

# Women's Experiences of Work and Leadership in Mexico: Structural and Emotional Barriers Across Sectors

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**Abstract:** Women remain underrepresented in senior roles in Mexico despite important progress in education and labour-market participation. Research on gender and work has often examined structural barriers in organizations and labour markets separately from emotional barriers such as self-doubt or fear of failure. Drawing on Acker's concept of gendered organizations, this paper explores how these barriers come together in women's experiences of work and leadership in Mexico. The study uses data from a cross-sectional survey conducted in 2024–2025 with 1,020 professional women from education, health, financial services, technology, retail, and other sectors. Participants held roles ranging from early-career positions and entrepreneurship to middle management, directorships, and senior executive positions. The survey included socio-demographic questions, a checklist of emotional obstacles reported as either already overcome or not yet overcome, and open-ended questions about relevant workplace experiences. The findings show that women frequently report self-doubt, fear of failure, pressure linked to traditional family expectations, work-care tensions, and the need to constantly prove competence in male-dominated environments. Several of these obstacles appear in both response categories, suggesting that they do not simply disappear but often return at different moments in a woman's career. Age comparisons indicate that self-doubt and fear of failure are more common among younger respondents, while qualitative responses show that senior women also continue to face isolation, bias, and work-family tensions. The paper contributes evidence from Mexico to the gender and work literature by showing that structural and emotional barriers are closely connected. It also suggests that leadership-development efforts should move beyond a "fix the woman" approach and pay more attention to organizational culture, evaluation systems, and support structures.

**Keywords:** Gender and work, Women in leadership, Mexico, Emotional barriers, Structural barriers, Gendered organizations

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## 1. Introduction

Women's participation in paid work has expanded across Latin America, but this has not translated into equal access to leadership positions. Mexico reflects this pattern clearly. Women have made important gains in education and professional participation, yet they continue to face barriers in promotion, recognition and access to senior roles. Research has shown that occupational segregation, unequal care responsibilities and gendered expectations still shape women's career opportunities. At the same time, many women who seek leadership positions describe internal struggles such as self-doubt, fear of failure and tension between being seen as competent and being seen as likable.

These are often treated as separate issues. Structural barriers are discussed in terms of institutions, hierarchies and discrimination, while emotional barriers are framed as matters of confidence or personal development. In practice, however, these experiences are closely connected. Feelings such as fear of failure or the need to constantly prove one's value do not emerge in a vacuum. They are often shaped by workplace cultures, evaluation systems and everyday interactions.

This paper focuses on women's experiences of work and leadership in Mexico. Although the broader Latin American context is relevant, the evidence presented here is specifically Mexican. This is important because much of the research on women's leadership comes from Europe and North America, often from single organizations or from corporate leadership programmes. We still know less about how women in Mexico describe both structural and emotional barriers across sectors and at different career stages.

The paper draws on Acker's (1990) concept of gendered organizations. This perspective is useful because it helps explain how organizations reproduce inequality through roles, expectations and apparently neutral procedures. It also helps us understand that emotional barriers should not be interpreted only as individual weaknesses. In many cases, they are responses to gendered environments.

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, it describes the profile of the women in the sample and the sectors and roles they occupy. Second, it identifies the emotional barriers women most frequently report as already overcome and not yet overcome. Third, it interprets these patterns in light of gendered organizations and women's leadership identity work. The paper contributes empirically by providing cross-sector evidence from Mexico, and conceptually by arguing that emotional barriers are often recurrent rather than once-and-for-all challenges.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Gendered Organizations and Women's Careers**

Acker (1990) argued that organizations are not gender-neutral. Gender is built into their structures, routines and assumptions about who the ideal worker is. In many workplaces, that ideal worker is imagined as someone fully available for paid work and largely free from care responsibilities. This model tends to fit men's traditional life patterns more easily than women's, especially in contexts where women continue to carry most domestic and caregiving work.

Later research has shown that gendered processes operate in many subtle ways: through promotion criteria, access to informal networks, performance evaluation, and expectations about how leaders should behave. These insights are especially relevant in Mexico, where labour-market inequality coexists with strong cultural expectations around family and caregiving. Regional reports from the International Labour Organization and UN Women have consistently shown that women perform a disproportionate share of unpaid care work, and that this affects their access to stable, well-paid and promotable jobs. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) has also highlighted how the organization of care is central to understanding gender inequality in the region.

From this perspective, women's underrepresentation in leadership cannot be explained only by individual decisions or aspirations. It is also shaped by institutional arrangements and organizational cultures that make advancement easier for some than for others.

### **2.2 Emotional Barriers and Leadership Identity**

A second body of literature focuses on women's emotional experiences in relation to leadership. Clance and Imes (1978) described the impostor phenomenon among high-achieving women who doubt their competence despite evidence of success. Eagly and Carli (2007) later argued that women's path to leadership is better understood as a labyrinth than as a single barrier, because the obstacles they face are varied, subtle and ongoing. Ely, Ibarra and Kolb (2011) further suggested that leadership development involves identity work: women must come to see themselves as leaders in settings that may not fully recognize them as such.

