

# Women and leadership: obstacles and gender expectations in managerial positions

LYGIA GONÇALVES COSTA HRYNIEWICZ<sup>1</sup>  
MARIA AMORIM VIANNA<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> FUNDAÇÃO GETULIO VARGAS (FGV EBAPE) / ESCOLA BRASILEIRA DE ADMINISTRAÇÃO PÚBLICA E DE EMPRESAS, RIO DE JANEIRO - RJ, BRAZIL

<sup>2</sup> NBCUNIVERSAL, LONDRES, UNITED KINGDOM

## Abstract

The representation of women in senior management positions has increased over the years, but the obstacles still remain. This study aims to understand how Brazilian women see themselves as leaders and what the main challenges are and how to overcome them to achieve equality not only in the workplace but also at home. To meet the objective of the research, we opted for a field research methodology. We selected 15 women to interview, which worked at public and private organizations as leader, in Rio de Janeiro, between years 2014 and 2016. The results showed that women have a more androgynous notion of leadership than what was suggested by the literature and that they see themselves as worthy of this role despite suffering several cases of prejudice in their careers.

**Keywords:** Gender expectations. Leadership. Women. Prejudice.

## *Mulheres em posição de liderança: obstáculos e expectativas de gênero em cargos gerenciais*

### Resumo

A representatividade da mulher em altos cargos vem aumentando ao longo dos anos, mas as dificuldades ainda persistem. O objetivo deste artigo é identificar os obstáculos que se apresentam ao longo da carreira da mulher brasileira e entender como ela se reconhece na posição de líder, quais são seus principais desafios e como ela pode superá-los para atingir a igualdade – não apenas no trabalho, mas também no lar. Trata-se de uma pesquisa de campo. Selecionamos, por meio de rede social própria, 15 mulheres que atuavam como líderes em organizações públicas e privadas no Rio de Janeiro, entre 2014 e 2016. Os resultados mostraram que essas mulheres tinham uma noção mais andrógena de liderança do que a sugerida pela literatura e que elas se viam como merecedoras desse papel, apesar de sofrerem vários tipos de preconceito em suas trajetórias.

**Palavras-chave:** Expectativas de gênero. Liderança. Mulheres. Preconceito.

## *Mujeres en posición de liderazgo: obstáculos y expectativas de género en cargos gerenciales*

### Resumen

La representatividad de la mujer en altos cargos viene aumentando a lo largo de los años, pero los obstáculos aún persisten. El objetivo de esta investigación que es cómo la mujer brasileña se reconoce en la posición de líder y cuáles son sus principales desafíos, cómo superarlos para llegar a la igualdad no sólo en el trabajo, sino también, en casa. En la metodología se utilizó un trabajo de campo. Selecionamos, a través de una red social propia, 15 mujeres, que trabajaban en organizaciones públicas y privadas como líderes, en Río de Janeiro, entre los años 2014 y 2016. Los resultados mostraron que las mujeres tenían una noción más andrógena de liderazgo que la sugerida por la literatura y que ellas se veían como merecedoras de ese papel, a pesar de sufrir varios tipos de prejuicios en sus trayectorias.

**Palabras-clave:** Expectativas de género. Liderazgo. Mujeres. Prejuicio.

Invited article submitted on May 21, 2018 and accepted for publication on June 21, 2018.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1679-395174876>

## INTRODUCTION

---

Over the years, women have conquered important achievements in the workplace. However, historical gender inequalities, as far as representativity is concerned, still persist. This is seen, especially, in senior management and executive positions where women remain a minority such as chief executive officer (CEO), chief financial officer (CFO), chief operations officer (COO), and board of directors. According to McKinsey & Company (2015) in a study of 60 US corporations using data from 2012, despite the ongoing presence of women in top positions of large companies, they are still underrepresented at senior levels.

This reality is also true for Brazil: few women occupy the position of CEO, board director or second or third executive levels. Only 4.5% of the board directors of Brazilian companies are women – the average in emerging countries is 7.2% (GMI RATINGS, 2012). In addition, in 2016, Brazil ranked 85<sup>th</sup> in the gender inequality index (GII), comparing 159 countries, behind Bolivia (65<sup>th</sup>) and Nicaragua (50<sup>th</sup>), which improved their GII in the last 10 years (BBC BRASIL, 2016). The 2016 National Household Sample Survey (PNAD) showed that, in the employed population over 16 years of age, women spend 20.3 hours a week on household chores, while men spend only 10 hours – another factor that has a direct impact on women's careers.

Based on the labyrinth of leadership theory by Eagly and Carli (2007), this study sought to identify obstacles that occur throughout the career of Brazilian women, as well as understand what they consider to be good leadership in their professional and personal life. It is obvious that women's lack of self-confidence, reinforced by the characteristics that are attributed to men and women, can have a major influence on how women perceive themselves and are perceived by others in the workplace.

