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GENDER EQUALITY AND DISCRIMINATION – AN EXPLORATORY RESEARCH

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Abstract:

The present research explores the concept of gender equality and the main issues faced by female civil servants in the pandemic, with purpose of designing recommendations for the development of an inclusive and fair working environment in the Romanian public administration. The study is an exploratory one and was conducted in the Romanian National Agency for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, the main institution with prerogatives in developing and implementing the strategy for gender equality. The research methodology consists of a survey based on a questionnaire designed by the author. The main findings of the study are: stereotypes and gender role biases are the main cultural or systemic barriers, indicating an increased awareness, especially among women, of the impact of these stereotypes and prejudices on their career opportunities and progress. In addition, the main difficulties encountered by female civil servants during the pandemic were the necessity to spend more time with their families and doing house chores, as well as to take more often, unexpected leave days.

Keywords: gender equality, discrimination, civil servants, Covid-19 pandemic.

JEL: I24, J16, K38

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INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is a fundamental right that every developed society should rely on. Gender inequalities affect everyone, regardless of gender, age, financial situation, or status. Eliminating these gender disparities helps prevent violence against women and girls and ensures the economic and social prosperity of the whole society.

Despite recent progress around the world, gender equality remains a subject of interest to researchers and a goal that has not yet been achieved. Furthermore, the pandemic deepened the gender inequalities, revealing once more, the problems faced by women, even if many countries, such as the European ones, have made considerable efforts to ensure a more equitable participation of women in society and in all working areas (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2022). These efforts have taken mainly the form of adopted legal acts and of formal institutions created to reduce the inequalities between women and men and provide equal opportunities (European Commission, 2024). However, the positive changes at the legal and policy level have been overshadowed by the fact that opinions and mentalities about women's abilities and roles have not changed, despite activism in the field. Gender stereotypes are common in most societies, and women, despite their skills and education, are less present in leadership positions and are often more involved than men in household chores and even, in some social strata, considered only responsible for household care.

In the European Union, the success of gender policies has been subject to fluctuations (Elomäki and Kantola, 2023). By the early 2000s, EU gender equality policy had reached a level of institutionalisation, consisting of five pillars: anti-discrimination legislation, positive action, gender mainstreaming, funding, and action programmes (Jacquot, 2023). In 2015, the European Commission took further steps to redevelop a more social Europe by reintroducing gender equality in the context

of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Furthermore, the latest Gender Equality Strategy (2020-2025) ensures the work of the coordination of the European Commission in this regard, with the overall objective of creating a European area of equality between women and men, where gender-based violence, all forms of discrimination, and structural inequality become issues of the past (Iftimoaei and Gabor, 2021).

Romania has aligned with the European legislation on gender equality, but some problems still persist, such as: inequalities in the representation of women in decision making (Robayo-Abril et al., 2023; Raiu and Mina-Raiu, 2023), the inefficient development of social services or the maintenance of patriarchal mentalities (Horobeanu, Zarcu & Irod, 2023), which sometimes lead to the perpetuation of stereotypical attitudes towards addressing the issue of women's rights (Bogza, Grünberg and Văcărescu, 2006, Faragalla et al., 2023, Columban et al., 2020, Stanila et al., 2020, Tănase, 2018). Even women's conditions have improved considerably, inequalities between men and women persist in Romanian society. Although today in Romania there is legislation aligned with the European Union's requirements and institutions aimed at combating discrimination, the need for a change in mentality is still felt. Given the existing regulatory framework, Romania, as an EU member state, should take a more effective and proactive approach to the issue of gender equality (Tănase, 2018).

Among EU countries, Romania is ranked as the second lowest in terms of gender equality. If gender inequality were to be eradicated in the country, its economy could experience an 8.7 percent growth by 2030, according to a report by McKinsey and Company in 2021 (Marin, 2023). Additionally, the removal of barriers could result in the addition of almost half a million women entrepreneurs in Romania, consequently fostering inclusive economic growth.

In this respect, the present research aims to explore the concept of gender equality in the National Agency for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (ANES), an institution from the central public administration of Romania with prerogatives in development and implementation of the gender equality strategy. The research also investigates the main problems encountered by female civil servants during the Covid-19 pandemic.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 GENDER EQUALITY – CONCEPTUALISATION

Gender represents the core concept of modern feminism, that highlights the fact that biological, psychological, and economic factors shape women (Tănase 2018). Therefore, sex differences are considered rather biological, with which an individual is born, and gender differences are those acquired through education or socialisation (Reale et al., 2023). Gender roles are attitudes and behaviours associated with women and men (Tănase 2018). These roles describe the way we should be and not the way we actually are (Reale et al., 2023). Since the end of the nineteenth century, the feminist activists have criticized the biological determinism of gender roles and the way in which a hierarchy is created, based on gender, where women are usually subordinated to men, concluding that gender characteristics are not native, but rather result from stereotypical thinking (Tănase, 2018).

Gender equality is a concept that has been widely transmitted across different national borders, between different institutional and noninstitutional political actors, through different national and international organisations (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo, 2010). Gender equality is a social condition where women and men share equal rights and a balance of power, status, opportunities, and rewards. It can be operationalised as: men and women having equal access in the use of resources, equal participation in relationships, in the home, in the community, and in political arenas. Gender equality does not mean that women and men should become the same, but their rights, responsibilities, and

opportunities should not depend on whether they were born female or male. When gender equality exists, society equally values the similarities and differences between women and men (Rolleri, 2012, 2013, 2014, Rolleri et al., 2021).

In addition, related to gender equality is the equality of opportunity that means that no one can be prevented from participating in an activity because individuals are not identical, differing in natural endowment, gender, culture, and capacity to use their abilities. Therefore, the equality of opportunity balances the inequalities between people, as they have the natural opportunity to conduct any type of activity (Tănase, 2018). According to the same author (Tănase, 2018), 'opportunity' can be explained as a set of favourable circumstances that lead to the achievement of a goal, through actions and decisions. When equality of opportunity is not enforced, forms of discrimination may appear on the grounds of gender, race, age, religion, nationality, or disability (Popescu-Sarry, 2024).

One of the most common forms of gender discrimination is occupational segregation, divided in horizontal and vertical gender segregation (Hustad et al., 2020). Voki, Obadi, and Orić (2019), explained this concept as the disproportionate participation of men and women in specific occupations or sectors. Usually, men and women work in fields where the same gender predominates, creating the horizontal segregation. Due to the social environment and biological characteristics, women are still predominantly attracted to 'social' careers, compared to men who are attracted to 'technical' careers (Voki, Obadi, and Orić, 2019). Women are considered to be biologically suited to occupations that require caring or interacting with people, and men to occupations that require strength, analytical, or managerial skills (Levanon and Grusky, 2016; Brişcariu, 2020). Through socialisation (especially early socialisation), observation, imitation, and reinforcement, starting in the family and later in society, children learn that acceptable and appropriate jobs for women are jobs that match their gender identity, i.e., those including care and support (Bell, 2012, Kalantari, 2012, McDaniel, 2016). They are taught to prefer certain jobs from their early childhood- therefore, gender-based preferences for different careers can be detected very early in life (Alksnis et al., 2008). Gender socialisation is a major factor affecting the occupational choices (Kalantari, 2012, McDaniel, 2016).

