

***Patroa*: lack of female leadership is a crisis that needs to be tackled**

1970, countryside of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil

Norma is a brilliant woman. She is creative, smart, innovative, and multitasking. She could easily be the leader of some big company. But she cannot, she needs to get married and have kids – that was what her parents said.

So, she gets married. She has five children and is fully engaged in domestic activities. She cooks, cleans, sews, takes care of her children, and works in the family farm. She does it every day, without resting. Unlike what many think, a mother and housewife's life is also the life of a manager: it requires planning, creativity, boldness, and strategy. Norma follows this routine until her death, in 2009.

Norma was my grandmother, a fantastic woman. However, she would never be able to write the two paragraphs above, as she never had access to education and, therefore, she neither learned to read nor to write. She could have been a great stylist, since in less than an hour she was able to make an entire collection of clothes for my dolls. She could also have been a psychiatrist, as she took care of three schizophrenic children with great care. But she was not allowed.

This is a common reality in Brazil, since access to education for women was very late in the country. Only in 1827 Brazilian women were allowed to attend the public education system.

For 327 years of Brazilian history, education was allowed only for men. White or black women, rich or poor, were strictly forbidden to study. The result for a country that does not practice gender equality is a society without equity in all sectors, where leadership and governance positions do not have diverse representations.

A crisis like this needs good managers.

2021, Brazil

The Portuguese language is a binary language, there are feminine and masculine for practically all words. *Patroa*, the word that bears the title of this article, means “female boss”, is the female version of the word *patrão*. According to the Portuguese Language Dictionary, *patrão* is the “owner or head of a private commercial, industrial, agricultural or services establishment, in relation to his subordinates; employer”.

You may think: "so, *patroa* has the same meaning"; but not really. As stated in the Portuguese Language Dictionary, *patroa* is “the boss's wife” or “housewife”. In 2021,

after a lot of pressure from Brazilian artists, like the singer Anitta, the word *patroa* had its meaning modified on *Google*, obtaining the same meaning as *patrão*/boss.

These are marks left by a long history of women's exclusion, for the *patroas* remains only the private space: the domestic life. Even after the access to education, Brazilian women remain behind men, since socially and culturally there is no incentive for female education and leadership. A survey conducted in 2021 found that in Brazil there are only 14% of women on company boards, while in the United States this rate is 25% and in Europe 30%¹.

What would be a greater crisis than a society that does not include all people? How can a society develop when few people reach positions of power? And how do good managers solve a crisis like this?

To answer this, we must consider the history of female work. As Drucker alludes in his article, *The next Workforce*², women have always worked. However, there was a distinction between the kind of work: "there was men's work and there was women's work".

As I learnt from Peter Drucker, centuries ago the majority of people in developed countries worked with their hands. In Brazil, working on farms, on building construction and in domestic service is still a reality for a large part of the population. Nonetheless, as more people gained access to education – elementary, secondary and higher education – employment has also changed (not for everyone, of course).

Currently, only 21% of Brazilians, between 25 and 34 years old, have completed Higher Education – this is the lowest percentage amongst Latin American countries³. These data demonstrate how access to education is still low.

Workers who have knowledge as their main tool are known as "knowledge workers". Peter Drucker⁴ explains that knowledge work is unisex, because it can be done by both sexes. But it is not as simple as it seems, because, as the author points, knowledge workers need access to an organization, otherwise, being successful and effective is difficult.

¹2020 *Board of Directors study*, prepared by Korn Ferry.

² Drucker, Peter. *The Next Workforce*. 2001.

³2019 *Education at Glance*, prepared by Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OCDE).

⁴ Ibid.

Imagine countless years without access to the formal job market and leadership positions? The path becomes more and more difficult. How to be professionally successful when there is no space for you?

Different from what was thought in the past, workplaces need women. Statistical evidence⁵ shows that more balanced women representation in main leadership roles brings up financial results.

*“But why women remain so dramatically underrepresented?”*⁶ This is a question that the researchers Robin J. Ely and Irene Padavic often ask for companies that report having troubles retaining women and promoting them to leadership roles. The answers are usually related to what they call “work/family narrative”; this means that there is a belief that women’s devotion to family is what makes impossible for them to grow professionally.

