

# Gender and profession: considerations on female roles in building the nutritionist career

## Gênero e formação profissional: considerações acerca do papel feminino na construção da carreira de nutricionista

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### Abstract

The collective trajectory traced by Nutrition is manifested in the fact that it is naturalized as a female profession and arises the discussion on the distinction between genders as conceived contemporaneously. From a gender conception as a historical and cultural construction, we propose a reflection of professional qualification focused on gender as an analytic category. We indicated the relationship between the professional and the household works confusing the private space with the public, which may have contributed to the initial difficulty in outlining the professional nutritionist identity. Likewise, we pointed to links between nutrition and gender, also as result of a habitus that naturalizes the profession of nutritionist as feminine.

**Keywords:** Nutrition. Gender Identity. Occupations.

### Resumo

A trajetória coletiva traçada pela Nutrição manifesta-se no fato de que ela se naturaliza como uma profissão feminina e nos remete às discussões sobre a distinção entre gêneros tal como a concebemos contemporaneamente. A partir de uma concepção de gênero como uma construção histórica e cultural, e não da natureza, propomos uma reflexão acerca da formação profissional centrada na questão do gênero como categoria analítica. Acenamos para a articulação entre o trabalho profissional e o trabalho doméstico, confundindo a esfera privada com a pública, o que pode ter contribuído para a dificuldade inicial de se traçar

a identidade profissional do nutricionista. Apontamos, ainda, para a articulação entre nutrição e gênero, também fruto de um *habitus* que naturaliza a profissão do nutricionista como feminina.

**Palavras-chave:** Nutrição. Gênero. Profissões.

## Introduction

Nutrition is part of a set of professions stereotypically considered “female” in Brazil. The Federal Nutritionists Council,<sup>1</sup> aiming to have a broad picture of nutritionists in the country, regarding their sociodemographic characteristics, educational background, professional experience, among others, found that 96.5% of them were women. This remarkable presence comes from the similarity with the first female profession – nursing, strongly associated with the social need for care.

Dietary aid was included in other nursing duties considered indispensable to the patients’ well-being. However, it is worth noting that the Brazilian industrialization movement and the knowledge on nutrition that emerged during the 1930s and 1940s are indicated in the literature as an important part of the scenario that constituted the nutritionist profession.<sup>2,3</sup> This movement meets the changes that took place in the global scenario since the Second World War. There was a redistribution of the female workforce in the labor market, and women were included in activities that were firstly occupied by men only, such as, for instance, engineering.<sup>4</sup>

The first Nutrition courses in Brazil also date back to this period, beginning with the creation of technical courses, at secondary level, for nutritionists-dietitians. The Social Security’s Food Service (SAPS),<sup>a</sup> which had the duty to provide safe, inexpensive meals to the emergent industry workforce in popular restaurants, became one of the main centers of education of nutritionists and also a major field of work, because the “girls” who completed the course had the possibility of joining the permanent group of employees in the autarchy, which shows the female hegemony since the creation of the profession.<sup>7</sup>

The recognition of the profession at the higher education level occurred only in 1962 by the Ministry of Education. In this process, the role played by the Brazilian Nutrition Association, created in 1949, was fundamental, being the first Brazilian entity to represent and defend the interests of nutritionists/dietitians.<sup>8</sup>

a The Social Security’s Food Service (SAPS) was created in 1940 in the city of Rio de Janeiro, then the Capital of the Republic, and later was extended to other cities. They were restaurants technically targeted to the insured persons of the Institutes and Retirement and Pension Funds, subordinated to the Ministry of Labor, Industry and Commerce, under the responsibility of doctors and dietitians, which provided a fixed menu considered technically balanced in their chemical composition.<sup>5,6</sup>

Studies on this profession, such as that by Vasconcelos & Calado,<sup>8</sup> mention the prevalence of women since that time and cite the first newsletter of this association, published in 1959, which describes the nutritionist profession as being of great value, especially for women, since it “would provide the care for the family health and control of household economy”.<sup>9</sup> (Our translation).

