



Do transformational leaders reduce the barriers women face in accessing managerial positions? The moderating role of leaders' gender

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Abstract

Despite recent advancements in promoting women to managerial roles, women face several barriers that diminish their chances of attaining managerial positions. These barriers include obstacles related to work-life balance, biased HR practices, difficulties accessing influential networks, being subjected to excessive scrutiny, and the need to demonstrate their contributions more than men. Additionally, a male-oriented organizational culture further exacerbates these barriers. However, transformational leadership could reduce gender barriers. Moreover, leader-member gender congruity can further alleviate these perceived obstacles. Female supervisors are better positioned to assess female employees' performance, empathize with their needs, offer invaluable support, and advocate for gender-equitable HR practices. This study delves into the direct impact of transformational leadership and leader-member gender congruity and their interactive effects on the perceived promotion barriers. The sample consists of 579 women from three Spanish financial organizations with different positions at work, ranging from executive managers to bank officers. A path analysis model was tested with Mplus, linking perceived barriers to women's promotion with transformational leadership. Transformational leadership perceptions diminish women's perceptions of organizational culture-related barriers hindering women's promotion. Leader-member gender congruity reduces their perceptions of barriers related to unequal performance appraisal and unfair HR practices. Furthermore, there was an unexpected interaction effect: perceived transformational leadership reduces women employees' perceptions regarding barriers to managerial positions when they have male supervisors. However, this effect was not observed when supervisors were female. Thus, the impact of women transformational leaders on reducing the barriers to women's promotion is not dependent on their transformational perceived behaviors. These outcomes highlight the role of perceived transformational leadership in mitigating women's promotion difficulties and emphasize the relevance of female supervision in reducing women's perceptions of barriers to management promotion.

Keywords Gender barriers · Female managers · Transformational leadership · Leader-member gender congruity · Role of leaders' gender

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Introduction

Despite recent advancements in promoting women to managerial roles, gender distribution among managerial positions remains unbalanced. In most sectors and organizational settings, including political activity, there is a notable lack of representation of women in the upper levels of organizational hierarchies. For instance, in the financial services sector, the percentages of female chiefs (CEO, CTO, CFO...), female senior leadership, and female managers under senior leadership in Europe were 17.3%, 21.7%, and 27.2%, respectively (Rogish et al., 2022).

This vertical discrimination has received different labels, such as “glass-ceiling” (Ragins et al., 1998) or “labyrinth” (Eagly & Carli, 2007), and it is the result of several barriers present in the labor market that women face when it reaches the promotion. Social stereotypes about managerial roles and the communal orientation often associated with women are the foundation for this vertical discrimination (Heilman et al., 2024). Gender biases in Human Resource (HR) practices, difficulties women face in balancing work and family life, the higher need for women to demonstrate their capabilities and performance, an organizational culture that favors masculine characteristics, and restrictions on women’s participation in influential networks are among the main barriers for women once it comes to getting promoted (Meldgin et al., 2024; Ramos et al., 2022a; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

Lyness and Grotto (2018) recommended further research to cope with women’s underrepresentation in managerial positions and to explore factors that facilitate women’s promotion. Building on this call, the present study analyzes whether transformational leadership and leader-member gender congruity can help reduce the barriers to women’s access to managerial positions.

Transformational leaders (Bass, 1999) provide women with resources to overcome promotion barriers. Review from Deng et al. (2023) provides evidence of the effectiveness of transformational leadership. According to Manning (2002), transformational leaders promote strong and supportive relationships with their employees. These leaders transform people and help them reach their full potential, thereby reducing the barriers women perceive. Transformational leaders could provide an unbiased vision of the team and organization, inspiring and empowering women’s competencies and considering individual needs (Bartone, 2024) that can help reduce women’s perceptions of barriers to promotion (Vinkenbunrg et al., 2011).

Moreover, Ko et al. (2015) showed that industry gender composition moderates the relationship between leader gender and leadership effectiveness perceptions, such that leader perceptions become more favorable as the gender composition of the industry becomes more congruent with the leader’s gender. Hence, lack of congruence can create barriers, especially for women in male-dominated industries (like financial companies), who may face disadvantages in selection, performance evaluation, and promotion, such as financial companies. AbouAssi (2021) found that greater gender congruence has positive implications for performance, engagement, and job satisfaction. Similarly, most studies have found evidence of the relationship between gender congruence and organizational outcomes, though some exceptions exist (Fjendbo et al., 2021). For Westover (2024), gender congruence between leaders and

subordinates enhances attitudes such as satisfaction. In most cases, gender incongruence stems from the underrepresentation of women in managerial positions.

In addition, women in managerial roles could make relevant contributions to reduce perceptions of barriers to other women’s promotion and increase fairness perceptions (Cremmer et al., 2007; Hurst et al., 2017). Having gone through a successful promotion, women leaders are more aware than men leaders of what kind of difficulties women face when it comes to promotions and how to withstand and overcome these difficulties. They are more familiar with the needs of other women when they are candidates for promotion and can offer them advice and support by mentoring them (Chang et al., 2023; Parker & Kram, 1993). Women leaders could serve as mentors and models for other women trying to climb the organizational ladder, and they could contribute to women’s empowerment and facilitate their access to higher-level job positions (O’Brien et al., 2024). The relevance of social support in women’s career transitions (Greer & Kirk, 2022) suggests that women managers could exert a relevant role in facilitating other women’s access to managerial jobs. Similarly, Heilman et al. (2024) suggest promoting appointments and active participation of women in top management as an effective strategy to counteract the male gendering of jobs and thus coping with gender stereotypes.

Building on these two research avenues, transformational leadership (Bass, 1999) and leader-follower congruity (Eagly et al., 1992; Erro-Garcés & Urien, 2024), the present study analyses the role of transformational leadership in reducing the barriers women employees perceive in accessing managerial positions and the impact of leader-member congruity (when women supervise other women) on diminishing perceived barriers to women’s promotion.

Using a moderated regression model with a sample of women employees from three companies within a financial group, this research enhances the understanding of barriers women face in accessing promotion and the organizational processes that maintain or enhance these barriers, with a particular focus on leadership dynamics. Additionally, our contribution could help organizations reduce barriers to promoting women, facilitate fairness in companies, and suggest interventions to take advantage of the entire human capital available (incorporating both women and men equally). Thus, the study contributes significantly to gender bias literature, extending our knowledge about barriers women face in accessing promotion, facilitating the reduction of such barriers, and extending research on the positive effects of transformational leadership.

Theoretical background

Role Congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) is rooted in Social Role theory (Eagly, 1987). Gender roles are based on prescriptive and descriptive norms of society that influence the possibility of human beings becoming leaders. Traditional gender roles perpetuate the notion that men are primary breadwinners with higher social status, while women are assigned lower status roles as homemakers. These societal beliefs align with the idea that women are perceived with more communal characteristics, whereas men are perceived as displaying agentic traits. Theoretical and empirical evidence confirms these roles (Badura et al., 2018; Heilman et al., 2024; Hoyt & Simon, 2011) and how people's stereotypes are pervasive and quickly activated, especially related to gender roles. Once gender roles have been described, it is important to review gender and leadership stereotypes. Gender stereotypes are rooted in 'people's direct and indirect observations of women and men in their social roles' (Eagly et al., 2020, p. 302). Women stereotypes describe women as exhibiting communal characteristics. These attributes are more related to a concern for the benefit and well-being of the community (i.e., supportive, gentle, and nurturant, among others). Contrary to women's stereotypes, male stereotypes describe men as possessing more agentic attributes and tend to be assertive, confident, and dominating (i.e., heavy-handed, energetic, and assured, among others). Therefore, it seems common for men to be leaders. In fact, Schein (1973) already suggested the "think manager—think male" paradigm, indicating that leader stereotypes are related to male-connotated attributes (Heilman et al., 2024). The meta-analysis by Koenig et al. (2011) considered Schein's "think manager—think male" paradigm, the agency–communion paradigm (Powell & Butterfield, 1979), and the masculinity-femininity paradigm (Shinar, 1975) to analyze a leader stereotype significance. This meta-analysis showed that leader stereotypes are closely linked to agency, males, and masculinity. Contemporary meta-analytical research showed that compared to men, women's attribution of communal attributes has grown in the past 73 years (Eagly et al., 2020). So, the idea of "think manager-think male" (Schein et al., 1996) persists. For instance, Baker and Kelan (2019) showed how executive women deny gender differences in organizational cultures high in masculinity, such as financial entities. Women, in this qualitative research, asserted that the glass ceiling (barriers that women found to access executive levels) is an excuse used by unsuccessful women to play the role of victim. They also showed many agentic characteristics in their narrative (e.g., career is a competition), given that they denied their gender roles, embraced their leadership roles, and adopted agentic characteristics, as Eagly and Karau

