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Scientific articles

Las mujeres y el acceso al liderazgo

Women and access to leadership

Mulheres e acesso à liderança

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Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar las percepciones de mujeres y hombres sobre las razones por las que hay menos mujeres líderes que hombres, considerando factores como la discriminación y los prejuicios, los roles de género, las oportunidades de crecimiento, las posibles estrategias que los empleadores podrían implementar para impulsar a las mujeres a ocupar puestos de liderazgo, y el equilibrio entre el trabajo y la vida personal. A través de este análisis, se pretende proporcionar una comprensión más profunda de los obstáculos a los que se enfrentan las mujeres. Este es un estudio cualitativo en el que se utilizó un cuestionario para recabar los puntos de vista de los participantes. La recolección de datos se realizó de manera digital a través de redes sociales, obteniendo un total de 392 respuestas. El muestreo empleado fue por conveniencia. Los resultados muestran que las mujeres reconocen su falta de presencia en puestos de liderazgo debido a que las oportunidades laborales son mayores para los hombres, además de que persiste la creencia de que las mujeres son incapaces de liderar. También enfrentan barreras como los techos de cristal, los sistemas patriarcales, la emocionalidad, y la minimización de su trabajo y habilidades. Por otro lado, los hombres señalaron que hay pocas mujeres líderes porque a ellas se les exige mucho más que a los hombres para llegar a estas posiciones, sumado a los roles y estereotipos de género que retrasan o bloquean su acceso a puestos de decisión, como las responsabilidades domésticas y la maternidad. Se concluye que las organizaciones deben tener la voluntad de implementar estrategias orientadas a atraer y retener talento femenino, desarrollar programas de



capacitación sobre liderazgo, y fomentar la flexibilización de los horarios laborales, la igualdad de género, y la erradicación del acoso y el hostigamiento sexual.

Palabras claves: liderazgo femenino, roles de género, estereotipos de género, techos de cristal, mercado laboral.

Abstract

The objective of this article is to analyze the perceptions of women and men regarding why there are fewer women leaders than men, considering factors such as discrimination and prejudice, gender roles, growth opportunities, potential strategies employers could implement to promote women into leadership positions, and the balance between work and personal life. Through this analysis, the aim is to provide a deeper understanding of the obstacles women face. This is a qualitative study that utilized a questionnaire to gather participants' viewpoints. Data collection was conducted digitally via social media, resulting in 392 responses. The sampling method used was convenience sampling. The results indicate that women recognize their lack of presence in leadership positions due to greater employment opportunities for men, as well as the persistent belief that women are incapable of leading. They also face barriers such as glass ceilings, patriarchal systems, emotional stereotypes, and the minimization of their work and abilities. On the other hand, men expressed that there are few women leaders because they are held to much higher standards than men to reach these positions, in addition to gender roles and stereotypes that delay or block their access to decision-making positions, such as domestic work and motherhood. The conclusion is that organizations must be willing to implement strategies aimed at attracting and retaining female talent, developing leadership training programs, and promoting flexible working hours, gender equality, and the eradication of sexual harassment and abuse.

Keywords: Female leadership, gender roles, gender stereotypes, glass ceilings, labor market.

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é analisar as percepções de mulheres e homens sobre por que há menos mulheres líderes do que homens, considerando fatores como discriminação e preconceito, papéis de gênero, oportunidades de crescimento, possíveis estratégias que os empregadores poderiam implementar para promover as mulheres a cargos de liderança, e o equilíbrio entre trabalho e vida pessoal. Por meio desta análise, pretende-se fornecer uma



compreensão mais profunda dos obstáculos enfrentados pelas mulheres. Este é um estudo qualitativo que utilizou um questionário para coletar as opiniões dos participantes. A coleta de dados foi realizada digitalmente por meio de redes sociais, resultando em 392 respostas. O método de amostragem utilizado foi por conveniência. Os resultados indicam que as mulheres reconhecem sua falta de presença em posições de liderança devido a maiores oportunidades de emprego para os homens, bem como à crença persistente de que as mulheres são incapazes de liderar. Elas também enfrentam barreiras como tetos de vidro, sistemas patriarcais, estereótipos emocionais e a minimização de seu trabalho e habilidades. Por outro lado, os homens expressaram que há poucas mulheres líderes porque elas são submetidas a padrões muito mais elevados do que os homens para alcançar essas posições, além de papéis e estereótipos de gênero que atrasam ou bloqueiam seu acesso a cargos de tomada de decisão, como o trabalho doméstico e a maternidade. A conclusão é que as organizações devem estar dispostas a implementar estratégias voltadas para atrair e reter talentos femininos, desenvolver programas de capacitação em liderança, e promover horários de trabalho flexíveis, igualdade de gênero e a erradicação do assédio e abuso sexual.

Palavras-chave: liderança feminina, papéis de gênero, estereótipos de gênero, tetos de vidro, mercado de trabalho.

