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FEMININE ACCESS AND LEADERSHIP ON THE WORK MARKET: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

ASCENSÃO E LIDERANÇA FEMININA NO MERCADO DE TRABALHO: PERSPECTIVAS HISTÓRICAS E CONTEMPORÂNEAS

ASCENSIÓN Y LIDERANZA FEMININA EN EL MERCADO DE TRABAJO: PERSPECTIVAS HISTÓRICAS Y CONTEMPORÁNNEAS

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the historical trajectory of women's participation in the labor market and their advancement into leadership positions, considering both past and contemporary contexts. Based on the literature review, the text discusses transformations since the Industrial Revolution, the feminist movements of the twentieth century, gender equality policies, and recent trends, including remote work, the digital economy, Industry 4.0, and ESG practices. The research highlights advances in women's participation, but also persistent challenges such as wage inequality, the burden of the double shift, invisible barriers to career advancement, and other structural limitations. Education, globalization, and technological innovation are emphasized as key factors that have expanded opportunities while exposing contradictions in equitable access. It concludes that, despite important achievements, full gender equity still depends on structural, cultural, and institutional changes.

KEYWORDS: Women. Labor market. Leadership. Gender.

RESUMO
Este artigo analisa o processo histórico de ascensão da mulher no mercado de trabalho e sua inserção em cargos de liderança, considerando os contextos históricos, sociais, políticos e contemporâneos. A partir de uma revisão de literatura, são discutidas as transformações ocorridas desde a Revolução Industrial, passando pelos movimentos feministas do século XX, até as políticas de igualdade de gênero e as tendências recentes como o trabalho remoto, a economia digital, a Indústria 4.0 e as práticas de ESG. A pesquisa evidencia avanços na participação feminina, mas também desafios persistentes, como a desigualdade salarial, a sobrecarga da dupla jornada, as barreiras invisíveis à ascensão profissional e outras limitações estruturais. Destaca-se o papel da educação, da globalização e da inovação tecnológica como fatores que ampliaram as oportunidades profissionais, mas que também expõem contradições no acesso equitativo. Conclui-se que, apesar das conquistas, a equidade plena ainda depende de mudanças estruturais, culturais e institucionais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE*: Mulher. Mercado de trabalho. Liderança. Gênero.*

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RESUMEN
Este artículo analiza la trayectoria histórica de la participación de las mujeres en el mercado laboral y su avance hacia puestos de liderazgo, considerando contextos tanto históricos como contemporáneos. A partir de una revisión bibliográfica, se discuten las transformaciones desde la Revolución Industrial, los movimientos feministas del siglo XX, las políticas de igualdad de género y las tendencias recientes como el teletrabajo, la economía digital, la Industria 4.0 y las prácticas de ESG. La investigación evidencia avances en la participación femenina, pero también desafíos persistentes, como la desigualdad salarial, la sobrecarga de la doble jornada, las barreras invisibles para el ascenso profesional y otras limitaciones estructurales. Se enfatiza el papel de la educación, la globalización y la innovación tecnológica como factores que ampliaron las oportunidades, aunque también revelaron contradicciones en el acceso equitativo. Se concluye que, a pesar de los logros, la equidad plena aún depende de transformaciones estructurales, culturales e institucionales.

PALABRAS CLAVE*: Mujer. Mercado de trabajo. Liderazgo. Género.*

INTRODUCTION

The social position of women was, for centuries, defined by patriarchal structures that reinforced their almost exclusive association with the domestic sphere and family care. This model, supported by religious and scientific justifications, consolidated the idea of women as subordinate and dependent beings, legitimizing inequalities and restricting their participation in public spheres (BEAUVOIR, 1980; MANSUR, 2003). The persistence of this pattern of domination resulted in profound social and economic asymmetries that have marked the trajectory of women up to the present day.

The Industrial Revolution represented a turning point in this process, as it incorporated female labor on a large scale in factories. However, this inclusion occurred under exploitative conditions, characterized by long working hours and low wages, which exposed female workers' vulnerability in relation to capital (BRUSCHINI, 2007). Nonetheless, this movement revealed women's productive potential, paving the way for questioning the social roles traditionally assigned to each gender.