(2002) explained. Somehow, these executive women who display agentic traits may be penalized by their followers because they failed to fulfill the expected gender role by exhibiting communal characteristics (Heilman et al., 2024), as proposed by the Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Baker and Kelan's (2019) results exhibited how women in the neoliberal world split disagreeable characteristics of the workplace (gender differences or discrimination), blaming other women for not being successful, given that they are uniquely responsible for their success, suggesting that gender barriers do not exist for these women. Therefore, these women adopted agentic characteristics and took on leadership roles. In this case, transactional leadership is the rule and not the exception. So, for women, the exception in such a competitive sector is transformational leadership (Baker & Kelan, 2019; Schein et al., 1996).

Followers mix gender roles with leadership roles and develop a view of their leader. Successful female leaders are described with similar attributes to male successful leaders (Heilman et al., 1995). Therefore, it is unsurprising that women leaders have more agentic characteristics than women in general (Martell et al., 1998; Meldgin et al., 2024). These female leaders often deviate from the prescribed gender role norm, displaying more agentic attributes than communal ones. Consequently, traditional individuals perceive these attributes and evaluate these women less favorably than male leaders. Outstanding women leaders are frequently perceived as bitter, selfish, and less rational than their successful male leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Thus, there are two ways of prejudice regarding female leaders following the Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). First, as a leader is associated with men: "think manager-think male" paradigm (Schein et al., 1996), women leaders would be observed worse than their counterparts (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Second, as women adopt agentic attributes typically associated with men, their leadership capabilities tend to be evaluated more critically than men as they deviate from societal expectations of women's gender roles (Heilman et al., 2024). According to this theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), if women leaders incorporate a balanced blend of agentic and communal characteristics, they will likely receive more favorable evaluations than their successful male counterparts. So, studying leadership styles, precisely the transformational leadership style, can contribute to eliminating gender bias.

Empirical evidence showed that women are prone to develop transformational leadership (Eagly et al., 2003; Shang, 2023; Vinkenburt et al., 2011), and if so, they will be better evaluated than other women who perform more agentic leadership styles (Eagly & Karau, 2002):

'Transformational leadership refers to the leader moving the follower beyond immediate self-interests through

idealized influence (charisma), inspiration, intellectual stimulation, or individualized consideration' (Bass, 1999, p.11).

Idealized influence and inspiration occur when followers identify with the aims and goals of the leaders for the group; intellectual stimulation is described as the ability of the leader to become more innovative and creative with their followers; and individualized consideration is when the leader cares about the personal and professional needs of their followers (Bass, 1999). Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) highlights the relevance of using this leadership style for women. This theory describes that transformational leadership's communal characteristics (more than agentic) make it more easily used by women than men (Cuadrado et al., 2012; Eagly et al., 2020). Since the beginning, women have been considered more transformational leaders than men (Bass, 1999), as communal characteristics such as empathy, sociability, relationship-oriented, and caring for others are more related to transformational leadership than transactional leadership. Men display more agentic characteristics like competence, aggression, independence, and dominance, among others (Heilman et al., 2024), less related to transformational leadership. Thus, dimensions included in transformational leadership are related to more communal characteristics, and they could reduce the perceptions of women subordinates regarding the barriers to promotion.

However, women still face many difficulties in their professional development. Some barriers to women's promotion are related to the double-day workload that women carry out to do household chores, making it difficult for women to maintain a work-family balance. These chores are culturally assigned to women, sustained by gender role stereotypes. This double workload and work-family balance also impact their difficulties accessing networks. Whereas their male colleagues could have informal meetings after work (i.e., playing football, having a drink), women must attend to their dependents and their homes. Additionally, other barriers that women need to cope with are that their performance appraisal is rated worse than their male counterparts (Correll et al., 2020; Mobley, 1982; Pikulina & Ferreira, 2023), and they have fewer possibilities of being promoted (Hentschel et al., 2018; Meldgin et al., 2024) and selected (McIntyre et al., 1980; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). So, it has been shown that women suffer unequal HR practices and policies (Klein et al., 2021; Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Finally, women must contend with organizational cultures that are perceived as more masculine within financial institutions (Baker & Kelan, 2019).

Transformational leaders (Bass, 1999) encourage employees (both men and women), attend to individualized needs, and inspire workers. Thus, they could reduce

the barriers to promotion that women subordinates perceive. Considering the individual demands of women, encouraging their strengths, and adopting a more balanced treatment of both men and women could reduce managerial bias. This includes giving women access to influential networks, providing better opportunities to balance work with extra-work demands, and developing fairer HR policies. Some empirical research supports the influence of transformational leadership on women's advancement opportunities. Burch and Guarana (2014) found that transformational leadership stimulates follower engagement. More engaged women could have more opportunities for advancement. Erro-Garcés and Urien (2024) showed that leaders with more supportive and relationship-oriented behaviors increased job satisfaction among followers. Cremer et al. (2007) found that when leaders are seen as transformational, their followers perceived more organizational justice, that in turns is clearly related with barriers to women promotion (Ramos et al., 2022a). Thus, when women followers perceive that the leader is transformational, they could perceive fewer barriers to access to management positions. Hence,

H1. Transformational leadership is negatively related to barriers to women's promotion (barriers related to work-family balance, barriers to access influential networks, unequal performance appraisal, unfair HR practices and policies, and barriers from organizational culture) perceived by female employees.

Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) asserts that female transformational leaders are better perceived than other women who exhibit agentic leadership styles. Accordingly with the similarity/attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals with similar characteristics are more likely to have a higher mutual understanding, acceptance, and social connection (Fjendbo et al., 2021, p.1543), thus, gender congruity between leader and employees will encourage positive behaviors of followers, for instance increasing learning and training outcomes. Similarly, AbouAssi (2021) found that gender congruency stimulated the range and commitment of employees in volunteer activities. Women supervised by other women would be in this sense more committed and willing to participate in more activities in the firm than women supervised by men, thus increasing their possibilities to be promoted. Additionally, the 'similar to me' effect (Rand & Wexley, 1975) describes that the more similar the people are, the higher the chance of being better evaluated. This effect is linked to biodemographic characteristics, such as gender. Rand and Wexley (1975) obtained that the more comparable the candidates and their interviewers were, the higher the chance of the applicant being selected for the

job. In this line, a study by Mobley (1982) found small but significant differences in race and gender when employees assessed supervisor performance (less than 5% of variance). Raters evaluated better their supervisors when they had the same gender or race. Tsui and O'Really (1989) analyzed that different gender dyads were evaluated as performing worse and were liked less than when superior and subordinate were of the same gender. Same-gender dyads perceived supervisors with more reputational effectiveness from the view of the employee. This work proved that positive outcomes were observed for female followers with female leaders (gender congruity in dyads) in terms of better performance appraisal, less role conflict, and role ambiguity. However, this result is not totally in line with Mobley's (1982) results, given that men did not rate followers as high. According to these results, Gloor et al. (2020) observed that a female leader with more female than male followers was viewed as more group-normative and had a better assessment.