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Introduction

Various circumstances have allowed women to conquer different sectors, such as access to education, female suffrage, the legalization of contraceptive methods, and access to domestic technology. However, despite these advances, women who aspire to leadership still face situations that block their aspirations, such as child care, household chores, the lack of family policies in organizations, gender stereotypes, and in some societies, the denial of their access and development in the educational field and the scarcity of opportunities outside the home (Keohane , 2020).

Scientific literature confirms that the image of the leader is more associated with the masculine, which causes a gender bias in leadership. The contradiction between feminine and leadership roles leads to two forms of prejudice: first, the perception that women are poorly suited for leadership positions, and second, the unfavorable evaluation of their behavior in these roles (Coronel Leadership also has negative aspects, such as the time demands that prevent prioritizing other activities, leading many women to question whether



or not they want to occupy leadership positions. The loss of work flexibility also influences these decisions (Sánchez *et al.*, 2010). Lehnert , 2019).

There are various circumstances that aggravate the problem of female leadership, such as the incompatibility between domestic and work responsibilities, male-dominated organizational cultures, gender stereotypes, and prejudices against women leaders, which explain the scarce female presence in strategic positions. Gender stereotypes, defined as beliefs about the traits and social roles assigned to each gender, and gender prejudice, which includes affective elements such as antipathy towards men and women and the predisposition to discriminatory behavior, represent serious threats to women's careers (Hoffmann and Musch , 2019). Likewise, the lack of women in leadership positions is due, in part, to the insufficient balance between personal and work life, the pressure they feel in male-dominated environments, the lack of a balanced work life, and the lack of a balanced work life.-lack of managerial support, and low self-confidence (Anthony, 2018). In addition, there are deficiencies in mentoring, role models, feelings of isolation, and the prevalence of impostor syndrome (Al Naqbi , 2023).

Regarding the issue of female leadership, Eagly and Carli (2018) state that the labyrinth that women face is related to the enormous pressure of family responsibilities, which causes them to accumulate fewer years of work experience, reduce their working hours and hinder their professional progress, also reducing their income. Women often face disparities in the workplace, facing obstacles related to organizational climate, business culture, fair compensation, work-life balance, creating opportunities for professional development, and occupational variables that can lead to burnout. Without the right conditions to recruit and retain women in leadership positions, efforts are limited (Hastie *et al.*, 2023).

In the context of female leadership, there is a persistent misconception that women lack leadership self-efficacy, so it is essential to recognize their ability to achieve goals. There is also a misperception that the female leadership style is less effective, when in fact gender stereotypes undermine the effectiveness of their leadership (Hastie *et al.*, 2023). Keohane (2020) emphasizes that leadership has historically been associated with masculinity, which has led to men being considered natural leaders even in developed countries, while women must follow them. Kossek and Buzzanell (2018) emphasize that men and women are valued differently in their professional careers, since the hierarchy of professional valuation tends to favor masculine characteristics over feminine ones.

Shinbrot 's studies *Kulkarni and Mishra (2022)* show that women who deviate from traditional roles face various difficulties, as leadership qualities are generally perceived as masculine. Furthermore, women are often underestimated, considered competent but cold, or warm but incompetent, virtuous but weak. They are seen as an economic threat, feared and envied. The reality of women on their path to leadership remains difficult due to the lack of neutrality in the workplace, which gives men an advantage and displaces women, accentuating traditional gender roles resulting from machismo. *Kulkarni and Mishra (2022)* emphasize that women face multiple barriers, such as the glass ceiling, the glass cliff, exclusion from informal networks, lack of education and experience, organizational biases, inability to take risks, and stereotypical attitudes.

The study of female leadership helps to understand the multifactorial phenomenon that causes the shortage of women in management positions, whether in the private or public sector. This allows us to investigate inequality gaps and their repercussions on the development and progress of nations, since condemning more than fifty percent of the Mexican population to formal labor discrimination results in a waste of female talent. This situation may be a consequence of gender biases and beliefs related to female roles and stereotypes that generate erroneous prejudices and influence decision-making to assign women to strategic positions, even questioning their ability and leaving spaces for men. In addition, women face a lack of self-confidence and fear or disinterest in occupying these types of positions. With this in mind, the objective of this article is to analyze the perceptions of women and men about their beliefs regarding why there are fewer women leaders than men and the strategies they consider that employers could implement to encourage women to occupy leadership positions, in order to understand the barriers that women leaders face.

Female leadership

Classical leadership doctrines include the great man theory, which holds that leaders are born to lead and therefore possess inherent characteristics that make them qualified to lead. Trait theory evolved from this and suggests that leaders can be born or trained, but require a specific combination of characteristics to be effective, competent, and successful. Later, behavioral theory emerged, which emphasizes the development of leaders through attention to behavior, rather than personality traits. Later, the influence of environmental factors was recognized, leading to the development of contingency theory and situational theory. The modern era, meanwhile, focused on the leader's relationship with his followers

and the situation. Later, concepts such as shared, collaborative, and inclusive leadership emerged, and complexity leadership was developed, which focuses on the entire organizational system (Benmira & Agboola , 2021).

