

## Gender equality at school: A study with high school institutions in the federal network



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### ABSTRACT

The objective of this work is to understand how the topic of gender equality has been addressed by teachers from the Federal Network of Professional, Scientific and Technological Education, within the

scope of secondary education. To achieve this objective, research was carried out through the application of online questionnaires, containing multiple choice and open questions, analyzed using quantitative (numerical systematization) and qualitative (content analysis) techniques. The results, although partial, point to an advancement in the approach to gender issues in the Federal Network, with emphasis on the performance of NUGEDIS and the existence of considerable awareness and awareness among teachers about the importance of the topic being addressed in education. It also highlights gaps in the initial and continuing training of teachers to address diversity and gender equality. It is concluded that, despite the advances achieved and the numerous challenges faced, the school has a duty to act to promote social transformation, educating for equality in diversity.

**Keywords:** Gender Equality, Education, High school, Federal Network.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Is the school a neutral environment for what happens in society? Are social problems reproduced in and by the school environment? What is the role of education in transforming discriminatory social practices? It is true that when we ask questions of this kind, we do not find easy and quick answers. However, studying the possibilities of the school's action in themes whose roots in culture and society are remarkable, sounds like mandatory to educational studies.

The issue of gender equality currently represents a topic of enormous relevance, both because of the data on violence against women and the LGBTQIA+ population, and because of the enormous challenge of overcoming this situation. Shedding light on this matter has proven to be fundamental in this context.

The failure to recognize the historical inequalities of Brazilian society, not only in its socioeconomic aspects, but also in terms of gender and ethnic-racial aspects, as well as the challenges regarding the role of the State and public policies in confronting them, indicates a risk to the democratic development of the country (SÍGOLO; GAVA, UNBEHAUM, 2021, p. 12).



It is observed that the most diverse situations and experiences of different social realities are gathered in the school, so that the approach to themes rooted in culture and society becomes elementary for the understanding and confrontation of prejudice, discrimination, and stigma. At the same time, an emancipatory education can also contribute to the construction of a society that better coexists with diversity, based on respect and equality (MARÇAL, 2019).

Aware of the role that the school plays as a social institution, whether in the reproduction of inequalities or in confronting them, this study aims to understand how gender equality has been approached by teachers of the Federal Network of Professional, Scientific and Technological Education, in the context of high school. The choice of institutions that are part of the RFEPCT is justified by the fact that it is present in all Brazilian states, allowing a broad reading of the gender theme in the national school environment. Also, because they enjoy pedagogical autonomy, RFEPCT schools have more freedom in the development of their guidelines (which are guided by current legislation), allowing the treatment of gender issues to be better defined than in other networks. As for high school, the choice was due to the fact that this is an important stage of school life that encompasses youth in a phase of self-definition and formation of personal identity, including life beliefs and worldviews.

### 1.1 EDUCATION AND GENDER ISSUES: OVERLAPS AND CHALLENGES

Does the school, as a social institution, reproduce situations of gender discrimination present in society in general? This question is important to the extent that answers to it can lead us to reflections and to review the practices adopted in the school by all who are part of the school community.

First, it should be noted that gender, in the context of this study, needs to be broadened beyond biological differences. Therefore, referring to

a socially constituted marker on these differences (biological sex) and that contemplates the social and historical constructions attributed to the baby's body from the moment of the discovery of sex (BOTTON; STREY, 2018, p. 56).

From this perspective, for the social sciences and humanities, gender is a product of culture and social reality, and not derived from the biological dichotomy of male and female (SILVA, 2007). This conception of the social construction of the concept is salutary to the extent that it broadens our view of the fact that, as a product of society, the themes related to gender and the resulting relations are also marked by historical and cultural legacies.

In our society, whose history is marked by the dominance of patriarchy, obviously, gender relations are characterized by strong inequality of rights and opportunities between both genders, with women having a position of submission and, requiring from them, a posture of struggle for the conquest of rights, respect and equality.



Pierre Bourdieu (2012) argues that male domination generates violence to the extent that it needs to maintain such status; and that this situation is ingrained in society, being taught to men and absorbed by women, although not explicitly. This unconscious understanding generates patterns of social behavior that have been perpetuated and delegated to girls and women a condition of fear, threat and violence.

Through symbolic violence, male domination is consolidated as a form of relationship and social power, being naturalized while shaping the way we conceive the world and the roles between the masculine and the feminine (BOURDIEU, 2012). In this sense, gender violence has its causes in men themselves, that is, violent behaviors are reflections of values learned and repeated, socially and culturally. For this reason, attempts to solve the problem of violence against women by considering only its effects are not effective. It is necessary, therefore, to take a critical stance, to try to identify what is hidden in behaviors, values, concepts. And, as a possible solution to the issue of male domination, as well as the effects of violence against women, in order to escape from this oppressive system, it is necessary to break with the universal and adopt an emancipatory vision, which implies respect for equality and non-discrimination, basic pillars for effective gender equality (NASCIMENTO GOMES, 2016, p. 13).

