

Barriers to Leadership: Experiences of Women Leaders in Business and Politics

Barreras para el liderazgo: experiencias de mujeres líderes en la empresa y la política

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore the challenges women face when exercising leadership in the political and business spheres in the department of Cauca, Colombia.

Design/Methodology: The methodology included a phenomenological analysis and in-depth interviews with ten women in management positions. The goal was to understand how these women experience, interpret, and express the challenges they encounter in their leadership roles.

Findings: The findings reveal that, despite breaking the glass ceiling, women leaders continue to perceive gender stereotypes in their immediate environments, particularly those related to reproduction, family care, and appearance. Additionally, they face apathy and resistance from other women while leading.

Conclusions: Although women have made significant gains in political and corporate scenarios, these achievements remain constrained by the cultural weight of machismo. It is therefore essential to foster androgynous leadership environments based on competencies and to advocate for the equitable distribution of family and social responsibilities between men and women.

Originality: This study contributes to the field of leadership by examining how women navigate management roles in the corporate and political arenas in the department of Cauca.

Keywords: women managers, women in politics, leadership, gender stereotypes.

Highlights

- Women still perceive gender stereotypes while fulfilling their leadership roles in the business and political spheres of Cauca.
- Women in leadership positions experience heightened (self-)demands in their roles, leading to significant emotional costs.
- Gender stereotypes manifest as skepticism from both men and women towards female leadership.
- Increasing the representation of women in leadership roles is crucial for regional development in emerging economies.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: esta investigación tuvo por objetivo comprender las dificultades que las mujeres enfrentan al ejercer liderazgo en el ámbito político y empresarial del departamento del Cauca (Colombia).

Diseño/Metodología: se indagó en los desafíos del liderazgo en un grupo de diez mujeres que ocupan cargos directivos, usando un diseño fenomenológico que incluyó entrevistas en profundidad para comprender cómo ellas experimentan, interpretan y expresan estos desafíos.

Resultados: los resultados indican que las líderes, a pesar de haber roto el techo de cristal, todavía perciben estereotipos de género en su entorno próximo, como la reproducción, el cuidado familiar y la apariencia; además, se enfrentan a la apatía y resistencia de otras mujeres mientras lideran.

Conclusión: desde esta perspectiva, el territorio ganado por las mujeres participantes en este estudio, en escenarios políticos y corporativos, aún se encuentra subordinado al peso cultural del machismo, por lo que es necesario estimular ambientes de liderazgo andrógino, basado en competencias, y promover la distribución equitativa en la asignación de tareas familiares y sociales entre hombres y mujeres.

Originalidad: esta investigación enriquece los estudios de liderazgo al analizar cómo las mujeres desempeñan sus labores cuando ocupan cargos directivos en el campo empresarial y político del departamento del Cauca.

Palabras clave: mujeres gerentes, mujeres en política, liderazgo, estereotipos de género.

Highlights

- Las mujeres siguen percibiendo los estereotipos de género en el desempeño de sus funciones de liderazgo en las esferas empresarial y política del Cauca.
- Las mujeres en posiciones de liderazgo experimentan mayores (auto)exigencias en sus roles, lo que conlleva a costos emocionales significativos.
- Los estereotipos de género se manifiestan como escepticismo tanto de hombres como de mujeres hacia el liderazgo femenino.
- Aumentar la representación de las mujeres en puestos de liderazgo es crucial para el desarrollo regional en las economías emergentes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership is a theoretical construct that has been extensively studied and documented in the literature. However, this trend is less pronounced when it comes to women's leadership in specific arenas. The increasing presence of women in political, economic, and social scenarios—where they have the power to voice opinions and make decisions—has garnered significant research interests, particularly given the historical conditions of inequality and inequity to which they have been subjected (Grabe & Dutt, 2020; Evans & Pfister, 2021). Leadership is generally understood as the ability to influence the ideas and actions of groups and individuals to achieve objectives (Husain-Talero & Muñoz Angulo, 2019). Such influence may be exerted from formal or informal positions. This study focuses on the leadership of women in management positions, specifically formal leadership, characterized by paid responsibilities and decision-making authority in political and business spheres.

The integration of women into various educational levels, including higher education, and their entry into the workforce has been undeniable in Latin America. This has been largely driven by the recognition of rights that guarantee gender equality (Marchionni et al., 2019; Ramos et al., 2022). However, despite these advancements, women still participate less in the labor market compared to men and often earn less for the same roles, even when they hold equal or superior qualifications

(Bustelo et al., 2023; Erkal et al., 2022). In addition, women are frequently burdened with multiple unpaid tasks (Muhr, 2011; Gobernación del Cauca, Observatorio de Asuntos de las Mujeres, ONU Mujeres, 2020). Furthermore, women remain underrepresented in senior management positions, with a more balanced representation at intermediate levels or in positions of medium responsibility (Asociación Nacional de Empresarios de Colombia - ANDI, 2021; Rincón et al., 2017).

The gender gap in management roles varies significantly depending on the sector. According to The Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2021), gender disparity in political and economic participation is notably greater than in the fields of health and education. Particularly, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2021) reported that, on average, women held only a quarter of seats in local governments in 2019. At the corporate level, less than a quarter (22.4%) of leadership positions were occupied by women (Martínez, 2021). Notably, inequality persists, with women's work still heavily concentrated in traditionally feminine roles such as assistants, secretaries, and other general services—a phenomenon known as 'horizontal segregation' (Alfonso Gallegos et al., 2017; Zabludovsky Kuper, 2015).

