

Invisible barriers and female leadership: strategic challenges in SME management within the contemporary Paraguayan context

Barreras invisibles y liderazgo femenino: desafíos estratégicos en la gestión de PYMES en el Paraguay

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify the main challenges faced by women in administrative roles within Paraguayan SMEs, with emphasis on the limitations affecting the development of leadership competencies and strategic skills. The research contributes to the design of public policies and business strategies aimed at promoting gender equality, strengthening women's empowerment, and enhancing the competitiveness and sustainability of SMEs in Paraguay. A qualitative approach was employed through a narrative literature review of publications from 2015 to 2024, using databases such as SciELO, Redalyc, Dialnet, and DOAJ. The findings reveal that women face barriers related to limited access to decision-making spaces, lack of professional networks, double workload, and limited availability of strategic training programs, despite regulatory advances in gender equity. The study concludes that it is necessary to strengthen inclusive organizational policies, mentoring programs, and transformational leadership strategies with a gender perspective, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in order to promote the competitiveness and sustainability of SMEs.

Keywords: female leadership, SMEs, gender, transformational leadership, organizational equity.



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Resumen

El presente estudio tuvo como objetivo identificar los principales desafíos que enfrentan las mujeres en roles administrativos dentro de las PYMES paraguayas, con énfasis en las limitaciones que afectan el desarrollo de competencias de liderazgo y habilidades estratégicas. La investigación contribuye al diseño de políticas públicas y estrategias empresariales orientadas a promover la igualdad de género, fortalecer el empoderamiento femenino y potenciar la competitividad y sostenibilidad de las PYMES en Paraguay. Se empleó un enfoque cualitativo mediante una revisión narrativa de literatura publicada entre 2015 y 2024, consultando las bases de datos SciELO, Redalyc, Dialnet y DOAJ. Los hallazgos evidencian que las mujeres enfrentan barreras relacionadas con el acceso a espacios de toma de decisiones, la ausencia de redes profesionales, la doble carga laboral y la limitada disponibilidad de programas de formación estratégica, pese a los avances normativos en materia de equidad. Se concluye que es necesario fortalecer políticas organizacionales inclusivas, programas de mentoría y estrategias de liderazgo transformacional con perspectiva de género, alineadas con los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS), para impulsar la competitividad y sostenibilidad de las PYMES.

Palabras clave: liderazgo femenino, PYMES, género, liderazgo transformacional, equidad organizacional.

Introduction

Female participation in the management of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) has gained relevance as a cornerstone of sustainable and inclusive economic development in Latin America. However, in contexts such as Paraguay, structural and cultural obstacles persist that restrict women's equitable access to strategic leadership positions, particularly in regions such as Itapúa. These often-invisible limitations impact not only gender equity, but also organizational efficiency, innovation, and corporate sustainability.

Although regulatory progress has been made, female representation in upper-level corporate decision-making remains unequal. Regional evidence indicates persistent gaps in labor force participation, economic autonomy, access to financing, and executive board representation; consequently, inferring a specific figure for Paraguayan SMEs is unwarranted without a disaggregated national statistical source (Economic

Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2022; World Bank, 2024).

Within this framework, the overall research objective is to identify, based on the reviewed scientific literature, the primary institutional, social, and cultural conditions that affect professional development and female leadership in SMEs. Three specific objectives are derived from this main goal: (i) to describe, based on the reviewed literature, the main institutional, social, and cultural conditions affecting professional development and female leadership in SMEs; (ii) to systematize the primary barriers limiting the practice of female leadership from an intersectional perspective; and (iii) to identify proposals and strategies for strengthening female leadership implemented in Latin America that could be adapted to the Paraguayan context.

The guiding proposition of this study posits that invisible barriers identified in the literature—such as the absence of professional networks, the double burden of paid and unpaid labor, and gender stereotypes—negatively affect the practice of female leadership, even within organizations that formally promote gender equity.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution of empirical evidence for the design of gender-responsive public policies and business strategies, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—specifically SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

From a theoretical perspective, this study is grounded in organizational gender theory (Acker, 1990), role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), and contemporary scholarship on leadership, strategic competencies, and female empowerment (Glass & Cook, 2018; Gipson *et al.*, 2017). International evidence demonstrates associations between female representation in leadership positions and specific organizational outcomes, although these relationships depend on the institutional context, sector, and degree of effective authority granted to women (Hoobler *et al.*, 2018; Post & Byron, 2015). In Paraguay, the scarcity of specific empirical evidence regarding female managerial leadership in SMEs constitutes a research gap that justifies a contextualized analysis of regional and international literature.

