





Original Article

# Narratives of middle-aged women: reflections about gender stereotypes in the construction of the body and occupational choices

*Narrativas de mujeres de mediana edad: reflexiones sobre los estereotipos de género en la construcción del cuerpo y elecciones ocupacionales*

*Narrativas de mulheres de meia-idade: reflexões sobre estereótipos de gênero na construção do corpo e nas escolhas ocupacionais*

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## **Abstract**

**Introduction:** Studies from a gender perspective and feminist studies are still emerging in Occupation Science. Based on the assumption that we live in a patriarchal society, this research rescues the narrative of middle-aged Chilean women from the Los Ríos region, to make visible how they built their lives based on the gender stereotypes that determined their choices. occupations according to the needs of men, under a traditional understanding of the female-male binary.

**Objective:** Recognize and understand the emerging relationship between gender stereotypes, body construction, and occupational choices. **Method:** From a post-structuralist feminist stance, interviews with a narrative approach are carried out with an intentional sample of eight women; Discourse analysis, as a methodological tool, gives an account of the life trajectory and experiences of women in relation to gender, body, and occupational choices. **Results:** Five categories emerged from the research that reflect the existence of gender stereotypes in women. female body that is impregnated in their identity and the occupational choices throughout their lives.

**Conclusion:** The women's narratives show the existence of an emerging dynamic relationship between the construction of the body, gender stereotypes, and occupational choices, where stereotypes and actions are combined, generating a construction of the concept of woman in a socio-historical context. occupational patterns and choices that will replicate gender stereotypes.

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**Keywords:** Body Constitution, Gender Stereotyping, Activities of Daily Living, Feminism.

### **RESUMEN**

**Introducción:** Los estudios desde la perspectiva de género y los estudios feministas son aún emergentes en la Ciencia de la Ocupación. Desde el supuesto que habitamos una sociedad patriarcal, esta investigación rescata la narrativa de mujeres chilenas de mediana edad de la Región de Los Ríos, con el propósito de visibilizar cómo han construido sus vidas a partir de estereotipos de género que han determinado sus elecciones ocupacionales en función de las necesidades de los hombres, bajo una comprensión tradicional del binario femenino-masculino.

**Objetivo:** Reconocer y comprender la relación emergente entre los estereotipo de género, la construcción del cuerpo y las elecciones ocupacionales. **Método:** Desde un posicionamiento posestructuralista feminista se realizan entrevistas con enfoque narrativo a una muestra intencionada de ocho mujeres; el análisis de discurso, como herramienta metodológica, da cuenta de la trayectoria de vida y experiencias de las mujeres en relación con el género, el cuerpo y las elecciones ocupacionales.

**Resultados:** De la investigación emergieron cinco categorías que reflejan la existencia de estereotipos de género en la construcción del cuerpo femenino que se impregnan en la identidad y elecciones ocupacionales a lo largo de su vida.

**Conclusión:** Las narrativas de las mujeres dan cuenta de la existencia de una relación dinámica emergente entre la construcción del cuerpo, estereotipos de género y elecciones ocupacionales, donde los estereotipos y el hacer se conjugan, generando una construcción del concepto mujer en un contexto socio histórico que define patrones y elecciones ocupacionales que replicarán estereotipos de género.

**Palabras-clave:** Constitución del Cuerpo, Estereotipo de Género, Actividades Cotidianas, Feminismo.

### **RESUMO**

**Introdução:** Estudos na perspectiva de gênero e estudos feministas são ainda emergentes na Ciência da Ocupação. Partindo do pressuposto de que vivemos em uma sociedade patriarcal, esta pesquisa resgata a narrativa de mulheres chilenas de meia-idade da região de Los Ríos, com o objetivo de tornar visível como elas construíram suas vidas com base nos estereótipos de gênero que determinaram suas escolhas ocupacionais em função das necessidades dos homens, sob uma compreensão tradicional do binário feminino-masculino. **Objetivo:** Reconhecer e compreender a relação emergente entre estereótipos de gênero, construção corporal e escolhas ocupacionais. **Método:** A partir de uma postura feminista pós-estruturalista, são realizadas entrevistas com abordagem narrativa com uma amostra intencional de oito mulheres. A análise do discurso, como ferramenta metodológica, foi utilizada para apresentar a trajetória de vida e experiências das mulheres em relação ao gênero, ao corpo e às escolhas ocupacionais. **Resultados:** Da pesquisa emergiram cinco categorias que refletem a existência de estereótipos de gênero na construção dos corpos femininos, que estão impregnados na identidade e nas escolhas ocupacionais ao longo de suas vidas. **Conclusão:** As narrativas das mulheres mostram a existência de uma relação dinâmica emergente entre a construção do corpo, estereótipos de gênero e escolhas ocupacionais, onde estereótipos e os fazeres se conjugam, gerando uma construção do conceito de

mulher em um contexto sócio-histórico que define padrões e escolhas ocupacionais que irão replicar os estereótipos de gênero.

