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# Women Rectors and Leadership Narratives: The Same Male Norm?

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how two Portuguese women rectors constructed narratives on their path to leadership positions and their performance of leadership roles. The study is based on a qualitative empirical analysis based on life story interviews with two women rectors in Portugal. The results from this research suggest that women rectors tend to develop narratives about their professional route to the top as based on merit and hard work, and tend to classify their leadership experience as gender-neutral and grounded on the establishment of good relationships with their peers along their professional path. These narratives may contribute to reinforcing the male norm that leads other women to blame themselves for not being able to progress in their career, hindering the creation of an organisational environment that is open to the development of institutional policies to improve equal opportunities. Portugal is a very interesting case study, considering that despite the long history of its higher education system and the high participation of women in higher education, there were only two women rectors in the country until 2014.

**Keywords:** gender and leadership; female leadership; women rectors; Portugal

## 1. Introduction

One of the great transformations in higher education (HE) systems worldwide has been its increased feminisation [1]. The trends of massification in HE systems have been translated into an increasing number of women students attending HE in different countries [2], leading to the idea of a feminised future [1].

However, despite the meritocratic principles that should rule higher education institutions (HEIs), they do not seem to be able to escape the worldwide phenomena of horizontal and vertical segregation. Women represent the majority of university graduates, but are the minority among Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths (STEM) graduates [3]. Simultaneously, women are the majority of the student population, but they are far from having a similar expression at the professoriate level, and the disparity is even worse in senior management positions [3–6]. Women's challenges and/or difficulties to reach top senior positions (such as rector or vice chancellor) have been identified in previous research on the field [7–10]. The literature identifies obstacles to women's progress that can be classified into five main perspectives: the gendered division of labour; gender bias and misrecognition; management and masculinity; greedy work; and work/life balance challenges [11]. While obstacles to women's progress have been widely researched, there has been less attention paid to the experiences of women leaders [12].

One of the reasons for the persistent dominance of gender differences in leadership positions in HEIs is because HEIs are gendered organisations [2]. This concept was advanced by Sandra Acker to acknowledge the advantages that the male norm brings to the distribution of power, meaning that

"( . . . ) masculine ways of doing things are inherent in structural, ideological, and symbolic aspects of organization, as well as in everyday interactions and practices" ([13], p. 274).

Bearing this in mind, increasing the number of women in leadership positions can be seen as relevant to change the dominant male norms. By assuming leadership positions in HEIs, women can contribute to breaking down institutional gender stereotypes, redefining the sense of power, and raising HEIs' gender consciousness.

Without denying the importance of having women in top positions in HEIs, it is also relevant to understand how these women make sense of their professional trajectory and role as leaders. In other words: how do they develop a rationale justifying the opportunity they had to reach the top in an adverse environment, and how do they construct the rationale for the performance of their role while being in the position?

This paper intends to contribute to this discussion by analysing a case study of two Portuguese women rectors, based on a qualitative study sustained in life story interviews. The Portuguese case is particularly relevant, since while Portugal is one of the European countries with a higher participation of women in higher education (HE), it has also a lower rate of women leading HEIs. The main intent of this paper is to understand whether the narratives of women with top positions about their trajectory and performance are disruptive, revealing gender awareness or not. The ways that women construct these narratives can contribute to deconstructing the dominant stereotypes associating leadership with the dominant traces of masculinity.

The paper starts by presenting a theoretical reflection on leadership and gender stereotypes, reflecting particularly on the case of HEIs and then on the specific case of Portugal. The methodological base of the study is then introduced, followed by the data analysis and discussion. Finally, in the conclusion, the main findings are discussed, along with recommendations for further research in the field.

## 1.1. Leadership in Higher Education

Since the Humboldtian conception of the university, HEIs have been conceived as a community of scholars [14]. At that time, leadership positions were associated with an intellectual function and an academic profile. Academic leaders were those who were able to obtain more appreciation, respect, and prestige from their colleagues; to a great extent, this was due to their high profile in teaching, but, most of all, it came from their research activities. To be a leader in HE implied that the candidates demonstrated excellence in publishing and research [15,16]. In this perspective, HEIs were ruled by academics, and those assuming leadership positions were considered as *primus inter pares*.