The situation in Cauca, Colombia mirrors that of other Latin American regions. The department's ethnic diversity poses additional challenges for women, especially in the political arena, where decision-making is crucial for equity, equality, and socio-economic development. For example, the department has never been governed by a woman, and women's representation in other political roles is similarly limited. In fact, only 1 out of 13 seats in the assembly and 8 out of 42 municipal mayoral positions are held by women (Gobernación del Cauca, Observatorio de Asuntos de las Mujeres, ONU Mujeres, 2020). While women's leadership is more representative in social and religious settings—largely due to their unpaid contribution to the care and well-being of their communities—the barriers they face increase as they seek higher political office. The efforts to achieve greater formalization in the political system are often diluted at the highest levels of the hierarchy (Fernández de Castro & Díaz-García, 2020; Hoyt & Murphy, 2016; Zabludovsky Kuper, 2015), which demonstrates the difficulties women encounter in reaching and maintaining management positions.

Various studies have positively correlated women's leadership with business development (Baena-Luna and García-Río, 2021; Rahman & Zahid, 2021; Zaccone, 2023). In particular, Baena-Luna and García-Río's (2021) systematic literature review suggests increased entrepreneurial initiatives among staff in companies led by women. However, the limited number of studies on this subject made it difficult for the author to draw definitive conclusions. The study by Rahman and Zahid (2021) demonstrates that corporate development is more significantly impacted when boards of directors are led and advised by women. Moreover, Zaccone (2023) notes that women's substantive presence in leadership roles enhances the potential for sustainable governance. These findings underscore the importance of women's contributions in critical areas such as economics and administrative management. Given that leadership is a key competence for social and economic development, it is evident that fostering a culture of gender diversity can have a profound impact.

The evolving demands of a diverse labor market call for democratic cultures that ensure equal distribution of power, recognize the skills of both men and women, and eliminate gender bias in decision-making. Moving away from the traditional model implies bringing to light the obstacles that women encounter in achieving and maintaining senior management positions. However, previous studies have concentrated more on the gender-specific challenges women meet throughout their career paths, rather than the additional struggles they face once they reach positions of power. Given the progress in female representation in key business and political positions, it is imperative to focus on the experiences of women leaders, as their perceptions are essential for understanding the organizational landscape and business development in Cauca. Examining these experiences within this context provides valuable insights into their phenomenology and helps to bridge research gaps. Therefore, the primary objective of this article is

to explore the barriers experienced by a group of women leaders in the business and political spheres in the department of Cauca in Colombia.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Breaking the glass ceiling

The concept of 'glass ceiling' is defined as the invisible barriers that women typically encounter when attempting to advance in their careers (Kaya & Tamer, 2024). This phenomenon has been discussed by several authors, including Chisholm-Burns et al. (2017), Wirth (2001), and Kanojia (2024). Research indicates that experience and training alone are insufficient for women to secure effective promotion opportunities (Waqar et al., 2021). Furthermore, the challenges persist even for those who manage to break through the glass ceiling, as women are more likely than men to hold risky and precarious management positions—a phenomenon referred to as the 'glass cliff' (Amakye et al., 2021; Ryan et al., 2016). For instance, organizations in crisis, where the risk of failure is elevated, see women as a wildcard. However, the glass cliff is not the only obstacle that women in management positions have to deal with. They must also contend with additional barriers within their organizations (Sobaih & Abu Elnasr, 2024; Naseviciute & Juceviciene, 2024). In addition, these adverse situations coexist with the new and minority leadership figures that they embody in contexts traditionally dominated by men. Internally, women grapple with a lack of recognition, respect, and validation—elements necessary to build their identity, self-esteem, and a sense of competence in management. Furthermore, astonishment, disbelief and distrust are typical of the business environment where the presence of women in positions of power is not common.

Gender stereotypes

Prior research on women in leadership positions has primarily relied on literature reviews and documentary sources, with limited field studies available. Despite this scarcity, some studies suggest that the primary barriers women face in leadership roles are linked to their leadership style and its perceived effectiveness (Lyness & Grotto, 2018). This may be due to gender stereotypes (Amakye et al., 2021; Carli, 2018; Carrascosa Puertas, 2020; Rincón et al., 2017; Ryan et al., 2016), which are defined as sociocultural beliefs that prescribe behavioral norms for men and women (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Such stereotypes have had negative implications in both business and political spheres (Alcaraz Marin & Vásquez Parra, 2020; Brescoll et al., 2018; Lozano Suárez, 2018; Zaragoza, 2020), often leading to the disqualification of women and the undermining of their dignity (Cook & Cusack, 2009). For example, women are usually expected to exhibit sensitive and affective behaviors, which are perceived as contradictory in positions of power (Brescoll, 2016). As a result, women are forced to choose between what they want to be and what is expected of them, so they must work twice as hard as men to earn the same respect and maintain their position (Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Carmona Suárez, 2015).