In addition, the incompatibility between behaviors considered more feminine, such as empathy and kindness, and behaviors associated with leaders, such as self-confidence and assertiveness, can lead to a distortion of expectations of a female leader. The mindset is that women should remain feminine and at the same time present behaviors attributed to traditional leadership, a perspective that may be the cause of prejudice in the workplace.

## LEADERSHIP AND GENDER

---

According to Adair (2003), management can be defined as the choice of what should be done and the its efficiently execution. The traditional idea of an efficient leader is a charismatic, selfish, and strong-willed person but that goes against the behavior observed in some current leaders who demonstrate humility, discipline, concentration, good communication, are not ego centered, and have a discreet personality (WILLIAMS, 2005). According to Goleman (1998, p. 94), "effective leaders are all alike in one crucial way: they all have a high degree of what has come to be known as emotional intelligence."

Eagly (2007, p. 2) defines leadership styles as a "relatively consistent patterns of social interaction that typify leaders as individuals. Leadership styles are not fixed behaviors, but encompass a range of behaviors that have a particular meaning". This does not mean that people maintain the type of behavior associated with their leadership characteristics in any situation. In the case of a crisis, for example, a participative leader can be more decisive and delegate less if more rapid action is needed.

Researchers of situational theory of leadership argue that the leadership style used depends on the context in which the leader finds themselves. Local characteristics, such as values, organizational culture and the nature of the task, can dictate the most appropriate form of action (EAGLY, 2007). According to Eagly (2007), however, regardless of the situation, leadership is historically defined in masculine terms. Shein, Mueller, Lituchy et al. (1996) corroborate this point of view with their research "think manager – think male", which analyzed responses of administration students in 5 countries (USA, UK, Germany, China and Japan). Schein, Mueller, Lituchy et al. (1996) concluded that, despite the differences among the 5 countries analyzed, the point of view that – among administration students – women are less likely to have leadership characteristics than men, is global (in the US, women saw attitudes of managers as more androgynous and not more masculine or feminine). Considering

these students will become managers and the stereotypes they believe in will shape their decision making, women have indeed to overcome many barriers to advance their careers (SCHEIN, MUELLER, LITUCHY et al., 1996). Schein (2007), in updating her research, observed results similar to the previous one conducted in the 5 countries, showing that, despite all legal, social and organizational changes, male managers were still associated with successful management.

Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt and Engen (2003) compared the leadership styles of women and men: transformational, transactional, and *laissez-faire*. Box 1 presents the definitions of the transformational, transactional and *laissez-faire* leadership styles described in the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X), proposed by Avolio and Bass (2002) and adapted by Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt and Engen (2003). The MLQ-5X measures the three leadership styles and has been used in numerous studies.

**Box 1**

**MLQ-5X**

Scales with subscales	Description of leadership style
<b>Transformational</b>	
Idealized influence (attribute)	Demonstrates qualities that motivate respect and pride by association with him or her.
Idealized influence (behavior)	Communicates values, goals and importance of the organization's mission.
Inspiring motivation	Shows optimism and enthusiasm for goals and the future.
Intellectual stimulation	Examines new perspectives for solving problems and completing tasks.
Individual focus	Focuses on the development of team members and meets their individual needs.
<b>Transactional</b>	
Contingent Reward	Satisfactorily rewards team members performances and works through their mistakes.
Exception management (active)	Works through team member errors and inability to reach goals.
Exception management (passive)	Waits until the problem becomes severe before intervening.
<i>Laissez-faire</i>	Often absent and lack of engagement at critical moments.

Source: Adapted from Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt and Engen (2003).

Box 1 shows that the transformational leadership style and the contingent reward component of the transactional style have a positive correlation with what can be considered as good leadership. On the other hand, transactional exception management and *laissez-faire* have negative correlation. The outcomes for women were better than those for men in all transformational components, except for idealized influence (behavior). The two less effective leadership styles cannot be considered as a determinant characteristic of men or women, however these styles can be observed more often in men. This proves that women are able to lead as well as – or better than – men in contemporary organizations (EAGLY, JOHANNESSEN-SCHMIDT and ENGEN, 2003).

One explanation for more women having better leadership styles may be because men have more access to leadership positions, which means that women have to be more skilled than men to achieve the same positions (EAGLY, JOHANNESSEN-SCHMIDT and ENGEN, 2003; EAGLY, 2007). Another explanation offered by Eagly (2007) is that women search for a style that is not, particularly, masculine or feminine. As the transformational style is more androgynous, it can be adopted by women in search of a neutral style avoiding the prejudice of being incompatible with the traditional idea of a kind woman and of an agentic leader.

## METHODOLOGY

---

This qualitative study was based on field research conducted in different public and private organizations in Rio de Janeiro between 2014 and 2016. Interviews were conducted with 15 women in leadership positions to obtain a detailed understanding of the challenges faced by them throughout their careers. According to Martinho Rodrigues (2007), structured interviews direct the conversation towards the research objective, obtaining shorter and more understandable answers.

