from 35 to 54 years. Most are married, and only two said they had no children. They all identify as white women.

We analyzed the data through content analysis to favor the search for the information contained in the interviews (Bardin, 2004). Therefore, we prioritize categories related to the research question, that is, those that help to understand how the networks led by executive women who work in Brazil are configured to promote gender equity in the corporate world; and how they have acted to reduce inequalities between men and women in business, especially concerning disparities in leadership positions. Briefly, their potential to degender organizations. The next section established the categories and subcategories presented in Table 3, including the interview content as empirical evidence.

EMERGENCY OF NETWORKS LED BY EXECUTIVE WOMEN AND FOCUSED ON GENDER EQUITY

In Table 3, we describe, exemplify, and explain our findings. Each category helps to understand an important aspect of the phenomenon analyzed.

Table 3

Results

Analytical category	Subcategories	Empirical evidence
Motivations	The relevance of the issue for organizations	"An organization that does not have women in decision-making positions does not reflect society, does not understand society and leaves companies poorer in many ways" (E3, Net A).
	Influence of experiences abroad	"Ten years later, when I came back to Brazil [after working in a bank in Switzerland], it was somewhat mind-blowing to know that these very intelligent and professionally ambitious women, with whom I had contact, were not working in any companies. They had little children and had a hard time reconciling work and family. Yet men were all vice presidents in large corporations" (E3, Net A).
	Personal purpose and legacy	"My greatest wish is to make my contribution. That's because of the professional level I reached – I became a CEO – with all my career and my life experience, with my struggles and my battles, I believe that I should try to help other women to get there too" (E8, Net B).

(continue)

Table 3 (continuacion)

Results

Analytical category	Subcategories	Empirical evidence
Motivations	Career development and professional networking	"Participation in the network brought me recognition in the company I work, and it also improved my articulation in the organization" (E1, Net A).
Focus of action	Gender parity at the highest hierarchical levels	As a first objective, the networks analyzed have gender parity in the positions of power and decision-making in companies. This goal works as a guiding force for their actions, which are carried out at two levels: 1. individual level that aims to promote the development of new skills for women who are already active in the market, training them to work in *middle* and *top management* positions; 2. organizational level that cares for the promotion of events and instructive projects on relations between gender equity and financial results (DOCUMENTATION OF THE A AND B NETWORKS).
	Partnerships with strategic stakeholders	The most strategic stakeholders of the networks are Business Schools, international organizations, such as UN Women, other national and international networks, and the government. Partnership agreements focus mainly on enabling an expansion of the action scope for the network. More specifically, it seeks to contact young professionals at their career start to assist them in getting to leadership positions. To do so, the networks have been developing forms of integration and support, either through the mentoring program or through the support of a business school (DOCUMENTATION OF A AND B NETWORKS).
Challenges	Diagnosis of causes	"We focus on identifying the causes of gender disparity in positions of power, which is very difficult" (E5, Net A).
	Intersectionality	"We do not talk much about diversity [race, sexual orientation, etc.]. There are other entities or organizations that deal with that. In fact, our goal is to help women, at managerial positions, reach the *top level* of companies" (E8, Net B).
Barriers	Sexism	"Brazil has a sexist culture that replicates itself in the business world. This culture is embodied by women, and most of them do not realize gender inequality in high-ranking posts" (E1, Net A).
	Abandonment of career	"Some women, at a certain career level, leave the job market, which contributes to this imbalance in the top management positions" (E1, Net A).

(continue)

Table 3 (conclusion)

Results

Analytical category	Subcategories	Empirical evidence
Barriers	Biases	"The network holds many networking meetings for women early in the morning. For me, it is a good time because my children leave for school. So, I take advantage of the children's school time, and I also take part of my work time, and I attend the meetings. At night, for me, it's awful because I get back home, then *I have* to wash my children, have dinner, help them with their homework" (E7, Net B).
	Absence of organizational policies	"In Brazil, few companies are involved in gender equality, and most of them are multinational corporations" (E2, Net A).
	Lack of resources	"This is voluntary work. In order to expand our activities and rely on structured projects and programs, we would need a fixed team, remunerated properly" (E3, Net A).
View on feminism	Recognition and rejection	"I do not sympathize with the feminist movement at all. It does not drive me. Of course, I'm not throwing away the feminist movement background. But I would not be a person who would go burn bras on the streets. It is not my way. I would not participate, you know…" (E4, Net A).
		"Oh, I do not see myself as a feminist. All that extreme. I think that*'s the last* straw. I've seen a lot of demonstrations, women with breasts out, protesting. I think that's damn silly. This is my view: I am against everything that is extreme, exaggerated, and that causes segregation. I do not think we have to start a war between men and women, and there are a lot of people heading that way. We take the risk of getting the feminist movements to sabotage merit initiatives, don't we?" (E6, Net B).