**Palavras-chave:** Constituição do Corpo, Estereótipo de Gênero, Atividades Cotidianas, Feminismo.

## Introduction

Throughout history, we have been part of a patriarchal system that is inserted and is part of a particular form of “political, economic, religious and social organization, where gender constitutes the ordering of society, whose base is sustained by the naturalization of male authority” (Miranda & Muñoz, 2013, p. 49). This has generated a dichotomy and a hierarchy between the female and male gender understood in the traditional binary form from the biological characteristics of sexual differentiation, reflected in the construction of social stereotypes, in which the first is associated with the body, the carnal and lower processes, while the second is linked to thought and higher processes (Energici et al., 2016). According to Beauvoir (2018), man is the one who continues to build and maintain these physical and behavioral canons, which, within the historical and sociopolitical context, manifest as symbolic violence embodied in language and doing, permeating the construction of the female body in a disadvantageous power relationship context.

Although the social transformations produced in the roles assumed by men and women in care work and work outside the home are undeniable, those traditional values socially defined as essential are still maintained, a reflection of gender stereotypes in the construction of the female body and thus, in occupational choices, such as having a heteronormative family, being mothers, doing housework and care, without excluding the activity of paid work. Chile, in particular, has maintained this patriarchal system (Miranda & Muñoz, 2013; Morrison & Polanco Cerón, 2019), where roles, behaviors, and submissive behaviors are assigned by women based on the needs of men, which has generated a lack of autonomy, processes of alienation in the construction of our identity, and multiple obstacles to becoming and exercising rights as historical and political persons (Rosso, 2016).

According to Occupational Sciences, the context in which we live influences occupational choices (Galvaan, 2012). Engels (1999) had already stated that it is the social construction and not the nature of women that has remained in the domestic sphere and under the domination of men. Thus, we replicate ways of dealing with ourselves that reproduce the formation of gender in each person, perpetuating sexist and patriarchal models (Morrison & Araya, 2018). Therefore, we seek to contribute to the reflection on these social problems that are naturalized, with the double objective of contributing to the theoretical development of Occupational Sciences and our practice, as Occupational Therapists, incorporating the gender perspective in professional work, keeping in mind that patriarchy, as a condition of possibility, is that it establishes hegemonic forms of 'doing'.

What we present here converges in this article as the result of an investigation focused on the narrative of median cis-gender women who live in Los Ríos Region, in southern

Chile, to gender stereotypes, the construction of the female body, and occupational choices, reflecting on how these three categories overlap throughout their lives. The research is positioned from a poststructuralist feminist perspective, which questions power relations and rejects the essence of gender and body that is reproduced through discourse (Scott, 1986), postulating that the meaning of concepts is dynamic and unfinished processes.

## **Gender Stereotypes and Traditional Roles**

Post-structuralist feminist theory questions the social structure of power, in which language and discourse are relevant concepts to analyze and understand this structure (Scott, 1986; Zambrini & Ladevito, 2009), with a discourse constructed and replicated through performative acts, producing social phenomena that impose norms and regulate us. Also, this theory visualizes the body as a carrier of gender and sex, which is understood as “a representation that obeys a social and cultural context of personal history, a kind of social construction” (Lossada, 2013, p. 235), that is, the construction of the women's body will emerge from the sociocultural context in which we are immersed.

Stereotypes are understood as the categorization of characteristics and particularities of people in a given social context (Cook & Cusack, 2010, as cited in Posada Kubissa, 2017, p. 253), among which the category of gender stereotypes is framed, who refer, following the same authors, to the construction of men and women only because of their biological and social differences. This construction is validated through discourses as a social practice, which directs the behavior of both genders, from a binary perspective, with specific characteristics for each one. It should be noted that gender stereotypes are incorporated and reproduced in the form of habitus, which, “[...] reflect the interconnection between social structure and individual action, an interconnection that is not reduced to the application of social norms or rules by the individual, but rather expresses the incorporation of the social in the production of subjectivity” (Posada Kubissa, 2017, p.253).

That is, customs, occupations, and common sense, among others, are produced and reproduced by habitus from the first life experiences and during the socialization process, so they acquire a sense of naturalness (Higuaita Lopez, 2015) provoking prescriptive expectations at the social level, specific to each gender. However, it is interesting to expose the tension between the normative prescription given by the habitus and the possibilities of change in gender relations. Given this, Venegas Medina (2010) raises an epistemological debate between Bourdieu (2005), who establishes that the change would be given by the modifications in the material conditions of existence that would produce a transformation of the habitus and, therefore, of the practices. This was pointed out by Butler (2001) for whom the changes in the discourse would be the ones that would promote social transformation. However, this apparent contradiction between the material and the discursive is resolved at the ontological level, eliminating the material-discourse binary, as proposed by feminist post-structuralism (Olivares-Aising, 2022), therefore, social change is emerging, given mainly from the social struggles in different fields.

As we have stated, gender roles link the feminine with the private sphere, that is, roles or tasks related to the domestic, family life, upbringing, and daily life, and the masculine with the public sphere, which is associated with a paid productive role, power, and politics (De Barbieri, 1991). The role of motherhood that women have fulfilled has

been based on gender essentialism that is replicated from a male hegemonic model generating symbolic violence, defined by López Safi (2015), as:

[...] the subjugation of some individuals concerning others, through the socialization process that allows the naturalization of power relations, which become unquestionable from asymmetries among which are those based on gender (p. 4).

