

## **The Challenges for Women to Achieve Executive Leadership Positions in Private Companies in Brazil**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Gender inequality in the business sector still prevails in Brazil, which has one of the lowest rates of women in executive positions in Latin America and in the world. This paper analyzes whether work-life balance, cultural characteristics, and the lack of female representation in organizations are major challenges for female career advancement to executive leadership positions in private companies in Brazil. Through close-ended and open-ended questions, an online survey was used to collect data about the barriers faced by corporate women in Brazil. The findings of the research indicate that work-life balance and the lack of female representation were not reported as major challenges for women's career ascension by these respondents; however, cultural characteristics such as *machismo* and gender discrimination were commonly noted by the participants. The analysis of the barriers encountered by women in Brazil illustrate the labyrinth introduced by Carli & Eagly. Previous studies on this topic focus mainly on interviewing women who hold a leadership position and this study adds the accounts of women who have not yet achieved such position.

Key Words: Brazilian women; women leaders; barriers to leadership

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## INTRODUCTION

Even though efforts to reduce gender inequalities in business have intensified across the globe, the Latin American region remains behind when it comes to women in leadership. For instance, in a study that focuses on six different world regions, Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, North America, Asia Pacific, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, the latter presented the lowest percentage of women in executive management positions (Grant Thornton International, 2019). Latin America also has the second lowest average of women on Boards of Directors (GovernanceMetrics International, 2009). Within Latin America, Brazil has one of the lowest rates of female representation in leadership positions, especially in the corporate arena (Grant Thornton International, 2017). Brazil is the largest and most populous country in Latin America, and, in the Americas, its economy ranks second only to the United States. Brazil is also one of the BRICS, an acronym for the largest emerging economies in the world. Gender inequality in the business sector remains, however, an area that needs improvement in Brazil, and exploring which challenges are the most relevant for Brazilian women is a step toward advancement of this issue.

A few recent studies have examined the barriers that Latin American women encounter in their pursuit to achieve leadership positions by interviewing women or their employers (Cárdenas et al., 2013; McKinsey, 2013; Avolio, Alcalá, Rurush, Vilca, & Zelaya, 2016; Flabbi, Piras, & Abrahams, 2017; Hermans et al., 2017). An exploratory study by Cárdenas et al. (2013) interviewed 162 female executives from 17 Latin American countries. These leaders were asked 51 questions about their views on the career challenges and factors that have helped them to ascend to first and second-level positions in their companies. Work-life balance was found to be the main challenge to women's ascension to leadership positions. The questionnaire used in the study also included a question about the women's perspective about *machismo*, which is a term that refers to the "exaggeration and amplification of traditional male values" (Dewey, 2018) common to Latin America. The interviewees believed that *machismo* is a major barrier, although the respondents believed that they had not experienced it themselves.

Several studies have investigated gender inequality in executive positions in Latin America and reported different challenges for women. In McKinsey's (2013) study, women expressed that the key reasons for the lack of gender diversity in leadership are lower promotion rates for women, low overall female representation in companies, and female attrition in mid- and senior-level posts. Conversely, most executives who reported having lower numbers of female employees believed that women who voluntarily quit their jobs did so to spend more time with their family. Avolio et al. (2016) analyzed executive women's strategies to overcome nine barriers to their careers: salary inequity, vertical segregation, glass ceiling, the labyrinth, maternity discrimination, cultural characteristics, organizational culture and politics, and female leadership style. Flabbi et al. (2017) looked at the female representation on corporate boards in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), and they concluded that companies with more women on boards tend to have more female executives, although it is not certain that both occur concurrently. Lastly, Hermans et al. (2017) attribute the traditional *machismo* in the region as a major barrier to female career advancement but discovered that a company's international proactiveness aids in alleviating traditionalist gender role perceptions and fortifying women's acceptance in the workplace. These studies present three main barriers to female career advancement in Latin America: work-family balance, cultural characteristics, and lack of female representation in organizations.

Work-family balance is an issue that is repeatedly explored in studies of Latin American countries (Spector et al., 2004; Paschoal & Tamayo, 2005; Barros & Barros, 2008; Álvarez & Gómez, 2011; Rocha-Coutinho & Coutinho, 2011; Puyana Villamizar, 2012; Cárdenas et al., 2013; McKinsey, 2013; Maia, Alloufa, & de Araújo, 2016; Avolio et al., 2016, Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018; Grant Thornton International, 2019). Work-family conflicts lead to low motivation, productivity and concentration at work (Spector et al., 2004; Maia et al., 2016), higher physical and mental stress (Spector et al., 2004; Barros & Barros, 2008), and higher work stress on women (Paschoal & Tamayo, 2005). Cultural characteristics refer to the inherent *machismo* and collectivist nature of Latin America, which cause and reinforce prejudice and discrimination against women based on gender role perceptions and stereotypes (Cárdenas et al., 2013; Hermans et al., 2017). Finally, the lack of women in boards of administration and executive seats may hamper the appointment of women to these positions and women's access to mentoring (Madalozzo, 2011; Flabbi et al., 2017). It also interferes with women's abilities to network in the company. These challenges are present in Latin America as a whole, but they may not be equally burdensome to women's ascension to leadership in all countries in the region.

Cultural differences in the Latin American region influence how these barriers to female career advancement manifest in each Latin American country. In Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov's (2010) study, which uses value dimensions to measure and compare cultural distinctions between countries, it is possible to observe that Brazil has a low score in individualism while Argentina, another South American country, has a close to average score. Furthermore, when comparing the masculinity value dimension between Brazil and Mexico, the former has a relatively low score on this dimension while the latter has a very high score. Due to these cultural differences among countries, researchers have recognized that the findings about the challenges women in Latin America face in the business sector cannot be assumed to apply to all the nations. There is a need for more studies to investigate the specific challenges that women face in each country.

This paper extends Cárdenas et al. (2013) research that investigated the main challenges and advantages that Latin American female executives encountered in their careers. Cárdenas et al. (2013) as well as other researchers who have delved into barriers for women in Brazil (Rocha-Coutinho & Coutinho, 2011; de Rezende, Neto, & Tanure, 2014; Henderson, Ferreira, & Dutra, 2016; Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018) interviewed women who were already in executive positions. This research adds the perspective of women from different age groups who have not yet obtained a leadership position or who have had to give up a similar post. Thus, this research examines whether work-family balance, cultural characteristics, and lack of female representation in organizations that are challenges found for Latin American women career advancement are also true for Brazil. The findings will help to establish whether the findings and recommendations currently available in the literature on the region are applicable to the Brazilian case.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Theories of leadership have progressed from considering that leaders are born with the adequate traits of a leader to acknowledging that leadership skills can be developed, and effectiveness involves other factors such as workplace conditions. One of the first efforts to define leadership in the 20th century was through the Trait Theory, which builds upon the Great Man Theory of Carlyle (1861) and determines that there are innate traits that are better

associated with leadership. In the following century, a new theory called Behavioral Theory emerged arguing that leadership combines both traits and situational factors (Stogdill, 1974). The idea that leadership skills can be learned was defended by Katz (1955) and was coined the Skills Approach. This approach is similar to the Trait and the Behavioral theories because it focuses mainly on the leaders, however, it posits that individuals can develop technical, human, and conceptual skills to become an effective leader, and the need for these skills change depending on the organizational level in question.

The importance of considering the situation in hand to explain leadership effectiveness is also preserved in the Contingency Theory. Nevertheless, this theory goes further and adds a focus on the relationship between leader and follower, suggesting that there are three components for situational control: leader-member relations, task structure, and leader position power (Fiedler, 1967). The leader-member relationship thus becomes central to the subsequent theories and approaches and the roles of leaders and members are less discrepant, as it is seen in servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1991). This model first introduced by Greenleaf proposes that servant leaders prefer to serve first and empower the followers to grow and become more autonomous so they can also become servant leaders (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002).

The above-mentioned theories served, in general, to describe male leadership. The evaluation of women's leadership style was only pursued with the development of studies on transformational leadership (Jogulu & Wood, 2006). Transformational leadership was first introduced by Burns in 1978 in his attempt to enhance military leadership roles and followership (Northouse, 2018), and it was later applied by Bass (1985) in business organizations. Bass' model of transformational and transactional leadership incorporate a total of seven leadership factors: transformational leadership encompasses (1) idealized influence and charisma, (2) inspirational motivation, (3) intellectual stimulation, and (4) individualized consideration; transactional leadership comprises (5) contingent reward and (6) management by exception; and finally, *laissez-faire*, also called (7) non transactional factor. In short, transformational leaders have vision, confidence, arouse needs, and elevate or motivate their subordinates to a greater awareness by gaining their trust (Bass, 1985). Transformational leadership shows a positive relation to effectiveness, and research has found female leaders have more aspects of the transformational leadership style than male leaders, although this difference in leadership skills is very modest (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003). This is consistent with Paustian-Underdahl, Walker, and Woehr's (2014) findings that men and women do not differ in perceptions of leadership effectiveness when all leadership contexts are analyzed. Moreover, predictors of leadership effectiveness can be influenced by the effectiveness of the trainer in emerging leaders (Luria, Kahana, Goldenberg, & Noam, 2019), meaning that effective leadership can be learned.