Other studies have identified specific barriers related to the social roles traditionally attributed to women, such as household responsibilities and child-rearing, which place them at a disadvantage in career advancement compared to men (Babic & Hansez, 2021; Moncayo Orjuela & Zuluaga, 2015; Undurraga & López Hornickel, 2020). This dual responsibility leads women to either relinquishing their achievements or maintaining their position at the expense of physical and emotional exhaustion as they strive to balance their careers with their family responsibilities—a phenomenon referred to in this article as the 'double burden'. These circumstances can result in feelings of vulnerability to failure and even resignation (Frkal & Criscione-Naylor, 2021; Kerfoot & Knights, 1998). Moreover, there is an additional pressure for women not to break gender norms, like "not to be where they should not be". Consequently, opportunities and advantages are forfeited in an effort to

overcome inequality (Belasen et al., 2021; Cortis et al., 2022). This includes the establishment of a level playing field in existing markets and the potential for greater economic growth. In either case, inequality represents a loss for society, as the potential of gender diversity in leadership is not being fully exploited (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Eagly, 2018; Peña Frade, 2010).

3. METHODOLOGY

To conduct this study, a two-stage descriptive approach was employed. In the first stage, a questionnaire was administered to gather the participants' sociodemographic data. The second stage involved in-depth interviews guided by a phenomenological approach, which emphasized the interpretation and understanding of subjective experiences by focusing on the participants' discourse and the meanings they ascribe to their experiences (De los Reyes Navarro et al., 2020). Although this methodology yielded interesting results, the analysis in this article is limited to narratives that account for the barriers to leadership, as directly experienced by the participating women (see Figure 1).

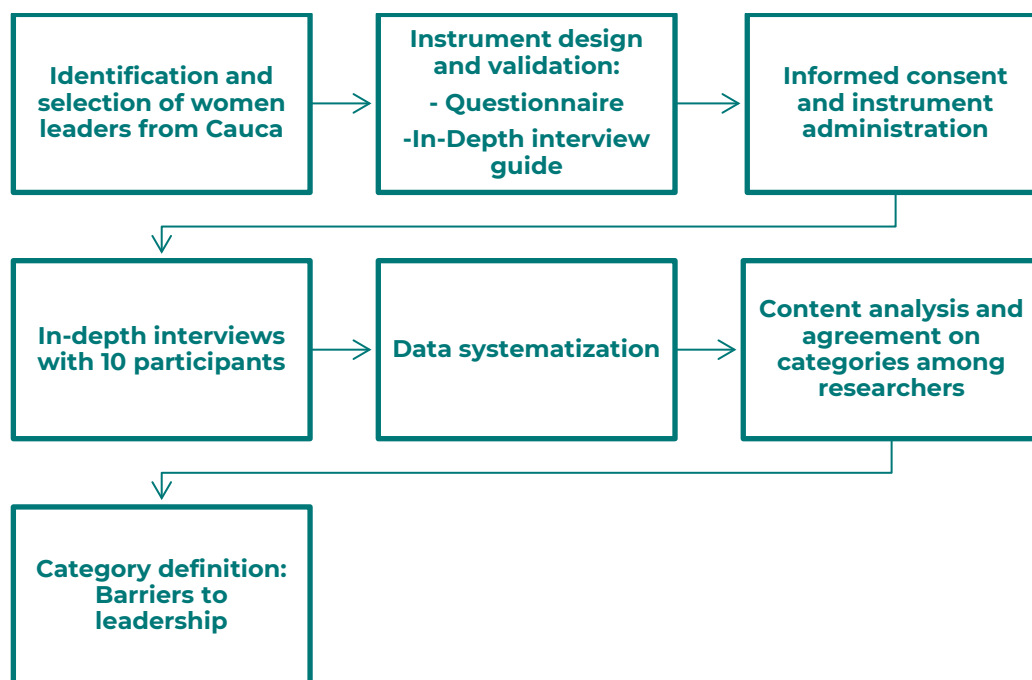


Figure 1. Steps of the research process
 Figura 1. Etapas del proceso de investigación
 Source: Own work (2023).

The study involved ten women leaders from the department of Cauca, working in both political (six participants) and business (four participants) sectors. Participants were selected using a random and non-probabilistic method based on the following criteria: (a) holding a leadership position in either political or business scenarios, (b) having leadership experience in the Cauca region, (c) having a leadership career of more than two years, and (d) providing informed consent to participate in the research.

The questionnaire administered in the first stage consisted of closed and open-ended questions designed to gather sociodemographic data, including age, years of experience, marital status, educational level, and leadership attributes. Among the ten leaders, three were mayors of

municipalities in Cauca, two were councilors, one was a member of parliament for Cauca, two were directors of a private union, one was a director in the banking sector, and one was a leader in the higher education sector. In terms of age, six were aged between 46 and 55, while four were aged between 36 and 45. Regarding their marital status, eight were married or in a civil union, one was separated, and one was widowed. All participants reported having children. Concerning educational level, three participants held undergraduate degrees, whereas seven reported holding graduate degrees. Finally, with respect to leadership experience, seven participants had over ten years of experience, while three had between five and ten years (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of participating women leaders

Tabla 1. Características de las mujeres participantes

Leadership scope	Six in the political arena, four in the business sector
Leadership experience	Seven with over ten years of experience, three with five to ten years of experience
Age range	Six aged between 46 and 55, four aged between 36 and 45
Educational level	Seven holding graduate degrees, three holding undergraduate degrees
Marital status	Eight married or in a civil union, one separated, one widowed

Source: Own work.

The in-depth phenomenological interviews conducted in the second stage of the study followed a dialogical technique aimed at eliciting descriptions of participants' own experiences. The researchers focused on understanding the narratives as expressed by each woman, respecting their perspectives empathically while inferring the phenomenon of interest, that is, barriers to leadership (Castro Ramos, 2021; Høffding & Martiny, 2016).

