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Leadership Self-Efficacy: A Study of Male and Female MBA Students in Mexico

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A disproportionate share of men holds leadership positions in Mexico. Relatively new studies on gender and leadership self-efficacy conducted under transformational leadership models have started to challenge the idea that gender moderates leader effectiveness. This study was developed to analyze differences in leadership self-efficacy between 80 female and 73 male MBA students in the city of Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico. The results contributed to the growing number of studies on leadership self-efficacy conducted under transformational leadership models that support the claim that gender does not moderate leader effectiveness.
Keywords: transformational, leadership, gender, Mexico, LPI

Introduction

Mary van Kleeck was a classical management scholar in the early 1900s and one of the first individuals to document the integration of women into the labor force (Hyland & Heenan, 2004). She was concerned that cultural norms at the time meant that female employees had to comply with the demands of the workplace while managing a high share of domestic responsibilities (Hyland & Heenan, 2004). Her research was influential in the passing of legislation designed to prevent employers from requiring female workers to spend unreasonable amounts of time at work, thus, allowing them to fulfill their roles at home (McGuire, 2011).

Since then, organizations implemented policies designed to prevent gender discrimination, creating a more favorable work environment for women (Peterson, 2011). However, there is still much to work ahead in terms of ensuring a fair and unbiased path for women to advance into top management positions within the private and public sectors (Eagly & Carli, 2007). One of the issues that may be contributing to the slow advancement of women as they try to climb the corporate ladder is the belief that leadership is mainly a male practice (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Burns (2010) cautioned that women have been ignored for participation in leadership roles for so long that it may have sunk into their consciousness. It is important for everyone that women overcome this belief to correct the gender gap in leadership roles.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The problem of underrepresentation of women in leadership roles is evident in Mexican society. Even though gender equity in educational attainment and inclusion in the labor force has been achieved (Kral, Covarrubias, & Iturribarría, 2012; Moctezuma Navarro, Narro Robles, & Orozco Hernández, 2014), the gender gap in leadership roles has persisted (Zabludovsky Kuper, 2015). The World Bank (WB) estimated that women occupy top seats in only15% of the firms operating in Mexico (2016), and the International Labour Organization (ILO) noted that women account for less than a third of all managers in the country (2015). Because of reduced opportunities for advancement, women on leadership tracks may become frustrated and choose to remove themselves from their organizations (Carnes & Radojevich-Kelley, 2011).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to compare male and female leadership self-efficacy to determine whether women in Mexico have reduced their chances for advancement into leadership roles due to internal factors. A correlation between gender and leadership self-efficacy may signal the need for key stakeholders to implement strategies to help women improve their perception of leadership efficacy and eventually reduce the gender gap in leadership roles. A lack of association between gender and leadership-self efficacy would suggest that key stakeholders responsible for promoting individuals to leadership positions have more confidence in males than in females to occupy top management positions. Proving that leader effectiveness is not moderated by gender could help reduce the gender gap in top

management positions by reducing the effects of biased beliefs that associate effective leadership with being male.

Although this study will not suffice to make any claims for proving the relationship between gender and leadership self-efficacy, it may serve to add to the list of studies on gender and transformational leadership, which may help address the problem of underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. In that sense, the main contribution of this study will be that women in Mexico who are working on obtaining a graduate degree in business can be effective transformational leaders. This should appeal to organizations looking for a wider talent pool to recruit personnel for management positions. This is especially true for organizations that constantly deal with change and complexity.

Weinberger (2011) argued that aspiring female leaders who are highly trained and have high earning potential are the groups most vulnerable to experience gender discrimination while trying the climb the corporate ladder. The logic behind this argument rests in the assumption that women who are underqualified for top management positions would not have to be discriminated based on gender to be denied this type of opportunity for advancement. However, well-qualified female workers may be denied a chance for a leadership position because of their gender.