The history of this profession is thus marked by its creation in a context of economic, political and social changes related to the national period called *Estado Novo* (New State) (1937-1945), when the then president, Getúlio Vargas, with the support of the Armed Forces, prolonged his hold on power with the justification of impeding a new threat of a communist coup in Brazil. In addition to the discussions around the political model adopted at the time, an important point that marked this government was the populist-oriented relationship of the government with the workers, which was fundamental to the growth of the industrial bourgeoisie. The State thus increased investments on the Brazilian industrial sector to replace imports, especially in the metallurgical and steel industries. With a most prestigious level in the economy, major changes in the society's structure occurred, creating opportunities for the inclusion of women in the labor market, such as the intensification of the migratory flux from the countryside to the urban centers, increasing labor supply.

Women, in this period, occupied some spaces, with a greater participation in the workforce and other sectors, such as radio and cinema. However, it should not be forgotten, as Nahes<sup>10</sup> argues, that the view that still existed in relation to the perfect woman, mother and wife – an opposing image of the working, politicized and militant woman, who occupied a public space in the decades of 1910 and 1920. So, Gustavo Capanema, the Ministry of Education from 1937 and 1945, stated:

[...] women were given a special treatment, which, during the New State, was divided into two similar segments: at one side, protection to the family, when women were put under the State's protection; at other side, it should be given to women an “appropriate education” to her family role, that is, appropriate to the State, obviously.<sup>10</sup> (Our translation).

It is reasonable to say that, at that time, the education on Nutrition met this proposal, but changed over time. From the 1940s until the present time, Nutrition courses in the country have grown considerably. Between 1939 and 2009, 391 courses were created.<sup>8</sup> Today, there are 431 courses duly authorized, 81,745 college graduates and 11,427 technicians in Nutrition.<sup>11</sup> According to the data published by the Instituto Nacional Institute for Educational Studies and Research), the predominance of women has remained until the present days; 93.4% of college graduates in Nutrition are female.<sup>12</sup>

Along with this growth, it can be seen an improvement in work tools, work conditions and market changes for these professionals<sup>8</sup> and changes in the professional profile. According to the National Curricular Guidelines of the Nutrition Course (undergraduate), the profile of the professional is:<sup>13</sup>

Nutritionist with a generalist, humanist and critical background, capable of acting, with an aim to food safety and dietary care, in all fields of knowledge in which food and nutrition are vital to the promotion, maintenance and recovery of health and for the prevention of individuals' or collective diseases, contributing to the improvement of the quality of life, guided by ethical principles, with a reflection on the political, social and cultural reality; [...] (Our translation).

The collective trajectory outlined by Nutrition, through a socialization process in which social roles are organized and typified, is based on the fact that it was naturalized as a female profession and leads us to discussions on gender distinctions, as it is contemporarily conceived.

The biological difference between sexes is assumed according to the social hierarchy, associating characteristics considered natural in women with the domestic activities, involving the care and expression of affection, whereas men are linked to the work sphere and social life outside the home and occupy spaces in political power, justifying the inequalities between men and women. Thus, the biological difference is used to justify a supposed women's incapacity to work in the labor market or in some professions.<sup>14</sup> As a result, careers traditionally considered more prestigious, such as Medicine, Law and Engineering were mostly pursued by men, and this picture begins to change more significantly only after the decade of 1990.<sup>15</sup> However, although women currently occupy jobs in professions that until some years ago were typically performed by men, there still are asymmetries. Examples are the inequalities, especially in top level jobs, when one compares the salaries of men of women.<sup>16,17</sup> On the other hand, men that choose professions historically built as female, such as Nursing, Child Education and even Nutrition, has a different position regarding the established stereotype. These differences help us realize that it is in the social game that roles are defined, naturalizing choices as if they were aptitudes of each sex.

Thus, some changes in the representations about the female role in the household chores and in the labor market lead us to important reflections in the field of professions. To think over the nutritionist education, according to our perspective, goes beyond the studies on technical and scientific knowledge and the need to build more skills and competencies to perform in the labor market. To think carefully about the activities of the hierarchized classification between men and women and their respective attributes, as well as the influence on the individuals' career choices, seems to be a major issue, still little discussed in Nutrition.