Among them, rectors, or vice chancellors, were considered the figures leading their institutions. This position derived not only from high academic and professional prestige, but also from equally high social recognition, since they were the ones with a greater symbolic power [17]. These roles were mainly associated with the institutions' administration and management; however, they subsumed or implied a leadership performance associated with an intellectual function and an academic profile. In this context, even if the authors of this paper acknowledge the differences between management and leadership, rectors' positions are assumed to be leaders' positions.

According to several authors [15,18–21], leadership positions in academia changed substantially since, as Burgan (2006) [22] suggests, the commercial considerations imposed by the reforms in the last decades replaced those associated with scholarship.

It is assumed that the role of leaders has been changing from a more democratic orientation into a more autocratic one in the new top–down organisational models in HEIs. However, the so-called democratic model was far from being equal. Gender differences are particularly relevant, since it has long been acknowledged that women in leadership positions are judged against men's norms [13]. Kanter (1993) [23] was one of the first authors to draw attention to how bureaucratic structures exclude women, with others following her. Sandra Acker [24,25] had a more broad vision with the concept of gendered organizations, pointing to the advantages that the male norm brings to the distribution of power.

The first theories on leadership tended to focus on the leaders and their characteristics such as their traits, personality, and whether leaders were born or made. However, more recent perspectives tend to focus more on the relation between leaders and followers, and especially on communication skills [26].

Studies on leadership in HE have also been quite dynamic, with Birnbaum, Bensimon and Neumann (1989) [27] classifying the existent theories into six categories: trait, power, behavioural, contingency, cultural, symbolic, and cognitive theories. The first studies were actually centred in the narratives around the 'great men' and their impact on the institution and society [28].

In the last years, there has been a tendency for assuming other perspectives on leadership in HE. First, due to the presence of a more individualist culture, there is a cult of the person, transforming leadership, and more specifically the leader, as the essential element in promoting change processes in successful institutions [11].

### 1.1.1. Gender and Leadership in Higher Education

Despite the increasing presence of women in HE, the number who have assumed presidency positions in HEIs is still low, even in countries with diverse policies and legislation for gender equality [2,11,29]. Women are equally represented in the beginning of the career, but are less represented in top positions, where the recruitment for senior top management positions occurs [7,11,30]. Furthermore, some studies reveal how women tend to be concentrated in low leadership positions (such as pro-vice chancellors) [7]. The lack of women in senior positions is translated into an absence of women in all of the relevant institutional decision-making forums. Among them are committees, boards, recruitment panels, and the executive, where academics seem to maintain relevant institutional power in the neoliberal university [31].

The reasons for women being kept distant from these decisions-making forums can be divided into five main groups [11]. The gendered division of labour is one of the first main reasons for the difficulties that women find in being recognised as able to accomplish these tasks. This affects both the public and private domain, with a division of labour still persisting that tends to attribute the support of the family to men, and domestic roles to women. Taking their higher workload in the domestic sphere, women are considered to be less available for assuming leadership roles [32–34]. Adding to this, women tend to be seen as more oriented to teaching than to research roles, and end up assuming more of the teaching workload [35–37]; this can create more difficulties in progressing to full professors, which is the main group from which leaders are recruited. The second relevant reason for women being kept out of decision-making positions is related to gender bias and misrecognition. Gender bias exists in all phases of academic life, and is translated into misrecognition of women's skills and competences [10]. In order to avoid this, more transparency is needed [38,39]. However, based on the Netherlands context, Van Den Brink et al. (2010) [40] revealed that bias and discriminatory practices can even elude formal protocols and objective criteria. Adding to this, there is an association between management and masculinity, which can be pointed to as the third reason for the lack of women in top positions. While senior leadership is associated with productivity, competitiveness, and strategy, it is also socially defined as a masculine domain [41]. The fact that leadership roles are associated with highly time-consuming work is also a reason for women being kept aside [38–40]. Louise Morley (2013a) [10] classifies leadership roles as greedy work, since it implies being available 24/7 and a high personal commitment to accomplish the strategic goals of the institution [41]. Finally, work/life balance, which has always been identified as more difficult for women due to the social division of labour, is even more evidenced since globalised economies have developed more aggressive masculine working cultures [42]. The increased workload results in a work/life imbalance that is more evidenced for women in academia [43].