Source: Elaborated by authors.

The category *motivations* helps understand why this phenomenon has arisen. It was divided into four subcategories. In the *relevance of the matter to organizations* subcategory, we can see that the executive woman focus primarily on the absence of women in leadership positions and the consequences for companies. We found that many senior managers women are disinterested in ascending to first-ranking hierarchical positions due to the difficulty with work-life balance (Reszecki, 2001). These executives mention that, with few women in leadership positions, men predominantly

make decisions, which is negative for both society and companies. In the *influence of experiences abroad* subcategory, the participants discuss their background in multinational corporations where they had contact with women's committees and/or were exposed to accounts on obstacles to ascension. As for the formation of committees within organizations, although they may be influenced by senior management, this can be a viable way to achieve the purpose of gender equity (Brunstein & Jaime, 2009).

Regarding the barriers, members of the two networks point out that this is structural and that prejudice and gender discrimination have been present since the time of education. In the *personal purpose and legacy* subcategory, the important aspect is that these women find that their personal life and career paths generate motivation to play a leadership role in the networks. All the executives reported that it is a life mission linked to the desire to contribute to gender equity in the corporate world and leave a legacy. In the *career development and professional networking* subcategory, the goal is to change the image of Latin American professional women worldwide, along with interest in meeting people, exchanging experiences, and broadening the vision of the global professional environment. We realized that integrating these networks has provided participants with access to social, political, and professional resources (Giddens, 2012), thus helping develop their careers (Brunstein & Jaime, 2009). In addition, the ability to cooperate with other people in search of mutual benefits is enhanced and promotes a sense of belonging and trust (Giddens, 2012).

The *focus of action* category helps understand the current internal logic of the phenomenon, shown in two subcategories: *gender parity at the highest hierarchical levels* and *partnerships with strategic stakeholders*. The first works as a guideline for the actions of the networks by aiming at developing new skills for women already in the job market, training them to take top positions, promoting events and instructional projects on relations between gender equity and financial results. The latter aims to establish connections with business schools, international organizations, such as UN Women, other national and international networks, and the Government to help young professional women at their career start on the way to leadership".

The category *challenges* helps to understand the complexities of this phenomenon. It is also divided into two subcategories. The *diagnosis of causes* subcategory enhances that latent/hidden nature of power relations, established from the differences between genders, makes it difficult to precisely analyze the lack of women in top management positions. The *intersectionality subcategory* focuses on overlapping gender differences with other social markers

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such as race, class, sexuality, and age. The participants' profile of both networks consists of white women between 35 and 54 years old, with higher education, fluency in English and other languages, experience in the national and international corporate environment, and occupying leadership positions. The diversity of network A is associated only with the presence of women of other nationalities. In network B, it is related to the presence of men and some younger women, who are even part of the board. When asked about intersectionality in the board's composition, the interviewees' statements presented hesitations and divergences, suggesting that this is not a topic discussed in depth in the networks.

The category *barriers* helps understand the limiting factors of the phenomenon. It is divided into five subcategories. The *sexism subcategory* highlights the sexism incorporated by women, who do not realize the presence of gender inequality in higher hierarchical levels. The interviewees point out that this is something concerning Brazilian culture represented in the corporate world. The *career abandonment* subcategory shows that some women give up their careers due to business standards, such as the absence of management practices for professional women and labor legislation that recognizes and protects women's rights. In this regard, motherhood appears as one of the biggest obstacles to the professional advancement of women in the interviewees' statements. The *biases* subcategory enhances the associations commonly made between house chores and the role of women. We observe that they see housework as the exclusive responsibility of women. In some moments, the women interviewed end up blaming those who do not reach managerial positions, being much more condescending to men who are silent about sexism in the corporate world and do nothing to struggle against gender inequalities. The *absence of organizational policies* subcategory reveals that few companies are involved in gender equity in Brazil, and most of them are multinational corporations. Finally, in the *absence of resources* subcategory, we can realize that the need for fixed teams, remunerated properly and required to expand the networks' activities, does not happen due to scarce resources.