From a critical feminist perspective, we understand the way of exercising motherhood as built in the patriarchal culture, which is defined by norms according to the needs of a particular social group and is organized in such a way that these needs are maintained in the historical trajectory (Palomar Vereá, 2005), being constructed as inherent to the identity of women.

## **Family and Life Cycle**

At present, the heteronormative family continues to be the parameter from which the different vital moments that the human being goes through are explained and constructed from the discourses of normality. However, for this research, the description of its stages, based on the canonical literature, places us to interpret the narratives of the women interviewed. Although the critical literature recognizes that the current capitalist and patriarchal system contributes to the maintenance of the heteronormative and monogamous family, in which the processes of upbringing and socialization are given according to gender differences as established roles (Salazar, 2006), which perform and perpetuate parenting styles, we will resort to traditional definitions to understand that parenting is understood as “behavioral schemes built by mothers and fathers with their children to establish their patterns of interaction, which will be used in the process of their formation” (Luje, 2018, p. 93).

This definition allows us to understand that parenting styles will have an impact on the configuration of the identity, actions, and construction of values of girls and boys, establishing the foundations of their personality and relationship with their families (Izzedin Bouquet & Pachajoa Londoño, 2009), reproducing ways of performing the gender already ascribed from birth according to its biological conformation. Therefore, early childhood is considered a key stage in development, since the experiences of the girl or boy would be an important contribution to the future stages of the life cycle (Miranda-Valdebenito & González-Burboa, 2016). The foregoing becomes even more significant if one considers the existence of cases considered as a violation of rights due to parental negligence, abandonment, mistreatment, and sexual abuse in childhood, affecting their growth and development.

Adolescence is characterized by the development and construction of identity, which stands out as the most important milestone, in a specific sociocultural context. Sexuality is relevant in the construction of identity, defined as a “symbolic social construction made from its reality [...] that compromises its emotional, behavioral, cognitive and communicative aspects both for its development at the individual level and in the social” (González Gómez & López Torres, 2015, p. 140). It should be noted that, in the process of sexual exploration and discovery, adolescents are faced with taboos and gender biases

that make it difficult to acquire reliable information about sexuality (Calero Yera et al., 2017).

One of the key milestones for women is menarche, which implies taboos within our society. The beginning of the menstrual cycle in cis-gender adolescents provokes a response in their immediate environment that focuses on accompaniment, usually from other nearby women, who relieves and delimits the issues to biological and hygienic processes, omitting to support this vital stage from an understanding of the emotional processes involved. For Fernández Olguín (2012), the mother is the main source of information, and the father is situated as an absent figure and not very empathic within the process of menarche, transmitting and replicating imaginaries about the male figure that at the same time justify ignorance and fear in the topic. The experience of physiological and psychological changes that women experience will depend on the contexts in which they develop, influencing the construction of their bodies, identity, and self-image (Duno & Acosta, 2019).

It is important to point out that, once again, we turn to the canonical literature on the life cycle, since it is the predominant discourse in our culture. Even when we understand that sexuality is not limited to the period of adolescence, it allows us to situate the lives of the women in this study in a culturally situated linear historicity, in the understanding that this same discourse, rooted in educational and health devices, performs the different stages of the life cycle that we finally realize in the story of the interviewees.

Along these same lines, middle age will be understood as “a transition stage in a woman's life, characterized by physical, psychological and social changes” (Li, 2000, as cited in Araya et al., 2006, p. 19), which ranges from 40 or 45 years to 65 years old. It is associated with a restructuring of traditional roles, which have been validated by a masculine and universal perspective, generating in women an identity construction based on masculine experience and discourses. For Maquieira D'Angelo (2002), the climacteric and menopause have a negative social vision often associated with concepts such as degeneration, spasms, or deterioration. The foregoing, added to patriarchal conditions, has repercussions on body image and self-esteem (Medina Sarmiento, 2018), making the experience of women invisible.

## **Body**

The body is defined as “a social and cultural construction and its ultimate reality are not given” (Le Breton, 2002, p. 182). This means that the construction of the body is an unfinished process in the constant transformation that is conditioned by social processes. Also, the representations and knowledge that can be generated about the body, beyond being attributed to a social origin, are a vision of the world and, therefore, the being and doing of a person (Le Breton, 2002). In particular, the female body has a biological and social load, that is, material and symbolic, given by gender stereotypes. On the one hand, they determine their position within society based on their biological role, such as reproduction, and on the other hand, their bodies are defined due to the incarnation of symbols, such as norms, values, and ideologies of the culture to which they belong, the body being a symbolic construction (Le Breton, 2002).

From the reproductive roles assigned to women as essential, sexuality is one of the recurring themes in literature. How a woman lives and is 'allowed' to experience sexuality is different from that of a man, presenting a duality, where there are rules and even myths about their behavior, which are different in each culture, society, and/or historical moment (Hurtado de Mendoza, 2015). According to the author, the experience of women's sexuality is part of the patriarchal system, normalizing the idea that housekeeping is an integral part of the act of attracting and seducing, replicating the ideal of femininity in society.