With the emergence of the so-called neoliberal university, new middle management positions were created, addressing, for instance, quality assurance or relations with the community, with women being called to assume relevant roles in these departments. However, these positions are frequently unpopular, and the negative roles associated with them can actually be a detriment for women to

progress in leadership positions [32,44,45]. Furthermore, the imposition of new governance models that are more aligned with the corporate top–down model of organisation are framed in a cultural ideology sustained in the individualisation and the cult of the person, which assumes that organisational changes are highly dependent on leaders' individual behaviour [11]. This cultural ideology is also framed by the 'excellence mantra' based on the notion that only the best in a specific field can make the difference [46].

In this paper, the way women rectors create narratives on their career paths and in their performance as leaders are examined to conclude if and how these obstacles are being identified.

### 1.1.2. Leadership in Portuguese Higher Education

The university system in Portugal dates back to the 13th century. However, it was only after 1974, when the non-violent revolution ousted the dictatorial regime, that the HE system started to be democratised, enabling an elitist system to evolve into one of mass HE.

The national network of HEIs comprises 38 universities (14 public universities and 24 private) and 65 polytechnics (20 public polytechnics and 45 private) [47]. Universities and polytechnics gained a high degree of scientific, pedagogic, administrative, and financial autonomy through Law 108/88 and Law 54/90, respectively, although with variations in each sector. The 1988 University Autonomy Act stipulated a governance system based on collegiality, with strong participation of academics and students in decision-making processes. Previously, the rector was elected from among the internal full professors in a General Assembly of the University that included all of the academics with a PhD and representatives of students and administrative staff [9]. At present, and since 2007 (Law 62/2007 of 10 September), the Rector is elected by the General Council, which is an executive body whose composition varies between 10–25 members maximum, with representatives of teaching staff, non-teaching staff, students, and external members. Other main differences in the new Law are that the position of the rector is now advertised internationally, and any professor or researcher, regardless of his/her position in the academic ladder, can apply to be a rector.

Portugal is one of the European countries with a higher participation of women in academia. For instance, Portugal is one of the two countries (together with the United Kingdom) where the proportion of women working as researchers exceeds the proportion of men; it is also the country with the smallest difference between the concentration of women and men in higher education (3.6%). However, it is one of the countries with the lowest concentration of women in grade-A positions (1.9%) [48]. Furthermore, in 2014, women accounted for 20.1% of the heads of institutions in the 28 European Union (EU) countries [5], while in Portugal, this percentage was around 8% (7.9%) for the university subsystem in 2018. As shown in Table 1, and although the Portuguese HE system is highly feminised, until February 2018, only seven women had been elected as rectors in the country, and only in the 21st century.

**Table 1.** Women Rectors in Portuguese Universities.

| Number of Women Rectors and Name | Time (Period) | University |
|---|---|---|
| 1st Isabel Alarcão | 2001–2002 | University of Aveiro |
| 2nd Helena Nazaré | 2002–2010 | University of Aveiro |
| 3rd Maria José Tavares | 2002–2006 | Open University |
| 4th Maria da Glória Garcia | 2012–2016 | Catholic University |
| 5th Ana Maria Costa Freitas | 2014–2018 | University of Évora |
| 6th Isabel Capeloa Gil | 2016–2020 | Catholic University |
| 7th Maria de Lurdes Rodrigues | 2018–2022 | ISCTE—Institute of Labour and Business Sciences |