Occupational segregation is mainly due to social values and cultural conditions, but also to other factors (Kalantari, 2012). Researchers indicate that women's occupational choices are linked to the belief that they will perform better in female-dominated careers, such as health and early education, then in male-dominated careers, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Tellhed et al., 2017). Compared to women, men often seek to work in jobs that satisfy their need for social status (Tellhed et al., 2017). Women are often not attracted to careers that include 'physical' aspects or that may pose a health hazard, such as those that require operating machinery (Alksnis et al., 2008; Dawson, 2019). Women are also attracted to jobs where interruptions to work are penalised as little as possible (England, 2011). However, people prefer to interact at work with persons of the same gender, making gender favoritism an explanation for horizontal segregation (Tellhed et al., 2017).

In terms of vertical segregation, this refers to the fact that women are under-represented in positions with high power of decision or in the top management of organisations and over-represented in middle and lower management positions (Sánchez, Diaz and Urbano, 2023).

Hierarchical gender segregation is mainly based on the presumption that men are better trained and better suited in management positions that also presume the most substantial rewards (Levanon and Grusky, 2016), while women are characterised as less capable of leading and managing, regardless of their qualifications, skills or performance (Dawson, 2018; Yap and Konrad, 2009). According to femininity stereotypes, women are not 'meant' to be in leadership positions (Voki, Obadi, and Orić, 2019). They are seen as 'untrustworthy' because they tend to prioritise family responsibilities over work (Eurofond, 2018). If a man and a woman in a leadership position are directly compared, it is likely that woman's performance to be considered inferior to man's (Pick, 2024).

Different authors (Voki, Obadi and Orić, 2019) found that the systematic undervaluation of women's competences is accompanied by other factors that stand against their hierarchical progress. Due to

the stereotypes that household chores are women's responsibility, they are not considered involved enough in a job, in order to merit and cope with the demands of management positions. In addition, women working in execution positions are repeatedly required to perform better than men in order to be promoted to higher positions and re-establish their credibility with each new assignment (London et al., 2019). Furthermore, women are expected to "act like a man" in a male-biased corporate environment, while paradoxically men are often promoted for adopting the "feminine approach" to management (London et al., 2019).

In addition, gender equality is related to economic development. In a research on the impact of reducing gender inequality in macroeconomically relevant areas: STEM education, labour market activity, and remuneration, the author (Maceira, 2017) showed that encouraging more active participation of women in the labour market and increasing their level of education in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics would have a high positive effect on the economy. A higher equality between women and men would lead to a significant increase in the number of jobs, benefiting both women and men. In 2050, there would be up to 10.5 million additional jobs as a result of improved gender equality, with around 70% of them being occupied by women. The study also showed that improving gender equality would have a strong, positive impact on the GDP per capita, which will increase over time (Maceira, 2017). The author demonstrated a positive impact of gender equality measures on economic growth due to an increase in the number of women pursuing STEM studies, higher female participation in the labour market, and lower gender pay gaps.

1.2 GENDER EQUALITY AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The Covid-19 pandemic had a negative impact on gender equality. Women around the world have been significantly affected by job losses, as well as the loss of husbands or other family members who brought essential income into households. Additionally, women's workplaces were affected more by the pandemic compared to men's (McKinsey & Company et al., 2020). Under these circumstances, gender inequalities increased, and previous efforts towards equality slowed down. The pandemic has led to new challenges regarding gender equality, opening the way for new leadership and gender studies that shown, for example, that characteristics considered traditionally masculine are better suited for crisis management (Dolan, 2014), leading to another negative perception about women and their capacities of leading (Raiu and Mina-Raiu, 2022).

The pandemic slowed progress on gender equality in the labour market and increased gender disparities by disproportionately exposing women to economic turbulence. As a result, it is essential to take action to encourage women's participation in male-dominated fields such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and ICT (Information and Communication Technology), and to attract more men into female-dominated fields such as education and care, not only to ensure an equitable impact on the labour market, but also to benefit from the economic dynamism and potential they can create (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021).

The negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on gender equality was also observed in the increase in the gender pay gap and on unemployment rate among women, especially in 2020 and 2021, due to the major impact on traditionally feminine work fields, such as tourism, education, public administration, food services, arts and recreation, and the entire commercial sector (McKinsey & Company, 2020). This led to a negative impact on the economic development of countries, particularly in terms of overall GDP growth, given the significant contribution of women to the economy (as they represent 39 % of the entire global economy) (McKinsey & Company, 2020).

In response to the expansion of the gender disparities due to Covid-19 pandemic, the European Commission has developed a new gender equality strategy, which aims to integrate gender in all policies developed in the European Union (Debusscher, 2023). The strategy was developed considering the realities shown by the pandemic in order to ensure a more equal world for women by

showing the need to incorporate the concept of gender equality in all Member States' policies, strategies, programmes, plans, and actions (Debusscher, 2023).

The EU's gender equality strategy for 2020-2025 aims to achieve an equal Europe for women and men, where all individuals have equal opportunities and can participate equally in the development of the European societies. The strategy has as key objectives the elimination of gender-based violence, gender stereotypes, gender gaps in the labour market, the achievement of equal participation in different sectors of the economy, as well as the gender balance in decision-making and politics (Raiu and Mina-Raiu, 2023), addressing also the problem of gender pay and pension gaps. It comprises a gender mainstreaming approach in all specific policies and actions, and intersectionality as a horizontal principle for its implementation (European Commission, 2024). Furthermore, the Directive on gender balance on company boards is a landmark achievement of the strategy (Debusscher, 2023). Other measures proposed and adopted under this strategy include mandatory conditions on pay transparency and a new proposal for an EU-wide directive to combat violence against women and domestic violence. Furthermore, the European Commission has launched an EU-wide campaign to challenge gender stereotypes as a result of the strategy (Debusscher, 2023).

Regarding the effects of COVID-19 and previous pandemics on gender equality, Carli (2020) reviewed the literature that focussed on job loss, the effects of having a key job on health and well-being, the increased domestic responsibilities of women and men due to school closures and other social services, and the effects of telecommuting on gender roles. Most studies have focused on samples from the US and Europe, but data from Asia, Africa, North and South America, and Oceania were also included.

In conclusion, the pandemic has generally created challenges for women's progress. More women than men have lost their jobs because they worked in essential jobs that exposed them to infections and psychological stress. Also, women have had more work interruptions than men due to childcare and other responsibilities. On the other hand, telecommuting has increased the amount of time men spend with childcare, and this has the potential to increase childcare responsibilities for men in the long term, thus reducing the gender gap in domestic responsibilities and increasing gender equality. The Covid-19 pandemic has also exacerbated women's problems in the family/household as they are forced to spend more time raising children and helping the elderly.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Taking into account the impact of the pandemic on women's working areas, the present study was carried out in an institution from the Romanian public administration (considered to be a feminine working area) with high importance in the implementation of measures related to the pandemic management process.

The main purpose of this research is to investigate the concept of gender equality in ANES, considering the essential role that this institution plays in promoting the principles of gender equality at national level and how civil servants were affected by the pandemic, from a gender perspective.

The main objectives of the research are:

- (1) To identify the main problems encountered by female civil servants in the pandemic;
- (2) To identify the current level of application of the concept of gender equality within the institution;
- (3) Determine the level of awareness regarding gender equality issues among civil servants and the management of the institution;
- (4) Identify the prevalence of any forms of gender-based discrimination and prejudice, including during pandemic times.