A leader is a person capable of showing the way to his companions (Kets de Vries) Leaders are clear about their guiding principles, believe they can make a difference, take risks and celebrate small victories, listen to the hopes and aspirations of others, and make people feel successful (Posner , 2016). In addition, those who exercise leadership are often referred to as "alpha", a term originating in the animal world and associated with the "alpha male". Alpha women are described as having traditionally masculine traits, such as aggressiveness and assertiveness. They show academic and professional achievements, have developed self-confidence, like to be treated as people and not as women, prefer independence, and do not exhibit feelings of inferiority, being dominant women (Sumra , 2019).

The literature highlights that women contribute to the work environment with various qualities such as their ability to listen empathetically, their preference for teamwork and collaboration, and their ability to build relationships. They are adept at motivating and encouraging their teams to reach their full potential. It is essential for women to understand how to navigate a male-dominated work world, and to be successful, they need to learn to counter gender-based attitudes (Elias , 2018). Furthermore, organizations led by women are more likely to innovate and engage in creative and socially responsible business practices (Khushk *et al.* , 2022).

Offermann and Foley (2020) argue that women leaders contribute to organizations through their unique traits, attributes, and behaviors, which add value to organizations. However, for organizations to benefit from these virtues, they need to take the initiative to combat obstacles faced by women, such as discrimination, prejudice, and unfair performance evaluations. Likewise, organizations need to implement serious measures to support the integration of work and family, which can reduce female employees' turnover intentions (Nie *et al.* , 2018). Similarly, Kossek and Buzzanell (2018) state that it is crucial to restructure organizational practices, with an emphasis on human resources, to change traditional ideals of male leadership and career paths.

Women leaders tend to display people-oriented styles, using emotional intelligence and transformational leadership (Gartzia and Baniandrés , 2019). According to Kulkarni and Mishra (2022), women possess strengths such as high emotional intelligence, empathy, a

democratic leadership style, sincerity, multitasking ability, dedication to work, and a greater ability to make decisions in critical situations that benefit organizations. Hentschel *et al.* (2018) found that men who are considered transformational leaders are more likely to be promoted than women, despite the fact that women possess the characteristics necessary to be transformational leaders. Furthermore, women who are autocratic leaders are less likely to be promoted and seen as effective compared to men. Likewise, women who show low levels of individualized consideration are less likely to be promoted, meaning that those who do not demonstrate concern for others anticipate negative consequences to a greater extent than men.

Congruence between gender roles and leadership roles is interpreted as the expectation of what men and women should do when occupying leadership positions, considering that this has traditionally been a masculine one. This is related to the perception that men excel in roles of power, competence and authority, while women adapt better to human interactions, which leads them to be discriminated against, especially in jobs and areas dominated by men (García-Retamero and López-Zafra, 2006). These deep-rooted conceptions have contributed to the perpetuation of invisible barriers for women in the workplace, known as glass ceilings, which prevent them from ascending to high-level leadership positions, in addition to the prevalence of a masculine work culture and discrimination (Akpınar-Sposito, 2013; Coleman, 2020).

The presence of women in senior management has positive effects on the financial performance of companies, especially when they feel supported and can apply their knowledge and skills. However, it is important to avoid appointing women solely for meeting a diversity quota, as this can lead to social isolation. It is crucial that organizations avoid falling into “tokenism”, where the inclusion of women in management positions is seen more as a superficial strategy to show diversity than as a real commitment. Women considered “token” feel additional pressures, as they believe they represent all women, face difficulties in advancing professionally, and are perceived as being included in a symbolic way, which reinforces the idea that only a few women are capable of leading (Guldike *et al.*, 2019; Lafuente and Vaillant, 2019; Stephenson and Yerger, 2024).

Zenger and Folkman (2012) found that women are rated higher than men in leadership competencies; they show greater initiative, practice self-development, demonstrate integrity, are honest, build relationships, pursue results, and develop others. However, even though they score high in leadership competencies, women are aware that they must work twice as

hard to be considered by organizational leaders. This needs to change, as women have shown that they are capable of taking on challenges, accepting positions with determination, and taking initiative (Moore & Diese, 2018). Factors that motivate female leaders in their career advancement include family support, mentoring, changing employer mindsets, and leadership competencies (Maheshwari & Nayak , 2022).

Despite the above, there is a persistent misconception that women lack self-efficacy in leadership, so it is essential that their ability to achieve goals is recognized. There is also a mistaken belief that women's leadership style is less effective, when in fact gender stereotypes undermine their effectiveness (Hastie *et al.*, 2023). In addition, the obstacles that women face in their professional lives are related to the imbalance between personal and work life, subordinates' perceptions of women leaders, social networks, and personal, organizational, and structural factors (Maheshwari and Nayak , 2022). Morley (2013) emphasizes that low female representation is associated with gender division of labor, gender biases, masculinity-linked management, "greedy" organizations, and heavy workloads that lead women to perceive a poor balance between their domestic responsibilities and time management. Khushk-*et al.* (2022) also noted that, unfortunately, organizations still show little interest in developing female leadership.

