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Missed Opportunities Due to Gender Bias: A Qualitative Analysis of Microdiscrimination against Female University Students in Spain

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Abstract: This study investigates the microdiscrimination that female students experience on their journey through higher education. Using qualitative methodology we interpret, analyse and categorize gender microinequities. The results show that female students are aware of the social naturalization of gender roles, but they in no way adopt them. Few participants go beyond condemning the fact that stereotypes are deeply rooted in the family and society. They do not generally perceive that the legal, political and economic systems are also structured in such a way as to hinder equal opportunities. Political and institutional measures, therefore, need to be applied to draw attention to the inequalities generated on a macrostructural level by the patriarchal system.

Keywords: gender microdiscrimination; higher education; qualitative methodology; inequality of opportunity



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1. Introduction

Despite the activist efforts made by feminist movements, the reports and communiqués issued by international organizations and the tentative steps taken towards political correctness, the hegemonic power in our global world is still predominantly male. Although progress has been made in the field of gender policy in research and innovation by the European Community since 2003 (particularly from 2012 onwards), the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation [1] has reported some dispiriting statistics, albeit in rather restrained language, that show that the gender gap persists. Business, political, governmental and institutional spaces—indeed, any spheres with decision-making power—are masculinized spaces. The figures provided in international and national studies show how these hegemonic, monolithic and patriarchal spaces of power leave little room for women to access and participate in decision making [2]. Until women are given real equal opportunities as a matter of course, the cycle of discrimination will remain unchanged. It is, therefore, essential for female students to focus on those factors that prevent them from making choices and decisions about their own education. The first of these factors is the all-pervasive microdiscrimination that manifests itself on campus in the shape of classroom incivilities from peers and academics [3–5]. The second is the invisibility of female academics, who tend to have no power and lack the opportunity to make their voices heard, while at the same time, their options are strictly limited by male corporatism in university power centres. One of the most notable forms of discrimination is the absence of women in the areas of STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine), which distances them from the centres of professional power [6–8]. As a result, women are shunted towards the services and care professions (where they are also managed by men) and do not demand fair pay commensurate with the importance and responsibility of the care they provide.

We agree with Billaud and Direnberger [9] that feminist scholarship has rejected the idea that gender-based violence may be personal and private. Gender discrimination is always a form of social inequality that is embedded in social and political structures. The concept of microinequities, which are described as biases that are based on prejudices, stereotypes and preconceptions experienced by women and other nondominant groups in any context, has ethical and social justice implications [10,11]. Rowe [12] was one of the first researchers to use the term to refer to a form of subtle discrimination that gradually builds up to form scaffolding constructed of ‘apparently small events’ that work together to mark and exclude the person of difference, signalling to the woman that she is ‘not one of us’. She came up with a highly appropriate metaphor for the concept: whereas one drop of water has little effect, continuous drops in the same place can be destructive. They may be very fine drops that erode and puncture the web of opportunities and rights that women have to weave for themselves little by little. Various authors have stressed the negative effects these microinequities have on mental [13] and also physical [14] health. A report written by Harding and McGregor for UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in 1996 noted that a university degree is useless for women if the polluting effect of microinequities prevents them from moving forward along the path beyond that stage [15]. This creates an off-putting climate in which they become distanced from the network of *insiders* and lack role models, given the dearth of female academics in positions of responsibility.

According to Aiston and Fo [16], microinequities are neither evidence nor an indication of aggression in themselves. However, they accumulate and socially shape a masculinized space of power and a climate of alienation that, together, silence women. The concept is often used in the literature on the gender gap in university settings, where female academics are still silent or unheard. It is difficult for them to participate, to be listened to and respected as a social force, as long as the power structure of male protectionism prevails [17]. Individual examples of discrimination against one female academic or another, which go unnoticed, are not a serious grievance, but when they are applied to female students or academics in general, they condense and build up until they form very shifting social sands. Thus, women miss out on opportunities for promotion or executive responsibility. Departmental meetings, faculty meetings, board meetings, staff meetings and even chance meetings in corridors are spaces where it is difficult for female academics and students to find support for their identity. Departmental and faculty micropolitics are often corporatist and adverse. Female academics who have achieved parity often settle comfortably into the safe place provided by their male peers by being careful and not disrupting the power plans of the male leaders. Thus, the strong currents of gender stereotypes are often navigated in ways that go unnoticed.

We understand microaggressions as being acts of communication (verbal, nonverbal and environmental) in social contexts that demean people from marginalized groups, e.g., derogatory, rude and insensitive remarks based on an individual’s lack of power in those contexts [18–20]. Skadegård [21] identifies this as structural discrimination, a framework in which microdiscrimination and other forms of subtle differentiation are naturalized, embedded and normalized. As Cook and Cusack [22] note, stereotypes are naturalized, i.e., the fact that they are social constructions is forgotten, and they are assumed to be absolute truths about what men and women are really like, thereby making it difficult to question them and deconstruct the content of the roles that underpin them. Gender stereotypes are deeply rooted in childhood, in family settings, which is where they are transmitted and learnt. They leave a profound, indelible imprint that permeates many circles of power, preventing women from becoming empowered in the same way as men. While there may be parity in university settings, the power of decision and action is not evenly distributed. Female students and academics are undoubtedly still to be found on the margins and borders of decision-making spaces.

