

Transitioning process to an organizational leadership position: a study with women

Processo de transição para uma posição de liderança: um estudo com mulheres

Catarina Brandão¹ 

Fábio Santos² 

Sara Peres³ 

¹Corresponding author. Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação, Universidade do Porto (Porto). Portugal. catarina@fpce.up.pt

²Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação, Universidade do Porto (Porto). Portugal. fabiodosantoss94@gmail.com, saraperes95@gmail.com

ABSTRACT | Women face challenges and constraints in reaching leadership positions in organizations. This research aims to describe the process of transition of women to a leadership position in an organizational context and the representations of young women regarding that process. In order to achieve this, two studies were conducted. Study 1 used semi-structured interviews with women who recently experienced the transition process. In study 2, a questionnaire with open questions was applied to 30 young university women. Data were subjected to categorical content analysis. The results allowed us to identify three phases in the process of transition to a leadership position - Learning, Empowerment and Consolidation. It was also identified that throughout the transition process women experience difficulties assuming the new role, gaining recognition of the leading role and changes in relationships. Representations of young women meet these women's experiences and we see they are aware of the role of gender stereotypes in female leadership.

KEYWORDS: Women. Leadership. Transitioning process. Gender stereotypes.

RESUMO | Parecem ser vários os desafios, emoções e constrangimentos com os quais as mulheres se deparam para alcançarem posições de liderança nas organizações. Nesse seguimento, este estudo tem como objetivos descrever o processo de transição de mulheres para uma posição de liderança em contexto organizacional e as representações de jovens mulheres sobre o mesmo. De forma a concretizar os objetivos definidos foram realizados dois estudos. O estudo 1 recorreu a entrevistas semiestruturadas a mulheres que viveram recentemente o processo de transição. No estudo 2 aplicou-se um questionário com perguntas abertas a 30 jovens mulheres universitárias. Os dados foram sujeitos a análise de conteúdo categorial. Os resultados permitiram identificar três fases no processo de transição para uma posição de liderança - Aprendizagem, Autonomização e Consolidação. Permitiu ainda identificar que ao longo do processo de transição as mulheres experienciam dificuldades a nível do assumir as novas funções, obter reconhecimento do papel de líder e mudanças nas relações. As representações das jovens mulheres vão ao encontro das vivências das mulheres, revelando-se conscientes do papel dos estereótipos de gênero na liderança feminina.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Mulheres. Liderança. Processo de transição. Estereótipos de gênero.

Introduction

Gender inequality remains a major factor in the path of women to leadership positions (Grant Thornton's International Business Report, 2019). Stereotypes make women feel that they must constantly prove they deserve their leadership positions, which creates pressure, anxiety and stress (Santos, Peres, & Brandão, 2018). This study aims to contribute to the comprehensive exploration of the experience of women in organizational contexts (Dória & Brandão, 2016), specifically when these women occupy or may come to occupy formal leadership positions. Without adopting the traditional view of gender research that focuses on the differences between men and women, we seek to identify representations that may translate implicit and explicit causes of gender differences, as well as the mechanisms through which they are perpetuated (Costa, Breda, Pinho, Bakas, & Durão, 2016). Within the scope of this study, we consider the dynamic leadership processes that are required of those in hierarchical positions of supervision, with which formal authority is associated.

Women in organizations and leadership processes

The presence of women in the labour market is increasing. In Portugal, the percentage of women in the employed population has grown to over 48.5% since 2015 (PORDATA, 2020)¹, with women representing more than 60% of the active population with higher education since 2013. Still in Portugal, and according to the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (2017), in 2016 women were the majority among administrative staff (65.7%), personal service workers, protection, security and salespeople (64.4%), and among specialists in intellectual and scientific activities (59.2%). However, they accounted for only about a third (35.9%) of the representatives of legislative power and executive bodies, and top and executive managers. In fact, with regard to leadership in organizations, and despite the growing presence of women in these positions, their percentage

worldwide is still quite low, at only 29% in 2018 (Grant Thornton's International Business Report, 2019).

Some literature points to gender differences in the exercise of leadership, associating women with a transformational leadership style (Bass & Avolio, 1994), which emphasizes the importance of shared values and vision (Martin, 2015). At the same time, Eagly and colleagues (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Engen, 2003) call attention to the influence of gender roles in leadership, that is, the influence of the rules on how someone should behave as a man or woman in exercising leadership in an organizational context. These authors report that women adopt a transformational leadership style because they are pressured to do so and due to their own efforts to accommodate gender roles in leadership. Consistently, in the light of contemporary perspectives, the disparities observed in the exercise of leadership are mainly due to contextual and situational factors (Daniel & Moudic, 2010). The literature has abandoned a categorical approach to the exercise of leadership, which identifies typical characteristics of female and male leadership, and instead focuses on contextual or situational factors that may be at the centre of disparities in the exercise of leadership, namely the role of education and the perpetuation of stereotypes that reinforce a male organizational culture (Daniel & Moudic, 2010).

According to a report by Catalyst in 2002, with data from 500 women and 132 men (in senior role positions) from 20 European countries (including Portugal), European women considered stereotypes and prejudices regarding roles and women's skills as the main barrier to their progress. This was closely followed by the lack of role models, lack of management experience, commitment to family and personal responsibilities and lack of guidance (i.e., mentoring). The impact of gender stereotypes in the process of reaching a leadership position emerged again in the study that the same organization produced in 2006.

¹ From 2015 to 2017, it was at 48.7%, in 2018 at 48.9% and in 2019 at 49.02%.