Ultimately, this paper seeks to contribute to academic debate and organizational practice through a structured narrative review, a critical analysis of regional evidence, and the proposal of action lines aimed at fostering skill development among female leaders within Paraguayan SMEs.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach with an exploratory-descriptive scope, utilizing a structured narrative review. The unit of analysis comprised publications on female leadership, gender barriers, business management, entrepreneur-

ship, and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

The primary search encompassed literature published between January 2015 and December 2024 across SciELO, Redalyc, Dialnet, DOAJ, and Google Scholar. Search string combinations in Spanish, English, and Portuguese included “liderazgo femenino” AND “PYMES”, “mujeres” AND “gestión empresarial”, “women leadership” AND “SMEs”, “gender barriers” AND “management”, “women entrepreneurship” AND “Latin America”, and “work-family” AND “women leaders”. To support the theoretical categories, seminal references prior to 2015 identified through backward reference chaining were also incorporated.

Inclusion criteria required peer-reviewed articles and institutional reports with verifiable authorship, publication year, title, and permanent link (URL/DOI); a direct relation to at least one of the three analytical axes; full-text availability; and relevance to organizations, entrepreneurship, or management. Exclusion criteria comprised duplicates, non-peer-reviewed commentary or popular science articles, documents lacking complete editorial metadata, references whose DOI or title could not be verified, and works lacking a direct relation to the research questions.

The final corpus consisted of 27 documents: 19 peer-reviewed scientific articles, six reports or guidelines from international organizations, and two Paraguayan regulatory documents. Of the scientific articles, nine were published between 2015 and 2024, while 10 represented foundational theoretical or meta-analytic precedents included to define core concepts and evaluate the field’s evolution.

For each document, metadata were extracted regarding authorship, publication year, geographic scope, study design, target population or unit of analysis, identified barriers, organizational outcomes, and proposed interventions. Data synthesis was conducted via thematic coding along three primary axes: (a) cultural and social barriers; (b) organizational and structural barriers; and (c) strategies and policies to strengthen female leadership.

Analytical rigor and trustworthiness were ensured through triangulation across empirical studies, meta-analyses, institutional reports, and Paraguayan regulations. Given its narrative nature and the heterogeneity of study designs, this review did not calculate pooled effect sizes nor does it seek to estimate prevalence rates across all Paraguayan SMEs; its findings represent a contextual and interpretive synthesis.

Results

The findings of this review were organized into three main thematic axes that enable the interpretation of the complexity and multidimensionality of female leadership in SMEs, as well as the assessment of its relevance to the Paraguayan context.

Cultural and Social Barriers

The first thematic axis highlights the persistence of gender stereotypes that condition the evaluation of women in corporate decision-making spaces. The perceived incongruity between traditional gender roles assigned to women and the agentic expectations associated with executive leadership can generate unfavorable performance evaluations and restrict career advancement opportunities (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig *et al.*, 2011). Meta-analyses indicate that the relationship among female representation, leadership, and organizational performance is contingent upon institutional and cultural contexts; thus, generalizing uniform effects across different business sectors or organizational structures is methodologically unwarranted (Hoobler *et al.*, 2018).

A recurrent empirical finding is the prevalence of the “double burden” (or second shift), which obligates women to simultaneously manage professional duties and unpaid domestic responsibilities. This disproportionate workload constrains their availability for continuing professional development, executive networking, and engagement in high-impact strategic initiatives (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2019; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

[OECD] & European Commission, 2021). Consequently, this dynamic reinforces a systemic cycle of exclusion that excludes female professionals from key leadership forums and high-level decision-making processes.

Organizational and Structural Barriers

The second thematic axis identifies limitations stemming from organizational structures and processes. Informal promotion criteria, unequal access to professional development opportunities, and a lack of transparent advancement procedures can perpetuate female underrepresentation in executive management positions (Glass & Cook, 2018; Kossek *et al.*, 2017).

Furthermore, the reviewed literature reveals systematic disparities in access to career ladder planning, executive mentorship, and professional networks that facilitate promotion to strategic roles. These structural mechanisms directly influence leadership selection and development, reinforcing cumulative barriers in the absence of adequate organizational support systems (Gipson *et al.*, 2017; Kossek *et al.*, 2017). Given the diversity of contexts analyzed across the literature, these patterns should be understood as analytical framework reference points rather than uniform estimates applicable to all Latin American SMEs.

Strategies and Proposals to Strengthen Female Leadership

The strategies backed by the strongest empirical support integrate executive training, mentorship, professional networking, work-life balance policies, and transparent talent selection and promotion mechanisms. Evidence suggests that isolated interventions yield limited efficacy when they fail to simultaneously modify organizational culture and structural processes (Glass & Cook, 2018; Kossek *et al.*, 2017; ILO, 2019).