For this reason, the individuals invited to participate in the present study were MBA students. Because of their training, male and female MBA students place themselves in a position to occupy leadership roles in the future. Therefore, the women in the sample may be vulnerable to gender discrimination now or in the future. With this in mind, a convenience sample of 80 female and 73 male MBA students from the city of Tijuana, Baja California Mexico, were asked to participate in the study. The study was designed to measure leadership self-efficacy through the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) Self (Kouzes & Posner, 2013). The LPI is commonly used to conduct research under the five practices of extraordinary leadership model developed by Kouzes and Posner (2012), a model that is consistent with transformational leadership theory (Northouse, 2016).

The dependent variables for the study were the five practices measured through the LPI Self (model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart). The independent variable was the gender of the participants. Once the data were gathered, independent-samples t-tests were calculated to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between male and female participants in terms of each of the leadership practices measured through the LPI Self. The findings from the study may be used to influence aspiring female leaders, educational leaders, and organizational decision-makers interested in creating more diverse management teams in organizations operating in Mexico. The study may also be added to previous works conducted on gender and transformational leadership that support the claim that gender does not moderate transformational leadership self-efficacy.

Literature Review
Gender Discrimination in Leadership Roles
Female workers in Mexico can be categorized into those with low earning potential and those with high earning potential. Both types of workers experience undesirable circumstances. Women with low-income potential (low educational achievement) are less likely to enter the workforce because the return on their investment would be negligible, so their time and effort would likely be better spent performing domestic tasks (Arceo-Gómez & Campos-Vázquez, 2014). On the other hand, women with high income potential have no problem finding financially rewarding employment, but are more likely to experience organizational barriers directed at women, and may have to make difficult work-life balance choices to improve their chances of climbing the corporate ladder (Arceo-Gómez & Campos-Vázquez, 2014). The latter category of women are said to experience what is known as glass-ceiling effects (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

The glass-ceiling can be perceived in the form of having women make difficult choices in terms of work-life balance, which often means that they have to sacrifice their family lives to improve their standings at work (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The glass-ceiling may also be perceived in organizations that promote a culture where conducting one-self in accordance with male patterns of behavior is preferred over stereotypical female behaviors. These two glass-ceiling effects are further explained in the next paragraphs.

Brumley (2014) analyzed qualitative data on the experience of female employees in one large organization in Mexico that adopted an institutional policy aimed at supporting women who were in the process of starting a family. The policy ensured that women could go on maternity leave without fear of losing their jobs. However, corporate culture in that organization was known to favor men for advancement to top management roles. Therefore, even though women no longer had to fear losing their jobs for starting a family, they had to accept that their chances for advancement were limited. Similarly, Castro (2012) studied the corporate culture of a major accounting firm in Mexico. The results of the study indicated that female employees were expected to work unreasonably long hours to be considered for advancement. According to Castro (2012), the senior leadership at the firm valued workers based on time spent at work, which often went well into the night. Employees who are willing to promote advancing in their careers at considerable expense to their personal and family lives are often referred to as "ideal workers" (Sallee, 2012).

Organizational cultures that favor having male leaders may put pressure on their female employees to conduct themselves in ways that are inconsistent with their gender identities. Barragan, Mills, and Runte (2010) studied successful female leaders in Mexico and concluded that these individuals had been willing to adopt traditionally-defined masculine characteristics and behaviors to achieve success in their organizations. Leskinen, Rabelo, and Cortina (2015) conducted their own study with 425

aspiring female leaders. They confirmed Barragan et al.'s (2010) findings that suggest that women on their way to top management roles feel the need to adopt an expected leadership approach, which is consistent with masculine patterns of behavior. However, Leskinen et al. (2015) argued that these individuals experienced discrimination for failing to behave in a manner consistent with their own gender. Therefore, women who aspire to top management roles should act more like their male cohorts, but will likely be penalized for deviating from traditionally established gender roles.

It is curious that women who manage to reach top management roles by adapting their approach to fit a more masculine way of behaving actually end up reinforcing gender inequity (Muhr, 2011). The logic behind this argument is that when women achieve success by acting more like men, they support the claim that leadership is a male role. What is most troubling about this situation is that women (not just men) accept the notion that the practice of leadership is more consistent with being male than being female. This places women in an unfavorable position when they try to climb the corporate ladder, and suggests that leadership self-efficacy plays a role in addressing the gender issue in leadership.