It is noteworthy that school institutions, shaped by the cultural patterns of capitalism of our times, tend to reproduce within themselves beliefs and attitudes that emphasize discrimination and inequality against women in their practices. The school, like the family and other organizations, is also configured and acts as a space for the reproduction of social structures and, as a result, can reproduce practices that define social divisions, especially those that originate in gender, ensuring the continuity of discriminatory differentiation between students based on this condition. For Bourdieu and Passeron (1992), the school, through the apparatus of material and symbolic power, reproduces relations that help in the incorporation of unconscious perception, appreciation and action schemes that perpetuate the relations of domination within it.

Analyzing violence in Brazil, according to data extracted from the Atlas of Violence in 2018, 4,519 Brazilian women were killed, which is equivalent to one death every two hours (IPEA, 2020), a situation that exposes the enormous challenge that questioning and actions aimed at confronting discrimination and gender violence face.

At the global level, on the occasion of the 70th United Nations General Assembly in 2015, the 2023 Agenda was approved, containing 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) for a more sustainable and equitable world (UN, 2015). Among these goals, we highlight SDG 5, which includes: "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls", unfolding into 9 other specific related and linked goals (UN, 2015). Certainly, the achievement of SDG 5 by countries would contribute to better living conditions and equality for girls and women around the world. It should also be noted that



Brazil is a signatory to three other important international standards: the Beijing Platform for Action, the Plan of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Although these are not easy goals to achieve, the fact that it is included in a global agenda presents itself as a promoter of important debates and actions by governmental, legislative and civil society entities.

With regard to education, recognizing the need for educational action in schools regarding gender discrimination, UNICEF approved the *Gender Action Plan – GAP 2014-2017* (UNESCO, 2019) contemplating various actions and activities to be implemented by the entity's member countries to promote gender equality. Among other measures, the GAP presents as fundamental actions the promotion of adolescent health with a focus on gender and the reduction of gender-based violence and the elimination of child marriage (SANTOS; DELAY; DEBIQUE, 2016, p. 43).

Nowadays, marked by prejudices against the school institution itself, whether due to ignorance or bad faith, it is noted that Brazilian education has numerous gaps in its performance to promote more egalitarian relations between genders. From teacher training to views that delegate the gender issue to an inferior and isolated status in education, there are important obstacles to be overcome (MARÇAL, 2019). Despite the difficulties, it is inevitable to discuss and elaborate agendas focused on the theme.

To build gender equality at school is to prevent discrimination processes from occurring and becoming naturalized. That is why it is important that this training is put into practice from the first years of school life. The participation of the teacher is necessary so that the classroom is not a space that generates and reproduces discriminatory education, but rather a space for the construction of equality, since the school, as is known, contributes significantly to the maintenance of the standards established in society (MARÇAL, 2019, p. 1).

In the context of high school, when adolescents around 15 to 19 years of age are forming their conceptions of the world, of personality, of life, the school can be a space capable of promoting changes in relation to gender discrimination or simply reinforcing patterns of inequality present in society, relativizing the seriousness of situations that imply a negative differentiation between male and female conditions. It is in this aspect of identity construction that education plays a central role.

Regarding the theme, the National Curriculum Parameters (Brasil, 1998) deal with the issue of sexual orientation as a cross-cutting theme, and attribute to the school the role of addressing the themes that involve the issue of sexuality in order to guide its students. According to the aforementioned document

The concept of gender refers to the set of social and cultural representations constructed from the biological difference of the sexes. While sex is related to the anatomical attribute, in the concept of gender the development of the notions of "masculine" and "feminine" is taken as a social construction. The use of this concept makes it possible to abandon the explanation of nature as responsible for the great difference between the behaviors and places occupied by men and women in society. This difference has historically privileged men, to the extent that



society has not offered the same opportunities for social inclusion and exercise of citizenship to men and women. Even with the great transformation of customs and values that has been taking place in recent decades, there is still a lot of discrimination, sometimes covert, related to gender (BRASIL, 1998, p. 321-322).

Although there is a legal provision in Brazilian education, it is noted that religious groups, conservative Catholics and Evangelicals, have acted forcefully against the insertion of gender equality agendas in the school environment. With strong mobilization with parliamentarians, for example, these groups achieved the exclusion of the word gender and strategic actions to combat discrimination from the National Education Plan – PNE 2014-2024 (BEDINELLI, 2015).