These studies on leadership skills demonstrate that both women and men have an equivalent potential of becoming effective leaders in modern companies. Nevertheless, the numbers of women within positions of business leadership are still small in comparison to men. A Fortune 500 article reported an all-time record of 33 female CEOs on their list, but a closer look at these executive women shows that they amount to only 6.6% of the total CEOs (Zillman, 2019).

## Leadership and Specific Challenges for Women

The paucity of women in high corporate echelons is explained by the various obstacles that women face throughout their careers. Most of the obstacles in women's paths are related to stereotypes and gender roles, which are at the core of all this inequity. Both descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes could be unfavorable for women in the workplace. Descriptive stereotypes refer to the impressions that women are more linked to communality, affiliative tendencies, deference, and emotional sensitivity, and prescriptive stereotypes designate how women and men should be (Heilman, 2001). The "lack of fit," which could be a descriptive or prescriptive violation of female stereotypes, can decrease their performance-related outcomes (Heilman, 2012). For instance, one of the most common gender stereotypes is that women are more emotional than men (Brescoll, 2016), so according to the "lack of fit" theory, when women behave in manners that oppose this stereotype, they may receive negative judgements as a consequence.

The "lack of fit" theory is seen in evaluations for promotion as well. Promotion to first-level positions heavily relies on the impressions of other first-level people. At times, it depends on the male predecessor CEOs' stance to name a female successor (Dwivedi, Joshi, & Misangyi, 2017). Along similar lines, the board of directors has a sizeable share of involvement in a firm's strategy and CEO appointment (Westphal & Fredrickson, 2001; Matsa & Miller, 2011). Therefore, the board's composition and attitudes towards women is relevant to female corporate ascendance. The "lack of fit" arises when the superiors have biased perceptions of their female employees that do not match with the women's reality, causing lower ratings to be accredited to female workers (Heilman, 2001). A prevalent perception is that female employees face work-life conflict, and this leads to a decrease in female promotability (Hoobler, Wayne, & Lemmon, 2009).

The deviation between the female gender role and leadership roles was termed the role congruity theory by Eagly and Karau (2002), and describes the prejudice that arises when a behavior that fulfills the prescriptions of a leader is perceived as less favorable when it is enacted by a woman. This theory is congruent with Schein's "think manager, think male" phenomenon that found successful managers were understood to possess characteristics that are normally attributed to men (Schein, 1975; Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996), awarding men better access to leader positions (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). Additional hardships posed to women emerge from them being held to stricter standards (Lyness & Heilman, 2006). In the workplace, this stigma may induce women to avoid leadership roles (Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005).

Women have reported experiences of both direct and indirect discrimination in the workplace, sometimes used interchangeably with explicit and implicit discrimination. Sexual harassment, either in the form of sexual-advance or gender harassment, is a type of direct discrimination (Holland & Cortina, 2013), while indirect discrimination are more subtle and may be manifested through microaggression (Basford, Offerman, & Behrend, 2014). One of the side-effects of gender discrimination is that it has been found to be a major element to cause the queen bee phenomenon: when female leaders conform to a masculine corporate environment and distance themselves from their female subordinates or younger women (Derks, van Laar, & Ellemers, 2016). This behavior leads to the reinforcement of the existent gender hierarchy in business.

Other factors that affect female career advancement are the absence of or inappropriate mentoring (McDonald & Westphal, 2013), the company's perceived international proactiveness (Hermans et al., 2016), and lack of ambition from women to aspire reaching higher job levels (Fels, 2004; Sandberg, 2013; Fox & Lawless, 2014). Furthermore, some research has traced back the analysis of gendered patterns from childhood to explain women's limitations to achieve CEO roles (Fitzsimmons et al., 2013), while other studies investigate the threats to women after they acquire an executive position. Some of the prominent concerns that may arise once a woman is promoted to a leadership role are questions regarding the legitimacy of the women who have attained the position of authority (Vial, Napier, & Brescoll, 2016), and the "glass cliff" phenomenon (Glass & Cook, 2016). The "glass cliff" refers to instances when women are promoted at a time the firm is facing problems, which sets them up for failure.

Despite the predominance in obstacles for women, some findings actually discovered advantages for them. Eagly et al. (2003) found that female leaders exert more transformational leadership than male leaders, a leadership style that is correlated with higher effectiveness. Moreover, the stereotype that women are more caring than men stereotypes may favor women over men (Langford & Mackinnon, 2000) and may be considered an advantage in certain instances (Diekman & Eagly, 2000). Finally, a predecessor CEO's influence over his or her female successors can turn out to promote female success if there are mentoring and sponsorship mechanisms plus partnerships with the boards (Dwivedi et al., 2017).

This evidence suggests that women may encounter various challenges throughout their careers while acknowledging that not all women face the same hurdles, as some may not even face hurdles at all. Carli and Eagly (2015) proposed the metaphor "labyrinth" to describe women's leadership. Terms such as the "glass ceiling" that characterizes women's lack of access to leadership and the "sticky floor," which refers to the difficulties of women who stay in low-level positions, are common metaphors used to define the challenges faced by females in the workplace. The labyrinth, however, is distinct from these common terms in the sense that it includes women's potential barriers without focusing on a particular job level. It also adds that women may advance in their careers in spite of the obstacles along the way, which would represent succeeding in exiting the labyrinth in the metaphor. Further, the labyrinth proposes that not all women face the same challenges, and culture is one of the main variables that shape this distinction because it shapes how barriers are perceived in a country or region.

## **Leadership and Culture**

A broader setting that defines and reinforces expectations of women is culture. Culture can be defined as "the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). As social norms vary from region to region, so do perceptions of particular attitudes. Consequently, certain barriers might be more applicable for a woman in location X than for a woman in location Y.

There are two main works that offer cultural comparisons between countries, Hofstede's Value Dimensions (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) and the GLOBE study (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). For this research, Hofstede's six value dimensions will be used as a basis to compare and discuss cultural differences between countries. Hofstede (1980) began his cross-cultural studies of values with IBM employees worldwide and has continued to expand and update the value dimensions. The first four dimensions (power distance, individualism, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance) were determined after a 1980 study about

values among employees in a variety of countries. Later, a survey in China showed there was a need to add the “long-term orientation” to the dimensions, followed by “indulgence” that arose after Michael Minkov’s World Values Survey (Hofstede et al., 2010). Hofstede’s value dimensions are:

- **Power distance.** The degree to which people in a society accept or reject unequal distribution of power. In low power distance, use of power should be legitimate, subordinates are expected to be consulted, and older people are neither owed higher levels of respect nor feared.
- **Individualism.** Measures whether the ties in a society are loose between individuals and if one only looks after oneself and one’s immediate family. A high score in this category shows more individualistic views, and a lower score would correlate with collectivistic views.
- **Masculinity.** States that societies where emotional gender roles are clearly defined and polarized are located on the masculine side of the spectrum. In these societies, men are expected to be assertive and tough, and women modest, tender, and more concerned with quality of life. The opposite side of the spectrum is named “femininity.”
- **Uncertainty avoidance.** Describes a society’s level of comfort with ambiguity, and how its members feel in unstructured situations. People in high uncertainty avoidance countries are more emotional and motivated by inner energy. Uncertainty accepting countries are more tolerant of opinions different from what they are used to and the country has less bureaucracy and social conservatism.
- **Long-term orientation.** Measures whether a society’s virtues are directed toward future reward. A low score on this dimension means a society prefers to maintain time-honored traditions and are apprehensive of societal changes, and a high score includes efforts to prepare for the future.
- **Indulgence.** The extent to which people are able to contain their desires and impulses related to enjoying life and having fun. Lower scores are closer to being labeled “restrained” and higher are closer to “indulgence.” (2010)

A country’s scores can be used to compare how one nation’s culture differs from another. Each value dimension ranges from 1 to 100; one indicates that the dimension is low in the country in question, and 100 indicates that the dimension has high pervasiveness in the country. For instance, Figure 1 (See Appendix) compares the scores of Brazil and the United States and reveals that these countries certainly differ in their value dimensions. Brazil has a larger power distance between leaders and subordinates than the United States as well as higher scores on uncertainty avoidance. The United States, on the other hand, is highly individualistic and its society scores higher in the masculinity dimension. These differences in value dimensions between the two countries affect how their business culture functions. The comparison indicates that in the United States communication between leaders and subordinates is smoother, people are more direct, and employees are overall more indulgent and express more openly the desires of enjoying life than in Brazil. Country comparisons are run frequently by companies that have plans of starting a business or partnership with a new country.

More and more research is done worldwide to determine how leaders in different countries behave, what challenges they face, and how employees must adapt when they do business with firms that have different values and customs. Examples of these cross-cultural

studies are Schein and colleagues (1996) that found managerial sex stereotyping is a global phenomenon, and Jugulu and Wood (2008), which found the perception of female managers' leadership style in Malaysia and Australia differ due to their cultural differences. These studies conclude that attitudes towards female leadership are not uniform in different countries due to the cultural differences between the nations that were compared. Research particular to women leaders in Latin America has centered on a few specific challenges.