Despite gender stereotypes being one of the main difficulties that women face in the work context (as well as outside of it) (Piterman, 2008), namely in moving to positions of leadership, there are other challenges and constraints. Consider, in particular, the difficulty felt by women in managing their work-life balance (Brandão & Lopes, 2017) and the social and cultural norms imposed on women (Haile, Emmanuel, & Dzathor, 2016), which can lead to inhibition about investing in areas associated with careers in positions of leadership. Many organizations remain, in general, more inflexible about accommodating women in positions of leadership if they have children or special needs (Aparna, 2014). It should be noted, however, that many of the women who participated in the study carried out by Catalyst (2002) advanced in their careers while managing personal responsibilities: 75% were married and of these, 73% had a partner with a full-time job, and 63% had children.

More than 30 years ago, Kanter (1989) drew attention to the transformative potential of the presence of women in leadership positions, showing that it could positively change the relationships between women in organizations, leading them to appraise women subordinate's characteristics more positively in relation to organizational requirements. In this sense, the diversification (and inclusion) of gender in organizations has the potential to change the status quo.

Transition to positions of leadership

When focusing transition processes, whether at the level of career, country, romantic relationships, or others, it is important to consider the variety of significant changes that occur in the life of the person who experiences the transition (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). Transition processes always cause changes in the lives of individuals and it is important to consider these changes in order to understand future behaviours, attitudes and performance.

Individuals in organizational positions of leadership are required to manage everyday situations that are entirely linked to the people under their supervision and that often involve transition processes (e.g., maternity or paternity leave, marriages, divorces, assistance to sick family members). However, the transition to a position that requires leadership processes has not been considered, although the difficulty associated with this challenge is recognized by those who experience it and by organizations (Keller & Meaney, 2018). It is important for individuals in this situation to consider their own process of transition to a new organizational role, with specific responsibilities, namely in terms of coordinating people. This change may lead to the perception of changes in their lives, namely, new rules, new roles, new relationships and distance from colleagues who now become subordinates. This can change the way they lead their lives and achieve their own goals.

Insofar as the literature is silent regarding the nature of the transition process to an organizational leadership position (although there are several works focusing on how to prepare someone to be a leader), we refer to a seminal work on the integration of a worker into an organization (which remains a main reference about this process), to better understand the nature of this transition. According to this model, proposed by Porter, Lawler and Hackman (1975), the integration of a new member into an organization comprises three stages: "enter", "adapt" and "stabilize". The model states that in a first phase of the process – entering – the person receives information about the organization, despite not being an organizational member. In the second stage – adaptation – the person becomes a member of the organization, starting a period of experimental work, which is promoted with the aim of adapting the new worker to the organization. In a final stage – stabilizing – the new member has adapted to the organization and changes their values, relationships and behaviours.

Transitions, even when desired, can lead to feelings of concern and confusion on the part of those who face them and may require coping strategies. Schlossberg (2011) advances with a transition model based on four 'S's (situation, self, support and strategies for coping), which seeks to help the individual to manage a transition process. With regard to the first S – situation, the author points out that it is necessary to understand what type of situation is being faced and the way the person sees it, that is, if there are other simultaneous stress situations and whether the person considers the moment of transition positive or negative. The second S – self, refers to the individual's ability to manage the transition – if he is optimistic, resilient and agile in dealing with the existence of ambiguity. The third S – support, maintains that the existing support on the part of others during the transition process is fundamental for the individual's well-being. Finally, the fourth S – strategies for coping, states that there is no miraculous coping strategy to manage the situation, and that each individual must identify the strategies that allow management of the transition in the way that best respects their well-being.

Considering the challenging nature of transition processes and the absence of literature on the process of women transitioning to organizational roles formally associated with the exercise of leadership, this study aims to (1) describe the process of transition of women to an organizational leadership position, identifying (i) the stages of this process and (ii) the difficulties associated with it. At the same time, considering the constraints experienced by women regarding organizational leadership positions, we intend to (2) describe the representations of young women about this process.

Method

This research adopts a qualitative approach, considering the absence of literature on the process of transition to leadership positions, particularly with regard to women. Given our research objectives, two studies were conducted, adopting procedures that aimed to ensure the quality of the inferences made². The data were collected in Portugal.

Study 1

In order to achieve the first research objective, information was collected from two female participants belonging to the millennial generation (since it is the most representative of the labour market today and in the near future) who had experienced the transition process to a position of leadership in the last six to twelve months. We chose this period so that the participants had a more detailed perception of the process. The participants were intentionally selected through the authors' network of contacts.

Participant 1 (P1) works in a computer organization. She is 37 years old, has a degree in computer science, took on the leadership position about seven months before data collection, and reports to the head of department. In her previous role in the organization, she had responsibilities related to the development, appraisal and monitoring of team members. Participant 2 (P2) works in a construction organization. She is 29 years old, has a master's degree in civil engineering, and took on the leadership position about six months ago, with the head of department as her direct supervisor.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to give detailed reports on experiences associated with their process of transition to the current leadership position. The interview script presented five open-ended questions (e.g., "Tell me about the transition to this new role") and was developed in order to understand how the participants perceived their work before the transition and their experiences during the transition process. A pilot study was conducted with a woman who had been in an organizational leadership position for about 10 years in order to validate the script.

Both interviews took place at the participants' homes, after work hours, in order to avoid work constraints. There were no interruptions or distractions during the course of the interviews. The participants signed an informed consent form which ensured their anonymity, explained the study's objectives and asked for authorization to audio-record the interview. The interviews took on average 20 minutes, and they were transcribed and then validated by the interviewees.