Although the terms are not explicit, the document mentions the themes of diversity and human rights when dealing with the general competencies that pedagogically underpin the base. Again, the suppression of the terms expresses setbacks in the achievements related to the fight against discrimination and gender inequalities, subsuming them to education for human rights (SIGOLO; GAVA, UNBEHAUM, 2021, p. 10).

Actions of this type have contributed to the emptying and weakening of education for gender equality in the school agenda and asserted issues of discrimination, prejudice and inequality.

Certainly, school education has limitations to promote changes in society, however, its performance can contribute to the reduction of social inequalities (KRAWCZYK, 2014), notably those arising from gender. "The school alone cannot compensate society, however, when it reaches effectiveness, it can contribute, within the limits of its range of action, to reduce social differences" (GOMES, 2005, p. 284). In this way, the fundamental role that the school can and needs to assume to combat discrimination and violence, as well as to promote more egalitarian and fair relations between genders, educating the new generations to respect diversity and peaceful coexistence among all.

## 1.2 THE GENDER ISSUE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RFEPCT

The RFEPCT contemplates the union of a series of institutions that began to act in an integrated manner and linked to the federal government, through links to the Secretariat of Professional and Technological Education (Setec/MEC). Created in 2008 by Law No. 11,892, of December 29, it is composed of:

- I - Federal Institutes of Education, Science and Technology (Federal Institutes);
- II - Federal Technological University of Paraná - UTFPR;
- III - Celso Suckow da Fonseca Federal Centers for Technological Education in Rio de Janeiro (Cefet-RJ) and Minas Gerais (Cefet-MG);
- IV - Technical Schools linked to Federal Universities; and
- V - Colégio Pedro II.

According to information from the MEC, in 2019 the RFEPCT encompassed 38 Federal Institutes, 02 Federal Centers for Technological Education (Cefet), the Federal Technological



University of Paraná (UTFPR), 22 technical schools linked to federal universities and Colégio Pedro II. 2019).

Recognized for offering quality education, RFEPCT works in the mission of expanding, internalizing and diversifying the offer of professional and technological education in the country. Many of the courses offered by the Network are integrated into high school, equivalent to 229 thousand enrollments, 3% of the country's total (INEP, 2021).

Despite being part of a Network, these educational institutions have administrative, patrimonial, financial, didactic-pedagogical, and disciplinary autonomy (MEC, 2019), which gives them greater freedom to act in response to the local and regional needs of their students and communities. In the field of inclusion and equality, the RFEPCT follows, as a general parameter, national legislations, in particular:

- Articles 3, 205 and 206 of the Federal Constitution (BRASIL, 1988);
- Article 3 of the LDB (BRASIL, 1996); and
- Technical Notes No. 24/2015 and 32/2015 SECADI (MEC, 2015a and MEC, 2015b).

In particular, Technical Note 32/2015 aims to guide the rethinking of exclusion practices in the school environment, working to promote inclusion on different fronts and is materialized by the work of the Support Center for People with Special Educational Needs (NAPNE), the Center for Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous Studies (NEABI), the Center for the Elaboration and Adaptation of Didactic/Pedagogical Materials (NEAMA) and the Center for Gender and Sexual Diversity (NUGEDIS). These centers join efforts to combat exclusion, discrimination and prejudice among and among their students. It should be noted that, as they enjoy pedagogical autonomy, the formalization of these thematic centers for the promotion of equality and inclusion may vary among the institutions of the RFEPCT, both in terms of constitution and forms of action.

Specifically, the gender issue is linked to the Gender and Sexual Diversity Center (NUGEDIS), whose general purpose is to promote a school environment focused on acceptance and respect for diversity and gender differences, enabling equal coexistence among all students through inclusive educational practices. They are spaces responsible for addressing the theme of gender and gender relations in an integrated and transdisciplinary way, whose performance differs according to the conception, perception and demands raised by each Center in their respective schools. Thus, the premise of the RFEPCT institutions is the existence of an educational policy instituted for the gender approach, which gives these schools a vanguard situation in relation to other networks and schools in the country.

The formalization of the gender issue, as a relevant and necessary theme to be addressed in and by the school environment, is also materialized with its inclusion in the Pedagogical Political Projects (PPPs) that direct strategic action, expressing the mission, vision, values and pedagogical conceptions



defined for each school, in addition to the insertion in the Pedagogical Projects of Courses (PPCs). that define both the relationship with axes or thematic nuclei of the gender issue, as well as guide the form of interdisciplinary approach as content.