### **Challenges for Women's Career Advancement in Latin America**

The potential challenges discussed thus far become roadblocks for women who seek to achieve higher executive positions in any region of the world and apply to Latin American women as well. Barriers such as managerial sex role stereotyping, behavioral or emotional stereotyping, early life experiences, direct and indirect discrimination, selection and promotion bias, leadership styles and personality dispositions, the company's international proactiveness, the composition of boards of directors, access to mentoring, and the "glass cliff" phenomenon are, too, found in the Latin American region. Nevertheless, it is important to clarify that the Latin American region designates a grouping of countries that are culturally similar and it includes the countries in South, Central, and North America that speak Romance languages. Some scholars include countries in the Caribbean in their studies as well. Because cultural arrangements are not as clear as geographical arrangements, there are certain disputes about which countries are indeed part of Latin America, meaning it is not uncommon to find research that include distinct sets of countries in the analysis. The International Labour Organization (ILO), for instance, group Latin America and the Caribbean as one region (2018).

On the ILO's latest report on women's labor market participation, the numbers for Latin American and Caribbean women have been increasing since 2009; the labor force participation rates (LFPR) show that there has been an increase from 43.5% to 51.5% in women's participation (ILO, 2018). The key determinants of change in LFPR include religious, cultural and social norms, access to education, income level, fertility, institutions (legal framework, enterprises, labour unions, etc.), sectoral base of the economy, political regimes, and wars and conflicts (ILO, 2010). Women are also driving the economic growth in the Latin American and Caribbean regions, in both macro and micro domains (Pagés & Piras, 2010). Despite the increase in LFPR and their cooperation to the economy, women are still less likely than men to hold upper managerial jobs.

The gender imbalance in top management positions are especially severe in Latin America, where the percentage of women holding such jobs is only 25%, the lowest out of all the regions in the world (Grant Thornton International, 2019), and the average percentage of women on Boards is only 4.7%, which is higher only than the Industrialized Asia-Pacific average (GovernanceMetrics International, 2009). Moreover, in a 2012 analysis of the Latin 500 companies, only 9 had a female CEO (Bamrud & Calderon, 2012). The literature suggests that there are three main challenges in Latin America that invigorate the hardships for women to advance to higher leadership positions in companies. These are work-life balance, cultural characteristics, and low representation of women holding preminent leadership positions in organizations. This research focuses on these three main challenges and seeks to answer the following research questions.



### **Research question 1: Do women in Brazil report work-life balance to be a major challenge to their career advancement?**

Household responsibilities require working women to balance work and family duties. Greenhouse and Beutell (1985) proposed that there are three main factors that contribute to the development of work-family conflicts:

- when the time required to perform one of the roles interferes with the other role;
- when tension in one of the roles interferes with the other role;
- when there is a behavioral conflict, which happens when the behaviors needed for one role is inappropriate to the other role.

These factors are commonly part of the lives of many Latin American women. In fact, women who work in the informal labor sector report that they frequently work longer hours, sleep less because they have to catch up with domestic chores, and find themselves tired at their jobs. Some women also said that they have had to change their behaviors at home and at work (Álvarez & Gómez, 2011). Moreover, studies have concluded that work-life balance is the main challenge among Latin American female executives (Cárdenas et al., 2013; Grant Thornton International, 2019). Employers also understand work-life balance to be a major reason for women to withdraw from their jobs, as a study has found that executives with lower number of female employees believe that women who voluntarily left their jobs did so to spend more time with family (McKinsey, 2013).

Work-life conflicts lead to low motivation, productivity and concentration at work (Spector et al., 2004; Maia, Alloufa, & de Araújo, 2016), higher physical and mental stress (Spector et al., 2004; Barros & Barros, 2008), and higher work stress on women (Paschoal & Tamayo, 2005). These outcomes show that having a work-life balance is not only important to women, but at the business level, it is also beneficial for the companies. Some of the support systems that assist working women to coordinate their work and family lives come from (1) family members, (2) domestic workers (Barros & Barros, 2008; Álvarez & Gómez, 2011), and (3) their communities (Feldman & Saputi, 2007).

### **Research question 2: Do women in Brazil report cultural characteristics to be a major challenge to their career advancement?**

Cultural characteristics mold how behaviors are perceived in a certain location, which creates the distinctions of how challenges are manifested in different countries. Characteristics such as *machismo* and collectivism constitute Latin America and spawn instances of prejudice and discrimination of gender.

- ***Machismo***. The term *machismo* does not have an exact translation to English, but much of it “centers on exaggeration and amplification of traditional male values” (Dewey, 2018), which augments certain gender role stereotypes and may portray women as submissive in society. *Machismo* harks back to the strong patriarchal social order Spanish and Portuguese colonization enforced in the Americas (Jelín, 2007). Its effects might harm women competing in the workforce, and influence attitudes within the household. The ideology of manliness is a fundamental component of family relations (Selby, Murphy, & Lorenzen, 1990). It is sometimes expressed through the appointment of

household responsibilities to women (Olavarría, 2002; Faur, 2006; Cosse, 2009; Puyana Villamizar, 2012) and, in extreme cases, leads to domestic violence (Jelín, 2007). Much of the burdens suffered by women are actually a result of domestic gender roles, given that studies show that women in single-parent families spend less time in domestic duties than women living with their partners (Milosavljevic & Tacla, 2007; Batthyány, 2009).

One of the ways *machismo* hinders female career advancement occurs when it is expressed through cultural bias towards women. The cultural bias refers to certain gender roles and behaviors attached to women that puts them at a disadvantage when competing with men in an organization. For example, women have repeatedly encountered overt and subtle discriminatory behavior and traditional cultural stereotypes both as they seek promotion to management posts and after they achieve this position (Muller & Rowell, 1997). For instance, in a McKinsey study, 78% of the participants reported that the cultures in their home countries make it easier for men than for women to move forward in their careers, with respondents in Brazil and Mexico being even more likely to say so. McKinsey also found that more than half of respondents said that cultural bias influences their own company's approaches to gender diversity (2013). A major finding by Hermans et al. (2017) concluded that a company's perceived international proactiveness plays an important role in moderating traditional gender role orientations and attitudes towards women's career advancement in Latin America, and so *machista* attitudes may be less frequent in these firms.

- **Collectivism.** The incorporation of the community to familial systems is a characteristic of countries that have high degrees of collectivism, which is the case of many of the Latin American countries (Hofstede et al., 2010). Even the idea of family itself is enlarged, as family is not only composed of spouse, parents and children; it includes various members like grandparents, cousins, in laws, and so on (Leiva, Madrid, & Howes, 2013). It is also common in Latin American countries to regard friends as part of the family. The strong family values have caused mothers to lament not spending more time with the family or to have anxiety about being absent from their children's lives (Oliveira, Silva, Menezes, Luiz, & Palmeira, 2012). This may keep women from pursuing careers that could require withdrawing family time.
- Work-life balance, cultural characteristics, and low representation of women in leadership positions are conditions familiar to the Latin American culture. Thus, the prevailing challenges to career advancement encountered by women in Latin America may differ from the challenges that confront women working in other regions of the globe. Nevertheless, these conditions do not affect all Latin American countries with the same intensity because cultural differences between these nations in the region exist. As an example, the majority of the Latin American countries included in Hofstede's research (2010) are found to be highly collectivistic with scores lower than 20 in the Individualism Index (IDV), but Argentina, for instance, is situated in the middle rankings with a score of 46. Considering the slight disparity of value dimension scores in Latin American countries, it is important to not generalize these findings and instead research each country individually.

**Research question 3: Do women in Brazil report the lack of female representatives in their companies to be a major challenge to their career advancement?**

A few studies focusing on the challenges for female career ascension in Latin America have shown a particular interest in the relationship between the proportion of women on boards of administration or holding executive titles and the appointment of women to these positions. This is an important barrier to investigate because Latin American women in business have expressed that lower promotion rates for women and low overall female representation in companies are some of the key reasons for the lack of gender diversity in their firms (McKinsey, 2013).

Flabbi et al. (2017) looked at prevailing ratios of women in board members and executives in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), and they concluded that women are still highly underrepresented in these positions, especially in the Latin American region. These researchers also found that companies with more women on boards tend to have more female executives, although it is not absolute that both occur concurrently or consequently. Madalozzo (2011) analyzed 370 companies and tested whether the CEO and board compositions could be the reason for the existence of glass ceilings in Brazil. She determined that boards of administrations tend to appoint a CEO that matches their own profiles, and there is a smaller probability of a woman being named CEO when the Board is mainly composed of men.

Moreover, a study that investigated public and private companies in over 5,600 Brazilian municipalities suggested that the “queen bee phenomenon,” which designates when a female leader distances herself from other female subordinates to conform with the firm’s culture, may be a myth (Arvate, Galilea, & Todescat, 2018). Having more women holding renowned positions in a company could not only facilitate the ascension of other women to these positions, but it could also improve women’s capability to participate in informal networks and to receive appropriate mentoring (McDonald & Westphal, 2013).

**Brazil’s Cultural Dimensions Compared to Latin America**

In order to determine which challenges are more commonly reported for women who seek to advance in private companies, this study will compare the findings from Brazil with the available results for Latin America. This study will also extend the Cárdenas et al. (2013) study by including women who are on the leadership track but are not yet executives. Although Latin America is by default a cultural grouping, the countries within it do not share the same culture. Brazil’s culture is different from most Latin American countries in many aspects, which can be seen in comparisons of value dimensions.