According to the Social Identity Theory of Leadership (Hogg, 2001), members of a group or an organization are perceived as more prototypical and more effective if the leader is similar to the whole group in behaviour and demographic attributes (Gloor et al., 2020). The "similar to me" effect highlights sociodemographic characteristics such as gender (Mobley, 1982; Rand & Wexley, 1975; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024; Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989). In the same vein, as women leaders are more prone to develop more relationship-oriented and supportive behaviors than men leaders (Erro-Garcés & Urien, 2024), women employees will perceive more support and receive more information and resources that help them to advance in the company from women leaders than from men leaders. Social identity theory also suggests that women's identification with women would make them considerate of each other (Ely, 1994). Hence, female managers may be more likely to avoid the barriers women employees face, and these followers perceive fewer barriers. Additionally, the relational demography theory provides a foundation for understanding gender similarity effects. Similarities along many different dimensions, such as gender, are associated positively with communication, relations, and interpersonal attraction (Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989). So, female members could perceive that a female manager empathizes more than a male manager with their work-life balance (given that they, too, must deal with double workloads). Moreover, female members could perceive fairer treatment from women leaders when applying HR practices or access to networks than male leaders (Ramos et al., 2022a). Women members showed better performance evaluations of their female transformational leaders than men (Ayman et al., 2009). In addition, Fjendbo et al. (2021) pointed out that gender congruency stimulated the capabilities and competences of employees, improving

advancement of employees who were supervised by leaders with their same gender, increasing the training results. In the same line, Hurst et al. (2017) outlined the relevance of the relational experiences of women managers and their women employees for the women's careers and advancement into the organizations. Thus, we hypothesize that the "similar to me" effect influences women's perceptions of barriers to promotion. Starmarski and Son Hing (2015) showed that how leaders treat their followers is relevant to understanding the perceived barriers to access management. Thus, women whom other women supervise will perceive fewer barriers to promotion than women whom men supervise. Hence,

H2. Leader-member gender congruity is positively related to the barriers to promotion (i.e., barriers related to work-family balance, barriers to access influential networks, unequal performance appraisal, unfair HR practices and policies, and barriers from organizational culture) perceived by women employees. As leader-member congruity is defined reversely (0 = congruity; 1 = no congruity) women supervised by men will perceive more barriers than women supervised by men.

In addition to the summative hypothesized effects of transformational leadership and leader-member gender congruity, and given how women leaders are more aware of the difficulties women frequently face in reaching managerial positions and are more empathetic with other women working under their supervision, it is expected that female transformational leaders could be more clearly driven to reduce the barriers that women usually face, following prescriptive and descriptive roles for women, compared to male transformational leaders (Eagly et al., 2003; Koenig & Eagly, 2014). Despite transformational features being able to empower women and contribute to reducing gender biases, women leaders would be more sensitive and conscious about the potential of such a kind of leadership to fight against gender discrimination (e.g., gender stereotypes; Vinkenburg et al., 2011). In addition, since women leaders who exhibit transformational leadership attributes are perceived as more prototypical than their male counterparts (Gloor et al., 2020), gender congruity is expected to strengthen the effect of transformational leadership among women employees. Thus, women supervisors who demonstrate transformational leadership are likely to reduce the perceived barriers to women's promotion more effectively than men supervisors, among women employees. Hence,

H3. Leader-member gender congruity moderates the negative relationship between transformational leadership and barriers to access promotion (barriers related

to work-family balance, barriers to access influential networks, unequal performance appraisal, unfair HR practices and policies, and barriers from organizational culture) perceived by women members. Concretely, we expect that when there is congruence (women supervised by a woman), the negative relationship between transformational leadership and barriers will be stronger.

Figure 1 shows the theoretical model and the hypothesized relationships among study variables.

Method

Sample

The sample was gathered from three different organizations from a Spanish financial group, with a response rate of 21.8% ($n = 1304$). This study included only women, resulting in a sample of 579 participants, which represents 44.4% of the overall sample. Among them, 25.5% had female supervisors, 71% had male supervisors, and 3.5% did not provide an answer. Regarding employees' age, 4% of respondents are 35 years old or younger, 42.7% are between 36 and 45 years old, 45.6% are between 46 and 55 years old, and 7.1% are 56 years or older (0.7% of respondents did not provide their age). Regarding job positions, 19% were technicians and banking managers, 1.4% were executive managers, 4.8% were middle managers, and 74.5% were working in the bank branch's offices (14.7% were managers, 17.8% were financial controllers, and 41.7% were bank officers).

Procedure

The research team contacted a member of the HR department to request the participation of the three financial entities of a financial group. Upon accepting this request by the Gender Equity Office and HR department, a link to the questionnaire was sent to all the staff at three entities through a corporate e-mail. Employees could or could not participate voluntarily. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed.

Variables

Independent variable

Transformational leadership was measured with the Spanish version of the MLQ-5X (Multifactorial Leadership Questionnaire; Bass & Avolio, 1997), validated by Molero et al. (2010) and Moreno-Casado et al. (2021). The questionnaire comprised 34 items measuring eight dimensions: five transformational (20 items), two transactional (8 items), and one passive leadership factor (6 items). Employees scored their perceptions of their leaders on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always).

Only the five transformational subscales (20 items) were used in the present study. They were operationalized as: attributed charisma ($\alpha = 0.92$), behavioral charisma ($\alpha = 0.87$), vision/inspiration ($\alpha = 0.91$), intellectual stimulation ($\alpha = 0.91$), and individual consideration ($\alpha = 0.88$). The overall score for the 20 items measuring the five transformational dimensions was used ($\alpha = 0.96$).