So, the aim of this study is to present and discuss the female nature in Nutrition as a profession. Using the format of an essay, we do not intend to give responses, but based on reflections about the history of the profession we seek to build a picture of issues related to the present and future of the profession.

## Gender and nutrition

The concept of gender has been discussed by several disciplines such as Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology. We will not discuss the various approaches to this topic. What is of interest and supports our reflection here is to discuss gender as a historical and cultural construction and not of nature. Thus, the concept is presented in the plural form, i.e., female and male or transgender, as they are constructed in the most diverse forms in the core of society and culture, to the extent that the sexual roles are established by society, inclusive guiding the professional choice.

[...] there is no “correct” representation of women in relation to men and that the whole science of difference is thus misconceived. It is true that there is and was considerable and often overtly misogynist bias in much biological research on women; clearly science has historically worked to “rationalize” and “legitimize” distinctions not only of sex but also of race and class, to the disadvantage of the powerless.<sup>18</sup>

From this perspective, professions performed by men and women in society are naturalized, and to women are given activities in the private sphere relating to the education of children and caring for life, interpersonal relationships and expressions of affection; and to men, tasks in the public sphere with rationality and competitiveness features, relating to conquest, physical danger, domination and exercise of power upon others.<sup>19,20</sup> Although the “female and male” polarization is more evident in the present essay, we cannot ignore the diversity of gender with respect to the professional choice and career. Thus, we highlight some events reported in the media, such as the increased number of transgenders enrolled in the National High School Exam (ENEM), the recognition of use of the social name in some public universities in Brazil and the possibility of a transgender becoming a dean of a university.<sup>21,22</sup>

In Nutrition, up to now, discussions on professional education have addressed the gender issue. Costa<sup>23</sup> describes the nutritionist education based on a historical retrospective of events and Brazilian and Latin American studies that occurred up to that moment. The author points out that, since the 1970s, when there was an increase in the number of Latin American Nutrition courses, the discussion, initially on scientific events in Latin America, was about the professional identity. It seems that it was not clear at the time the need to institute this career and its object of practice. During these forums, there were efforts to emphasize the importance of nutritionists and make a clear statement of their responsibilities and functions. Recommendations were prepared for the conduction of studies on this topic and, in education, guidelines on the minimal requirements for admission to the course, duration of the course, teachers’ background, aspects considered essential to the organization of educational programs, among others.

In the following decades, 1980, 1990 and 2000, discussions on the topic and on the professional profile continued, in an attempt to define the nutritionist’s duties and the academic training

approaches, as well to seek solutions for the problems identified in nutritionists' education. In the 1980s, discussions covered the interrelationship with other professions in the broadest context of healthcare professionals and their commitment with the majority of the Brazilian population – in the case, nutritional needs.<sup>23</sup> According to the author, the main concern with the specificity of nutritionists' competencies and skills and the analysis of the educational framework was due to the low social visibility of the profession, which lacked an own identity both in the eyes of society and the professional category itself.

In the core of discussions on the professional profile and competencies, we cite Maria Lúcia Magalhães Bosi,<sup>24</sup> who published in 1996 the book *Profissionalização e conhecimento: a nutrição em questão* (Professionalization and Knowledge: Nutrition at Issue). According to the author, any debate on the lack of clarity about the object of practice of the professional category, its functions, assignments and duties touched on the very identity of the category, in its relation to the degree of professionalization by the practice it developed – that is, the own reason of being of the “profession”<sup>b</sup> as a whole.

[...] what can be seen is a struggle in the defense of an object, the search for an identity that would define and give autonomy to the category. This object which, under various names, is exclusive and legitimate for nutritionists, has its defense based on the argument of a supposed specificity in the level of education, which however would not withstand a confrontation with practice.<sup>24</sup> (Our translation).

The author's work is cited here due to the effort that she employed to elucidate the circumstances upon which the nutritionist developed efforts for the professionalization through a reflection on the category's restraints and possibilities. Accordingly, she focused on the question of analysis of the cognitive dimension and found that a bachelor's degree in Nutrition did not provide sufficient instruments for the nutritionists to exercise an autonomous and clearly defined practice and to claim an exclusive jurisdiction on a given area of knowledge and practice. In her contribution to the construction of the profile of the Brazilian nutritionist, she discussed the question of gender because she considered it a key issue for the study on professionalization.

