

# **Gendered Perceptions of Leadership in Brazil: Attitudinal Divides and Cultural Implications**

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*This study explores gender-based attitudes toward women in managerial roles in Brazil using the Women as Managers Scale (WAMS). Informed by social learning and gender role socialization theories, responses from 375 participants reveal notable attitudinal differences between men and women on issues such as emotional regulation and leadership competence. The results provide new empirical insight into gender perceptions in Brazil's workplace culture and highlight the need for targeted interventions, including inclusive policies, training programs, and educational efforts, to advance equitable leadership opportunities across sectors.*

*Keywords: gender, attitudes, leadership, management, Brazil*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Brazil, with a population exceeding 200 million and a real GDP per capita of just over USD 10,000 (World Bank, 2024), remains one of the most economically significant yet socially stratified nations in the Western Hemisphere. Despite its status as the largest economy in South America, Brazil continues to grapple with entrenched patterns of racial and gender inequality that limit the full economic participation of many of its citizens. Women, in particular, face persistent barriers to labor market advancement, including wage disparities, occupational segregation, and limited representation in managerial roles. These inequities contribute to the intergenerational transmission of poverty and suppress national productivity, which, based on adult employment indicators, is currently operating at just one-third of its potential (World Bank, 2024).

Although Brazil has made strides in improving the treatment of women in the workplace, recent data suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately disrupted progress for Brazilian women,

particularly in comparison to their male counterparts (Saeed & Shaiekh, 2024). However, the country has shown notable economic resilience, with real GDP growth reaching 3.4% in 2024, expected to moderate to 2.2% in 2025. This growth has been attributed to robust domestic consumption and favorable fiscal policies, supported by strong macroeconomic buffers including high levels of reserve assets, manageable external debt obligations, and a reputable central bank. Nevertheless, Brazil's complex tax structure, limited global integration, and underinvestment in infrastructure continue to constrain private investment and innovation (World Bank, 2024).

In response to these structural limitations, Brazil has initiated an indirect tax reform aimed at simplifying the business environment and fostering national productivity. For such reforms to yield inclusive benefits, however, systemic barriers affecting underrepresented groups (Afro-Brazilians, Indigenous Peoples, women, and youth) must be addressed (World Bank, 2024). Enhancing gender equality in the workplace is thus not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for achieving long-term economic sustainability.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to explore a critical but understudied dimension of gender equality in Brazil: attitudes toward women in managerial roles. By examining how Brazilians perceive women in leadership, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural and attitudinal factors that may support or hinder progress toward workplace inclusion and leadership parity.

### **Gender Inequality in Brazil: Progress, Parity, and Persistent Gaps**

Although Brazil has made measurable progress in areas such as health and education, gender inequality persists across key spheres of economic and political life. The World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report* (2024) ranks Brazil 70th out of 146 countries in overall gender parity, placing it behind many of its regional peers in Latin America and the Caribbean, even as the region is projected to achieve gender equality within the next 50 years. Brazil's category-specific rankings illustrate these persistent disparities: 88th in economic participation and opportunity, 54th in educational attainment, 74th in political empowerment, and first (tied) in health and survival. The low economic participation score reflects unequal pay, occupational segregation, and limited access to leadership roles, which are barriers that constrain women's economic advancement and limit national productivity. While educational attainment is more balanced, with women achieving comparable levels of schooling as men, these gains are not mirrored in employment or leadership outcomes. Similarly, Brazil's poor ranking in political empowerment points to women's underrepresentation in high-level government positions, reducing their influence on policy decisions that shape gender equality. Although Brazil ranks highly in health and survival, this alone does not ensure equality without parallel progress in the economic and political spheres.

These structural gaps are reinforced by national data. Women in Brazil earn 19.4% less than men on average, with this gap widening to 25.2% in managerial roles (Secretariat of Social Communication, 2024). Only 15.2% of officer, board, and fiscal council positions in publicly traded companies are held by women, and 17.5% of companies have no women on their boards at all (Brazilian Institute of Corporate Governance, 2023). Women also remain underrepresented in politics, holding just 17.7% of seats in the Federal Chamber and 12.3% in the Senate, despite making up over half of the population and electorate (Quartucci, 2024). Workforce participation reflects a similar imbalance: in 2021, only 53% of Brazilian women had formal employment, compared to 72% of men (Zimmerman, n.d.). In industries such as media, women hold just 13% of senior leadership roles, which is far below comparative benchmarks (Eddy et al., 2023; Pennacchio, 2023).