However, is that the real reason? As reported by the researchers, the answer is no. Women do not grow professionally within companies because they are not encouraged to. Instead, they are encouraged to settle. As the study points out: for women, the suggestion is working part time or moving to internal positions, for example, which slows them down. Robin J. Ely and Irene Padavic share the real problem: a culture of overwork which harms not only women, but men as well. This makes possible for gender inequality to continue.

“But things must have changed in the last few years, right?” Yes, and also no. Yes, because things have changed a lot from 1970 to 2021, for instance. But no, because in 2020 a new crisis has come to delay us once again.

This crisis is called “the Covid-19 pandemic”.

A crisis intensified by the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed every aspect of life in society. Several sectors were impacted and major advances took steps backwards. Gender equality in the workplace is no different.

Data⁷ has shown that women all over the world were more likely to have lost their jobs, there was also an increase in the time that women spend on unpaid household work

⁵ Emma, Charlton, *“Hiring more female leaders is good for profits. Here’s the evidence”*, 2018.

⁶ Robin J. Ely and Irene Padavic, *What’s Really Holding Women Back?*, Harvard Business Review, 2020.

⁷ *“COVID-19 and gender equality: Countering the regressive effects”* prepared by McKinsey Global Institute, 2020.

and childcare. With the closure of schools, taking care of the children was aimed to women, in most cases.

According to the survey “*COVID-19 and gender equality: Countering the regressive effects*”, prepared by McKinsey Global Institute and published in 2020, women have lost jobs at nearly twice the rate of men during the pandemic. Also, they spend three times more than men on unpaid care and domestic work per day. And these are not the only problems: due to isolation in some countries – including Brazil – there has been a significant increase in violence against women.

Even with so many challenges, nevertheless, women still manage to stand out in governance and in the way they deal with the Covid-19 crisis. The best examples are countries like New Zealand, Finland, Denmark, Slovakia, and Germany: all of them led by women. These countries have been internationally recognized by how they have handled the pandemic.

These leaders⁸ had fewer Covid-related deaths in their respective countries, smaller number of days with confirmed deaths, and lower peak in daily death rates. And what did they do for it? These women in leadership were proactive and responded to the crisis quickly. Among the actions that were implemented early in the pandemic, there was the social distancing restrictions since the first cases of contamination; they sought for expert advice to inform health strategies and transmitted information in a clear and transparent way to their population.

In Brazil, it was completely different. 2020 and 2021 were years marked by misinformation, fake news sharing by the government itself, and constant denial about the seriousness of the virus. It is no wonder that the country currently has one of the highest numbers of death and contamination in the world and that the vaccination process is still very slow.

These female leaders from the countries mentioned above have one common concern: the population of their countries. Recalling Peter Drucker’s words⁹, the importance of management is in the human-approach. As he says, “management is most and foremost about human beings”.

⁸ Soumik Purkayastha, Maxwell Salvatore and Bhramar Mukherjee, “*Are women leaders significantly better at controlling the contagion during the COVID-19 pandemic?*”, US National Library of Medicine, 2020.

⁹ Peter Drucker, “*The Practice of Management*”, 1954.

According to my way of thinking, there is something extremely important to leaders who are managing a crisis: they need to have humility to admit they are required more knowledge to deal with the problem that they are facing. This is a thought that Peter Drucker¹⁰ had already written about: when facing challenges, individuals need to see them as an opportunity to learn and relearn.

“So, are you saying that having women leaders in governments, companies, and institutions also changes society?” Yes. A study¹¹ conducted by the researchers Craig Volden Alan, Alan Wiseman, and Dana Wittmer has shown that the presence of female leadership, not only in national, but also in local and community level governance, leads to an increase in policy making. The result is advancement in the promotion of rights. Moreover, equality and quality of life for those overlooked in society are also important concerns for women leaders.

What can companies do to promote more gender equality?