It is relevant to verify that from the five universities that had women rectors, the majority are public universities (The Catholic university has a specific statute being classified as a private institution with public utility), which are also among the youngest institutions in Portugal, having all been created in the 1970s (although the University of Évora was created in the XVI century, it was only recognised

as a public HEI in 1973). Furthermore, the Open University is the only Portuguese university that operates exclusively with e-learning programmes. The specific characteristics of these institutions raise the hypothesis that women have more opportunities to ascend to top positions in HEIs with less symbolic power within the system. On the other hand, changes in governance models and, particularly, in the processes of choosing rectors introduced by Law 62/2007, may have a positive impact on women's ascendance, since Portugal has had more women rectors since 2007 than in 700 years of HE history.

## 2. Methodology

This paper is based on two in-depth interviews with two women rectors in Portugal. In these two interviews, the life story interview method was applied, since they were directed towards documenting the respondent's life, or an aspect of it that has developed over the course of their lives [49]. Even if the authors recognise the differences between leadership and management, the interviewees are considered to be leaders since they were, at different periods of time, the main representatives of their institutions, incorporating a high level of symbolic power [17].

One woman rector interviewed was appointed by a previous rector to be his substitute when he was appointed as the Minister of Education (Interview 1). The other woman interviewed was elected twice to the rector position (Interview 2).

Each interview had an average duration of two hours, and was audiotaped and transcribed. All of the information was given, recorded, analysed, and treated under the consent of the interviewees. However, the authors have naturally considered anonymity and ethics issues, considering that, at least for the attentive national reader, it should not be difficult to identify these women. The interviewees' anonymity is, for the purpose of this article, maintained. To analyse the interviewees' discourses and understand how the women rationalised their route to assuming leadership positions, a phenomenological research method was employed. Phenomenology allows searching for the central meaning of an experience. In this context, phenomenology was used to research the rationale that the women attributed to their experiences in becoming rectors [16]. In this context, the case study methodology was chosen. The authors interviewed two persons from a population of seven, but the intent was not to generalise the data, but rather allow a deeper reflection on the construction of leadership narratives. In this sense, the results need to be read in the specific context, and cannot be assumed as characterising the entire population. The interviewees' discourses were submitted to content analysis. In this paper, two main categories are analysed: (i) the rationale of a professional trajectory, and (ii) leadership and gender roles.

### 2.1. Data Analysis and Discussion

Data analysis and discussion are based on the two main categories selected for this paper. In different ways, the analysis of both categories reveals how the discourses of these two women can exemplify the reproduction of the male norm. Simultaneously, these discourses can contribute to reinforcing the lack of gender awareness in HEIs.

### 2.1.1. Rationale of a Professional Trajectory

Concerning the professional trajectory of these women rectors in Portugal, both described their path in a very similar way, emphasising the importance of obtaining good marks, the right qualifications, and the capacity to engage in management roles. They started their careers after finishing a first degree (an old bachelor of five years), since both were outstanding students in their field of expertise (one in Education and the other in Physics). Then, both went abroad to obtain a PhD (both in the United Kingdom). When they returned to Portugal, they were highly engaged with their academic careers (especially with teaching and research duties), being able to progress in their careers to the top. After obtaining full professor positions, both become vice rectors and finally rectors.

> The two rectors had a typical trajectory in the institution: "( . . . ) [they] started as assistants, [they] obtained the PhD, become professors, published, [they] ( . . . ) had a normal professional career, [they] ( . . . ) [and] were both full professors when ( . . . ) become vice rectors".
>
> (Interview 2)

The description of the two women's professional trajectories is rationalised as gender-neutral. The experiences of these women leaders reveal the types of behaviours, mainly centred in career performance, that were rewarded as they ascended to leadership positions, assuming them as equal for women and men. In this sense, their discourses are linked to the idea of a disembodied worker [25] that seems to be inherent in almost all of the descriptions of their professional trajectories. The expression "normal professional career" reveals how these women perceive their careers as aligned with the male norm and with the notion of academic meritocracy. When referring to another woman rector, one interviewee sustained:

> "[She] has always been a very prestigious person. She received a doctorate from University XYZ and developed research in XX field, which was a prestigious area in the university. She was vice-chair of the Scientific Council, and had been vice rector for four years".
>
> (Interview 1)

In line with other previous studies [8,21], to be a full professor and be associated and identified as a prestigious researcher is an important condition to be able to ascend to top positions. However, other studies also reveal how informal career paths are equally important to ascend in the career path, highlighting, for instance, the relevance of the inclusion in the right networks or the role of mentors [8], which were not equally valued in these women's discourses.

Their descriptions are associated with a linear and providential career path that is quite similar to the dominant job description that is associated with a male whose life is centred around his full-time job. It is quite interesting that although both of the women in the study were married, they did not talk about the difficulties in dealing with work–family balance. Instead, the main difficulties were identified as being gender-neutral "technical issues" that were easily suppressed with specific training:

> "The main difficulties were learning new things, like making a strategic plan. I am from a time when there was no such culture. The greatest difficulty is learning what a person does not know and has to learn. It was about having the technique, the instrument, and knowing what to do. What I needed was a result of not having training to be a rector. The first thing I did was to go to a European program for the training of rectors, and it was excellent".
>
> (Interview 2)

> "[The] Obstacles and difficulties [that] we all have ... are general whether we are men or women. I confess that as a woman I never felt any difficulty".
>
> (Interview 1)

Probably these women may have found mechanisms to conciliate work and family, using diverse strategies such as having the support of other family members or by hiring other women for work and services. To a great extent, this description is associated with the particular historical and cultural characteristics of the country. There is a high tradition for women, mainly due to economic reasons, of having high levels of participation rates in the labour market [50], with teaching being particularly considered as an adequate profession for women.

Furthermore, the way that these women assume that they did not plan nor did they even want to become leaders may transmit the idea that if women are good enough, they become more visible and are "naturally" invited to assume leadership positions. The following quotations reveal how these women assume that their route was unplanned and almost accidental.

"At the time, when the previous rector approached me, I said: 'For God's sake, no!' Nothing was further from my personal goals. I was a researcher in X at that time and dedicated with all my heart and soul to research. I liked what I did. It was X, I was publishing, and that was what I wanted. But, this career also helped me later having recognition by my peers".

(Interview 2)

"The previous rector invited me to be his vice rector. Then, when there were six months left to the end of his mandate, he was invited to be Minister of Education and he appointed me to substitute him. I was in the position for six months, and then started preparing the elections because I didn't want to be a rector".

(Interview 1)

These quotations demonstrate that the assumption of leadership roles was not a "natural" process. These women acknowledged the importance of their mentors, which reveals the relevance of the gendered organisational structure and the links between leadership and positional power [8]. These quotations also reveal that to ascend to top positions, questions of "who self-identifies, and is identified by existing power elites, as having leadership legitimacy" (Louise, 2013a: 6) [10] are determinant, demonstrating that the progress in the career ladder is not only dependent on performance, but also on having specific individual characteristics. These quotations actually demonstrate that, in some specific organisational circumstances, there are other personal characteristics (such as socio-economic background or socio-cultural capital), which can be more relevant than gender in electing those who have leadership legitimacy.

"I do not know the other universities so well, but I think that here, in addition to the opening spirit, eventually our personalities in our journey also had some influence. For example, I have always been chosen by others for positions. I think people had the idea that I was very transversal. I have good relations with everyone!"

(Interview 1)

The idea of the disembodied worker and male norm of academic work is assumed in such a way in these discourses that, in fact, it seems that their position as tokens [51] is counterproductive, since they are presented as an example that women can reach top positions as long as they are willing to.

"I believe that we are going to have more women rectors in the future. If we already had some, why shouldn't we have more?"