Prior to conducting the interviews, a guide consisting of ten questions was prepared. As proposed by Køster and Fernández (2023), this guide traces the interaction route, allowing for an exploration of the 'what' and 'how' of the barriers experienced by the participants. To validate the instrument, two strategies were employed. First, the initial set of questions was reviewed by thematic experts, namely professors with research experience and a background in gender studies. These experts offered formal and content-related suggestions to refine the questions and ensure that the elicited responses were pertinent to the research objective. Subsequently, the guide was tested on a group of participants with characteristics similar to those of the study population. These two strategies enabled the validation of seven guiding questions. However, while these questions addressed leadership roles, career trajectories, milestones, attributes, barriers, and opportunities, this article focuses exclusively on the narratives that accounted for obstacles in the exercise of leadership.

The data presented in this study are part of a larger research project titled *Leadership, Political Participation, and Empowerment from a Gender Perspective: Political, Social, and Economic Fields*. To identify women leaders in the business and political sector, databases provided by the Observatorio de Asuntos de las Mujeres del Cauca (OAMC, abbreviated in Spanish) were consulted. Participants were contacted via e-mail and telephone to explain the purpose and scope of the study and to request their verbal consent to participate. Those who confirmed their willingness to participate were emailed a virtual form containing questions on sociodemographic aspects and leadership experience, along with a section to confirm their consent and agreement to use the information provided.

Having gathered the preliminary sociodemographic data, a meeting was arranged with the ten selected women leaders. After confirming the nature and purpose of the study, participants verbally consented to participate in the interview and to have it recorded. The interviews lasted approximately two hours and were conducted by the three authors of this article via Google Meet, as COVID-19 restrictions were still in place. To ensure participant privacy, pseudonyms were used in the transcription of the interviews. Ethical guidelines on the confidential management of information and identity were shared with the participants, in accordance with Colombian legislation, specifically Law 1090 of 2006 and Resolution 8430 of 1993. This study was categorized as minimal risk and was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Psychology Department at the Fundación Universitaria de Popayán.

Finally, the narratives from the in-depth interviews were transcribed, with irrelevant information excluded from the analysis. Responses related to barriers and obstacles encountered in the exercise of leadership were coded and organized into conceptual themes, which formed the basis for the categories presented in the results section. Content analysis techniques were employed to interpret the narratives (Bardin, 2002) and construct three major conceptual categories related to the challenges posed by the macho culture. In this context, various stereotypes that constrained women's performance were recreated. This approach considered the recommendations by Høffding and Martiny (2016) for conducting phenomenological interviews, which emphasize the importance of an empathetic and reciprocal encounter between the interviewee and the interviewer. Such strategy facilitates the analysis and understanding of the participants' experiences while ensuring interpretive coherence. Lastly, the research team reviewed, contrasted, and consolidated the narratives, thereby enhancing the rigor and reliability of the data management process.

4. RESULTS

The results are organized into three main categories derived from the experiences of women leaders in both the political (coded L.P. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6) and business (coded L.B. 1, 2, 3, 4) spheres. Most narratives highlight challenges rooted in culturally discriminatory generalizations. In the first category, participants account for barriers encountered in their private and public environments, where *stereotypes pervade their daily leadership roles*. Such stereotypes exacerbate gender differences and hinder women's ability to manage effectively. In the second category, participants recognize cultural beliefs as ingrained mental schemas, which are attributed to the *weak gender awareness* among their peers and manifested in the limited sense of sorority or sisterhood. In the third category, participants emphasize the pressing need to *demonstrate* extra effort, which is often seen as the greatest value in fully exercising leadership.

First category. The cultural weight of machismo: Stereotypes in women leaders' everyday lives

Subordinate inclusion: "Women are seen as standing behind a male leader"

The narratives presented in Table 2 reveal how men instrumentalize the desire of women leaders to achieve political prominence. This dynamic can be conceptualized as a form of "if you run behind me, you can run," whereby the so-called subordinate inclusion is far from promoting genuine equality.

Table 2. Subordinate inclusion: "Women are seen as standing behind a male leader"

Tabla 2. Inclusión subordinada: "Las mujeres están detrás de un líder"

Category	Subcategory	Narratives
The cultural weight of machismo: Stereotypes in women leaders' everyday lives	Subordinate inclusion: "Women are seen as standing behind a male leader"	<p>"One of the worst things was having to beg for political endorsement. Men use us just as a number. Women are always seen as standing 'behind' a male political leader. It's up to us to make our work more visible (...) If you are with him, you have a chance; otherwise, you don't. That is a very complex limitation. It's one thing to enter as a candidate to be elected, and quite another to be merely an addition to Pepito Pérez" (L. P. 1).</p> <p>"They know me because of Dr. Y. [a prominent male political figure in Colombia]. For example, D.T. [a former governor of a major Colombian department], who is she recognized by? This is a pattern in all women's political scenarios" (L. P. 3).</p>

Source: Own work.

Differentiated schemes of being a man and a woman: Production – Reproduction

The experiences of disqualification by their male peers, who prioritize private-domestic tasks for women, often force them to make choices that diverge from pursuing roles in the public-political sphere. Such disqualification extends beyond mere stereotypical and prejudiced expressions, becoming a clear behavior of exclusion, as evidenced in the following narratives (see Table 3).

