Scientific Research Publishing

Male, Millennial Leaders Perceptions of Women Leaders in Large Business Organizations

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Abstract

This study used a qualitative case study research design to explore male millennial leaders' perceptions of female leaders in large, Mauritanian organizations. The researcher used transformational leadership theory and social dominance theory as the theoretical bases to guide the study. The study raised awareness about aspects of Mauritanian female leaders through the eyes of the male, millennial leaders in a historically male-dominated society. Furthermore, the study provided data to enhance the understanding of local, regional, and global leaders who work to liberate female leaders through organizational development and gender equality. This study explored perceptions of male leaders to find out what could be done to change perceptions that may limit the possibilities for women to gain access to leadership roles in Mauritanian organizations.

Keywords

Culture, Dominance Theory, Global Mindset, Gender Equality, Leadership, Transformative Theory

1. Introduction

The executive leadership of business organizations worldwide shows the number of female leaders is relatively small compared to men. African companies are not an exception; however, the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions has not attracted attention among scholars and practitioners across Africa.). Auster and Prasad (2016) acknowledged there is a global tendency of favoring men over women in recruitment and promotion to high-level leadership positions in organizations. Both scholars and practitioners need to explore such a phenomenon in a cross-cultural context because discrimination against women worldwide is clear (Yukl, 2015).

The concept of gender discrimination claims men are more competent than women in leadership roles (Yukl, 2015). There are other stereotypes and outdated assumptions about inherent differences between men and women in terms of behaviors and ways of thinking.

Yukl (2015) concluded there is no empirical evidence for "the belief that men are more qualified to be leaders" (p. 448) and mentioned some countries enacted laws to stop widespread gender-based discrimination, sending the message men and women are equally qualified to lead in all types of organizations.

Mauritania was among the first countries in West Africa to publicly address and recognize challenges that prevented women from accessing leadership positions.

Mauritania's government initiated gender quotas in 2006, which helped women hold 30% of the seats in municipal and parliamentary councils (Markham, 2013). This level of political involvement showed women's access to leadership positions received special attention in Mauritania. However, the Mauritania gender quota policy has not extended to large business organizations in the country. Therefore, this case study featured a large, for-profit organization to explore gender disparities with a focus on how male millennial leaders perceived women in leadership positions as transformative leaders.

Mauritanian government classifies women as a historically disadvantaged group the society. The dominant trend of religious interpretations and social legacies has hindered women from achieving leadership roles, which gave authority to men as a dominant group in business organizations (Dunford, 2003). However, Tauzin (2007) acknowledged women in Mauritania have used social media to express tensions between their "aspirations to modernity and religious imperatives demanding reaffirmation" (p. 7), adding women are preparing to break away from the "traditional definitions of their sex" (p. 7). There is no scholarly research on the ongoing social change, especially in organizational settings where power disparities are visible.

2. Literature Review

Many scholars and practitioners associate gender differences and leadership with perceptions of gender role expectations across cultures (Gipson, Pfaff, Mendelsohn, Catenacci, & Burke, 2017). Therefore, gender studies have illuminated questions of gender bias that can have an immense influence on decision-making processes worldwide. Payne (2001) explained work environments in large organizations reflect and revive traditional (men-centric) thoughts that establish boundaries based on gender stereotypes. However, Payne (2001) revealed women who aspire to start careers in male-dominated firms tend to have higher career aspirations compared to those who prefer careers in female-dominated firms. As a result, gender experts expected more social and cultural tensions.

Paludi (2012) conveyed similar views, adding, "Gender role expectations contaminate organizational roles to some extent" (p. 85). All leaders stuck to gender role expectations to keep the respect, trust, and support of subordinates in the

workplace. Such patterns reflected the powers of sociocultural traditions; however, Gipson et al. (2017) found women leaders were "better at developing others, as well as inspiring, and motivating others, building relationships, and collaboration and teamwork than their male peers" (p. 44). Certain traditional gender perceptions continued to influence the concept of leadership in modern organizations, resulting in situational and contextual "organized anarchy" (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Madsen (2017) clarified, "Women navigate[d] a complex maze of challenges along their leadership journeys" (p. 183). These greater challenges women encountered in leadership, relative to men, were dubbed the glass ceiling (Madsen, 2017). Madsen (2017) revealed that while the differences in men's and women's leadership are probably "small," barriers women faced in leadership were substantial. At the same time, scholars such as Gorska (2017) and Yukl (2015) have suggested there were no significant differences in leadership between men and women, adding organizations should focus more on talent and identify, encourage, and promote the most effective leaders, regardless of gender.