At this point she conducted a brief discussion on the lower occupational prestige of those who choose this career as well as the late and marginal inclusion process of women in the workforce. She explained that, in part, such devaluation, also in monetary terms, is related to the fact that the “female professions” perform in the public sphere activities equivalent to those performed by women in the private space. As an example, she cited the words of one of the pioneers in Nutrition education: “The basic course of Nutrition [...] matches the natural female affinities,

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b The author uses the term “profession” between quotation marks based on the hypothesis that Nutrition was considered a semi-profession because it did not have a cognitive basis to allow a clear professional identity and claimed an exclusive jurisdiction on a given area of knowledge and practice.

and the profession is, in many aspects, an expansion of their domestic work”.<sup>24</sup> (Our translation). Bosi<sup>24</sup> pointed out that the traditional vision of the division of tasks according to sex, which makes women strive to reconcile the family life, such as taking care of the children, with the professional life, is an obstacle to their professional ascent in the competition with men. The focus on gender was also considered a factor of influence on the choice of the profession, to the extent that the role performed by women in the social sphere of private life is reproduced in the choice of profession, because it is linked to the male domination in the family. The cultural tradition, the organization and structure of the labor market also shape the professional work by restricting the entry of women into other sectors, such as when they decide for jobs that offer the possibility to adjust their working hours to suit family needs.

Other studies were carried out to detail the professional practice and their relationships. Andrade & Lima,<sup>9</sup> for instance, when considering the gender issue as an important aspect for the configuration of the identity and autonomy in the professionalization process, evaluated to what extent the “gender” category was the focus of research in the field of Food and Nutrition in the period from 1980 to 2002.

The authors found that, in the general body of researches, “gender” was not a key analytical category and the discussions passed through the arguments much further on the grounds of the female hegemony in the profession and the difficulty encountered by women at work, the latter expressed by an attitude of acceptance to adverse work-related situations.

We can assume that the inexpressive approach to gender in the studies about the educational and professional practices in Nutrition is also due to the fact that the gender perspective, as an analytical category, has been addressed especially after the 1980s. In addition, the consolidation of the scientific field in Food and Nutrition is recent and the focus of studies has been on “nutrient” and “food”.<sup>25</sup>

We did not find recent studies focusing on the analysis between Nutrition and gender. However, we looked into the history of the professional education and have some considerations.

Among the first courses on Nutrition, those offered by SAPS, initially designed to train food and nutrition auxiliaries or visitors, were exclusively for women.<sup>26,27</sup> We can state, as Bourdieu<sup>14</sup> did, when Nutrition courses are directed to women, SAPS “[...] consecrates the established order, by bringing it to known and recognized, official existence.” In this case, women leave the domestic environment to work, but part of their job in restaurants is seen as an extension of the domestic chores. Although working under different conditions in restaurants, at the end of the day the woman/nutritionist is still responsible for providing food.

Such courses design for women, as mentioned earlier, is related to the attribution of the professional training to the functions recognized as female. Still according to Bourdieu,<sup>14</sup> what the

discourse imputes as natural characteristics of women is in fact immersed in the social conditions of their possibilities. In this case, the ability to cook, construed as a female affinity, has its possibility produced, for example, in the availability to learn to cook in the family environment (this was a lesson taught to the girls, not the boys) or in the encouragement to cook as a girls play; or, still, as a condition necessary to the constitution of new families and in order that the woman could assume her role as wife (we should recall here the popular saying “she can cook, so she can marry”). Moreover, as some authors mentioned that the nutritionist was considered a subaltern profession, subordinated to the medical practice,<sup>23,24</sup> for us, the fact that it has been naturalized as a female profession contributes to place the nutritionist in this same condition.