Thus, it is understood that, given the extension and diversity of institutions that are part of the RFEPCT, studying how its teachers view the theme of gender equality in school practices and how they recognize its importance and effectiveness in the daily life of these schools, is relevant for the understanding of the theme, which may even reflect different understandings of other networks and stages of education in the country.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

To achieve the objective proposed for this study, it was decided to carry out a quantitative and qualitative research, having as target audience teachers from institutions that are part of the RFEPCT, specifically, those who work in high school. Given the extension and breadth of these schools, distributed throughout the national territory, it was decided to use an *online* questionnaire, available on the *Google Forms Platform*, through the link (<https://forms.gle/MR4XDqUhWkkCrkyF9>). It is noteworthy that the use of virtual questionnaires as a form of data collection provides agility, practicality, and sustainability to research, allowing greater coverage and reach to different geographic regions in an easy, safe, and anonymous way (ANDRES et. al, 2020).

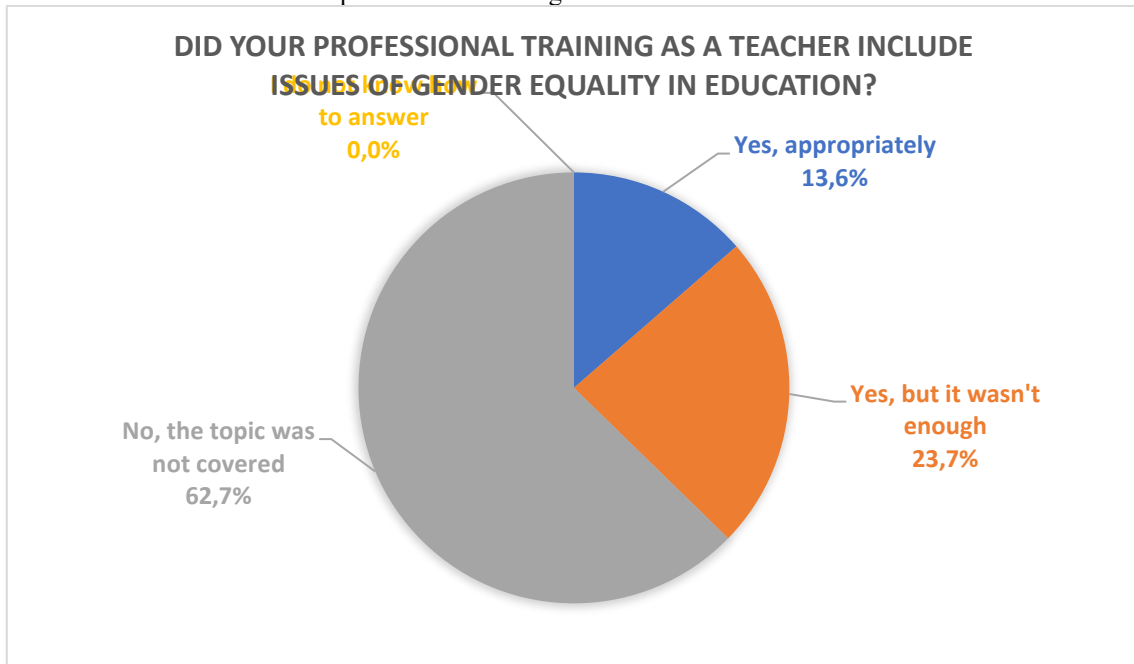
The questionnaires were sent through institutional contacts, available on the institutes' websites, as well as in WhatsApp messaging application groups. To date, 59 questionnaires have been returned from the 5 Brazilian regions, 57.6% from the Southeast, 22% from the Northeast, 8.5% from the Midwest; 8.5% from the South and 3.4% from the North. The quantitative results were grouped and presented in the form of graphs, in turn, the qualitative responses were scrutinized using the Content Analysis technique (BARDIN, 1977), and both results were discussed in the light of the theoretical knowledge versed in this study.

## 3 RESULTS

From the research carried out with professors who are members of the RFEPCT, the results discussed below were obtained. It should be noted that the sample included 59 teachers from the 5 Brazilian regions, providing an opportunity for a broad reading of the reality of the gender theme within the scope of the RFEPCT.