Scholars' interest in understanding millennials has been growing worldwide. Studies have shown millennials are more likely to understand and support gender equality in organizational settings (Chou, 2012; Gokulsing & Tandrayen-Ragoobur, 2014); however, the reality is still hard to change due to the influence of older generations who maneuver leadership in business and politics. Chou (2012) suggested millennials were unique compared to previous generations, demonstrating different thoughts, beliefs, values, attitudes, and visions at the workplace, which have been given scholarly attention globally in the contexts of leadership and management. Scholars have conducted limited research on African millennials and their perceptions of leadership and gender in Africa (Madsen, 2017).

Exploring the defining characteristics of millennials can help understand this age group. Hershatter and Epstein (2017) argued millennials have "a great deal to bring to the organizations" (p. 220) in which they work, adding that "Their comfort with technology enables them to not only access information and resources creatively and easily but also to think and function in a world that, to them, has always been without boundaries" (p. 220). Therefore, both scholars and practitioners expect millennials to approach workplace issues differently, seeking talents beyond geographical locations and gender lines in the context of the increasingly globalized world (Mendenhall et al., 2012).

While millennials have been described in conflicting ways, many researchers have suggested broader, cross-cultural research in the context of global leadership (Chou, 2012). In fact, studying millennials may bring further cultural complexities related to individualism and collectivism in terms of work perceptions and human relations.

Human perceptions can differ from one nation to another based on cultural and contextual factors, including collectivism and individualism. Even though millennials have demonstrated higher levels of individualism, millennial percep-

tions need further study across cultures given the collectivist nature of African cultures (Chou, 2012; Hershatter & Epstein, 2017).

Large businesses play a significant role in local, regional, and global development. Organizational experts tend to associate the growth of large organizations with job growth, economic prosperity, and development (Bolman & Deal, 2017). The impact of the increasingly changing, globalized market and the fast-paced growth of technologies set the tone for a new era of business development beyond cultural and geographical boundaries. Therefore, effective leaders try to improve and tackle emerging challenges of new, complex environments in large organizations. Bolman and Deal (2017) called for reframing traditional views of organizational leadership in the context of gender, culture, and leadership.

3. Overview of Methods

This study explored male millennial leaders' perceptions of female leaders in a large, top organization in Mauritania. The study comes in the frame of advancing the field of female leadership studies that has attracted global attention (Mendenhall et al., 2012). Despite the increased rates of female leaders in the last 10 years, there are immense social, cultural, and organizational challenges that prevent women from attaining leadership positions in their organizations. Therefore, researchers conducting more global, empirical studies centered on female leaders will contribute to understanding the phenomenon across cultures in the context of global leadership (Mendenhall et al., 2012).

Participants were selected based on the following criteria: a) being a leader at the organization under study (supervisor, manager, director), b) being a millennial (age ranging from 22 to 39), c) work experience of at least 3 years, and d) gender. The study focused on male leaders only. Participants needed to meet all four criteria to participate in the study (see Figure 1 for participants education level).

The study used a qualitative case study research design to explore male millennial leaders' perceptions of women as leaders in a large Mauritanian organization. The researcher used in-depth interviews as one data collection method (see Figure 2 for age range and figure 3 for organizational status). The researcher conducted interviews via Skype with participants in Nouakchott, Mauritania, the host business's location. The research question that guided this study was: How do male millennial leaders through social dominance theory perceive women as transformative leaders?