² See Santos, Peres and Brandão (2018) for a discussion on the challenges associated with the study of female leadership.

Study 2

In order to achieve the second research objective, information was collected from 30 university students, aged between 20 and 33 years old ($M = 23.00$, $SD = 2.59$). Among the participants, 22 had a degree, seven a master's degree and one was attending higher education. The participants had never been involved in a transition to an organizational leadership position; 80.0% knew a woman who was in a leadership position and 20.0% did not.

A questionnaire with open-ended questions was used, so that the participants could elaborate their perceptions about the object of study. The questionnaire had three open-ended questions with the intention of eliciting descriptions of perceptions regarding the phenomenon under study (e.g., "How do you think the transition to a leadership position is experienced by a woman?"); and a debriefing, in which participants were given feedback on the study. The questionnaire was also subject to a pilot study.

The questionnaires were applied online, using the Google Docs platform, and they were available for three days, being disseminated through the social network Facebook. They also included an informed consent form.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data collected were subjected to categorical content analysis, according to the principles defined by Bardin (2011). The corpus of analysis was constituted by the totality of the collected qualitative data, the coding unit was the theme, and the context unit was the document where it was inserted. Deductive categories were identified based on the literature review, and inductive categories resulted from the data. The final categorization system has four first-level categories and 13 second-level categories. The process of data management, organization and analysis was supported by NVivo11 and 12 (QSR), a useful software in the process of developing deep thinking about qualitative data (Brandão, 2015).

Findings and Discussion

The process of transition to a position of leadership for women

As the participants were women who had recently moved to a leadership position, it is important to describe their previous role, so that we can understand their process of transition to the current position.

Before being promoted, P1 already held a leadership position in the organization, albeit at a lower level and less structured. Her main functions included managing a team of programme analysts. Since her responsibilities were closely linked to the development, appraisal and monitoring of team members, the main difficulty she felt was keeping them motivated, due to the particularities of the work. When occupying the new leadership position, P1 replaced a worker who was leaving the organization. Her direct supervisor is the department head and she leads a group of team leaders, which means that P1's subordinates are also leaders themselves.

Regarding P2, she was previously the subdirector of construction projects in the organization. Hence, the director of the projects was her direct supervisor. She was responsible for technical tasks and others required by her supervisor. She did not feel that her work was challenging, since, although it was considered important, if she made a mistake her supervisor would manage it and address the problem. Unlike P1, P2 did not replace a former leader, and the change in her role implied that she became responsible for new projects. Her present direct supervisor is the head of the department, and she has construction workers as subordinates, often subcontracted.

The stages of the transition process

Analysis of the data of these two participants allows us to differentiate three sequential stages in the transition to their leadership position: the learning phase, the autonomization phase and the consolidation phase.

The learning phase represents the beginning of the process in which the participants learn to perform the role associated with the new position of leadership. In the case of P1, this phase occurred with the support of the person who had previously held the position and who was now leaving the organization:

"[a] phase where we are both still present, so the person has not left yet and is teaching me. He is passing on to me everything he has"

In this case, the learning stage coincided with a passing of tasks (from the previous leader to P1), as the experienced worker, in the process of leaving the organization, trained the worker who was to replace him. Despite being a frequently used strategy by organizations to manage members' substitutions, we see that for P1 this initial moment is of some confusion, since there were two people present in the organization, without her knowing exactly which of the two was actually taking on the role:

"the two are still there; it seems a little confusing who is taking on the role"

Therefore, although having the support of someone more experienced during this stage is perceived as positive, it also represents some noise, inasmuch as P1 did not know exactly how to act. She felt she had to get involved so she could learn and be prepared to take on the role, but at the same time, there was still another person officially responsible for the position:

"for me it's the most complicated, because it's the feeling that I don't want to get into it all because the other person is still there, but at the same time I have to start taking control now, because from one day to the next the responsibility is all mine and you need to know things"

This experience highlights the challenges associated with roles that are simultaneously assumed by different people, when the boundaries of each are changing. In this case, one of the actors fulfils a role that he will soon leave (the supervisor who ensures the training of the person who will replace him), and the other actor is learning the content and boundaries of the new role.

In the case of P2, this first stage took place differently. She did not replace someone, and becoming a leader meant she became responsible for new projects. Thus, despite having colleagues holding the same position level, there was no one responsible for guiding her in the process of becoming a leader and she had to assure the performance of her new role autonomously, which also presented challenges:

"a lot of difficulty in assimilating everything there was to do or that there could be, in that case, and a little bit "putting the cart before the horse" because I was already trying to foresee all the problems that could exist"

For P2 this stage was difficult, and it seems she felt lost in the immensity of her new tasks and responsibilities:

"at the beginning there was a very bad phase because when I learned that I was going to be in charge of two projects on my own I thought it would be too much responsibility for me and that I didn't have enough time to be sufficiently prepared to deal with this situation"

So, as perceived, the learning stage may happen with or without support. As support in transition processes is certainly relevant, as mentioned by Schlossberg (2011), the experience of this phase without a support network, namely in the form of a tutor, may imply greater pressure due to not knowing what has to be done, and the need to learn the demands of the new role alone or autonomously. Our participants tried to understand what they would have to do and how to position themselves in the new role. This initial stage is even described as being the most difficult of the entire transitioning process, due to the fact that the person is not yet comfortable in the new role and does not yet know how to perform it:

"it is not frustration, but it is a very strange feeling. For me it was always the worst phase" (P1)

"This phase was very bad, a lot of stress" (P2)

The second stage of the process is autonomization, which reflects the period of adaptation of the participants to the organizational role. In this phase, the participants effectively take on the leadership position and start carrying out tasks independently:

"there is another phase (...) 'yes, this is serious'; I am alone, I don't have the support anymore" (P1)

"when I actually started to execute the function of being responsible for both projects" (P2)

At this stage, the participants seem to have a clearer notion of their role and of what the job implies and are trying to adapt to it. This phase involved understanding how to perform and plan tasks and, at the same time, understanding the changes that took place at the relational level with colleagues, subordinates and supervisor:

"this phase, a bit to conquer people again, to understand my space, to understand their space, to understand that more informal space that we sometimes have, that we notice ceases to exist." (P1)

Doubts emerge regarding how to perform the job, who to turn to and how to behave in the leadership position. These doubts may stem from the perception of having to do everything correctly, which they seem to consider as inherent to the leadership role and having subordinates dependent on their work:

"How am I going to do it? Am I going to be able to do it? (...) What time do I have? Who should I go to in the organization when I have doubts?" (P1)

"I felt a lot of responsibility; I didn't want to let anything fail" (P2)

The last stage of the process is consolidation. In this stage, both participants felt they had adapted to their new role and revealed a new way of functioning and greater stability:

"after some time, we have already adapted; we all adapt to the new situation we are in (...) and things are going normally" (P1)

"now I think I've got used to things being like this" (P2)

Nevertheless, at this stage, both participants still feel they are not able to fully predict and plan work, as well as all the difficulties that may arise, which may be justified by the fact that they have not yet completed a year in this new role:

"I'm not at the pace where I can already say that I can have everything very well planned and everything very well defined" (P1)

"I'm not yet at the stage where I can predict the difficulties to come" (P2)

Difficulties in the transition process

The participants identified three main difficulties in their transition process: fully taking on new functions; gaining recognition for their role as a leader; and dealing with changes in relationships. With regard to fully assuming the new functions, there is reference to the diversity of tasks to be performed and the responsibility associated with them, as well as the performance pressure resulting from the new role, which seems to be associated with the need to demonstrate value and professionalism:

"it's hard to integrate everything there is to do or that could be" (P2)

"I felt a lot of responsibility, I didn't want anything to let anything fail" (P2)

Another difficulty mentioned was getting recognition for their role as a leader from those around them:

"this recognition was very difficult, for people to change their person of reference in the workplace" (P1)

"sometimes it gets a little complicated to impose respect, to enforce the rules" (P2)

It should be noted that for P1, the transition to this leadership role implied replacing the previous team leader, which may possibly have made it difficult for the members of the team to change their leadership reference.

The difficulty in having her leadership role recognized seems to be influenced by gender and age issues, as can be seen in P2's discourse:

"in addition to being a woman, I'm young, and I'm not always taken seriously" (P2)

This excerpt calls attention to the importance of considering the characteristics of the leader in the transition process. But also the contextual dimensions, represented here by the nature of the occupational activity of both participants, who perform functions in environments still typically dominated by the male gender, which intensifies gender differences (Piterman, 2008). This is also consistent with the literature that points out some difficulty in women having leadership positions recognized by colleagues, especially men (Brescoll, 2011).

Another difficulty identified is related to the relationships established with subordinates, colleagues and managers, which change formally and informally:

"the most complicated thing was having to report the events to my direct supervisor, the head of production" (P2)

"that more informal space that we sometimes have, that we notice ceases to exist." (P1)

Consider also the difficulty of P1 as a leader requesting support from her supervisor, which is now felt as problematic and a source of stress:

"now it is no longer expected to happen [asking for support]; therefore, it is such a stress to understand if I am doing this well and if I am not, nobody will see it, nobody will review it." (P1)

The participants reported feeling discrimination based on their gender, which can be an extra pressure (Santos et al., 2018). This was visible, for example, in the fact that people asked for their support for behavioural problems, but not technical issues:

"I never felt any kind of discrimination for being a woman directly, but indirectly I notice it. For example, the person I substituted, who I succeeded, was a man, and clearly there were questions that they asked him, particularly technical ones (...). I notice that there are things that they could ask me, they could consult, and that they don't, in the more technical part (...) on behavioural issues they clearly look for me, but not because of my role, but because I am a woman and I will understand better" (P1)

According to P1, it is usual to observe a social distancing from those who take a position of leadership. However, she considers that this distance tends to fade more quickly for men than for women:

"Even my colleagues, men, who recently took on leadership roles, in this case at a hierarchical level below me, but who also took on these roles, I saw that others distanced themselves from them (...) [But] they were able to get closer to people more quickly than I did. I am getting there, but it takes longer and I think I still haven't made it with everyone in the office." (P1)

This suggests that the process of transitioning to a leadership position seems to be characterized by an impoverishment of the support network in the organization, to the extent that when moving up the hierarchy the person experiences social distance from co-workers and, to some degree, remains isolated (even temporarily). This can be experienced with particular intensity given the inexperience in the