The *view of feminism* category helps set the phenomenon in the historical course on the gender issue in Brazil. Most respondents intentionally reject to consider themselves feminists and even emphasize that the network they belong to has no relation with feminism. However, they recognize the relevance of this movement as a historical predecessor. Even though the reports show the contempt for feminism and the ignorance of its claims, including in the workplace (Kanan, 2010; Fontenele-Mourão, 2006; Pinto, 2003), an

approximation of the networks with postfeminism can be observed in the interviewees' statements (Lewis, 2014), and those with moderate corporate feminism (Mavin & Grandy, 2019).

Based on the results, we contribute to the gender debate in Organizational Studies. We propose and conceptualize the notion of PFN and discuss its distinctive traits and its relation of rupture and continuity *vis-à-vis* feminism. The main implication for the advance in the theory is the new possibility of delimitation: from '"gender issue" to "'postfeminist network"' as an emerging strategy for degender organizations. We summarize our propositions in Table 4 at the end of the next section to make them clear.

TOWARDS THE NOTION OF THE POSTFEMINIST NETWORK

As we have stated, research on gender in the fields of Organizational Studies in Brazil has been characterized by a focus on the barriers of women's career development in organizations and the strategies to cope with them. Special attention has been given to collective actions through networks to increase gender equity (Andrade et al., 2014; Brunstein & Jaime, 2009; Jaime, 2011; Tonelli & Andreassi, 2013). It is an emerging strategy that has been little debated in the literature until recently. Therefore, to advance the debate based on our findings, we introduced the notion of the PFN. We suggest and discuss a definition and point out the paradoxical character of continuity and rupture of these networks concerning feminism and their potential to degender organizations. We propose the notion of PFN to conceptualize the phenomenon of networks led by executive women and focus on gender equity in companies. We use the adjective postfeminist in reference to Lewis's (2014) argument about postfeminism as a repudiation of "excessive" feminism while accepting and promoting, in such spaces as work organizations, more moderate feminism. We also have in mind Mavin and Grandy's (2019) suggestion that moderate corporate feminism reflects and deflects feminism.

- Postfeminist network: collective action organized to promote gender equity that is not based on, or does not share, a feminist *lato sensu* socio-political-ideological struggle, but rather a feminine professional pragmatism, that is, in the search for hierarchy ascension of women in companies through actions focused on *stricto sensu* professional development; and, paradoxically, that maintains a relation of continuity and rupture with feminism.

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The main distinguishing feature that we seek to provide with this definition is that, while feminism has been characterized by the intention to change male domination in the various social arrangements (Flax, 1990), which carries a broad socio-political-ideological sense, the networks we studied are marked by the pragmatic intention of women's ascension in the organizational hierarchy to reach gender equality in power positions. The notion of PFN and the definition we suggest seem to be relevant mainly for two reasons. The first reason is the evident emergence of executive women-led networks as a new phenomenon, or at least a new moment in the history of collective action for gender equity in Brazil, which characterizes a split from feminism. The second reason is that, paradoxically, they maintain a relationship of continuity with feminism.

Feminism is marked by questioning the role of women in the family, in the workplace, in society, etc., and also for claiming changes in gender relations (Fontenele-Mourão, 2006; Kanan, 2010; Moore, 1999, 2005; Pinto, 2003). Additionally, it is possible to state that these questionings and claims refer to categories of great breadth. They are subject to social reconstruction, regardless of the gender issue. The motivation for collective feminist action has been broad and fragmented, focused on different social spheres and various courses of action. That is manifested mainly in the emergence of several currents of feminism (liberal, radical, psychoanalytic, Marxist, socialist, post-colonialist). The PFNs, in turn, are marked by the strict concern with gender parity in positions of power in the corporate world. Their motivation has been restricted in pursuing ascension in the organizational structure. This was evident in the networks researched, mainly due to the centrality of the professional/organizational question in the category *motivations* (which helps to understand why this phenomenon has emerged). The content of its subcategories (*relevance of the matter to organizations, influence of experiences abroad, personal purpose and legacy, career development, and professional networking*) proves this difference concerning feminism, driven predominantly by broad issues and coming from different social spheres (family, values, work, politics, etc.). However, despite this break, we argue that, paradoxically, these networks maintain a continuous relationship with feminism. This continuity can be accounted for by the permanence of latency and idiosyncrasy that marked the *raison d'*être of feminism itself.