Methodology

Materials and methods

It is a qualitative study, the data was obtained through a questionnaire which was distributed through social networks, 392 participations were captured. The application was carried out in the months of February and March 2024. 24% of the participants were men and 76% women, the average age was 33 years and the education was bachelor's degree.

Instrument

The instrument included variables such as: 1) sex, 2) age, 3) education; as well as two open questions: 1) why do you think there are fewer women leaders than men and 2) what strategies could employers implement to encourage women to occupy leadership positions? The distribution strategy of the instruments was carried out through social media groups such as Facebook and WhatsApp.

Data processing and analysis

The responses were processed using Atlas ti, which allowed the integration of comments from women and men, thereby enabling the content of each category to be analysed.

Results

Comments were collected from women in response to the question: “Why do you think there are fewer women leaders than men?” Opinions were analysed considering the historical and cultural background surrounding female leadership. Participants in the study stated that historically, women have had less time to make their way into the labour market and, therefore, into leadership positions, as in the past they were mostly considered housewives. The lack of opportunities for them, which differ from those available to men, was acknowledged.

It was also observed that, although social changes have occurred, women continue to be under the shadow of the patriarchal system, where men are perceived to be better prepared and are the ones who can make important decisions, while women continue to be underestimated in intellectual terms, with more value being placed on their physical appearance than on their intelligence. In addition, the belief that women are not capable of leading persists, which adds more barriers to their access to leadership positions.

On the other hand, women are often pigeonholed as people who are not very capable of leading teams. Even when some of them manage to lead, they are perceived as imposing, inflexible and insufferable. This perception is added to the glass ceilings and patriarchal systems that grant control to men, generating the idea that the productivity of the organization could be affected by the hormonal changes of women.

As for men, they expressed that there are more men than women in leadership roles due to the mentality of society, which demands more from women to reach a leadership position. They also pointed out that this phenomenon is the result of machismo, gender inequality, the patriarchal model, and the idiosyncrasy of the country, stating that there is still a preference for the male gender. In addition, they mentioned that, from home, women are educated to be submissive and men to be good providers. Gender roles that perpetuate oppression add to this, along with the fact that women play a double role in society, as workers and mothers. This situation underlines the lack of adequate conditions for women to exercise their motherhood adequately, which blocks or delays their access to leadership

positions. The cultural lag of companies and the erroneous ideas that leadership is only for men, who would be the only ones qualified to exercise it, were also highlighted (see table 1).

Table 1. Beliefs about why there are fewer women than men leaders

Topic/Category	Content analysis
Historical and cultural background	Historically, women have been less likely to make their way into the labour market and leadership positions, as they were previously considered housewives.
Lack of opportunities	It is recognized that the opportunities available to women are limited and differ significantly from those available to men.
Patriarchal system	They continue to live under the shadow of the patriarchal system, where men are considered to be more prepared and are the ones who can make important decisions.
Social perception	Women are often pigeonholed as people who are not capable of leading a work team, and when some do manage to lead, they are considered imposing, inflexible and insufferable.
Glass ceiling	Glass ceilings reinforce the belief that organizational productivity can be affected by factors such as hormonal changes in women, which perpetuates their exclusion from leadership roles.
Education and gender roles	At home, women are educated to be submissive and men to be good providers.
Double Role: Work and Motherhood	Women play a double role in society, that is, they become workers and mothers. The lack of conditions to adequately exercise their motherhood blocks or delays their path to leadership positions.

Fountain:-Prepared by the author based on information provided by the Atlas ti software.

Discrimination and prejudice

Women believe that there are fewer female leaders than male leaders because their work is rarely recognised and organisations tend to offer more job opportunities to men. Furthermore, there is a persistent belief that women are less capable, which shows that prejudices against them are still in force, as their ability is questioned due to the perception that they act based on their emotions. There is also a resistance to accepting women in leadership roles and valuing their abilities, which often prevents them from performing fully, undervaluing their work and making them believe that they are inferior. It is also recognised

that opportunities for women are fewer in male-dominated sectors, largely due to the lack of support for them to develop their professional careers. This limits their potential, and leaders often minimise or ignore their contributions. This situation is exacerbated by the inequalities, stereotypes and discrimination they face.

Men, on the other hand, expressed that there are more male leaders because women are underestimated in different aspects and in various areas of work, in addition to facing a lack of support and being undervalued. It was also observed that, depending on the business sector, the image of a male leader is preferred over a female one, and the practice of inheriting high-level positions to men is maintained. In addition, it was stated that women are not considered as competitive and their skills are minimized, partly due to sexist customs and a lack of values (see table 2).