The twentieth century intensified this process, particularly during the World Wars, when women assumed roles previously reserved for men. This scenario accelerated social reorganization and contributed to the expansion of feminist movements, which began demanding equal rights and opportunities in various parts of the world (SCOTT, 1995). In Brazil, important achievements, such as the right to vote in 1934 and the Federal Constitution of 1988, consolidated legal advances that ensured formal equality between men and women. Still, as Souza Neto and De Liberal (2006) highlight, changes in education and labor also required a cultural reconfiguration capable of redefining paradigms about women's roles in society.

These historical achievements demonstrate that women's advancement did not occur spontaneously but resulted from intense social and political mobilizations. Movements such as nineteenth-century women's strikes and feminist struggles in the following decades became symbols of resistance and transformation. Globally, March 8 has been established as a day of remembrance and mobilization, representing the ongoing fight for gender equality. In Brazil, leaders such as Berta Lutz emphasized the importance of organized political action for the advancement of women's rights (BLAY, 2004).



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Currently, women's achievements must also be analyzed from the perspective of educational practices and leadership development. As Rached et al. (2025) demonstrate, innovative experiences with active methodologies in higher education can contribute to the development of leadership skills among women, preparing them to operate in complex and challenging contexts. This aspect underscores that the historical struggle for equity is not limited to the legal or political fields but extends to pedagogical and professional practices that strengthen women's presence in decision-making spaces.

Thus, the historical context of female inclusion in work and leadership shows a movement of gradual advances, marked by resistance and achievements. The trajectory from subordination to the pursuit of autonomy reflects not only economic and social transformations but also a profound cultural redefinition, in which education and training practices become pillars for women's emancipation.

However, understanding women's trajectory in the labor market also requires reading it in light of twenty-first-century transformations. The advent of the so-called "Industry 4.0" and digitalization has introduced new forms of production and organization, characterized by intensive use of digital technologies, automation, and artificial intelligence. These changes have profoundly altered labor relations, demanding from women not only technical qualifications but also adaptability in highly dynamic and interconnected contexts.

In this scenario, remote work and hybrid employment models, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, have simultaneously brought opportunities and challenges. While such formats have expanded flexibility and enabled greater female participation in certain areas, they have also reinforced historical inequalities, such as the burden of the double shift and the invisibility of care work. Moreover, the acceleration of digitalization has revealed new forms of exclusion, related both to unequal access to technologies and to the concentration of women in lower-prestige positions in the technology sector.

Therefore, the analysis of women's advancement and leadership needs to articulate the historical legacy of struggles and achievements with the contemporary demands of a constantly transforming labor market. The integration of education, technological innovation, and equity policies is essential to understanding not only the progress already made but also the obstacles that persist in an increasingly digital, remote, and globalized world of work.

1 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach, with an exploratory and descriptive character, based on a bibliographic review. The choice of this methodological procedure is justified by the need to understand the historical trajectory of women's inclusion in the labor market and in leadership positions, as well as the contemporary challenges that still limit gender equity. To this end, both classical and contemporary works from the social sciences were consulted, in addition to specific studies on gender, work, and leadership.

The research encompassed different historical periods, from the Industrial Revolution to the twenty-first century, considering social, economic, and cultural transformations that directly impacted

female participation. Primary sources, such as legislation and institutional documents, as well as secondary sources, including academic articles, books, and reports from national and international organizations, were selected. This strategy allowed the identification of key milestones in the struggle for gender equality, as well as the advances and limitations observed in women's professional practice.

The analysis of the bibliographic data was organized around three central axes, which structure the discussion throughout the article: Historical Context and Social Achievements, addressing the main milestones of women's trajectory; Education, Globalization, and the Labor Market, highlighting structural factors that expanded opportunities; and Leadership and Current Challenges, discussing persistent barriers and perspectives for consolidating equity. This thematic division allows for an articulation of women's past and present participation, emphasizing both the advances achieved and the challenges that remain.

2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SOCIAL ACHIEVEMENTS

Education has played a central role in women's advancement in the labor market, representing one of the fundamental conditions for expanding opportunities and achieving greater autonomy. The progressive access of women to higher education has allowed them, in recent decades, to become the majority in Brazilian universities, overcoming barriers previously imposed by cultural and social stigmas (BRUSCHINI, 2007). This progress, in addition to providing higher qualifications, has contributed to redefining gender roles, as it has expanded women's capacity to participate in economic, social, and political life actively (LIMA et al, 2022).