The study started with the following research questions:

- (1) What were the main problems faced by female civil servants during the pandemic?
- (2) What is the current level of implementation of the concept of gender equality in the institution and what changes were caused by the pandemic?
- (3) To what extent do execution and management civil servants understand the impact of gender bias and discrimination on workplace culture and productivity?
- (4) How prevalent is gender discrimination within the institution and what forms does it take?

The research is an exploratory study conducted in the Romanian National Agency for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (ANES), an institution with responsibilities regarding gender equality. The research methodology consists of a sociological survey conducted using a questionnaire designed by the author. The sampling method used is exhaustive, because the questionnaire was sent to all 51 civil servants working in the institution. 31 civil servants agreed to participate in the study, meaning a response rate of 60%.

Table 1. The main characteristics of the sample

Item	Categories	Percent
Gender	Female	74.2 %
	Masculine	25.8 %
Age	25-34 years	16.1 %
	35-44 years	30.4 %
	45-54 years	31.5 %
	55-64 years	22 %
Education	Bachelor degree	22.6 %
	Master degree	73.2 %
	Ph.D.	4.2 %
Tenure in the analysed public institutions (years)	0-1 years	5.26 %
	1-5 years	22.60 %
	5-7 years	11.92 %
	over 7 years	60.22 %
Seniority in the held positions (years)	0-1 years	12.9 %
	1-5 years	25.8 %
	5-7 years	51.6 %
	over 7 years	9.7 %
Seniority in public administration (years)	0-5 years	22.6 %
	6-10 years	14.55 %
	11-15 years	15.17 %
	over 15 years	50.31 %
Hierarchical levels within the state's public administration	Management level	16.1 %
	Execution level	83.9 %

Source: data collected and processed by the authors

Regarding the sample of the study, the majority of the civil servants that agreed to participate in the research were women, between 35 and 54 years old, with master degrees, occupying execution positions, with a seniority in the occupied positions of 5-7 years, with more than 15 years of experience in the public administration.

3. THE MAIN RESULTS OF THE STUDY

1. The main problems encountered by female civil servants in the pandemic

Table 2. The main problems encountered by civil servants in the pandemic period

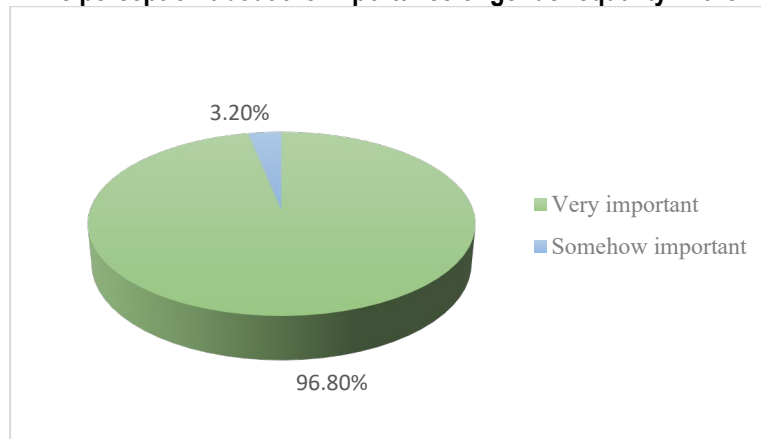
Main problems	Female civil servants		Male civil servants	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
<i>The necessity of working from home full time</i>	20%	80%	0%	100%
<i>The necessity of working from home part of the time</i>	60%	40%	15%	85%
<i>The necessity of spending more time with the family</i>	85%	15%	40%	60%
<i>Health issues</i>	75%	25%	67%	33%
<i>The necessity of taking unexpected leave</i>	95%	5%	70%	30%
<i>More time allocated to house chores</i>	97%	3%	15%	85%
<i>Reduced availability to work overtime or extra</i>	95%	5%	75%	25%
<i>The need to take leave for a longer period of time</i>	57%	43%	41%	59%

Source: data collected and processed by the authors

In order to fulfill the first objective of the research and respond to the first research question (R1: What were the main problems faced by female civil servants during the pandemic?), civil servants' were asked if they confronted to a series of problems that could have negative impact on their work. Table 1 presents the frequency of the responses, by civil servants' gender. It can be observed that a higher proportion of female respondents encountered the mentioned problems. Men were also affected by the presented issues, but on a small proportion. Women needed to spend more time with their families, allocated more time to house chores, and took often then men, unexpected leave days. The problems that affected male civil servants the most were: the necessity of taking unexpected leave, the reduced availability for working overtime and health issues. The results show that women were affected more than men by different problems that appeared in the pandemic period.

2. The current level of application of the concept of gender equality within the institution

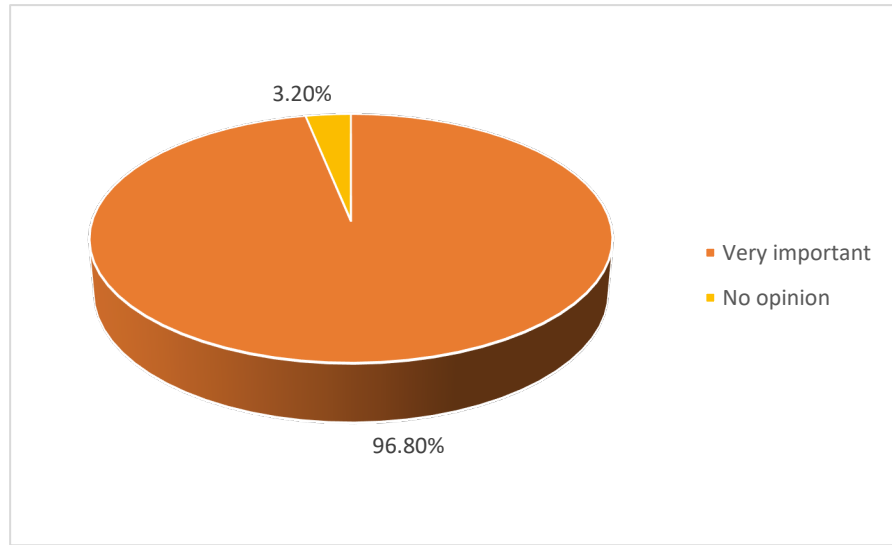
Figure 1. The perception about the importance of gender equality in the institution



Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

In order to respond to the second objective of the research, civil servants were asked about the importance of prioritising gender equality in the institution. Most of respondents appreciated that gender equality is a very important issue and a priority for the institution. These results are not surprising given the role that the institution in ensuring equality between women and men at the national level. Therefore, it is expected that civil servants will attribute particular importance to the respect of the principles of gender equality within the institution.