In sum, Brazil's gender gap rankings and national indicators paint a clear picture: while foundational conditions like health and education are relatively equitable, women continue to face significant barriers to power, opportunity, and representation. Closing these gaps will require moving beyond access to address outcomes, through targeted reforms that dismantle systemic discrimination and foster inclusive leadership across sectors.

## THEORY

Stereotypical beliefs about gender roles continue to shape managerial evaluations, particularly in contexts like Brazil where leadership positions remain male-dominated. Men are frequently associated with traits such as assertiveness and competence, while women are linked with empathy and nurturance, characteristics not traditionally valued in leadership (Schein, 1973, 1975; Szczesny, 2003). These associations contribute to a pervasive “think manager, think male” paradigm that disadvantages women in promotion decisions and undermines perceptions of their leadership potential.

Bandura’s (1977) Social Learning Theory offers a foundational lens for understanding how such attitudes toward women in management are formed and perpetuated. According to the theory, behavior is acquired through observation, modeling, and vicarious reinforcement, underscoring how environmental influences, such as organizational culture, powerfully shape individual beliefs. Within workplace settings, these learned behaviors can either reinforce or challenge dominant gender norms, particularly when leadership roles are disproportionately occupied by men.

Relatedly, gender role socialization, an approach informed by social cognitive and identity theories, proposes that individuals internalize gendered expectations beginning in early childhood through socialization processes that are continually reinforced by cultural norms and institutional structures (Guy-Evans, 2023). These ingrained beliefs can influence workplace attitudes toward leadership competence, emotional regulation, and ambition, traits often misaligned with stereotypical views of women.

Eagly and Karau’s (2002) Role Congruity Theory builds on these ideas by explaining how women are often perceived as less suitable for leadership because their socially prescribed gender roles are seen as inconsistent with managerial expectations. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971) offer further insight, suggesting that individuals, particularly men in positions of power, may favor others who share similar demographic or identity characteristics in hiring, evaluation, and mentorship. Together, these frameworks highlight how cultural beliefs and institutional practices can perpetuate gender bias in leadership contexts. In Brazil, where these dynamics remain particularly salient, they provide a valuable foundation for examining the persistence of negative attitudes toward women in management.

### **Perspectives on Attitudes Toward Women in Leadership**

Over the past five decades, extensive research has explored attitudes toward women in leadership, with early studies focused primarily on Western contexts. These studies consistently found that men exhibited less favorable attitudes toward women in managerial roles than did women (e.g., Terborg et al., 1977; Dubno, 1985; Everett et al., 1996). More recent research has expanded to cross-cultural comparisons, demonstrating that gender-based differences in attitudes are remarkably consistent across diverse national settings. For instance, studies in India (Gulhati, 1990), Hong Kong (Ng, 1995), Nigeria (Adeyemi-Bello & Tomkiewicz, 1996), China (Sincoff et al., 2009), and the Netherlands (Chullen et al., 2017) all revealed more favorable attitudes among women than men toward female leaders.

Cross-national research has further underscored that both gender and culture significantly influence perceptions of women as managers, with gender often explaining more variance in attitudes than national culture (Cordano et al., 2002). For example, Cordano and colleagues found no significant cultural differences between U.S. and Chilean students in the overall acceptance of women as managers, though gender differences were pronounced. Similarly, Tomkiewicz et al. (2004) found that U.S. females expressed the most favorable attitudes, followed by Polish females, U.S. males, and Polish males, respectively. In other studies, however, cultural effects were more prominent, such as Güney et al.’s (2006) findings that Turkish respondents, including women, held more negative views of women in managerial roles than Pakistani participants. While gender-based attitudinal differences have been documented globally, the large absence of national-level evidence from Brazil, the largest and most economically influential country in Latin America, represents a significant gap in the literature.

## PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Although gender disparities in Brazil have been well-documented through global indices and national statistics, there remains limited empirical research examining public attitudes toward women in managerial roles, a key factor influencing women's leadership advancement. This study seeks to fill that gap by systematically assessing Brazilian respondents' perceptions across several areas including perceived competence and skills, social and cultural role expectations, and emotional stability and psychological traits. Grounded in Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and gender role socialization theories, and informed by a robust body of global literature, this research asks: to what extent do Brazilians hold negative attitudes toward women managers? By answering this question, the study offers insight into how cultural beliefs and social norms may facilitate or hinder gender-inclusive leadership, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of gender equality challenges in Brazil's evolving workforce and informing strategies for organizational and policy reform.