As noted before, Burns (2010) identified leadership self-efficacy as a factor linked to the gender gap in leadership roles. It seems that organizations that value workers who are willing to forego their domestic responsibilities to climb the corporate ladder, and organizations that prefer to have leaders who fit a traditional male prototype, have reinforced the notion that leadership effectiveness is moderated by gender. Several studies support this claim. These will be explained in the following paragraphs.

Leadership Self-Efficacy and Gender.
Leadership theories largely ignored the role of women in leadership roles prior to the 1970s (Chemers, 2000). Studies based on leader personality or behavior tended to associate leadership efficacy with men and not women (Jogulu & Wood, 2006). Traditionally female behaviors like being caring and considerate have been deemed useful and even preferable in certain contexts, but generally hurt aspiring female leaders by confirming gender stereotypes associated with leadership efficacy (Crites, Dickson, & Lorenz, 2015). Schein (1973) conducted a study to compare male and female workers with effective managers in terms of characteristics and behaviors. She surveyed male participants to gather her data, and concluded that the characteristics and behaviors of effective managers were more closely associated with men than with women. Schein repeated her study two years later using female workers as her subjects (1975). In spite of this, her conclusion was the same as before, which suggested that men and women believed that leadership efficacy was more aligned with male personality and patterns of behavior. Thus, leadership self-efficacy was lower among women than men.

This basic premise was supported in a laboratory experiment, which involved having male and female undergraduate students rate their performance as leaders (Heilman, Simon, & Repper,

1987). Heilman et al.'s (1987) work concluded that female undergraduate students were more likely to underestimate their leadership skills, fail to take credit for positive outcomes, and prefer to yield the opportunity to remain in a leadership role to others. In a study involving male and female project managers, Cohen, Ornoy, and Keren (2013) used the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to compare the characteristics of male and female project managers with those of the general population. Their conclusions supported the notion that project managers more closely resemble those of the male general population than the female general population. Again, the implication was that leadership roles more closely align with being male than being female.

Flanagan (2015) assessed the impact of gender stereotypes on perceptions of leadership efficacy with a sample of male and female subjects. The participants in Flanagan's study rated themselves in terms of leadership traits and skills. These participants were asked to estimate how others would rate them in terms of leadership efficacy. Flanagan (2015) concluded that female subjects were more likely to rate themselves lower than their male cohorts and expected that others would rate them lower as well. Once again, leadership self-efficacy was lower among female subjects. In another study concerned with female evaluations of leadership efficacy, Sturm, Taylor, Atwater, and Braddy (2014) noted that women under-estimated the way their bosses assessed their leadership skills. Strum et al. (2014) pointed to learned gender roles as one of the reasons why women expected to be rated less favorably than they were in terms of leadership efficacy.

After a review of 49 years of studies on gender and leadership efficacy, Paustian-Underdahl, Slattery Walker, and Woehr (2014) concluded that internal measures of leadership efficacy yielded higher scores for males than females in low and top management positions with no statistically significant differences for middle managers. Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2014) noted, however, that external measures of leadership efficacy tend to yield higher scores for women in middle and top management positions than for men. Again, the implication is that men are more likely to rate themselves higher than women in terms of leadership efficacy.

These studies were developed under early leadership models that focused on traits and initiating and consideration structure behaviors that tended to support the claim that leadership was predominantly something that men could do better than women (Chemers, 2000; Jogulu & Wood, 2006). However, works conducted under transformational leadership theory seem to be more neutral in terms of gender (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen (2003) examined several contributions to the study of gender under transformational leadership theory. They noted that women fared well relative to men in their assessments of leadership behaviors as measured through the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), a prominent transformational leadership instrument.