(Interview 1)

Although these women did not plan to become rectors, their descriptions of the route to the top are strongly identified with the male norm. The portrayal of their career is defined as rational, meritocratic, and sustained as a total dedication to work. To a great extent, these descriptions reproduce the idea that in order to be identified as eligible for the position, women need to demonstrate having these masculine characteristics. In turn, this perspective blames women for not being able to reach leadership positions [10], and legitimises actions that are based on "fixing the women" [52], or even worse, supporting the idea that the only thing that needs to be fixed is society, removing the responsibility of institutions to promote equal opportunities. The Portuguese case exemplifies that this is not necessarily true, considering that despite the changes in national laws promoting gender equality in society, and the high participation of women in HE, it was only in 2001 that the first woman rector was elected, and since then, only six more in the whole country have achieved this position.

The notion of a hero leader is embodied in their discourses, adding to the traditional male hero discourse the capacity they demonstrated to win in a men's world and with men's norms. To a great extent, these discourses incentivise other women to follow the same example and overcome themselves

to be extraordinary in their personal, familial, and work life. The ideal type of an academic woman as an excellent teacher, an outstanding researcher, and an excellent mother and wife is ruling women's behaviour in Portuguese academia, leading to heavy workloads and high levels of stress and feelings of not belonging. The same trends of women feeling overwhelmed in academia have also been acknowledged in other contexts [53]. Using life history and ethnographic methods, Gornall and Salisbury (2012) [54] revealed the existence of a 'hyperprofessional' academic, meaning that academics make strong efforts to maximise the levels of productivity, working harder and longer even when they are not explicitly asked to. The new academic work environment based on auditing and monitoring is internalised by academics who "become more demanding and rigorous with themselves than any other employer could be" (39: 6). This hyperprofessionalism, which is aligned with the increasing use of new technologies, does not allow delimiting space and time outside of the academic environment, turning academic work into non-stop work. Academics' self-discipline results from the internalisation of the dominant performativity culture, leading academics to blame themselves for not being "good enough". Feldamn and Sandoval (2018: 214) [55] suggest that: "Neoliberal academia ( . . . ) promotes a meritocratic ideology of individual achievement that frames success and failure as purely personal 'achievements', which encourages a competitive ethos and chronic self-criticism". This is particularly true for women, since the gender dominant structure and culture impose more constraints on career advancement that are not acknowledged by those who do not have gender awareness. Simultaneously, as women are so tired and overworked in their individual engagement with their career, it becomes exceedingly challenging to realise the role that organisational culture can play in this. In this sense, the discourses of these rectors reinforce the persistence of the image of a disembodied worker, and can contribute to women who are not able to reach top positions blaming themselves in an individualist perspective, which can have consequences for their psychological well-being.

In addition to how they rationalise their route to the top, it is also important to reflect on the women's narratives about their experience as rectors by exploring the ways that these narratives are associated with gender stereotypes.

### 2.1.2. Leadership and Gender Roles

The analysis of this second dimension intends to understand how the interviewed women created narratives about their performance as leaders, and if and how these narratives were related with gender.

Findings revealed that when identifying the major characteristics that were needed to be able to assume a leadership position, the majority of people in these positions tend to identify gender-neutral characteristics. For these women, what seemed more determinant was their willingness to assume "greedy work" [11].

> "I would say to be a little crazy . . . Of course, to have the ambition to do the best for the university. There is also a great deal of ambition in this. Willingness to do things differently and to do more. ( . . . ) To have the ability to be reasonable, to ask the right questions (instead of finding answers) and then realise where you can find answers".
>
> (Interview 2)

These findings confirm previous studies revealing the existence of a dominant perspective of academia as gender-neutral in Portuguese HEIs, revealing a lack of gender awareness [11,56].

> "On the other hand, this is a modern university where the community itself, as far as I know and can assess it, was never discriminatory; at least I never felt any kind of discrimination for being a woman. Neither negative, nor positive".
>
> (Interview 1)

However, one of them actually recognised specific situations in academia that she identified as potentially leading to gender discrimination.