In short, the source of men’s invisible advantage in this male-dominated space within higher education is becoming increasingly difficult to perceive [6]. Nevertheless, the

fact that it is less conspicuous does not mean it does not exist. There is total acceptance of political correctness because nonacceptance would often cause conflict between male academics and students. The upper echelons are inhabited by sufficient women to meet parity criteria, but this is not enough. From the field of medicine, Azam and Oxetenko [23] stress that gender parity is not the same as parity in leadership. In a similar vein, Aiston and Fo [16] talk about the silencing of academic women, which begs the question of whether the same is true of female university students. Miller and Izenkova [24] question how ownership of power, knowledge, education and a voice within academia can be embodied by women and other under-represented groups in this space at the top of the pyramid that is still patriarchal and masculinized. It is of particular interest and relevance to examine how women analyse gender facts and power relations. The data suggest that the vast majority of female academics show little willingness to critically explore the relationships between power and gender. Acker and Dillabough [25] argue that female academics are vulnerable to forms of symbolic domination embedded in the workplace culture. Overall, female lecturers have a more modest and probably more insecure opinion of their own professional merits and abilities than their male colleagues. In short, female academics and scientists will accept practically any professional situation that the scientific community offers them, without displaying a sufficiently active critical reaction.

Various studies [26–28] have shown that universities have policies in place to combat sex discrimination and introduce initiatives aimed at increasing women's representation in academia. However, are the changes made as a result of these policies having any positive effect? This question has to be asked because we need to understand the example we are setting and the legacy we are leaving to our students. Universities have implemented what is politically correct, but they have not achieved levels of committed awareness. Lozano, Iglesias and Martínez [29] found that the concerns, fears and dilemmas that academics express in their narratives on the culture of equal opportunities are not permeating the fabric of the university as they should. Meanwhile, Barone and Assirelli [30] attribute the persistence of gender inequalities in the labour market to gender segregation in higher education, since female students are subjected to a variety of microaggressions that pass negative messages on to them about those workspaces that are deemed to lie beyond the aspirations expected of them [31]. Microinequities become microinhumanities or microincivilities because they maintain glass barriers [32]. Ultimately, our conceptual approach in this paper stems from the sociostructural basis of gender microaggressions. This perspective sees this abuse not only as a psychological problem for the victims but also as a problem involving human rights, health and equality. Our aim is to explore how these microaggressions lead to the loss of learning opportunities, undermining and eroding women's decisions and career plans [33], and how expelling female students from sustainable learning spaces towards the less sustainable margins by means of these microaggressions is allowed and tolerated by the powers that act from a culturally, socially and politically male structure. We also intend for young women's voices on the subject to be heard. For this reason, we have chosen to follow qualitative methodology, given that it will enable us to interpret the students' perceptions of the microdiscrimination that they experience in what, for them, is a social and political space of opportunities, i.e., the university. Knowing what these perceptions are is essential for identifying these microaggressions and for taking measures to cultivate a healthier and more supportive campus climate for women [20].

2. Methodology

Our research falls within the framework of naturalist inquiry [34], grounded theory in particular [35]. This is a qualitative method concerned with generating conceptual perspectives and theoretical approaches. It does this by interpreting and thoroughly analysing specific voices in their natural context when they are referring to an experienced and, therefore, complex social problem. In our case, we aim to identify the perceptions that female university students have of the microaggressions that they are faced with every day,

along with the causes attributed to them. Exploring these perceptions is a challenge. It involves following inductive procedures and reflecting on the words until we know what they really mean. Once this happens, we can interpret the voices and analyse them by organizing the information into units of meaning (categories and codes). For this to happen, the researcher must have a thorough knowledge of the subject and spend a great deal of time reflecting on the participants' words [36].

2.1. Context

The University of Alicante is a public university, which is open, sustainable and participatory. It comprises seven faculties, thirteen university institutes and five interuniversity bodies. It offers 50 undergraduate degree courses, 57 master's degrees and 30 doctorate programmes. For the academic year 2021–22, there were a total of 14,947 women and 10,778 men enrolled across all courses and institutions. The university has a teaching staff of almost 2700, of which approximately 41% are women and 59% men. As regards the distribution of students at the degree level, it is notable that in health sciences, 77.6% are women, while in arts and humanities (1469 women and 752 men) and social and legal sciences (8506 and 4538), women outnumber the men by practically two-to-one. In the STEMM area, however, the distribution changes. In sciences, women account for 48.5% of the students, while in engineering and architecture the proportion drops to 30% [37].

As far as gender equality is concerned, the university's organic structure includes an equality unit with very well defined functions set out in its regulations [38]. These include the promotion of gender mainstreaming in all university policies and the incorporation of a gender perspective in teaching and research. It provides regular training courses for both teachers and students, which are aimed at increasing awareness and encouraging strategies for the collective construction of egalitarian environments. The university is currently working on the fourth equal opportunities plan for women and men [39], which, like the previous ones, includes specific measures aimed at promoting equality between women and men and avoiding any gender-based discrimination. The plan is designed to guarantee equality from a triple perspective: (1) that of the public administration, (2) that of a higher education institution and (3) that of a company as regards its staff. The plan takes as its benchmarks the sustainable development goals 5 (gender equality) and 8 (decent work and economic growth).