The ages of the interviewees varied from 32 to 70 years; 9 of the 15 interviewees were married and 8 had children; 2 were single and 3 were divorced. To maintain confidentiality, the true names of the respondents were not disclosed. The sample was selected in accordance with the following criteria: reachable female professionals who hold or previously held a leadership position in their professional career, residing and working in Rio de Janeiro.

From the material collected during the interviews, the interpretation was based on the five barriers identified by Eagly and Carli (2007) in their study on the labyrinth of leadership: a) Vestiges of prejudice; b) Resistance to women's leadership; c) Issues of leadership style; d) Demands of family life; and e) Underinvestment in social capital. Three additional barriers were added to the original barriers proposed by Eagly and Carli (2007): i) Motherhood; ii) Personal Appearance; and (iii) Division of Childhood Tasks. Specific issues that did not correspond to any barriers created by Eagly and Carli (2007) were added as new obstacles, which are: question of option; women without children suffer less prejudice; woman must be better than men to be boss; lack of explicit ambition; attribute their success to external factors; and lack of confidence in affirmative actions.

## RESULTS

---

The initial interpretation was divided according to the barriers encountered by women throughout their careers described by Eagly and Carli (2007) in their work on the labyrinth of leadership, shown below.

### Vestiges of prejudice

Men still benefit from higher wages and faster career advancement than women (EAGLY and CARLI, 2007). Respondents recognized the fact that women earned less than men, but only one of them knew of any real case in which this had happened, which indicates women's lack of consciousness of their disadvantages:

*There is a guy who is less qualified, with a job easier than the one of another [woman] technical staff, and they earn the same. [...] That is because he was able to talk to the boss and got it. (Renata)*

*It is not because he is a man that he will earn more, he has a status, and because of that [the stauts] he earns more. (Flavia)*

As for the issue of men getting faster promotions, most respondents said they were not aware of any disadvantages. One of the only interviewees to acknowledge having had clear experiences of prejudice, for working in an extremely masculine area, was an engineer and head of department:

*I sometimes missed opportunities because when I was younger, being a woman interfered in the others' [work colleagues] point of view, who questioned whether a young woman could do those things. [...] and I was a graduated engineer, something that would never have happened to a man. (Deborah)*

In addition to the two vestiges of prejudice analyzed by Eagly and Carli (2007), the interviews demonstrated additional cases of prejudice. Some have been mentioned so often that new categories have been created for them: motherhood and appearance.

## Motherhood

Many of the respondents mentioned maternity leave as an issue, especially when it comes to their replacement at work. In this sense, a unique barrier has been created for woman, which would never occur for men in the same position:

*My team is very feminine, everyone is married, around 30 years old, so, a short time ago I opened a vacancy and I confess that I preferred a man, and soon I'll have another vacancy and I will prefer to select a man for that position. Maternity leave is an issue [...] (Helena)*

*Women take 4 to 6 months off. There is no miracle, someone will have to take responsibility. In a leadership position, time availability is different for a man and a woman, the woman will go some time without working. It's called discrimination, yes, but I understand. (Camila)*

The respondents felt that their situation was different from most women, they imagined themselves as an exception. When taking this posture, women may not realize they are inserted in a prejudiced environment.

## Personal appearance

Appearance was another topic that respondents mentioned as a motivator of prejudice. From comments about their hair or the way they are dressed, to requests for them to change.

*There have been moments I've said: I will leave my hair white [...] and at work someone told me: please go dye this white hair! (Flavia)*

*No one looks at men's appearance [...] Woman must always wear her make up even if she works like mad. (Gabriela)*

*A woman from the planning department was encouraged to lose weight. (Julia)*

Another aspect about women's appearance is that colleagues usually associate job promotions with the physical attributes of women and with love affairs with bosses, ignoring their performance. There was also an association that a beautiful woman is a dumb woman, who prefers to spend time dressing instead of studying or working.

Heilman (2001) cites the demerit of women as a serious problem. To attribute a woman's success to external factors makes her an exception, as if this could not have happened without special circumstances.

## Resistance to women's leadership

For Eagly and Carli (2007), behind discrimination against women are the mental associations made with women, men and leaders. Women are considered more communal, demonstrating characteristics such as empathy and kindness, while men are more agentic, showing confidence, aggressiveness and autonomy (EAGLY, 2007; HEILMAN, 2001). The interviewees confirmed such stereotypes. When asked about the characteristics most observed in women and men leaders, women leaders were given the main attributes of determination, dedication and communication. As for the men leaders, attributes such as ambition, strength and self-confidence appear as their main characteristics. Thus, women were considered more communal and men more agentic, as the literature suggests. In addition, empathy, good looks and optimism were characteristics more related to women than to men, although they were not among the most cited. Innovation, too, though not a defining feature of men leaders, was more associated with men than women.

