Qualitative study on female intrapreneurship and leadership in Brazil

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Abstract—In all contemporary industrialized societies, women remain underrepresented in boardrooms and governments. While the gender gap has narrowed, women still face substantial challenges climbing the corporate and political ladder. A male bias in the highest leadership positions is universal. In most past and contemporary societies, formal positions of political leadership have been, and continue to be, almost exclusively occupied by men. If women are currently no longer formally prohibited from holding positions of leadership and entrepreneurship, they remain less numerous or less powerful than their male counterparts. Women are less likely to reach the highest echelons in politics, business, science, and religion—and this is hard to justify, given that no consistent evidence exists of their being worse or better leaders by virtue of their gender. An attempt to explain the gender gap in leadership and entrepreneurship includes the consideration of gender stereotypes, prejudice, institutional sexism, etc. This study sought to investigate this gender gap in Brazil in an exploratory manner, through a literature review and interviews with women intrapreneurs)

Keywords— female entrepreneurship, gender equality, female intrapreneurship, female leadership.

I. Introduction

In all contemporary industrialized societies, women remain underrepresented in boardrooms and governments. They hold less than 6% of CEO positions in S&P 500 companies and less than 5% of national political leadership positions worldwide. While the gender gap has narrowed, women still face substantial challenges climbing the corporate and political ladder (Deloitte, 2022).

In the social sciences, scholars have generally attempted to explain the gender gap in leadership and entrepreneurship by considering gender stereotypes, prejudice, institutional sexism, and the glass ceiling phenomenon—that is, the invisible barriers women face when trying to advance in a professional or entrepreneurial career (Rocha, 2006).

The role of women has been changing significantly in several countries in recent years, as shown by the increased number of those attending college, enrolling in graduate programs, and obtaining a PhD. Nevertheless, despite the efforts of women themselves and organized societies to achieve gender equity, even women in leadership positions still face obstacles to becoming recognized leaders and entrepreneurs. Hence the justification for this study: Although opportunities have grown in the workplace, a significant difference persists between male and female employees in management. Women face discrimination and are stuck in entry-level positions, and many still struggle to obtain and maintain senior leadership positions. Exposing these data supported by theory and practice is key because, through information, we can build a more egalitarian society.

Women now seek—and often obtain—the highest leadership positions in education, business, and other professions. For example, in the Brazilian banking sector, the number of women in senior management positions has been increasing since the beginning of the 21st century. It rose from 19% to 31% between 2003 and 2006, an extraordinary leap of 63% in just three years (Silva et al., 2018). Even more important, the percentage of executive women in banking increased by 37% (from 27% to 37%) in that same three-year period. This is, however, but one employment sector. Despite these large increases, nearly 20 years later, the migration of women to leadership positions has not yet been fully accepted.

Nuccio et al. (2021) presented data confirming that high inequality persists, with some sectors remaining male-dominated: only 1.8% of the world's largest companies have women CEOs, and only 13% have female members of the board. In other words, women are still battling their way into executive leadership and struggling to become business heads.

Given this scenario, the present study sought to investigate the gender gap in Brazil in an exploratory manner through a literature review and interviews. Our interviewees were intrapreneurs, i.e., internal entrepreneurs—those who exercise entrepreneurship within the bounds of an already established company (Clark, 2018). We sought to collect data on the professional opportunities and challenges facing these women, as well as discuss common situational barriers to achieving prominence within an organization.

Understanding these issues could help organizations increase the number of women throughout the corporate hierarchy. People of all genders can work together to improve inclusion and diversity.

II. Literature Review

To begin this discussion, we reflect on the image of women in different societies around the world. In ancient times, some Eastern countries looked down upon female daughters; families celebrated the birth of a male son only. In other societies, women were not allowed to eat next to men—they had to serve men's meals and sit at a different table (Pena, n.d.).

Disturbingly, Aristotle stated, "the female is as it were a deformed male" (400 BC–300 BC, p. 175). Similarly prejudiced positions have deemed women as physically and intellectually inferior, and the narrative of inferiority from ancient times lingers on today. Several jokes commonly told also mock women because, according to the Bible, they were supposedly made from Adam's rib (Nascimento, 2014).

World War I boosted the insertion of women into the labor market. Men had to engage in armed struggle, and, as a result, their female partners had to work in their stead. In addition, some women helped in battle by working as nurses and cooks, among other functions. In World War II, women could enlist as soldiers (Leal, 2016).