> "However, I also know that there is a lot of machismo and there are certain areas of knowledge that are still male-dominated. In most of the evaluation panels, engineering, mathematics, etc., these are made up of men. As much as I believe in the objectivity of these panels, I cannot consider that the objectivity in evaluation is total".
>
> (Interview 2)

The dominant discourse was, instead, one that associated discriminatory episodes with women's attitudes and with other general processes in society, especially with the division of labour in the workplace.

> "Women are less willing to accept management posts and leadership positions; sometimes because they have more burdens outside of the profession than men. The government of the house is still in the hands of the women, like the education of the children. Adding to this, women don't like to publicly expose their image".
>
> (Interview 2)

As a result, the suggestions these women proposed to eliminate discrimination were mainly associated with the perspective of fixing women [52].

> "Women also have an obligation to try to be rectors. They have nothing to feel discriminated against, they have to fight against it (...) To break the glass ceiling also demands that women have no glue on their feet and try to get up there. The phenomenon of glue on the feet means that there is a need to stimulate female participation at various levels".
>
> (Interview 2)

> "It is often the women who put themselves in this position and think: 'Oh, I am a woman ...' and that inhibits them. They have a preconception of their non-acceptance".
>
> (Interview 1)

Actually, assuming that women do not want to develop leadership positions, another important question remains: why should women desire or aspire to enter HE leadership at a time when it is so problematic even to be able to demonstrate their capacity to fit within an excellence and performativity culture? At a time when academics are already feeling exhausted with their teaching, research, and social roles, why would women chose to be more involved in leadership roles that are widely acknowledged as being exhausting work? Which motivations underlie these women to apply for positions in which they are not specifically interested?

The analysis of the ways that women rectors rationalise their performance as rectors reveals some nuances in the male norm neutral discourses analysed in the narratives on career pathways.

Probably because these women developed their roles at a time when collegiality was still the dominant culture in Portuguese universities, their discourses are not entirely based on the cult of the person, and on the cultural ideology that the leader on her/his own can determine the success of transformation processes within HEIs.

> "You have to be able to communicate and enjoy communicating with everyone: from students to colleagues to non-academic staff, and to realise that within an institution [that is] most constituted by human capital, there are idiosyncrasies, and the university is not a company. The only asset [that] HEIs have is the people".
>
> (Interview 2)

> "Men tend to follow a more logical reason and we have an intuitive reason, and this has happened a lot in my professional life. I can sense what is going to happen and make decisions based on this and only then start trying to rationalise them".
>
> (Interview 1)

The way that these women describe their performance in the position, based on their communication skills and in continuous search for collective consensus, is an expression of a transformational leadership style that is far from what is identified in the neoliberal university assuming the "ideal leader" as based on individual agency. These women embody a democratic, collaborative leadership style which, at the present, depends ultimately on the person(ality) of the rector in office, as the new legislation imposes a very much top–down decision-making process. Furthermore, their leadership style is usually assumed as being more aligned with femininity [57]. In this sense, the adoption of this type of leadership can, in fact, be seen as a strategy for these women to feel more "fit" or comfortable in the position. Although these women did not demonstrate high levels of gender awareness, their description of their daily activities reveals how they were "doing gender", trying to continuously self-negotiate a balance between feminine and masculine traits.

Nevertheless, although they differentiate from the dominant male norm in these specific aspects, these may be recognised as minor and acceptable deviations from the norm, in large part because management norms in the last years have also included more traditional feminine traits known under the general term of "soft skills".

> "In Portugal, there is still a very strong presence of bias. There is still the notion that women's leadership is not the same. People think [that] women can only lead behind the scenes. The female leadership style is often different from the male one, and it is a mistake for women to try to perform like a man. You should not ignore your own characteristics. People do not rule; people lead in a consensual way. You only lead if you can. At the time when this support and this credit disappears, the person cannot lead".
>
> (Interview 2)

The balance between feminine and masculine leadership style was also evidenced on the references to their bodies. The following quotation is a good example of the way women played the gender game in order to be able to succeed.