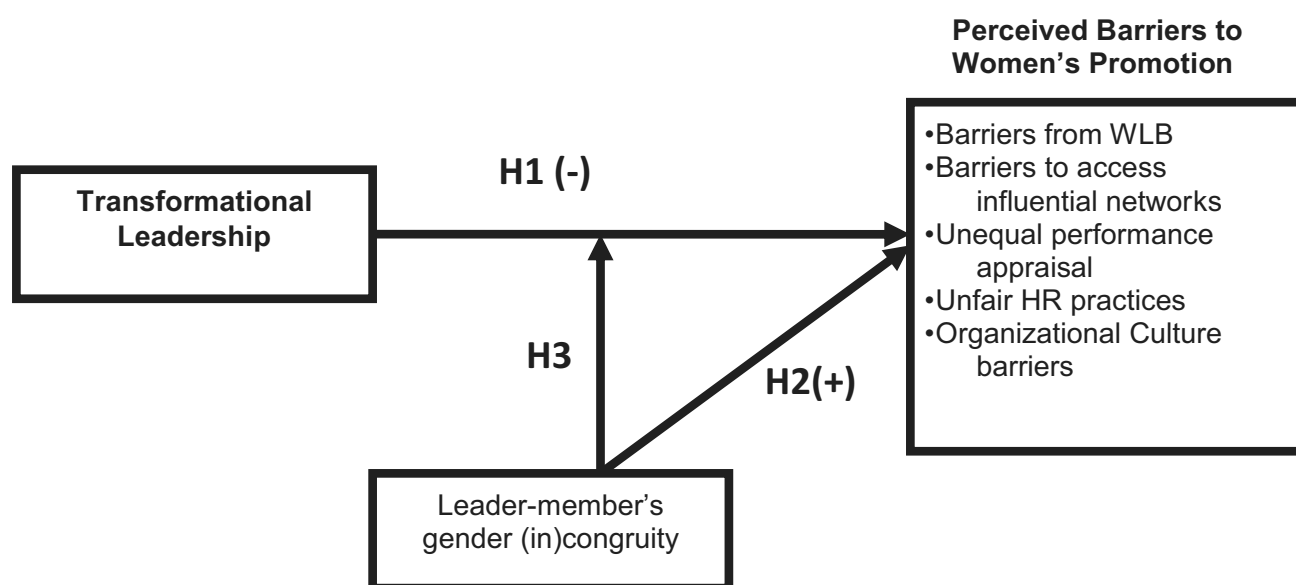


Fig. 1 Theoretical model

Using an aggregated score for transformational leadership was based on empirical data and previous literature. First, we compared the fit of two confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) models: (1) a 5-factor model differentiating the 5 subdimensions of transformational leadership (attributed charisma, behavioral charisma, vision/inspiration, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration), and (2) a second-order factor model with the 5 aforementioned first-order factors and a second-order factor representing transformational leadership style. The five-factor model showed adequate goodness of fit indices ($\chi^2=972.69$, $df=160$, $p<.01$; RMSEA=0.094 (0.088–0.099); CFI=0.97; TLI=0.96), and so did the second-order factor model ($\chi^2=104.24$, $df=165$, $p<.01$; RMSEA=0.096 (0.090–0.010); CFI=0.967; TLI=0.962). Moreover, differences among the two CFA tested models were irrelevant (incremental goodness of fit indexes showed $\Delta CFI=0.003$; $\Delta TLI=0.002$; $\Delta RMSEA=0.002$ (see the Data analysis section for model comparison criteria). Thus, the more parsimonious model, including the transformational leadership style in the analysis, was considered instead of the five dimensions. Previous research has also used transformational leadership style (overall score) instead of the dimensions of transformational leadership for different research purposes (e.g., Batista-Foguet et al., 2021; Moors, 2012; Overbey, 2013; Paramova & Blumberg, 2017; Wang et al., 2011).

Moderator variable

Leader-member gender congruity In addition, the questionnaire asked employees about the gender of their supervisor (man/woman). This means that gender congruity between leader and members happens when women are supervised by another woman, and non-congruity when the supervisor is a man. Hence, we categorized 0=Congruity (both leader and employee were women) and 1=No congruity (woman employee supervised by a man).

Dependent variables

Perceived barriers to women's promotion were assessed through the TOP-WOMAN scale (Ramos et al., 2022b). In the present study, we excluded two dimensions of barriers (Motivational barriers and Gender stereotypes) because they present very low scores in the present sample, showing that such barriers are hardly perceived. The five dimensions of barriers used are the following. *Barriers related to work-family balance* (five items, $\alpha=0.81$). This scale was composed of three items of women's family responsibilities and two items about work life balance (e.g., 'Women's family responsibilities make their career dedication and promotion difficult' and 'Work-family balance is not considered

abroad'). *Barriers to access influential networks* included five items ($\alpha=0.82$) regarding the access of women to the organizational networks which have big amount of information and decision-taking as well as access to mentoring (e.g., 'Women move in groups with lower access to relevant information' and 'There are no models of women managers that other women can follow'). *Unequal performance appraisal* included four items ($\alpha=0.95$), measuring the higher scrutiny and higher requirements to demonstrate performance that women face as compared with men (e.g., 'Women have greater requirements than men' and 'Women's work and achievements are less valued than men's'). *Unfair human resources policies and practices* (four items, $\alpha=0.79$) assess gender unfairness in HR policies like training, promotion, retribution, performance appraisal (e.g., 'Women receive lower wages than men'). Finally, *Barriers from organizational culture* (three items, $\alpha=0.71$) measures some agentic characteristics of organizational culture as competitiveness or authority (e.g., 'The organizational culture favors aspects like authority and control') and communal aspect ('The organizational culture does not favor aspects like mutual support, collaboration, and empathy', reversed item).

Control variables

Age We controlled for the effect of age in women for the outcome variable "barriers related to work-family balance" because they culturally take care of dependents (e.g., caring for dependents), as Jyrkinen et al. (2017) described. So, women have to manage a double workload during certain stages of their life, such as when they have children and are caring for aging parents. Age was measured as follows 1=<35; 2=36–45; 3=46–55; 4=>55.

Occupational status As occupational status can have effects on the "barrier to access influential networks" because employees in higher positions could have more opportunities to maintain regular contact with other colleagues with more influence and information along the firm, we controlled this dimension of barriers for occupational status. The Social Identity Theory of leadership (Hogg, 2001) describes human beings as tending to be with others, which is more prototypical of the group, so occupational status could influence women's access to influential networks. This variable considered six different position levels in the bank branch offices and the central support services. The higher the score, the lower the status.

Data analysis

We conducted descriptive data analysis and examined the relations among the variables. Pearson's correlation

coefficient was used for continuous variables or those treated as continuous (e.g., age, occupational status). Additionally, we assessed the relationship between leader-member gender congruity and continuous variables using point biserial correlation (Kornbrot, 2014).

With the exception of control variables, skewness and kurtosis were within acceptable ranges, therefore we performed t-tests to analyze differences between women employees supervised by another woman and those supervised by a man.

First, we run confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test the common method of variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The measurement model contained 6 variables of the model (transformational leadership, barriers related to work-family balance, barriers to access influential networks, unequal performance appraisal, unfair HR practices and policies, and barriers from organizational culture). The Weighted Least Squares Means and Variance adjusted (WLSMV) estimation method was selected due to the characteristics of certain items (skewness and kurtosis values). We evaluated the fit of a 6-factor model and compared it against a one-factor model to determine which better fit the data.

A modelling rationale was applied to examine differences between models and evaluate better fit. Differences smaller than 0.01 in NNFI and CFI values (Δ NNFI and Δ CFI), and differences less than 0.015 in RMSEA values (Chen, 2007) were considered a sign of negligible practical differences (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002; Widaman, 1985).

To examine the hypotheses, we used path analysis with Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). Specifically, we selected maximum likelihood (ML) as the estimation method, considering the absence of asymmetry and kurtosis of the variables.

To examine conditional effects, we considered BC bootstrap CI methods using a bootstrap sample size of 5000 (Preacher et al., 2007). In line with Preacher et al. (2007), the conditional effects described in Hypothesis 3 can be calculated as the conditional product $(a_k + b_k W)X$, with k ranging from 1 to 5 and where a_k are the coefficients estimating the relationship of transformational leadership with each barrier, b_k are the coefficients calculating the moderator effect of leader-member gender congruity in the relationship between transformational leadership and these barriers, W represents the moderator variable (leader-member gender congruity), and X represents the independent variable (transformational leadership). The conditional effect will happen when the strength of the relationship between transformational leadership and the corresponding barrier (a_k) depends on the level (congruency vs. non-congruency) of the moderator variable (W), that is when the BC bootstrap confidence interval for the conditional effect does not include zero (Preacher et al., 2007). So, coefficients of conditional effects

were as follows: transformational leadership to barriers to work-family balance ($a_1 + b_1 W$), transformational leadership to barriers to access networks ($a_2 + b_2 W$), transformational leadership to barrier unequal performance appraisal ($a_3 + b_3 W$), transformational leadership to barriers unequal HR practices and Policies ($a_4 + b_4 W$), transformational leadership to barrier organizational culture ($a_5 + b_5 W$).