Table 3. Differentiated schemes of being a man and a woman: production – reproduction

Tabla 3. Esquemas diferenciados de ser hombre y mujer: producción-reproducción

Category	Subcategory	Narratives
The cultural weight of machismo: Stereotypes in women leaders' everyday lives	Differentiated schemes of being a man and a woman: Production - Reproduction	<p>"When it comes to political matters, the men we encounter in these spaces sometimes behave like brutes. They make comments like 'all you're good for is going to bed or staying home to take care of the kids'" (L. P. 3).</p> <p>"To be a mother, wife, housewife, responsible daughter to aging parents, among other roles, is a great additional burden. At least, I manage it all, though. It was me who raised my children, not my husband. I don't leave them with a nanny, so I have to be a mother, even if I'm busy" (L. B. 2).</p> <p>"The father of my daughter has never supported my candidacy because, if a woman comes home at 2 or 3 a.m., he imagines the worst. Instead of supporting me, he has burdened me with even more responsibilities" (L. P. 1).</p>

Source: Own work.

The cultural beliefs described by the participants not only manifest in the workplace but also in the family domain. It is clear that understanding how to change these deeply ingrained schemas requires acknowledging their pervasive nature and the ease with which they are perpetuated in different scenarios.

Salient traits in stereotypes: Weakness – Beauty

Women are culturally stereotyped with traits such as weakness and beauty, which contrast with the physical strength attributed to men, from whom firmness, protection, and leadership are expected. Leadership qualities in both men and women are judged based on physical attributes, as well as cognitive and emotional capacities. The traits culturally and biologically ascribed to men tend to favor them and place women at a disadvantage (see Table 4).

Table 4. Salient traits in stereotypes: Weakness – Beauty
 Tabla 4. Rasgos destacados en los estereotipos: debilidad-belleza

Category	Subcategory	Narrative
The cultural weight of machismo: Stereotypes in women leaders' everyday lives	Salient traits in stereotypes: Weakness – Beauty	"When I'm in a meeting and a man gets angry and slams the table, they say he has a strong temperament; if a woman does the same, she's labeled as hysterical. There are a series of qualifiers closely tied to gender in leadership" (L. B. 1).
		"I feel treated differently for being a woman. I don't walk into a room and immediately comment on a man's appearance; men do make those kinds of comments to women. I think it's part of Latino culture, but I'm not sure" (L. B. 4). "Paradoxically, not having those beauty attributes can also work against you: I have felt belittled and attacked because I don't have the perfect figure. My physique is that of common people, not the promoted prototype" (L. P. 4).

Source: Own work.

These qualifiers reflect behaviors where women are treated as objects of beauty—behaviors that are notably absent in the interactions of women leaders with their male counterparts (see Table 4). This scenario reveals, in some narratives, an underlying discomfort linked to the lack of formal recognition of women's leadership. There is a plea for respect for their identity as leaders, rather than being valued merely for their physical appearance or reproductive potential. Moreover, the traditional conception of men as providers and public figures, who wield decisive power in various domains, remains largely unchanged.

Double presence: Exacerbated gender awareness?

Double presence is a strategy employed by some women leaders to achieve their professional goals without breaking their domestic "contracts". While this approach may enhance gender equality in the public sphere, it does not necessarily translate to improved conditions in the private sphere. Previous studies indicate that, at times, domestic tasks are delegated to other women, often leading to a concomitant sense of guilt (see Table 5).

Table 5. Double presence: Exacerbated gender awareness?
 Tabla 5. Doble presencia: exacerbada conciencia de género

Category	Subcategory	Narrative
The cultural weight of machismo: Stereotypes in women leaders' everyday lives	Double presence: Exacerbated gender awareness?	"Sometimes I look at my husband. We get home at 8 p.m. He opens the door, goes upstairs, and lies down to watch TV. I open the door, go in, see what is going on and what needs to be picked up, check on school assignments" (L. B. 4).

Source: Own work.

The narratives reveal a degree of internalized legitimization, even among women leaders who, being part of this sociocultural environment, are burdened by the concept of double presence. The consequences of this duality are profound for themselves and their environment, since having challenged the traditional socio-cultural binary distinctions and assuming non-traditional roles, women find themselves compelled to meet the demands of both home and work (see Table 6).

Table 6. Double presence: Implications

Tabla 6. Doble presencia: implicaciones

Category	Subcategory	Narratives
The cultural weight of machismo: Stereotypes in women leaders' everyday lives	Double presence	"The business of being a candidate, mother, head of household is overwhelming because you have to give up responsibilities that are only yours. Managing my daughter's education during the campaign was very complex. I had the support of my mother, but it wasn't her responsibility" (L. P. 1).
		"When [my daughters] returned [from their trips], I would wake up at 4 a.m. to work from 4 to 8 a.m. so they wouldn't see me working and I wouldn't miss out on those moments. I remember once getting a call from the High Council because the president had arrived. I had to tell my daughters: 'Sweethearts, I know we're on vacation, but I need to head to the city for a meeting with the president at the events center.' It hurts not to have been more present. I feel this emptiness for not having spent more time with them" (L. B. 1).

Source: Own work.

Seeking to fulfill these multiple roles, women often encounter heightened physical exhaustion, reduced hours of sleep and rest, conflicts within their family life (with partners or children), and conflicts of a personal and emotional nature (see Table 7).