We refer to the predominantly occult character of power relations structured from the difference between genders by latency. The characteristic of latency has always been present in what the different feminist currents have fought (e.g., the "oppression" of the sexual class concerning what the liberal

current has been against; the "subordination" reified by the right-wing policies against which it has fought the radical current; the biological "determinism" on the sexual identification denounced by the psychoanalytic current; the "capitalist control" attacked by the Marxist current; the "patriarchy" objected to by the socialist current; the "epistemological colonization" confronted by the post-colonialist current (Calás & Smircich, 1999). This latency of the struggling target remains a remarkable trait in the networks studied. This is evident in the categories of *challenges* and *barriers*. Even more specifically in the subcategories: 1. *diagnosis of causes* that reveals the character of 'invisibility' of the subjacent reasons for the current gender disparity in leadership positions; 2. *sexism*, which proves the cultural/symbolic aspect of prejudice and discrimination incorporated even by women; and 3. *biases*, which show implicit associations, also made by women, between house chores and the role of women, as well as a kind of *mea culpa* among successful executive women with other women who have dropped out of their careers due to the absence of support.

By idiosyncrasy, we refer to the peculiar, often contradictory, character of the various feminist currents that preceded black and postcolonial feminism, which were the main reason for their emergence. Here, we are referring to intersectionality. Black and postcolonial feminists have criticized western feminist currents for representing "the woman" as white, middle-class, and heterosexual, which does not effectively represent all women (Rabay, 2008; Buttler, 2003). This type of idiosyncrasy – for example, the fight against the repression of women by the man concomitant with the complacency and the repression of black women by white women, lesbians by heterosexuals, etc. – was evident in the networks analyzed in the subcategory *intersectionality*, within the category *challenges*. The absence of interest of the networks in seeking contact with black and/or lesbian women who have managerial positions or the potential to take them was clear.

Another important aspect for understanding the emergence of postfeminist networks concerns its greater potential for organizational degendering. We argue that these networks have more significant potential in the process of degendering organizations in relation to feminism. Since their main motivation is to build executive women's careers, their operations aim at the corporate world, unlikely feminism, whose agenda is broad and varied. This distinction is relevant to understanding the phenomenon because, in daily organizational routines, gendering occurs mainly from administrative and hierarchical aspects, such as permissible behaviors in certain types and levels of work, as well as symbols and images that reinforce the masculine predominance in language, dress codes, press releases, etc. (Acker, 1990).

While feminism moves away from these aspects, the networks approach them. In the networks researched, that distinctive feature was especially evident in the category *focus of action,* which reveals the core of the escalation of power to the operation of the networks (*see subcategories*: gender parity at the highest hierarchical levels; partnerships with strategic stakeholders).

In addition, it is worth emphasizing that participating in a network provides access to crucial social, political, and professional resources, enables interaction with others for mutual benefits, and fosters a sense of belonging and trust (Giddens, 2012). These aspects can leverage career development (Brunstein & Jaime, 2009), mainly due to the environment of exchange, learning and trust, typically of the networks (Giddens, 2012). Another important aspect is the networks' capability to promote collaborative intelligence, as there is room to discuss relevant issues (Brunstein & Jaime, 2009).

Regarding the possibility of non-realizing the potential for organizational degendering of PFNs, it is important to highlight the absence of organizational policies and the lack of resources. On the one hand, the formation of support groups needs to envisage more inclusive, egalitarian, and participative management practices and, consequently, the emancipation of women in the corporate world (Brunstein & Jaime, 2009). At the same time, the networks studied still must deal with the lack of interest and/or effective involvement of companies operating in Brazil concerning gender equity. That is clear when we look at the Ethos Institute's survey results, which we referred to earlier.