2.2. Participants

A total of 33 female students volunteered to participate in the study as part of the tutorial action plan carried out at the faculty level at the University of Alicante (UA), Spain. All but three were aged between 18 and 22, and all were students in the Faculty of Education. The curriculum for education includes math and experimental and environmental sciences (STEMM).

The participants were all middle-class Spanish women who financed their education in different ways, including scholarships and temporary jobs, or were covered by financial contributions from their parents. UA students are respectful of the environment; there is no vandalism of any kind, and they are politically moderate. They lead active social lives, especially as the weather encourages people to spend time outdoors. Generally speaking, all students are dedicated to their studies and their circle of friends and have no great involvement in either political or social issues.

The research questions that guided the questionnaire (see next paragraph) were:

- What forms of microdiscrimination do female university students report?
- In the participants' view, what factors cause the microinequities they have experienced?

2.3. Collecting the Voices

To collect the narrative voices, we designed an open, *ad hoc* questionnaire using *Google Forms* because it has strong potential and is being increasingly used in university contexts. The reasons for this are that (1) it is fast and enables wide dissemination, (2) it is easy to

use, (3) it is inexpensive, and (4) it can store a large amount of data [40]. The questionnaire included a series of sociodemographic-type questions and two open questions that were inextricably linked to the research questions: (1) Have you felt discriminated against or invisible as a woman in any particular area or situation of your life trajectory? (2) If so, what do you think was the cause of it?

The questionnaire was validated by three experts in gender from the University of Alicante. After being reviewed, the first question was rephrased to make it easier to understand. The questionnaire was then shared with a group of five students, who evaluated it in the pilot phase.

Because it is difficult for students to schedule personal interviews, they were invited to complete the questionnaire online. Kitto and Barnett [41] and Braun et al. [42] say that this is a good strategy in qualitative research because technology enables opinions to be collected when personal contact is difficult. The ease with which students could participate in the research, insofar as they could complete the questionnaire anywhere, at any time, may have increased the number of responses and the richness of the content.

A database containing contact details was used for the initial mailing. A total of 252 messages were sent out, obtaining a response rate of around 10%. Respondents were asked to reply by stating whether they would be willing to participate. The email informed them of the aims of the research and explained that anonymity was assured and that their responses would be treated in confidence. Finally, in order for the questionnaire to be sent to them, participants had to agree to the reading and processing of their data. The study was conducted in accordance with the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and the regulations of the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Alicante.

2.4. Interpreting and Analysing the Voices

It is essential to interpret the participants' narratives with care and precision. The work team began by reading and rereading the responses, clarifying and discussing them until they agreed on how to interpret the voices. The work involves triangulation and is highly recursive. Due to the heuristic nature of the methodology, the process is frequently repeated until a perfect consistency between codes and meanings is found. The categories were defined by the research questions, and conceptual perspectives were established. The categories were defined to align with the emerging voices and the conceptual perspective, marking out a conceptual structure, while the codes accounted for distinctions and nuances between voices within the same category. Those narrative units that best exemplified each code were selected for the presentation of the results.

The process was carried out with the help of AQUAD 7 (assisted qualitative data analysis software) [43]. This was chosen because it facilitates the management process involved when categorizing units of meaning. Its internal logic adapts perfectly to the mechanisms the researcher needs for repeated analysis of the qualitative data and to present the results.

The set of codes that emerged from this process enabled us to make assumptions and formulate conclusions by relating them to each other, identifying and comparing reiterations of some of the more common configurations that were represented in the data analysed. These codes were also established and defined as a result of consensus decision making among the authors, who created a set of overall structures known as categories that were useful for ordering and synthesizing information based on the inter-relationships between units of meaning.

Four categories emerged from our analysis of the participants' voices and the way they connect with the conceptual framework:

- *Category 1. Spaces of discrimination.* This includes the settings in which the microdiscrimination occurred, ranging from the domestic space to the social spaces in the lives of the female students.
- *Category 2. Types of microdiscrimination.* This refers to the forms of discrimination experienced, ranging from lack of consideration, through unequal treatment compared

to men, to microaggressions when acting outside the stereotypes of the weaker sex and femininity.

- *Category 3. Emotional experiences.* This describes the participants' narratives about their emotional responses to microdiscrimination, ranging from humiliation or indignation to indifference or denial.
- *Category 4. Perception of and reflection on the causes and origins of inequity.* This covers the participants' views about the origin and permanence of unequal gender roles and the hows and whys of persistent male gender superiority.

3. Results

This section shows the narrative-based findings for each of the study's four categories. In each case, we show the absolute frequency (AF)—which refers to the number of times that the participant narratives fall within a particular code—and its percentage (AF%)—which is calculated using the formula $AF \times 100 / \text{Total AF}$. The narrative units that best exemplified each code were selected and added to the presentation.

3.1. Category 1. Spaces of Microdiscrimination

3.1.1. Code 1.1 Family and Domestic Space

Various different codes emerged from the participant narratives when they identified the spaces in which they had experienced discrimination. *Code 1.1 (Family and Domestic Space)* contains the earliest experiences of the double standards applied to sons and daughters and the obstacles that overprotection puts in the way of daughters' autonomy. Table 1 shows the frequencies for the category as a whole, while in these separate code areas we give examples and comment on some of the participant narratives:

Table 1. Frequencies emerging from the narratives coded under Category 1.