In Brazil, many situations of the past seem unacceptable today. For instance, in the Senate session of August 28, 1827, which addressed the creation of basic education laws, the Marquis of Caravelas considered that girls should not learn more than reading, writing, and the four basic math operations. This is because, according to him, women had the "frivolous tendency of applying themselves to subjects for which it seemed that nature had not shaped them, thus deviating from the true ends for which they were created, and the economy of their homes" (Porto, 1989 as cited in Tribunal Superior Eleitoral, n.d.).

Brazilian women's right to vote illustrates well what it means to be a woman in a male-dominated society. According to Franzão (2021), women's voting rights were recognized in Brazil on February 24, 1932, behind some European countries and ahead of most Latin American countries. Even though women's participation in politics was approved, their involvement remained very controversial. Society did not take well the recently achieved equal rights, as women had not played the same roles as men since the country's early days. Females were well-regarded only in the capacity of housewives, lacking the intellect to participate in politics and other causes and activities. Women's voting rights were often rejected on the grounds that women would allegedly vote for the same candidate as the men in their homes, so that granting these rights would only duplicate existing votes (Cotrim et al., 2020).

Women's participation in the labor market has been increasing since World War I. In addition to the war, the industrial revolution also merits consideration. With the growth of industry, women had more opportunity to work. However, they earned less than men, even though they performed the same functions. On top of working in companies, women also played (and oftentimes continue to play) the role of mothers, wives, or even sole managers of their households (Antloga et al., 2021).

Today, we see women who are as competent as men or more, but who are not equally valued in the labor market. They are prevented from fully exercising intrapreneurial and leadership skills, and they do not receive the same compensation or benefits despite performing equivalent functions. Thus, women seek alternatives to stand out in the labor market through higher education.

Righetti and Gamba (2021) reported that women constitute the majority in Brazilian graduate programs but the minority among faculty, due to biases in hiring practices. This situation, however, has been improving somewhat: The number of faculty hired for graduate studies went from 33,500 in 2004 to 69,200 in 2019. This means in 2004 women accounted for 37.6%, while in 2019 they accounted for 42.9%.

The historical dominance of men in the workplace has resulted in less developed social networks among female leaders. Such networks play a key role in mentoring and sponsoring talent. Some leadership networks may offer formal presentations on strategies for keeping up with business, while others may feature casual get-togethers about, for example, wine—during which women professionals have a chance to build relationships, learn about each other's businesses, and offer mutual help. Rising women professionals have fewer opportunities to get the same level of support from mentors and sponsors as their male colleagues (Cotrim et al., 2020).

As Almeida (2015) noted, when women are constantly interrupted or mistaken for administrative assistants in meetings, we must recognize that organizational barriers can delay their progress. This is not about trying to identify whether men or women make better leaders, but about recognizing they might have different styles, with different strengths. Organizations need diversity in leadership to combine the best of each style. For instance, Frankel (2007) stated that women are highly effective at defusing conflicts, since they usually have a high emotional quotient. This allows them to identify and mitigate interpersonal animosity before it becomes serious.

Organizational barriers affect women from hiring and development all the way to promotion and leadership levels. Although these barriers vary significantly across companies, they may represent a huge obstacle that prevents women from reaching top management (Tonani, 2011).

A crucial organizational barrier is the relationships many women establish with their mentors, bosses, and co-workers. Most people tend to relate to others with similar interests. Thus, women professionals often experience limited access to networks generally established and maintained by men. This makes them outsiders and hinders their ability to communicate, belong, and position themselves as equals before male colleagues and bosses. Since there tend to be few women at the executive level, many are also unable to find a female mentor, which further inhibits women's development in the workplace. Of course, female mentors understand firsthand the challenges most commonly faced by their peers. Men do not face the same barriers and often do not wish to mentor a woman, simply out of embarrassment or prejudice. In short, women's needs differ from those of men. Cotrim et al. (2020) stated that many women need more encouragement or someone to look up to. They pointed out that male mentors tend to resist mentoring a woman due to perceiving her as

more emotional and less skilled at problem solving. In addition, they may want to avoid the risk of issues related to sexual harassment at the workplace.

Many barriers to progress clearly exist, preventing women from advancing their professional careers within organizations as intrapreneurs or solo as entrepreneurs.

III. **Methods**

This is an exploratory study. Researchers engage in exploratory studies to address problems that have not yet been explored or to investigate a problem that is not clearly defined. The answers and analysis arising from this type of work will enable a better understanding of a problem but will not provide conclusive results. This process lays the foundation for more conclusive data collection and analysis (Cervo et al., 2007).

