

## **Transport female workers: Barriers and conditions to their participation in a masculinized sector**

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### **Introduction**

The following research was conducted within a sociocultural context of increasing permeability of Argentine institutions to the introduction of the gender perspective, as a direct result of the struggles of the feminist movement. These favorable conditions to the opening up of historically masculinized sectors (Collins, 2011), leads to digging into one of those that still presents high barriers to women's participation: mass public ground transport in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. The paper focuses on the distribution of inter- and intra-sector workers and on accessibility: cultural, political and institutional barriers that exclude women from this activity. The methodology used combines quantitative (statistical analysis of secondary data) and qualitative methods (interviews with transport female workers and public decision makers). During 2020, a systematic request for access to information (Law 27.275) was made to all companies and public entities affected by the sector. The main variables analyzed by gender were: number of workers by mode and sector, occupational category, time career, and age. The information collected includes different modes of public transport: buses, trains, subways and commercial aviation.

At the same time, semi-structured biographical interviews were conducted with female workers in the sector to capture assessments and representations about their own experiences at different moments in their careers. The main topics explored were the gender-based working relationship, the social demands on their performances, the compatibility between paid work and care roles, and their experiences in fighting for their rights.

The final characterization shows a highly masculinized sector where vertical and horizontal segregation (Aguado Bloise and Ballesteros Doncel, 2018) relegates women to lower paid jobs but also less qualification and hierarchical positions. These conditions are shaped by cultural barriers, a result of long-term gender stereotypes and an institutional political framework that impedes their participation.

### **The concept compass**

In this paper, working in transport is conceived as a male-dominated activity. In classical theory, domination may be understood as the likelihood of finding obedience to any given mandate (Weber, [1922] 1964, p.43). One of the conditions under which domination operates is articulated to the system of relations established in social order. If this social order involves the construction of historical structures incorporating the male dimension as a normalizing pattern, such a domination is then to be considered from a sex/gender perspective (Bourdieu, 2010). The movement caused thereby impacts the consolidation of objective divisions operating in the world, which are incorporated into the cultural symbolic map that drives actions, interaction codes, expectation systems, physical and cognitive dispositions, collective values, and political practices, among others, which in turn produce and reproduce the established patterns (Bourdieu, 2010; Collins, 2015). The characteristic feature is that masculinity and femininity are presented as opposing, binary terms, where the former takes preeminence over the latter, in addition to excluding those who identify with non-hegemonic masculinities (Collins, 2015). This evidences a sexualized division of labor in and across productive activities, which operates based on the development of segregation processes occurring in different ways.

One of them is horizontal segregation, which refers to over-representation of women or men in various sectors or occupations. Its development builds 'crystal walls' dividing working sectors considered typically 'female' or 'male'. In this connection, there is a predominant presence of

female workers in traditionally feminized sectors, such as nursing, teaching, domestic labor, public service, and commercial activities (Botto, 2019:26; OIT, 2019)<sup>1</sup>.

Another way is the so-called vertical segregation, which implies barriers for promotion to higher positions involving more responsibility in decision-making (Sánchez Bilbao, 2018), and is related to the idea of the glass ceiling. As pointed out by the referenced authors, these barriers can be seen even in feminized spaces, where the higher the tier of power and responsibility, the more reduced the presence of women. The other side of 'glass ceilings' is 'sticky floors'. The latter refer to the forces that keep a large number of female workers trapped in the lower tiers of the economic pyramid. In this case, the situation is mainly due to an overload of domestic work and caring roles (Botto, 2019, p.26).

The various forms of segregation operating in labor markets and configuring them as sexed structures are supported by gender stereotypes. This involves certain beliefs across the social fabric concerning attributes that are deemed typical of either men or women (Sanchez Bilbao, 2018). One of the most prevailing ones, which supports not only exclusion but also market self-exclusion by females, is that women would be more interested in devoting themselves to domestic life and in becoming the household's emotional support. While males would be more prone to devoting themselves to labor, professional growth and social life, and in becoming the household's economic support.