In Paraguay, the statutory framework recognizes the imperative to prevent discrimination and foster substantive equality. Law No. 5777/2016 establishes public policies aimed at eliminating violence

against women, while the IV National Equality Plan 2018–2024 incorporates economic autonomy and equitable access to opportunities as core objectives. However, these legislative provisions do not obviate the need for verifiable internal policies within SMEs, such as transparent promotion criteria, specialized training, executive sponsorship, and the systematic monitoring of gender equality indicators (Congress of the Paraguayan Nation, 2016; Ministry of Women, 2018).

The comparison with the Paraguayan legal framework reveals that while Law No. 5777/2016 and the IV National Equality Plan 2018–2024 provide a solid institutional base for combating discrimina-

In synthesis, the findings demonstrate that barriers to female leadership are not confined to individual or attitudinal factors; rather, they reflect a complex nexus of sociocultural norms, traditional organizational structures, and gender-neutral corporate policies. Consequently, transformative efforts must be comprehensive and multisectoral, strategically integrating public policy interventions, corporate management frameworks, and individual as well as collective empowerment initiatives.

Discussion

The results support the guiding proposition in an analytical sense: informal barriers can constrain

Table 1.
Main Findings Organized by Thematic Axis

Thematic Axis	Key Findings	Consequences / Impact	References
Cultural and Social Barriers	- Gender stereotypes assigning secondary roles to women. - Perception of lower leadership capacity. - Double burden: uncompensated domestic care and professional employment.	- Career advancement restrictions. - Exclusion from strategic professional networks. - Diminished organizational innovation and firm-level participation.	Koenig et al. (2011); OIT (2019); CEPAL (2022).
Organizational and Structural Barriers	- Lack of career plans. - Poor strategic planning. - Lack of equality policies. - No mentorship or support networks	- Women's skills being overlooked. - Low representation in strategic positions. - Persistent structural inequality.	Glass y Cook (2018); Kossek et al. (2017).
Strategies and Proposals	- Leadership programs with a gender perspective. - Creation of networks of women entrepreneurs. - Equal access to training and financing.	- Empowerment of women leaders. - Reduction of the gender gap. - Improvement in the competitiveness of SMEs.	CEPAL (2022); Glass y Cook (2018); OIT (2019).

tion and promoting economic autonomy, the reviewed literature does not support the assertion that these statutory mandates translate uniformly into internal protocols, career development paths, or gender metrics within individual SMEs. This gap between de jure regulation and de facto organizational practice represents a key empirical research deficit (Congress of the Paraguayan Nation, 2016; Ministry of Women, 2018).

Comparative Matrix of findings by thematic axis

Below is a summary table synthesizing the main findings grouped by each thematic axis:

the practice of leadership even within organizations that explicitly endorse gender equity principles. Organizational gender theory explains how seemingly neutral rules, routines, and criteria systematically reproduce structural inequalities (Acker, 1990). Concurrently, role congruity theory clarifies that women are evaluated against dual, conflicting expectations of agentic executive competence and communal behavior; this tension frequently induces unfavorable performance evaluations and stereotype threat (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hoyt & Murphy, 2016; Koenig *et al.*, 2011). Consequently, the core issue stems not from a deficit in individual capacity, but from institutional legitimacy and evaluation criteria saturated with gender stereotypes.

The literature on leadership styles and effectiveness provides a critical nuance. Meta-analyses and systematic reviews identify average differences in transformational behaviors, as well as variations in how male and female leaders are selected, developed, and evaluated (Eagly *et al.*, 2003; Gipson *et al.*, 2017; Paustian-Underdahl *et al.*, 2014). However, the empirical link between female representation and organizational outcomes remains contingent upon institutional context, industry sector, and the degree of authority actually granted (Hoobler *et al.*, 2018; Post & Byron, 2015). Thus, the evidence does not substantiate an intrinsic gender advantage, but rather demonstrates that organizational conditions shape the viability of effective leadership execution.

The synthesis further demonstrates that gender inequality operates cumulatively. The inequitable division of unpaid care work reduces the time available for executive training and networking; limited network involvement restricts access to strategic information and mentorship; and a lack of transparent promotion protocols increases reliance on informal, homosocial networks. This interplay aligns with the career-equality framework proposed by Kossek *et al.* (2017) and broader research on unpaid care work, economic autonomy, and inclusive entrepreneurship (ECLAC, 2022; OECD & European Commission, 2021; ILO, 2019). Furthermore, the gap between statutory rights and their practical implementation continues to constrain female economic agency (World Bank, 2024).

At the firm level, corporate governance literature shows that female access to executive roles is moderated by selection mechanisms, networking structures, and institutional arrangements that determine career longevity (Cook & Glass, 2014; Terjesen *et al.*, 2009). Research on diversity and corporate practice indicates that female leaders' capacity to effect organizational change depends heavily on positional authority and structural backing (Glass & Cook, 2018). Correspondingly, empirical studies examining female executive representation and firm performance report heterogeneous and conditional outcomes, precluding the assertion of a universal causal re-

lationship (Dezsö & Ross, 2012; Matsa & Miller, 2013; Post & Byron, 2015).