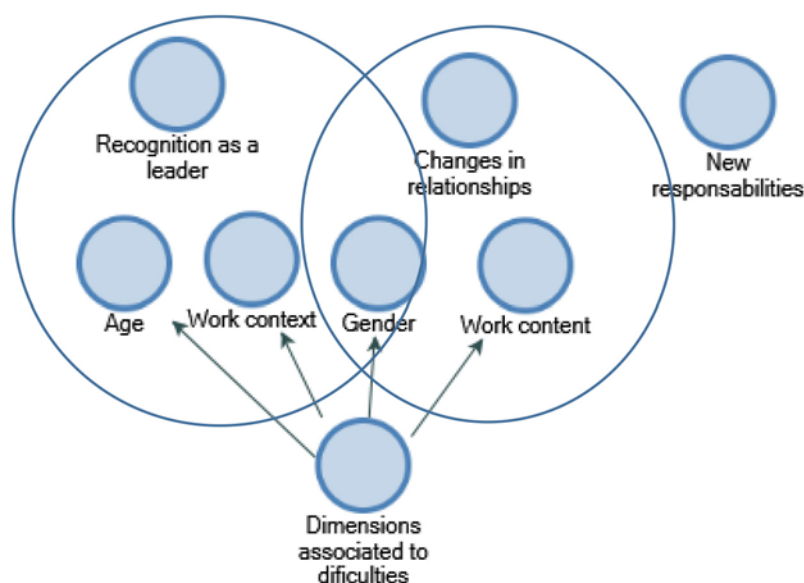
new position, coupled with the fact that they assume full responsibility for the position, without having the opportunity to dialogue or request support from supervisors – either because they are not physically available, or because it is socially expected not to:

“the more we move up, the more lonely we feel, right? That’s another thing that I’m trying to adapt to and I’m trying to understand why. We are a group small here in the [organization]; this is not easy, because, really, I am no longer the person to whom they go ask for advice [...] it seems that I am the reference for when there are problems, but not the person of reference for when they need help, which is annoying for me, because I think it doesn’t make sense” (P1)

Note that the social isolation of women leaders at work may be a stressor, resulting in a lack of formal and informal support (Santos et al., 2018). About twenty years ago, Bellamy and Ramsay (1994) indicated that one of the factors underlying the women leaving the organizations where they worked was the exclusion they felt from their colleagues, mostly men. More recently, Nelson and Burke (2000) stressed that isolation at work is one of the main factors that leads women in positions of leadership to exit the organization, also resulting from the lack of support at a formal and informal level.

Figure 1 represents the different difficulties identified by the participants in the transition process and the variables with which they associated these difficulties.

Figure 1. Difficulties and influences in the transition process



Note, however, that gender stereotypes were simultaneously considered by both participants as enhancing their performance, as they felt compelled to show that being a woman does not hamper their performance:

“it gives me more strength to be able to show that nothing has to be different and that, come on, it is the same. Being a man, a woman, whatever – it is the same and things work” (P1)

“(...) But I think I can overcome this and that it has been a good experience, at this moment, to have that leadership role. It has given me the baggage I need. (...) It gives me some pleasure in knowing that I am capable of doing it” (P2)

While there is satisfaction when they feel that they are capable of taking on the leadership role and overcoming the obstacles associated with it, discrimination and gender differences create sadness and hurt:

“The thing is, really, it hurts me. I will not lie, it hurts me (...) it makes me sad, but it does not make me frustrated or stressed, no. I am just sorry. We are in the 21st century, right?” (P1)

The transition to the leadership position is seen by the participants as a vote of confidence from the organization and the recognition of their competence, factors which they mobilize to manage their experience of discrimination:

“if someone chose me to take this leadership role, it is because I have the skills to do it and that's it. Frequently, I see that if this trust has been placed in me it is because I can be like them, at least, if not better” (P2)

In other words, the external validation of leaders of a higher hierarchical level, in the form of assigning a leadership role, seems to bring security to this participant, allowing her to recognize herself as competent in her performance.

Representations about the transition to a leadership position

The majority of young women who answered the questionnaire (86.7%) believe that the transition to a leadership position is different for men and women, with only 13.3% considering that there are no gender differences in this process. This result is in line with the literature (Grant Thornton's International Business Report, 2018).

Regarding the difficulties which they consider that a woman has to face during this process, they mentioned recognition of the role of leader; responsibilities of the role; and work-life balance. The difficulty in recognizing the role of leader refers to the lack of recognition of the formal authority of the leader and the legitimacy of their promotion. This first aspect is then associated with questioning the credibility of women as a leader:

“discrediting your authority” (PQ4)³

“questioning your credibility as a leader” (PQ8)

“Disrespect, lack of authority” (PQ19)

“Lack of acceptance” (PQ21)

The participants also mentioned that women feel that those around them believe that the promotion to the leadership position was not due to their competence:

“need to prove yourself and show that the job is deserved” (PQ6)

“Attribute your transition to factors not associated with your performance and skills” (PQ10)

“they never consider that a woman has reached a prominent position on merit, with effort, dedication, commitment and professionalism.” (PQ19)

“wanting to do the best and thus prove that you deserve the job” (PQ3)

³ Identifies the questionnaire respondent.