Economy and affection are thus rooted to differing dimensions of the social world, thus unevenly distributing expectations, fields of action and responsibilities between genders. This verifies a distinction conceptualized as productive work versus the so-called reproductive work. The former includes all remunerated labor, while the latter involves all those activities not-for-pay that enable the reproduction of individual, family and social life<sup>2</sup>. Organization of domestic chores, house cleaning, caring for and accompanying children in their activities, etc. are all included into this group. For females participating in the labor market, this combination of activities, in the setting of a patriarchal social order, configures a situation of over-exploitation that contributes to the persistence of sticky floors<sup>3</sup>.

What can we see in the field of transport in relation to the ways of male domination? How are the various forms or segregation exposed? What are the legitimating social values that support the organizational structure of this labor market? What is the experience that females undergo while working in this economic activity?

### **Female involvement in the sector - How many are they? Where are they?**

The low proportion of females involved in the sector under analysis is an initial indicator of its high access barriers and extent of masculinization. Across the three public land passenger transport modes, female workers account for only 8% on total workers. In relation to supplier companies, road transport service is the one evidencing the least favorable inter-gender relation. Females account for 1% total workers. In guided modes, while the gap is smaller,

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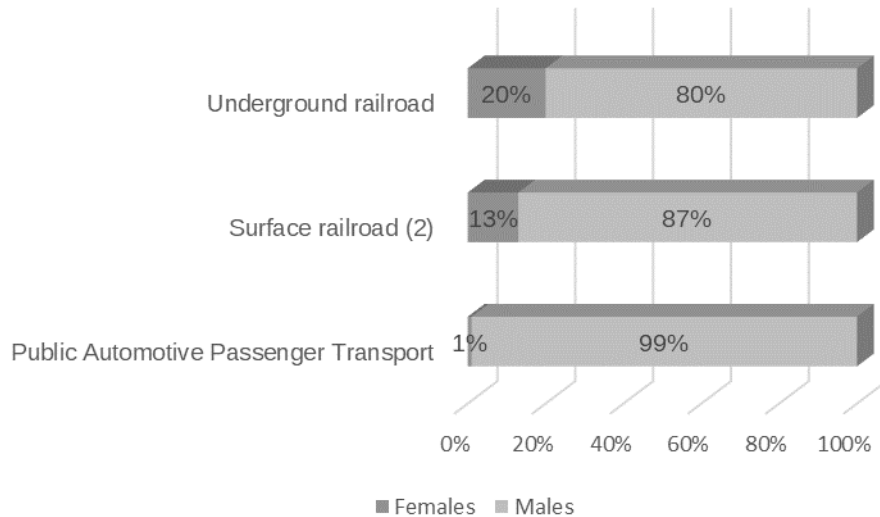
<sup>1</sup> In Argentina, 2 out of 10 employed women are paid domestic workers, with this being the main activity involving female salaried employees. 97% of total individuals employed in this activity in the country are women.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting the authors' unease with this notion, given that both productive and reproductive processes are present in both dimensions of social life. Productive work, attached to an economic organization system, reproduces a particular configuration of historically conditioned social relations. On the other hand, reproductive work, associated to social family life, can also be deeply productive of new social relations capable of resulting in different ways of thinking about and sensing the social sphere, having unexpected consequences in other orders of life.

<sup>3</sup> According to the latest data available from the Time Use module incorporated into the Permanent Household Survey (*Encuesta Permanente de Hogares*, EPH), in 2013 occupied females devoted 37.6 weekly hours to non-remunerated work and 33.1 hours to remunerated work. In this distinction, males dedicated 14.9 hours to the former and 43.9 hours to the latter. A global view evidences the pressure suffered by females on time use, as they accumulate a total 70.7 worked hours, versus 58.6 hours in the case of males (INDEC 2021).

female involvement is still limited: urban railroad female workers account for 13% and subway female workers for 20% (Graph 1).

Graph 1. Percentage of workers in mass public passenger transport service suppliers in BAMR by sector and gender. Year 2020.



Source: own elaboration based on data supplied by companies and organizations, 2020. Underground railroad N =5,464; Surface railroad N=23,529; PAP (Public Automotive Passenger) N= 32,720.

1) It comprises 86 companies providing services in the national jurisdiction.

(2) It includes lines operated by SOF.SE (Belgrano Sur, Mitre, Roca, San Martín, Sarmiento, Tren de la Costa) and those operated by Ferrovías (Belgrano Norte) and Metrovías (Urquiza).