Category	Codes	AF	AF (%)
1. Spaces of microdiscrimination	1.1 Family and domestic space	20	24.39
	1.2 Teaching space	18	21.95
	1.3 Workspaces	6	7.32
	1.4 Areas used for sports	23	28.05
	1.5 Public space	4	4.88
	1.6 Social and leisure spaces	11	13.41
Total		82	100

Note: AF (absolute Frequency); AF(%) (percentage of absolute frequency).

In terms of doing housework, I don't know if it's because of my culture, but, for example, my brother never did the washing-up. I did it. (Student 26)

I wasn't allowed to go home on my own because I was a girl. My brother could go home alone without having to worry about anything. (Student 18)

Other narratives show that microaggressions come about because the opinions of the men in the women's closest circles are given greater consideration than theirs, or through the assumption that certain tasks are associated with particular gender roles:

In other cases, I've also seen how older people like my grandfather have taken my male cousins' opinions into account before mine when it was obvious they were wrong, or if people were talking about politics he'd say to my grandmother, "you just don't understand this sort of thing". (Student 21)

To give an example, recently I felt discriminated against because my little cousin, who's a boy, had to go to the toilet. He asked a male friend of the family to go with him. This friend turned round and looked at me like I should go. In that instant I did it without thinking, telling myself it was my cousin. But afterwards, thinking about it, I realised it was a really sexist thing to do. He could have gone with him, no problem. (Student 29)

As these examples of *Code 1.1* show, women frequently see the family space as their first experience of gender differentiation.

3.1.2. Code 1.2 Teaching Space

There were various narratives involving *Code 1.2 (Teaching space)*. It is clear that some classroom practices were disappointing for female students, as they felt undervalued in certain aspects. These behaviours and discriminatory comments stood out, especially in the areas of sciences:

I did the science baccalaurate in secondary school and there were twice as many boys as girls. People tended to have more faith in the boys in the science branch, though some of us girls got better marks. (Student 3)

In my case, I've always liked science subjects. They've always been considered to be 'for boys', so when I did a science baccalaurate or took science subjects, I somehow felt isolated, as I was one of the few female students that took any science subjects. We were also treated by teachers as if we were in the wrong class. (Student 11)

There are also numerous narratives that reveal the microdiscrimination in the area of physical education. This coincides with the participants' frequent identifications of discriminatory comments in their narratives relating to sports:

An example of this is physical education classes. In secondary school girls were taken less into account, or simply not at all, when it came to doing exercises. Girls and boys were never mixed. Instead the teacher would make up homogeneous groups. (Student 4)

I also felt discriminated against because more was always expected of the boys in certain subjects (physical education) when in fact I love sport but never got higher marks than them even when I performed better than they did. (Student 7)

Here, we can also see that discrimination comes not only from the teaching staff but from classmates as well:

But when it was time for break, if the girls wanted to use the basketball court or play football (which wasn't that often), the boys who were already there would tell us not to come onto the court because basically we were terrible players. (Student 8)

As far as I remember, the only time that I felt out of place was possibly in physical education classes, then we girls were the last to be picked on the grounds that we were biologically less strong or less talented than a boy. This is something that doesn't bother me and I don't give it more importance than it deserves because, when we're children, we sometimes don't look beyond our own interests. (Student 12)

3.1.3. Code 1.3 Workspaces

This code shows that these are spaces where women are asked to conform to stereotypes of femininity, despite the fact that working female students are in the minority:

In my work environment you sometimes get comments coming directly from the other workers or the bosses, along the lines of 'Stand at the door for a bit and see if you can attract a customer' or 'So you were flirting with the customer at table x, were you?'. These are comments that you get used to and you laugh because you have no choice. You just keep working. (Student 5)

In another case it involves looking for work. I don't know if it's considered discrimination, but I've definitely seen fairly sexist attitudes in connection with my appearance when being taken on to do waitressing work. (Student 21)

The participant narratives make it clear that they are offended if any doubt is thrown on their abilities or if they are given certain tasks purely and simply because they are women:

I've got a job that's 'typically done by men'. In the beginning they didn't want to take me on because I'm a woman, and I quote. 'Women are much worse than men at finding their way around'. Today, I'm recognized as being one of the best workers in the company. (Student 28)

At work I've also experienced similar situations. During my first university course I worked in a pizzeria and, while the women were cooking or helping out, the men were on motorbikes delivering the food. (Student 14)

3.1.4. Code 1.4 Areas Used for Sports

This code indicates that, with many of the participants being sportswomen, these places were seen as some of the most discriminatory and masculinized spaces for women. They explain that their abilities are again doubted and that they are constantly discriminated against. This is consistent with research showing that one of the most obvious gender gaps is to be found in sports [44]:

First of all, in my sports career I've experienced many situations of discrimination. The women's team, for example, has never been the main source of sponsorship or impetus for the club. Even in the year that both teams (male and female) were playing for promotion to the national league, the men's team didn't pay membership fees but the women's did, and the support in matches as well as in economic terms was obvious. They had better pitches, a better timetable, better conditions, better terraces, etc. In the end, though, the women's team got promotion and the men's didn't. Even today, after various situations like that, it's still the men's teams that are supported by default. (Student 14)