In addition to fighting for a society with more women leaders in politics, power relations in the workplace also need to change. Some studies have shown a strong relation between gender equity and organizational success. More than that, social dynamics also change when women grow professionally.

I have been thinking a lot about how a company in a developing country can contribute to gender equality. With that in mind, I started looking for examples in my own country – Brazil. As the research already mentioned in this article demonstrates, only 14% of women are on administrative boards in Brazil. Amongst the councils analyzed by the survey, only three have women acting as presidents.

One of them is the company Magazine Luiza, where the businesswoman Luiza Trajano works as president. In the past few years, the company has been investing in diversity programs. In an interview¹², Luiza Trajano said that diversity needs to be in companies planning.

In 2020, Magazine Luiza opened its first trainee selection process exclusive for black people. The main objective – in an unequal country where the black population is

¹⁰ Peter Drucker, *Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, 1985.

¹¹ Craig Volden Alan, Alan Wiseman and Dana Wittmer, “*The Legislative Effectiveness of Women in Congress*”, Vanderbilt University, 2010.

¹² Luiza Trajano in an interview to Expert ESG.

underrepresented within all environments – was increasing the number of black professionals in the company, seeking greater equality in the distribution of positions. Through this program, 19 trainees were hired.

In 2021, the company launched the second edition of *Luiza Code*, a training course for software development area that gives 320 scholarships exclusively for women. Its main goal is contributing to the technology ecosystem, encouraging the entrance of the female public in an area that is still predominantly male (it is noteworthy that, in Brazil, only 25%¹³ of technology-related posts are occupied by women).

Due to the increase in cases of violence against women in Brazil, the company created the “Women’s Channel”, a hotline that serves female employees through website, e-mail or telephone. The records can be made by the victim or by anyone who has noticed that something is wrong with a colleague. The employee does not need to identify herself. After the denunciation, a team of three psychologists (this team is entirely female) makes contact and talks directly with the possible victim. This channel has served and assisted more than 250 Brazilian women in situations of violence.

These actions are innovative in the Brazilian business context and have impacted thousands of people. A creative mind is an important characteristic for a manager who needs to deal with a crisis. In agreement with Peter Drucker¹⁴, innovation is the specific function of the entrepreneur: “it is the means by which the entrepreneur either creates new wealth-producing resources or endows existing resources with enhanced potential for creating wealth”.

When this statement is put like this, it seems like I say that we should seek diversity in the workplace just for the economic benefits, but it is not about that. Work relations are better in an environment that celebrates diversity. Also, there are improvements in the organizational conditions, as employees have more space to unlock their potential and creativity.

But the most important thing is the impact that this has on society. How could we aim for a society that does not give opportunity to all people?

¹³ Data released in 2019 by Microsoft's YouthSpark program.

¹⁴ Peter Drucker, “*The discipline of Innovation*”, 1998.

It is time for the *patroas* to take the lead

What are the next steps to fight against the gender inequality crisis? Unfortunately, the answer is not that simple and, for developing countries, like mine, it is even more difficult. But there is always a path to follow.

First, as society, we need to vote consciously; and I am not just talking about electing more women, but about electing candidates who have a political agenda that is geared towards training, qualifying, encouraging, and inserting women into the workplace.

Secondly, companies need to establish new models for recruiting professionals, as well as establish new work processes. There is no more space for questions like “*how many children do you have?*” and “*who will take care of them while you work?*” during a woman’s interview. Furthermore, it is necessary to remove the gender pay gap. Moreover, a good action recommended by the *World Economic Forum*¹⁵ is women mentoring men, this would benefit both parties and society as a whole.

To conclude, can I tell you a secret? I have high hopes that, in some years, we will be closer to real gender equality. The last time I spoke with a group of girls during a project that I was part of – before the pandemic started –, they told me about their ambitions: “*I want to be a doctor*”, “*I want to be a veterinarian*”, and “*I want to go to university*” were some of them.

They were dreaming about a future in which they would be the protagonists, this is a big step that my grandmother never took.

That already means a lot.

¹⁵ World Economic Forum, “*5 ways to improve gender equality at work*”, 2021.