Upon observing female occupations in the different modes of transport analyzed, there is a clear similarity in the processes of vertical and horizontal segregation referred to at the top of this paper.

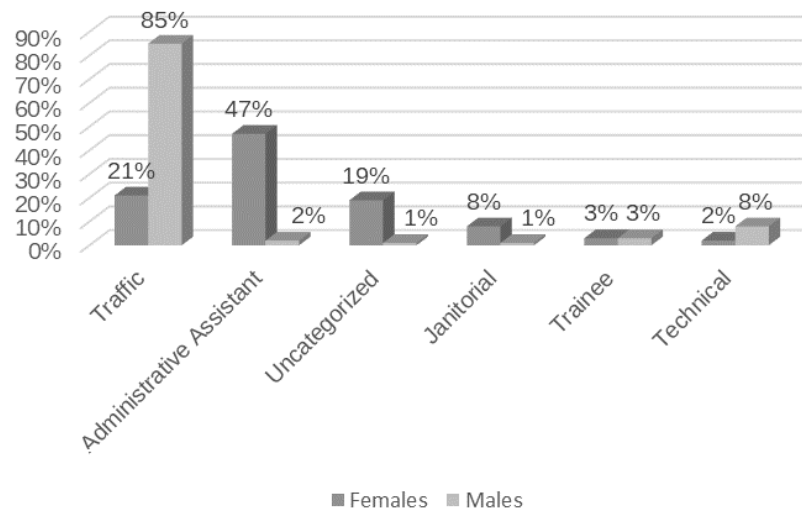
In the case of public automotive passenger transport<sup>4</sup>, 78% from a total of 86 companies analyzed employ female personnel; however, this participation in no case is over 4%.

Regarding occupations, they are distributed across 18<sup>5</sup> categories comprising different sectors. The traffic sector (drivers, attendants and inspectors) is the one concentrating most personnel (85%).

<sup>4</sup> For this mode of transport, we were unable to access the companies' senior personnel data.

<sup>5</sup> The 18 occupational categories are: trainee, attendant, administrative assistant, workshop assistant, fueller, driver, tow truck driver, diesel fueller, oiler (technical staff), oiler (hand work staff), tire repair/replacement staff, inspector, washer, mechanic, assistant officer, officer, day laborer, and uncategorized staff.

Graph 2. Percentage of workers in PAP by activity sector and gender. July 2020.



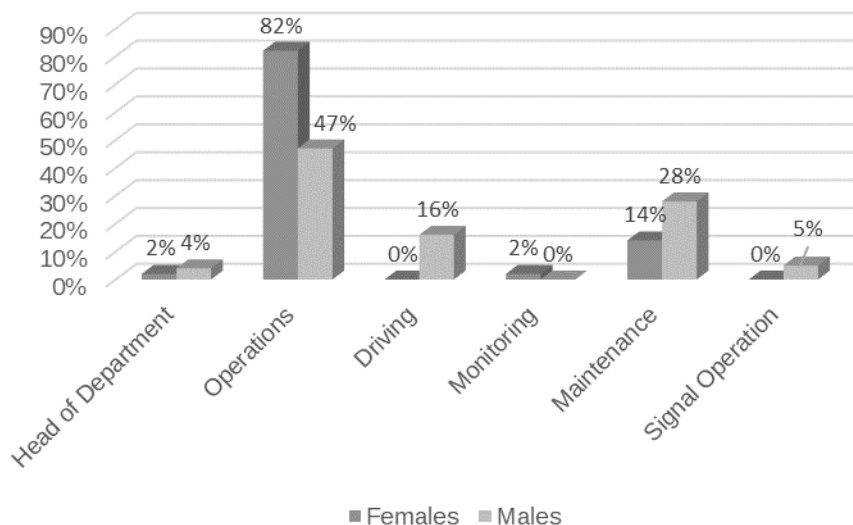
Source: own elaboration based on data supplied by the Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security, July 2020. N= 26,931

Females are mainly involved in the administrative assistance sector (47%). 21% is employed in traffic, where the prevailing occupation is driving (93%). Here, females account for 1 every 492 males. By order of relevance, females are also employed in non-categorized occupations (19) and janitorial work (8%).