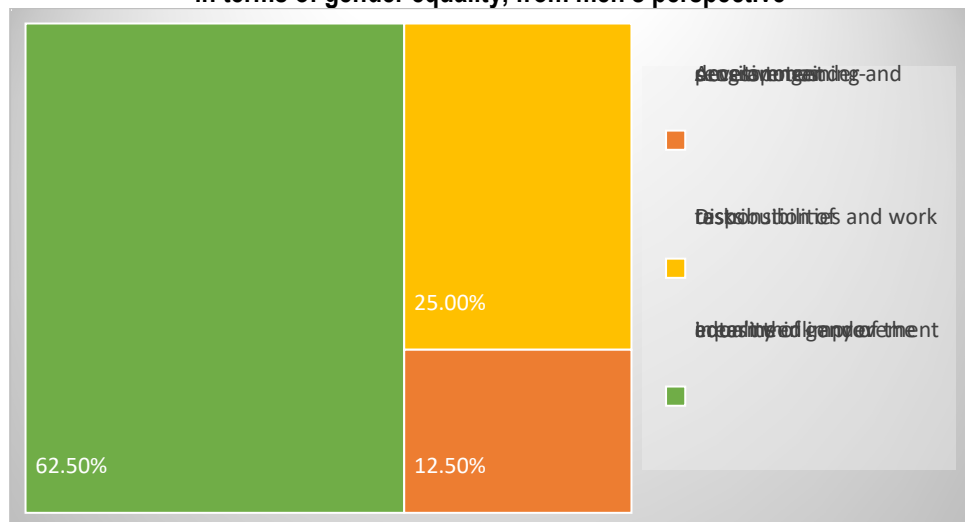
Figure 2. Civil servants' perception regarding the importance of gender equality in creating a positive and productive work environment



Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

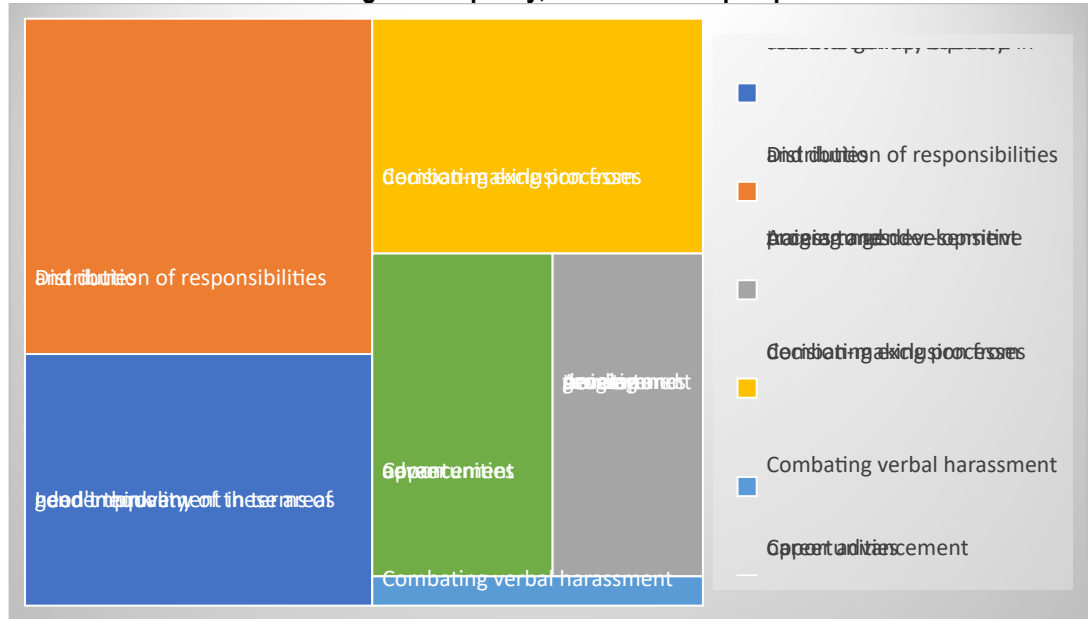
The second question focused on the importance of gender equality in creating a positive and productive work environment. With the exception of one respondent who did not want to express his opinion, all civil servants considered that respecting the principles of gender equality is very important for creating a positive and productive working environment. By ensuring fair and nondiscriminatory treatment for all employees, is created a working environment in which trust and collaboration are developed, thereby stimulating individual potential and contributing to the improvement of organisational performance.

Figure 3. Areas that need improvement in the institution in terms of gender equality, from men's perspective



Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

Figure 4. Areas that need improvement in the institution in terms of gender equality, from women's perspective



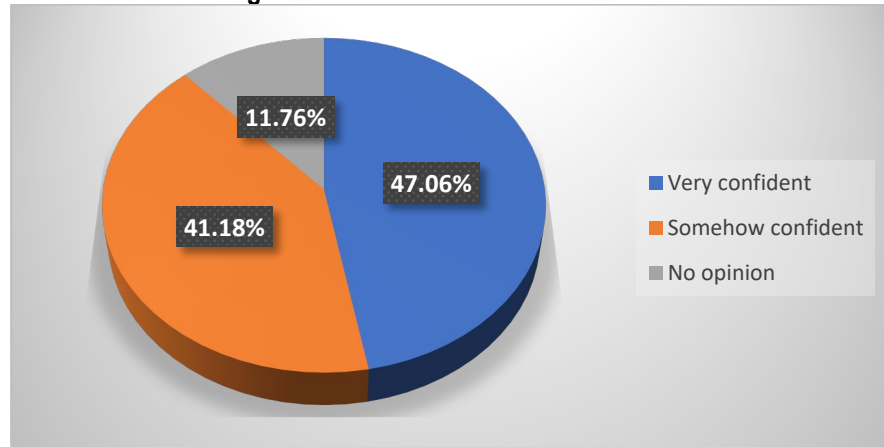
Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

In addition, respondents were asked to express their opinions on the areas that need to be improved in the institution, from gender equality perspective. Responses are presented by civil servants' gender, figure 3 representing men's responses and figure 4 women's responses. It can be observed that most of the male respondents did not consider the necessity of improving any area of working in terms of gender equality. The other half considered that improvements should be made with regard to the distribution of tasks and responsibilities, as well as access to programmes regarding gender equality subjects. The responses show that male civil servants perceive that the current way of working is appropriate and satisfactory in terms of respecting the principles of gender equality.

On the other hand, female civil servants had different opinions. They considered in a high proportion that the distribution of responsibilities and duties should be improved, as well as the process of decision-making, career advancement opportunities and access to training programmes. This increased awareness and concern from women's part, about the need to promote gender equality in the institution may be due to the fact that they face gender-based discriminatory situations often than men.

On a whole, most respondents, regardless of gender, considered that the distribution of responsibilities and work tasks within the institution presents gender inequalities. This can be due to the overload of work or the situations when certain civil servants are given fewer tasks and responsibilities than other, based on gender. In this respect, different measures can be taken in order to the equitable assignment of duties between men and women. The institution should also focus on career promotion, addressing exclusion from decision-making processes, and facilitating access to training and development programmes, as a significant number of respondents considered that these areas require improvement in terms of gender equality.