## METHOD

The data for this study were gathered through an opinion survey. Prospective participants received an email invitation outlining the study's purpose, which aimed to better understand job-related attitudes to enhance their future work experience. The invitation encouraged participation and assured participants that their responses would remain completely confidential. Participants were informed that data would be sent directly to the researchers, with no individual responses accessible to others. Both demographic and attitudinal information were collected. For demographics, participants were asked questions such as "What is your age?"; "What is your ethnicity?"; and "Are you currently employed? If so, how would you categorize your position?" Participants then filled out a questionnaire assessing their perceptions of women in managerial roles. The survey was administered electronically via Qualtrics.

### Sample

Although all participants were university students, the high employment rate among them, combined with a significant number of non-traditional students (those with substantial work experience), supported classifying them as "workers." In total, the study included responses from 375 Brazilian workers (170 males, 205 females). The participants were recruited from a large private university in Southeast Brazil.

The average age of Brazilian workers was 25.49 years of age (25.58 years for males, 25.33 years for females). Brazilian participants identified as 76.3% branco (white), 13.4% pardo (brown-skinned), 6.7% preto (black), and 3.7% from other backgrounds.

To further justify the classification of participants as workers, it is worth noting that 64% of Brazilian participants were currently employed. Additionally, 37% of participants were post-traditional students, defined as those aged 25 or older with established work experience. Although some participants were not currently employed, as future members of the workforce approaching full-time employment, students represent a meaningful sample that reflects the future cultural and managerial landscape of organizations in their respective countries (Cordano et al., 2002).

### Measures

Participants responded to 21 attitudinal statements regarding various perspectives on women in managerial roles, known as the Women as Managers Scale (WAMS) (Peters et al., 1974; Terborg et al., 1977). The scale consisted of 11 positively worded items and 10 negatively worded items (reverse coded), all rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Higher WAMS scores indicated more favorable attitudes towards women in managerial positions, while lower scores reflected less favorable views. Sample statements included, "It is acceptable for women to compete with men for top executive positions," "Women have the capability to acquire the necessary skills to be successful managers," and "On the average, women managers are less capable of contributing to an organization's overall goals than are men" (reverse coded). The reliability and construct validity of the

WAMS have been well-documented in numerous studies (e.g., Ilgen and Moore, 1983). To ensure the cultural equivalence of questionnaire items, a rigorous process of forward-translation and back-translation was implemented, involving multiple bilingual translators. The measure showed robust reliability ( $\alpha = 0.77$ ).

## Results

ANOVAs were performed to assess whether statistically significant differences existed between males and females on any individual items of the WAMS scale and the overall WAMS scale (i.e., the combined 21 items). Table 1 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for male and female workers, both for each individual item on the WAMS scale and for the overall WAMS scale (i.e., the combined 21 items).

**TABLE 1**  
**MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND ANOVA RESULTS BY GENDER**

Gender								
		Males = 170		Females = 205		Between-Subjects Effects		
Survey Item		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	df, error df	p
1	It is less desirable for women than men to have a job that requires responsibility. (R)	6.44	1.26	6.16	1.68	3.2	1, 373	n.s.
2	Women have the objectivity required to evaluate business situations properly.	6.48	1.06	6.57	0.87	0.9	1, 373	n.s.
3	Challenging work is more important to men than it is to women. (R)	6.12	1.37	6.42	1.22	5.07	1, 373	*
4	Men and women should be given equal opportunity for participating in management training programs.	6.88	0.48	6.84	0.73	0.44	1, 373	n.s.
5	Women have the capability to acquire the necessary skills to be successful managers.	6.76	0.81	6.89	0.54	3.64	1, 373	n.s.
6	On the average, women managers are less capable of contributing to an organization's overall goals than are men. (R)	6.58	1.13	6.83	0.66	7.24	1, 373	**
7	It is not acceptable for women to assume leadership roles as often as men. (R)	6.65	0.95	6.59	1.27	0.33	1, 373	n.s.
8	The business community should someday accept women in key managerial positions.	6.67	0.81	6.74	0.77	0.75	1, 373	n.s.
9	Society should regard work by female managers as valuable as work by male managers.	6.82	0.57	6.9	0.59	1.75	1, 373	n.s.