A review of the surface railroad mode is of greater complexity due to the various characteristics of operators (state-owned or private) and the ways in which they record labor-related data. In the case of Operadora Ferroviaria Sociedad del Estado (a state-owned company that operates 6 out of the 8 lines of services across BAMR), over a total of 21,044 workers, 1,340 are involved in Central Administration. Here, females account for 33% of payroll. Their hierarchical distribution confirms a vertical segregation process that restricts them to lower ranking positions (Sánchez Bilbao, 2018): at the highest level, their participation is equivalent to zero (President, Vice President, General Secretary and General Manager). 12% of females are present in the medium tier (Manager, Deputy Manager, Manager Consultant, General Coordinator, Coordinator). Here, the ratio is 1 female every 2.5 males. The lowest hierarchy group (administrative staff, hand labor, intern) is the one comprising the largest number of workers, and where the proportion of females exceeds by 11 points that of males (88% versus 77%, respectively).

Among the personnel not involved in Central Administration, most are employed in the operative sector, with females accounting for 12%. Graph 3 shows female distribution of roles according to their respective activities. 82% females are employed in the sub-sector also called 'operative sector', where they perform low-qualification work, such as cleaning, passenger access and exit ('evasion') and ticket window. To a lesser extent, they are employed in railroad equipment maintenance (14%), which involves work performed by officers of different hierarchy and qualification. It should be noted that there are no female drivers in driving positions.

Graph 3. Percentage of workers in operative sector in SOF.SE (land railroad lines) by category and gender. June 2020.



Source: own elaboration based on data supplied by SOF.SE, June 2020. Female N =2,304; Male N = 16,840.

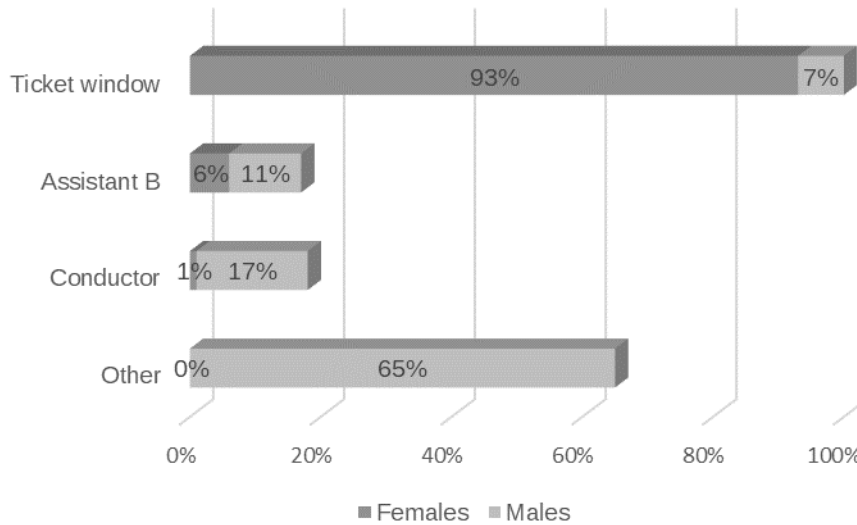
Private company Ferrovías S.A., in charge of the Belgrano Norte line, has a staff of 1,537 workers. In senior positions (managers, supervisors, chiefs and coordinators) there are 157 individuals, with a female/male ratio of 1 female every 11 males.

Out of 27 work sectors<sup>6</sup> classified as 'non-senior positions', 12 include no females at all. In the remaining 15 positions,<sup>7</sup> most workers are involved in transport (49%), cleaning (13%), and human resources (3%), with the presence of males versus females being of over 75%. In the transport sector including 67 female employees, almost all of them are ticket window staff (93%).

<sup>6</sup> Ticket checking, railways, cars, locomotives, signals/telecommunications and electricity, works, rolling stock, warehouses, operational security, procurement, internal audit and general services.

<sup>7</sup> Transport, cleaning, human resources, protection, administration and finance, operations, infrastructure, legal counseling, systems, board of directors, commercial area, leveling plan, contract management, customer care and institutional relations.