Bass, Avolio, and Atwater (1996) compared male and female MLQ scores and noted that women edged out men in terms of the transformational leadership dimensions covered in the instrument. Moreover, Garrett-Staib and Burkman (2015) surveyed a sample of male and female superintendents in Texas using the LPI to compare their mean scores in terms of the model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart leadership practices. They found that there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups. In the state of Tamaulipas, Mexico, researchers used the LPI to measure the leadership practices of managers in the commercial sector (Pedraza Melo, Lavín Verástegui, Delgado Rivas, & Bernal González, 2015). Although the study was not designed specifically to compare male and female mean scores, the researchers noted that there were no statistically significant differences between males and females in the sample. This conclusion was taken with caution because of the disproportionate share of men in the sample.

Therefore, male leaders have traditionally exhibited higher levels of leadership self-efficacy than female leaders. Recently, however, studies of leadership self-efficacy have documented similar levels in male and female leaders. These, more recent, studies have been conducted under transformational leadership theory, using both the MLQ and the LPI as the preferred research instruments to gather data from participants. Kouzes and Posner's (2012) five practices of exemplary leadership model, which is measured through the LPI, will be further analyzed in the following paragraphs.

Transformational Leadership Models.
In the 1960s, the works of Max Weber helped bring to the forefront of leadership thought the notion of the charismatic leader (Derman, 2011). To Weber, the source of leaders' influence derived from their legal roles within society, traditional or historical significance, or charisma (Taylor, 2012). Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John F. Kennedy are three leaders that displayed charismatic qualities (Northouse, 2016). The first discussions on transformational leadership theory have been attributed to James Downton, who in 1973 wrote about a type of leadership that combined charismatic qualities, developed transactional relationships with their followers, and inspired them to perform above expectations (Bradley, 1975). In the late 1970s, James McGregor Burns stated that transforming leadership takes place "when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality" (2010, p. 20).

In the 1980s, Bass (1985) continued to work on the development of transformational leadership theory. Along with Bruce Avolio, Bass developed the full range leadership model, which included four transformational, three transactional, and one non-leadership dimensions (Northouse, 2016). Since then, the models developed by Bennis and Nanus, and Kouzes and Posner have contributed in important ways to the study of transformational leadership (Northouse, 2016). The present study was developed under one of these models, Kouzes and Posner's (2012) five

practices of exemplary leadership model. As noted before, Kouzes and Posner's (2012) model covers five dimensions: model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart. These dimensions were designed to reflect how often leaders engage in behaviors aimed at making sure that the actions of the group of followers are aligned with their values, creating consensus and support toward a common goal, finding new ways to exploit opportunities, developing trusting relationships, and rewarding good performance (Kouzes & Posner, 2012).

Research conducted under this model makes use of the LPI, a 30-item questionnaire that uses a 10-point Liker-scale to measure respondent engagement in each of the five practices of exemplary leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Over the past few decades, several studies conducted under this model addressed male and female leadership practices (Posner, 2016). In the United States, Garrett-Staib and Burkman (2015) used the LPI to determine whether the leadership practices of superintendents in Texas were moderated by gender. Their results yielded no statistically significant differences attributed to gender. In Mexico, Pedraza Melo et al. (2015) used the LPI to assess the leadership practices of managers in the commercial sector in the state of Tamaulipas. In the process, they compared mean scores by gender. They did not find statistically significant differences. Both studies were similar in their results and the fact that they used a small number of women in their samples.

To summarize, the gender gap in the labor force has been reduced considerably in part because of the enactment of policies aimed to protect the right of women to work, female educational attainment, and increased participation in the workplace. However, the glass-ceiling effects can still be felt because women continue to be discriminated at work, especially when they seek to comply with their culturally-assigned gender role while trying to advance to top management positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Early leadership models facilitated the development of studies on gender and leadership by focusing on traits and initiating and consideration leader behaviors (Chemers, 2000). These studies often suggested that effective leadership is more closely associated with being male than being female. After the 1970s, this started to change with the emergence of transformational leadership theory (Chemers, 2000; Eagly et al., 2003; Jogulu & Wood, 2006).

Research Questions and Hypotheses
To guide the present study, the following general research question and five hypotheses were addressed:

Research question: Are there statistically significant differences in LPI mean scores between male and female participants in the study?

H1: There are statistically significant differences between male and female participants in the *model the way* dimension.