This literature is useful, but it also carries a risk. Emotional barriers can easily be framed as individual shortcomings that women must solve through confidence-building or resilience. That interpretation is too narrow. Self-doubt, fear of being judged too harshly, or anxiety about balancing work and family may be deeply connected to organizational environments in which women are held to different standards. For this reason, emotional barriers should be analysed in relation to context rather than as purely private struggles.

### **2.3 Research gap and Analytical Focus**

Existing studies often emphasize either structural constraints or women's internal emotional experiences. Fewer studies examine both at the same time using cross-sector evidence from Mexico. There is also limited attention to whether women experience barriers as definitively resolved or as challenges that reappear over time. This paper addresses that gap by analysing responses that distinguish between obstacles women feel they have already overcome and those they feel they have not yet overcome. That distinction offers a useful way to explore whether barriers are linear, cumulative or cyclical.

## **3. Method**

### **3.1 Design and Sample**

This study is based on a cross-sectional survey. Data was collected between March 2024 and September 2025 through an online questionnaire distributed through professional networks, social media and organizations interested in women's leadership. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no financial incentives were offered.

The final sample includes 1,020 women in Mexico. The sampling strategy was non-probabilistic and based on convenience, so the results cannot be treated as statistically representative of all women in the country. Even so, the sample includes women from different age groups, sectors, educational backgrounds and hierarchical levels, which makes it valuable for exploratory analysis.

### 3.2 Measures

The questionnaire included three main sections. The first gathered socio-demographic and occupational information, including age, education, sector and hierarchical level. The second included a checklist of emotional obstacles to career progression. Respondents marked which obstacles they had already overcome and which they had not yet overcome. The items included self-doubt, fear of failure, pressure linked to family expectations, work-family conflict, fear of being seen as too aggressive or too soft, pressure to prove competence, discrimination, lack of mentors and isolation in leadership roles. The third section included open-ended questions that invited respondents to describe other important workplace challenges or experiences.

### 3.3 Analysis

The quantitative analysis is descriptive and exploratory. Because respondents could select multiple items, frequencies and percentages are reported by barrier rather than as mutually exclusive categories. Age comparisons focus on two not-yet-overcome barriers that appeared frequently in the data: self-doubt and fear of failure. The qualitative responses were examined through thematic coding to identify recurring issues such as work-family tensions, discrimination, organizational culture, support networks and personal growth.

## 4. Sample Profile

**Table 1: Sample characteristics (N = 1,020)**

Variable	Category	n	%
<b>Education</b>	Bachelor's degree	622	61.0
	Postgraduate degree	204	20.0
	Engineering degree	92	9.0
	Basic education	71	7.0
	Other	31	3.0
<b>Sector</b>	Other sectors	367	36.0
	Education	163	16.0
	Health	153	15.0
	Financial services	143	14.0
	Technology	112	11.0
	Retail	82	8.0
	<b>Age</b>	Under 25	326
	26–35	173	17.0
	36–45	184	18.0
	Over 46	337	33.0

The sample also includes women at different hierarchical levels. The most frequent categories reported were entrepreneur or business owner (204), section head (156), area manager (133), department director (115), and senior executive roles such as CEO, CFO or COO (86). The original categories in the survey were in Spanish and have been translated here for clarity.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1 Main Emotional Barriers

The barriers most frequently selected in the already-overcome category were pressure to comply with traditional family and social expectations (55.8%), doubts about self-confidence and personal worth (52.1%), fear of failure and of not meeting leadership expectations (51.0%), difficulty balancing professional and family

responsibilities (50.2%), fear of being perceived as too aggressive or too soft (47.5%), and constant pressure to prove competence (46.5%).

A similar pattern appears in the not-yet-overcome responses. Fear of failure and of not meeting leadership expectations was selected by 42.0% of respondents, followed by difficulty balancing work and family responsibilities (34.5%), fear of being perceived as too aggressive or too soft (34.0%), pressure to prove competence (33.4%), self-doubt (33.2%), and pressure to comply with traditional expectations (32.1%).

**Table 2: Main emotional barriers reported as already overcome and not yet overcome**

Barrier	Already overcome %	Not yet overcome %
Pressure from traditional family/social expectations	55.8	32.1
Self-doubt and personal worth	52.1	33.2
Fear of failure / not meeting expectations	51.0	42.0
Difficulty balancing work and family	50.2	34.5
Fear of being too aggressive / too soft	47.5	34.0
Pressure to prove competence constantly	46.5	33.4

What stands out most is the overlap between the two categories. Several of the same barriers appear among those women who say they have overcome and among those they say they are still dealing with. This suggests that these difficulties do not simply vanish. They may return to different forms at different moments in a woman’s career.

**5.2 Age Differences**

The age comparisons point in the same direction. Younger women are more likely to report self-doubt and fear of failure as ongoing barriers, but these challenges are still present among older women.