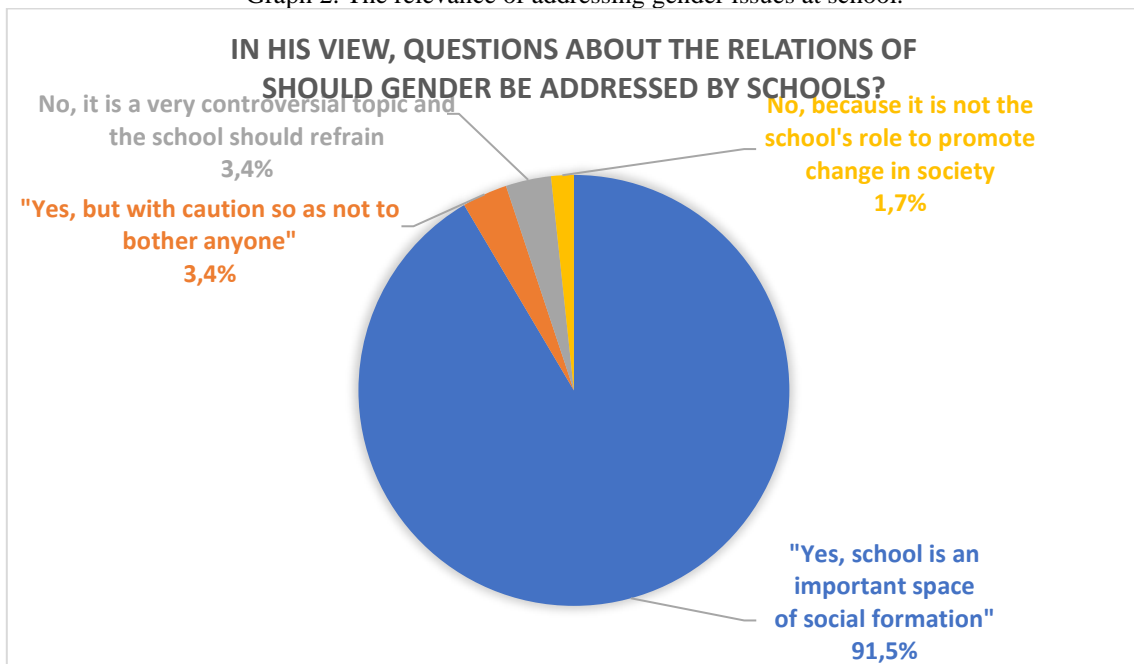
Graph 1. The theme of gender in teacher education.



Source: Prepared by the authors.

When asked if their professional training included issues of gender equality in education, 62.7% of the teachers answered that the theme was not covered; 23.7% that it was treated insufficiently, and only 13.6% consider that the treatment was adequate, corroborating the propositions of Marçal (2019), about the gaps in teacher training when it comes to cross-cutting and urgent issues in our society, such as diversity.

Graph 2. The relevance of addressing gender issues at school.



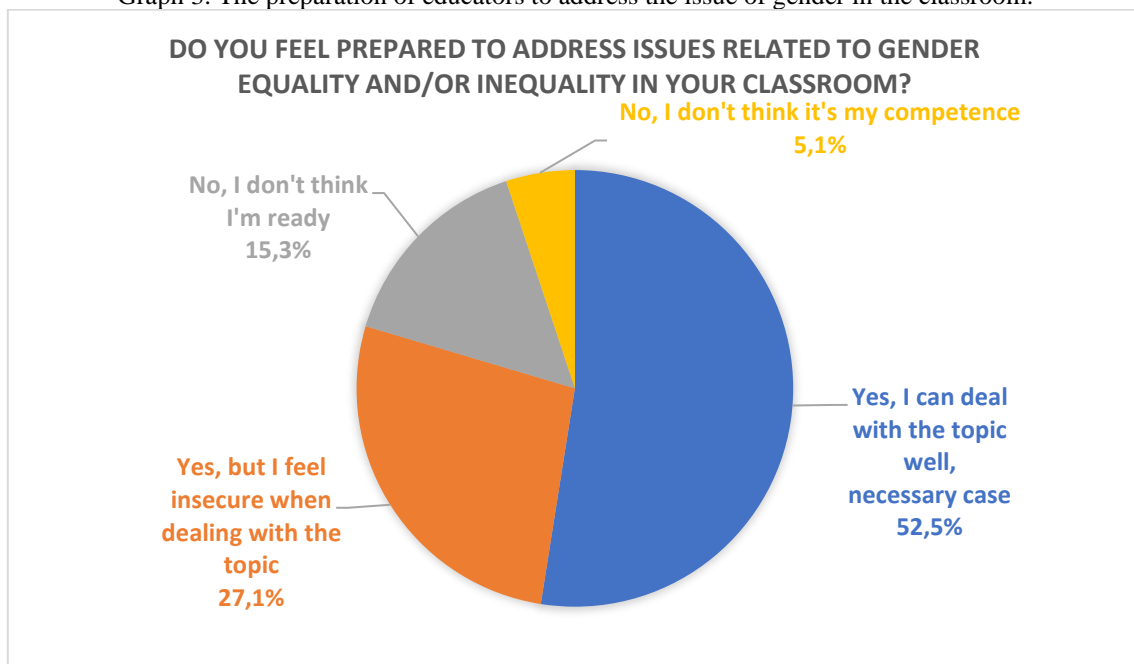
Source: Prepared by the authors.





When asked if questions about gender relations should be addressed by the school, 91.5% understood that it should, because it is an important space for social education; while 3.4% think that it is a very controversial topic and, therefore, the school should abstain from the approach, which demonstrates that the teachers who are members of the federal network and participants in the research, in their expressive majority, are aware of the importance of the school as a space for social transformation and emancipatory education of the being and society, in accordance with the role of school defended by Bell Hooks (2017).