On the other hand, as the similarity of the housework with the work at restaurants is identified – the responsibility for preparing the food as an essentially female task – we should emphasize that the shift from the responsibility for the domestic food to that of restaurants also allowed the woman/nutritionist to incorporate a certain power. When leaving the informal work at home for a formal job in restaurants, the woman/nutritionist changed her position, leaving the exclusively domestic sphere to also compose the labor market and the field of Food and Nutrition itself, even though within certain limits.

Instead of being only responsible for the housework and children, she becomes also responsible for the operation of restaurants and the employees in charge of handling the foods. This brought implications to this agent, by conferring prestige and power related to the new knowledge that she now has: organize the production of large quantities of meals. Thus, the statements of nutritionists who graduated from SAPS<sup>c</sup> and worked there are very illustrative:

The work developed there was marvelous because I never had a kind of work like that - commanding this group, a restaurant serving more than a thousand people; preparing those menus! Our work consisted of directing the staff, preparing menus, all of them according to the technique; passing to the kitchen all of that [...]<sup>28 d</sup>

[...] Besides studying, I would earn some money, which would allow me to buy books, notebooks and not be a burden to my parents. Given this, my mother and father agreed [...] in the beginning we served three thousand meals a day, then we increased and reached ten thousand meals/day. I got my fingers dirty on the work, and taught some dishes to the cooks. (...) we participated in management, inspecting the receiving of foods (...) we had the responsibility of preparing balanced menus to avoid excess or lack. <sup>28 e</sup> (Our translation)

c They are statements of nutritionists who graduated from SAPS and worked there, telling how they were admitted to the course of nutritionist as well as part of their experiences as students and professionals.

d Statement of Oswaldina Nole do Nascimento given to Ana Maria da Costa Evangelista, Rio de Janeiro, in April 2010.

e Statement of Euthalia de Araújo Tavares given to Ana Maria da Costa Evangelista, Rio de Janeiro, in August 2010.



Two recognizable points in the statements are the possibility of gaining a certain financial Independence when joining SAPS (both as a professional and student, because scholarships were granted to the “girls”) and the possibility of obtaining scientific and legitimate knowledge that would ensure the exercise of the profession in a respectable space.

Likewise, at the time, the extension of the domestic work to the professional sphere may have contributed to the initial nutritionist’s difficulty in building their professional identity,<sup>24</sup> a meaning that Nutrition, as well as the other so-called “female” professions, articulates the professional work with the domestic work, confounding the private sphere with the public one, making it difficult for women to distinguish the boundaries between both.

### The gender issue in graduate courses

Reflections on gender and nutrition can also be broadened in graduate studies. In Brazil, education has been considered in social mobility studies as a determinant of social trajectories. Brazilians’ average salary rises markedly from an educational level up to the next. Brazilians with a master’s degree earn on average 84% more than those who hold an undergraduate degree only; those who completed doctorate earn 35% more than those with a master’s degree only.<sup>29</sup>

Such mobility has encouraged women and men to invest in education, and women are increasingly present in graduate courses. In 2009, women predominate among those holding a master’s degree (men 46.5% and women 53.5%), but there has not been a female predominance in all major areas of expertise. Women were markedly present in the areas of Health Sciences and Linguistics, Language and Literature, and Arts. The three areas of knowledge in Health Sciences where women had a significant participation were Speech-Language Therapy (95.95%), Nursing (91.88%) and Nutrition (88.13%). In the major areas of Engineering, Exact Sciences and Earth Science, women accounted for less than a third of the total number of graduates in this year.<sup>29</sup>

Regarding doctorate, in 2008 the number of women and men with a PhD degree was practically the same, women slightly outnumbering men, but with the same pattern of expertise as in the master’s level: in Linguistics, Language and Literature, and Arts, women’s share was higher (63.8%), and the lowest was in the area of Engineering (33.3%). The major area of Health Sciences, the area with the greatest number of doctoral degrees, in that year it had 60% of women among its graduates, with an outstanding number of women in Speech-Language Therapy (100%), Nursing (90.8%), Collective Health (69.4%) and Nutrition (66%).<sup>30</sup>