To this end, a researcher starts from a general idea and uses the study to identify issues that may be the focus of future research. An important aspect is that the researcher must be willing to change focus as new data or perceptions appear (Andrade, 2010).

To meet the objectives of this study, we used a qualitative research method. We adopted this strategy to analyze and interpret the data obtained from all aspects of the data source during the research period. Qualitative research is expressed in words. It is used for shedding light on concepts, thoughts, or experiences. This type of research allows one to gather in-depth insights on poorly understood topics. Common qualitative methods include interviews with open-ended questions, observations described in words, and literature reviews that explore concepts and theories. Mixed-methods research combines qualitative and quantitative research methods (Fonseca, 2002).

According to Andrade (2010), an interview can be structured or unstructured. In a structured interview, the interviewer follows a previously established script. They are not allowed to adapt questions to specific situations, reverse the pre-defined order, or ask new questions. In an unstructured interview, the interviewer is free to take each situation in any direction. To collect data, we used structured interviews with female leaders. We created a script from pre-defined questions in accordance with our theoretical framework.

Initially, for the literature review, we collected data through books and websites from reliable sources. Then, we developed a script to interview two women in leadership positions. Inclusion and exclusion criteria concerned participants' work experiences only, disregarding factors such as age, field of work, marital status, or children. Instead, we considered factors such as time in a leadership role and number of people on participants' teams. This enabled a broad, informed perspective.

The script comprised six open-ended questions, which we asked online in July 2022. We chose to conduct the interviews remotely due to ease of scheduling, convenience, and speed of information exchange. This form of data collection also made sense for the current reality of the labor market in the age of globalization, in which time is the scarcest resource. This method allowed us to obtain data without compromising the quality of collected material.

The results of the interviews were analyzed through the content analysis method. First, we engaged in what Bardin (2011) termed "leitura flutuante," or "floating reading" in a literal translation. This amounts to "a first contact with the documents to be analyzed, the choice of those documents, the formulation of hypotheses and objectives, the elaboration of indicators that will guide interpretation, and the formal preparation of the material" (Câmara, 2013, p. 183). Next, the interviews were explored. Through this, we identified existing categories in the discourse of intrapreneurial leaders, paying attention to the theoretical framework.

Given that the interviewees would not be identified, we did not need to obtain registration or evaluation from the Research Ethics Committee. This rule is defined in item I of the single paragraph of Resolution No. 510 of Brazil's National Health Council (Conselho Nacional de Saúde, 2016), which deals with specific ethical guidelines for the humanities and social sciences. This item clarifies that public opinion surveys with unidentified participants are not registered under or evaluated by Brazil's CEP/Conep system. For this reason, we need not show a Certificate of Presentation for Ethical Consideration. Still, the interviews were only conducted after respondents acknowledged the informed consent form.

IV. **Results**

The two interviewees were selected based on ease of access, through referrals from acquaintances. Both met the requirements proposed in this study (women, leaders, intrapreneurs).

The first interviewee, E1, aged 31, held the position of teleservice operations manager at a contact center. With over 20 years of experience in customer service, she was known for providing high-quality, efficient services across three pillars: customer service, collection, and sales. The company was headquartered in São Paulo but present throughout southeast Brazil. It provided services for one of the main phone carriers in the country.

The second interviewee, E2, was 28 years old and held the position of chief investment officer at an American business incubator. Founded in Palo Alto, California, in 2009, this company also promoted entrepreneur training and startup launch programs. Although based in Silicon Valley, this incubator maintained branches in over 180 cities and 65 countries, one of them being in São Paulo, where E2 worked.

To facilitate the analysis and comparison of both interviewees' responses, we created Table 1 below. The table shows the transcriptions of their responses, allowing an overview of the qualitative data collected.