According to Hofstede et al. (2010), Latin American countries converge in mainly four dimensions: (1) individualism, (2) uncertainty avoidance, (3) long term orientation, and (4) indulgence. They generally score low on individualism, as it is a more collectivistic region, and on long term orientation. Brazil has an index of 38 and 44 on these dimensions, respectively. On the other dimensions, Latin American countries converge but with high scores. In uncertainty avoidance, bureaucracy and laws are necessary to enforce safety and structure life, and indulgence measures the tendency to allow gratification related to enjoyment and having fun; Brazil has a score of 76 and 59 on these dimensions, respectively.

On the dimensions that are not uniform for Latin America, Brazil scores 69 on power distance, which reflects that hierarchies are typically respected in Brazil and inequalities are

more perceived as acceptable. That may be common for some Latin American countries, though Costa Rica has a low score of 35, whereas other countries such as Guatemala and Panama have high scores. Lastly, on masculinity, Brazil has an intermediate score of 49, indicating a balance between competitiveness and quality of life, and the scores of the Latin American countries vary greatly in this dimension. For example, a comparison of the dimensions of the two largest countries in Latin America, Brazil and Mexico, is shown in Figure 2 (See Appendix) as an example of differences in cultural scores. Even though Brazil and Mexico are both in the Latin American region and they do have similar scores in most of the value dimensions, they do differ 20 points in masculinity and long-term orientation, and Mexico has an extremely indulgent society whereas Brazil is more moderate in this dimension. This comparison illustrates that gender roles are very defined and are harder to change in a Mexican company than in a Brazilian. Moreover, Mexican employees would hardly plan long-term goals and would prioritize enjoying life.

Hofstede et al.'s (2010) value dimensions describe the cultural tendencies of countries so that organizations around the world can better shape and structure themselves for successful outcomes. Moreover, Hofstede and colleagues demonstrate that countries differ in their cultures. Therefore, it is important for companies to understand that each country has its own sets of characteristics. Along similar lines, this research acknowledges the characteristics found by Cárdenas et al. (2013) regarding the career path of women in Latin America, and it aims to look with more detail into Brazil and uncover the characteristics true to Brazilian women when it comes to the difficulties or advantages for them to ascend to executive positions in private companies in the country.

### **Challenges for Women's Career Advancement in Brazil**

Brazil is the largest and most populous country in Latin America, and it also has the largest GDP in the region (International Monetary Fund, 2019). Since 1988, when the most recent constitution was ratified and women's rights were included, female participation in the workforce has been increasing (de Oliveira, Pinto, & dos Santos, 2015), as it has overall in Latin America. However, gender inequalities in labor is still a reality that women encounter throughout their careers (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2018).

Even though female labor participation in Brazil is becoming more accepted and female tertiary education attainment has a higher rate than that of males (The World Bank, 2018), the gender equality gap in many sectors seems far from being closed. Looking at the pay and labor participation gap, women between 25 and 49 years old are paid about 79.4% of men's salary in the same occupation (IBGE, 2018), and the rate of women participating in labor is only 56%, while the rate of men is 78.2% (ILO, 2017). As of 2019, there is not a law in place that mandates equal pay for all genders. Not surprisingly, gender imbalance among prestigious roles is also prevalent in various divisions in Brazil. For example:

- Women hold only 15% of the total seats in the lower house and 14.81% in the Senate (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2019);
- Only 23% of the Brazilian diplomats are women (Itamaraty, n.d.); Women amount to about 13.8% of the Air Force, 10% of the navy staff, and 3.2 of the army (Ministério da Defesa, 2014);

- In the University of São Paulo (USP), the largest university in Brazil, around half of the undergraduate and graduate students are female, but only 15.4% of the full professors and 23.7% of the leadership positions are occupied by women (Jornal da USP, 2016).
- In the business arena, women's participation in all levels is rising, however, women are still underrepresented in comparison to men (Catho, 2015).

Challenges for women to acquire, ascend, and remain in leadership roles still persist. Indeed, a McKinsey's study (2013) reported that 41% of the Brazilian participants shared that their companies have not taken any measures to recruit and retain women. This is high considering that the average answer for the other countries was 29%. The path to executive positions is even more strenuous, and the proportion of women in senior management in Brazil is only 19%, which places the country in the low performing group in the Grant Thornton's report (2017).

The literature exploring the barriers encountered by women in Brazil to ascend to executive positions, or the C-suite, is scarce. A few researchers have interviewed women who are currently executives, general managers, or hold a leadership position in public or private businesses to identify how these women see themselves as leaders and what challenges they faced along their careers (Rocha-Coutinho & Coutinho, 2011; de Rezende et al., 2014; Henderson et al., 2016; Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018). Both Rocha-Coutinho and Coutinho (2011) and Hryniewicz and Vianna (2018) interviewed female leaders in Rio de Janeiro, and a multitude of challenges were found to women's career ascension in Brazil. The main challenges reported by the interviewees were work-life balance, the double burden (i.e. unpaid labor in informal settings after regular work hours), and discrimination. Henderson et al. (2016) concluded that the labyrinth was more fitting to describe the female career journey in Brazil and de Rezende et al. (2014) focused on distinction of leadership styles.

In summary, this current research seeks to identify whether the three major challenges to female career advancement found for Latin America (work-life balance, cultural characteristics, and lack of female representation in organizations) apply to Brazilian women as well. This study will also add to the existing literature by including in the survey women who have not achieved or hold a leadership position, and women who work in states other than Rio de Janeiro. Outcomes from this research will point out whether the existing leadership literature is addressing the reality in Brazil, and suggest what findings converge or what new directions the research needs to take.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Primary research on gender disparity in business in Brazil is typically conducted by interviewing female leaders working in public or private enterprises (Rocha-Coutinho & Coutinho, 2011; de Rezende et al., 2014; Henderson et al., 2016; Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018). These studies focus on work-life balance, issues of leadership styles, prejudice, educational levels, identity, and support of a mentor. The data for this current research was collected using both close-ended and open-ended questions that covered the topics explored in the other studies about the challenges for women's career ascension in Latin America based on the questionnaire used by Cárdenas et al. (2013). The three research questions were developed to narrow the study in order to direct the analysis of the main challenges for women's career advancement in Brazil: (1) Do women in Brazil report work-life balance to be a major challenge to their career

advancement? (2) Do women in Brazil report cultural characteristics to be a major challenge to their career advancement? (3) Do women in Brazil report the lack of female representatives in their companies to be a major challenge to their career advancement?

For this study, an online questionnaire was used for data collection. Although this study was adapted from the Cárdenas et al. (2013) research, it differed in several ways. This study focused solely on women working in Brazil, it utilized electronic means of gathering data instead of interviews, and it spanned generations of working women, including participants who had not yet achieved a leadership position.

## Research Design

Cárdenas et al. (2013) questionnaire was replicated in this study with permission. The research design consisted of an online survey with 50 questions to collect data inquiring about the challenges for women to ascend to leadership positions in Brazil. A few questions were altered from the original survey so it would be better understood by the participants; for example, a question about comparing the situation of women in Brazil with other Latin American countries was replaced by an open-ended question.

The questionnaire used was divided into five sections: Sociodemographic Data, Current Status, Professional Career, Leadership, and Summary. The first section retrieved information about the participants' demographics, such as age, education, profession, marital status, number of children, and their partner's career level. The second section inquired about both their current position (job level, work hours, travel frequency, difficulties, salary, sources of support) and their companies' information (internationalization, size, employee sex distribution, sector). The third section concerned their career paths, including questions about their own professional development goals, interest in power positions, job promotions, executive positions held, maternity leave, and challenges. The fourth section gathered the women's views on the necessary characteristics of a leader, attributes of their own leadership style that has contributed to the participants' career advancement, distinctions between male and female leadership, and *machismo*. The last section was comprised of three open-ended questions: the first asked the participants to tell their career history and how they arrived to their current positions, the second asked what they thought young women need to know to advance into executive leadership positions, and the third asked them to share what they believed were the differences in the experiences that women from different generations have confronted.

The research analysis used in this study is a mixed method, which includes both quantitative and qualitative data. The close-ended answers were analyzed as means and percentages, and the open-ended responses were contrasted with the quantitative results to check if the women's narratives support the findings or if they contradict one another. After reviewing the literature about the most critical challenges to the career advancement of Latin American women, three major barriers stood out as topics that were repeatedly the focus point in studies of gender imbalance in the region: work-life balance, cultural characteristics of the region, and lack of women in leadership positions in the company. In order to determine if these three challenges are the most detracting to Brazilian women as well, specific research questions were developed to guide the study:

- Do women in Brazil report work-life balance to be a major challenge to their career advancement?

- Do women in Brazil report cultural characteristics to be a major challenge to their career advancement?
- Do women in Brazil report the lack of female representatives in their companies to be a major challenge to their career advancement?