Thus, there is a belief in the difficulty in recognizing the woman's merit for promotion, which is something that the literature demonstrates (Sanders, Hrdlicka, Hellicar, Cottrell, & Knox, 2011). For young women who participated in this study, gender stereotypes are very present in the phenomenon of female leadership, in the process of transition to that position and in a more global way:

"The issue of gender is, in itself, a difficulty. Even in the 21st century, there is a stigma of the role of women in leadership, specifically the influence of hormones that, according to the existing stereotype, influences the decision-making process" (PQ7)

"prejudice due to being a woman and having an idea that leadership is for men" (PQ3)

"there are still a lot of stereotypes associated with female leadership skills." (PQ10)

Since the characteristics attributed to a leader are seen as typically masculine, men also end up being seen as natural leaders, which reinforces gender differences, as perceived by the participants:

"men are seen as natural leaders so their transition to a leadership position is not seen as unusual or wrong" (PQ2)

"There is an assumption that men are better leaders." (PQ11)

"Due to the cultural and social norm, women are typically seen as less capable than men" (PQ25)

"There is a greater stigma regarding women's ability to lead, since it is almost assumed that men are innate leaders." (PQ30)

The stereotype that men are natural leaders leads to women's skills being questioned (Grant Thornton's International Business Report, 2018), creating gender differences. Stereotypes and gender discrimination result in negative perceptions of women's leadership skills (Grant Thornton's International Business Report, 2019) – see the testimony of PQ22 below –

and women tend to compare their performance with male members and often try to overcome them (Davidson & Cooper, 1983). This is clearly present in the speech of PQ16:

"Having to show more competences (personal and professional) since for a woman to be considered for a leadership position she often has to show more evidence than the man" (PQ16)

"comments like 'she's a woman, that's why it didn't go well' are common" (PQ22)

The participants also consider that the transition process will be experienced more intensely by women and with more obstacles, given that it is more common for a man to reach a position of leadership:

"As it is more usual for men to reach leadership, it is normal that they no longer live the process as intensely" (PQ3)

"full of barriers and constraints that might not have been posed if it were a male" (PQ19)

With regard to the difficulties associated with the responsibilities of the function, there is reference to the tasks inherent in a leadership position, as well as the pressure of performance that is exercised and felt by women:

"pressure to do your best" (PQ5)

"required perfectionism and very short deadlines" (PQ26)

"difficulty of reconciliation derived from organizing your own work and the work of others that you will have to guide" (PQ27)

The participants also referred to work-life balance, considering that women will have less time and availability to dedicate to their professional life:

"in our culture women have a markedly more important family role" (PQ19)

Although there are currently some policies adopted by companies to reduce gender disparities – payment of maternity leave (59%), flexible hours (57%) and part-time work (54%) (Grant Thornton's International Business Report, 2018) – women continue to play an important family role, making it more difficult for them to manage the work-family relationship, as shown by the literature (Brandão & Lopes, 2017).

A woman's transition to a leadership position is considered to involve a mixture of positive and negative emotions. The participants associate frustration, doubt and fear with the process, given the barriers that are posed and that women must overcome, the fact that this is an unknown territory for women and the increased responsibility and work associated with the role:

"Full of frustrations" (PQ2)

"I think it is a complicated time, in which she goes through several emotions – like doubt" (PQ11)

At the same time, they refer to satisfaction and pride, considering that the process will be understood by women as an acknowledgment of their work and a way of asserting themselves, which seems to be consistent with the fact that one third of European women interviewed in the study undertaken by Catalyst (2002) aspire to top leadership:

"Happiness?" (PQ1)

"the transition is always seen as a recognition of your effort" (PQ3)

"lived with positivity" (PQ11)

"With a lot of pride" (PQ28)

Young university students consider that in this process women also find aspects that motivate them to take action, namely the desire to achieve the goals previously defined by women:

"Willingness to do well, wanting to excel" (PQ1)

"The goals that the person wants to achieve" (PQ2)

"willingness to give everything" (PQ6)

"Will to change, personal affirmation, will to achieve individual and collective success" (PQ9)

"personal and professional growth" (PQ13)

"Goal reward awards; definition of work objectives" (PQ14)

"anger" (PQ15)

"great motivation to make a difference" (PQ28)

Consider anger in particular, which, having been mentioned by a participant, we highlight for its difference, and for revealing how difficulties can be differently interpreted and promote individual overcoming. However, it is important to understand at what cost to the well-being of women.

Conclusions

This study allows us to present a preliminary proposal for a model of the transition process to a position of leadership, understanding that it is structured in different phases, in a rationale of progressive autonomy. It was not possible in this study to identify whether these phases have a time limit, which is something that future studies should seek to explore. It therefore seems to us that it will be important to collect data from leaders who initiated the transition process between two to three years earlier, with the two-year time limit often being considered to assess the success of the transition (e.g., Keller & Meaney, 2018). This period may allow us to assess the extent to which the leader is completely autonomous, as well as the way in which the difficulties we identified here are being managed, whether they remain in time or if other constraints emerge.

As mentioned in the introduction, no models were identified in the literature about the transition process to a position of leadership, and, therefore, the model of organizational integration proposed by Porter and colleagues (1975) was used. It should be noted, however, that this model describes the process of someone who enters an organization. In this study we focused on two participants who

became leaders in the organization where they were already integrated. While it is true that in the learning phase, participants already knew the norms and the culture of the organization, they accessed new information on how to perform the job, being introduced to a new role. In the second phase of the integration model, the worker starts a period of experimental work, which aims to adapt them to the organization, resembling the phase of autonomy in our model of the transition to a leadership position. In this second phase, which is characterized by the beginning of the performance of a new function in its entirety, the person tries to adapt to the new role, but also to the whole reality underlying it (e.g., changes in work relations, indecision regarding decision-making). Finally, there is the phase when the new member has already adapted to the organization, changing their values, relationships and behaviours. Likewise, in the consolidation phase of the proposed model, the person feels they have adapted to the new role, and we see that the participants associate this phase with a way of doing and being that represents a new normal, albeit with uncertainties.