H2: There are statistically significant differences between male and female participants in the *inspire a shared vision* dimension?

H3: There are statistically significant differences between male and female participants in the *challenge the process* dimension?

H4: There are statistically significant differences between male and female participants in the *enable others to act* dimension?

H5: There are statistically significant differences between male and female participants in the *encourage the heart* dimension?

Methods

The present study was developed under a post facto research design, which is common in quantitative research where the effects of the independent variables on the dependent variable are perceived in the participants without manipulation on the part of the researcher (Abbott & McKinney, 2013). The aim was to measure the effect of the independent variable (gender) on the dependent variables (the five practices of exemplary leadership). The sampling, data gathering, and analysis processes are described in the following paragraphs.

Participants.

This study was designed to collect data from a sample of 80 female and 73 male MBA students in the city of Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico, through survey research (Fowler, 2015) using the LPI Self (Kouzes & Posner, 2013) as its instrument. Three different universities agreed to participate in study by allowing access to their students. At the time the survey took place, there were 589 MBA students in the city of Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico (Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior, 2015). However, there were only 513 students among the three participating institutions. Therefore, just under 30% of the students enrolled in the three participating institutions responded to the survey.

Procedure.

First, six MBA program administrators running MBA programs in Tijuana were invited to participate in the study. Three agreed to allow the researcher to survey their MBA students. Second, the LPI (Spanish version) was administered to the 153 MBA students in the sample during class time under the supervision of their program administrators and/or faculty. Before administering the LPI to the MBA students, the researcher collected signed informed consent forms from each participant and made sure that everyone in the sample understood that they were not required to participate in the study and that they could withdraw at any time. There were no incentives promised or delivered to the MBA students who responded to the LPI Self.

Third, the completed LPI Self questionnaires were collected and responses were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) spreadsheet that had been created to run the statistical tests necessary to identify any potential correlations between the five leadership practices and gender. It should be noted that permission to use the LPI in its paper form was obtained from the publisher of the instrument. Last, reliability coefficient, descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests were calculated to compare mean scores for each dimension in the LPI Self between males and females (Chen, 2012). The

alignment between each LPI dimension and its corresponding items on the questionnaire are illustrated on Table 1.

Table 1

Alignment between LPI Dimensions and Items on the LPI.

LPI Dimesons	Item number on the LPI
Model the way	1, 6, 11, 16, 21, and 26
Inspire a shared vision	2, 7, 12, 17, 22, and 27
Challenge the process	3, 8, 13, 18, 23, and 28
Enable others to act	4, 9,14, 19, 24, and 29
Encourage the heart	5, 10, 15, 20, 15, and 30

Note: Adapted from LPI: "Leadership Practices Inventory Self" (4th ed.) by J. M. Kouzes and B. Z. Posner, 2013, San Francisco, CA, Leadership Challenge.

Cronbach alpha coefficients for the five leadership dimensions are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Cronbach Alpha Coefficients for the LPI Dimensions.

LPI Dimensions	Cronbach Alpha Coefficient
Model the way	.724
Inspire a shared vision	.845
Challenge the process	.782
Enable others to act	.667
Encourage the heart	.871

As noted in Table 2, four out of the five leadership dimensions in the LPI have a Cronbach alpha coefficient that is above the .70 norm. The enable others to act dimension scored below the norm. This represents a limitation for the present study. While the results for the enable others to act should be taken with caution, for the purposes of the present study, both validity and reliability for the LPI have been established in previous studies (Vito & Higgins, 2010; Pugh, Fillingim, Blackbourn, Bunch, & Thomas, 2011; Quin, Deris, Bischoff & Johnson, 2015; Posner, 2016).

Results

A total of 153 MBA students participated in the study. Female MBA students accounted for 52.3% of the participants while male MBA students represented 47.7%. Three different MBA programs were included in the study. The results suggested that there were no statistically significant correlations between gender and leadership-efficacy under Kouzes and Posner's (2012) transformational leadership model. These results can be appreciated by identifying the *p* values in Table 3, which show no statistically significant differences in LPI mean scores between male and female participants.

