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Leadership Development Programmes: Part of the Solution, or Part of the Problem of Women's Underrepresentation in Leadership?

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Abstract

Purpose –This paper aims to critically reflect on current Leadership Development Programmes (LDPs) and their potential in addressing the issue of women's underrepresentation in leadership positions. To this end, the paper queries the current processes through which employees are selected to participate in LDPs as well as how these programmes are designed.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach, this conceptual paper draws attention to the pitfalls of current organisational practices aimed at women's leadership development.

Findings – The introduction of gender quotas and the implementation of Women-Only Leadership Development Programmes (WOLDPs) are unlikely to address the persistent gender leadership gap. Instead, these practices are likely to intensify the negative effects of second-generation gender bias and perpetuate the issue of gender inequality and inequity in the workplace.

Originality – This paper critiques contemporary organisational practices aimed at women's leadership development and suggests alternative practices which are more likely to respond to the issue of women's underrepresentation in leadership positions.

Keywords Gender leadership gap, Women's leadership development, Second-generation gender bias, Double-bind in leadership, Gender quotas, Women-only leadership development programmes, Capabilities approach

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

According to the United Nations' (2020, n.p.) report, 'women held only 28% of managerial positions globally in 2019 – almost the same proportion as in 1995'. As highlighted by Brue and Brue (2016), the causes of women's persistent underrepresentation in leadership positions are complex. Ely *et al.* (2011) argue that subtle barriers to women's advancement to leadership roles include second-generation gender bias, double-bind expectations, backlash against agentic women, self-sealing and internalised bias impacting women's self-confidence, devalued invisible work, unbalanced caregiving responsibilities, and lack of access to networks and mentors. Despite the causes, women's underrepresentation in leadership positions is a matter of both social justice and business efficiency.

Besides the moral imperative for gender equality and equity in the workplace, there is an accompanying business imperative. The underutilisation of female talent is illogical economically since

women make up the majority (54%) of university graduates globally (Times Higher Education and UNESCO, 2022), and represent a large part of the workforce in different industries (Klettner *et al.*, 2016). Pellegrino *et al.* (2011) argue that the utilisation of female talent could help companies overcome the current skill shortages. Research conducted by McKinsey (2018), based on a data set of over 1,000 companies, indicated that companies with greater gender diversity, particularly in senior management, outperform on profitability and value creation less gender-diverse companies. Gender diversity is also noted to help companies improve their decision-making and understanding of consumer behaviour (Hopkins *et al.*, 2008; Oesch and DuVernet, 2020). Further, an empirical study conducted by Lorenzo *et al.* (2017) indicated a significant positive correlation between gender diversity and innovation. Finally, gender diversity is argued to lead to enhanced employee satisfaction, engagement, and retention, which may result in optimised team performance (Pellegrino *et al.*, 2011). Hence, the increasing competitiveness of the global market urges companies to invest in the currently underutilised potential that the female workforce presents (Pellegrino *et al.*, 2011).

However, as underlined by Miner *et al.* (2018), the issue of gender inequality and inequity in leadership is often viewed by companies through a narrow neoliberal lens focused on women's personality (self-confidence and self-efficacy), performance (often based on biased assessments), choices (between career and family), and preferences (interest in assuming leadership roles). In other words, women's perceived competencies and preferences are often claimed to be the causes of gender differences in an attempt to reify their role as agents of gender equality and equity. According to this neoliberal view, entry to and success in leadership roles is presumed to be open to all employees, so long as they can demonstrate merit based on impersonal, objective, and measurable criteria (Riegle-Crumb *et al.*, 2012). Consequently, this neoliberal approach is likely to advance the unexamined assumption that if women do not prosper in an ostensibly meritocratic workplace, this is due to their lack of interest or effort, rather than due to the subtle, yet pervasive barriers that may hinder their development (Ely *et al.*, 2011; Bradazon and Schulz, 2020). Furthermore, this neoliberal approach reinforces the unsupported presumption that the choices of both women and men are freely and deliberately made, meaning that they are not constrained by their broader organisational and societal contexts (Miner *et al.*, 2018). As a result, companies around the globe often place the onus on women to develop their leadership capacity and become leaders, rather than systematically seeking to interrogate and remove the barriers, often described as the *glass ceiling* (Cech and Blair-Loy, 2010), which might obstruct their development (Myers *et al.*, 2019).