TABLE 1 - Transcript of respondents' responses

Question	E1's Answer	E2's Answer
About their career	I started working at age 16 as a teleservice intern, and over time I was promoted to higher positions. I became an operations leader, then I got my dream job—a supervisor. Next, I became a coordinator and finally an operations manager. I lead 760 people today.	I started working for the first time during an exchange program in Australia, where I had the opportunity to join the recruitment team of a language school. I recruited people and earned a commission for it. At that time, I began to develop an entrepreneurial mindset and realized that so many business opportunities existed. I've always wanted to start a business and help people. After a few years, I started working in technology at a startup and opened a social entrepreneurship company; we helped minority women learn programming. After three years, I was invited to be part of this incubator and soon took the position of company director in Brazil.
About their career choice	I chose this because my dream was to become a teacher, and in this career I can fulfill my dream of teaching and developing people. Compensation is better compared to a teacher's. Besides, this is a challenging career, as the company's goals need to be met. There is no routine; it's dynamic, which delighted me.	I chose this because I've always wanted to change the world. I knew technology was the way to do it.
About their dreams	My biggest dream was to achieve a leadership position, to develop other professionals, and to be recognized and respected in this industry.	My dream is to really make a change, to give back better solutions to the world, and to help entrepreneurs fulfill their dreams.
About their main challenges	* Dealing with prejudice related to occupying a previously male-dominated space in	* Communicating and being firm; giving orders without seeming arrogant; getting people to meet deadlines.
	the labor market; having a high leadership position within the company. * Developing and empowering the team. * Meeting the defined goals; seeking to increase revenue; leveraging the company's operating margin.	* Having the time to study all the small businesses seeking investment; being able to correctly decide on the best opportunities.
About gender-related challenges	Unfortunately, our society is still very sexist and sees women as the weaker sex. The biggest challenge I faced was prejudice and discrimination, as well as harassment. I started my career at a very young age. I became a manager at age 23 and had to face the challenge not only of being a woman in a leadership position, but also of being considered young for this position. The second challenge was reconciling my career with house chores and the responsibilities of being a mother. I am married, and, when I was 22, I had my first child. I had to face not only prejudice at work but also at home, where, on several occasions, I was told that the responsibility over domestic duties had to be mine because I was a woman. I had to be resilient and persistent to make my husband understand that we needed a harmonious division of our domestic chores and our son's	Because I occupy a leadership position and deal with several entrepreneurs from different areas, I have to study a little bit about each topic. Sometimes, being involved in this as a woman and having to make difficult decisions while leading a big team makes people underestimate me, as if I didn't understand enough. It is also difficult to socialize and integrate into more masculine environments because everyone assumes that I do not understand subjects normally thought of as masculine, such as sports. It's a challenge to deal with stereotypes and be respected while being a leader in a male-dominated industry like technology. Since I started working very young and my partner also works in the same company, people often associate my performance with his. They often think I'm his assistant, but we're colleagues. As I try to juggle my career as a woman along with all the responsibilities of handling a house, I feel the weight of being the most responsible for domestic duties, and every day I have to reiterate that this is not my responsibility just

	schoolwork. Just as I contributed to part of the financial expenses of the household, he also needed to contribute to housework.	because I am a woman.
About facilitating female intrapreneurship and women's rise to leadership	We need to change the culture of our society, teaching children from an early age that, regardless of gender, we all have the same conditions and opportunities to achieve our dreams and goals. By doing so, we would avoid much of this sexist prejudice that we face, guaranteeing professional and social respect.	We need greater insertion of women into these spaces, as well as educational initiatives that encourage women and make them realize they are capable and worthy of leadership positions.

The results of the interviews, as explained in the methods section, went through content analysis. After analyzing the data obtained from participants' answers, we were able to identify persistent obstacles in terms of women's condition in leadership positions. Sexism (gender discrimination), whether covert or overt, impedes the development of women professionals—a trend evident in both interviews. Sexual harassment, unfair work environments, and more subtle forms of sexism place a huge burden on these women.

Attitudes and a deeply rooted prejudice against women stood out when the interviewees talked about their career choice, as these factors make it difficult for female professionals to obtain respect and opportunities for advancement. In Brazil, the social structures that favor men over women—not just professionally but in various aspects of social life, as highlighted daily in news media—have not yet been totally dismantled. Thus, women professionals must confront incorrect assumptions and perceptions about their leadership skills and capacity.

Although, throughout their career, women tend to assume their male colleagues to be competent, this sentiment is rarely reciprocal. This leads women to deal with colleagues or supervisors who expect little of them. Thus, gender biases and stereotypes hamper women's leadership aspirations. Their employers tend to interpret men's assertive behavior in the workplace as strong and direct, while viewing the same behavior as aggressive when it comes from women.

If a woman's behavior does not align with gender stereotypes, she often faces backlash. However, if she fits traditional roles—by being passive or securing others' interests before her own—she risks presenting herself as less competitive than her male counterparts.

Regarding dreams, unfortunately, a lifetime of socialization has taught women to seek perfection, which can make them more risk-averse and, therefore, more afraid of career advances and entrepreneurship. Still, some women manage to break this paradigm: E2, for example, developed an entrepreneurial mindset when she realized that many business opportunities exist. In her words, she always "wanted to start a business and help people." This is worth highlighting because, unlike boys, who are usually taught to take risks and act bravely, girls are still taught to be cautious.