This study explored one of the three largest businesses (telecommunication sector) in the capital city of Mauritania, Nouakchott. The targeted business for this study has had affiliations with national and regional corporations that have contributed to the development of the region, generating billions of dollars annually. The organization provides Internet and phone lines throughout Mauritania, thereby connecting millions of people. The organization focuses on sustainable development and plays a significant role in Mauritania's economic and social development. The organization is a national sponsor of cultural, social, and sporting

events that promote public welfare and has strategic ties with important African partners that contribute to modern technologies.

The sample of this study consisted of 12 male millennial leaders (aged 22 - 38) from various departments of the organization under study (Dimock, 2019). For a single case study, Creswell (1998) recommended five to 25 participants and Morse (1994) suggested at least six participants. Therefore, the researcher collected enough data through 12 interviews to attain data saturation. The researcher used two methods to collect data: a) interviews and b) archival records. The data was collected from various departments of the organization to improve the reliability of the findings (Depoy & Gitlin, 2011).

4. Demographic Information

There were 12 participants from various social and educational backgrounds, representing all the racial diversities and the multicultural realities of Mauritanian people that were used to collect the data. All participants were male millennial leaders who worked in different positions at the headquarters of the hosting organization (Mauritel), Nouakchott, Mauritania. Millennials in this study are defined as anyone born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, 2019). Male leaders refer to supervisors, managers, and directors who oversee the daily work operations in various departments of the organization.

4.1. Educational Level

Most participants hold a bachelor's degree in management, or a related field and the remaining have a master's degree. Eight out of 12 participants graduated from European universities, and the four remaining went to schools in Morocco and Tunisia with some sort of affiliation with French universities (see Figure 1).
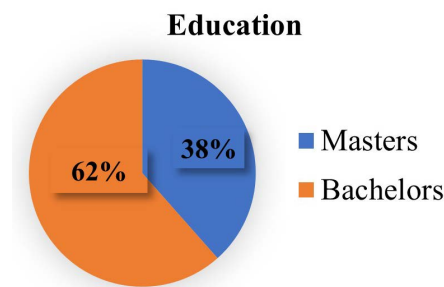
Education

Figure 1. Participants education level (degree type).

4.2. Age Range

Participants fell into two age ranges: 29 - 30 years old and 31 - 37 years. As mentioned before, the study is about male millennials, 22 and 39 years old in 2020 (see Figure 2).

4.3. Organizational Status

The third demographic identifier is organizational status. Participants include three

directors, seven managers, and two supervisors. They all work in different departments and agencies inside the headquarters of the organization (see **Figure 3**).
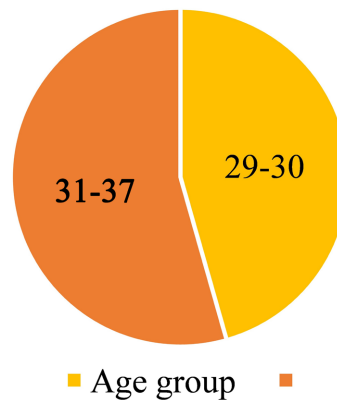
Age Range

Figure 2. Age range.
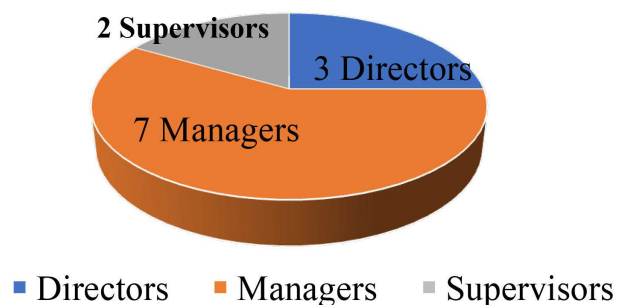
Organizational Status

Figure 3. Organizational status (job classification).

All participants are Mauritanian nationals. Mauritania is located in the northwest African region where multiculturalism is a norm. Participants represented the three major racial communities in Mauritania: Moors, Black Moors, and Negro Africans. The researcher intended to hear from millennials from various sociocultural backgrounds in Mauritania, so the study sample was diverse enough to reflect Mauritania in its ethnic diversity.