As argued by Nash and Moore (2021), even though companies around the globe formally commit to address the gender leadership gap through the implementation of LDPs, gendered organisational processes and practices often undercut these initiatives. Brue and Brue (2016) note that one-size-fits-all LDPs continue to fail in addressing the issue of women's underrepresentation in leadership. As stated by

Ely *et al.* (2011), the absence of a coherent, theoretically grounded, and actionable framework for designing LDPs that can help women progress to leadership roles indicates the need for further research on women's leadership development. To this end, drawing on Martha Nussbaum's (2012) capabilities approach, this paper seeks to critically reflect on current LDPs and their potential to address the issue of women's underrepresentation in leadership. Specifically, this paper queries the current processes through which employees are selected to participate in LDPs, as well as how these programmes are designed. Finally, this paper recommends alternative organisational practices which might be more likely to narrow the persistent gender leadership gap.

In this section of the paper, efforts were made to frame an issue of gender inequality and inequity in the workplace and to indicate the pitfalls that a seemingly meritocratic discourse poses for women's leadership development. The second section outlines the features of Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach that are used to critically reflect on current leadership development practices. The third section is divided into two parts. The first part critically reflects on the processes through which employees are selected to participate in LDPs. The second part interrogates how the currently offered LDPs are designed. Finally, the Conclusions section suggests alternative practices that might be more likely to narrow the gender leadership gap and highlights areas for future research.

Theoretical framework

Whilst it would be challenging to do justice to the depth and detail of Nussbaum's work, this section outlines the features of her capabilities approach that are used as building blocks to critically reflect on LDPs. Nussbaum's (2012) normative framework aims to develop a universalist approach, which is concomitantly sensitive to local particularity and pluralism. Although Nussbaum's capabilities approach has been criticised for its perceived lack of operationalisation, it is argued to offer an outcome-oriented and entitlement-based theory of justice that could help critically reflect on issues of gender inequality and inequity (Robeyns, 2005). The features of Nussbaum's approach that are used in this paper are the concept of *capability* and its three types, namely *basic*, *internal*, and *combined*, the notion of *adaptive preferences*, and the concept of *care* (Nussbaum, 2019).

The first feature of Nussbaum's approach is the notion of *capability*, meaning the substantive freedom that individuals should have to lead the kind of pluralistic lives they have a reason to value (Nussbaum, 2006). Nussbaum (2012) holds the view that *capability* is the primary feature of human dignity and well-being, and makes a distinction between the notion of *capability*, meaning what an individual is able to do and to be, and the notion of *functioning*, meaning what an individual actually does. Nussbaum's (2019) approach proposes three types of capabilities, namely *basic*, *internal*, and *combined*. Firstly, the concept of *basic* capabilities refers to the innate materials that individuals possess, and, which enable them to develop higher-level capabilities (Nussbaum, 2019). Secondly, the concept of *internal* capabilities refers

to the developed abilities of individuals, which can, for instance, be enhanced through the provision of development opportunities (Nussbaum, 2019). These opportunities could potentially enable individuals to undertake certain positions, such as leadership, in an organisation. Thirdly, *combined* capabilities are defined as the combination of internal capabilities and an enabling social or organisational environment, the processes and practices of which allow the individual to flourish (Nussbaum, 2019). The concept of combined capabilities calls for attention not only to the enablement of internal capabilities but also to the securement of the circumstances in which the internal capabilities can be freely and fully exercised (Gagnon and Cornelius, 2006). Thus, the notion of *capability* is considered to be a demanding concept since it requires freedom of agency to make 'choice' a substantive possibility.

The second feature of the capabilities approach is the notion of *adaptive preferences* (Nussbaum, 2003; 2006; 2019). According to the capabilities approach, the formation of preferences is a social process situated in the interplay between agency and social structure. Hence, individuals adapt their preferences to what they believe they can achieve, or what they are taught is appropriate for them (Nussbaum, 2019). In other words, the creation of preferences is influenced by the individual's perceptions of available resources and opportunities (Vandekinderen *et al.*, 2018), and may be developed within the boundaries of limited options or unjust arrangements (Nussbaum, 2006). Consequently, when individuals lack the ability to examine their own preferences and imagine life otherwise, it is unlikely that they will make choices that negate the status quo and result in real change (Baehr, 2021). That said, if women do not believe that they will be given the opportunity to progress to and succeed in leadership positions, they are likely to adapt their preferences accordingly.