Education, in this sense, should not be understood merely as technical training but as a process of cultural and social transformation. Souza Neto and De Liberal (2006) emphasize that educating for work involves considering emerging paradigms in which flexibility, adaptability, and relational skills gain prominence in the face of productive transformations. This movement has enabled women not only to enter professions historically dominated by men but also to build solid careers in strategic sectors, where innovation and team management have become competitive differentiators.

With the intensification of globalization, structural changes in the labor market accelerated. The expansion of the service sector, the diffusion of information technologies, and the increasing interconnection between economies facilitated female participation in new fields of activity. As De Liberal and Ferreira (2025) observe, the crisis of traditional production models and the emergence of new paradigms highlighted the importance of competencies such as collaborative leadership, creativity, and communication, attributes often aligned with the profile of female professionals in various contexts. Thus, globalization, despite its contradictions, contributed to opening new spaces for professional participation and recognition.

Still, educational advancement and labor market restructuring have not eliminated structural inequalities. Wage disparities, occupational segregation, and difficulties in reconciling professional life with domestic responsibilities persist (CASTELLS, 1999). These barriers demonstrate that female

human capital, although strengthened by education and globalization, continues to face obstacles that limit full equity in the labor market.

Therefore, analyzing education and globalization reveals a dual movement: on the one hand, the empowerment of women through access to knowledge and the recognition of new competencies; on the other hand, the need for deeper structural and cultural changes capable of transforming these advances into sustainable achievements. In this process, education reaffirms itself not only as an instrument of inclusion but as a strategic element for building a more diverse, innovative, and equitable labor market.

In this context, educational achievements and the expansion of professional opportunities in the twenty-first century intersect with even deeper transformations brought by Industry 4.0 and the digitalization of work relationships. The incorporation of digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and the rise of remote work have expanded the possibilities for female participation in strategic sectors but have also revealed new forms of inequality and exclusion. Thus, the historical legacy of struggles for rights is directly connected to contemporary challenges, where gender equity depends not only on access to education but also on the capacity for adaptation and agency in an increasingly digital, flexible, and globalized labor market.

3 EDUCATION, GLOBALIZATION, AND THE LABOR MARKET

The expansion of women's access to higher education represents a decisive milestone in transforming gender relations in the workplace. In many parts of the world, including Brazil, women now outnumber men in universities, highlighting not only the overcoming of historical barriers but also the redefinition of societal expectations regarding their professional trajectories (BRUSCHINI, 2007). This educational advancement has strengthened women's economic autonomy, enhancing their decision-making capacity and their participation in strategic sectors of the economy. Beyond technical training, education has consolidated itself as a process of cultural emancipation, capable of breaking stereotypes and re-signifying women's roles in contemporary society.

In this context, Souza Neto and De Liberal (2006) emphasize that educating for work requires understanding emerging paradigms in which competencies such as flexibility, adaptability, and relational skills become central. These competencies, often associated with women's experience in collaborative and managerial environments, have contributed to their inclusion in decision-making spaces and in high-complexity areas.

At the same time, globalization and productive restructuring have triggered profound changes in labor dynamics. The expansion of the service sector, the incorporation of digital technologies, and the growing internationalization of economies have created unprecedented opportunities for female participation. As De Liberal and Ferreira (2025) observe, the crisis of traditional production models and the emergence of new paradigms in the world of work have promoted the valorization of attributes such as creativity, communication, and collaborative leadership, enhancing women's competitiveness across various sectors.

However, women's inclusion in this globalized scenario still faces structural obstacles. Wage disparities, occupational segregation, and the burden of reconciling professional and domestic responsibilities persist, showing that educational and technological advances do not automatically translate into full equity (CASTELLS, 1999). Additionally, the phenomenon of the "double shift" remains a challenge, limiting the full utilization of women's potential in the labor market.