Table 3

Independent Samples t-tests for the LPI Dimensions.

LPI Dimensions	Mean (SD)		t	p
	Male	Female		
Model the Way	46.69 (6.89)	47.17 (6.40)	.443	.659
Inspire a Shared Vision	42.36 (9.87)	42.32 (10.48)	-.027	.987
Challenge the Process	43.95 (8.40)	43.41 (9.27)	-.380	.704
Enable Others to Act	50.26 (5.90)	49.95 (5.47)	-.337	.736
Encourage the Heart	47.21 (7.69)	47.30 (9.92)	.057	.955

Therefore, the response to the general research question used to guide this study is that there are no statistically significant differences in LPI mean scores between male and female participants across the five leadership practices (model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, encourage the heart). Thus, H1-H5 were rejected.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study was designed to analyze leadership self-efficacy in a group of 80 female and 73 male MBA students to better understand the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in Mexico. By itself, the study serves to show that the participants in the study engage in the model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart leadership practices at similar levels. These findings only apply to the individuals who participated in the study. Because of the use of a convenience sample, this information may not be generalized (Creswell, 2014) to the general population in Mexico or MBA students. The true value of the study rests on its contribution to the study of gender and transformational leadership, which can serve to support the claim that gender does not moderate transformational leadership self-efficacy.

The present study joins several works conducted using transformational leadership models that suggested that leadership is not exclusively or primarily a male task (Bass, et al., 1996; Eagly, et al., 2003; Garrett-Staib & Burkman, 2015; Pedraza Melo et al., 2015). The accumulation of works under transformational leadership can contribute significantly to make the argument that both males and females can enact leadership roles and move others to action without having to comply with gender-based expectations for people in leadership positions. Aspiring female leaders, educational leaders, and organizational decision-makers may use these findings to ensure that stakeholders understand that leadership is not inherently a male

task; therefore, creating environments where female leaders can perform based on their own values and comply with their culturally-developed gender roles without suffering gender-related discrimination.

Aspiring female leaders may use the findings from the present study to raise their own consciousness regarding the similarities they share with their male cohorts in terms of leadership efficacy and feel confident about their ability to lead. This may help women who are similar to the group in the study to engage in self-promoting activities that may lead to leadership opportunities. Educational leaders may use the findings presented here to replicate the study and design educational programs to help their students develop the type of leadership approach prescribed by Kouzes and Posner's (2012) model or other transformational leadership approaches. This represents an opportunity for educators to help address the gender imbalance on leadership roles. Organizational leaders may use the findings presented here to promote buy-in on the part of their stakeholders to create a more gender diverse and inclusive work environment that may lead to more creative and innovative outcomes. This kind of initiative may help motivate talented female workers climbing the corporate ladder to stay the course and not give up on their careers.

By showing that male and female participants engage in transformational leadership behaviors at similar levels, this and past studies (Bass, et al., 1996; Eagly, et al., 2003; Garrett-Staib & Burkman, 2015; Pedraza Melo et al., 2015) make the argument for a more equitable society. The argument is that more women can engage in leadership roles without having to act according to traditional male behaviors or stereotypical female expectations. To develop this argument in full, more studies on gender and transformational leadership will be required. The present study focused on MBA students, a logical group for future leadership opportunities, but other interesting samples include middle managers, undergraduate students involved in leadership programs, males and females who belong to different age groups, geographic locations, and so on. Moreover, the present study focused on leadership self-efficacy, which is an internal factor. More work will be needed using external sources, like information gathered through observer groups to describe leadership efficacy in middle and top managers (Brandt & Laiho, 2013). The LPI is available in Observer form, which should facilitate this type of research.

One concern that was raised during the development of the present study is the below the norm Cronbach alpha coefficient for the enable others to act leadership dimension. Future studies conducted outside the United States, particularly those using the LPI Self (Spanish version) should explore the reliability coefficients of the LPI to address this concern. Through additional research, the gender gap in leadership roles in Mexico and other places may be readily addressed by informing key publics who can create a more just, egalitarian and prosperous society through diversity and leader effectiveness.

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