I've felt discriminated against when playing football with boys. Before you play with them, when they see a girl who wants to play football they tend to undervalue her, leaving her till last when picking people to be on their team because they assume you won't be as good as them just because you're female. (Student 27)

Comments are recurring and hurtful:

They say things like 'your arms are going to get too big' or 'you're going to have arms like a man and I don't like that'. There are probably more, but in the end we get used to these examples of micro-male chauvinism after hearing them so often, and sometimes we don't even realise how they affect us. (Student 5)

Not in my career as a student, but as a sportswomen because the idea persists that if women train a lot they're going to look like men. I've heard it said various times, but my desire to be an elite sportswoman eclipse any comments like that. (Student 10)

3.1.5. Code 1.5 Public Space

Another important code is Code 1.5 (Public Space) due to the lack of public safety measures (poorly lit streets, parks and other areas, low police presence), which, together with Code 1.6 (Social and Leisure Spaces), involves places that trigger fear among participants:

I don't think enough importance is being given to our own safety. Feeling afraid when we're alone on the street or even when we go out on a Saturday night are things I've experienced, and unfortunately that's how it'll continue. (Student 9)

3.1.6. Code 1.6 Social and Leisure Spaces

Although we can say that a town or city is very safe, there are always areas that are more dangerous, especially at night. A fair proportion of the narratives coded with this meaning highlight the distress the women have felt in leisure spaces. Their contributions reveal that the microaggressions they suffer on a social level come about in multiple and diverse contexts:

I feel discrimination in everyday life as far as society's concerned, since women and men aren't seen as equal human beings. (Student 19)

Finally, now that I drive, I've heard comments like "women don't know how to drive" or the typical "it had to be a woman driver" when I've found it difficult to park, for example, although it might actually be due to still being a newly-qualified driver. I haven't heard the same comments being made when any of my male friends were driving and they've been in the same situation or worse than me at the wheel. (Student 21)

3.2. Category 2. Types of Microdiscrimination

3.2.1. Code 2.1 Invisibility and Lack of Consideration

This code covers various forms of microinequity reported by participants: invisibility, unequal treatment and barely concealed harassment. *Invisibility and Lack of Consideration (Code 2.1)* certainly surprised the participants, who did not expect to be ignored simply because they are women, given that they do not disregard men simply because they are men. Table 2 shows the frequencies for this category, while here we include some examples:

Table 2. Frequencies emerging from the narratives coded under Category 2.

Category	Codes	AF	AF (%)
2. Types of microdiscrimination	2.1 Invisibility and lack of consideration	8	8.79
	2.2 Unequal and differential treatment	43	47.25
	2.3 Sex-based discrimination, harassment and pestering	12	13.19
	2.4 Harassment for transgressing female role stereotypes	23	25.27
	2.5 Denial	5	5.49
Total		91	100

Note: AF (absolute Frequency); AF(%) (percentage of absolute frequency).

Above all I've felt most discriminated against in situations such as going to hardware stores or similar shops. When I've been there with a man and asked a question, they always look at him. (Student 1)

Yes, at times when I've wanted to make my own contribution I've had comments like 'this is men's work, they're stronger, you might hurt yourself'. (Student 2)

When we had physical education classes at secondary school, girls were taken into account less or not at all when it came to doing exercises. (Student 4)

I've enjoyed playing football since I was little, but I've felt invisible every time I've wanted to play football with boys. (Student 15)

3.2.2. Code 2.2 Unequal and Differential Treatment

Differential behaviour was the most annoying for participants when they experienced it from their male peers:

Before you play with them, when they see a girl who wants to play football they tend to undervalue her, leaving her till last when picking people to be on their team because they assume you won't be as good as them just because you're female. (Student 27)

I've always felt most discriminated against by my peers. (Student 8)

This unequal treatment does not always come about between peers. This can be seen from the following narratives:

Like with sportspeople's salaries, there's a big difference in pay and even in importance between sportsmen and sportswomen. (Student 11)

Later on, when I was working as an occupational therapist, in some places they always asked for men, presumably because they're assumed to be strong, but perhaps the requirement should be the ability to lift more or weigh more than X kilos, because I'm sure

some men wouldn't be able to and a lot of women can lift much more weight than men. (Student 14)

Also, when doing the same exercise, the boys almost always got higher marks than the girls in physical education. (Student 4)

3.2.3. Code 2.3 Sex-Based Discrimination, Harassment and Pestering

Sexual microaggressions caused a great deal of indignation among the participating students. As well as being a source of annoyance, these situations generate fear and might eventually restrict freedom when going to certain places:

I also remember going out partying and men would come up and touch my bottom as if there was nothing wrong with doing that. (Student 29)

Another situation that scared me was when I was getting on a bus and a boy put his phone number in my bag. He got on behind me and he left it without me realizing. I spent months looking behind me before getting on buses, scared in case another boy put another piece of paper in my bag. (Also student 29)

In general, no reference is made to relationships with partners, although one of the participants mentioned the following:

Yes, I had a relationship with a boy that made me feel undervalued as a person. The boy in question gave me to understand that I was only an object, that I had to conform perfectly to today's idea of beauty (developing an eating disorder in the process) and that my contributions were insignificant compared to his. (Student 13)

3.2.4. Code 2.4 Harassment for Transgressing Female Role Stereotypes

This was very frequent among female athletes. When they crossed the boundaries of stereotypical female roles, they were subject to numerous microaggressions. Female students were rebuked if they stopped being 'feminine' in the clothes they wore, or in sports:

[...] as for style of clothing, I feel more comfortable in loose clothes and I've had comments like 'you look like a man dressed like that'. (Student 2)

They've never passed me the ball and they always said that they did it better and that because I played with boys I was a "butch". (Student 15)

As well as having physical exercise and sports as part of the curriculum, female university students frequently play sports and generally wear sports gear. Therefore, one of the things that infuriates them is when men make comments about what they're wearing and express their displeasure as if they owned whatever sporting activity was taking place.