Results

Measurement model

The results of the CFA showed that the theorized 6-factor model fit the data well ($\chi^2 = 2.541,049$; $df = 764$, $p < .01$; RMSEA = 0.063 (0.061–0.066); CFI = 0.97; TLI = 0.96), whereas the one-factor model exhibited a lack of fit ($\chi^2 = 11,954.3$, $df = 779$, $p < .01$; RMSEA = 0.157 (0.155–0.160); CFI = 0.78; TLI = 0.77). Taking into account, the incremental goodness of fit indices (Δ CFI = 0.184; Δ TLI = 0.194; Δ RMSEA = 0.094) the difference between the 6-factor model and the one-factor model was significant. These results indicated that the 6-factor model showed a better fit and supported the discriminant validity of the variables included in the model.

Descriptive statistics, reliability, and correlations

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and correlations among the model's variables. As shown in Table 1, all measures had adequate internal consistency. Means are high for transformational leadership ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.88$) and low to the barrier of unfair HR policies and practices. Skewness is negative but the coefficients were less than 2, so it could be considered that it would follow normal distribution. Related to kurtosis, coefficients were also below two, so the method of estimation for path analysis was adequate.

Correlations among barriers were positive, as expected. Transformational leadership showed low but significant negative correlations with all barriers (see Table 1). However, leader-member gender congruity was only significantly associated with barriers to accessing influential networks, and this correlation was minimal. Additionally, we only found significant differences in this variable between women employees supervised by women and those supervised by men. Specifically, women employees supervised by other women ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.57$) reported significantly fewer barriers to accessing influential networks compared to those supervised by men ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.50$) ($t(557) = -2.08$, $p < .05$). However, no significant differences were found for the other barriers, and women employees did not perceive

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis, correlations, and reliability

	Mean	SD	Sk	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Occupational status	-	-	-	-	0.04	-0.07	-0.05	-0.09*	0.00	0.40**	0.62**	0.65**	0.49**
3. Transformational leadership	3.81	0.88	-1.08	1.79	-0.07	0.05	0.03	-0.09*	(0.81)	(0.82)	(0.95)	(0.79)	(0.71)
4. Leader-member gender congruity	-	-	-	-	0.07	0.09*	0.13**	-0.20**	0.09*	0.28**	0.55**	0.49**	0.49**
5. Barrier Work-family balance	3.92	1.60	-0.12	-0.91	0.04	0.15**	0.13**	-0.20**	0.00	0.40**	0.62**	0.65**	0.49**
6. Barrier Access to influential networks	4.08	1.52	-0.23	-0.71	0.15**	0.15**	0.03	-0.25**	-0.09*	0.28**	0.55**	0.49**	0.49**
7. Barrier Unequal performance appraisal	4.27	1.99	-0.35	-1.13	0.15**	0.03	0.01	-0.26**	-0.06	0.21**	0.55**	0.49**	0.49**
8. Barrier Unfair HR practices and policies	2.84	1.44	0.44	-0.66	0.05	0.01	0.01	-0.29**	0.01	0.22**	0.49**	0.49**	0.49**
9. Barrier Organizational culture	4.26	1.47	-0.27	-0.34	0.09	0.01	0.01	-0.29**	0.01	0.22**	0.49**	0.49**	0.49**

N = 579 * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Pearson coefficient was calculated, except point biserial correlation for Leader-member gender congruity. Barriers (rows 5 to 9) were perceived barriers by participants

Table 2 Results for the moderated regression model (unstandardized results)

Outcome variable: Barriers related to work-family balance			
Independent Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Age	-0.11	0.10	0.30
Transformational leadership (a_1)	-0.11	0.19	0.54
Leader-member gender congruity	0.53	0.84	0.53
Transformational leadership X leader-member gender congruity (b_1)	-0.13	0.21	0.53
$R^2 = 0.014$			
Outcome variable: Barriers to Accessing Influential Networks			
Independent Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Occupational status	0.13	0.04	0.00**
Transformational leadership (a_2)	-0.13	0.18	0.48
Leader-member gender congruity	1.41	0.81	0.08
Transformational leadership X leader-member gender congruity (b_2)	-0.28	0.21	0.17
$R^2 = 0.059$			
Outcome variable: Unequal performance appraisal			
Independent Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Transformational leadership (a_3)	0.02	0.23	0.92
Leader-member gender congruity	3.51	0.99	0.00**
Transformational leadership X leader-member gender congruity (b_3)	-0.82	0.25	0.00**
$R^2 = 0.089$			
Outcome variable: Unfair HR practices and Policies			
Independent Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Transformational leadership (a_4)	-0.12	0.15	0.40
Leader-member gender congruity	1.67	0.67	0.01*
Transformational leadership X leader-member gender congruity (b_4)	-0.39	0.17	0.02*
$R^2 = 0.070$			
Outcome variable: Organizational Culture Barriers			
Independent Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Transformational leadership (a_5)	-0.42	0.14	0.00**
Leader-member gender congruity	0.45	0.74	0.46
Transformational leadership X leader-member gender congruity (b_5)	-0.12	0.16	0.44
$R^2 = 0.085$			

any difference in transformational leadership between male and female supervisors (Student $t(557) = -0.66, p > .05$).

Path analysis

The model (Fig. 1) showed adequate fit to data ($\chi^2 = 20.6$, $df = 8$, $p < .01$; RMSEA = 0.053 (0.025–0.083); CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.94; SRMR = 0.026). As shown in Table 2, the paths from transformational leadership to barriers related

to work-family balance ($a_1=-0.11, p>.05$), to the barriers to access influential networks ($a_2=-0.13, p>.05$), to the unequal performance appraisal ($a_3=0.02, p>.05$), and to the unfair HR practices and policies ($a_4=-0.12, p>.05$) were not statistically significant. However, the path from transformational leadership to organizational culture barriers ($a_5=-0.42, p<.01$) was significant, so Hypothesis 1 was only partially supported. The more transformational the supervisor was perceived to be, the fewer barriers related to organizational culture were perceived by women employees.

The path between leader-member gender congruity to barriers related to work-life balance ($B=0.53, p>.05$), to barriers to access influential networks ($B=1.41, p>.05$), and to organizational culture barriers ($B=0.45, p>.05$) were not statistically significant. However, the path from the leader-member gender congruity to the unequal performance appraisal ($B=3.51, p<.001$) and to unfair HR practices and policies ($B=1.67, p<.05$) were statistically significant. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was partially supported.

In addition, leader-member gender congruity significantly moderated the relationship between transformational leadership and two types of barriers to women's promotion. Specifically, the interaction between transformational leadership and leader-member gender congruity on unequal performance appraisal was supported ($b_3=-0.82, p<.01$). To interpret the interaction effect, we computed simple slopes of the relationship between transformational leadership and unequal performance appraisal for each possible value of the moderator (0 = Congruity, 1 = No congruity) and plotted

the regression lines (see Fig. 2) by means of the Process macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013). Results confirmed that the slope estimating the relationship between transformational leadership and unequal performance appraisal was not significant for congruity (women supervised by another woman; $B=0.04, p>.05$), but was negative and statistically significant for incongruity (women supervised by men; $B=-0.77, p<.01$). Accordingly, the conditional effects estimated with Mplus showed that transformational leadership did not have a statistically significant effect on the barrier of unequal performance appraisal when there was congruity (women supervised by a woman) ($a_3+b_3W_{(1)}=0.02$; 95% BC CI=[-0.42,0.50]), as the CI included zero. Though, the aforementioned relationship was negative and statistically significant when there was incongruity (women supervised by men) ($a_3+b_3W_{(0)}=-0.79$; 95% BC CI=[-1.01,-0.59]).