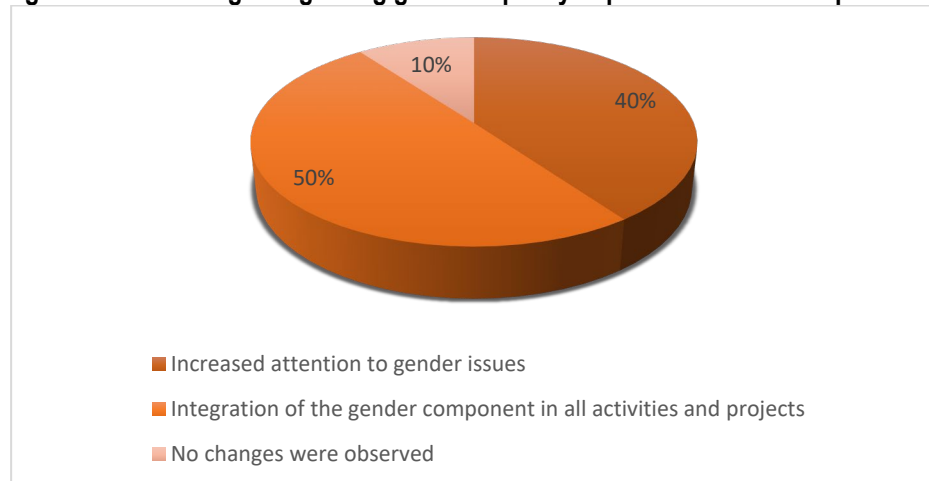
Figure 5. Level of trust in the institution



Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

In addition civil servants were asked if they have confidence that the institution will take the necessary measures in the areas that require improvements related to gender equality. Most of them are very confident and somehow confident. The results show a high level of trust among civil servants that the institution will continue to act to eliminate inequities between men and women in the specified areas.

Figure 6. Main changes regarding gender equality implemented after the pandemic



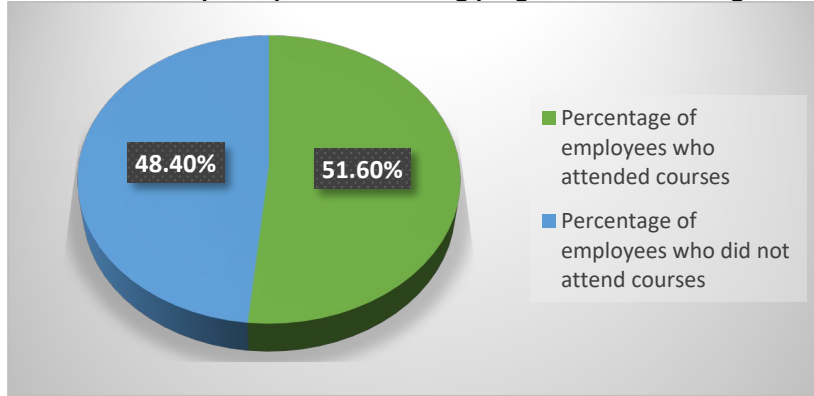
Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

Finally, civil servants were asked if they observed any changes that were implemented in the institution after the pandemic, with respect to the gender equality issue. Most of the respondents, regardless of gender observed an increased attention on gender equality issue and the integration of gender component in all activities and projects, in accordance with the Gender equality strategy adopted at the European level.

The results offered response to the second research question (R2: What is the current level of implementation of the concept of gender equality in the institution and what changes were caused by the pandemic?) showing that gender equality is an important value for the institution, with certain areas that need improvement. Also, the results show that the attention on gender equality increased after the pandemic.

3. The level of awareness regarding gender equality issues among civil servants and the management of the institution

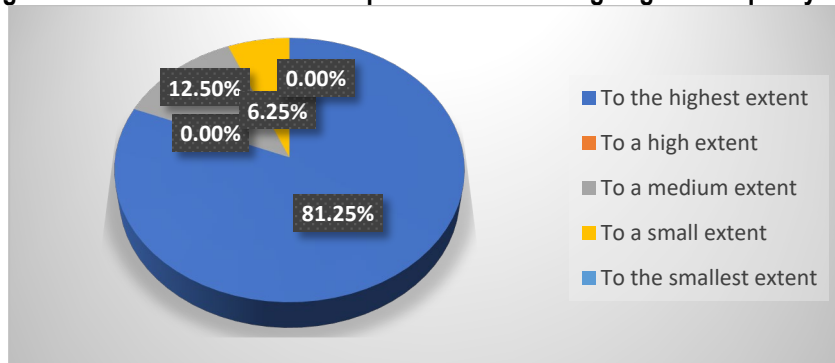
Figure 7. Civil servants' participation in training programmes related to gender equality



Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

Regarding civil servants' participation in training programs on gender equality related subjects, the respondents are divided in two, as half of them- 51.60 % participated in training programmes, and the other half- 48.40 % did not attend such courses. It can be concluded that there is an interest among respondents to get involved and learn more about gender equality, but further efforts are needed to ensure that more civil servants receive training in this area.

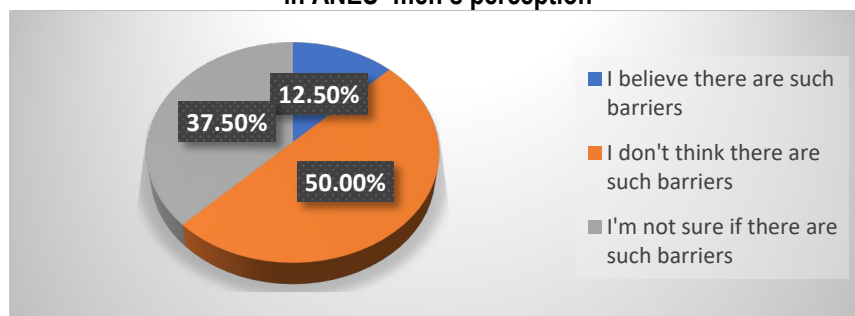
Figure 8. The need of continuous professional training in gender equality area



Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

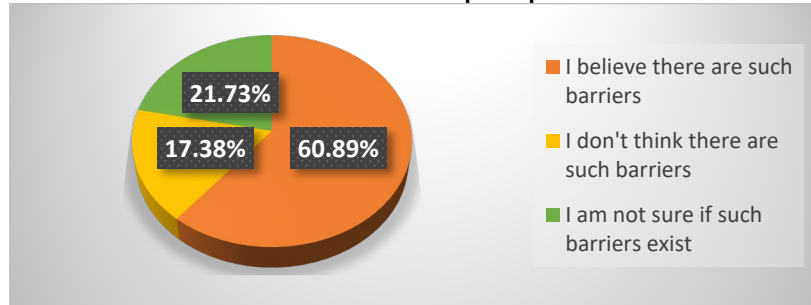
The majority (81.25 %) of the respondents considered that continuous training among civil servants should be done to the highest extent and only a small proportion considered that this should be a priority only to a medium or a small extent.