> "It was painful to be always publicly exposed. I only realised that now because I am thinking how good it is that I can go in jeans and do not need to go to the hairdresser. Men do not need to go to the barbershop. If they go with less well-arranged hair, no one notices, and if I do, it will be highly visible".
>
> (Interview 1)

To sum up, it is possible to say that there are nuances in the male norm hero discourses of women rectors' leadership styles. These women identify their leadership role as more aligned with feminine stereotypes such as communication skills and some physical traits or specifics as being "extra" careful with their (public) image. However, despite sustaining the discourses about their performance on communication and interaction, nothing is revealed about the emotional side of dealing with conflict, anxiety, morale, disappointment, or resistance while influencing other colleagues, which other studies have identified as being present in leaders–followers relations [1,14].

## 3. Conclusions

HEIs are usually presented as meritocratic institutions assuming themselves to be gender neutral. To these attributes, the collegial model of running HEIs also added democracy. In this conception of HEIs, ruled by a community of scholars, the presidency was expected to be assumed by those recognised as the best, being *primus inter pares*, meaning the first among equals. However, these institutions are also reproducing gender inequalities. Despite women being the majority as students, their presence decreases in the staff group and especially along the academic career. Women are the minority in top positions associated with leadership roles where the important decisions for the organisation are taken.

Previous studies have identified the reasons for the persistence of women's less expressive presence in leadership positions. Among these, the existence of a male-normed organisational structure and culture is assumed as an obstacle to women's progress [5,25,58]. Furthermore, research on gender in organisations has been deconstructing the hegemonic norm of male leadership, and defining different types of leadership.

However, the analysis of these discourses of Portuguese women who have reached the rector position demonstrates that they also inscribe their route to the top and the process of their election/nomination on the dominant male norm of a work-intensive orientation and heroic individualist route, even if this also includes some deviations from the norm, including aspects such as communication skills or using intuition to take decisions instead of rational arguments and facts. It seems that there is room to perform leadership roles in a distinct way as long as the male dominant norm is not questioned. In this line, women assume their presence at the top as the final moment of successful achievement, especially as researchers that ended up by making them more visible to the men with positional power. This vision is perceptible throughout the interviews and denotes that, especially for the first interviewee, even if the idea of becoming a rector did not seem plausible in a first moment, as time passed by, they identified (especially the second interviewee) themselves with their role and assumed their performance to be as gender-neutral as possible. The integration in the right networks or the informal mechanisms that allowed them to obtain the support of positional men, as any other possible micropolitical strategies that were developed by these women, were not presented as such, creating the idea that the ascendance of women in academia is only dependent on their hard work, while there is a vast literature demonstrating the relevance of the organisational culture in women's advancement within academia [2,25,59,60].

It is undeniable that women's presence in leadership positions contributes to deconstructing the dominant association between power and men. However, the presence of women is not enough to change the gendered organisation, since it is also necessary to transform HEI's institutional culture. Furthermore, persisting with a male norm discourse and a heroic individual narrative on leadership can perpetuate the notion that the problem is mainly in women, leaving the organisation out of the equation. Taking the changes in academia under the neoliberal influence, the persistence of these leadership narratives can contribute to incentivise women to require more and more from themselves in a spiral movement that may end in physical and psychological health problems, and in a greater resistance to assuming leadership roles.

To be a woman leader does not imply necessarily to have gender awareness. In fact, although these women identified their trajectory as masculine, even with enough scope to be different, they did not spontaneously raise the issue of gender. Changing organisational structures and cultures in a more inclusive way may be excluded both from women and men leadership agendas. To have gender awareness, being a woman or a man can be seen as an essential condition to rationalise professional experiences and be able to change organisational culture, opening the door for other women to be able to fit in a more comfortable way than these women described in their top management positions within academia.

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