The third feature of the capabilities approach is the concept of *care*. Nussbaum (2000) insists that societies must provide care to those in conditions of dependency so that women, who have traditionally been the primary caregivers throughout history and across cultures (Noddings, 1988), will not be deprived of other important capabilities. In this paper, Nussbaum's notion of care is complemented by Tronto's concept of *privileged irresponsibility*. Tronto (1987) notes that the unequal division of caregiving responsibilities, which are often devalued in terms of material compensation, is rooted in rigid constructions of femininity and masculinity and the binaries of gender. As a consequence, the unbalanced distribution of caregiving duties may lead those that do not have them, who are more often than not men, to trivialise, ignore or deny the hardships that caregivers face. Nevertheless, Tronto argues that everyone, regardless of their gender or any other diversity dimension, should demonstrate what she calls *personal responsibility*, meaning that everyone can have caregiving responsibilities if they decide to take them up (Zembylas *et al.*, 2014).

The three features of the capabilities approach outlined above are used in the following section to critically reflect on LDPs and their potential to address the issue of women's underrepresentation in leadership.

LDPs: part of the solution or part of the problem?

As highlighted in the Introduction, companies around the globe currently implement LDPs as a response to the persistent gender leadership gap (Nash and Moore, 2021). However, one-size-fits-all LDPs are criticised for their failure to address the issue of women's underrepresentation in leadership (Brue and Brue, 2016). Drawing on the previously presented features of Nussbaum's approach, this section reflects on the ways in which the participants of LDPs are selected as well as on how these programmes are designed.

Selecting the participants of LDPs

The participants of LDPs are often selected by companies based on their perceived potential to be promoted to leadership roles in order to maximise the return on investment of these programmes. Future leaders are primarily identified based on existing employees' performance appraisals and recommendations by senior management (AMA Enterprise, 2011). Although this process might appear gender-neutral, it fails to acknowledge that performance metrics are inherently designed to reflect masculine values and the needs of men, who have traditionally been dominant in work settings and in leadership (D' Agostino *et al.*, 2022). D' Agostino *et al.* (2022) note that second-generation gender bias, which is deeply ingrained in cultural beliefs about gender as well as in organisational processes that inadvertently favour men, creates invisible barriers to women's career progression. Consequently, second-generation gender bias may result in gender differentiation in performance management, career progression and succession planning. According to a study conducted by Hoobler *et al.* (2014) at a U.S. Fortune 500 firm, biased manager perceptions of women's (compared to men's) potential for career progression had a negative effect in terms of the development opportunities offered to women. Interestingly, gender-biased perceptions were exhibited by both male and female managers (Hoobler *et al.*, 2014). This finding appears congruent with the United Nations Development Programme (2020) report, which states that almost 90% of people (men and women) globally are biased against women. Because of this possibility, Hopkins *et al.* (2008) emphasise that the interpretation of results derived from leadership assessments should be undertaken with a deep understanding of the gender roles and norms that pervade the workplace.

The effect of the double-bind in women's leadership, meaning that women are simultaneously expected to be feminine as women and masculine as leaders, can negatively impact their leadership opportunities (Hu *et al.*, 2022). As asserted by several scholars (Trumpy and Elliott, 2019; Banu-Lawrence *et al.,* 2020; Hu *et al.*, 2022; Perriton, 2022), women are often expected to meet competing expectations. On one hand, women are expected to show authority, agency, assertiveness, dominance, rationality, and instrumentality to be perceived as effective leaders (Trumpy and Elliott, 2019; Hu *et al.*, 2022). These

characteristics have traditionally been associated with masculinity (Trumpy and Elliott, 2019; Hu *et al*., 2022). On the other hand, women are expected to be emotionally warm, affectionate, and nurturing to comply with existing societal norms about femininity and motherhood (Trumpy and Elliott, 2019; Hu *et al*., 2022). This can lead women who appear to be affective to be perceived as not tough enough for a leadership role, and women who appear to be assertive to be labelled as aggressive. This is because, as highlighted by Hu *et al*. (2022), women who portray masculine characteristics violate long-standing gender stereotypes and the status order, which, consequently, triggers the legitimacy judgement of others. Moreover, as noted by D'Agostino *et al*. (2022) the backlash effect is even more pronounced when gender intersects with race presenting additional barriers to career progression for women of colour.