As a sportswoman, yes, because there's still this idea that if women train a lot we'll look like men. I have heard this various times, but my desire to be an elite sportswoman eclipses any such comments. (Student 10)

3.2.5. Code 2.5 Denial

It is important to note that there were two participants who denied having experienced discrimination (Code 2.5), although both used the word 'luck' (and related terms), and one of them even considered herself 'thankful':

Academically I've been lucky not to feel discriminated against because of my gender. On a personal level, I consider myself to have been equally lucky. (Student 30)

Luckily, I've never experienced discrimination... To this day I can be thankful and hope that I'll never be faced with such a situation. (Student 31)

3.3. Category 3. Emotional Experiences

These narratives describe the various feelings that accompany the experience of microaggressions. The codes cover a range from displeasure and humiliation to anger and

rage, as shown in Table 3, all of which cause participants to react or be afraid. Displeasure is at the core of all the stories reported by students and is evident in the very tone of the narratives. Part of the experience contained in the narrative is almost surprise, as these women were astonished to hear what others thought. They did not expect such stereotypes to exist, but they did not lose control of themselves. Humiliation was felt with a fair degree of equanimity when they were not valued because of gender stereotyping, partly because they knew it was clearly based on a stereotype and did not affect them too much.

Table 3. Frequencies emerging from the narratives coded under Category 3.

Category	Codes	AF	AF(%)
3. Emotional experiences	3.1 Humiliation and powerlessness	7	15.22
	3.2 Indignation and anger	31	67.39
	3.3 Apprehension or fear	5	10.87
	3.4 Indifference and equanimity	3	6.52
Total		46	100

Note: AF (absolute Frequency); AF(%) (percentage of absolute frequency).

3.3.1. Code 3.1 Humiliation and Powerlessness

This code brings together all those narratives that demonstrate the sense of powerlessness that women feel when they see how they are viewed differently from men in particular contexts. Examples of this are shown in relation to work and academia:

Having done a degree in education (considered by many people to be an easy option and aimed at girls), I've felt 'discriminated against' when talking to other people, as if the degree was seen as being of no value. (Student 11)

Because in that case what he wanted was for me to be just for show, for me to study but not raise my voice, for me to go out but not for long and depending on who with, for me to buy clothes but not show anything. He made me feel that women are valued for our bodies, not our minds. (Student 13)

3.3.2. Code 3.2 Indignation and Anger

The women usually felt negative emotions after experiencing discrimination because of their gender, and it is difficult for them to forget:

It's true that in the school playground I'd be furious that girls were not allowed to play 'what boys played'. (Student 8)

But they felt even angrier when they were accused of transgressing their gender roles. When that happened, they were determined to fight for what they wanted and clearly saw this type of aggression as unfair:

In our case, we had to fight for these rights as if they were luxuries instead of seeing them simply as what they are: rights. (Student 33)

3.3.3. Code 3.3 Apprehension or Fear

This refers to how aggressions that made the women fearful and, in some ways, inhibited, also caused them to become indignant. These narratives also appeared under Code 1.5:

There was also one day when a car with two boys stopped by me on a rather lonely street and they asked me to get into the car with them. I remember I said something not very nice to them and walked faster. (Student 29)

I remember another day when a boy followed me home to ask me if I had a boyfriend. This also makes me scared of going to certain places in case someone follows me or tries to do something to me. Wherever I go I'm almost always looking over my shoulder to see who's behind me. (Also Student 29)

3.3.4. Code 3.4. Indifference and Equanimity

Finally, there was a feeling of indifference and equanimity, which may have been a strategy for maintaining emotional control:

There are probably more, but ultimately we've also got used to these examples of micro-male chauvinism after hearing them so often, and sometimes we don't even realize how they affect us. (Student 5)

However, it hasn't affected me much on my journey. (Student 6)

3.4. Category 4. Causes and Origin of the Lack of Opportunities

This category interprets the reflections that have emerged from the participant narratives on the origin, persistence and purpose of gender stereotypes and how their existence translates into a lack of opportunities for women, who are shunted aside in favour of men. Frequencies are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Frequencies emerging from the narratives coded under Category 4.

Category	Codes	AF	AF(%)
4. Causes and origin of the lack of opportunities	4.1 Origin: sociocultural construction of weak and strong roles	28	32.18
	4.2 Persistence: naturalized social roles	24	27.59
	4.3 Purpose of stereotypes: maintaining inequity by exclusion to perpetuate patriarchal behaviour and male power	31	35.63
	4.4 Means: being aware that political, legal and economic structures maintain double standards of privilege and limit opportunities for women	4	4.60
Total		87	100

Note: AF (absolute Frequency); AF(%) (percentage of absolute frequency).