## **Participants**

This study targeted adult women who are currently employed in private companies in Brazil. Participants were gathered through convenience sampling, followed by the snowball sampling technique. A total of 40 females participated in the study; however, only 29 answered all the close-ended questions. Therefore, the results will display only the means and percentages taken from the answers of the 29 women who completed the quantitative portion of the survey. The participants were mostly Millennials, women who were between 23 and 38 years old in 2019, single, and with no children. Not all the participants shared the states where they worked, but at least 19 out of 29 women reported working in the state of São Paulo. Although this sample may not accurately represent the situation of women in business in all the regions in Brazil, São Paulo is recognized as the business and economic center of the country, contributing to 32.2 percent of Brazil's GDP. Rio de Janeiro, the second largest economy, contributes to 10.2 percent (IBGE, 2017). Because at least 89 percent of the participants earned a salary twice as high as the minimum wages per month, it is presupposed that these women belong to the middle class or richer classes. People in these classes may reassure their status by embracing practices that oppose those of the working class (Owensby, 1994). Practices that distinct middle class from working class people in São Paulo are refraining from manual labor, enrolling children in private schools, and adopting practices of consumerism such as living in a large house, employing more domestic workers, and dressing differently (Dougherty, 1998).

The women held jobs from diverse areas, with the most common job levels being managerial, coordination, and entry level. They worked an average of 44 hours per week and some reported having a job that required traveling. Their job titles indicate that the participants held diversified positions, the majority exercising some type of leadership position. There was a considerable mix of national and multinational companies, and the participants were mostly employed in large companies. The participants shared that their companies employed women and men in relatively equal numbers. Those who reported gender discrepancy among the numbers of employees noted a male majority. Most of their companies were from the service or industrial sectors.

## **Data Collection Procedure and Analysis**

Data were collected through a Qualtrics online survey to allow participation by women from different regions. The structure of the questionnaire is very similar to the original used by Cárdenas et al. (2013); only minor changes were made so the questions would be clearer in Portuguese, as the original survey was in Spanish. The final survey scale included 47 close-ended questions for the quantitative portion of the analysis and 3 open-ended questions for the qualitative to gather information about how the participants view women's corporate careers and their perceptions on experiences of women from different generations. Participants were recruited with the snowball sampling technique, and accessed the survey simply by clicking on an anonymous link from either a computer or a smartphone. To participate in the survey, each

respondent was required to be female, over 18 years old, and employed in a private company. Participants were encouraged to forward the link to others who also match the criteria above.

The data analysis of this exploratory descriptive study involve mixed methods. For the quantitative data, the results of the close-ended questions will be presented as means and percentages, which were already provided by Qualtrics' final report of the survey analysis. The qualitative portion will analyze the participants' open-ended responses and their narratives will be used to add the reasoning that regulates the close-ended responses. There will also be cross-referencing of data between the different quantitative questions in the study to examine complex patterns that do not specifically tackle the research questions but provide valuable insights.

## RESULTS

This research examined whether the three major challenges to female ascension to leadership positions in Latin America (i.e. work-life balance, cultural characteristics, and lack of female representation in the company) also apply to Brazil. The quantitative data are reported in means and standard deviation or percentages. The qualitative portion of the data is presented as quotations extracted from the participants' answers to the open-ended questions. The open-ended questions were examined in comparison to the close-ended answers to analyze if the qualitative responses backed the quantitative or if there were inconsistencies between the responses.

The analysis found that the women reported sometimes having to prioritize their work over their family or personal time, but that had rarely led them to consider switching jobs, quitting, or retiring sooner. Moreover, work-life balance was revealed to be one of the least frequent barriers to be encountered by the participants. Cultural characteristics, on the other hand, is one of the major barriers for women's career advancement in Brazil as most of the women reported to have encountered some sort of discrimination or difficulties throughout their careers. The majority of them also believed that *machismo* has made it challenging for women to ascend to leadership positions. Lastly, the lack of women in executive positions in the company is uncertain as a challenge for female career advancement in Brazil. Although the women identified that support from leaders has helped them to progress in their careers, the respondents did not provide explicit reference to these bosses being female.

### Demographics of the Participants

The mean age of the women who participated in this study was 34.7 years old, 45.5 percent of them were in their twenties, 20 percent in their thirties, 17.5 percent in their forties, 14.5 percent in their fifties, and 2.5 percent in their sixties. The generation that had the largest representation was the millennials (ages 23 to 39), amounting to 47.5 percent of the total participants. The majority of the respondents were single and did not have children (See Table 1 in the Appendix). All of the women had at least a university degree, making them part of a select group in Brazil; only 18% of the country's adult population has completed undergraduate education (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2019). Table 1 also shows that the highest educational level achieved by the majority was a postgraduate specialization degree, which is a graduate degree such as an MBA that is focused on non-academic careers, and 10 percent of the participants obtained their diplomas abroad. The prevailing professional background among the women was in Business and Economics and



Engineering and other sciences. Professional backgrounds included Information Technology, Design, and Education.

The participants' work hours per week averages 44.55, which is similar to the Brazilian average for both female and male workers (IBGE, 2015). Some women also reported having to do some travel for work, averaging 18.41 days per year. Their job titles reflect that more than 68 percent of the respondents hold some type of leadership position, with the majority of them being managers or coordinators (See Table 1 in Appendix). The survey also included women who have an entry-level job, so the data contains the perspectives of women from diverse corporate ranks. When cross referencing positions from different levels and encounters with discrimination and other difficulties, 50 percent of the participants who shared not facing any hardships held entry-level positions. Furthermore, hardships were encountered in all levels, and it is imperative to hear their experiences to detect which challenges restrain women from obtaining executive positions.

There was a balance in the numbers of national and multinational companies where the participants were employed. All the encounters with discrimination and other difficulties were reported in both company types, and there were no considerable frequency discrepancies between national and multinational firms in which the women faced career barriers and their believed success factors. The majority of the firms were large with a relatively balanced proportion of male and female workers. The companies were mainly from the service and industrial sectors, and the third most common answer to their firm's sector was "Other" (See Table 1 in Appendix) and included insurance, communication, tourism, agribusiness trading, maintenance services, telecommunications, and pharmaceutical sectors.

### **Research question 1: Do women in Brazil report work-life balance to be a major challenge to their career advancement?**

The participants appeared to give emphasis to their professional careers in relation to their personal/family life. Participants in the survey were asked how often they had to prioritize their professional life over their personal/family life. They answered using a five-point scale: 1 = never and 5 = always, used for most frequency ratings in the questionnaire. The mean was 3.44 (SD = 0.89), indicating that the average answer was between "Sometimes" and "Almost always." When asked if being required to prioritize their profession has led them to consider switching jobs, quitting, or retiring sooner, the mean was a relatively low value of 2.48 (SD = 1.10), which falls into the "Rarely" rating. Furthermore, when asked if they ever decided to discontinue their professional careers, with the exception of instances of maternity leave, 72.41 percent of the women responded "No." These responses indicate a common high career commitment.

The women surveyed also did not view work-life balance as a barrier to their career advancement. The data presented in Table 2 (See Appendix) shows that work-life balance was reported as the third lowest frequent barrier faced by the participants when asked "How frequently have you had to face the following barriers/obstacles to ascend in your professional career?" This finding is backed by the lack of references to work-life balance issues in the open-ended responses. Participants were asked "What do young women need to know to advance into executive leadership positions in their careers?" and only one respondent, a 54-year-old mother who holds a first-level position in a service company, seemed to raise the issue of work-life balance. She answered: "Having clear objectives, knowing how to structure their personal lives in order to achieve a good balance and not blame themselves for the long hours away from

family...” (Participant 9). In a question that asked the respondents to compare the experiences of women from different generations, a recurring response was that Millennial and Generation Z women prioritize their professional lives over family/personal lives, whereas Baby Boomers and Generation X women prioritized their families. Another quote by Participant 9 illustrated this thought: “Generation X women had to take on the first leadership positions, work in new areas that were before restricted to men, show ability and competence but at times for the very high price of giving up their families. The Millennials start a family late and focus more on their jobs in the beginning of their careers.”

The low concern with work-life balance as a major barrier to female career advancement for the women working in Brazil could be due to their ability to rely on home support. As Table 3 illustrates (See Appendix), the majority of the women (68.97 percent) gave some importance to home support. Seventy-two percent of all respondents reportedly had the support of a housemaid, 3.25 percent of a nanny, 9.38 of a driver, and other sources of support varied from dog care, mother, friends or husband.

### **Research question 2: Do women in Brazil report cultural characteristics to be a major challenge to their career advancement?**

Cultural characteristics mold how behaviors are perceived and what roles are expected from women in an organization. *Machismo* and the collectivist value in Brazil are cultural characteristics that may reinforce gender stereotypes and lead to the discrimination of women in the workplace (Olavarría, 2003; Segrest, Romero, & Domke-Damonte, 2003). Questions addressing *machismo* and workplace discrimination were asked separately, allowing for a later examination of whether there is a consistency between the participants’ views of their culture and their personal experiences.