Dedication and attention to work are characteristics expected of women. Therefore, attentive behavior on the part of a man is remarkable, while a woman with the same behavior is not. Men get away with being unhelpful, while women do not (EAGLY and CARLI, 2007).

Worrying less about the consequences of your attitudes can be considered risky. Hoyenga and Hoyenga (1993) argue that men have a higher risk preference than women, which may explain men's more abrupt behavior. The issue of self-confidence,

which is also largely associated with men, is important. According to Bennett (1997), men overestimate their abilities, while women tend to underestimate theirs. This may explain the riskier conduct of men and safer conduct of women. It can also give men greater confidence in their decisions, making them more practical and objective, something that was noted by the interviewees.

*Men are more practical and afterwards discuss football, women are always thinking, talking about relationships. (Gabriela)*

*Certainly, I find men more objective, less emotional, easier to deal with because the rivalry between women is on another level. (Julia)*

*I think there is less concern with the collective than with personal things. (Maria)*

The difficulty for women to lead is a reality, there is constant questioning, testing and prejudice. For a woman, managing men, especially those older than herself, can be challenging. It is not yet common, and people are not accustomed to such relationships. For this reason, when people are faced with such a situation, they may act strangely and not be so receptive or respectful.

*When I became a boss, I had to face many people who did not like it [...] Because I started to lead much older people and because I was a woman in a male universe. (Deborah)*

As the traditional image of a leader is strongly associated with the male gender (EAGLY, 2007), they are often considered natural leaders. There are also more men in top corporate positions than women, which makes them the standard, while women will always be *the other*. Being the *other*, or a *token*, makes the woman stand out, all her actions are scrutinized and analyzed much more frequently, increasing the pressure she bears at work (OAKLEY, 2000).

*I think men are more accepted as leaders than women. (Mariana)*

*There is an inherent perception that women would not bear some jobs' responsibilities [...] things happen very naturally, and I think the pressure on women and their requirements is very intense. (Flavia)*

*I never thought I wanted to be a team manager, things just happened and I think at some point I want to take the next step, but not now. (Giulia)*

Pressure is understood here as the fact that women have to endure prejudiced comments in the workplace. These comments range from harassment to personal insults - often associated with stereotypes and motherhood.

Many women reported to having suffered harassment. Such comments are often treated as "compliments" by both men and women who cannot see the prejudice in a comment about the appearance of a woman in the middle of a business meeting:

*My first leadership position was coordinating a factory [...] In three years, I was coordinating people that had me as an intern in the area, so it was not an easy experience and I suffered a lot [...] Not because I am a woman, but because I was very young [...] one of the prejudices I suffered was to hear that my promotion was due to my marriage and not to my ability. (Ana)*

In relation to personal insults, an example is to call the woman "hysterical" when she has to speak louder or be more assertive, something that would not happen to a man. Another interviewee, Flavia, draws attention to the fact that the comments are usually personal insults little related to the woman's ability. Heilman (2001) confirms that it is more difficult to distort a person's concrete achievements than to discredit personality judgments, which is what usually occurs:

*No one questions the working power of the women who got there. What I hear is: She is a cow! These are minor personal insults when you are angry. Because those who get there, have worked a lot. (Flavia)*



Some comments demonstrate a clearer prejudiced nature, when they are associated with the idea that the woman is weaker, more fragile, or not good enough. This type of comment is more easily perceived by people and impacts more, although not everyone feels offended or harmed, so many prefer not to intervene. This behavior generates a normalization of prejudice, making it more and more widespread as harmless play and not as aggressive and insulting.

## Issues of leadership style

The traditional view of a leader is usually more associated with male behavior (EAGLY, 2007). The interviewees, however, provided a different view when asked about their ideal behavior for leaders. For them, the key characteristics of a good leader were character, determination, self-confidence, and communication. A view that includes a more gender-neutral characteristic such as *character*, a typically masculine characteristic, *self-confidence*, a more feminine, *communication*, and one associated with both genders, *determination* – although it has been more associated with women. This demonstrates a much more integrated view of leadership by women, who are evolving from the all-male leadership concept to a mix of male and female behaviors that can form a better leader.

Many of the respondents, however, said they did not feel that men and women had different leadership characteristics:

*It depends on the man and depends on the woman. It is a matter of the person, not of gender. (Carla)*

*I believe there are none [different characteristics of being a man or women leader]. I think the woman is always having to prove a lot more things than the man, but there is not much difference, no. (Deborah)*

These same interviewees contradicted themselves when they marked the four characteristics most observed in men and women leaders. They attributed characteristics such as optimism, dedication, empathy and communication to women and strength, ambition and self-confidence to men, showing a clear difference. It is important to consider that there is a difference between what a person says and what they intimately believe to be true. The tendency is to adopt stereotypes that perpetuate the idea that women are more communal and men more agentic, even if one believes that there is no difference in practice.