Figure 9. The existence of cultural or systemic barriers to achieving gender equality in ANES- men's perception



Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

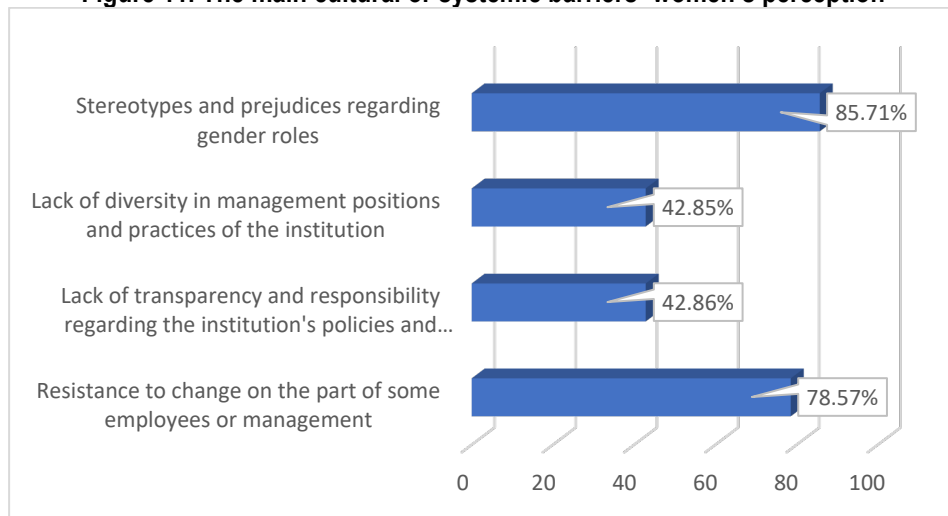
Figure 10. The existence of cultural or systemic barriers to achieving gender equality in ANES- women's perception



Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

Figures 9 and 10 highlight the differences between men's and women's perceptions regarding the existence of cultural or systemic barriers that hinder the achievement of gender equality within the institution. Female civil servants are more aware and more likely to identify cultural or systemic barriers that contribute to gender inequalities, as the majority of them- 60.89% considered that such barriers definitely exist. On the contrary, the majority of men believe that such barriers do not exist or are uncertain about their existence. Only a small proportion of male respondents admitted the existence of gender barriers. This difference of opinion can be attributed to the different perspectives and experiences of men and women within the organisation, the presence of gender stereotypes, as well as to the cultural and social influence on individual perceptions.

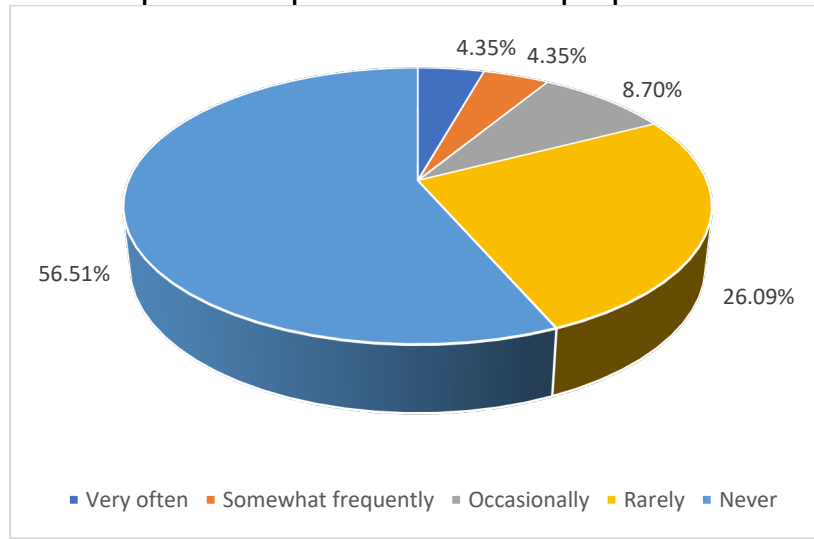
Figure 11. The main cultural or systemic barriers- women's perception



Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

With respect to the main cultural or systemic barriers encountered by female civil servants, they considered gender stereotypes and prejudices regarding gender roles to be the main barriers that stand against achieving gender equality within the institution, followed by resistance to change from both execution and management civil servants. The results reveal an increased awareness among female civil servants regarding the existence and impact of gender stereotypes on their career opportunities and progress, as well as the difficulty in implementing changes and adopting policies and practices that promote gender equality due to opposition or lack of commitment from colleagues and hierarchic superiors.

Figure 12. Perception regarding the impact of gender stereotypes and discrimination affect professional performance- women’s perspective



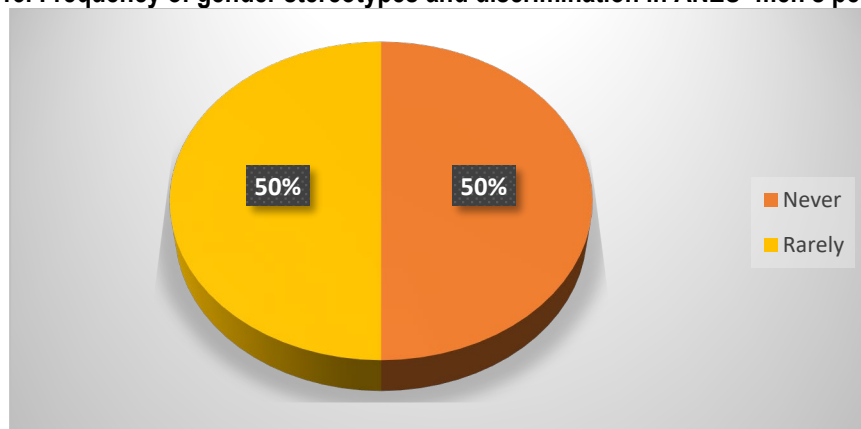
Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

Regarding the impact of gender stereotypes and discrimination on professional performance, all male respondents stated that their professional performance had never been affected by gender stereotypes and discrimination, consequently, the figure above presents only women’s responses. The majority considered that their career was not affected by the presence of gender inequalities and if it happened, it was rarely. The results reveal a positive perception and the fact that gender discriminatory situations are rarely present in the institution.

The results helped at answering the third research question (R3: To what extent do execution and management civil servants understand the impact of gender bias and discrimination on workplace culture and productivity?) revealing that all civil servants consider gender equality as being an important concept on which they should improve their level of knowledge. Thus, women present a higher level of awareness regarding the impact of discrimination and gender bias, even if most of them considered that discrimination and stereotypes did not affect their work performance.

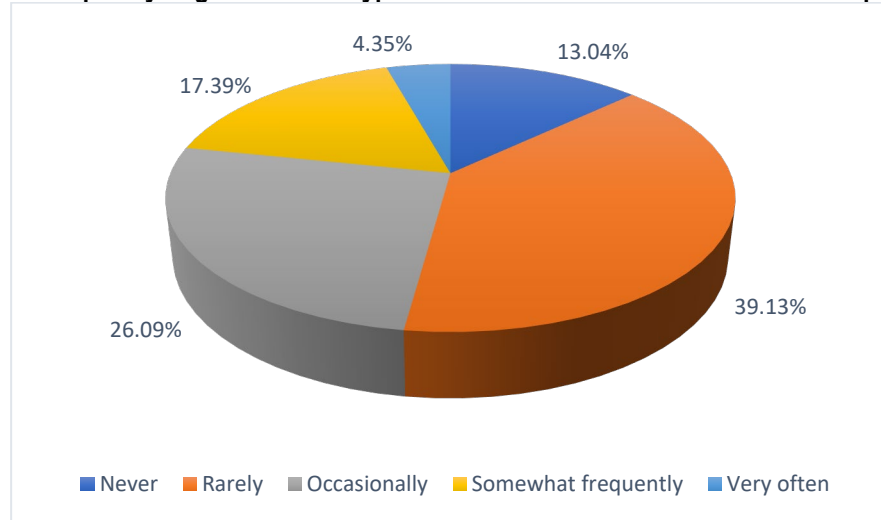
4. The prevalence of any forms of gender-based discrimination and prejudice, including during pandemic times

Figure 13. Frequency of gender stereotypes and discrimination in ANES- men’s perspective



Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

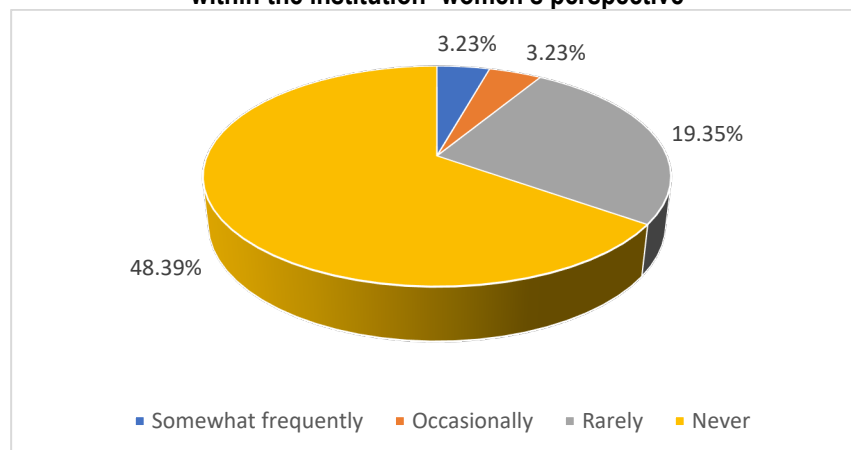
Figure 14. Frequency of gender stereotypes and discrimination in ANES- women’s perception



Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

Regarding the presence of gender stereotypes and discrimination within the institution, the difference of opinion regarding men and women can again be observed. In men’s case, either they do not consider that discrimination and stereotypes are present, or they perceive that these situations occur rarely. Women, consider also in high proportion that discriminatory situations occur rarely, but almost the same proportion consider that the presence of stereotypes and discrimination are observed occasionally and somewhat frequently. The answers confirm that these situations exist and that civil servants, regardless of gender, are aware of them. It should be mentioned that these situations occur with a small frequency and that women face more discriminatory situations within the institution compared to male employees.

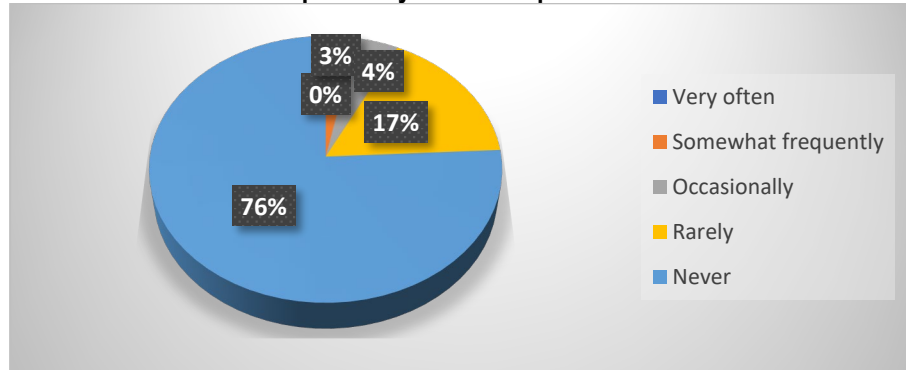
Figure 15. The frequency of gender-based discriminatory situations within the institution- women’s perspective



Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

With respect to the frequency of gender-based discriminatory situations within the institution, all male civil servants replied that they had never faced discriminatory situations within the institution. 48.39 % of the women gave the same answer, and 19.35 % said they were rarely put under such circumstances.

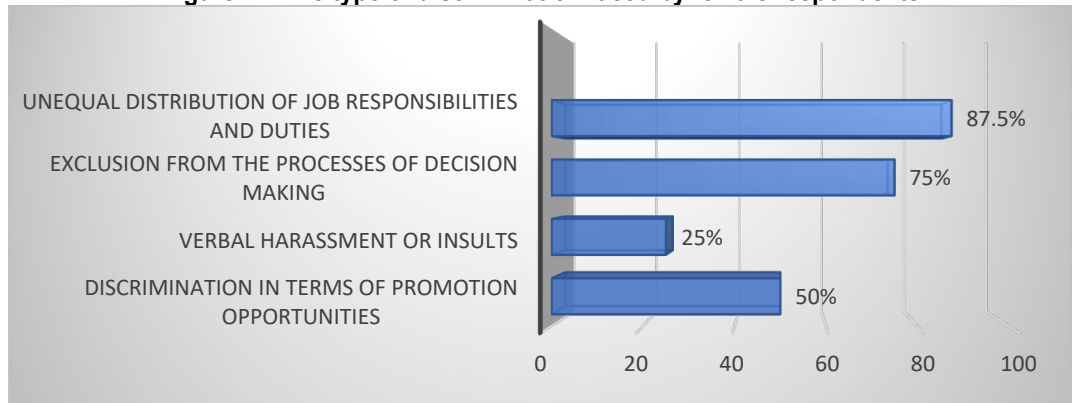
Figure 16. Frequency of gender discrimination against work colleagues reported by female respondents



Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

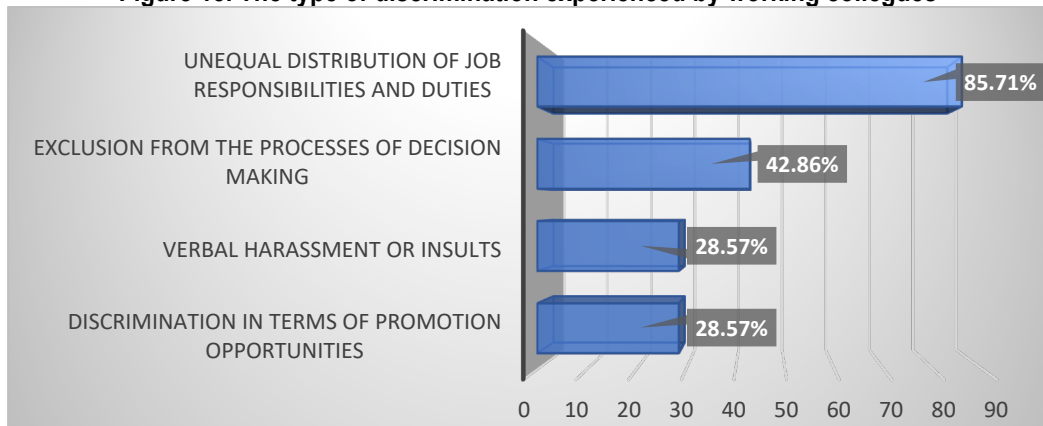
Regarding the frequency of gender discrimination against work colleagues, men stated that they did not witness such a situation and that women within the institution do not face a situation in which they were discriminated on their gender. Consequently, the figure presents only women's answers. The majority of the female respondents stated also that they never faced gender discrimination at work. Female civil servants' responses contradict those received in the question "How often do you think gender stereotypes and discrimination occur on the workplace?", where the results showed that the women felt that these situations occur occasionally (26.09%), somewhat frequently (17.39%) or very often (4.35%). This discrepancy may be the result of the personal character of these two questions, which may lead some people to be more reserved in providing honest answers.