One of the questions in the survey asked the participants to share if they had faced any of the following difficulties throughout their careers: salary discrimination, promotion discrimination, inflexibility of work schedule, verbal harassment, sexual harassment, other difficulties not listed, or none. The answers indicated that the majority of the women (81 percent) have faced difficulties throughout their careers: inflexibility of work schedule (20 percent), followed by promotion discrimination (17 percent), salary discrimination (15 percent), verbal harassment (13 percent), sexual harassment (11 percent), and other (6 percent). The difficulties presented by the women who chose the option “Other” were moral harassment, harassment for being pregnant, and age discrimination. Only 19 percent of the respondents shared not having faced any difficulties. It is important to note that all of the Generation Z women reported not facing any of the above difficulties, which could mean that difficulties are felt after some time in an organization as all of them held entry-level positions, or that companies are becoming more aware of adversities to their female employees.

When the women were asked about the barriers encountered in their careers, overcoming female stereotypes had a low mean value of 2.00 (0.83), the 11th most frequently encountered barrier out of the 14 potential barriers. Although there was a relatively low value for the women’s perception of having faced difficulties related to discrimination based on gender stereotypes, when questioned about whether they believed that *machismo* has made it difficult for women to access top leadership positions, 86.21 percent of the women said “Yes.”

Moreover, instances of stereotypes, harassment, and *machismo* are repeatedly mentioned in the open-ended responses. In a question that asked the participants to describe their career

history and how they were able to arrive to their current positions, some of the answers were: “My first job was in a company that provided office supplies where I was the assistant of one of the owners and suffered moral and sexual harassment a few times...” (Participant 16, 28 years old), “I have worked in large companies in the automotive and engineering sectors -- environments predominantly masculine and full of *machista* attitudes” (Participant 15, 27 years old) and “I have faced a lot of prejudice for being a woman, and several times I had to prove my competency doing more than a man would need to do” (Participant 11, 22 years old). There were both consistencies and inconsistencies with the respondents’ answers. For instance, Participant 11 wrote that she had to face a lot of prejudice for being a woman, but she did not report facing any discrimination in question 18. In question 47 she responded “Yes” to the question of *machismo* hindering female career advancement and shared her views on *machismo* in the open-ended question, stating that “*Machismo* is implicit in men’s attitudes and way of thinking.” On the other hand, some respondents reported encountering discrimination throughout their careers both in the close-ended and open-ended questions, and they also see *machismo* as a barrier for women to advance to leadership positions.

Another open-ended question inquired about what younger women need to know to achieve high-level positions. There was a mix of answers; one woman advising that younger women should focus on their own characteristics and competencies without giving emphasis to the female vs. male issue (Participant 9), another encouraging women to take chances and not question their abilities because men do not do so (Participant 16), and another saying that men dedicate too much of their personal time to their careers and women should not do the same (Participant 28). Based on the answers to this question, *machismo* is not explicitly mentioned as a barrier to younger women and it is possible to see that women also integrate stereotypical gender roles in their discourse. When the participants were asked how men and women differed in their leadership styles, 68 percent of the answers mentioned that female leaders had more empathy or emotions than male leaders.

### **Research question 3: Do women in Brazil report the lack of female representatives in their companies to be a major challenge to their career advancement?**

Having women among the leaders in a corporation may facilitate other women’s rise to these positions and also improve their ability to participate in informal networks (McDonald & Westphal, 2013). As Table 2 in the Appendix shows, being excluded from informal networks was ranked the 7th most reported barrier to the participants’ career advancement with a mean value of 2.21 (1.00), meaning that this barrier is rarely encountered. Making contacts and having a superior’s support were considered important success factors for the women’s promotions (See Table 4 in the Appendix), but these were not ranked among the major success factors and it was not conclusive whether the superiors who aided their ascension were women. One of the respondents shared her view of the benefits of having women in leadership positions for inspirational purposes: “We need more women in leadership positions so that we can get inspired and have role models to follow” (Participant 14).

It is important to highlight that the barriers shown in Table 2 (See Appendix) had means below the scale midpoint of 3.0. The respondents, therefore, did not emphasize a particular barrier to their career ascension but noted a few consistent obstacles to their success as women. This pattern aligns with the representation of the labyrinth, which says that women may face multiple and differing barriers throughout their careers. In the analysis of age groups, it was

found that all the Generation Z women reported not having faced any discrimination or difficulties, and they also showed the lowest average in confronting barriers in their professional careers. Interestingly, 100 percent of respondents view that *machismo* has made it difficult for women to obtain leadership positions. When cross-referencing the views on *machismo* with other demographics, one striking result was that the only group that disagreed that *machismo* impeded women from achieving leadership positions was the one with the women who received between 10 to 20 times the minimum wages per month. This discovery may reflect Brazil's high score of 69 in the power distance value dimension, indicating that its society accepts inequality of power among its people. It was also noticed that the reports on encountering difficulties began to be more frequent once the participants earned a salary of at least 4 minimum wages per month, which was true to all the women who were past an entry-level position.

### Success Factors

Besides examining the obstacles that women have encountered throughout their careers, respondents were asked what success factors have allowed them to achieve job promotions. All the factors included in the query were important to the women's job promotions, with the exception of religion or spirituality (See Table 4 in the Appendix). Out of the options included in the study, the most important success factors to the respondents were their personality traits and their performance or results.

Another important finding emerged from the ranking of leadership traits that contributed the most to their career advancement and the most important characteristics of a leader, the participants in the study evaluated being strong or leaving emotion aside ( $M = 7.68$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ) and being empathetic with the hardships of others ( $M = 5.54$ ,  $SD = 1.92$ ) as the strongest characteristics (See Table 5 in the Appendix). These data suggest that the typical male stereotype of being strong and leaving emotions aside (Langford & Mackinnon, 2000) is not only admired by these women, but they also adopted these characteristics as leaders. Participant 15, a 27 year old coordinator at a communications company, shared that young women could advance to leadership positions by being strong and not being emotional: “[young women] will need to impose [sic] themselves consistently; there will always be professionals who will not give you voice, who will try to diminish your work - but it is important to keep the focus, do your best at work, and never let anyone get to you (which is hard sometimes).”

The ranking of the leadership characteristics followed a similar pattern after being cross-referenced with generational groups, with a few distinctions being that the Generation-Z women placed higher importance to knowing how to manage a team and less importance to knowing the organization well compared to the Millennials and Generation-X and Baby Boomers. This could be a result of the Generation-Z women having less time working in their respective companies or of the cultural drift towards focusing more on people and emphasizing less making a career in a company.

An analysis including educational levels also revealed that the women with specialization degrees as their highest educational level placed less emphasis on being empathetic with hardships of others when compared to the women with only graduate degrees or a master's degree. Moreover, the women who were paid less than 4 times the minimum wages recognized being goal-oriented as a most important leadership characteristic than being empathetic. Respondents did ascribe more of the caring emotions to describe female leadership, as in a question that asked the women to share how female and male leadership differed, common

words to describe female leaders were: sensitive, empathetic, multi-tasked, and attentive. Although gender stereotypes may provoke negative responses when people do not conform, studies have suggested that in some cases the female stereotype of being more empathetic or caring has been favorable for women when generally feminine styles are evaluated (Eagly & Mladinic, 1994). Being empathetic was shown to be a beneficial leadership characteristic to the participants' career advancement.

## DISCUSSION

This study investigated whether work-life balance, cultural characteristics, and lack of female representation in their Company (which are notable challenges for women in Latin America to achieve executive leadership positions) also affect women working in private companies in Brazil. While evaluating the results to answer the research questions, it was possible to observe the complexities of each challenge and how these are interconnected.

### **Research question 1: Do women in Brazil report work-life balance to be a major challenge to their career advancement?**

The women who participated in this study did not report work-life balance to be a major challenge to their career advancement both in the quantitative and qualitative questions. Although the participants reported sometimes having to prioritize their professional life over their personal/family life, this issue had not been sufficient for them to contemplate switching jobs, quitting, or retiring sooner. Perhaps making a decision to interrupt a career due to work-life conflict is an option considered more frequently by Generation-X women and Baby Boomers, or women who have more experienced careers (Anderson & Vinnicombe, 2015). Another motive for not discontinuing careers could be that women in Brazil, as well as in other Latin American countries, may heavily depend on the salary to sustain their lives. Additionally, Brazil's current economy may make finding an alternative employment restrictive. Furthermore, work-life balance was ranked the second lowest barrier that the participants have encountered in their careers out of 14 barriers listed. In the open-ended questions, only one respondent indicated work-life balance as a potential problem that younger women could encounter in the future of their careers.

A common view among the respondents when they were asked to compare experiences of women from different generations is that Millennial women give more emphasis to their professional lives and choose to have children at a later age when compared to the Generation X and the Baby Boomers. Even if this is true, having children and getting married are not the only priorities that women may contemplate, and work-life dimensions do not only involve having family time as it could also include leisure time.

Another point to consider when evaluating work-life conflict is that these women are able to obtain home support with chores from a housemaid, nanny, driver, or relatives. Services that aid with housework and errands also reduce the amount of time the women would be spending with these chores and allow them to spend more time at leisure activities. Even though home support could aid corporate women, this may reinforce the double burden to women who work in the informal sector. These women encounter work-life imbalance as well, especially because work shifts in the informal sector can be very inconsistent. A portrayal of the double burden of housemaids was exposed by Sheriff (2001) in one of her conversations with a wealthy Brazilian

woman. During their talk, this woman revealed that the maids lived with her family and went home to their families after fifteen days. Evidence of racial inequalities is also observed in domestic work, given that even though it is a job done by mainly black women, white women are more likely to receive the benefit of having their labor converted to formal work than black women (Abreu, Jorge, & Sorj, 1993).