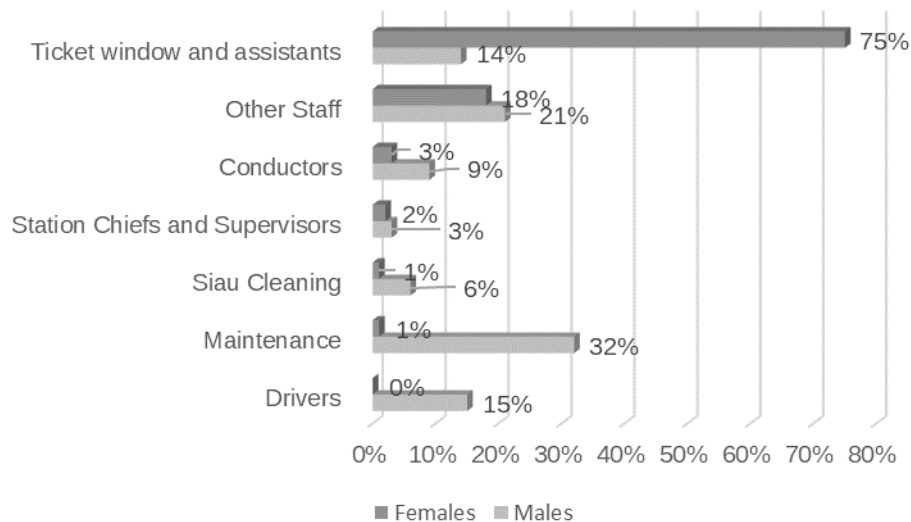
Graph 4. Worker involvement in transport sector (Belgrano Norte line), by occupational category and gender. June 2020.



Source: own elaboration based on data supplied by Ferrovías S.A. July 2020. Female N =67; Male N = 615.

On the other hand, Metrovías, under concession responsible for the Urquiza line, has similar bias to those observed so far. Females account for only 17% of a staff including 35 employees in senior positions. As regards non-senior positions, most females entering the line do so as ticket window staff (75%) (Graph 5). An inter-activity reading shows that females represent 64% of this sector. It should be noted that overall female participation -considering all occupations under analysis- amounts only to 14%.

Graph 5: Percentage of non-senior workers in Metrovías (Urquiza Line), by occupational category and gender. April 2020.



Source: own elaboration based on data supplied by Metrovías S.A. April 2020. Female N =126; Male N = 787.

In the underground mode, identical bias is observed as in the other railway lines. The company is the same as the one responsible for the concession of the Urquiza line above-ground railway. In this mode, Metrovías employs a total of 5,464 workers, out of which 20% are women. Out of total workers, 159 are in senior positions, with 9 males for every female employed. In non-senior categories, this gap is even bigger -here, females account for 1 every 17 males. As in the previous case, most women working in the subway service do so as ticket window staff (40%). In this category there are 427 females and 605 males. This is where the smallest gender-based gap is found.

### **Barrier-promoting stereotypes**

Upon conducting our current research concerning the world of transport, certain stereotypes were identified, operating at various levels in the processes described so far, as well as at different moments of a woman's track-record. Based on timing considerations, we can identify a set of factors supporting access barriers, strongly impacting decision-making.

As referenced by female interviewees, the first manifestation of this occurs upon considering the range of alternatives available for their employability. They also account for the tensions promoted by female employment in masculinized activities, perhaps because the availability of more alternatives raises certain concerns in relation to the possibilities of consolidating a successful career. In addition, there is their own discomfort with the prospect of assuming roles traditionally deemed male-oriented. One example of this was pointed out by interviewed bus driver, Ms. Érica Borda: *"So I thought, no way....[I can't be a driver]. Basically because I thought that'd be awkward... What would I be doing there? In front of all those people?"*

Low confidence levels are partly the result of a discouragement policy that is present from their very first steps, and that is applied by both their closest family group and the labor environment. As pointed out by Ms. Silvina Podeley, former train operator: *When I started taking the mandatory training course for the job, instructors, who were used to dealing with men, were always telling us that this was no environment for a woman, that conditions were unsuitable, that women were best for other kinds of jobs, not for railroad jobs (...) That's the kind of message I got for the entire duration of the course.*

Once the access barrier has been overcome and based on available empirical evidence, the existence of glass ceilings is seen in the sector. In all areas surveyed hereunder, there is a dominant male authority. In addition, it is usually observed that males are the ones holding the 'key' for access and promotion of workers to higher responsibility and pay sectors.