Table 2. Discrimination and prejudice

Topic/Category	Comments
Lack of credit and recognition	They are hardly given any credit for their work. Their work is underestimated, making them believe that they are less capable.
Preference for men at work	Organizations prefer to open up work spaces to men. There are fewer opportunities for women in male-dominated sectors.
Prejudices and underestimation	They are seen as less capable because they involve their emotions. There is resistance to accepting that there are women leaders and praising their abilities.
Lack of support	Women lack support to grow their careers. Leaders minimize and fail to recognize women's work.
Inequalities and discrimination	In addition to the inequalities, stereotypes and discrimination that exist towards them.

Source: Prepared by the authors based on information provided by the Atlas ti software.

Gender roles and responsibilities

In relation to this category, women expressed that there are more men in leadership roles due to responsibilities related to caring for children and the elderly, tasks that generally fall on them. This unpaid work limits their opportunities to aspire to leadership positions in organizations or institutions. The workloads they take on reduce the time available to develop their professional careers. In addition, it is recognized that the education they receive



frequently confines them to the home, and that at home and in other areas, women receive little support, especially when they have professional aspirations. It was also highlighted that those who do not receive help with household chores are often overburdened, which leaves them little energy to lead projects at work, evidencing the inequity in the distribution of responsibilities between men and women. The stereotypes imposed by society, which generate fears in men of being displaced by women, perpetuate this situation, a product of machismo that gives priority to men over women. Leadership was found to require time and effort, and when women decide to become mothers, they are faced with the difficult choice between devoting more time to work or to their children, while men are not judged for their lack of presence in parenting, unlike women, who are singled out for it. This is exacerbated by structural violence and patriarchal ideas that hold that men should be the bosses in organizations.

Men, on the other hand, expressed that there are fewer women leaders due to gender roles and responsibilities, which lead them to develop multiple activities that absorb them and impose various obstacles on them to exercise leadership. In addition, there is a belief that women do not have the necessary skills to lead a work team or to handle pressure in stressful situations. They also pointed out that the presence of women in masculinized sectors is not equitable, which varies according to the sector in which they work. It is stated that women bear high work and domestic loads, which limits their professional and academic development (see table 3).

Table 3. Gender roles and responsibilities

Topic/Category	Comments
Caregiving responsibilities	Responsibilities related to caring for children or the elderly, limiting their leadership opportunities.
Workload	Unpaid work limits the time they can devote to developing their professional career.
Education and support	The education that women receive forces them to stay within the home, in addition to the lack of support at home and other areas for their aspirations.
Distribution of tasks	Women are not supported with household chores, leaving them with little energy to lead projects at work, showing the inequity in the distribution of domestic work.
Stereotypes and machismo	Stereotypes imposed by society provoke fears in men of being displaced by women, influenced by machismo.
Structural violence	Structural violence and patriarchal ideas that prioritize men as bosses in organizations.
Gender roles	Gender roles lead women to develop multiple activities that create obstacles for them to be leaders.
Employment sector	The presence of women in masculinized sectors is not equitable, which depends on the sector in which they operate.
Loading activities	Women maintain high workloads, causing little professional and academic development.

Source: Prepared by the authors based on information provided by the Atlas ti software.

Opportunities and growth

Women said they are not given the opportunity to demonstrate their leadership skills, partly due to the belief that men are more capable. In addition, many women do not feel confident enough and therefore are hesitant to apply for these roles, as their work is less valued.

Men, for their part, acknowledged that there are more opportunities for women to obtain leadership positions today; however, they believe that female leadership needs to be further encouraged in organizations and that women must dare to take on that role. They also mentioned that leadership positions should be assigned based on ability, not gender, although they noted that women often have difficulty working under pressure, as they get stressed more easily and find it difficult to handle high-tension situations.

It was also observed that men believe that there are fewer women in leadership roles depending on the industry, but they attribute this situation mainly to the sexist culture. They also highlighted the existence of labour inequality and gender discrimination in the business sector, which prevents the full recognition of women's abilities and knowledge, highlighting the disparity in the opportunities offered to them. In addition, they stressed that resistance to change on the part of organisations contributes to this situation (see table 4).

Table 4. Opportunities and growth

Topic/Category	Comments
Leadership opportunities	They are not given the opportunity to demonstrate their leadership skills.
Beliefs about ability	It is believed that men have greater capacity.
Self-esteem and self-perception	Women do not feel capable and for this reason they do not dare to propose themselves.
Work evaluation	Their work is less valued.
Current possibilities	There are more opportunities for women to obtain leadership positions today.
Fostering leadership	There is a need to promote more leadership in organizations and for women to dare to take on that role.
Ability vs. gender	Leadership positions should be awarded based on ability, not gender.
Working under pressure	Women find it difficult to work under pressure, they get stressed more quickly and do not know how to respond to stressful situations.
It depends on the industry	There are fewer women leaders because it depends on the industry.
Machista culture	It's because of the macho culture.
Inequality and discrimination	Inequality at work and gender discrimination in the business sector, preventing women's skills and knowledge from being seen.
Resistance to change	There is resistance to change on the part of organizations.