In a study conducted with holders of masters’ degree on ten *stricto sensu* graduate programs in Brazil in the field of Nutrition (the majority being women), salary increases, increased self-confidence and recognition by the peers were identified as the main changes in the professional life resulting from this academic achievement.<sup>31</sup>

Bourdieu<sup>32</sup> tells us about the logics of official nomination, which is not so clear as in the case of title – nobiliary, academic, professional – a symbolic, social and even legally assured capital. The noblemen, according to him, are not only those who are known and notorious. They are also those who are recognized by an official, “universal” sphere – i.e., known and recognized by everyone. Professional or academic title is a kind of legal rule of social perception. It is an institutionalized symbolic capital, present in the discourse of the nutritionists from SAPS and in the master’s nutritionists in the study cited.

In general, although women outnumbered men in master’s degrees and similar proportions in doctorate, this was not the same in the academic environment. We still have a lower number of women in the university teaching staff, and a low presence of women in the highest hierarchical positions of universities. According to the Census on Higher Education in 2013,<sup>33</sup> men accounted for 54.9% of the teaching functions in higher education in Brazil, while women, 45.1%. The profile of a university professor is 35 years old, male, with a PhD and exclusive dedication in public higher superior institutions (HEI) and a master’s degree, contracted on an hourly-paid basis by private HEIs.

More specifically regarding the *stricto sensu* graduate faculty, data of 2003 indicate that women accounted for 36.1% of the faculty at this educational level, with a majoritarian position in the major areas of Linguistics, Language and Literature, and Arts (60,7%) and Human Sciences (50.6%). Although the area of Health Sciences has more women with graduate degrees, as previously mentioned, men outnumbered women (60.4%) present on the faculty in the same area in 2003. In the major areas of Engineering and Exact Sciences and Earth Science, women accounted for less than a quarter of the total number of teachers in that year.<sup>34</sup>

Besides the fact that the number of women in *stricto sensu* graduate programs is not the same in the university teaching staff, another key issue for discussion is that women are paid less than their male counterparts in the same functions. In 2008, women with a master’s degree obtained in Brazil in the period of 1996-2009, earned, in December 2009, an average remuneration 28% lower than men with the same degree in the same period.<sup>29</sup> With respect to the female PhD holders, their average monthly pay was 11% lower than their male counterparts. Despite the average number of contractual working hours and the total time spent by men in the job are relatively higher than women’s, the differences in these variables appear to be insignificant to explain all this existing average pay gap.<sup>30</sup>

As seen, there is already a representative number of women in sciences, which however is not large in some areas and not significant in the power ranking. Lower wages are pointed out as one of the factors of the low women’s integration in the Science universe, as well as biases, marriage and children.<sup>35</sup>

The rigid separation of duties between genders in traditional marriage was partially overcome by women throughout the twentieth century. However, the increased access to formal education and to the workforce does not mean an abdication of household chores. The women's overlapping activities in the private and professional spaces and the men's non-sharing tasks in the private space resulted in an additional workload to women – what we popularly call “double burden”.

In the division of work according to sex, caring for the young children, elderly parents/-in laws, the sick at home, and the home itself is still the responsibility of women. It is up to the women, for example, to miss work or school to manage emergency care situations. In this division, it is also the woman's duty to sustain a loving relationship, called “love feminization”. The division of work by gender is one of the key obstacles found in the academic pathway of female scientists, preventing them to reach higher positions in their careers.<sup>36</sup>

The difficulties encountered by women who have a productivity research scholarship in the field of Physics, according to the perspective of gender relations, in combining the demands of the scientific career with those of love and family relationships, were analyzed by Lima.<sup>36</sup> For women, investment in the career and in affective relationships are often construed as excluding. In the reports, most of the female researchers had their professional options determined by the professional choices made by their partners and/or husbands (uncomplete doctorates, not participating in civil service entrance examinations...), as if their (male) careers were the main ones and the wives' complementary or secondary. There were few reports in which the male partner undertakes the burden of having a supporting career.