Sexuality is strongly influenced by religion since it determines sexual norms and behaviors for each individual (Suarez, 2015), especially women. Behaviors defined as moral and immoral within society are established and normalized. Thus, the woman's body is visualized from two perspectives. On the one hand, in allusion to sensuality, temptation, and sin, and on the other hand, as a function of man in the act of procreation, placing the latter within moral parameters, rejecting pleasure, being the bodies of women controlled by the notions of sin and guilt (Hurtado de Mendoza, 2015), performing women's bodies. Performativity, defined by Butler (2018, p. 19) as "the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and imposes", includes the construction of gender, resulting in a naturalized perspective, both the actions and the ideas based on a hegemonic heterosexist system. Butler (2018, p. 319) further points out that:

This view of performativity implies that discourse has a history that not only precedes but also conditions its contemporary uses and that this history effectively decentralizes the presentist view of the subject according to which the individual is the exclusive origin or owner of what is said.

The discourse has a historical charge of power that is replicated and transcends generationally, conditioning the construction of the meaning of the body, which will continue to be repeated through performativity, which could not only offend bodies but could also build and position them disadvantageously (Butler, 2018).

## **Narrative and Occupation Under Social Construction**

The women's narrative is a central aspect of the research, since "we build ourselves on narratives, we are based on stories" (Velasco, 2010, p. 117), which account for the meanings of life experiences. We build ourselves in others and depend on the context in which we place ourselves, forging a narrative identity, from which we can order, explain and reconstruct experiences, ordering them in a dynamic reality. According to Velasco (2010), the narrative builds an identity that allows us to understand ourselves, being part of the construction of the community in which we insert ourselves. Therefore, the narrative, from a performative perspective, builds and, at the same time, reproduces and transforms the individuals, to the extent that he can account for their life trajectory.

For the Science of Occupation, the narrative is closely linked to the occupation, to the extent that when narrating we tell about our occupations, being understood as "a social production that implies understanding it as a collective expression of culture, history and its material aspects" (Palacios Tolvett, 2017, p. 75). That is to say, the

narrative and the occupation emerge from the social context that implies a certain way of doing and recognizing this doing, forging an identity that remains but is also transformed to the extent that we do and tell what we do. Occupations are impregnated with gender stereotypes, which are replicated through performative acts, which have an impact on the construction of the body, since to the extent that we do and take care of ourselves, we build our body and identity, whereas women build, practice and replicate occupations based on power relations within a culture, which restrict and/or enable occupational choices (Morrison & Polanco Cerón, 2019).

The Science of Occupation establishes and at the same time stresses the concept of occupational choice. For Galvaan (2012), occupational choices are socially and culturally situated. Therefore, he raises the existence of a multiplicity of factors that influence the possibility that a person can decide the occupations in which he/she is involved and questions the definition of the term and how it should be understood. The author assumes that the individual perception of control over the choices made by the person has social and cultural roots, which would be particularly significant in marginalized groups, as restricted possibilities of choice and limited access options. For this study, and as a contribution to the development of Occupational Science, we integrate the gender perspective into the concept of occupational choice, since women have historically been restricted in the options and control of the occupations in which they are involved.

## **Methodology**

Post-structuralist feminism delivers the onto-epistemological position to this study, which considers, among others, that “language and discourses are the most important elements in the analysis of social organizations, in social meaning, and relationships of power and individual conscience” (Urrea Medina, 2007, p. 14), criticizing the patriarchal structures that societies have forged. We understand discourse as a social practice that constructs reality and provides a common way of understanding the world for individuals (Urrea et al., 2013).

For the selection criteria, we focus on the population of Chilean women, between 50 and 55 years old, with medium and low economic income, belonging to the Los Ríos Region, mothers, responsible for the care of the home and family, with or without paid activity, who have or have had a partner and complete basic education level. We chose this age group because it represents a stage of life with profound biological and psychological changes since it corresponds to the end of childbearing and reproductive life, a moment in which a retrospective and reflective look at the significant occupations in the previous stages is possible. We used a digital form, selecting an intentional sample of eight women who, for ethical safeguards, read and signed an informed consent term to participate voluntarily in the research. According to Chilean regulations on health research, no review by the Ethics Committee was required, as it was not considered a vulnerable population.

The semi-structured interviews focused on the women's narrative, as a data collection technique, and were carried out electronically or in person, between April and June 2021, depending on the sanitary conditions given by COVID-19, and prior agreement with the participants. The research assumptions emerge from the relationship



of three concepts: body construction, gender stereotypes, and occupational choices being the pillars that guide our theoretical perspective and analytical process. Regarding the analysis process, we transcribed the previously recorded interviews. Subsequently, we began the coding process from a chronological view of the vital stages that, when linked to the central conceptual pillars, resulted in the emerging categories that we will explain below.

## **Results**

### **Category 1: Emergence of the female body from a patriarchal upbringing**

The construction of the body, as a symbolic-material space, begins from the beginning of life and is reflected in the bodies of women through experiences, which are framed in a patriarchal culture that is impregnated with stereotypes of gender. This is a constitutive element in the family organization so that a hetero norm is replicated based on occupations that differentiate the roles of women from those of men, where they are instilled and reproduced from childhood, that is, habitus is created from the teachings and generational values that occur under the context or the ideal of a heteronormative family. This differentiation of roles is replicated unconsciously and positions. On the one hand, the woman within the family is the main caregiver, who provides most of the upbringing, and on the other hand, the father is the provider of economic resources for the family.