According to Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and Engen (2003), women were more closely associated with the transformational styles of leadership, which are related to efficient leadership, and not by chance, are the most androgynous. In this research, it is not possible to define the leadership style of any of the women interviewed. However, several aspects related to these styles were mentioned during the study, for example, the importance and the attempt to motivate the team, communicate values and objectives clearly, try to promote optimism and enthusiasm and the development of team members:

*I challenge myself a lot to be generous [...]. Leading a team demand results without losing generosity, I train leaders and managers under my responsibility to be more generous. (Flavia)*

*To get everyone on the same line, believing in the same vision. I speak more and more to each one individually to make it clear to everyone what the vision is and to align expectations [...]. (Camila)*

Other interviewees believed that they had to change their way of leading and sometimes to adapt to the masculine style. Until society accepts more women as leaders with new leadership styles, they will have to adapt to the traditional one and perhaps be more aggressive than would normally be considered in good leaders. Even if this has a negative impact on the perception of their personality.

## Demands of family life

According to Eagly and Carli (2007), demands of family life is the barrier most women face at some point in their career. Women continue to spend a lot more hours a week than men on household chores and looking after their children. This difference was clear in the interviews with married women, especially those who had children, when asked how the household chores

are shared in their house. Among married women with children, only one said the chores and child care were shared equally with her husband. However, all the married respondents had a housekeeper, which helped in the household chores and, often, with looking after the children. Women, however, still exercised much of the control, for example, on weekends, and was usually the person in the household who communicated with the housekeeper.

One thing that many of the interviewees mentioned is that the pressure to care for children is on the mother. One of them even mentioned that when she is travelling, her husband takes on this responsibility and actually expressed feeling this pressure:

*The child gets sick, call the mum. I think we are more impacted by this [having children]. (Julia)*

*I think this is going to be a very difficult thing to be equal. The woman has this, this connection, a different protection. Although I have a husband who participates. Funny that when I travel, I go to the MBA course, and my husband is alone, he feels this pressure. (Camila)*

What these women have reported is that their husbands are more interested in themselves, that they assume the household chores are women's responsibility, even if women have responsibilities outside the home. The modern woman not only has to support the family financially, as the man did - and does - but she must also be responsible for all the household chores. She has a double - and often even triple - work load and men simply do not realize, either from lack of attention or for convenience:

*I do not see my husband doing this [...] read a book with my daughter before going to school, I have to give up what I had to do for me, I don't go to the gym so I stay with her. It would not cross his mind. (Helena)*

*He has a flexible schedule, although he does nothing [to help with the children], so it is good because he is at home but he does not do any of the tasks at all. (Flavia)*

*In the men's mind, household chores are for women. (Flavia)*

According to the married interviewees, it is not only the men who believe that it is the woman's job to take care of the children and the house, society also expects this from women. When women need to return later from work, the family notices more, children and husbands complain. As it is more common for men to work loner hours, their behavior is already expected, but when it is a woman, the choice to work is thought unusual.

Because of these expectations, women end up having to make more choices for the family than men. When they have small children, they try to reduce their workload, do not participate in after work courses so they can spend more time at home, and even give up professional opportunities. If the responsibilities around the house were more balanced, men and women could share the care of their children, giving them the opportunity to pursue their careers in the best possible way, while still providing a stable environment for their children.

*When I had children I made a point of having a light professional activity to have more time to be with them. So this interfered with my career (Mariana)*

*I'd give up certain jobs if they required me to travel a lot. Before I had a child, I worked in a different way. The difference is having and not having a child, for the man, the woman ends up doing everything upfront. (Camila)*

*I did not participate in any more courses because of my children, because of the schedule, so as not to get home late. (Clara)*

We note that these women are managers, consultants, heads of departments, and directors. They have time-consuming jobs and very important positions within the hierarchy of their companies; even so, they still have to take care of household and family matters. Some interviewees reported that they only have time alone when they are at the gym, that is, 2 hours a week. Mothers in leadership positions were considered multitasking, since they do not experience work and family as two separate lives (HALPERN and CHEUNG, 2010).



## Childhood experiences on sharing household chores

One issue that influences how adults behave is how their parents behaved during their childhood. Seeing the mother at work, for example, shows the daughter – and the son – that women can work and have a family, that the two complement each other and are not mutually exclusive. On the other hand, a sexist education presents to the child another reality and shapes their future life:

*I always wanted to work because I always saw my mother working. (Clara)*

*[...] the mental model I have is of my mother doing everything, being responsible for everything. And aside from that, I also think that it is my husband's model, because although his mother is a person who works [...] I think the education he had, is very sexist, in the sense of not seeing the need to share [household chores and child care], you know [...] he is not available for that [...]. I already gave up, it's not his thing. (Helena)*

Other women, however, currently live the opposite of what they have experienced in their childhood, reporting that they wanted something different for themselves. A man who is used of having everything done for him, especially by his mother, can find it difficult to change and become responsible for more tasks than he has been used to. Perhaps that's why many men tend to reproduce this experience in their relationships and cannot or will not change:

*It is the opposite for me. My mother always motivated me to be independent. Seeing women being dependent led to not wanting that for myself. (Deborah)*

*As much as the two of them lived very well together, I could feel a financial dependence. And I thought, "I do not want that for myself, I want to earn my own money". (Priscila)*

Most of the interviewees had a mother devoted to the home and children, so perhaps many of the participants identified the role of women with household responsibilities. However, many mothers talked to their daughters about the importance of being independent, which may have helped them to perceive work not only as positive but as necessary – although they also keep up with the household chores.