In Brazil, housework is still mainly provided by women; a 2010 census revealed that there are around 7 million people employed in housework in the country, among which only 5 percent are men (Hirata, 2016). Women tend to take on the housework duties even within the familial domain, and evidence of this is found in the responses by the participants where only two women reported receiving support from their husbands. Support from partners can help avoid or alleviate women's work-life balance issues. However, parental roles exercised by male figures are at times hindered by influence of the *machista* culture in the household, which relates to the following research question.

**Research question 2: Do women in Brazil report cultural characteristics to be a major challenge to their career advancement?**

Cultural characteristics were found to be a major challenge to female career advancement in Brazil. Challenges based on cultural characteristics were measured through questions about experiencing gender discrimination in the workplace and views on *machismo*. Among the difficulties faced by the women in their careers, there were reports of promotion, salary, and age discrimination, inflexibility of work schedule, and verbal, sexual, and moral harassment. The open-ended questions also reported numerous accounts about experiences of prejudice, loss of opportunities for being a woman, and “*machista*” workplaces.

When asked if the participants believed that *machismo* has made it difficult for women to reach executive leadership positions, 86.21 percent of the women responded affirmatively. Despite agreeing so strongly and providing examples of instances in which *machismo* has been materialized through discrimination, there were frequent references to meritocracy as a means for women to make themselves noticed. This is to say that if women worked hard and showed positive results these women would be able to excel in their careers. Although this notion has an empowering appeal to it, studies have shown that when meritocracy is applied, male employees are favored over the female with the same qualifications (Castilla & Bernard, 2010). The women's views that *machismo* disadvantages female ascension in the workplace and their remarks about meritocracy oppose one another because in a meritocratic system, hard-working women would face no challenges related to discrimination. Research into meritocracy has found that members of disadvantaged groups believe in meritocracy because it gives them a perception of control over the outcomes (McCoy, Wellman, Cosley, Saslow, & Epel, 2013). Reinforcing meritocracy in the workplace can thus accentuate the burden on women and the challenges they may encounter.

**Research question 3: Do women in Brazil report the lack of female representatives in their companies to be a major challenge to their career advancement?**

Whether the lack of female representatives in companies is a major challenge to female career advancement is inconclusive in this study. The questions inquiring about the importance of mentorship and networking to the women's promotion did not explicitly ask if the

participants' success factors were facilitated by female leaders and there were no references to that in the open-ended answers. The close-ended responses show that making contacts and having a superior's support were important success factors for the women's advancement, but the gender of these leaders is unknown. Nevertheless, according to an open-ended response by Participant 14, the appointment of women to executive leadership positions provides a role model to be followed. Previous research supports the theory that increasing female representation is a fundamental first step to overcoming negative stereotypes (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019).

Gendered stereotypes of leadership styles have been reproduced by the participants in this study, as female leaders were usually described as being more sensitive, empathetic, multi-tasked, and attentive than male leaders. However, characteristics typically ascribed to men, such as being strong and leaving emotions aside, were considered the most important characteristic of a leader as well as their own. Being empathetic with the hardship of others was viewed by respondents as their second most important leadership characteristic and of other leaders. On the one hand this means that the participants regard the characteristics usually assigned to men as the most valuable, but on the other hand it also means that these women are adopting both the typical masculine and feminine traits, lessening the incongruity among gender leadership roles. The discoveries on favored leadership characteristics match the "think manager, think male" phenomenon that contends that good leaders are perceived to have characteristics usually attributed to men (Schein, 1975). However, the embrace of this characteristic by the women and its importance as a success factor to the participants' career advancement may dismantle the notion that being strong is a male characteristic, and ultimately pose a challenge to traditional gender stereotypes.

Investigating these three research questions has shown the complexity of the barriers for female career advancement to leadership positions in private companies in Brazil. A puzzling finding is that no single challenge has emerged as the main obstacle for the women in Brazil. It seems that the metaphor of the labyrinth (Carli & Eagly, 2015) is the fairest description to encase the careers of the women who envision ascending to executive leadership positions. As labyrinths, corporate women's path to executive leadership positions has its complexity too. This study tested at least 14 barriers and 6 difficulties that women can possibly encounter along their corporate ladder, and they have all threatened the participants' careers at some level. Nevertheless, there are success factors such as the women's personality traits, performance, and relationship building that facilitate their prosperity, or facilitate reaching the end of the labyrinth. It is necessary to emphasize that since this study only examined the employees' responses and not the employers, the analysis includes the accounts of how the women perceive their own trajectory in their careers.

## **LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

In the model study (Cárdenas et al., 2013) the data were collected through an in-person interview with the women executives. However, in order to reach a larger sample of participants for this current study, data were collected through an online survey. One of the limitations of this procedure is that some respondents skipped some questions and did not complete the questionnaire in its entirety. This complication was probably a result of the lengthiness of the questionnaire because the first nine questions recorded responses by 40 women, but after question 10 the numbers began to decrease. By the end of the quantitative section, there were

only reports of 29 responses. Comparisons between the results including the total women who answered a particular question and the results including only the participants who completed the whole survey do not show large variation, though. In a question that asked women how frequently they had to face the provided barriers, a change in the number of participants in the analysis led to a reordering of the rank order, but it still showed the same underlying result that no barrier could be considered an outlier.

Another shortcoming is that most of the participants reported to be working in the state of São Paulo. Although São Paulo hosts the economic center of Brazil, it may not accurately represent women who work in different regions of the country because the corporate culture in large cities may differ from companies in smaller urban centers. This study also aims to present the challenges that women working in Brazil view as most significant to them. Despite having reports from women of various ages, this study does not include a thorough generational analysis of the challenges. There was only one Baby Boomer who participated in the study, and she was included with the Generation X women to facilitate comparisons among age groups. Future research could include a larger representation of women from the different generations and an examination of whether these different generational groups perceive challenges alike or how they differ.

Millennials are more represented in this study, as well as women who were single and did not have children, so the findings may be more applicable to women who fit these characteristics. However, the findings of this thesis may contribute to the field because studies on gender disparity in business in Brazil focus on women who have experience in leadership positions and are mostly married and have children. Because challenges to career advancement can be encountered by women in various corporate levels and of any age, civil status, and having children or not, it is also important to investigate the experiences of women who may be just starting their careers or do not aspire to marriage or to nurture children for a more complete picture of the unfair corporate culture in Brazil.

Considering the limitations to this study, future studies could include a large number of participants from each region or different states of Brazil to provide a more accurate description of the challenges faced by women working in private companies. It would also be interesting to integrate a comparison of the challenges between the different age groups or generations. Moreover, future research could investigate the role that race and socio-economic class in gender inequalities play in business. These elements were not addressed in this study because the survey for this study did not include specific racial or socio-economic demographic data. However, due to Brazil's history of race inequality and also a high power distance value dimension, analyzing the intersectionalities of gender, race, and socio-economic class is necessary for firms to develop better support programs and to provide more equal opportunities of promotion to their employees.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study adds to the existing literature on the scarcity of women in executive leadership positions in Brazil and the challenges that hinder female career advancement. Previous research in this area focused on women who had experience leading a company. This research includes the participation of women who have not yet achieved leadership positions and a majority of Millennial respondents.



Work-life balance was not viewed by these respondents as a major challenge to female career advancement in Brazil. In fact, work-life conflict was one of the least frequent barriers encountered by the participants. This was further supported by a lack of references to work-life conflict in the open-ended responses. The country's cultural characteristics were found to be a major challenge for women's attainment of executive positions. Over 80 percent of the participants shared having faced difficulties and discrimination throughout their careers, and the women's narratives backed this finding. Finally, the lack of female representation in organizations was not found to be a major challenge because the participants placed low emphasis on this barrier. Further, it was inconclusive whether the support they received from leaders to ascend in their careers came from a woman or a man.

The analysis of the barriers and difficulties faced by women demonstrated that no single barrier stood out as the most prominent challenge to women in business in Brazil. This may indicate that the metaphor of barriers as a labyrinth (Carli & Eagly, 2015) is the most suited to describe the professional careers of these women. Although the labyrinth suggests that women's career path to top leadership positions is arduous and complex, it also adds that the women can find the exit to the labyrinth and thus succeed in their careers. Companies can assist female employees by destroying the walls of the labyrinth. As there is no standalone barrier that affects all women in business in Brazil, one way organizations can establish practices to create a more just environment for all their employees is by doing a study similar to this research in their workplace, assessing the views of both employees and employers. In this manner, projects that focus on specific challenges can be developed. Overcoming gender inequalities in business requires initiatives from the executives in charge; thus, it must be a collective effort that includes men as well.