3.4.1. Code 4.1 Origin: Sociocultural Construction of Weak and Strong Roles

The views in Codes 4.1 and 4.2 show that participants understand the origin as well as the persistence and perpetuity of stereotypes. They are fully aware that dividing the sexes into weaker and stronger is a social construct, that this stereotype has become naturalized and that its persistence is detrimental to them because it ensures that men get more opportunities than women. The participants make this very clear in their narratives:

I've felt that a role was assigned to me simply because I'm a woman. (Student 29)

There are many inequities that women experience simply because they're women. (Student 9)

I believe that discrimination against women is something that's connected to society; for a long time women have had a more 'insignificant' role. (Student 16)

Women and men are still not seen as equal human beings. Women have never been seen as people in their own right, but only as companions for men. (Student 25)

All the participants are clear that gender stereotypes are the result of a sociocultural construction that aims to establish a view of gender roles that favours male power, patriarchy and the existence of a social structure that keeps women on the margins of participation, from the school playground to the areas of employment and the economy. They are also aware of the power of the family in this separation of roles and generally perceive that any small type of discrimination reflects an intention to deny them space and opportunities outside the gender role into which they have been placed and categorized.

3.4.2. Code 4.2 Persistence: Naturalized Social Roles

As regards Persistence: Naturalized Social Roles (Code 4.2), participants perceive the gender roles as being naturalized, but do not accept them. Their reactions may be less

emotionally charged than those of women who were young in the second half of the twentieth century and who had to fight more for the opportunity to learn and to work, but it is also true that women today experience a more subtle form of microdiscrimination than young women in the last century:

Society is sexist and accepts some situations as normal when they're not. (Student 29)

I also think that the problem lies in continuing to believe that certain old and obsolete lifestyles are normal. (Student 11)

I think there's still a lot of cultural influence and gender bias instilled in us when we're children. This would explain the discrimination found at work, in sport, in education, in the decisions we make when choosing a degree, choosing a job, starting a family, etc. (Student 14)

3.4.3. Code 4.3 Purpose of Stereotypes: Maintaining Inequity by Offering No Opportunities to Women in Order to Perpetuate Patriarchal Behaviour and Male Power

Code 4.3 was very frequently mentioned. They not only involve understanding gender stereotypes and their normalization but go one step further. They also concern the purpose of these stereotypes, namely, to maintain male power and deny opportunities to women:

Women, on the other hand, were excluded, which meant they were highly economically dependent on men. (Student 3)

I also think that having made women invisible for so many years means that a lot of men still believe that they have this power of superiority that allows them to treat women as if we had no idea of what we're doing or saying, when in fact to avoid this very assumption we've probably become much more informed and have done sufficient research to be able to address any kind of comment. (Student 21)

3.4.4. Code 4.4 Means: Being Aware That the Political, Legal and Economic Structures Maintain Double Standards of Privilege and Limit Opportunities for Women

Few participants went beyond the view of stereotyping as being social and family-based. Just a small number realized that there is also a need to engage in a struggle against the legal, political and economic systems:

The role of women is still subordinate to the patriarchal system of our government. The difference is our continuing struggle even today to obtain something that for men is enshrined as a basic right. (Student 33)

There are experiences underlying many of these voices, such as the belief that men have more opportunities and that women do not, simply 'because they are women', and that their autonomy and decision making must be in line with whichever traditional female role predominates in their lives.

I've experienced unequal treatment throughout my life because I'm a woman. (Student 24)

Behaviours such as men working outside the home and earning money to support the family while women do the housework and look after the children are instilled in both men and women. (Student 3)

However, participants are confident that change is possible:

It is essential to continue working on this in order to eliminate every prejudice and sexist stereotype that is still present in our lives today. (Student 3)

This is changing, I have faith in our society. With the support of everyone and with new education, new schools, new teachers and new generations, let's change what used to be normalized and create a new reality. (Student 11)

We cannot finish without making a final observation concerning a subject that we think deserves to be mentioned: only two of the women made any clear reference to transgender issues:

They didn't understand why there should be a third gender. To which I replied: 'Maybe you're lucky enough to be able to identify with the male or female sex, but what about people who don't feel that way?' This was met with silence. (Student 3)

In the 21st century there are still thousands of women who do not feel comfortable with themselves. They're afraid of expressing their feelings, of being excluded simply because they can't find a place for themselves. Trans women are also women and should be proud of it, should shout it out and celebrate it without fear of rejection. (Student 23)

In qualitative research, it is just as valid to interpret what is missing as what is present. Colleagues might discuss the transgender issue among themselves, but setting it out in writing outside their own circle is more difficult. Equally, they are unlikely to find it strange or be concerned that narrative research opens a door enabling participants to express themselves, to speak about what worries them and what they feel the need to share.