Table 4

Toward the notion of postfeminist network

	Feminism	Postfeminist network
Distinctive feature	The social-political-ideological intention of broad sense: change of men's domination in the various social arrangements (Flax, 1990).	The pragmatic intention in the strict sense: the ascension of the woman in the organizational hierarchy until gender equalization in positions of power.
Rupture	Motivation is broad (several social spheres) and collective action is fragmented (different courses/currents) (Calás & Smircich, 1999; Giddens, 2012; Flax, 1990; Scott, 1986; Beasley, 1999; Rabay, 2008; Pinto, 2003).	Motivation is strict (ascension in the organizational structure), and collective action is cohesive (only one way: career recognition).

(continue)

Table 4 (conclusion)

Toward the notion of postfeminist network

	Feminism	Postfeminist network
Continuity	Latency (hidden character of the collective action focus) (Calás & Smircich, 1999). Idiosyncrasy (peculiar or contradictory character of its collective action) (Rabay, 2008; Buttler, 2003).	
Potential to degender organizations	Low: struggle does not focus on specific causes of organizational genderization.	High: actions strategically aimed at ending the genderization of organizations.

Source: Elaborated by authors.

CONCLUSION

This article aimed to analyze the emergence of a new form of collective action related to gender issues in the Brazilian corporate world. It is based on a case study of two executive women networks in São Paulo that aim to encourage gender equity in organizations. However, it should be noted that the analysis timeline was short, which may have hindered the deepening of the research on the network phenomena.

The investigation was structured based on the following research question: What is the potential of these networks related to gender equity led by executive women to degender organizations?

The results showed that the motivation for the involvement of the women interviewed in these networks is related to a life purpose, the desire to contribute positively to other women, and the possibility of leaving a legacy. However, there was also an interest in developing one's career with the expansion of social capital: networking establishment, broadening horizons, and recognizing the company they work within.

It was possible to recognize an effort to reduce gender inequalities in the corporate world, especially concerning women in command positions in companies. However, the limits of these experiences are also not negligible. Their action strategies are guided by a liberal feminist idea (Calás & Smircich, 1999), even if most representatives reject any identification with feminism and even disdain for the feminist movement. Moreover, by distancing themselves from any link with the feminist movement, women sometimes blame themselves for not achieving their career goals while being condescending to some men who benefit from the sexist culture and make no effort to change the current reality of gender inequalities.

It is also important to point out that no proactive stance of its founders or current managers was found in any of the networks, aiming at an approximation of women with different profiles from their own. So, they intend to act on behalf of women who wish to build executive careers but do not consider the intersections between gender and other social markers of difference, such as race, class, and sexuality. We consider these aspects as substantial limits of these networks.

However, we also consider that this experience of collective action to promote gender equity led by executive women cannot be neglected. They represent a significant advance in individual strategies that many women undertake to occupy spaces in the corporate world (Jaime, 2011), and even concerning affinity groups created by executive women within each company (Brunstein & Jaime, 2009).The creation of networks that cross organizational boundaries is even more critical in a business environment such as in Brazil, where few women are in top management positions in the corporate world, and male leaders have done little to encourage the presence of women in top management positions, as the Ethos's survey has demonstrated.

Therefore, we argue that the collective actions led by executive women, which we have conceptualized as postfeminist networks, can degender organizations. These executive women remembered the "well behaved" women from the middle class and higher education that marked the first wave of the feminist movement in Brazil in the early 20th century (Pinto, 2003). But it is necessary to recognize that they take the feminist movement to other fronts and are marked by contradictions, in the same way as the activism undertaken through NGOs, which started in the 1990s (Alvarez, 1998).

We consider that these networks are an expression of a postfeminist agenda for all these reasons. They reject "excessive" feminism (Lewis, 2014) while seeking to promote moderate corporate feminism (Mavin & Grandy, 2019). We agree with Lewis (2014) and Mavin and Grandy (2019) when they state that, instead of discarding or simply criticizing the choices that some executive women have made because they are not the ones that we would like them to do, it can be more beneficial for researchers in Organizational Studies to seek to understand these choices and their ambiguities and contradictions. Whether we appreciate them or not, these postfeminist networks led by executive women are a reality. It will still take time until we can understand all of their complexities. We believe we have taken steps in this direction through this research.

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