In summary, the combined impact of education and globalization has not only expanded female participation in the labor market but also redefined professional spaces and forms of engagement. Technological and productive transformations have opened unprecedented opportunities while also exposing contradictions that reinforce the need for inclusive policies and more equitable institutional practices. In this sense, women's integration into an increasingly interconnected world should be analyzed through the lens of innovation, competitiveness, and social justice, highlighting that building an equitable labor market depends on simultaneously overcoming local and global challenges.

Moreover, the impact of digitalization and Industry 4.0 underscores the need to analyze female inclusion in light of new productive dynamics. The growth of the technology sector, advances in artificial intelligence, and the spread of remote work are reshaping qualification requirements, increasing demand for digital skills, innovation, and networked leadership. While these transformations may facilitate women's participation in emerging sectors and make work-life balance more flexible, they also reveal persistent barriers related to unequal access to technology, segregation into lower-prestige roles, and the overburden of domestic work. Thus, the contemporary labor market highlights the tension between opportunities for emancipation and the reproduction of historical inequalities, demanding more effective policies for digital inclusion and gender equity.

4 LEADERSHIP AND CURRENT CHALLENGES

The presence of women in leadership positions represents a historical and symbolic advancement, yet it continues to face barriers that reveal the persistence of structural inequalities in the labor market. Despite being increasingly qualified and highly represented at middle management levels, women remain underrepresented in strategic decision-making spaces. This discrepancy illustrates the so-called "glass ceiling," a concept describing the invisible limits imposed by gender stereotypes, institutional norms, and cultural practices that restrict women's advancement, even in organizations that formally advocate equality (BRUSCHINI, 2007).

Research indicates that women in leadership positions tend to adopt more collaborative, participative, and team-development-oriented management styles (CALÁS; SMIRCICH, 2007). This profile challenges the traditional hierarchical and centralized leadership model, opening space for new forms of governance that value diversity, innovation, and organizational sustainability. Thus, female leadership is not merely a matter of symbolic representation but constitutes a competitive and strategic differential in increasingly complex scenarios.

However, these advances do not eliminate the challenges. Barriers such as wage inequality, low female representation on boards of directors, difficulties in balancing professional and family

demands, and the persistence of unconscious biases continue to limit the full democratization of leadership. Castells (1999) notes that networked societies require highly adaptable and resilient workers, a demand that applies even more intensely to women, who must simultaneously respond to technological changes, productive reconfigurations, and historically entrenched discriminatory practices.

In this context, it becomes evident that the promotion of female leadership depends on coordinated strategies among public policies, institutional initiatives, and cultural transformations. Mentorship programs, encouragement to participate in leadership networks, diversity policies, and measures to reconcile work and personal life are instruments capable of mitigating inequalities and expanding access to decision-making positions. More than creating space, the goal is to establish conditions that allow women to fully exercise their competencies, contributing to innovation and equity in the workplace.

In the contemporary context, female leadership also needs to be analyzed in light of digital transformations and remote work. The expansion of hybrid organizational models has brought new opportunities for participation and flexibility, but has also imposed additional challenges, such as difficulties in visibility and recognition in virtual environments and the intensification of the workload due to hyperconnectivity. At the same time, the low representation of women in strategic sectors of the digital economy, such as data science, artificial intelligence, and technological entrepreneurship, underscores the need for targeted policies to promote inclusion. In this scenario, female leadership faces the dual task of breaking historical barriers while positioning itself in emerging fields of economic and social power, where the future of work and innovation is being determined.

Thus, current challenges are not limited to overcoming individual barriers but also involve transforming organizational and social structures that still restrict women's potential. The consolidation of women's leadership should be understood not only as a requirement for social justice but also as essential for institutional strengthening and competitiveness in a globalized economy, where diversity and inclusion have become strategic assets.

5 FUTURE TRENDS IN FEMALE LEADERSHIP

The future of female leadership in the labor market is directly linked to the technological, social, and organizational transformations shaping the twenty-first century. The intensification of digitalization, advances in artificial intelligence (AI), and the increasing adoption of hybrid and remote work models create a challenging yet promising scenario. These changes are likely to enhance labor flexibility, allowing for greater work-life balance. However, they may also exacerbate existing inequalities if women continue to bear the primary responsibility for care work, which is often undervalued and invisible (HIRATA, 2014).