This research suggests that the approach to the transition process focused on here should follow the ecological model, in the sense of considering the process, the person, the context and the time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Moreover, the importance of planning the transition processes to leadership positions should be recognized, contrary to the tendency of many organizations to leave this process to be managed entirely by the leader in transition. It seems important to us to design transition programmes tailored to the new leader, which, moreover, meets a more ecological approach, as advocated. Note, for this purpose, that although P1 previously held a leadership position in the organization (although at a lower level), she associated difficulties with the transition, which supports the idea that the transition to a leadership position always requires planning and support. These considerations may be particularly relevant when dealing with women who are experiencing the process. Since this process is influenced by stereotypes based on gender (according to the experience of the participants in study 1 and the perceptions of those in study 2), it is important to consider that these are potential stress factors for women in positions of leadership (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999).

Further studies are needed to make the proposed transition model more robust, identifying in particular whether it adequately describes the transition process of leaders at different levels of the organization (e.g., top leaders as opposed to first-level leaders, such as the participants in study 1), as well as from different genders. These studies will allow the definition of strategies that organizations can mobilize to better support the experience of the transition process to leadership roles.

The three phases of the transition process for women to a position of leadership are characterized by difficulties and constraints. These difficulties are simultaneously seen as driving forces, as they allow women to demonstrate their value as a professional. It should also be noted that although participants of study 2 did not experience a process of transition to a leadership position, they associated it with difficulties that jibe with the experiences of participants on study 1, who did experience the transition process. This suggests that the representations of young women about this organizational process is close to the transition experience itself.

This research has some limitations that must be considered. First, study 1 focuses on the experience of only two participants. In view of the difficulty in accessing participants who met the defined inclusion criteria in a timely manner, an attempt was made to reach participant saturation; however, we believe that this was not fully achieved. It would be important, therefore, to access more leaders, in order to reach the theoretical saturation point. For the future, it will also be pertinent to develop studies with men and women, in order to understand if the proposed model applies regardless of gender and what the role of this and other dimensions is in the way the transition process is experienced. Another aspect to be considered in future studies is whether the transition process presents particularities for leaders who already are members of the organization compared to those who move from other organizations. Note that in study 1, the two participants were already workers at the organization where their transition process took place. It should also be noted that the participants in study 2 responded the questionnaires thinking of women leaders without being asked to consider a particular level of leadership (e.g., top or first line).

This work contributes to a better definition of the concept of transition process to a position of formal leadership in an organizational context, advancing with a first proposal of the internal structure of this process and the difficulties that women who experience this process have to manage. It also suggests that women who have not yet experienced this process and who belong to the millennial generation are aware of the gender stereotypes present in the work context with regard to female leadership. Being certain that this awareness can make them more competent in identifying the manifestations of these stereotypes, enabling them to better deal with them, it is important to reflect on (and study) whether these beliefs will have negative effects on women's self-esteem and sense of competence, discouraging their investment in leadership positions. It is important to intervene in society, namely in terms of education and training, so that the competence and potential of each person to perform leadership (and other) functions is valued, without gender stereotypes limiting women or men. Note that, contrary to common sense, women also want to reach the top.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Center for Psychology at the University of Porto, Portuguese Science Foundation (FCT UIDB/00050/2020).

Author contributions

Brandão C participated in the conception, design, analysis of research data, interpretation of results, writing and the approval of the final version of the scientific paper. Santos F participated in the conception, design, collection and analysis of research data, interpretation of results and writing of the scientific paper. Peres S participated in the design, collection and analysis of research data and interpretation of results.

Competing interests

No financial, legal or political competing interests with third parties (government, commercial, private foundation, etc.) were disclosed for any aspect of the submitted work (including but not limited to grants, data monitoring board, study design, manuscript preparation, statistical analysis, etc.).

References

- Aparna, J. (2014). By whom and when are women's expertise recognized? The interactive effects of gender and education in science and engineering teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 59(2), 202-239. Recuperado de <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0001839214528331>. doi: [10.1177/0001839214528331](https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839214528331)
- Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (1994). Shatter the Glass Ceiling: Women May Make Better Managers. *Human Resource Management*, 33(4), 549-560. Recuperado de <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/hrm.3930330405>. doi: [10.1002/hrm.3930330405](https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.3930330405)
- Bellamy, P. A., & Ramsay, K. (1994). *Barriers to women working in corporate management*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Brandão, C. (2015). P. Bazeley and K. Jackson, Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo (2nd ed.). *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 12(4), 492-494. Recuperado de https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282802998_P_Bazeley_and_K_Jackson_Qualitative_Data_Analysis_with_NVivo_2nd_ed. doi: [10.1080/14780887.2014.992750](https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2014.992750)
- Brandão, C., & Lopes, D. (2017). Conciliando a liderança e a maternidade: um estudo com recurso a histórias de vida. *Revista Psicologia, Diversidade e Saúde*, 6(4), 1027-1043. Recuperado de <https://www5.bahiana.edu.br/index.php/psicologia/article/view/1702>. doi: [10.17267/2317-3394rpd.v6i4.1702](https://doi.org/10.17267/2317-3394rpd.v6i4.1702)
- Brescoll, V. L. (2011). Who takes the floor and why: gender, power, and volubility in organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 56(4), 622-641. Recuperado de <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0001839212439994>. doi: [10.1177/0001839212439994](https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839212439994)
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (1998). The ecology of developmental processes. In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: Theoretical models of human development*. Hoboken, NJ, US: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Catalyst (2002). *Women in Leadership: A European Business Imperative*. Retrieved from <https://www.catalyst.org/research/women-in-leadership-a-european-business-imperative/>
- Costa, C., Breda, Z., Pinho, I., Bakas, F., & Durão, M. (2016). Performing a Thematic Analysis: An Exploratory Study about Managers' Perceptions on Gender Equality. *The Qualitative Report*, 21(13), 34-47. Recuperado de <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol21/iss13/4/>