Participants are leaders at the organization with years of experience, ranging from 4 to 11 years. Most of these leaders (eight out of 12) had previous work experiences with large business organizations inside or outside of Mauritania. Based on the interviewee's responses, people with Western work experiences and education are highly preferred in the recruitment process, especially in the last 5 years.

Eleven of the 12 participants were promoted at the organization. All of the participants agreed the process of promotion was fair and depended on employee's experience, performance, and level of education.

5. Emerging Themes

Saldaña (2013) defined a theme as "an extended phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit of data is about and/or what it means" (p. 267), adding many of the themes "also consist of descriptions of behaviors within a culture, iconic statements, and morals from participant stories" (p. 176). By identifying 12 male millennial leaders and checking the organizational archival records, three major themes emerged. The emergent themes were directly attributed to the research question, which informed the final report. The research question frames and supports emerging themes.

Themes	1. Female leaders as transformational leaders	2. Male millennial leaders have progressive, positive perceptions of female leaders	3. Global influence is raising awareness about the significance of gender diversity in leadership positions.
Description	This theme demonstrates female leaders have their own unique ways of leading as models of positive change in their organizations. They are described as leaders who are innovative, optimistic, enthusiastic, and flexible, so these characteristics strongly indicate a transformational leadership method	This theme shows millennial leaders uniquely think differently from the older generation of male leaders. Millennial leaders are mostly globally minded and think beyond gender lines, this mindset is helping women to rise and move forward based on their educational qualifications.	This theme reflects the role of global human rights and feminist movements in gender advocacy in developing countries, including Mauritania. This business organization and others are trying to comply with the global voices, speaking against gender-based discrimination.
Subthemes	Women as nontraditional leaders	Millennial leaders with Western experiences are more supportive of female leaders	Gender quotas
Selective Codes	Optimism Enthusiasm Confidence Productivity Punctuality Job promotion	Gender bias Stereotypes Male leaders Dominance Gender diversity Progress	Diversity Performance Innovation Global mission

Theme #1
Female leaders as transformational leaders

Subtheme: Women as nontraditional leaders

How do male, millennial leaders through social dominance theory perceive women as transformative leaders?

Theme #2
Male millennial leaders have progressive, positive perceptions of women leaders

Subtheme: Millennial leaders with Western experiences are more supportive of female leaders

Theme #3
Global influence is raising awareness about the significance of gender diversity in leadership positions.

Subtheme: Gender quotas

6. Results

Saldaña (2013) defined theme in qualitative research as "an extended phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit of data is about and/or what it means" (p. 267), adding many themes "also consist of descriptions of behaviors within a culture, iconic statements, and morals from participant stories" (p. 176). By identifying 12 male millennial leaders and checking the organizational archival records, three major themes emerged.

The thematic analysis process produced three primary themes and three sub-themes. Patton (2015) explained themes as "the core meanings found through content analysis" (p. 541). Each theme was supported by evidence from the two data sources: participants' responses and archival records. The researcher used reflective notes and memos during the process of data collection to inform the thematic analysis. All the emergent themes center around the research question of the study.

1) Theme 1 significantly shows female leaders tend to exhibit behaviors and attributes that correspond to the transformational leadership method. In Mauritel, female leaders serve in various departments and carry out organizational tasks regardless of gender status. Millennial leaders at the organization seem to admire, respect, and appreciate their female counterparts and see them as a model for positive change. Ten out of 12 participants repeatedly described female leaders in Mauritel as innovative, optimistic, enthusiastic, and flexible. All these characteristics indicated the core values of the transformational leadership method. Participants emphasized female leaders empower, respect, and encourage followers to achieve outstanding performance in the organization.

2) Theme 2: Male Millennial Leaders demonstrated progressive, positive perceptions of women leaders. The collected data meaningfully show male millennial leaders in Mauritel have new, different, and positive perceptions of female leaders, thereby differing from the previous, older generations' perceptions of female leaders. Male millennial leaders in Mauritel think, understand, and perceive gender as human diversity. All interviewees understood and recognized that women have been previously marginalized as a result of gender stereotypes and said the time has come for male leaders to be aware of gender bias and its consequences. All interviewees indicated access to leadership positions at the organization is based on individual qualifications and not solely on gender identity.