*Woman 2: my mother is the housewife, my father is the provider of the house.*

*Woman 6: my dad knew in advance that my mom was the one who had to take all the work and teach us things (...) he was always attentive to us so that we never lacked anything.*

This differentiation of roles is a reflection of the hierarchy of power socially established in a capitalist system, which positions women in the private sphere, where their mothers adopted occupations and roles built based on a social imaginary, such as being a homeowner, being considered a non-productive role for the system. Therefore, the man is placed as an authority as he is the provider of the home for being part of the public sphere, reducing women to economic dependence on it and, being a single mother difficult to cope with the situation. This authority is extrapolated to what happens in a heteronormative family dynamic where there are gender roles and the body of the wives and daughters is built according to the father, since this power is socially validated, causing an attitude of submission from other family members.

*Woman 2: We were always humiliated by my father, always. But then since he was my dad, we accepted him.*

*Woman 5: why, because she told me to stop going online, better come live with me and I, between continuing to walk and giving my daughter a home, I'll stay here, I'll stay, I said, well, as I said, love will come later, I got on well with him, I*

*liked being with him, we had a good time, he was super affectionate, super attentive.*

Another factor in this construction is the socioeconomic situation in which these women are growing up since it has an impact on the occupations they are carrying out, whether they are those that are limiting them or those that are needed in the family dynamics. There are reports of women who in their childhood, they fulfilled the role associated with the care of their siblings, domestic chores, and unpaid work, actions that were necessary based on the economic deficiencies that existed, so since they were little, the idea of reward is established in their experiences and worldview associated with a life of effort and sacrifice.

*Woman 8: I didn't have much free time after I was 9 years old when I started helping my mother with the business (...), I already had to take on another responsibility.*

*Woman 3: work well, I have the idea that I don't know, I had to make bread, and help my mother make bread and clean while she did something else.*

## **Category 2: Adolescence: an invisible stage**

Although adolescence is a vital stage of transition from childhood to adulthood, it is investigated in the narrative of women that it is invisible as such since they justify it only with the arrival of menarche, being a biological milestone that causes a change in the definition of themselves, incorporating stereotypes associated with the meaning of being a woman that influences their identity construction.

*Woman 6: "I think I'm already becoming a woman here...by already having a relationship with a man I was going to get pregnant"*

The foregoing alludes to the milestone of her first menstruation, linking the change of stage with the beginning of reproductive capacity. A milestone that is socially impregnated with taboos and social charges granted by a patriarchal society, which configures the meaning and way of experiencing the process of each woman, causing limitations in her actions and expectations in the menstruation process.

*Woman 8: I put aside child games, not because I wanted to, but because one was embarrassed, and then at about 14 years old, I already liked boys, and we notice the change.*

On the other hand, during this process, body changes are presented that bring with them stereotypes associated with the body that is built from a masculine vision. Feminine beauty standards are created that point to the satisfaction of men, where the adolescent internalizes these patriarchal demands with the expectation of being accepted by others, causing alterations in their self-esteem and body dissatisfaction by not complying with the standards and configuring their identity based on a socially idealized body image.

*Woman 3: I had a lot of complex because it didn't accept me... I had a complex if no guy looked at me if I was a little girl... I felt like I was reduced, like insignificant.*

Finally, there is the fact of associating certain responsibilities to an imposed, constructed, and normalized maturity in society to define the roles of an adult woman. These responsibilities point to the role of maternity, wife, and home maintenance that women must fulfill.

### **Category 3: Spheres of sexuality with a patriarchal social burden**

According to women's narratives, female sexuality is built based on ideals established in a patriarchal culture, which configures the meaning of sexuality and at the same time represses and limits the exploration of female sexuality. This construction is guided by the phallogocentric perspective, where the concept of sexuality for the interviewees is conceived only as the sexual act of penetration, whose purpose is procreation and male sexual satisfaction. Thus, a dynamic of domination of men over women is established.

Along with this, during adolescence secrecy and shame predominate over sexual relations, where it becomes a taboo subject and is educated from misinformation and prejudice. This vision is socially constructed and is replicated in the first instance by the family so that sexual education is generated through conversations with peers and the intimate experience with their partner, that is, the knowledge acquired is impregnated with social stereotypes, which are based on the subjectivities of another, positioning the man as his main provider of information and experiences, internalizing the sexual act as an experience focused on satisfying the man over the exploration of personal pleasure.

*Woman 4: As my mother-in-law once told me: inside your room, you are a whore and a woman, but for your husband, you have to find a way to make him happy.*

*Woman 6: The first one who taught me was my husband... he came from a 'corredero area', yes, he was much older, he was 14 years older than me, so he knew, he had lived his life.*

### ***Sexual violence***

Now, in the stories of these women, experiences around gender violence are visualized, which are based on the inequalities of power that exist between men and women. Within this violence, objectification is presented, which places women as sexual objects in society, which implies that they are violated to such an extent that they exercise sexual violence against them in public and private spaces, as happens in experiences of street and workplace harassment, where the body of women is objectified, generating occupational limitations around fear and devalues the capacities of women.