Graph 3. The preparation of educators to address the issue of gender in the classroom.

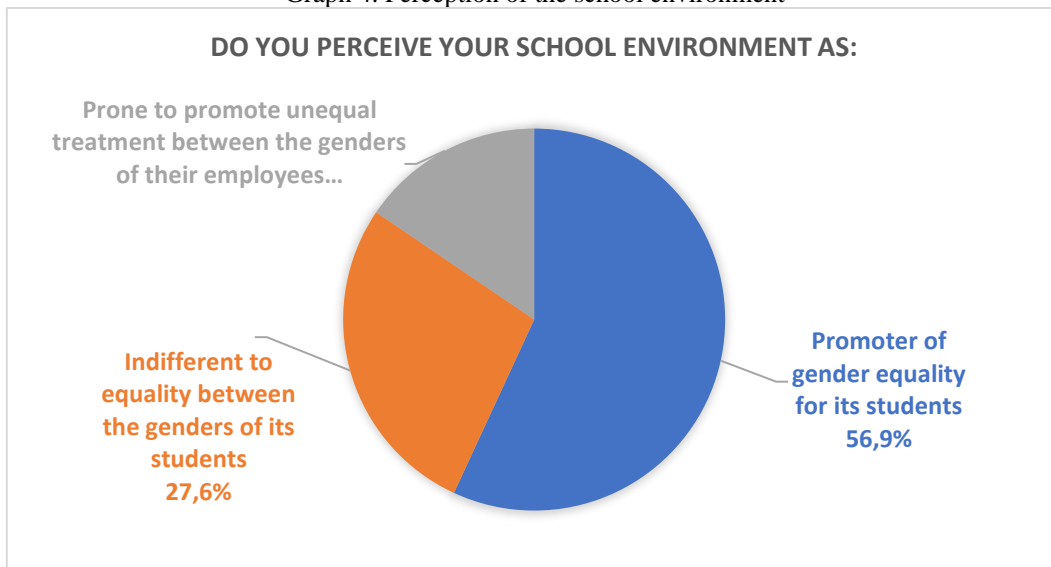


Source: Prepared by the authors.

Regarding the preparation to address issues related to gender equality and/or inequality in their classroom, 52.5% consider themselves to be prepared to deal well with the topic, if necessary; 27.1% consider themselves to be prepared, but feel insecure when conducting the theme; and 15.3% consider that they are not prepared. Thus, it is observed that, despite insufficient or non-existent initial training for the majority, the same teachers have already managed to build knowledge and experience to intervene on the subject.



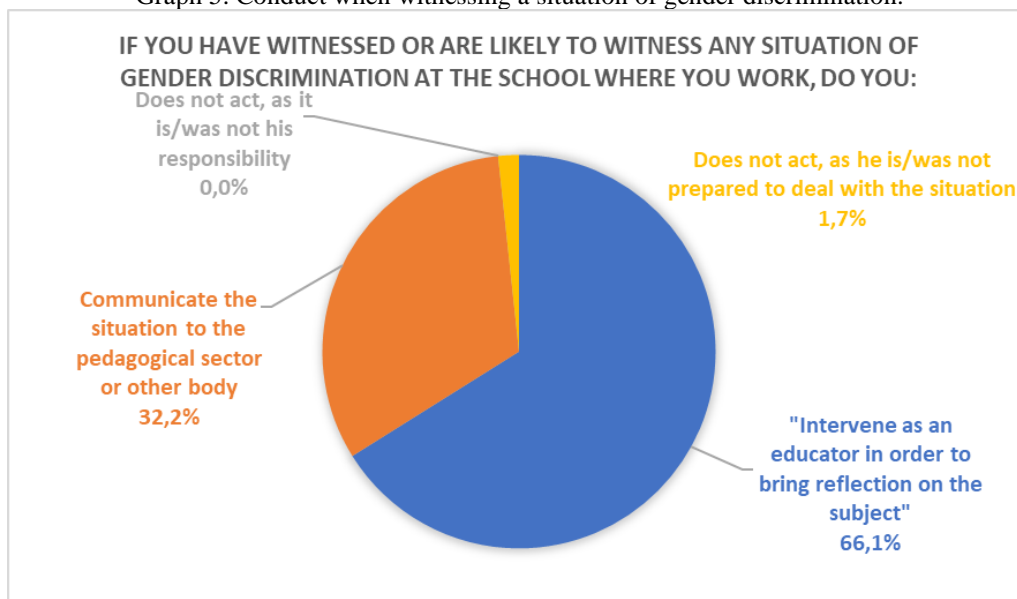
Graph 4. Perception of the school environment



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Regarding their perception of the school environment, 56.9% of the teachers consider it to promote gender equality among students, while for 27.6% the school environment is indifferent to the equality between the genders of the students and another 15.5% consider it prone to promote unequal treatment between the genders of their students. Considering the sum of respondents who consider their school as indifferent or prone to promote unequal treatment, it is latent that, in the experience of these teachers, the school is still a reproducer within the inequalities between the genders present in society (BOURDIEU; PASSERON, 1992).