3) Theme 3: Global Influences Are Raising Awareness About the Significance of Gender Diversity in Leadership Positions. International development partners (e.g., International Monetary Fund and United Nations) required governments of sub-Saharan Africa, including Mauritania, to provide official data that can be used to initiate and support gender policies that may improve women's access to education and employment (Bikalemesa, 2014). This global awareness of gender equality pushed many Mauritanian business organizations to work toward gender diversity in leadership positions; therefore, opening new opportunities for women to emerge as leaders in both public and private organizations.

Mauritel, as a Mauritanian top technology organization, is fully compliant with local and global policies that promote gender equality in leadership positions. Most leaders in this organization have been educated in the West, especially in European countries. These leaders are more supportive of women in both recruitment and promotion; however, large business organizations are not required by the government to have gender quotas. Participant 09 mentioned, "With the exception of some organizational tasks that need special physical abilities, I can say that men and women have the same chance in the promotion process to leadership positions. In general, the researcher can say the gender gap is being narrowed down."

7. Discussion

In addition to the organization's archival records, the researcher conducted 12 interviews with male millennial leaders (directors, managers, supervisors) at Mauritel. The interviews generated significant information about young male leaders' perceptions of gender and leadership. The interview questions covered a variety of things, including: a) the definition of successful leadership, b) individual experiences, c) gender perception, and d) women's leadership and management. The author carefully collected and analyzed the data in accordance with qualitative case study strategies, including thematic analysis. The study findings should help researchers and scholars understand millennial's perceptions because the findings add important insight to the field of female leadership studies, especially in North West Africa, where female leaders are making a difference in business organizations.

The research question was, how do male millennial leaders, through social dominance theory, perceive women as transformative leaders? The collected data support the research question, showing male millennial leaders perceive female leaders positively. Participants shared personal and professional statements that praise the outstanding roles of female leaders at Mauritel. Participants used keywords like "smart leaders," "amazing coworkers," and "impressive leaders," which reflected and described their appreciation and experiences with female leaders at Mauritel.

The emergent themes of the study showed male millennial leaders perceived women as transformational leaders. Eleven out of 12 participants believed female leaders represented a positive, untraditional model of leadership in Mauritanian large business organizations. In various responses, participants described female leaders as "optimistic," "enthusiastic," "confident," "innovative," and "punctual." All these characteristics are defined and related to transformational leadership. Yukl (2010) clarified transformational leaders were characterized by enthusiasm, confidence, and innovation, which aligns with what was reported in this study. Findings of the study were also in alignment with the literature.

Most participants (9 out of 12) believed global women's movements (feminist movements) contributed worldwide to attracting attention toward the gender bias

women experience in attaining leadership positions. All participants agreed gender discrimination is no longer legally accepted. They praised the Mauritanian government for appointing more female leaders, including judges and military leaders, in top public positions, which paved the ground for female leadership to emerge as a driving force of change in the country. Participant 1 argued, "Today, the situation is different. Women become leaders and followers in various organizations and gender bias is no longer a factor in excluding women from leadership positions.".

During data analysis, large business organizations in Mauritania were constantly seeking talent regardless of their gender; however, educated women were highly preferred leaders, especially in marketing and finance. At Mauritel, female leaders were associated with financial honesty and popular acceptance; therefore, digital sources of the host organization were mainly led by women who introduced and promoted the organization's various projects. Women played important roles in leadership, workforce, and marketing new services. In this work environment, women became an important asset to the development and success of large business organizations in Mauritania, including Mauritel (Mauritel, 2019).

The researcher learned that people who graduated from Western schools were much preferred by business companies compared to graduates coming from local or regional African schools. As a result, top leaders and most middle managers were products of Western education and seemed to advocate for the same professional and educational path. The researcher also noticed most of these leaders had strong personal and professional ties with the West, occasionally traveling to Europe for seminars, professional training, and social events for professional development in their areas.