*Woman 8: at work, because this man was after me and things and he didn't take no for an answer, (...) he started treating me badly and I had to put up with it, put up with it, all my sadness that I had at that moment because I liked the job, until he fired me.*

Woman 2: *Before I remember that he was walking down the street, they grabbed my breast, they grabbed my bottom, they even grabbed my vagina, they grabbed it. Before, that was normal.*

Woman 3: *A man started to harass me... blocks and blocks... but it was an old man on a bicycle, he said horrible things to me and I was small... I was wearing shorts and covered myself... I never went anywhere alone again and it took years to wear shorts.*

Women victims of sexual violence were also investigated, who over time were able to configure the trauma as an experience of resilience. However, they maintain sequels that impact the different spheres of their lives, building their bodies based on those experiences and generating limitations in the activities.

Woman 7: *Rape I had when I was eight years old, that marked me a lot in my life, it helped me defend myself in life (...) they gave me crises of fear after what happened, at night.*

Woman 8: *Then one has to make a chip and try not to remember anymore, so I told you there that I was sexually abused there as a child, they are marks that remain in one's life, but they don't prevent you from developing or being the positive or happy person that I consider myself to be.*

### *Sexuality in middle age*

Today, being middle-aged women, with more experience and knowledge both in the sexual field and their body, they have managed to break down taboos, shame, and modesty, favoring personal discovery and acceptance. However, it is relevant to mention that, the discourse on the sexual act in a couple, focuses on the woman meeting the needs and desires of her partner, which is linked to the idea of a heteronormative monogamous relationship, where there is a sense of possession towards women that is justified and normalized within the patriarchal society.

Woman 3: *I was embarrassed, I don't know the same fact that I didn't know myself, that I didn't know my body, that I didn't know anything, I didn't dare to ask for anything, instead later over the years we have been learning... now I accept myself.*

Therefore, women rely on their partner's assessment of them and their sexual desires to build their perception of themselves, both sexually and in everyday life. As mentioned in the previous category, there are idealizations around the body that impact the configuration of their body image and their self-esteem, causing modesty and limitations in the sexual act.

Woman 3: *My husband always made me feel that I was pretty like that... And that's when I began to accept and love myself, it's hard to love yourself in the body that you have.*

Woman 7: *Every day I can't have sex with my husband with light.* Referring to his feeling of bodily insecurity.

It is relevant to mention that some of the experiences around the menopause milestone bring with them not only physiological changes that determine the end of menstruation and fertility, but also social prejudices and misunderstanding by their immediate environment that configure how they experience their sexuality, implying a process of significant transformation in women based mainly on a collective conceptualization of menopause.

This conceptualization sometimes becomes unpleasant for women since they associate it with a perspective of negative aging linked to the arrival of diseases and physical deterioration, based purely on the biological changes that exist in this stage of life. These changes, together with the lack of knowledge about the climacteric and menopause, condition and predispose the perception of themselves at this stage, emerging in some cases feelings of loneliness, misunderstanding, insecurity, and rejection of their body image that are reflected in sexual life as a couple. However, there is relief with the cessation of menstruation and the care associated with it. Therefore, based on these changes, it is investigated that for women it is a significant transformation milestone that is not exempt from stereotypes, that brings with it new challenges, such as the search for new ways of experiencing sexuality as a couple, and new perspectives and meanings in the concept of women in the sexual sphere.

Woman 8: *I have not been, as well as neurotic, depressive, no, I have not gone through that, I do not know why, I have heard it from other women, but it has not happened to me, no, I hope it does not happen to me because this question is longer than, I've been there for 3 years, the only good thing is that the rule is cut.*

Finally, menopause continues to be considered a taboo subject, since there is misinformation regarding the bodily changes that occur in the climacteric and menopause, to which is added the masculine power extrapolated to sexuality in a couple, clearly responding to the enjoyment of the man, even when these situations are uncomfortable, and cause discomfort to the woman.

Woman 1: *About intimacy in menopause, I have my partner, that's why I would still like to respond to him in a good way and not in that way, because just like he feels that you don't love him.*

#### **Category 4: Maternity role imposed from the essentialism of the concept of woman**

There are hegemonic discourses where the patriarchal discourse prevails in the meaning of motherhood, which is defined by the interviewees as '*a wonderful stage*', since an idealization of this role is perceived innately in women, presenting it as the most relevant in their lives and causing a postponement in other roles, occupations, and interests, prioritizing the care of their children. Along with this, it is investigated that there is fear of infertility and the impossibility of fulfilling the socially imposed role for them, which may interfere with their construction and personal satisfaction.

*Woman 1: I knew that if I didn't get my period... I had a problem, I wouldn't be able to have children, I always thought and that was the part that I suffered from because I did want to be a mother, but when it came, to it was a joy for me.*

*Woman 6: Being a mother means fulfilling myself as a woman...for me, being a mother is all that a woman can give in this life, there is nothing else.*

On the other hand, the pregnancy process brings with it a transformation in her body perception. There is normalization and social acceptance of the body image of pregnant women, which facilitates the acceptance and empowerment of their bodies during the gestation period, justifying their body image based on it. This shows that there are beauty standards that enhance thinness and that only during pregnancy can one go beyond that standard, however, these same standards can cause women to perceive themselves as rejected and disliked by not feeling or looking slim.