## Underinvestment in social capital

According to Eagly and Carli (2007), the most destructive result of women's double work load, is the little time left for socializing with peers and networking. To promote work and confirm status and competence is not a communal expected behavior for women, it is unusual. While men can exhibit their achievements; modesty is expected even from very successful women (EAGLY and CARLI, 2007).

Many women find it difficult to create a close relationship with their boss, who, at higher levels, is usually a man. In this sense, women end up further from job and salary promotions:

*You have to be political all the time, talking to the judge ... I do not like this social relationship. [...] I did not want [to be a boss] because of the responsibility, because I had to be political. (Gabriela)*

*I could not project myself in a position of leadership, first because I do not feel like talking to the bosses all the time. (Deborah)*

As men are not expected to be modest and can emphasize their talent without being criticized, they end up in advantage. In addition, they also have the opportunity to maintain close relationships with male bosses, to share interests, and are not blamed for having an inappropriate/romantic relationship with the boss - as is often thought of women.

Continuing the analysis, other barriers were highlighted in the research, which we identified as: the question of choice; women without children suffer less prejudice; women must be better than men to be a boss; lack of explicit ambition; attribute their success to external factors; and lack of confidence in affirmative actions.

## A matter of choice

The fact that there are few women in high leadership positions was attributed to their own choices. With the extra pressure a woman suffers at home, it is much harder to have a smooth promotion. Even if women choose to work, there will always be a man ahead of them who can easily take over the job, since women have many responsibilities in their personal lives and are less work-centered. On the other hand, much of what involves a promotion decision is not a visible action, but influenced unconsciously, which makes the prejudice and biases even more difficult to perceive and it is easier to confuse social conditioning with the woman's conscious choice:

*If you look at the number of men and women leaders, there are many more men than women, but I do not know if it is a choice. Sometimes a woman chooses to go to a specific leadership position just because she does not want to take on something she can not deliver. (Camila)*

*I do not know if it is a matter of quality of life or if women make this choice to be able to stay with their children [...] because men do not feel like this intrinsically. It is not necessarily prejudice, but choice. (Flavia)*

## Women without children suffer less prejudice

Respondents who did not have children felt that not having children allowed them to focus more on work and that they were not victims of prejudice to the same degree. It is not a coincidence that three of the women that did not have children held the highest positions among the interviewees: one is the HR director of a large media company who went through various boards of large companies; another is the head of department of planning and operations management of a large state-owned company, which makes her the second person in charge of planning in the city of Rio de Janeiro, behind only the director of the company; and the third is head of a bank's legal department, making her the highest ranking person in her department in Rio de Janeiro. We realize that a woman often needs to be unmarried and decide not to have children if she wants to reach some positions, decisions that are not demanded from a man that wants to achieve the same status. These decisions, however, should not be mandatory for women to achieve leader positions; they should not have to choose between work and family while men are not confronted with the same issue:

*I never stopped accepting a professional opportunity because it was in São Paulo. My husband knew I would never give up any opportunity because of him, it would not be fair to either of us. (Priscila)*

*He [the boss] understands that the woman has a child, but if problems start, he will fire her. I do not think of it [to have children] but I would certainly have problems with him. (Renata)*

## Women must be better than men to be a boss

Due to all the disadvantages of being a woman, to access the same opportunities as a man to be promoted, a woman needs to be way better than him. If she is not, she may not be considered for the position as the man has the advantage of having fewer responsibilities out of work, so to compensate for his personal burden, the woman has to be way better than the man she is competing with:

*A woman leader has to be smarter than the man leader, because being a man is already a kind of invitation to take a leadership role. (Mariana)*

*For all the difficulties she experiences, the woman, to become a boss, has to be excellent, acknowledged. It is not enough to be good, she has to be excellent. (Deborah)*

*I think the man works without thinking much about achievement, when a woman gets a leadership position it is because she has struggled a lot in life. (Flavia)*

## Lack of explicit ambition

Many women are still afraid to say they want certain positions, they fear they will fail and not manage. When you do not see people like you at the top it is harder to imagine yourself in that position, this is true for all minorities, women, LGBT, black people, and so on. As children, we are conditioned to think that there are certain jobs that we must do and it is difficult to change that even in adulthood. Perhaps that is why few women allow themselves to assume that they want a higher position than they currently have:

*I do not want to create expectations and suddenly get frustrated. (Helena)*

*Anything that comes to me I never say "no", I never say "I do not know", but It is not my goal. The higher your position, the less life you have. My director, he has the power, in compensation he arrives at 7 in the morning and we never know when he leaves. I do not want this for myself. (Deborah)*

Another major problem is the lack of confidence that many women have in their ability to take on new challenges. They do not consider themselves prepared for certain jobs and stop pursuing promotions, while men risk more and often overestimate their abilities (BENNETT, 1997) and get the job.