10	It is acceptable for women to compete with men for top executive positions.	6.84	0.5	6.8	0.71	0.32	1, 373	n.s.
11	The possibility of pregnancy does not make women less desirable employees than men.	5.59	1.88	6.01	1.77	4.83	1, 373	*
12	Women would no more allow their emotions to influence their managerial behavior than would men.	4.96	1.89	5.62	1.62	13.51	1, 373	***
13	Problems associated with menstruation should not make women less desirable than men as employees.	6.46	1.15	6.69	1.09	3.92	1, 373	*
14	To be a successful executive, a woman does not have to sacrifice some of her femininity.	6.42	1.22	6.54	1.3	0.81	1, 373	n.s.
15	On the average, a woman who stays at home all the time with her children is a better mother than a woman who works outside the home at least half time. (R)	5.4	1.82	6.33	1.33	32.7	1, 373	***
16	Women are less capable of learning mathematical and mechanical skills than are men. (R)	6.61	1	6.75	0.96	1.76	1, 373	n.s.
17	Women are not ambitious enough to be successful in the business world. (R)	6.16	1.85	6.38	1.64	1.43	1, 373	n.s.
18	Women cannot be assertive in business situations that demand it. (R)	6.63	0.99	6.78	0.88	2.45	1, 373	n.s.
19	Women possess the self-confidence required of a good leader.	6.22	1.36	6.57	0.98	8.29	1, 373	**
20	Women are not competitive enough to be successful in the business world. (R)	5.87	2.05	6.15	1.87	1.92	1, 373	n.s.
21	Women cannot be aggressive in business situations that demand it. (R)	6.33	1.34	6.5	1.05	1.85	1, 373	n.s.
-	<i>Overall WAMS Scale (all 21 items combined)</i>	6.33	0.56	6.53	0.47	13.82	1, 373	***

\* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001

ANOVAs revealed significant gender differences on 7 of the 21 items and on the overall WAMS scale, with females expressing more favorable attitudes across all 7 items and the overall scale. Of the 7 items, the greatest difference in mean scores was observed for the statement, "On average, a woman who stays home full-time with her children is a better mother than one who works outside the home at least half time (reverse coded)." In contrast, the smallest difference was found for the statement, "Problems associated with menstruation should not make women less desirable than men as employees."

## DISCUSSION

This study reveals a complex and uneven set of attitudes toward women in management within the Brazilian context. Consistent with prior global research, the data indicate that Brazilian women hold more favorable views of female managers than their male counterparts overall and across several distinct areas. This aligns with longstanding evidence from cross-national studies showing that gender, more so than nationality, predicts attitudinal differences regarding women in leadership roles (e.g., Cordano et al., 2002; Tomkiewicz et al., 2004; Güney et al., 2006).

Among the most salient findings are the significant gender differences on items tied to traditional and biological gender roles. Brazilian male respondents were more likely than females to agree with statements suggesting that challenging work is more important to men than women, that women managers are less capable of contributing to organizational goals, and that women's biological characteristics, such as pregnancy, make them less desirable employees. Men were also more inclined to endorse the belief that women who stay at home full-time are better mothers than those who work outside the home, reflecting persistent societal expectations around women's caregiving responsibilities. Additionally, men were less likely to affirm that women possess the emotional stability and self-confidence needed for leadership. These results underscore the persistence of deeply ingrained gender stereotypes, particularly among men, that equate leadership with traditionally masculine traits and view biological, emotional, and familial factors as legitimate limitations for women in managerial roles.

The broader societal and economic implications of these findings are considerable. Brazil's relatively poor performance in the World Economic Forum's *Gender Gap Index*, particularly in economic participation (88th) and political empowerment (74th), is echoed in the attitudinal data from this study. Negative or ambivalent perceptions of women as leaders may contribute to the persistent underrepresentation of women in senior roles across sectors, limit the pool of leadership talent, and reinforce structural inequalities that undermine productivity and innovation. In a country where women comprise more than half of the population and electorate, such attitudes not only stall progress on gender equality but may also constrain Brazil's long-term economic trajectory.