Caring roles, unevenly distributed, imply added difficulties to this scenario, thus configuring sticky floors that reinforce glass ceilings and contribute to the neglect of improved working conditions for females. Ms. Karina Nicoletta, underground train operator, warns that female workers *"usually have to disregard a potential promotion because it is incompatible with their caring roles, or even because their male partner prioritizes his chances for promotion over those of his female partner."*

In the setting of the daily interactions in the labor world, a greater difficulty faced by women to achieve full social and work integration is yet one other constraint noted. In some cases, male hegemony leaves its mark on physical spaces, thus compelling females to run away from situations causing them high levels of discomfort. In this connection, Ms. Karina Nicoletta points out:

*On a daily basis, there were notorious instances of male chauvinism, like making you feel that this is not where you belong... Why are you here? You want to steal our conditions away from us (...) Whether it be on a casual encounter, in common dressing sectors, when meeting in resting areas -where male coworkers typically appropriate territorial space, and so females tend to look for other places to meet among themselves, where they feel more comfortable because there is always some comment reproducing prevailing stereotypes.*

One other strategy applied by female workers is the so-called discrimination management. It involves adapting to the *status quo* by seeking emotional self-control so as to better deal with adverse situations.

In addition, there are actions intended to occupy power spaces -those enabling the best resources for change. This refers to unionized representation, a space where interviewed females fight to break into, and where the greatest obstacles to their inclusion are observed. Very limited female involvement in this field is an issue that is gradually being acknowledged as a problem, although there is still a long road ahead in Argentina<sup>8</sup>. Ms. Borda points out that in the celebration of the 100th Anniversary of trade union Unión Tranviario Automotor (UTA), females accounted for less than 1% -not only are there few women, but also even fewer of them had been invited. She said: *"Some women have been in the activity for over 30 years, but it seems like they are just unaware of their existence"*.

Finally, as noted above, the discouragement policy does not operate only within company boundaries, but it is also replicated by outsiders, i.e. passengers. In this connection, Ms. Podeley said: *"When I was starting off as a train operator, people would be surprised to see a female conductor (...) There was a time when I was told to 'stick to my knitting' by some of them. This is also replicated in other activity sectors, as pointed out by Ms. Borda: "More than once, there have been passengers who were about to get on and, in seeing a female driver, they would step off. -Oh, I'll just wait for the next one (they would say to her).*

The surprise factor noted by interviewees shows that female presence in driving positions is disruptive of transport passengers' expectations. This, in turn, evidences widespread beliefs that contribute to seeing these occupations as naturally male and, no doubt, socially acknowledged as such. What is seen as 'odd' in a public setting, also results in increased screening of the tasks performed by female workers, as there is certain distrust towards their skills. Phrases like: "Can you park?" "Can you drive?" "You break more smoothly", "You're more cautious", "You're a great driver" either express doubt about women's abilities or, as in the case that notices more care in their actions, highlight qualities that are traditionally associated with or consolidated as typically feminine, as seen from the standpoint of male domination (Bourdieu, 2010).

### **Some closing ideas...**

This paper has enabled empirically proving that working in the world of transport is still a privilege enjoyed by males. Male over-representation is an indisputable fact that evidences the remarkable height of barriers that still persist today. As a result, a situation that is favorable for some, in turn leads to fewer employment opportunities for others.

In these terms, the discouragement policy guarantees the perpetuation of segregation mechanisms. In this paper, their exercise was observed in the case of female transport workers, but clearly gender-based inequalities reach those who position themselves outside the hegemonic social configuration, also including diverse masculinities and femininities, as well as other identities.

For proposal development, knowing the composition of the worker group is a diagnostic tool that enables targeting public action. In the last five years, it has been noted that more female workers have been incorporated, although they are still a minority on total sector incorporations. There is also increased development of gender-based policies aimed at setting quotas and streamlining insertion routes in order to increasingly democratize working spaces.

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<sup>8</sup> The turn of the century in Argentina brought about the enactment of Act No. 25674 in 2002, providing for female participation in collective bargaining in proportion to the number of female workers in the sector or activity (Section 1). However, under Section 3, the Act establishes a 30% female quota in elective positions when the number of females reaches or exceeds that percentage on total workers.