## Attributing success to external factors

Women tend to attribute their success to external factors such as luck, meeting the right people or being at the right place; men tend to credit their success to themselves (SANDBERG, 2013). In doing so, women end up reducing the merit of their job and achievement. They admit that they studied and invested a lot, but attribute their current position to luck. This also denotes the need for women to be modest in presenting themselves in order to avoid being considered arrogant (EAGLY and CARLI, 2007):

*It all happened by chance in my life. I studied a lot, I invested in it. I wanted to be considered one of the best. But it was luck, I never sought leadership. (Gabriela)*

*We cannot credit the things that happen in our lives only to our training, there were other people as trained as I am. I always value other people very much [...] there is the factor of being in the right place at the right time. [...] You have to have the knowledge to get access, but luck can make a difference. (Deborah)*

## Lack of confidence in affirmative actions

The vast majority of respondents were against affirmative action, specifically managerial quotas. The interviewees mentioned meritocracy as the only correct way to achieve an executive position and if the woman is "good enough" she will succeed. This presupposes that nowadays almost no woman is good enough, since the great majority of the executive positions of the companies where the interviewees work were held by men. Another explanation given by the respondents for the lack of women in higher positions was the woman's choice to have a job that did not consume so much of her time. The problem of meritocracy as the only method of achieving equality is that it ignores the cultural legacy of centuries of discrimination that disadvantaged some groups. Meritocracy is based on a speech of equality and fair opportunity, but it does not take into account that men and women depart from different places in our social system (JONSEN, MAZNEVSKI and SCHNEIDER, 2010) and have to follow different paths and obstacles throughout their careers:

*I am in favor of meritocracy, I do not like quotas. (Mariana)*

*There should not be an incentive policy for women, incentive has to be for everyone, encourage study, not quotas. (Renata)*

Some people think that opportunities have to be equal and quotas should not exist because there is, supposedly, no longer a differentiation between men and women in the workplace. Even if this were true, there are still differences when it comes to the roles at home, where women have a lot more responsibilities, which influences their performance at work.

Most interviewees mentioned that having benefits would be worse for women because they would become the target of more prejudices for theoretically having facilities to achieve promotions. Some believe that the more benefits women gain, the worse it will be, because it will become more expensive to hire a woman, and increase discrimination. A quota could also be interpreted as disqualification of women's work, implying that they would only get promotions through affirmative action:

*If we want equal rights, we have to be equal in everything, in responsibilities and duties. I'm against quota. You already have this issue of maternity leave, which is only for women. Having benefits would be worse for us, because if it will get even more expensive to hire women, we won't get the job anyway. (Helena)*

*I think it would be worse creating this difference [quotas]. (Flavia)*

Two of the interviewees were civil servants and they mentioned incentive programs adopted in their companies. In both cases, acceptance was difficult, but over the years, the policy was incorporated into managerial attitudes and its fulfillment did not require much effort, it became part of the organizational culture.

We observed that the higher the positions, the greater the discrimination suffered by women, from prejudice to the constant questioning of their position. Discrimination, however, starts from the moment women enter the workplace, –their journey is a labyrinth where they often suffer from obvious prejudice and other discriminations in a more veiled way. Many do not even realize the situation in which they find themselves and do not consider certain comments in their daily lives offensive, even when they are present. While women do not come forward and stand up to discrimination and the unequal division of household chores and child care, women at the top will remain exceptions and isolated cases of success.

## CONCLUSION

---

The objective of this study was to identify obstacles that occur throughout the career of Brazilian women and what they perceive as good leadership in their professional and personal life. What changes in the narrative collected from women, is the definition of a leader that gains more androgynous characteristics, mixing communal and agentic attributes such as communication and self-confidence. The women interviewed can see themselves as leaders and consider the contemporary leader as a more transformational person, characteristic that they attribute to themselves. Yet in the narrative observed from the interviews, men seem to be *natural leaders*. Schein, Mueller, Lituchy et al. (1996) confirmed the worldwide view that men are seen as natural leaders because they have more characteristics associated with leadership. Maybe that is why women are so tested, even by the team itself, in an attempt to prove that they should not be in the position of leader.

Women who seek to be leaders, in addition to having lower salaries and fewer promotions, often do not realize the prejudice around them. Because they do not always suffer from open prejudice, many find that it only exists with other people and do not understand certain malicious actions as prejudice.