As argued by D' Agostino *et al*. (2022), 'think manager, think male' is a long-established phenomenon that negatively impacts women's career progression despite efforts of companies to be gender-neutral. For instance, a meta-analysis of 82 studies measuring leadership effectiveness found that, even though male and female leaders do not differ in effectiveness overall, men's evaluations are more favourable when the setting is male-dominated, when there is a high percentage of male subordinates, and when the position is perceived more congenial with masculine conceptions of leadership (Eagly *et al.,* 1995). Additionally, a study conducted by Pratch and Jacobowitch (1996, p.204) found that women who demonstrated strong agentic characteristics, such as being 'independent, masterful, assertive, and instrumentally competent' were negatively evaluated as leaders. On the other hand, men with strong social skills, which are traditionally associated with femininity, such as 'affiliative needs, lack of self-centeredness, concern for others, spontaneity, playfulness, and emotional expressiveness', did not receive negative assessments of their ability to act as effective leaders (Pratch and Jacobowitch, 1996, p.204).

Furthermore, Ely *et al*. (2011) note that second-generation gender bias could also be internalised by women, who may consciously or unconsciously conform to gender stereotypes, and even help reinforce them. For instance, women might demonstrate hyper-masculine behaviours because they want to be perceived as effective leaders, or, at the other end of the spectrum, they might deliberately refrain from engaging in negotiations to avoid being labelled as aggressive (Ely *et al*., 2011). This might lead women to become overly focused on self-image to the detriment of concentrating their efforts towards their career development (Ely *et al*., 2011).

Drawing on Nussbaum's (2012) capabilities approach, this paper argues that second-generation gender bias, the backlash effect of the double-bind in women's leadership as well as the effect of internalised bias, may limit women's *capabilities*, meaning their substantive freedom to progress to leadership roles if they so choose without facing any obstacles. On this account, as highlighted by Robeyns and Byskov (2021), the notion of *capability* calls for an important distinction between the formal right to do or be something, for instance, to apply to participate in a LDP or to interview for a leadership position,

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and the substantive opportunity to achieve it (*functioning*), which requires the elimination of potential impediments, such as biased performance assessments and the backlash effect of the double-bind. That said, if companies rest content with merely securing formal equal rights to participate in LDPs or to apply for leadership roles without ensuring a favourable organisational environment, it is unlikely that the issue of women's underrepresentation in leadership will be resolved.

Internalised bias might also hinder women from actively pursuing leadership development opportunities. Drawing on Nussbaum's (2003; 2006; 2019) concept of *adaptive preferences*, women may adapt their career preferences to what they are conditioned to believe they can achieve or what they are taught is appropriate for them. That said, the formation of women's preferences significantly depends on their perceptions of opportunities to turn *capabilities* into *functionings* (Nussbaum, 1994). Consequently, women may feel satisfied with their current circumstances, even though they might be materially and socially worse off than men because they are conditioned to accept their status due to internalised constraints that result in distorted preferences (Higgins, 2010).

A similar argument regarding the issue of women's underrepresentation in both LDPs and leadership positions is that women are not interested in pursuing these roles due to the long-hours requirement, which is often presumed to be a necessary condition for the attainment and successful maintenance of a leadership position. As noted by D' Agostino *et al.* (2022), the long-hours narrative requires leaders to be available 24/7, irrespective of their gender. Although this places an unreasonable burden on both women and men, it hurts women more than men since it appears to be incongruent with the caregiving responsibilities that women, as the primary caregivers, are perceived or expected to have (D' Agostino *et al.*, 2022). This argument is problematic for three reasons. Firstly, it does not encourage us to scrutinise the 24/7 culture, which is built on the unexamined assumption that productivity is directly related to time at work, and interrogate its adverse effects on the work-life balance of all managers regardless of their gender (Klettner *et al.*, 2022). Secondly, it could lead to the argument that if women choose to prioritise their family over their career, they should accept the consequences of that choice, even if this may ultimately intensify the issue of women's underrepresentation in leadership (Miner *et al.*, 2018). This second argument could be linked to Tronto's (1987) concept of *privileged irresponsibility*, meaning the tendency of those who are not burdened with caregiving responsibilities, who are more often than not men, to trivialise, ignore or deny the hardships that caregivers face when trying to progress in their career. Due to this, women may be held responsible for their own marginalisation (McClelland and Holland, 2015), and continue to be deprived of other important capabilities due to their caregiving duties (Nussbaum, 2000). Thirdly, even if there are women who do not want to pursue leadership positions due to the long-hours requirement, there may still be women who would be interested to undertake these positions regardless of the potentially unreasonable workload (Klettner *et al.*, 2022).