Additionally, the interaction between transformational leadership and leader-member gender congruity on unfair HR practices and policies was supported ($b_4=-0.39, p<.05$). Results exhibited that the slope estimating the relationship between transformational leadership and unfair HR practices and policies (see Fig. 3) was not significant for congruity (women supervised by a woman; $B=-0.07, p>.05$), but was negative and statistically significant for incongruity (women supervised by men; $B=-0.54, p<.01$). Accordingly, the conditional effects estimated with Mplus showed that transformational leadership did not have a statistically significant effect on the barrier of unequal HR practices and policies when there was congruity (women supervised

Fig. 2 Relationship between transformational leadership and unequal performance appraisal's perceived barrier moderated by leader-member gender congruity

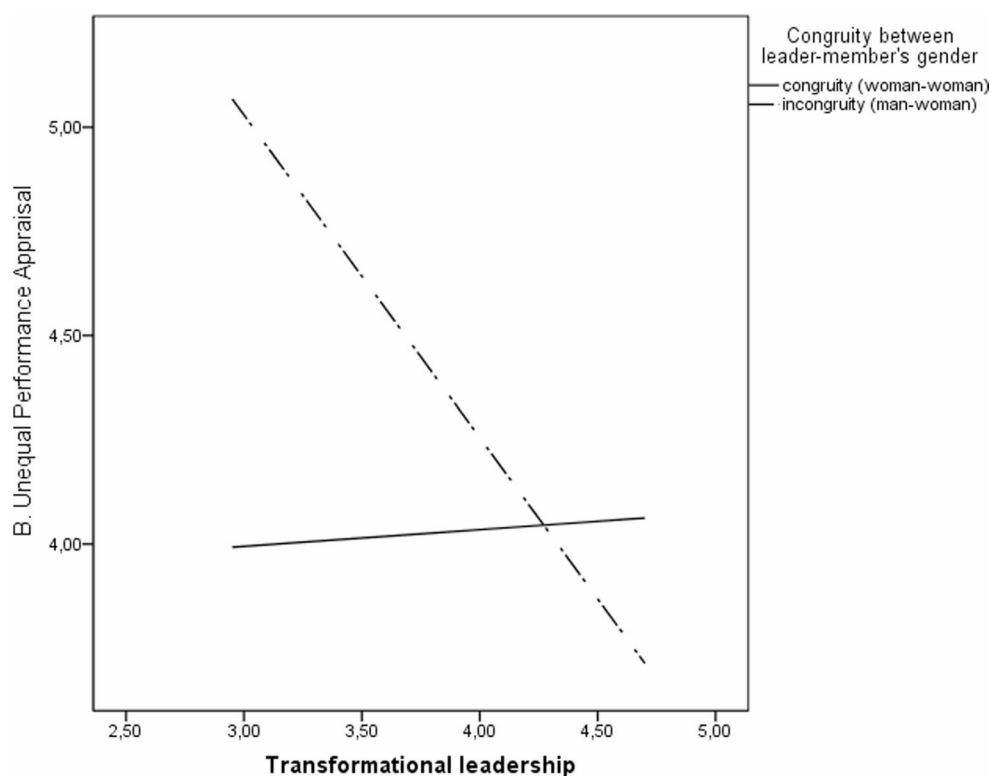


Fig. 3 Relationship between transformational leadership and unfair HR practices and policies' perceived barrier moderated by leader-member gender congruity

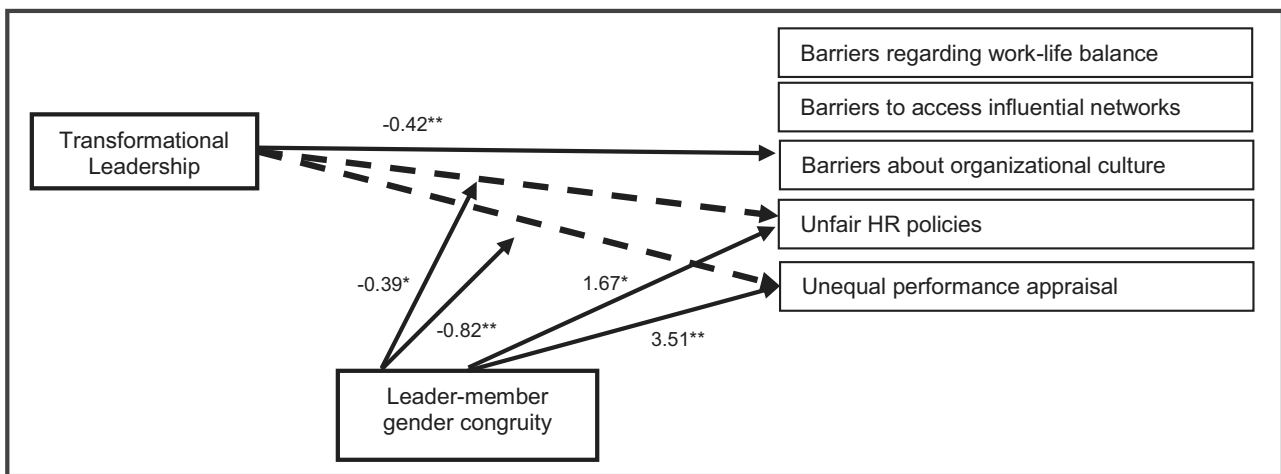
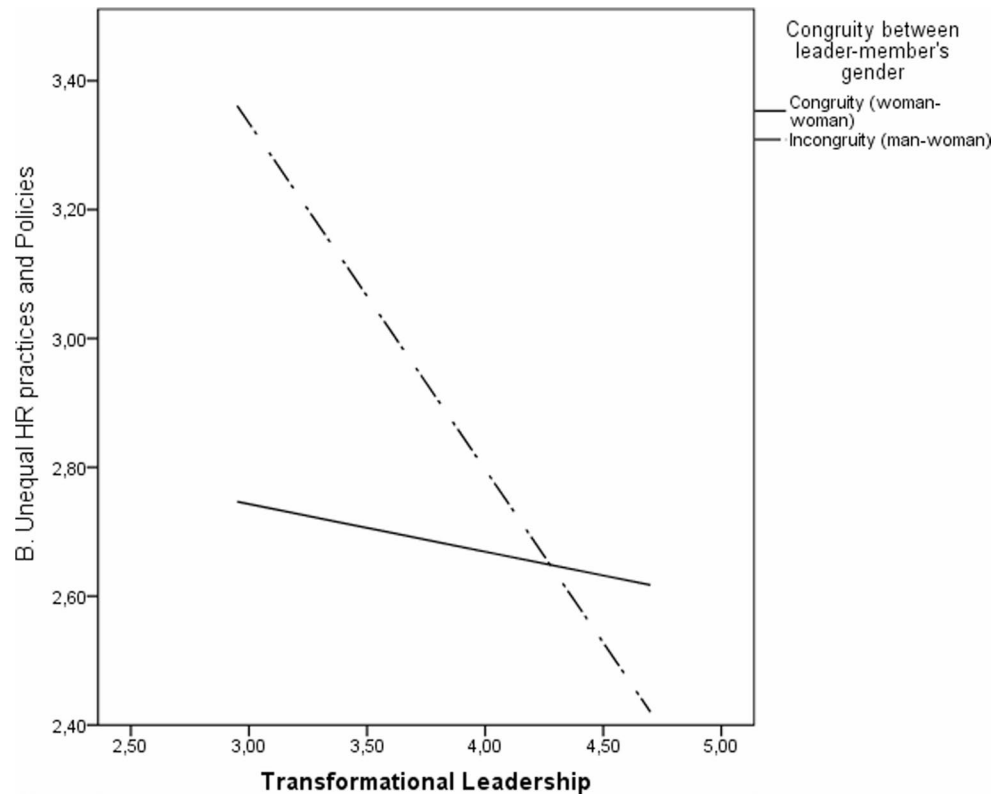


Fig. 4 Results from the moderated regression model. Note: Coefficients are B (non-standardized coefficients). * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

by a women) ($a_4 + b_4W_{(1)} = -0.12$; 95% BC CI=[-0.41, 0.17]), as the CI included zero. However, the above mentioned relationship was negative and statistically significant when there was incongruity (women supervised by men) ($a_4 + b_4W_{(0)} = -0.52$; 95% BC CI=[-0.69, -0.35]).