Figure 17. The type of discrimination faced by female respondents



Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

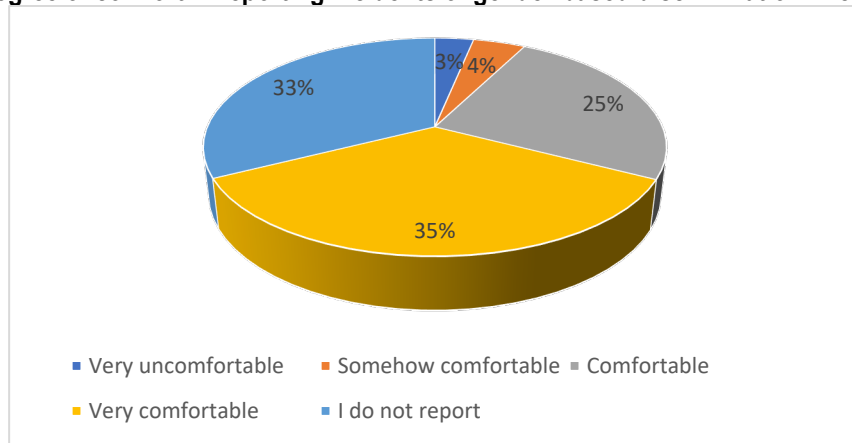
Figure 18. The type of discrimination experienced by working colleagues



Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

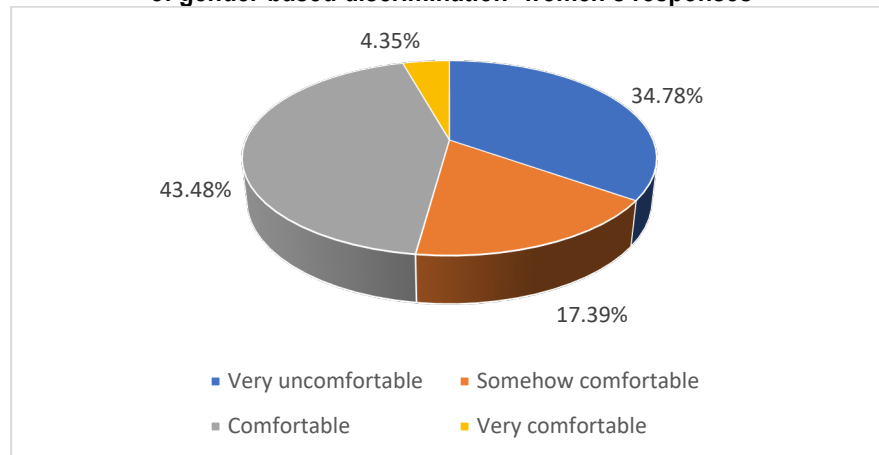
Given that no male respondents were confronted with gender discrimination and reported that they never witnessed discriminatory situations against colleagues, the figures present only women's responses. Figure 17 presents the situations in which women felt discriminated and figure 18 presents the situations in which women observed that their colleagues were discriminated. For both questions, the most discriminatory situations are considered to be related with the unequal distribution of work responsibilities and tasks, followed by the exclusion from the decision-making processes. The results are in accordance with the ones received to the question 'In your opinion, which areas require most improvements within the institution, in terms of gender equality', where both men and women felt that the distribution of responsibilities and work tasks within the institution was unequally gendered.

Figure 19. Degree of comfort in reporting incidents of gender-based discrimination- men's responses



Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

Figure 20. Degree of comfort in reporting incidents of gender-based discrimination- women's responses



Source: Author based on the responses received from the distribution of the questionnaire

Considering the report of gender discrimination incidents, it can be observed that less men than women would feel comfortable in reporting such incidents and the same proportion would feel very uncomfortable. Possible causes for feeling uncomfortable may include fear of repercussions, reluctance to address sensitive gender issues, or fear of not being believed or taking into consideration.

Regarding the last research question (R4: How prevalent is gender discrimination within the institution and what forms does it take?) it can be stated that discriminatory situations are quite low in presence, being felt more by women than men.

CONCLUSIONS

Following the interpretation of the answers it can be stated that gender equality is a respected value in the studied institution and that many civil servants recognise the importance of this concept and believe that the institution should prioritise fair treatment between men and women. However, there is higher awareness among women regarding the need to promote gender equality in the institution, possibly due to the fact that they faced more situations of gender-based discrimination. The results also indicated that there are areas where civil servants feel that improvements need to be made in relation to gender equality, such as *the distribution of responsibilities and tasks, career advancement, combating exclusion from decision-making processes, and access to training and development programmes*. In terms of taking the necessary steps to eliminate gender inequalities in the identified areas, employees show a high level of confidence in the institution's ability to act to promote gender equality.

Also, there is a varying level of awareness and understanding of gender equality issues among execution and management. On one hand, the results show that there is significant interest among employees in engaging and educating themselves about gender equality, as the majority of respondents who attended training related to this topic found it very effective.

However, there is a significant difference between men's and women's perceptions of the existence of cultural or systemic barriers to achieving gender equality. Women are more aware and more likely to identify these barriers, whereas men believe that they are not prevalent or are unsure of their existence. This discrepancy may reflect the different perspectives and experiences of men and women within the organisation, as well as the influence of culture and society on individual perceptions. The results also indicated that stereotypes and gender role biases are considered the main cultural or systemic barriers by female respondents. This indicates an increased awareness among women of the impact of these stereotypes and prejudices on their career opportunities and advancement.

However, there are difficulties in implementing changes and adopting policies and practices that promote gender equality due to resistance to change from some civil servants or management. Through training and awareness-raising programmes, the institution can address resistance to change and differences in perception between men and women. In these programmes, it is essential to facilitate an open dialogue between women and men, giving them the opportunity to understand the negative impact of gender inequality and to identify and develop effective ways to prevent discriminatory situations. Both execution and management civil servants should reconsider their mindsets and behaviours, adopting more inclusive and equitable practices and policies.

Most male civil servants claimed not to have experienced or observed situations of gender discrimination at work, while a number of female civil servants reported occasional or even frequent experiences of discrimination. Although most women claimed that gender stereotypes and discrimination do not affect their ability to perform their job duties, they acknowledge the existence of discriminatory situations within the institution. This finding suggests that gender discrimination may have a subtle impact or may be present in certain contexts, even if it does not directly affect civil servants' job performance.

Regarding the nature of discrimination and gender bias, the unequal distribution of responsibilities and job duties is identified as the most common form of discrimination in the institution, according to the answers received to several questions. It is recommendable to monitor how work tasks and responsibilities are distributed within the institution in order to determine whether employees are carrying out their work according to their job description. If the assessment shows that some employees are overworked or are assigned less work on the basis of gender, the management of the institution can take action, such as redistributing work fairly among civil servants.

In addition, the pandemic seemed to have brought more challenges for women compared to men, who needed to take more often unexpected leave, spend more time with their families and doing different

In conclusion, it can be considered that the principles of gender equality are respected in ANES, given the relatively low frequency of discriminatory situations reported by employees. There are programmes and policies that promote equality and attention is paid to training and education in this area. However, it is important to note that there are areas for improvement. The unequal distribution of responsibilities and job tasks, resistance to change, and different perceptions of men and women regarding cultural and systemic barriers to gender equality are challenges that need to be actively addressed. By assessing and adjusting the distribution of tasks, promoting open dialogue, and encouraging changes in attitudes and behaviours regarding gender equality, the organisation can move towards a more inclusive and equitable working environment for all employees.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTIONS

The author/authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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