**Table 3: Selected not-yet-overcome barriers by age group (%)**

Age group	Self-doubt	Fear of failure
Under 25	41.5	49.1
26–35	46.3	51.4
36–45	29.3	40.3
Over 46	20.5	31.0

These figures suggest that emotional pressure is especially strong in early and mid-career stages, when women are trying to establish credibility, seek advancement, and often navigate major life transitions. At the same time, the continued presence of these barriers among women over 46 shows that experience does not remove them entirely.

**5.3 Qualitative Themes**

The open-ended responses add nuance to the quantitative findings. Four broad themes appeared repeatedly.

The first was work-family tension. Many respondents described the difficulty of being expected to perform as committed professionals and as primary caregivers at the same time. Guilt, exhaustion and the sense of never doing enough appeared often in these comments.

The second was organizational culture and bias. Respondents referred to machismo, sexist comments, exclusion from decision-making, unequal recognition and blocked promotion opportunities. Several explicitly said that they had to prove more than men in order to be taken seriously.

The third theme was support and isolation. Some women highlighted the positive role of mentors and supportive supervisors, while others described feeling alone, lacking guidance or experiencing competition rather than solidarity. A few mentioned tension among women themselves, especially in environments where leadership opportunities are limited.

The fourth theme was growth through difficulty. Many respondents described learning to set boundaries, ask for help, trust their own judgment or recognize their accomplishments. These reflections do not suggest that barriers are unimportant. Rather, they show that agency often develops in the middle of constraint.

## **6. Discussion**

This study set out to examine how structural and emotional barriers interact in women's work and leadership experiences in Mexico. The findings support three main points.

First, emotional barriers are better understood as recurrent than as fixed. The overlap between already-overcome and not-yet-overcome barriers suggests that women do not simply solve a problem once and leave it behind. Similar fears and tensions may resurface during promotions, changes in role, motherhood, conflict with authority figures or entry into male-dominated environments. In that sense, the findings are consistent with the idea that leadership is not a straight path but an ongoing negotiation.

Second, structural and emotional barriers are tightly linked. Fear of failure, self-doubt and the pressure to prove competence are not merely personal feelings. They are connected to work environments in which women may face biased evaluation, stronger scrutiny, reduced access to influence, or less flexibility around care responsibilities. Acker's theory is useful here because it reminds us that emotions are not outside organizational life. They are often produced and shaped within it.

Third, the Mexican context matters. The prominence of family expectations, care burdens and machismo in the data suggests that women's leadership experiences are shaped by local cultural and institutional conditions. This does not make Mexico an exceptional case, but it does show why country-specific evidence matters. Gendered barriers are not abstract. They take shape in concrete social settings.

The paper's conceptual contribution lies in reframing emotional barriers as relational and cyclical. Rather than treating self-doubt or fear of failure as traits that belong to women as individuals, the findings suggest that these experiences often reflect women's encounter with gendered settings. This helps bring together two conversations that are still too often separated in the literature: organizational inequality and women's emotional experience of leadership.

## **7. Implications**

The findings have practical implications for organizations, leadership-development initiatives and future research.

For organizations, the results suggest the importance of looking beyond representation targets. Transparent promotion criteria, fairer evaluation systems, mentoring opportunities and safer climates for disagreement and visibility matter. Work-family tensions also require structural responses. In Mexico, parental leave is partly defined by legal frameworks, but organizations still have room to complement these provisions through flexible arrangements, support for caregivers and managerial practices that do not penalize caregiving.

For leadership-development programmes, the findings support approaches that combine skill development with space for reflection on gendered experiences. Women do not simply need more confidence. They also need environments that make leadership more accessible and less costly. Programmes that ignore context risk individualizing what are often organizational problems.

For research, the distinction between already-overcome and not-yet-overcome barriers appears especially useful. It opens the door to studying whether barriers are episodic, cumulative or cyclical. Longitudinal work, cross-country comparisons and more intersectional analysis would be especially valuable in future studies.

## **8. Limitations**

This study has several limitations. The sample is non-probabilistic and likely overrepresents women who are already connected to professional or leadership-development networks. The design is cross-sectional, so change over time is inferred from self-report rather than directly observed. In addition, the structural measures used here are relatively limited, focusing mainly on sector and hierarchical level. Future research could incorporate organizational size, employment arrangements, family situation and more detailed measures of workplace policy and culture.

## 9. Conclusion

This paper examined the work and leadership experiences of 1,020 women in Mexico across sectors and career stages. It showed that self-doubt, fear of failure, work-family tension, pressure from traditional expectations and the need to prove competence remain central parts of many women's career experiences. These barriers are best understood not as isolated emotional weaknesses but as recurring responses to gendered organizational and social conditions. By placing Mexico at the centre of the analysis, the paper contributes context-specific evidence to the gender and work literature and argues for interventions that address structure, culture and emotion together.

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