Significant interaction effects were found for two of the barriers to women's promotion. However, these effects were in the opposite direction to what was hypothesized. Specifically, the negative relationship between transformational leadership and the two barriers (unequal performance appraisal, and unfair HR practices and policies)

was significant only when there was incongruence (women supervised by men). Therefore, these findings did not support Hypothesis 3.

The results of the moderated regression model are summarized in Fig. 4, which shows the non-standardized coefficients for the significant paths.

Discussion

This study analyzed the effect of transformational leadership and leader-member gender congruity on the perceived barriers to women's promotion. Additionally, it explored the moderating role of leader-member gender congruity on the relationship between transformational leadership and perceived barriers to promotion access of women members. The results found that higher transformational leadership only diminished the barriers from organizational culture (those barriers derived from organizational emphasis on authority, competitiveness, and control instead of mutual support and empathy). Additionally, there was a direct relationship between leader-member gender congruity and barriers of unequal performance appraisal (barriers derived from more exigent and continuous scrutiny regarding women's performance as compared to men's performance) and unfair HR practices and policies (derived from a biased application of HR practices which favored men against women). However, there were no significant relationships between leader-member gender congruity and barriers related to work-family balance, barriers to accessing influential networks (the difficulties experienced by women to become and participate in those groups with more information, influence, and authority in the company), and organizational culture barriers. Thus, women whom other women supervise perceive fewer barriers to unequal performance appraisal and unfair HR practices than women supervised by male supervisors. Finally, leader-member gender congruity moderated the relationship between transformational leadership and the barriers to unequal performance appraisal and unfair HR practices and policies, where the relationship between transformational leadership and these two barriers was negative and statistically significant only when there was incongruity (women supervised by men). Nevertheless, no moderating effect of congruity of leader-member's gender was found in the relationship between transformational leadership and barriers related to work-family balance, barriers to access influential networks, and organizational culture barriers. These results suggest that the perception of a female supervisor as more or less transformational does not reduce the barriers women perceive, beyond the effect of having a female leader. In contrast, male transformational leaders do reduce the barriers women perceive regarding promotion, contrary to our hypothesis 3. This result suggests that transformational leadership does not reduce the perceptions of barriers among women employees when the leader is a woman. However, women leaders influence the reduction of gender barriers that transformational leadership does not expand. The results suggest that effective

transformational leadership can partially compensate for the effects of leader-member gender incongruity (women that are supervised by men).

Transformational leadership is associated with effectiveness and enhanced organizational performance (Bass & Bass, 2008). Moreover, transformational leaders inspire and motivate their followers to overcome barriers. In this line, our results extend the positive influence of transformational leadership on different performance, attitudinal, and well-being outcomes (Deng et al., 2023) to the reduction of gender discrimination. Transformational leadership is considered the more feminine leadership style, given that it includes intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration given to followers (Eagly et al., 2003). Leaders transmit values, attitudes, and behaviors to their followers. Considering their followers' demands, they could buffer cultural values that are a barrier against women. Given that transformational leadership is considered more communal than agentic (Cuadrado et al., 2012; Eagly et al., 2020), women may perceive the leaders (men and women) who perform this type of leadership to be more similar. O'Brien et al. (2024) suggest empowerment as one of the ways to reduce gender discrimination. In this sense, transformational leadership could reduce the perceived barriers to women's promotion as this leadership style stimulates followers' empowerment. These characteristics could be another explanation for why higher transformational leadership reduces the barrier of organizational culture, as evidenced by our results. In addition, transformational leadership affected two additional barriers, unequal performance appraisal and unfair HR practices and policies, but only when men supervised women. This implies that male leaders who display transformational leadership, compared with those who are low in transformational leadership, could reduce the barriers women perceive to being promoted. Nevertheless, women supervisors do not reduce women's perceptions when it comes to barriers to promotion when they are more transformational, as the barriers' perceptions were already low for women with a female supervisor low in transformational leadership. These results are in line with those obtained by Burch and Guarana (2014) about the increase of followers' engagement from transformational leadership, and Cremer et al. (2007) who found more perceived organizational support among followers of transformational leaders. In the same vein, Erro-Garcés and Urien (2024) showed that more supportive relationships from leaders increased satisfaction of followers. In our study these supportive relationships came both from women supervisors as well as men supervisors just in case they are transformational. These results are consistent with Hypothesis 2, which supports the positive direct effect of leader-member gender (in)congruity on the barriers to unequal performance appraisal and unfair HR

practices and policies. Concretely, when there is congruity (women supervised by women), the perception of these two barriers to promotion is lower. This result aligns with the proposal of Heilman et al. (2024), who point out that increasing women's participation in top management is a valuable strategy to combat gender discrimination. Women who supervise female employees may offer resources that help reduce the perceptions of barriers to promotion. Similarly, O'Brien et al. (2024) mention that practices such as empowerment, mentoring and fostering a sense of belonging can reduce gender discrimination. In this sense, when women supervise other women, it is likely that they enhance women's capabilities, provide more frequent mentoring, and foster a stronger sense of belonging among their female followers. Moreover, our results expand the findings from AbouAssi (2021) who found more commitment in volunteer activities among women employees when supervised by other women; Fjendbo et al. (2021) who found better training results among women who were supervised by other women, as well as Hurst et al. (2017) who reported that the relational experiences of women supervisors had beneficial aspects on their women followers' careers. In this line, our results point out that leader-member gender congruency has positive effects on women's perceptions about the barriers they need to cope for career advancement, and the complementary role of transformational leadership in case of leader-member gender incongruency.

It is noteworthy that neither transformational leadership nor gender congruity (women employees whom other women supervise) will decrease the perceptions of women of barriers associated with work-family balance and the inability to access influential networks. In the first case, while organizational practices are undoubtedly relevant in facilitating work-family balance, barriers related to balancing work and family may demand extend beyond the scope of corporate policies and managerial interventions. Surveys on work and non-work demands and working hours reveal a consistent finding: women allocate more time to family responsibilities than men (Eurofound, 2018). Recently, Chen et al. (2024) highlighted companies' relevance in providing family-friendly workplaces as a strategy to promote female representation in top management. However, our results suggest that transformational leadership is insufficient to reduce the barriers women perceive from difficulties in balancing work and family. Similarly, women managers seem not to be influential in reducing work-life balance barriers to promotion. More institutional and organizational measures should be required to reduce such barriers. Beyond these potential explanations, recent research suggested that some variables could moderate the relationship between transformational leadership and its effects, like followers' motives-affiliation, power, and achievement- (Kehr et al., 2023).

Concerning the second case, the absence of effects regarding the barriers to accessing influential networks may be attributed to the fact that the proportion of women decreases as the organizational status increases. This is evidenced by the observation that most women in managerial positions are located in middle levels, with a notable absence in executive positions.

The absence of the effect of gender congruity (women supervised by other women) on different barriers could be potentially explained through two different mechanisms. First, not all women are the same; thus, not all women can be equally oriented and provide the same degree of support to other women (Parkinson et al., 2019). In this way, women could display more equal consideration and scrutiny and more equal HR practices, but not enough concern to go beyond, providing additional social support and networking and offering additional opportunities for work-life balance. Second, as women supervisors predominantly perform middle-manager positions, they cannot influence barriers regarding influence networks and family-friendly policies (excepting some higher understanding of other women's needs). The lack of impact concerning barriers to accessing influential networks might be because women leaders are not consistently engaged in influential circles. In this context, the presence of women diminishes as organizational hierarchies ascend, with the most of women in managerial positions situated in mid-level roles and rarely occupying executive positions.