- Daniel, A., & Moudic, Y. (2010). *Female and gender leadership: To which extents gender impacts on leadership and organizations in France?* (MBA), Linnaeus University. Recuperado de <http://www.diva-portal.se/smash/get/diva2:322450/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Davidson, M. J., & Cooper, C. L. (1983). *Stress and the woman manager*. Oxford: Martin Robin.
- Dória, A., & Brandão, C. (2016). *The exercise of leadership in the feminine: the state of the art*. Protocol of the International psychological applications conference and trends, Lisbon.
- Eagly, A. H., & Johannesen-Schmidt, M. C. (2001). The leadership styles of women and men. *Journal of Social Issues, 57*, 781-797. Recuperado de https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227528503_The_Leadership_Styles_of_Women_and_Men. doi: [10.1111/0022-4537.00241](https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00241)
- Eagly, A. H., Johannesen-Schmidt, M. C., & Engen, M. L. (2003). Transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles: A meta-analysis comparing women and men. *Psychological Bulletin, 129*(4), 569-591. Recuperado de <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/64ab/af52dd802cf569379cf52bbb9822d56857aa.pdf>. doi: [10.1037/0033-2909.129.4.569](https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.4.569)
- Gardiner, M., & Tiggemann, M. (1999). Gender differences in leadership style, job stress and mental health in male- and female- dominated industries. *Journal of Occupational & Organizational Psychology, 72*(3), 301-315. Recuperado de <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1348/0963179991666699>. doi: [10.1348/0963179991666699](https://doi.org/10.1348/0963179991666699)
- Comissão para a Cidadania e a Igualdade de Género (2017). *Igualdade de Género em Portugal. Boletim Estatístico 2017*. Recuperado de <https://www.cig.gov.pt/2018/02/igualdade-genero-portugal-boletim-estatistico-2017/>
- Grant Thornton's International Business Report. (2018). *Gender balance remains elusive*. Recuperado de <https://www.grantthornton.global/en/press/press-releases-2018/Gender-balance-remains-elusive/>
- Grant Thornton's International Business Report. (2019). *Mouting pressure beginning to drive progress for women in senior leadership*. Recuperado de <https://www.grantthornton.global/en/press/press-releases-2019/mouting-pressure-beginning-to-drive-progress-for-women-in-senior-leadership/>
- Haile, S., Emmanuel, T., & Dzathor, A. (2016). Barriers and challenges confronting women for leadership and management positions: review and analysis. *International Journal of Business and Public Administration, 13*(1), 36-51. Recuperado de <https://bit.ly/2UwS0sG>
- Kanter, R. M. (1989). *Work and Family in the United States: A Critical Review and Agenda for Research and Policy*. Family Business Review: Russell Sage Foundation
- Keller, S., & Meaney, M. (2018). *Successfully transitioning to new leadership roles*. McKinsey & Company, 1-8. Recuperado de <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Business%20Functions/Organization/Our%20Insights/Successfully%20transitioning%20to%20new%20leadership%20roles/Successfully-transitioning-to-new-leadership-roles-web-final.ashx>
- Martin, J. (2015). Transformational and Transactional Leadership: An Exploration of Gender, Experience, and Institution Type. *Libraries and the Academy, 15*(2), 331-351. Recuperado de https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277626481_Transformational_and_Transactional_Leadership_An_Exploration_of_Gender_Experience_and_Institution_Type. doi: [10.1353/pla.2015.0015](https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2015.0015)
- Nelson, D. L., & Burke, R. J. (2000). Women executives: health, stress, and success. *Academy of Management Executive, 14*(2), 107-121. Recuperado de https://www.researchgate.net/publication/289691801_Women_executives_Health_stress_and_success. doi: [10.5465/AME.2000.3819310](https://doi.org/10.5465/AME.2000.3819310)
- Piterman, H. (2008). *Women in Management: The Leadership Challenge*. Melbourne: Hannah Piterman.
- Porter, L. W., Lawler, E. E., & Hackman, J. R. (1975). *Behavior in organizations*. London: McGraw-Hill.
- Sanders, M., Hrdlicka, J., Hellicar, M., Cottrell, D., & Knox, J. (2011). *What stops women from reaching the top? Confronting the tough issues*. Recuperado de <https://cew.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/2011-CEW-Bain-report.pdf>
- Santos, F., Peres, S., & Brandão, C. (2018, julho). Considerações metodológicas no estudo da liderança feminina. *Atas do Congresso Ibero-Americano em Investigação Qualitativa*, Fortaleza, CE, Brasil, 7. Recuperado de <https://proceedings.ciaiq.org/index.php/ciaiq2018/article/view/1777/1902>
- Sargent, A. G., & Schlossberg, N. K. (1988). Managing adult transitions. *Training and Development Journal, 42*(12), 58-60. Recuperado de <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ381396>
- Schlossberg, N. K. (2011). The challenge of change: the transition model and its applications. *Journal of employment counseling, 48*(4), 159-162. Recuperado de <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/j.2161-1920.2011.tb01102.x>. doi: [10.1002/j.2161-1920.2011.tb01102.x](https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1920.2011.tb01102.x)