Another finding was the obfuscation of the women's merits in cases of disciplinary endogamy, considered by peers as “scientific climbing”. Women's achievements were viewed with suspicion when in collaboration with their spouses. Competition between couples and the lack of support and encouragement in the career were also cited. Bringing work home or working in the weekends were common family's complaints. However, when the spouse was in these conditions, this was not a problem. Harmonizing career and marriage and consequent decisions can result in slow or tortuous professional trajectories, making the work of accumulation of scientific capital and the achievement of academic recognition much more difficult.

By observing data of scholarships awarded by the National Council of Scientific and Technological Council (CNPq) in Productivity in Research (PR) and post-doctorate programs in the careers considered “more female” in the area of Health Sciences (Speech-Language Therapy, Nursing and Collective Health), we can see that women are the majority in these four areas, but the predominance is not so expressive in Nutrition and Collective Health. In these areas, we also find a minority of women in more prestigious positions, such as in the PQ 1A scholarship level (62% of these grants were awarded to male researchers in Nutrition and 68% in Collective Health.<sup>37</sup>

Scholarship is an indication of knowledge and recognition by the peers in the same career and also a major scientific capital<sup>38</sup> that attracts more symbolic and material capital. Researchers need to accumulate this capital because it provides them authority to (re)define the laws according to which the profits in the game will be distributed, the laws that set out whether or not it is important to research and write on a specific subject.<sup>39</sup> Researchers and their dominant research lines are those who define the relevant scientific interventions, publications, topics, objects of study. Therefore, authority and power in the field of Science in the area Nutrition have been exercised more expressively by men.

We are not reducing the gender issue to quantitative issues, which shows us a lower number of women at the highest positions of power and prestige, since the female meaning can be present in all spaces and practices, even when these positions are occupied by men. Maybe the numbers indicate the benefits of the work division for men, given that such positions demand more productivity, greater work involvement and time of dedication, which can mean giving up of an idealized family life.

It seems to be important here to consider nutrition and gender in the literature, the latter being a core analytical category, as well as the result of an *habitus*<sup>40</sup> that naturalizes the nutritionist profession as female. Socially structured, but at the same time structuring of social actions, the *habitus* ensures the internalization of values, beliefs and norms (social laws), by fitting the agent to his social position.<sup>38</sup> In short, a way of conceiving and living a profession that makes us say, in our daily life, “that is the way it is”.

## Final considerations

This essay aimed to demonstrate, through a critical and reflective review on gender and Nutrition, some facets of this issue in this predominantly female profession. Although the presence of men in Nutrition courses has grown in the last decades, it can be seen that they primarily pursue activities associated to attributes of male identity that value virility and physical strength, such as in workout gyms or sport clubs, while women remain acting mainly in the area of Clinical Nutrition or in foodservices.

The possibility of exercising a profession and thereby gaining some autonomy and respect has been an important change for women who were restricted to the domestic work. On the other hand, the extension of the domestic work to the professional sphere may have contributed to the initial difficulty of building the nutritionist's professional identity. Realizing that the nutritionist profession is permeated by gender significations in its historical constitution is fundamental to understand it in present times.

The advances made by the category in the last decades, especially by expanding the fields of activities, the professional recognition by the academia and the labor market show the social conquests achieved by women.

Many are the considerations that can be made on this topic and many are the concerns still existing. What are the reasons for choosing this career today? If Nutrition at first was a specialization culturally more suitable to women and derived from a domestic and female work, how can we construe this profession today, after more than 50 years from the creation of the first higher school? What are the relations that we can observe with the changes in the career and more inclusion of the male identity? How can we go further in the discussions that would allow us to make the transgender visible in the construction of the profession?

Despite the persistence of asymmetries and naturalization of meanings established in the social relationships engendered by men and women, as shown in this essay, it is important to emphasize that these relationships and meanings are not isolate, static. The conflicts in the conduction of the career, for instance, can be outlined differently, when we consider the fact that there are female nutritionists married to women. Despite the numerical predominance of female nutritionists, the profession is not exclusively female, and the slow and recent entry of transgenders will certainly bring about new approaches to the discussions.

We believe that this text resumes an important discussion about the nutritionist profession, its female-considered nature, giving visibility to some gender-related approaches in the process of social organization and providing topics of discussion for new insights, reflections and perspectives in this field of studies.

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