Within the SME and entrepreneurship domain, contextual dynamics are decisive. Specialized research highlights that entrepreneurial ecosystems do not provide equitable access to capital, resources, strategic networks, or legitimacy (Brush *et al.*, 2019; Jennings & Brush, 2013). Institutional frameworks, family policy regimes, and cultural norms heavily influence female entrepreneurial trajectories, though available evidence originates from varied cross-national contexts (Thébaud, 2015; Yousafzai *et al.*, 2015). This heterogeneity underlines the necessity of avoiding direct generalizations and reinforces the imperative for empirical data specific to Paraguayan SMEs.

The identified intervention strategies must therefore integrate cultural shifts with organizational reform. International business frameworks recommend incorporating gender equity into corporate governance, career advancement pipelines, performance metrics, and accountability systems (UN Women & UN Global Compact, 2016, 2020). In alignment with regional evidence, executive training, mentorship, professional networking, care-reconciliation policies, and transparent promotion mechanisms exert maximum efficacy when implemented as an interconnected strategy (ECLAC, 2022; Kossek *et al.*, 2017; ILO, 2019).

For Paraguayan SMEs, the primary practical implication lies in adapting these frameworks to organizational structures characterized by resource constraints and varying levels of formalization. Low-cost measures—such as codified selection and promotion criteria, systematic training tracking, internal or inter-firm mentorship programs, work hours compatible with family care duties, and baseline gender participation monitoring—offer an actionable starting point. While Law No. 5777/2016 and the IV National Equality Plan 2018–2024 provide the macro-level legal framework for anti-discrimination and economic autonomy, primary empirical research remains essential to evaluate their operational translation into firm-level management

practices (Congress of the Paraguayan Nation, 2016; Ministry of Women, 2018).

Conclusions

This review demonstrates that female leadership in SMEs is constrained by multiple structural, cultural, and organizational barriers, with significant implications for the Paraguayan context. The body of literature reviewed highlights critical challenges related to unequal access to professional support networks, female underrepresentation in decision-making forums, and weak institutionalization of gender equality procedures.

Despite regulatory advancements, the literature indicates that the gap between normative discourse and operational practice remains a major hurdle. Persistent stereotypes regarding female roles in corporate executive management constrain professional development and restrict effective participation in strategic decision-making spaces.

Overcoming these limitations necessitates articulated, multisectoral action involving the state, academic institutions, the private sector, and women's organizations. Strengthening female leadership in SMEs requires a comprehensive strategy integrating:

- Specialized training in strategic leadership.
- Promotion of transformational and inclusive leadership styles.
- Mentorship programs and institutional sponsorships.
- Formal recognition systems for female talent.

Furthermore, it is imperative to consolidate female leadership networks that serve not only as support systems, but also as platforms for executive training, knowledge exchange, competency development, and corporate visibility. The reviewed literature emphasizes the strategic value of networks and mentorship in broadening access to

professional development resources and market opportunities (ILO, 2019).

From an intersectional perspective, leadership trajectories vary according to factors such as age, socioeconomic class, educational attainment, and geographic location. For instance, a young indigenous woman in a rural setting faces structural challenges distinct from those encountered by an urban, college-educated female professional. This heterogeneity mandates the design of differentiated policies tailored to these intersecting realities.

Ultimately, advancing toward more visible and effective female leadership in Paraguayan SMEs demands political will, institutional commitment, and sustained investment in female human capital, alongside deep cultural transformation at both organizational and societal levels. These efforts will not only enhance corporate competitiveness, but also foster sustainable economic development and build more equitable, resilient societies.

These findings align directly with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—specifically SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)—underscoring the importance of embedding gender equity into business management to advance inclusive and sustainable growth.

As a methodological limitation, this review synthesizes literature spanning diverse countries, industry sectors, and firm sizes; consequently, its conclusions should not be construed as statistical estimates applicable to all Paraguayan SMEs. The paucity of national empirical research and disaggregated data by enterprise scale precludes the establishment of statistical prevalence or causal relationships.

Future research should employ mixed-method designs across Paraguayan SMEs, compare industry sectors and geographical territories, and incorporate empirical indicators tracking network access, care work distribution, promotion practi-

ces, financing access, and firm performance. This research agenda would allow for the empirical validation of identified patterns and inform interventions customized to the national context.

Editorial Declarations

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Declaration on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence
During the final manuscript review, ChatGPT by OpenAI (GPT-5 model, July 2026) was used as a supporting tool for linguistic editing, textual coherence verification, and cross-checking the alignment between inline citations and the reference list (OpenAI, 2026). All AI-generated suggestions were thoroughly examined, cross-referenced, and edited by the author. The tool was not used to generate data, fabricate sources or findings, or substitute for the author's critical analysis and sole intellectual responsibility.

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