Importantly, this study fills a notable gap in the literature by systematically examining national attitudes toward women in management in Brazil, an emerging economy with increasing global influence but limited prior empirical investigation in this domain. These insights contribute both to theory and practice, offering a culturally grounded snapshot of how gendered leadership is perceived and pointing to potential levers for change.

### Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the broader literature on gender and leadership by reinforcing the relevance of social learning and gender role socialization theories in shaping workplace attitudes. Consistent with these frameworks, the results suggest that societal norms and cultural messaging continue to influence how individuals perceive women in managerial roles, particularly in contexts where traditional gender expectations remain strong. The observed gender differences indicate that even as educational and health parity improves, attitudinal gaps persist in areas tied to leadership, ambition, and biological assumptions.

Moreover, the data affirm prior cross-national research suggesting that gender, more than nationality or culture, often predicts attitudes toward women in leadership. This reinforces the utility of gender role theories as cross-culturally robust explanatory models. However, the lack of significant differences on certain items, particularly those involving general principles of equality or access, suggests that some egalitarian ideals may be widely endorsed at a surface level, even as deeper, role-specific biases endure. These nuances invite continued theoretical exploration into the difference between abstract endorsement of gender equality and the application of such beliefs in specific organizational contexts.

By extending established theoretical frameworks to a Brazilian sample, an underexamined yet globally significant setting, this study helps bridge the gap between global gender theory and local cultural dynamics. Future theory-building should consider how internalized ambivalence and selective endorsement of

equality norms contribute to the persistence of structural and attitudinal gender gaps, even in societies making formal progress on equality indicators.

### **Practical Implications**

This study provides actionable insights for organizations aiming to advance gender equality in the Brazilian workplace. The significant attitudinal differences between male and female respondents, particularly around themes such as pregnancy, emotional stability, and maternal roles, reveal the persistence of traditional gender norms that may hinder women's access to leadership positions. These findings suggest that employers must do more than promote abstract support for equality; they must also confront the specific stereotypes that shape everyday workplace decisions.

Organizations can begin by implementing family-friendly policies that challenge normative assumptions about gender and caregiving. Flexible work arrangements, equitable parental leave, and visible support for working mothers can help reframe outdated perceptions and support the retention and advancement of women. At the same time, targeted diversity and inclusion training is essential for addressing implicit biases, especially those tied to biological or emotional stereotypes, that may otherwise go unexamined.

Given that the study's sample included some university students on the cusp of entering the workforce, the findings underscore a valuable opportunity for early intervention. Companies can partner with educational institutions to provide mentorship, leadership development programs, and awareness-building campaigns that challenge stereotypes before they become embedded in professional norms. These initiatives can shape the next generation of Brazilian professionals and help normalize women's leadership across industries.

Finally, the WAMS offers a practical benchmarking tool for organizations interested in tracking internal attitudes toward gender equality over time. By regularly assessing employee perceptions, companies can evaluate the impact of their inclusion efforts and make data-informed adjustments to foster a more equitable organizational culture.

### **Limitations & Future Directions**

This study is not without limitations. Given the characteristics of the sample, the findings may not be fully generalizable to the broader Brazilian workforce. Attitudes could vary among older or more professionally established individuals, especially those in senior leadership positions or with extensive organizational experience. Additionally, the survey design captures attitudes at a single point in time and cannot account for how these perceptions may shift alongside evolving gender norms or policy changes. While the WAMS provides a reliable measure of attitudes, it does not assess actual workplace behaviors or outcomes, such as hiring decisions or promotion rates.

Future research should explore how targeted interventions, such as exposure to female leaders or diversity training, might reshape public perceptions, particularly among men. Longitudinal studies could assess whether attitudinal change occurs over time. Finally, cross-national comparisons within Latin America could reveal important cultural similarities and differences, supporting the creation of regionally tailored strategies to promote women's leadership across the region.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study's focus on Brazilian males and females sheds light on the cultural and gender-based dimensions of leadership perceptions in an influential emerging economy. While progress has been made in health and education, persistent societal attitudes continue to constrain women's advancement in business and politics. By addressing identified biases through culturally grounded strategies, spanning training, policy, and education, Brazilian organizations and institutions can foster more inclusive leadership, strengthen workforce participation, and accelerate progress toward both gender equality and long-term economic growth.



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