In this context, the care economy emerges as a central axis of debate. According to UN Women (2022), the fair redistribution of domestic and care responsibilities will be decisive in ensuring that women can fully occupy decision-making positions. The economic and social recognition of this work,

historically associated with women, represents not only a matter of justice but also a prerequisite for the sustainability of contemporary societies.

Another vector of transformation is the incorporation of ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) practices in organizations. Companies and governments have increasingly committed to diversity and gender equity, not only as an ethical demand but also as a strategic factor for competitiveness and innovation. The presence of women on boards and in executive positions is increasingly monitored by investors and consumers, pressuring institutions to adopt more consistent inclusion policies.

Social media and digital activism also constitute a field of potential transformation. Movements such as #MeToo have demonstrated the power of digital platforms in mobilizing for equity and combating gender-based violence. This global visibility enables women to connect across different contexts, promoting collective agendas that transcend national borders.

Finally, future trends should be analyzed in dialogue with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda, particularly SDG 5, which establishes gender equality as a global goal. Recent reports indicate that, at the current pace, full equity in the labor market may still take decades (UN WOMEN, 2021). This underscores the need to accelerate structural and cultural changes to transform historical achievements into consolidated realities.

Within this horizon, it is crucial to reflect on the competencies that will shape the leadership of the future. Beyond technical training, skills such as critical thinking, virtual team management, intercultural communication, emotional intelligence, and the ability to innovate in digital environments emerge as strategic requirements. Recent research indicates that collaborative and adaptive leadership styles, often associated with female profiles, may represent a competitive advantage in contexts of uncertainty and high complexity.

On the other hand, it is important to recognize that the same digitalization that opens opportunities may also deepen inequalities. Task automation, concentration of power in technological sectors, and unequal access to digital skills are likely to affect women more intensely, particularly those in socially vulnerable contexts. Thus, the future of female leadership will depend not only on innovation and inclusive policies but also on the capacity to prevent setbacks that could widen existing gender gaps.

Therefore, future female leadership will rely on a balance between technological innovation, inclusive policies, and cultural transformation. Societies' ability to integrate these elements will determine whether the next generation of women can definitively overcome historical barriers and consolidate their presence in the highest spheres of power and decision-making.

CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis of women's trajectory in the labor market and in leadership positions highlights significant progress, but also reveals the persistence of structural challenges. From a historical perspective, the process of women's inclusion was marked by social resistance, inequalities, and

stigmas, which, although diminished, still resonate in contemporary organizational practices and social culture (BEAUVOIR, 1980; MANSUR, 2003). Legal recognition of rights and expanded access to education were fundamental for increasing female participation, yet full equity remains distant from everyday reality.

In the economic and organizational sphere, globalization and transformations in production models have enabled greater female inclusion in previously restricted sectors. As De Liberal and Ferreira (2025) emphasize, the emergence of new paradigms in the labor market has valued competencies often aligned with female leadership styles, such as cooperation, flexibility, and innovative capacity. However, the advancement of digitalization, remote work, and Industry 4.0 introduces new challenges, such as the need for digital skills and the persistence of inequalities in access to technologies, which could widen gender gaps if effective inclusive policies are not implemented. Additionally, wage disparities, occupational segregation, and the burden of the double shift constitute significant barriers, requiring public policies and corporate practices that ensure equitable conditions.

Although still underrepresented in high-level executive positions, female leadership has proven to be a strategic asset for organizations. Studies indicate that women leaders tend to adopt participative, collaborative, and human-development-oriented styles, strengthening diversity as an asset for innovation and sustainability (CALÁS; SMIRCICH, 2007). In this sense, the debate on gender equity should not be understood merely as a social demand but as a necessary condition for institutional strengthening and economic development (CASTELLS, 1999).

In conclusion, women's advancement in the labor market is an ongoing process, characterized by significant achievements but also by limitations that require deep cultural and structural transformations. Investments in education, mentorship programs, work-life balance measures, and anti-discrimination policies are essential to ensure that gender equality becomes an effective reality rather than merely a normative goal. The future of leadership and management will largely depend on the ability of societies and organizations to recognize that equity is not only a matter of justice but also of efficiency and innovation.

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