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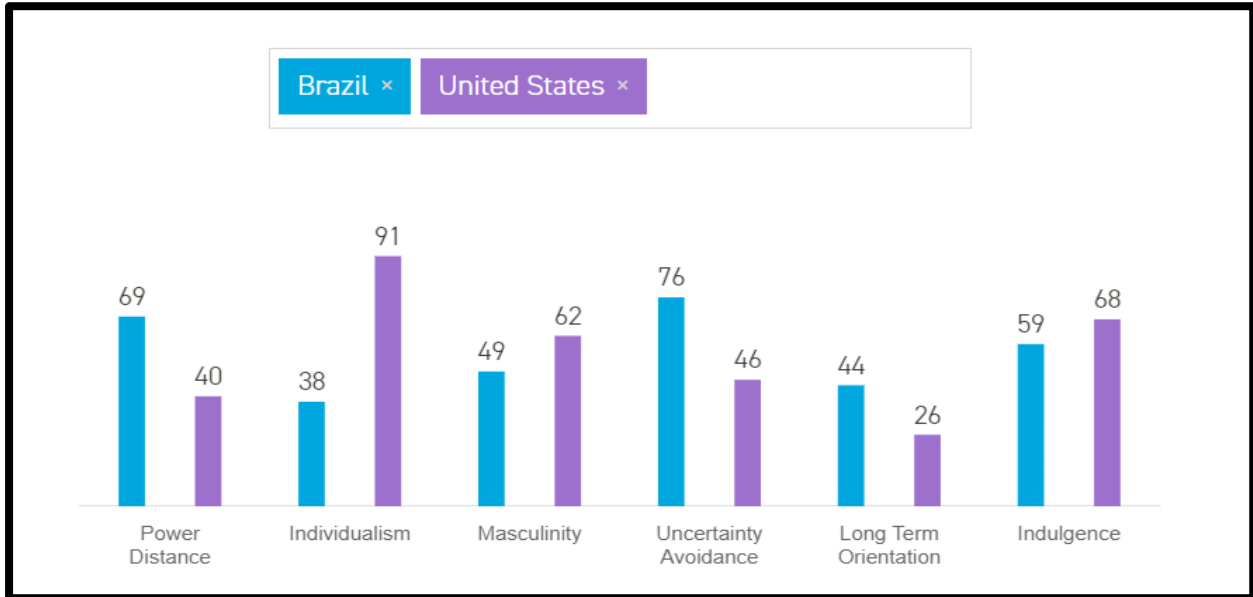
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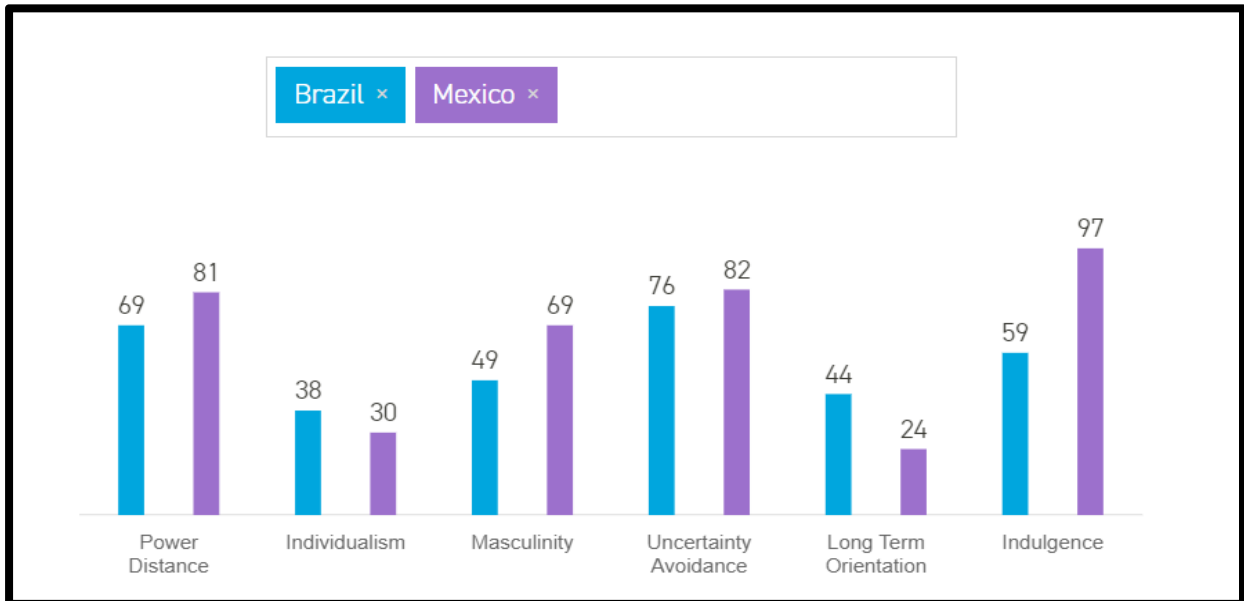
APPENDIX

Figure 1: Comparison of Brazil and United States' Value Dimensions



Retrieved from <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/brazil,the-usa/>

Figure 2: Comparison of Brazil and Mexico's Value Dimensions



Source: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/brazil,mexico/>

**Table 1: Demographics of the Participants**

<b>Demographics</b>	
Mean age (in years)	35.38
Single (%)	51.72
Married, domestic partnership (%)	34.48
With children (%)	44.83
<b>Education</b>	<i>(%)</i>
Bachelors	34.48
Post-graduate specialization	51.72
Masters	13.79
Doctoral	0.00
In Brazil	93.10
Abroad	6.90
<b>Professional Background</b>	<i>(%)</i>
Business and economics	27.59
Communication and marketing	20.69
Engineering and other sciences	27.59
Tourism	10.34
Other	13.79
<b>Work Schedule</b>	
Mean hours per week	43.56
Mean travel days per year	22.44
<i>Corporate title (%)</i>	
Directors, presidents, general managers	6.90
Vice-presidents	3.45
Manager	24.14

Supervisor	3.45
Coordinator	24.14
Any other leadership position	6.90
Entry level	24.14
Other	6.90
<b>Organization</b>	<b>(%)</b>
National	48.28
International	51.72
More than 250 employees (Medium-sized)	62.07
Mean percentage of female employees	45.67
Service sector (health, entertainment, education, culture, sports)	30.30
Industrial	24.24
Other	24.24
Note: The numbers indicate the value considering only the 29 participants who answered all the quantitative questions.	

**Table 2: Barriers for Women's Career Advancement in Brazil**

<i>Barrier</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Lack of skills to reach top leadership positions	2.59 (0.97)
Ascend without support networks	2.55 (1.00)
Not being able to use own leadership style	2.45 (0.97)
Politics in the organization	2.38 (1.10)
Lack of opportunities for visibility	2.34 (1.06)
Have my leadership style valued	2.31 (0.87)
Being excluded from informal networks	2.21 (1.00)
Lack of challenging tasks	2.17 (1.02)
Inhospitable corporate culture	2.07 (0.87)
Desire to reach higher levels	2.03 (0.93)
Overcoming female stereotypes	2.00 (0.83)
Work-life balance	1.93 (1.11)
Lack of experience in entry level positions	1.86 (0.78)
Little effective leadership	1.69 (1.02)
<p>Note: Means are on a five-point rating scale (1 = never and 5 = always) that assessed responses to the question "How frequently have you had to face the following barriers/obstacles to ascend in your professional career?" The numbers indicate the value considering only the 29 participants who answered all the quantitative questions.</p>	

**Table 3: Importance of Home Support**

<i>Importance of home support</i>	<i>%</i>
Not important	31.03
Relatively important	17.24
Important	10.35
Very important	17.24
Essential	24.14

Note: Percentage of responses to each ranking to the question “How important has home support (housemaids, drivers, nannies, etc.) been so that you could attain your current position?” The numbers indicate the value considering only the 29 participants who answered all the quantitative questions.

**Table 4: Success Factors in the Participants’ Careers**

<i>Success Factors</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Personality traits	4.31 (0.65)
Performance/results	4.24 (0.73)
Good interpersonal relationships	3.83 (0.75)
Successful labor history	3.76 (0.93)
Educational level attained	3.62 (0.89)
Family support	3.55 (1.16)
Contacts	3.45 (1.13)
Superior’s support	3.43 (0.94)
Working harder than others	3.34 (1.15)
Religion or spirituality	1.76 (1.04)

Note: Means are on a five-point rating scale (1 = never and 5 = always) that assessed responses to the question “How important have the following factors been in your achievement of job promotions?” The numbers indicate the value considering only the 29 participants who answered all the quantitative questions.

**Table 5: Participants' Assessment of Leadership Characteristics**

Characteristics	Of Own Leadership	Of a Good Leader
	M (SD)	M (SD)
Being goal-oriented	4.36 (2.26)	5.29 (2.05)
Having vision	3.28 (1.64)	3.43 (1.64)
Knowing how to manage a team	3.88 (2.01)	3.39 (1.80)
Knowing how to work in a team	2.96 (1.59)	3.61 (1.76)
Knowing the organization well	4.92 (1.79)	4.43 (1.90)
Being empathetic with the hardships of others	5.28 (1.71)	5.54 (1.92)
Being strong/leaving emotions aside	7.72 (0.60)	7.68 (0.89)
Communicating well	3.60 (2.23)	3.04 (2.20)

Note: Participants ranked the eight characteristics, 1 = least important to 8 = most important. The numbers indicate the value considering only the 29 participants who answered all the quantitative questions.