Due to these subtle impediments to women's leadership development and career progression, companies are currently exploring alternative solutions to address the issue of women's underrepresentation, such as the introduction of gender quotas. However, Klettner *et al.* (2016) and D' Agostino *et al.* (2022) argue that an increase in the number of women in LDPs or positions will not necessarily result in cultural and practical change that could ultimately resolve broader issues of gender inequality and inequity. This is because, as highlighted by Banu-Lawrence *et al.* (2020), the introduction of gender quotas may have adverse effects, such as tokenism, and potentially contribute to the reproduction of the very gender stereotypes that it is meant to eliminate. That said, the existence of gender quotas could undermine the efforts of women who would have been selected to participate in LDPs because they would have demonstrated an appropriate level of preparedness. Furthermore, this could lead companies to select women to participate in LDPs and progress to leadership positions before they are ready to do so, simply to meet their quota indicators. If these promotions happen during times of crisis, women could potentially be placed in positions associated with greater risk and a possibility of failure, which is often argued to be an additional subtle barrier that women face, referred to as the *glass cliff* (Ryan *et al.*, 2007). Consequently, women, whether they would have genuinely been considered suitable candidates for LDPs, and subsequently, leadership positions, or not, would run the risk of becoming stigmatised by the mere presence of quotas (Brown, 2014).

The introduction of strict gender quotas also appears to be in tension with a key feature of Nussbaum's (2006) capabilities approach, namely freedom of choice, in the sense that employees should be able to choose what they want to do or become in order to flourish in their own pluralistic ways. In other words, employees should be provided with opportunities and resources based on their varying needs and aspirations as individuals, and not as members of specific groups, such as *women*. Moreover, this approach could potentially move from injustice against women to a second round of injustice against men, who would be called to pay the price for historical discrimination (Brown, 2014). In the same vein, critics argue that if quotas were introduced on the grounds of gender, it would be fair to also introduce quotas based on other diversity dimensions, such as race, age, religion, sexual orientation, disability, and so on (Brown, 2014). However, this approach would likely create additional layers of complexity in the selection process, which would limit nomination possibilities and lead to further injustices (Brown, 2014).

In conclusion, this paper argues that neither the securement of *negative liberty*, meaning that women are not excluded from LDPs, nor the imposition of gender quotas, meaning that a specific number of seats are allocated to women, would be adequate in addressing the issue of women's underrepresentation in leadership. This is because as noted by Scholten and Witmen (2017), an exclusive focus on a narrow quantitative aspect of gender equality could run the risk of becoming an exercise of counting heads without necessarily resulting in actual organisational change. Hence, Brown (2014) suggests that it would be more

beneficial to scrutinise the selection process for participation in LDPs, which often reproduces gender stereotypes and relations of privilege, hierarchy, and domination.

Designing LDPs

This section seeks to query how LDPs, which are currently offered by companies as a response to the persistent gender leadership gap, are designed. As stated by Perriton (2022), one-size-fits-all LDPs, which fail to acknowledge the double-bind in women's leadership, are unlikely to respond to women's distinctive development needs because they are designed to promote a singular leader identity based on a masculine notion of leadership. In a similar vein, Sugiyama *et al*. (2016) concluded that standardised programmes frequently promote an agentic and transactional conception of leadership, meaning that they overemphasise the role of the leader in driving business performance without acknowledging the unique barriers faced by women due to gender bias. These programmes often adopt a *fix-the-women* approach, which encourages women to demonstrate stereotypically masculine leadership traits, such as assertiveness and authority, as the only way to be perceived as effective leaders (Nash and Moore, 2021).