Graph 5. Conduct when witnessing a situation of gender discrimination.

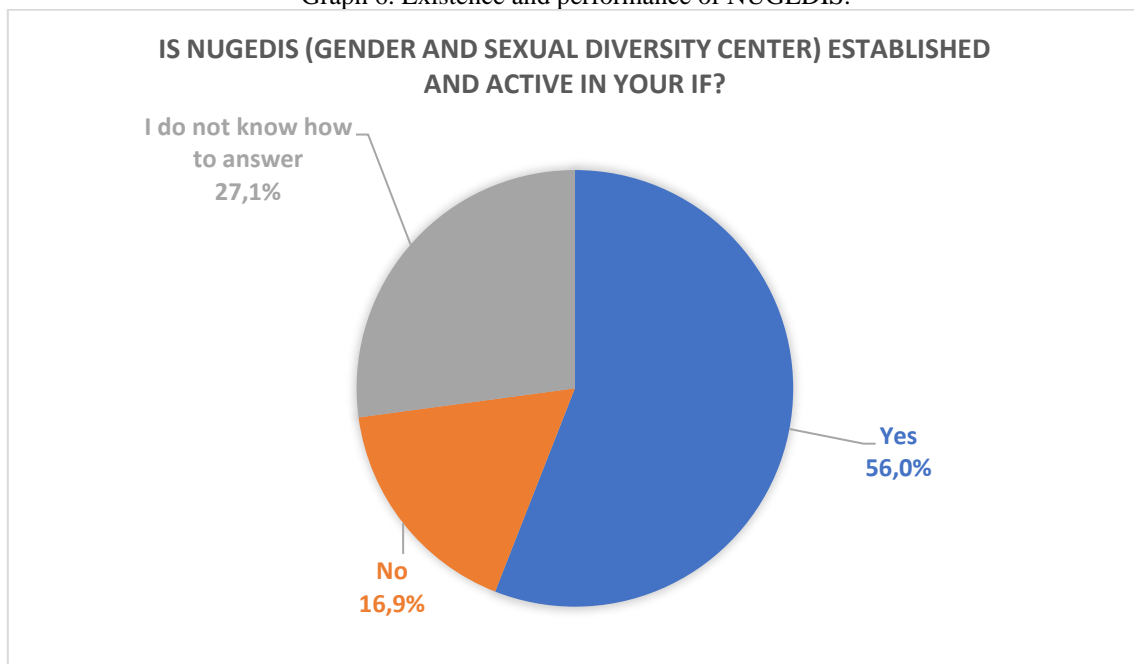


Source: Prepared by the authors.



In the event of having witnessed or in the hypothesis of witnessing some situation of gender discrimination in the school in which they work, 66.1% said that they would intervene as educators in order to bring reflections on the subject; 32.2% would report the situation to the pedagogical sector or other body; and only 1.7% would not act, because they are not prepared to deal with the situation, which demonstrates among teachers a proactive attitude towards injustices in the school environment, reinforcing their commitment to a more egalitarian education and promoting respect for diversity among their students.

Graph 6. Existence and performance of NUGEDIS.