Table 7. Double presence: Conflicts

Tabla 7. Doble presencia: conflictos

Category	Subcategory	Narrative
The cultural weight of machismo: Stereotypes in women leaders' everyday lives	Double presence	"The sacrifices have mainly been time, time for myself and time for my family. These sacrifices sometimes have significant consequences. There's often no time for yourself, for your health, for your husband, for your children, or for many other things. You're caught up in work issues that come with these positions" (L. B. 2).
		"Even though I'm exhausted, I stay up all night. My husband says: 'You've stayed up late three nights in a row; why don't you make some space for me?' There's just no space to let off steam" (L. B. 5).
		"Many also looked down on me because I had no money. I had to overcome fear. I still face fear" (L. P. 4).

Source: Own work.

In general, this time overload, compounded by unpaid duties in addition to the leadership responsibilities, takes a significant toll on women's psychological and emotional well-being. These challenging situations represent barriers to women's leadership, which can affect their aspirations for promotion and, in some cases, lead to resignation. This is evident from the narratives of one of the political leaders who participated in the study (see Table 8).

Table 8. Double presence: Effects

Tabla 8 Doble presencia: efectos

Category	Subcategory	Narratives
The cultural weight of machismo: Stereotypes in women leaders' everyday lives	Double presence	"Those are the reasons a woman might not accept being a candidate. She has to take responsibility for her house, her children, everything" (L. P. 3).

Source: Own work.

Such narratives highlight the precarious situation in which some leaders' life plans are found. The decision to abandon a career, whether by one individual or several, results in the loss of diverse leadership. This, in turn, widens the gaps between men and women in political and economic scenarios, leading to a reduction in equitable gender representation for the citizens of Cauca.

Second Category. The cultural weight of machismo: Prevailing stereotypes among women

A lack of gender awareness? "Women also discriminate against one another"

This negative conception, especially when expressed by other women, contradicts the expected behavior. Despite the initial surprise voiced by political and business leaders, this behavior reveals its deep cultural roots and pervasive influence (see Table 9):

Table 9. A lack of gender awareness? "Women also discriminate against one another"

Tabla 9. Falta conciencia de género: las mujeres también nos discriminamos

Category	Subcategory	Narratives
The cultural weight of machismo: Prevailing stereotypes among women	A lack of gender awareness? "Women also discriminate against one another"	"Among women, we treated each other worse. On the political stage, they called me a whore. Women hit each other harder and lower. They made fun of my mom because she has no education. It's funny because now, the women who attacked me have to meet me in different scenarios. It's wise not to judge anyone without knowing what the future holds. I insist, women hit each other harder" (L. P. 1).
		"We lack unity in supporting each other. Sometimes, we even do not allow ourselves to receive help. Rather, we discriminate against our own community" (L. B. 2).
		"You can see this discrimination among women themselves—we are often responsible for it. We tend to criticize other women the most. It's incredible, but it happens a lot" (L. P. 5).
		"The problem isn't just the macho man; it's also the 'macho woman'—the woman who feels inferior because she is a woman. It's a vicious cycle that we, as a society, perpetuate. Men do what they do because women allow it" (L. B. 3).

Source: Own work.

Apparently, the expected behavior among women in a group would typically involve solidarity and mutual support, as part of a shared gender identity. However, this does not occur, which could be attributed to women leaders not accepting the traditional social roles associated with the private and domestic spheres. As a result, the awareness of being with others is lost in their struggle for gender equality.

Third category. Demonstration as a resource to address skepticism about women’s leadership

Publicly showcasing their achievements becomes a useful tool for women leaders to counter criticism related to their leadership (see Table 10).

Table 10. Demonstration as a resource to address skepticism about women’s leadership

Tabla 10. La demostración: un recurso para afrontar el escepticismo sobre su gestión

Category	Narratives
Demonstration as a resource to address skepticism about women’s leadership.	“Because I’m both indigenous and a woman, people often think: ‘She won’t be able to do it.’ However, as people began to recognize my experience and listen to my speeches, it became clear that I could contribute to meaningful dialogue and problem-solving. When they noticed my confidence, they began to respect me. They want to make you invisible, but we won’t let them” (L. P. 2).
	“It’s a cultural belief that women should obey. The goal is not to change our mindset but to prepare ourselves and gain experience because we are capable” (L. P. 5).
	“We women have received training and demonstrated that we are very capable” (L. B. 3).

Source: Own work.

Given the skills and talents that society demands from its leaders, training and experience seem to be essential but often insufficient for effective women’s leadership. This may result in increased emotional and physical strain as women strive to prove their decision-making abilities and take on high-level responsibilities, often exceeding what is typically expected of them.

The statements above reflect the persistence and resilience of women in a diverse and hostile context that has empowered them to assume positions of high responsibility. They not only confront and overcome personal, professional, and social challenges but their example inspires other women to shatter the glass ceiling. Their efforts cultivate an environment for emerging female leadership practices.

Table 11 provides a summary of the three main categories defined in the analysis.

Table 11. Categories defined in the analysis

Tabla 11. Categorías de análisis

Category	Subcategories	Description
The cultural weight of machismo: Stereotypes in women leaders’ everyday lives	Subordinate inclusion: “Women are seen as standing behind a male leader”	Women as instruments, to the detriment of gender equality.
	Differentiated schemes of being a man and a woman: Production - Reproduction	Disqualification of being a woman, stereotypical schemes.
	Salient traits in stereotypes: Weakness-beauty	Social attributes of feminine beauty contrast with social expectations of masculine strength.
	Double presence: Exacerbated gender awareness?	Home vs. work demands and their psycho-emotional effects on women.