Source: Prepared by the authors based on information provided by the Atlas ti software.

Strategies employers could implement to encourage women into leadership positions

Women shared comments on the category of training and professional development. They stated that employers should maintain constant training and growth, as well as involve women in decision-making. They also suggested identifying women with managerial skills to assign them activities of greater responsibility, such as important projects that encourage their participation and allow them to present the results. They also considered it important to create safe spaces for women and offer training on gender issues. Organizations could also create calls to attract female talent, implement specific development plans for women, and hold meetings where they can express ideas or propose innovative projects. Participants pointed out the need to offer professional development programs that include mentoring and the development of managerial skills, using case studies and practical situations where they can apply what they have learned and reinforce their knowledge when accessing high positions. The importance of trying to equalize the number of male and female leaders was also highlighted, providing equal opportunities to both.

It was also suggested that talks be scheduled on gender equality and female leadership, assertive communication, workshops on managing emotions and work roles. It is also essential to carry out unbiased evaluations and internal reviews to find out how members of the work teams feel. In addition, it was proposed that in organizational structures there be a mandatory percentage of women in decision-making positions, along with monitoring compliance with protocols against gender violence and sexual harassment. Courses on gender stereotypes and constructs, and their impact on life in general, should not be forgotten.

Men identified strategies that they consider useful for organizations to encourage women to occupy leadership positions. Regarding training and professional development, they believed that there should be better control of growth opportunities, promoting equality and job equity through fair evaluations that measure performance and allow for the promotion of the most qualified personnel. They also suggested that companies invest in mentoring programs and integrate women into projects and activities that reinforce their leadership. They also mentioned that the best strategy would be to allow women to learn through experience and overcoming challenges, but with training programs that teach them to express clear ideas and establish limits with male employees, since respect is earned (see table 5).

Table 5. Strategies that employers could implement to encourage women to occupy leadership positions

Topic/Category	Comments
Training and professional development	Maintain ongoing training and growth, including mentoring and managerial skills development, through the use of case studies and practical situations.
decision making	Take them into account when making decisions.
Skills Identification	Identify women with leadership skills to involve them in activities of greater responsibility and assign them important projects.
Safe spaces	Create safe spaces for women and conduct training on gender issues.
Calls for female talent	Develop calls for applications to attract female talent.
Development plans for women	Implement development plans for women and boards where they can express ideas or carry out projects and innovations.
Professional development programs	Offer specific professional development programs for women.
Gender equality	Try to equalize the number of male and female leaders, giving equal opportunities to both.
Communication and emotion management	Talks on gender equality, female leadership, assertive communication, emotion management workshops and job roles.
Unbiased evaluations	Unbiased evaluations and internal reviews to recognize how they feel about their peers.
Mandatory percentage of women	Include a mandatory percentage of women in management areas where decisions are made.
Gender violence and sexual harassment protocols	Monitor compliance with gender-based violence and sexual harassment protocols.
Gender stereotypes and constructs	Conduct courses on gender stereotypes and constructs and their impact on life in general.

Source: Prepared by the authors based on information provided by the Atlas ti software.

Women and cultural change and awareness

Women say that sexist attitudes need to be abandoned in order to achieve true equality of opportunity for all, encouraging competition in an equitable manner from the lowest positions. In addition, they consider it positive to be invited to participate in projects without their physical appearance being a determining factor. They also insist on the importance of job offers clearly expressing gender equality, without preferences for a specific sex. Likewise, it is crucial to trust women and provide them with security in decision-making, complemented by sorority courses for women, awareness programs for men, and education and training with a gender focus, promoting an equal labor system. It must be demanded that sexism has no place in the workplace and stereotypes must be eliminated, promoting a respectful work environment that offers the same opportunities and rewards to men and women. In addition, it is essential to raise awareness about female leadership, raise awareness about gender gaps and the existence of sexism, and maintain a zero tolerance policy against harassment and gender discrimination, guaranteeing a non-sexist and harassment-free work environment.

Men, for their part, expressed the need to assign tasks equitably, regardless of gender. They also suggested that the name of the person being evaluated be omitted in evaluation processes, to avoid bias in favor of men. In addition, they stressed the importance of promoting respect and appreciation for female leadership, creating spaces that are friendly to women, and eradicating machismo. They also pointed out the need to promote the professional development of women within organizations, through talks on gender issues that recognize women's capabilities. They also highlighted the importance of having a code of ethics, maintaining good communication, a positive attitude, and being vigilant about the glass ceilings that still exist for women (see table 6).