3.5. Summary of Conclusions

The main findings for each category show that:

1. Sporting, family-domestic and teaching spaces are the most typical areas for gender microaggressions. Although, generally speaking, these occur in any area that women pass through (possibly less so on the street) and in the workplace, only those who work are affected (not every participant in this investigation).
2. In the *Category 2 Types of Microdiscrimination*, the most common aspects mentioned are differential treatment, double standards and harassment for transgressing the stereotypical role that women are expected to play. This means that men are not willing to give up the opportunities that from time immemorial women have not been given.
3. In the emotional experiences category, the code for indignation and anger is the most frequently mentioned. In general terms, these are resilient women who do not usually feel scared or humiliated. We could say that their anger is quite high. Maintaining equanimity is not frequent and would probably not be recommended either. Women want to advance in their careers and achieve their dreams and should not have to accept the lack of opportunity.
4. In this fourth category, it is the first three codes that indicate the most common areas of awareness, while the other level requires even greater awareness and is the least-mentioned. Nevertheless, participants are aware that microaggressions are more than just impertinence and that men are reluctant to give up their role, while at the same time, assigning women a different one.

4. Discussion and Final Conclusions

The results show that most discrimination against the women in our sample occurred in a sports context, as other studies have shown [45,46]. These are the places where unequal treatment was most frequently perceived. In most cases, the participants received negative comments for not following female role stereotypes in the way they dressed, for example, or in sports and in cases where the participant tried to break away from the role of the weaker sex. The emotional reaction generally involved the students' clear perception and awareness of this type of discrimination, which they attributed to the sociocultural origin of stereotypes and the naturalization of gender roles.

Although these women dared to transgress female role stereotypes and were aware of discrimination when they experienced it, not all of them perceived that the lack of opportunities was part and parcel of this unequal treatment, nor that sociopolitical structures protect double standards where gender is concerned. In gender-based violence, as in all forms of aggression, there is a perpetrator and a victim. However, our reflection cannot be limited to this because in gender inequality there is a hegemonic, sociopolitical structure of male power and a collective of women that is denied its potential and opportunities [47].

4.1. *What Society Allows: The Construction of a Binary Difference*

In light of these results, it can be said that stereotypical gender role differences are still socially supported. There is also aggressive social support to ensure that women do not break out of their established gender roles. They are not allowed to dress in the same way as men, for example, as one female student reported. Behind the microdiscrimination that each student described, there was tacit consent for unequal opportunities on the grounds of gender. This is a structural and social problem that affects all female students. While political correctness is maintained in governmental structures and university institutions in Spain, the notion of entitlement is still understood as being a right, a power and a privilege inherent to the male sex [48].

4.2. *What the Participating Students Experienced*

The results clearly show that the students in the study did not see themselves as victims. This is consistent with the analysis found in a report on women and science in Spain [49], which showed that women do not like to see themselves as victims, nor do they tend to blame their own institutions for discrimination. Female students shy away from criticizing their lecturers and avoid making harsh attacks in their narratives. Although the avoidance of victimization is a positive phenomenon, it is also worth bearing in mind that, as the above study pointed out, when a female academic chairs an assessment board in any field of knowledge, this has a marked effect on the percentage of female students who pass.

Another important result is that the participating students' experiences of microdiscrimination were linked to emotional control. Their perception relativizes the situation and portrays it as a relic of the past that will not survive. Traditional norms and gender stereotypes have always looked down on women's attempts at autonomy. Yet women's sense of autonomy is a powerful factor in opposition to the submissive view of women that the traditional perspective of social control exploits. In addition, the emotional self-control shown by the students in their narratives can certainly be identified as a protective tool to combat inequality. As well as establishing their autonomy, social interaction—as long as it is not toxic—helps women's liberation [50]. In general, the participants seemed quite detached from the situation and did not take a combative stance. Instead, they were pragmatic and gave due weight to how microdiscrimination is ultimately one of the ways whereby opportunities fail to materialize. No reports of microaggressions from their partners were made, perhaps because it is unusual for a young woman to have a partner at the beginning of university life in Spain. On the issue of gender equality, there is often tolerant disagreement between young women and their partners.

4.3. *Structural Microinequity*

The measures suggested in *She Figures 2021* [1] aimed at promoting gender equality in careers, ensuring a gender balance in decision making and incorporating the gender dimension into R&I content. Programmes also form part of the sustainable development goals. They should, therefore, be integrated into the political and institutional structures because microaggressions against young women do not take place only on a personal and private level. Likewise, the moral and ethical status of microinequities requires a response from the institutions because of their association with implicit biases in terms of how stereotypes lead to increases in differential treatment. What measures would be appropriate, given the institutional context in which they occur? There is no doubt that even small injustices are part of a long history for women. Brennan [17] believes that every time a person is 'either singled out, or overlooked, ignored, or otherwise discounted' because of their gender or race, a social injustice is being committed because that person is discriminated against because they belong to a more vulnerable group, and this must be challenged at the institutional and political level. One participant commented: 'Personally, I think that as long as all these attitudes continue to be seen as unimportant, they will be perpetuated and restrict women to a lower plane' (Student 22).

Human rights include the right to nondiscrimination and equal opportunities, along with physical, economic and decision-making autonomy [51]. Political powers and government institutions such as universities must enforce these rights. The only way to guarantee women's right to equal opportunities and freedom from discrimination is to ensure that they can exercise their rights to full social participation [52,53]. The responsibility and commitment of academia and higher education structures is one of the greatest strengths for overcoming discrimination [54]. We suggest that people should engage in combating the microinequities on campus, using microaffirmations (e.g., from academics, tutors, peers and groups) when necessary to counteract microaggressions. In addition, as Thege et al. [55] propose in their gender-sensitive approach to teaching, we should continue to be supportive and sensitive. Watching and listening can help us to engage with the situations of inequality around us.

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