Drawing on Nussbaum's (2012) notion of *capability*, this paper argues that, although one-size-fits-all LDPs appear to offer equal opportunities to both women and men to develop their leadership capacity, in the sense that they teach them the same lessons about effective leadership, they are likely to limit women's substantive opportunities to *function* as leaders. This is because these programmes promote a singular masculine leader identity, which is incompatible with the double-bind in female leadership (Hu *et al.*, 2022). On one hand, if women do not demonstrate the promoted leader identity over the course of the LDP, they are unlikely to be considered as potential candidates for leadership positions, since they have not met the programme's learning objectives. On the other hand, if they demonstrate the taught masculine leader traits, they are likely to suffer the backlash effect of violating long-standing gender stereotypes (Hu *et al.*, 2022). In both cases, women would be unable to exercise their *combined* leadership capability, which would require a combination of their *internal* capability to develop their leadership capacity and an enabling organisational environment free from barriers rooted in gender bias (Nussbaum, 2019).

In addition to the learning objectives and content of one-size-fits-all programmes, the scheduling of these programmes is also likely to be problematic for women since participants are typically expected to attend full-day training sessions for extended periods of time. This means that participants are expected to continue performing their normal job duties outside of working hours. Participation in these programmes is, therefore, likely to be incompatible with the participants' caregiving and household responsibilities, which are disproportionately placed on women (Bradazon and Schulz, 2020). Specifically, according to a study conducted by the International Labour Organisation (2019, p.3):

Across the world, without exception, women carry out three-quarters of unpaid care work, or more than 75 per cent of the total hours provided. Women dedicate on average 3.2 times more time than men to unpaid care work.

According to Hobson (2013), the disproportionate allocation of caregiving responsibilities to women is underpinned by the dominant male breadwinner model, which promotes a view of men as the primary family earners. This perception might also be reinforced by the fact that women often earn less than men, which might result in women being forced to leave their jobs or take breaks to raise their children (Oesch and DuVernet, 2020). An additional burden is observed to be placed on the 'sandwich generation', meaning middle-aged (45-60) women, who often provide care for both their children and their older parents (Merck, 2017). The disproportionate distribution of unpaid labour is consistently identified as a major constraint to women's career progression (World Economic Forum, 2020). Further, career advancement is noted to be even more challenging for single-parent households, the vast majority of which are headed by women (Antoniou and Drosos, 2018).

Drawing on Nussbaum's distinction between *capability* and *functioning*, this paper argues that, even though women are not formally prohibited from participating in LDPs, and, in some cases, they might even be invited to participate, they are unlikely to benefit from this opportunity, due to the inflexible attendance schedules. Consequently, women's desires and aspirations to progress to leadership positions might be deformed by the assumption that it is not feasible for them to meet the eligibility criteria without compromising their identities as partners or mothers (Nussbaum, 2007). On that account, Nussbaum (1999, p.63) warns that the dichotomy between the public and private realm of life, which is rooted in the assumption that 'the family is a place of love and comfort into which the society should not meddle', should be examined. To this end, Nussbaum (1999) argues that the public and private realms should be encapsulated in a concept of situated agency to address the career progression constraints that women are likely to face.

To overcome the effects of subtle yet pervasive barriers to women's leadership development, such as second-generation gender bias, lack of access to networks and the disproportionate burden of caregiving responsibilities, some companies around the globe currently offer WOLDPs. This practice is in line with Ely *et al.*'s (2011) argument, who are considered to be the first to incorporate an understanding of second-generation gender bias into women's leadership development, that WOLDPs could address the issue of women's underrepresentation in leadership. Specifically, Ely *et al.* (2011) support the view that WOLDPs can offer a safe learning space allowing women to build committed peer-support networks to develop their social capital. Further, Ely *et al.* (2011) highlight that WOLDPs can increase women's self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-efficacy, which are considered to be key elements for effective leadership. This is because, as suggested by Brue and Brue (2016), the open sharing of experiences in WOLDPs allows women to go through an affirming process of objectively identifying their strengths and areas for development,

whilst recognising and reflecting on shared barriers that may hinder their career progression. On the other hand, this is claimed to be a shortcoming of mixed-gender programmes, where women are likely to experience fear of judgement or failure due to their perceived inability to exhibit stereotypically masculine leadership traits (Brue and Brue, 2016).