Promoting diversity can bring diverse benefits to the organization as a whole (COX, 1994). However, most interviewees do not perceive women as part of a minority group in society and believe that affirmative action to ensure their inclusion in

leadership positions is not necessary, even those who say they do not consider the ratio between men and women fair in such positions. Many argue meritocracy, stating that women are as competent as men and able to attain leadership positions. The fallacy of meritocracy lies in the false equality of social opportunities for both genders (BARBOSA, 1999), that is, it is not clear that men and women face different obstacles in their professional career.

Finally, this article contributed with an initial view of the situation of women in leadership positions, encouraging further studies involving men and their narrative about leadership.

## REFERENCES

- ADAIR, J. **The concise Adair on leadership**. London: Thorogood, 2003.
- AVOLIO, B.; BASS, B. **Manual for the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Form 5X)**. Redwood City: Mindgarden, 2002.
- BARBOSA, L. **Igualdade e meritocracia**. 2. ed. Rio de Janeiro: FGV, 1999.
- BBC BRASIL. **Calculadora revela desigualdade de gênero no mundo**. 2016. Available at: <[http://www.bbc.com/portuguese/videos\\_e\\_fotos/2015/11/151118\\_100w\\_calculator\\_vj\\_2015](http://www.bbc.com/portuguese/videos_e_fotos/2015/11/151118_100w_calculator_vj_2015)>. Accessed on: 1 Apr. 2018.
- BENNETT M. Self-estimates of ability in men and women. **Journal of Social Psychology**, v. 137, p. 540-541, 1997.
- COX, T. **Cultural diversity in organizations: Theory, research, and practice**. San Francisco: Berrett Koehler, 1994.
- EAGLY, A. Female leadership advantage and disadvantage: resolving the contradictions. **Psychology of Women Quarterly**, v. 31, p. 1-12, 2007.
- EAGLY, A.; CARLI, L. Women and the labyrinth of leadership. **Harvard Business Review**, v. 85, n. 9, p. 62-71, 2007.
- EAGLY, A.; JOHANNESSEN-SCHMIDT, M.; VAN ENGEN, M. Transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles: a meta-analysis comparing women and men. **Psychological Bulletin**, v. 129, p. 569-591, 2003.
- EAGLY, A.; KARAU, S. Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. **Psychological Review**, v. 109, p. 573-598, 2002.
- GMI RATINGS. **GMI Ratings' 2012 women on boards survey**. 2012. Available at: <[http://library.constantcontact.com/download/get/file/1102561686275-86/GMIRatings\\_WOB\\_032012.pdf](http://library.constantcontact.com/download/get/file/1102561686275-86/GMIRatings_WOB_032012.pdf)>. Accessed on: 17 Nov. 2014.
- GOLEMAN, D. What makes a leader? **Harvard Business Review**, v. 76, n. 6, p. 93-102, Nov./Dec. 1998.
- HALPERN, D. F.; CHEUNG, F. M. **Women at the top**. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010
- HEILMAN, M. Description and prescription: how gender stereotypes prevent women's ascent up the organizational ladder. **Journal of Social Issues**, v. 57, n. 4, p. 657-674, 2001.
- HOYENGA, K. B.; HOYENGA K. T. **Gender-related differences: origins and outcomes**. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1993.
- JONSEN, K.; MAZNEVSKI, M.; SCHNEIDER, S. Gender differences in leadership: believing is seeing – implications for managing diversity. **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal**, v. 29, n. 6, p. 549-572, 2010.
- MARTINHO RODRIGUES, R. **Pesquisa acadêmica: como facilitar o processo de preparação de suas etapas**. São Paulo: Atlas, 2007.
- MCKINSEY & COMPANY. **A CEO's guide to gender equality**. 2015. Available at: <<https://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/leadership/a-ceos-guide-to-gender-equality>>. Accessed on: 1 May 2018.
- OAKLEY, J. Gender-based barriers to senior management positions: understanding the scarcity of female CEOs. **Journal of Business Ethics**, v. 27, p. 321-334, 2000.
- SANDBERG, S. **Lean in: women, work and the will to lead**. New York: Random House, 2013.
- SCHEIN, V. Women in management: reflections and projections. **Women in Management Review**, v. 22, n. 1, p. 6-18, 2007.
- SCHEIN, V. et al. Think manager – think male: a global phenomenon?. **Journal of Organizational Behavior**, v. 17, p. 33-41, 1996.
- WILLIAMS, M. **Leadership for leaders**. London: Thorogood, 2005.

Lygia Gonçalves Costa Hryniewicz

PhD in Sociology (IUPERJ-UCAM); Professor at the Brazilian School of Public Administration and Business, Rio de Janeiro - RJ, Brazil. E-mail: [lygia.costa@fgv.br](mailto:lygia.costa@fgv.br)

Maria Amorim Vianna

Master in Digital Anthropology (University College London- UCL); DreamWorks Marketing at NBCUniversal, London, UK. E-mail: [mariaamorim@icloud.com](mailto:mariaamorim@icloud.com)