Table 6. Women and cultural change and awareness

Topic/Category	Comments
Equal opportunities	Stop being sexist, promoting equal opportunities from the lowest positions.
Participation in projects	Invite them to participate in projects without taking into account their physical appearance.
Job offers	Job offers that express either gender and not only men.
Trust and security	Trust women and give them confidence in decision-making.
Sorority and awareness courses	Offer sorority courses for women and awareness programmes for men, complemented by gender-sensitive education and training.
Elimination of machismo	Reject sexism in the workplace and eradicate stereotypes.
Promoting equality	Foster a respectful work environment that offers equal opportunities and rewards to men and women.
Respectful work environment	Raise awareness on the issue of female leadership.
Raising awareness about gender gaps	Raise awareness about gender gaps and the existence of machismo.
Zero tolerance for harassment	Zero tolerance for gender harassment and discrimination, guaranteeing a non-sexist and harassment-free work environment.
Equal assignment of tasks	Assign tasks equally regardless of gender.
Anonymous reviews	In evaluation processes, do not include the name of the person being evaluated to avoid bias.
Assessing female leadership	Promote respect and appreciation for female leadership.
Women-friendly spaces	Provide women-friendly spaces.
Development for women	Promote the professional development of women within organizations through talks on gender issues.
Code of ethics	Have a code of ethics.
Communication and positive attitude	Good communication and positive attitude.
Glass ceiling surveillance	Be vigilant against the glass ceilings that exist for women.

Source: Prepared by the authors based on information provided by the Atlas ti software.

Work-life balance and promoting women

Women pointed out that organizations should offer them more opportunities to access strategic positions, suggesting diversifying these roles by applying exams. They also stressed the importance of not underestimating their capabilities and of giving them the possibility of reconciling their work activities with raising their children. In addition, they mentioned that women who are heads of household are usually more committed to their work, so they recommended considering policies that take this reality into account. Likewise, the idea of implementing hybrid work systems and labor flexibility was raised. Women also asked that the processes of delegation of activities and projects be fair, and that equal pay with men be ensured. In addition, they emphasized the need to guarantee transparent and equitable selection processes for all candidates, warning that observed preferences or inequalities can damage the credibility of the organization.

Men, for their part, expressed that organizations should further encourage the development of women in areas of coordination and personnel control, and ensure that they receive support from their colleagues. They also recognized that many women do not opt for leadership positions due to the time these roles require, as much of their hours are dedicated to caring for their family. Men pointed out that it is important to encourage women to be confident and break stereotypes, in addition to having diversity and inclusion policies. However, they stressed the need to carry out objective assessments on issues of knowledge, skills, aptitudes, leadership and communication, in order to make appropriate decisions about the profiles required for leadership positions. They also supported the idea of incorporating work conditions adapted for women with young children, such as teleworking (see table 7).

Table 7. Work-life balance and promotion of women

Topic/Category	Comments
Opportunities at strategic levels	To give women greater opportunities to take up positions at strategic levels, they suggest diversifying these positions through examinations.
Do not underestimate capabilities	Do not underestimate their abilities and offer them the opportunity to carry out their child-rearing activities. Consider women who are heads of household.
Hybrid systems and labour flexibility	Consider adopting hybrid work modalities and flexible schedules.
Fair and equitable processes	Fair processes when delegating activities and projects.
Equal pay	Women should earn the same as men.
Transparent and fair selection	Ensure transparent and equitable selection processes for all participants.
Development in coordination and control	Promote the development of women in areas of personnel coordination and control.
Peer support	Encourage women to feel supported by their peers.
Work-family conciliation	Recognize that most women do not opt for leadership positions because it is time consuming and most of their hours are spent caring for their family.
Confidence and breaking stereotypes	Encouraging women to be confident and break stereotypes.
Diversity and inclusion policies	Have diversity and inclusion policies.
Objective evaluations	Objective assessments on knowledge, skills, aptitudes, leadership and communication to make an appropriate decision on leadership profiles.
Working conditions for mothers	Establish remote work options for women with young children, adapting working conditions to their needs.

Source: Prepared by the authors based on information provided by the Atlas ti software.

Discussion

This study revealed that women recognize the historical barriers in the labor market, which have relegated many to the role of housewives. In addition, patriarchy perpetuates the idea that men are better leaders, which underestimates the intellectual capacity of women. Inequality manifests itself in the lack of opportunities for women, maintaining a negative perception towards those who assume leadership positions, in addition to carrying the unpaid work associated with family responsibilities. On the other hand, men recognized that women are required to do more to reach leadership positions, and they attribute this situation to machismo, gender inequality, differentiated education at home and preference for men. Marshall *et al.* (2017) state that, although education has opened its doors to women, leadership positions are still mostly occupied by heterosexual white men. In addition, women experience greater stress due to the constant pressure to prove that they can be as directive as men, facing fears and doubts about their emotions, which are judged and questioned. These factors, along with persistent obstacles, are slowing down their progress. Mutabai *et al.* (2016) emphasize that patriarchal nations give greater power to men, which limits women's participation in many aspects of society and hinders their access to decision-making positions. Adongo *et al.* (2023) add that low expectations and negative attitudes towards women's managerial skills discourage them from taking leadership positions in male-dominated societies.