However, empirical research on the effects of WOLDPs is scarce and non-conclusive. Specifically, Brue and Brue's (2016) study, which supports the view that WOLDPs may enhance women's authenticity, agency, as well as their cognitive, affective and behavioural development, highlights that 'the homogenous and limited sample size of the study may restrict generalizability' (p.90). Further, Peterson's (2019) study found that the investigated WOLDP created an environment of belonging and inclusion for some participants. Nonetheless, almost half of the research participants stated that they did not feel comfortable and wanted to dissociate themselves from the programme. Similarly, Anderson et al.'s (2008) study, which investigated the effects of a two-day WOLDP as part of an MBA, argued that the programme established an open learning environment facilitating deep reflection on individual experiences and challenges that promoted authenticity. However, some women stated that they feared participating in WOLDPs to not be stigmatised and because 'they want to do leadership like and with the men' (Anderson et al., 2008, p.158). Finally, Debebe et al.'s (2016) study did not include any empirical evidence, whilst Debebe's (2011) prior qualitative research, which involved only 8% of the alumnae of a WOLDP, do not allow for conclusions to be unequivocally drawn.

Consequently, Perriton (2022) argues that WOLDPs are built on the unsupported presumption that mixed-gender programmes cannot address women's needs by default, because they reproduce masculine conceptions of leadership and limit women's access to professional networks. In a similar vein, Trumphy and Elliott (2019) note that, although gender-segregated programmes intend to eliminate the gender leadership gap, they unwittingly reproduce gender differences and normalise the gender binary, instead of challenging essentialist beliefs related to gender. This conclusion was formed following participant observations of two gender-segregated LDPs. From that, Trumphy and Elliott (2019) concluded that tutors were unintentionally reinforcing the very gender-stereotypical behaviours that they were attempting to break down, and participants were often exhibiting exaggerated gender behaviours because they were spending substantial amounts of time exclusively with same-gender peers.

Furthermore, against Ragins and Cotton's (1993) argument that mixed-gender mentorship programmes lead women to be more passive and submissive with male mentors, Thorpe (2019) posits the view that even same-gender professional networks run the risk of replicating power relationships. On the other hand, mixed-gender mentorship can provide valuable career benefits, such as access to information and resources that would otherwise be inaccessible to women. This would also allow male leaders within the organisation to view the issue of women's underrepresentation as a shared responsibility and become

active advocates of gender equality. Besides that, Thorpe (2019) warns that women might also experience difficulties in finding female mentors, even if they exist within the organisation. This could be caused due to a phenomenon known as the *queen bee syndrome*, which is observed when women who have broken through the glass ceiling, intentionally refuse to help other women do the same, either because they expect others to work as hard as they did to succeed, or because they question the existence of the glass ceiling altogether. However, Mavin (2006) notes that the *queen bee syndrome* is often used to inappropriately transfer an organisational and societal responsibility to individual women, who not only have to assume full responsibility for their own career progression, but also of the progression of others.

Thorpe (2019) further highlights that WOLDPs run the risk of reinforcing a *fix-the-women* approach that views women's leadership development as a problem that needs to be addressed. In a similar vein, Perriton (2022) advances the view that WOLDPs are unlikely to lead to structural change, whilst remaining focused on self-acceptance, self-management, and self-development of individual women. Instead, Perriton (2022) advocates for programmes that reflect outward and allow both women and men to recognise and interrogate prevailing gender norms and expectations as well as the conditions under which these are reproduced. Furthermore, Perriton (2022) raises concerns that WOLDPs that are focused inward may unintentionally reproduce the idea that by implementing a set of personal changes, women can resolve structural issues of gender inequality and inequity. On the other hand, Debebe (2011) notes that incremental individual change is necessary for organisational change, and that, even if structural conditions improve, women's career progression may still be hindered due to internalised bias. However, Perriton's (2022) response to this argument is that this approach is likely to force women to internalise responsibility for their success or failure without acknowledging the overwhelming effects of gendered organisational practices.