Category	Subcategories	Description
The cultural weight of machismo: Prevailing stereotypes among women	A lack of gender awareness? "Women also discriminate against one another"	The lack of sorority affects the fight for gender equality.
Demonstration as a resource to address skepticism about women's leadership	Demonstration as a resource to address skepticism about women's leadership	Demonstrating their capabilities is crucial for women to mitigate social pressures associated with their leadership.

Source: Own work.

5. DISCUSSION

Advances in gender equality augur a future with greater possibilities for women in fields where decisions impact areas other than domestic and social spheres. These new realities reflect an increasing acceptance of female representation, as reported by prominent institutions (ANDI, 2021; ECLAC, 2021; UN Women, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2021). Despite this, research on the challenges women face in attaining leadership positions remains limited. This study aimed to address this gap by examining the experiences of women in key organizational roles, specifically the barriers they encounter in fully exercising leadership.

The study's participants reported encountering various forms of prejudice, along with subtle and systematic efforts to undermine their management skills. The prevalence of male dominance in influential positions often subordinates women's actions and reduces their presence to mere symbolic representations, a concept referred to as *descriptive representation* in the literature (Sánchez Medero, et al., 2022; Young, 2000). Specifically, the women participating in this study, especially those engaged in politics, acknowledged the impact of male dominance within party systems. To be included in parity lists, they frequently had to compromise their personal and political beliefs, often repaying favors to their male peers, with the implicit benefit of normalizing their presence in governance spaces.

Similar to the findings of Amakye et al. (2021) and Rincón et al. (2017), the results obtained in this study indicate that women continue to face prejudices and stereotypes even after attaining leadership positions. Participants reported experiencing discrimination in their daily administrative duties, which could be interpreted as a form of symbolic violence (Morales Alfonso & Pérez Cárdenas, 2021). They frequently encountered reminders of their "proper place" and "best-suited roles", which are rooted in cultural beliefs about biological, physical, or social competencies (Cook & Cusak, 2009). These beliefs imply that when women step outside their traditionally assigned roles of care and reproduction (Brescoll et al., 2018), they are regarded as a threat to the traditional figure of authority, commonly provoking attitudes of disdain and aversion. According to the role congruity theory, prejudices against women increase when their roles are seen as incompatible with their gender (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women are typically viewed as outsiders in a system traditionally considered appropriate for men, and their participation in leadership may be considered detrimental. Furthermore, the perceived (in)congruence between their gender and their roles influences expectations regarding their success or failure (García-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006).

This study also highlights the derogatory assessments of women's bodies and appearances. As members of a select group, women are subjected to greater scrutiny and face contested privileges while navigating uncertain social expectations regarding what it means to be a woman in power (Mavin & Grandy, 2016). In other words, deviations from expected behavior, style, or appearance

generate ambiguities that affect their authenticity, leading to labels such as “a woman with pants.” Women leaders are expected to demonstrate people-oriented leadership, high diligence in task completion, flexibility, authority with subtlety (to avoid being labeled hysterical), and firmness in critical situations (to prevent censorship). Frkal and Criscione-Naylor (2021) explored the decisions of women who resign and stress the exclusion they experience in reconciling work and family, further constraining their authenticity. Other authors, including Liu et al. (2015) and Zabludovsky Kuper (2015), have also noted that expectations surrounding women’s leadership styles threaten their autonomy.

Undoubtedly, the positions attained by the women participating in this study offer them certain advantages, mainly in terms of economic autonomy and media visibility. However, the lack of commitment from men in household responsibilities significantly heightened the participants’ physical and psychological stress. Paradoxically, contrary to what Babic and Hansez (2021) and Kerfoot and Knights (1998) suggested, they did not express any intention to resign. Instead, they described feelings of exhaustion and excessive guilt for not being in “the right place,” coupled with frustration at not aligning with the rational ideals of organizations. The male figure, in contrast, is typically seen as a worker-manager, free from the socio-emotional burdens associated with procreation and family duties—a phenomenon Joan Ackers refers to as the “disembodied worker.” Consequently, neither the private nor the public spheres offer a supportive environment for women to fully express their identities and aspirations.

Stereotypes and prejudices persist in the practice of women’s leadership. As mentioned, women continue to face discrimination motivated by both gender expectations and managerial roles. Interestingly, the narratives reveal that such biases also emerge within the minority groups that experience discrimination: “women discriminate against each other as well.” Although some research highlights the importance of gender awareness in promoting women’s leadership and challenging dominant gender roles (Alkhaled, 2021; Caicedo-Muñoz et al. 2021; Ríos, 2022), this aspect is not commonly identified as a primary barrier in the existing literature. The participants’ experiences shed light on this issue, as they expressed feelings of indignation and disbelief over the lack of sorority. In fact, they attribute this absence of support to the perpetuation of the problem and the endless spiral of inequality. Success seems to increase awareness of this inequality, making it appear as a privilege reserved for a select few. These circumstances ultimately hinder the collective access to opportunities that are intended to be inclusive and emancipatory.

In their study, Staines et al. (1974) asserted that women in positions of power often perceive their merits as superior, which can lead them to impose the same or greater demands on others aspiring to the same level. In this regard, Alexander-Stamatios and Aggelou (2019) suggest that such hostile behaviors among women toward their female peers may arise from perceived threats to their social identity. This dynamic, according to the findings, creates barriers to a collective understanding of the challenges that affect all women, ultimately impeding both personal and societal development. The lack of gender awareness clouds the possibility of fostering rapprochement, support, and sorority. For this reason, in addition to exploring leadership dynamics through the lenses of gender, race, and culture, gender awareness should be the basis of revolutionary initiatives aimed at achieving social justice and equity, as emphasized by Msila (2022) and Wickström et al. (2021).