*Woman 7: So when I got pregnant, how you started to get a little belly, uuh I was happy, I put on all kinds of clothes, I enjoyed them and showed my total big belly, I was chubby, and I could enjoy it, without anyone criticizing me for the roll came out here, roll there, it was a pregnancy fat so I had a great time as chubby.*

*Woman 6: I already started to get deformed, to get fat and the months go by I was getting fatter and at the same time my body was also growing more and in the end nothing, it was beautiful.*

The woman's body is understood as an object that has a procreative purpose, which often places her partner with the right to decide about her pregnancy, generating dispossession of the woman over her body.

*Woman 6: I was looking for a way to make my husband happy, alluding to the fact that the husband wanted to be a father and she complied with this wish.*

*Woman 5: I didn't want to be a mother again, because of the experience I already had from two, with the experience one later retract (...) if I had had the opportunity to do things with XXX, like work, go to work, maybe I wouldn't even have gotten married.*

## **Category 5: Occupations linked to gender**

There is a differentiation of roles based on gender that is normalized in the patriarchal society, which is built to the extent that gender stereotypes are replicated in everyday situations. They are reflected in childhood internalizing occupations linked to gender, which are mainly instilled and imposed by their mothers and fathers. In childhood, gender stereotypes are replicated through play, the main occupation where girls and boys learn to relate to the world, promoting the construction of their identity based on hetero norm, which defines standardized roles and characteristics for women.

Woman 3: *I couldn't play that because it was for a man... I felt bad, I felt capable of playing that, I knew how to play that, I didn't understand why I couldn't play that.* Referring to the marbles game.

Thus, the fact that there are games for each gender causes a limitation in the participation of women since as a result of this there are situations where they are socially categorized as masculine in an offensive way, which influences their self-perception and construction of their identity. However, there are behaviors associated with the masculine gender that is based on virtues and values, such as strength, which are adopted by women without the need to feel that they leave their feminine norm.

Woman 3: *They used to tell me pico de palo when I was a little girl... it's like calling the girl as macho... for playing bowls or ball... it made me very angry, they told me it was boy's games.*

*\*Pico de palo: idiom that refers to a person who presents attitudes associated with the masculine\**

Woman 7: *I was very manly, I played ball, tennis, houses and all those things because my friends were men, so I didn't have any other type of activity. For example, we played chola, when caught, or just things like that, very abrupt, I never played with dolls.*

Along with the above, limitations are perceived when carrying out occupations associated with women, since the social burden of stereotypes generates beauty canons that women want to be fulfilled. Then, they feel that they do not comply with these, they have cataloged themselves with masculine characteristics that do not “enter” into these feminine practices.

Woman 4: *the fat macha because I did them all, if I had to chop firewood I would chop it if a sack of firewood had to be brought in I would go in (...) my sister would dress up as “the Xuxa paquitas” (\*) with a spectacular physique and I didn't think I was the chubby black girl (...) I felt like I couldn't.*

*(\*) Dancers from the shows of the Brazilian singer Xuxa.*

On the other hand, in the public sphere, feminine essentialism extrapolated to jobs is still maintained, which is implicitly mediated by a hierarchy of patriarchal power, since women continue to have preferences towards occupations and roles associated with the feminine, to which the possibilities of socioeconomic opportunities and access to education are added.

Woman 2: *I say that we are the mothers of the transition, where we had to be taught like the mother, who taught her to be a housewife and we are at the stage where we have to study, we are projecting ourselves to be professionals, to be more independent women.*

However, in the private sphere, gender roles associated with women are assigned, such as taking care of the home and the family, differentiating themselves from the other members, since they fulfill the function of helping women. At the same time, it is recognized that certain occupations within the home are linked to the masculine, such as those that imply strength based on biological essentialism.

*Woman 3: My husband is a homeowner and he does what a homeowner does, he takes care of cleaning the patio and all the man's work.*

However, when the man is not present within the family dynamics, the woman adopts roles and tasks beyond those defined as traditional for her, placing the woman from a sphere of effort and sacrifice to respond to the demands of an absent father. This situation is a source of pride and strength since this sacrifice is socially rewarded based on the family.

*Woman 6: In the end, I say thank you because it was still a blessing after being a widow at 37 years old with 3 teenage children where I still had to be brave, hard-working, rigorous, I had to be a mom and dad to get my children ahead in everything, in all areas.*

*Woman 1: My partner, for example, he doesn't get involved in the laundry, nor does he fix clothes (...) he suddenly helps me to straighten the clothes a little, he doesn't like to make the bed (...), but we share things, for example, if we have to go out to clean the patio we clean it together, if we have to bring a stick in, we bring it in together, eh he cooks... he helps me a lot with cooking, washing dishes, in those kinds of things we do together.*

## **Discussion**

“This world has always belonged to men, but none of the reasons proposed to explain the phenomenon has seemed sufficient” (Beauvoir, 2018, p. 63). Although there are currently social transformations that question the power hierarchy of the male gender over the feminine, society positions women as the inferior sex, building their bodies for the benefit of men's satisfaction. This domination implies the exercise of symbolic violence since the male-female binary implies that the identity of one party is built in the other. Therefore, man maintains the idea of domination and objectification.