As for the main challenges in their career, the interviewees expressed that women often hesitate to push for advances and take a more intrapreneurial position due to a lack of confidence and fear of others' reactions. We can infer that historical sexism and gender bias have resulted in structural barriers that keep women from taking the lead and trying to climb the corporate ladder. Our own experience in companies has shown that corporate social activities, both formal and informal, often leave women out. This is not because women do not wish to socialize, but because men fail to include them, causing them to miss opportunities to network and build relationships that help in career advancement.

Regarding gender-specific challenges, respondents expressed that women in leadership positions often face significant difficulties in balancing work and family. Their family responsibilities may limit their ability to pursue leadership positions. This is because, despite having full-time jobs, they also execute most domestic chores, even in the absence of children (E2).

Both participants showed a surprising ability to adapt to these challenges and revealed great desire to excel in professional life. This did not exempt them from conflicts between the role they play at their companies and the role they play at home, as the main caregivers of their families. In this sense, as time constraints and the demands of work become more important, promotion is expected to force many women to choose between their families and their careers. E1 asserted that she had to be "resilient and persistent" to make her husband see the necessity of "a harmonious division of domestic chores and [their] son's schoolwork." The financial aspect seemed to play a key role in persuading her husband: "just as [she] contributed to part of the financial expenses of the household, he also needed to contribute to housework."

The interviewees proved that one does not need to give up having a healthy family life (E1 and E2) or children (E1) to succeed professionally, although examples abound of women who voluntarily left their jobs due to family decisions (or vice versa).

To mitigate stereotypes and outdated perceptions that hinder female intrapreneurship and the rise of women to leadership positions, both interviewees agreed that the solution lies in education (E1: "... teaching children from an early age..."; E2: "...educational initiatives..."). In fact, if women

were raised for entrepreneurship from an early age and men began to see women as their professional equals, it is very likely that many more women could emerge as competent leaders. This would benefit not only companies and organizations, but society as a whole.

v. **Final Remarks**

This study reveals that women's perception of themselves as leaders and potential intrapreneurs has changed remarkably, as the two interviewees were very self-confident about what they have to offer their companies and society. Through experience, both learned the value of persistence and determination in overcoming challenges inherent to women's condition within companies, aiming to build a successful career.

In contrast, this study shows that women are still typically expected to work more at home, and men to work more outside. Our data suggests the gender division of labor remains relatively ubiquitous across companies. Brazilian culture was identified as a factor that influences women to suppress skills, attitudes, and ways of leading as entrepreneurs. These could be very useful to the organizations in which women work.

Despite the obvious change in demographics and labor relations that has been taking place lately—making more room for women's growth in companies—the interviewees experienced situations that demonstrate the presence of sexism. This might not entirely stop women from unleashing their entrepreneurial spirit and assuming leadership in organizations, but it certainly still makes it very difficult for them to do so. This reveals, in many cases, the fragility and narrowness of the corporate conception of "inclusion and diversity."

With the modernization of the labor market, one would expect companies to rely on their ability to skillfully leverage human talent as their main competitive advantage, free of prejudice or gender distinctions. However, our interviewees' experiences disprove this hypothesis. This serves as an alert that companies may not be fully harnessing human talent.

The data collected and analyzed allow us to infer that women's progress has been substantial but uneven: both interviewees were women who achieved success in their intrapreneurial careers, but many other professionals remain trapped below the level of leadership in large-, medium-, and small-sized companies.

This research contributes to alert women of the need to recognize, articulate, and act on their greatest strengths in order to face and overcome the barriers that undermine their efforts in building rewarding and sustainable careers.

In terms of limitations, we recognize that this an exploratory research with a small database (just two interviews). Results, therefore, cannot be generalized. This limitation does not invalidate the study, since it points to important reflections on the role of women in organizations. One such reflection is the fact that women not only need to occupy positions of power but should also influence decisions that govern the maintenance of a sexist culture or not.

In view of this, we suggest that new studies be carried out with a broader database, seeking to understand women's evolution as intrapreneurs and leaders. Many female professionals may feel unmotivated in their search for prominence due to the many obstacles on the way to leadership, including discrimination, stereotypes, prejudice, family demands, and lack of opportunities.

In this sense, as a practical action, we propose that companies, if they have not already done so, begin to implement programs for developing leadership and entrepreneurship skills aimed at women's success.

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