Discrimination rooted in prejudices and stereotypes places an additional burden on women: demonstrating their abilities in the exercise of power. This frequently requires extra effort to prove their value beyond traditional feminine roles, despite evidence that leadership qualities are present in both genders (Bedoya Dorado et al., 2023; Méndez-Suárez et al., 2023). The studies by Amakye et al. (2021) and Carmona Suárez (2015) further reinforce the relationship between the efforts of women leaders to demonstrate their leadership skills and the stereotypes they encounter. Such studies also suggest that the challenges inherent in the practice of leadership can even have an impact on the

low participation of other women in pursuing such positions. The women leaders interviewed in this study echoed these findings, expressing a strong determination to demonstrate that “Women Can.” Proving this capability involves navigating a path that glimpses one or another opportunity while showcasing extraordinary traits such as drive, confidence, perseverance, and, above all, resilience in balancing both professional and domestic responsibilities and overcoming stigmas. While every achievement demands sacrifices, these challenges should ideally be shared equally by both men and women.

In contrast to previous research, Flores-Domínguez et al. (2019) reported greater advances for women in the health sector, without requiring extraordinary efforts to prove their worth. However, they emphasized the importance of developing specific qualities to navigate a potentially hostile environment. It is evident that gender gaps vary across sectors, regions, races, and other variables. For example, indicators for the health and education sectors suggest that the gender gap is narrower in these areas.

After analyzing the experiences of the women leaders participating in this study, it is clear that they have been significantly influenced by cultural stereotypes, largely due to the persistence of a heavily masculinized organizational structure. Although many reviewed studies align with these findings, the analysis conducted here also underscores a notable lack of sorority, which can be linked to a low gender awareness. The use of pejorative terms by women to refer to their peers creates barriers that perpetuate social oppression. Additionally, gender stereotypes remain anchored in the collective consciousness of society. Consequently, women often feel compelled to demonstrate their abilities to succeed in male-dominated areas. Understanding the obstacles faced by women, as highlighted in this study, can inform decision-making processes aimed at normalizing women’s presence in positions of power. Such normalization not only benefits their immediate environments but also contributes to the much-needed economic and social development, while creating opportunities to promote diversity in business management approaches.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the barriers encountered by women in political and business leadership roles in the region of Cauca in Colombia. The findings highlight three key considerations.

Firstly, the participants operate in gendered political or business contexts, shaped by social and cultural aspects and reinforced by gender stereotypes. These stereotypes generate skepticism both from men and women, and the low sorority further exacerbates the challenges women leaders must face. The most prominent stereotypes mentioned by the participants were related to their expected roles—reproduction and family care—as well as their appearance and style. To foster equitable societies, it is crucial to assess the leadership potential of both men and women free from gender bias. The promotion of androgynous leadership—a more inclusive and competency-based approach—can help overcome gender tensions and contribute to equity and social justice.

Secondly, despite the prevalence of prejudices and stereotypes, there is a noticeable increase in social acceptance of women in positions of power and decision-making, as evidenced in both the reviewed literature and the study’s findings. This reflects a new reality resulting from ongoing struggles and critical reflections around gender equality. Nevertheless, progress for women leaders in the private sector remains slow, particularly regarding the distribution of home care responsibilities. Cultural norms continue to assign these duties primarily to women, while men are often granted privileges that distance them away from such responsibilities. Unless men recognize home obligations as a shared duty, tensions will increase, leading to a higher risk of physical and emotional strain for women.

Thirdly, women leaders are often pressured to continuously demonstrate their agency capabilities, despite already having the necessary skills for effective leadership. This constant effort to challenge the status quo imposes a significant socio-emotional burden, affecting other areas of their lives and negatively impacting their well-being. There is thus a clear need to broaden the discussion on these particulars. Additionally, the important role of women leaders in fostering inclusive societies in the region must be acknowledged.

Furthermore, the analysis conducted here highlighted the vital contributions of women leaders in promoting inclusive societies in the region. By bringing their experiences to light, as captured in the narratives of the participants, this study aims to inform strategies that support the achievement of the UN's Fifth Sustainable Development Goal—gender equality. Achieving this goal will require coordinated efforts from academia, the productive sector, and society in general. While there is a perception of greater female representation in management positions, a new challenge emerges: the need to transition from symbolic representation to substantive change.

Finally, this study also sought to include the perspectives of women leaders without sectoral differentiations, since advances in women's leadership are still limited in a developing region like Cauca. This is evident in the restricted number and access to business organizations and political positions. However, conducting a comparative analysis of experiences across sectors (business and politics) that considers regional characteristics could deepen the understanding of the challenges faced by these women. Another limitation of this study is the insufficient emphasis on ethnic issues, particularly considering that one of the characteristics of the region under analysis is its outstanding indigenous population. Although only one participant identified as belonging to an ethnic group, this issue emerged in some of the discourses. Future studies should therefore explore the ethnic dimensions of the barriers faced by women in leadership.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no financial, professional, or personal conflicts of interest that may have inappropriately influenced the results or interpretations presented in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors made significant contributions to this article, including the design and development of the research, data analysis, writing, and final review of the manuscript.

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