Discrimination and prejudice towards women in leadership positions were also identified as persisting. Women consider that their low presence in these roles is due to the preference for men in the workplace and the tendency to question their ability to lead due to the perception that they are too emotional. This lack of support and the minimisation of their work exacerbates inequalities and reinforces gender stereotypes. For their part, men recognise that women's work is underestimated and undervalued in various areas, with a general preference for the male figure in leadership, especially in certain business sectors. This reflects the persistence of sexist customs and a lack of values that minimise the skills and competitiveness of women in the workplace. Goyal Taylor *et al.* (2023) note that women continue to face limitations in working independently in leadership positions, as well as being subject to inappropriate and sexist comments. More worryingly, even when they reach managerial positions, they continue to face complex structural barriers, forcing them to develop coping strategies to avoid becoming demoralized. Taylor *et al.* (2022) state that women experience more emotions of contempt and greater tension at work compared to men,

and that the effects of these emotions vary depending on the emotional demands of the position and the proportion of women in the organization. Post *et al.* (2019) found that in crisis situations, women's work is valued only when their actions are predictable; otherwise, men are preferred, leaving women on what is known as "glass cliffs."

Furthermore, women were found to point to the prevalence of men in leadership positions due to the disproportionate caregiving responsibilities that fall on them, restricting their time and energy to develop work activities. Lack of support at home and raising children also negatively affects their professional development. Men, for their part, acknowledge that women face additional burdens from housework, but also believe that there are fewer female leaders because they consider women to lack skills to manage teams and handle stress. Fisk and Overton (2019) claim that many women do not pursue leadership positions because female leaders are punished more harshly than men, which diminishes their ambitions. Torres *et al.* (2024) and Almond (2025) *et al.* (2023) found that motherhood negatively impacts women's career advancement, limiting their access to leadership positions and highlighting the motherhood penalty. This reinforces the mistaken belief that mothers are less competitive and committed, which delays their potential promotions and restricts their career options. Latura and Weeks (2023) argue that female leadership is not only measured by the number of women in decision-making positions, but also by public policies that allow women to advance in their careers, especially when they have children.

Regarding the strategies that companies could implement to encourage women to occupy leadership positions, women highlight the importance of maintaining a constant focus on training and professional development, as well as including them in decision-making. They also suggest identifying and developing female talent with leadership skills, creating safe spaces for women, offering mentoring programs and guaranteeing equal opportunities. They also advocate that women be evaluated based on their knowledge and not their physical appearance, and demand job offers that do not discriminate based on gender. In addition, they request awareness and education programs on gender issues, the elimination of stereotypes and sanctions against harassment and sexual harassment. Men, for their part, consider it necessary to promote equality and labor equity in growth opportunities, as well as foster respect in labor relations with female staff. They also suggest that evaluation processes be anonymous to avoid bias, and propose creating inclusive spaces free of machismo. They also insist on the importance of having codes of ethics and the need to monitor the glass ceilings that women still face. These results coincide with what Zhang (2024) states, who states that,

in order to empower women, organizations must provide continuous training and development, while society must promote gender equality education and break stereotypes. Nater *et al.* (2023) suggest that when women leaders are selected on merit rather than quotas, they spark interest from other women aspiring to leadership positions, so quotas should undergo additional competency assessments so they can serve as inspiring role models.

Conclusions

This paper recognizes the existence of complex gender barriers that hinder female participation in leadership positions, such as glass ceilings, patriarchal systems, and deeply rooted gender stereotypes in society. It concludes that it is necessary to promote leadership education with a gender perspective to empower women, recognizing the historical circumstances that have relegated them to unpaid work. Likewise, it proposes the implementation of workshops in schools focused on female leadership, where they can develop skills in areas such as negotiation, communication, teamwork, planning and supervision of large-scale projects, in addition to strengthening their self-esteem to face both personal and work challenges.

Ultimately, to make significant progress on gender equality in leadership, it is essential to adopt an interdisciplinary approach that combines education, training, emotional support and structural changes in organizations. This will help overcome gender barriers and generate a more inclusive and equitable future for women in leadership roles. It is also essential that organizations have the will to review their policies to identify and eliminate gender biases present in promotion and professional development processes.

Future lines of research

It would be important to investigate how the presence of women affects decision-making, performance, and organizational culture. In addition, it is crucial to investigate the barriers they face on their way to leadership positions and the variables that support their advancement in strategic positions within organizations. It is also essential to identify how education influences, positively or negatively, the development of leadership skills in female students. Studying the challenges faced by women in leadership roles in masculinized industries is equally necessary. Likewise, it is important to investigate compensation policies in organizations and the influence of gender stereotypes on the evaluations of women who occupy leadership positions.



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