Our research emphasizes the fact that women leaders could play a relevant role in reducing women's perceived barriers to promotion. This is congruent with recent calls for women's empowerment and the impact of variables like social support, power relationships, and group dynamics (Lyness & Grotto, 2018). Their study suggests that women leaders could reduce gender bias in organizations. Our results suggest that transformational leadership could empower women employees through a fair consideration of women's merits and performance and by reducing gender discrimination in HR practices, especially when leaders are men. In addition, women leaders could provide more social support for their women employees and provide role models and mentoring practices. Perhaps the primary challenge hindering women's advancement lies in domestic overwork, with companies and supervisors playing a limited (yet significant) role in assisting women in navigating these challenges.

Our findings underscore the potential impact of women leaders in alleviating the perceived barriers to promotion women face. Our results indicate that female followers identified with women leaders applying the "similar to me" effect (Rand & Wexley, 1975); they identified with their leaders and perceived fewer barriers. In this line of results,

Ayman et al. (2009) found that female members assessed the performance of female transformational leaders better than male ones. Our results showed that leader-member gender congruity could lead women supervisors to fairly evaluate the contributions of women subordinates and avoid biases when applying HR practices. Women perceived that they would be better evaluated if their supervisors were women. Again, the effect of gender similarity under social identity theory, relational demography theory, and the “similar to me” effect is demonstrated. Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) is partially consistent with this result. As managerial roles are considered to be more aligned with men than with women, having a female supervisor may inspire other women to believe that they are suitable for a managerial position. Women supervisors will act as models for other women, showing a path to pursue. When men supervise women, they have no such models, and they may feel that they are not appropriate for managerial positions. In this vein, the meta-analysis from Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2014) highlights that increasing the presence of women at managerial levels could shift the masculine orientation of the company and will favor a different (more equitable) assessment of managerial effectiveness, thus offering more opportunities to other women.

Additionally, we found a moderating effect of the interaction of transformational leadership and unequal performance appraisal and transformational leadership and unfair HR practices and policies. Our study hypothesized that female transformational leaders would exhibit a greater tendency to engage in behaviours that reduce barriers to women’s promotion than male transformational leaders. Nevertheless, this “boosting effect” was not found. Instead, our research indicates that the effect of women leaders on reducing the barriers to women’s promotion is not dependent on their transformational behaviors. It seems that leadership from women cannot benefit from transformational style beyond the effect of leader-member gender congruity. The previous experience of women leaders in terms of gender bias and discrimination, empathy toward other women, and their communal characteristics seem to play a relevant role in reducing the barriers perceived by women when it comes to being promoted (Eagly & Carli, 2003). All these aspects reinforce Lyness and Grotto’s (2018) call to increase the number of women in leadership positions, which will influence the opportunities available for other women to progress at managerial levels. Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2014) call for increasing the number of women managers to shift the evaluation of the effectiveness of (women) leaders in a less biased way.

Reversely, male leaders are less aware of the barriers faced by women, have less communal characteristics per se, and their characteristics are less aligned with those of

women subordinates (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly et al., 2020). Thus, male leaders who are more transformational largely reduce the barriers perceived by their female subordinates when compared with less transformational male leaders. In parallel, women subordinates could perceive their transformational male leaders as more similar and congruent than less transformational male leaders. As has been mentioned before, transformational leadership is the style that has more communal attributes (Bass, 1999; Cuadrado et al., 2012). Given that male transformational leaders show communal characteristics traditionally associated with women, female members may feel more able to identify with them (Ely, 1994; Hogg, 2001; Rand & Wexley, 1975).

In summary, our results have theoretical implications regarding the effects of transformational leadership and leader-member gender congruity on the barriers to women’s promotion. So, transformational leaders reduce organizational culture barriers, and when there is incongruity (women supervised by men), contribute to reducing unequal performance appraisal and unfair HR practices and policies. This evidence adds to the larger evidence about the advantages of transformational leadership (for further information, see Wang et al., 2011). As perceived barriers to women’s promotion have been associated with organizational (in)justice and other organizational outcomes (Ramos et al., 2022a), promoting transformational styles (individualized consideration, idealized influence, and inspiration) is a relevant tool to build fairness in the workplace. In addition, our results are partially in line with the Role Congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and the “similar to me” effect (Rand & Wexley, 1975). Leader-member gender congruity, specifically when other women supervise women, showed relevant effects to diminish perceived barriers to promotion. This means that women leaders are more aware of the difficulties experienced by women and more empathetic to women’s needs. From the point of view of Social Identity Theory (Hogg, 2001), endo-group members who share similar characteristics over time in their roles are more likely to perceive themselves as more identified.

These theoretical contributions have managerial implications. Hence, we strongly recommend that managers encourage transformational leadership in their companies. Moreover, promoting women for leadership positions will have a powerful impact on how women perceive their access to promotions. Increasing the number of women leaders will improve fairness perceptions and strengthen positive climates, especially in companies with a large percentage of women employees.

The generalization of our results is limited. Our findings are based on the perceptions of women followers in a financial group composed of three organizations. We encourage future research to explore these perceptions of barriers in

male followers and test different demographic characteristics such as age or race. These barriers could also be analyzed in other countries and sectors. Moreover, our sample is cross-sectional, and even though we tested the measurement model to ensure there is no common method of variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003), we could not affirm causal relationships. In addition, future studies could analyze in depth the psychosocial processes that leader-member gender congruity implies both for women leaders and subordinates. Further studies could analyze the effects of transformational leadership dimensions separately. Finally, one limitation of our study is considering gender as a dichotomous variable (woman or man) depending on the perception of employees, without considering the social construction of gender.

Conclusion

This article showed how women members perceived fewer barriers to organizational culture when their leader was transformational. Furthermore, women whom another woman supervises perceived less barriers related to unequal performance appraisal and unfair HR practices and policies, showing that leader-member gender congruity plays a role in HR management. Additionally, there is an interaction effect of transformational leadership and leader-member gender congruity on two barriers: unequal performance appraisal and unfair HR practices and policies.

This effect highlights that when male leaders demonstrate transformational qualities, female team members perceive fewer barriers (in comparison with females supervised by male leaders with low transformational leadership). This pattern does not emerge when female leaders display these characteristics. When other women supervise women employees, their perceptions of barriers to promotion do not vary despite the level of transformational leadership shown by managers.

No notable effects were observed in relation to challenges concerning work-life balance and access to professional networks, whether in the context of transformational leadership or leader-member gender congruity.

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Data availability The data presented and/or analyzed in this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author.

Declarations

The paper titled *Do transformational leaders reduce the barriers women face in accessing managerial positions? The moderating role of leaders' gender* has been written by Felisa Latorre, Amparo Ramos, Inés Tomás & José Ramos and has been supported by a research grant from Generalitat Valenciana (Ref.:PROMETEO/2016/138).

Ethical approval The survey was previously approved by union representatives in the company. This study was in accordance with the ethical standards of the company and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The authors declare they don't have any conflict of interest nor financial or non-financial.

Informed consent Research involves Human Participants answering an online questionnaire. Participants (all employees in the company) were invited to participate through a letter of invitation from the Equal Opportunities Unit of the company, enclosed in its II Equal Opportunities Plan.

Participation was voluntary. Survey does not include personal information, only attitudinal variables, sex, age and job. Online questionnaire included a clause ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. In addition, the following sentence appear in the first screen of on-line questionnaire:

"When sending the present questionnaires, you accept the voluntary participation in this survey and manifest your consent."

Conflict of interest Authors declare they don't have any conflict of interest nor financial neither non-financial.

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