Based on the results, we recognized that the main space that configures the construction of women's bodies is the private sphere since gender roles are normalized and replicated from childhood through a heteronormative family structure. However, when interacting in social contexts or different life situations such as widowhood, women face new roles, links, and challenges related to the productive sphere and participation in the community, in which there is the possibility of a deconstruction of the existing sexist patterns in the private sphere or, their maintenance. Therefore, the material and symbolic conditions change, modifying the discursive elements of being a woman.

Thus, the existence of gender essentialism is recognized, which influences how women perceive themselves since the patriarchal system supports roles and occupations that are imposed naturally and universally according to the sex of each person. Therefore, there is



an intrinsic construction of femininity, which represses individual qualities and processes that are different from the social norm, influencing women's occupational choices and ultimately, their worldview about what it is to be a woman and the expression of their identity. For this reason, essentialism immersed in the concept of woman is questioned, and it is proposed to separate the ideas associated with the feminine gender from the sex since these, when energized, cancel the valuation of themselves.

Motherhood is the main role that, from gender essentialism, defines the concept of woman, since historically it has been her “natural” objective, which generates a social and moral obligation, to the point that women must take care of something that is not necessarily desired, but rather, imposed by society. Likewise, it generates occupational limitations because women are socially more responsible than men in terms of the care and upbringing of their sons and daughters, maintaining a patriarchal idealization of motherhood.

Finally, thinking about occupational choices is not alien to the power relations exercised by a socially and politically patriarchal culture, which could limit or favor them. Galvaan (2012) points out that political, cultural, and social aspects determine people's choices. Therefore, from the body of women, we understand that occupational choices have a cultural load impregnated with stereotypes, which emerge in the construction of their bodies and would determine the occupations chosen throughout their lives, generating the idea or perception of free choice over them.

## **Conclusion**

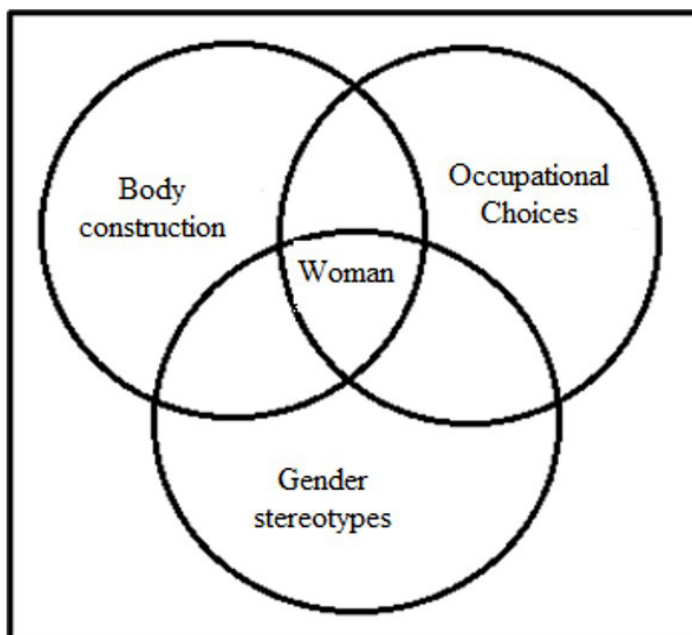
Women's narratives reflect how gender stereotypes are replicated in a transgenerational way from childhood, incarnating through upbringing, social relationships, and life experiences. In childhood, a patriarchal heteronormative family tendency was investigated, which generates biases in the actions and occupations differentiated by gender. Socioeconomic vulnerability and intrafamily violence are evident, which influences occupational choices, construction, and relationship with the body of those who at that time were girls.

From the social point of view, the roles that women must fulfill are constructed and defined, such as reproduction, upbringing, and care given their biological and psychological capacities. Likewise, from upbringing, the fact of menarche is associated with the immediate change of being an educated woman regarding care, symptoms, and behaviors that should be adopted in this regard. Therefore, it is understood that during this stage the construction of the women's body and their occupational choices are directly related to the social preconceptions associated with their reproductive role. Thus, if they were unable to comply with these aesthetic imaginaries and with the reproductive role, they tended to present complexes or frustrations with their bodies and their self-perception.

Poststructuralist feminism posits that gender is constructed through performative acts, which shape identity, subjectivity, and occupations. These acts are reflected in the narratives of women, where it is evident that the social construction about motherhood is perpetuated by them, since this role goes beyond an occupational choice, being a construction of the body impregnated with biological essentialism. and masculine power.

Therefore, women's narratives show the existence of an emerging dynamic relationship between the construction of the body, gender stereotypes, and occupational

choices, in which stereotypes are created from doing, generating a construction of the concept of women in a socio-historical context that defines patterns and occupational choices that will be replicated in gender stereotypes (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Explanatory diagram of body construction, occupational choices, and gender stereotypes.

Finally, the results of this research allow us to stimulate the questioning under a critical and gender perspective of the naturalized and stereotyped practices that are replicated in the discipline of Occupation Science, to strip ourselves as a discipline of these preconceptions that imply an Occupational limitation in the construction of women. If we remain indifferent to gender perspectives and feminist theories, we will be collaborating to maintain a patriarchal system that has historically shaped the lives of women, contributing to a system of oppression, instead of contributing, as health professionals, to the social transformation.

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All authors were responsible for the conception, formulation, writing, and review of the text and approval of the final version of the article.

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