In conclusion, this paper posits that neither one-size-fits-all LDPs that promote a singular masculine leader identity and offer inflexible attendance schedules nor WOLDPs that create an artificial learning environment focused on the self, are likely to adequately respond to the issue of women's underrepresentation in leadership. Instead, the paper suggests that it would be more beneficial to scrutinise the content of mixed-gender LDPs and ensure that they incorporate an understanding of second-generation gender bias as well as the double-bind in leadership for the development of both women and men in a shared learning environment. Moreover, it is argued that these programmes should be designed to offer flexible attendance options to both women and men. The provision of flexible arrangements would not only be more likely to increase women's participation in LDPs, but could also allow men to become more involved in caregiving or household responsibilities, which could eventually contribute to the elimination of persistent gender stereotypes (Fagan and Walthery, 2013). This approach could ultimately reinforce the view that the pursuit of gender equality and equity in the workplace should be a matter of shared responsibility.

Conclusions

This paper sought to critically reflect on LDPs and their potential to address the persistent gender leadership gap. To overcome the subtle yet prevalent barriers to women's leadership progression, such as second-generation gender bias, the double-bind in female leadership, internalised bias, the disproportionate burden of caregiving responsibilities and more, some companies are now seeking to introduce gender quotas and offer WOLDPs. However, this paper argues that such simplistic solutions are likely to intensify the negative effects of gender bias and perpetuate the issue of gender inequality and inequity in the workplace. In line with concerns raised by a number of scholars (Brown, 2014; Klettner *et al.*, 2016; Scholten and Witmen, 2017; Banu-Lawrence *et al.*, 2020), this paper draws attention to the potential adverse effects of gender quotas, which are likely to reproduce the very gender stereotypes that they are meant to eliminate, place women in positions of risk where the likelihood of failure is higher (glass cliff), and lead to a second round of injustice against men. Moreover, in agreement with Thorpe (2019), Trumphy and Elliott (2019), and Perriton (2022), this paper argues that WOLDPs are unlikely to succeed in addressing the gender leadership gap because they create an artificial learning environment, and reinforce, albeit unintentionally, a *fix-the-women* approach by focusing exclusively on self-acceptance and self-management.

This paper posits the view that companies should look beyond statistical correctness in terms of the ratio of men to women who participate in LDPs, and, instead, adopt a more holistic approach aimed at removing the organisational impediments that are likely to hinder women's leadership development. Specifically, the paper suggests that companies should take affirmative action to create an enabling work environment that would allow women to exercise their leadership capability. In terms of the selection process for participation in LDPs, companies should focus on identifying and addressing instances of bias in seemingly merit-based decisions, which might in reality be shaped by second-generation gender bias and the double-bind in female leadership. That said, the results of leadership assessments conducted by the employee's direct manager and other stakeholders should be examined for potential bias, and the selection criteria should be defined with a deep understanding of the gender roles and norms that pervade the workplace.

Concerning the design of LDPs, companies should steer away from one-size-fits-all LDPs that promote masculine notions of leadership and adopt inflexible attendance schedules, which are likely to be incompatible with women's caregiving responsibilities. Instead, this paper argues that companies should make efforts to provide support and flexibility to all employees through the provision of accessible and affordable caregiving support, when this is not adequately provided by the state, flexible working arrangements, and the establishment of equal opportunities policies (Maceira, 2017). The provision of flexible work conditions could also help men become more involved in family caregiving or household

responsibilities, which could eventually lead to the elimination of long-held gendered stereotypes about the role of men and women in the family (Fagan and Walthery, 2013). Finally, although the paper does not disregard the complexity of the implementation of the proposed solutions for companies, it is suggested that such changes are more likely to address broader issues of gender inequality and inequity in the workplace so that companies will no longer need to take affirmative action in the future.

In conclusion, this paper sought to raise questions about the potential of LDPs to address the gender leadership gap. Secondly, the paper sought to recommend alternative methods for companies to identify the participants of LDPs and design their curriculum. However, the paper does not claim to offer simple answers with pretensions of conclusiveness to the complex organisational, and, ultimately, social issue of women's underrepresentation in leadership. Moreover, due to space limitations, this paper did not delve into the effect of *intersectionality*, meaning how gender intersects with other diversity dimensions, such as race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, disability and so on, which would potentially nuance our understanding of the effect of LDPs on women's career progression. Therefore, it is recommended that empirical research on the potential effects of the proposed organisational changes with a focus on intersectionality is conducted in the future.

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