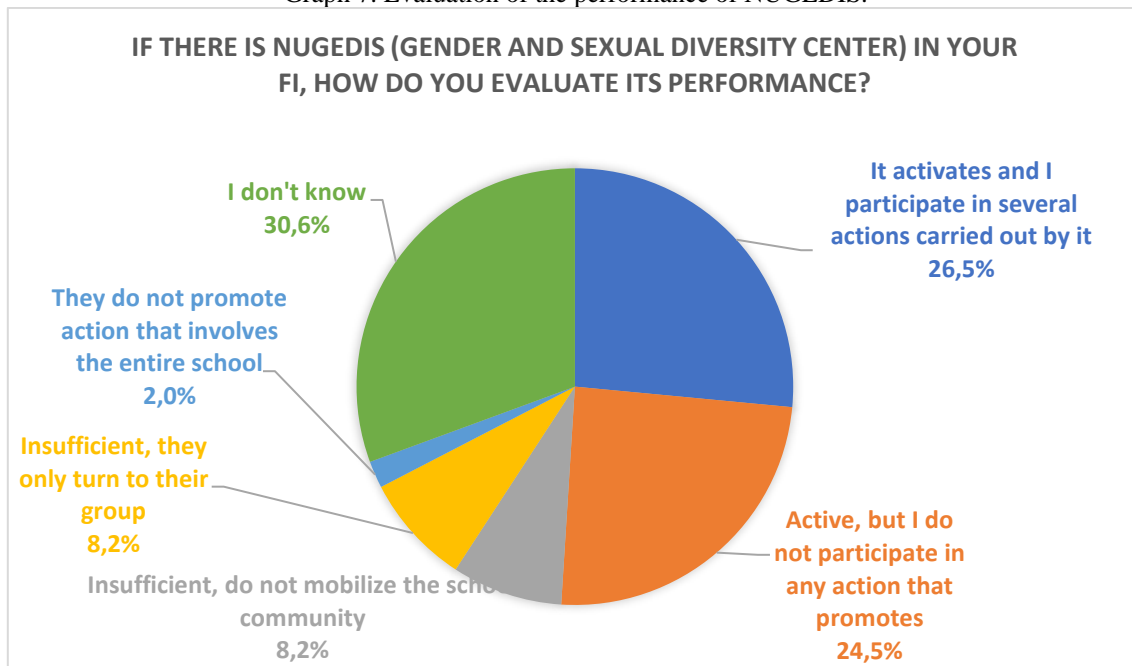


Source: Prepared by the authors.

The existence of Gender and Sexual Diversity Centers (NUGEDIS) is a particularity of the institutions of the Federal Network, which, if not exclusive, are more numerous than in the other networks. Regarding the NUGEDIS, two questions were listed in the research instrument: the first is whether the NUGEDIS is constituted and active in the school in which the respondent works; the second refers to how the respondent evaluates his/her performance. According to 56.0% of the interviewees, NUGEDIS is established and active; 27.1% did not know how to answer; and 16.9% understand that it is either not constituted or not active.



Graph 7. Evaluation of the performance of NUGEDIS.



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Regarding the evaluation of the performance of NUGEDIS, among the respondents, in numbers, 30.6% of them are unaware of the performance of NUGEDIS; 26.5% consider it active and participate in the actions promoted by the Center; and 24.5%, despite considering it active, do not participate in its actions. It should be noted that such data, despite pointing to the existence of a space for the discussion and promotion of gender equality, still lacks, in some schools, to have their performance improved to become more effective and cover a greater number of students.

The answers to the open-ended question "how do you understand that the issue of gender equality could be better addressed in your school" demonstrated the recognition of the importance of the debate on the gender approach. There were proposals at the operational level, such as the diagnosis of harassment and its treatment, including feedback to those involved; others at a strategic level, such as frequent training actions and participation and awareness-raising activities involving the entire school community. The frequency with which propositions about the need for training on gender equality were suggested was highlighted. Such views corroborate the numbers found in the multiple-choice questions, in which more than 60% of the respondents consider that the gender issue was not contemplated in professional training, as well as revealing a level of knowledge of teachers that the gender approach is not only linked to specific actions, but permeates all levels of school pedagogical planning. It is necessary to involve the strategic levels of the school in the development of the theme.

Criticisms mention the need for a transdisciplinary approach to the issue and the lack of a scientific and impartial treatment of the gender issue. It should be added that some teachers, despite considering the gender approach important, believe that a less ideologized way of approaching the theme could bring greater adherence and effectiveness in the school environment.



#### 4 FINAL THOUGHTS

This research, which sought to understand how the theme of gender equality is perceived by the teachers who are part of the RFEPCT, demonstrated that such schools have a considerable level of sensitization and awareness about the approach to issues related to gender, representing an advance in the consolidation and performance of the NUGEDIS.

On the other hand, the existence of insufficient teacher training regarding the gender issue was also evidenced, which reflects the considerable levels of insecurity and unpreparedness pointed out by some teachers to act in situations of discrimination in the school environment and that require educational interventions. It was also found that continuing education on the subject needs to be contemplated in a more effective way in the training of RFEPCT teachers, and it is still evident, as pointed out by the research participants, the need for involvement of the strategic level of these school institutions in the direction of gender issues in their school communities.

It is suggested that new studies expand the form of evaluation, especially correlating the performance of NUGEDIS with the reduction of gender inequality in the school environment and evaluate successful practices and activities developed in RFEPCT and other education systems.

Finally, we share Hooks' (2017, p. 243) view when she argues that "it takes courage to embrace a vision of integrality of being" and that teaching can and needs to be "a catalyst that invites everyone to become more engaged"; It is believed that it is the duty of education to act in the struggle for a less discriminatory and unequal society, contributing to promote a more just, respectful and egalitarian society between genders. Acknowledging diversity and promoting equality seems to be an imperative mission for education today.



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