While exploring gender perceptions, the author did not explain or clarify gender-related terms to his interviewees because they all seemed familiar with the topic, especially in an organizational context. Some of the interviewees stated they significantly contributed to local and regional training aimed at eliminating gender bias in recruitment, promotions, and intra-organizational settings. While interacting with these leaders, the researcher better sensed how the world was becoming globalized, and technology and social media bridged differences between Western countries and African nations.

The researcher used social dominance theory and transformational leadership theory to frame and inform this research. Social dominance theory explored the historical underrepresentation of women as a disadvantaged group that suffered from systematic gender bias. Transformational leadership theory was used to frame the descriptions of the outstanding performance of female leaders leading transformation in Mauritania's large business organizations as a model of positive change. Findings of the study demonstrated the two theories were appropriate as a theoretical framework to explain how male leaders viewed female leaders' progress toward justice and gender equality.

This study provided an important contribution to the existing literature on female leadership studies by adding an African perspective. This study explored male millennial leaders' perceptions in a large business organization, which aligned with growing voices to extend the scope of global leadership research with gender construct (Duehr & Bono, 2006; Kumar, Jauhari, Ladha, & Shekhar, 2018; Romager, Hughes, & Trimble, 2017).

For instance, Gipson et al. (2017) found female leaders were "better at developing others, as well as inspiring, and motivating others, building relationships, and collaboration and teamwork than their male peers" (p. 44). Studies have shown millennials are more likely to understand and support gender equality in organizational settings (Chou, 2012; Gokulsing & Tandrayen-Ragoobur, 2013). The study also aligned with the interest in understanding millennials that have been growing worldwide.

8. Defining Successful Leadership

The researcher did not find a single, widely recognized definition for successful leadership in large businesses. Rather, leadership theories focused on concepts, including trait, behavior, power, situational approaches, and other empirical studies centered on the relationship between leaders and followers. Organizational researchers viewed the concept of leadership from different perspectives, so Yukl (2010) argued most definitions of leadership "share the assumption that it involves an influence process concerned with facilitating the performance of a collective task" (p. 23).

However, Yin (2018) insisted transformational leadership, as a style and vision, is universally relevant for all types of business organizations where transformational leaders stimulate and inspire followers to both achieve extraordinary outcomes and develop their leadership capacity. Every participant in the study had his own view and definition of successful leadership.

Given the rapid social, economic, cultural, and technological transformations, the world becomes a small, intersecting community. This new reality reveals the significance of global leadership research that goes beyond the traditional local geographical and gender lines. The global scope of cross-cultural research shows that cultures intersect in the context of human phenomena; therefore, exploring human phenomena in a specific region of the world increasingly makes a significant contribution to global communication research. For instance, gender perception is globally conveyed through media systems like films, music, and social media (Mendenhall et al., 2012).

An increasing number of scholars (e.g., Madsen, 2017; Madsen & Ngunjiri, 2015) have called for adding a gender construct in global leadership research. It is mainly because stereotypes of gender role expectations need to be explored globally in the frame of the ongoing intercultural changes in which female leaders emerged as an influential force in various fields, including business organizations, in a challenge to the legacies of gender discrimination. More studies also indicated

gender diversity in leadership positions was crucial to the improvement of organizational performance (Mendenhall et al., 2012).

9. Suggestions for Future Research

This case study focused on exploring male millennial leaders' perceptions of women as leaders in a large Mauritanian business. Findings revealed male millennial leaders perceived female leaders as transformational leaders. Findings showed male, millennial leaders in Mauritania were progressive and felt positive about gender equality in leadership. The study also found male millennial leaders in Mauritania were more supportive of female leadership, reflecting a global influence that advocates for gender equality in leadership positions.

There are significant opportunities to build on the findings of this research study to examine gender quality in large organizations. Bolman and Deal (2017) posited exploring leader perception is crucial to development and change in large business organizations. Accordingly, female leaders' perceptions of their male, millennial counterparts can be explored in light of the ongoing sociocultural and economic changes in Africa and Mauritania. The researcher also suggests studies on the perception of female military leaders in the Mauritanian army where 1000 women serve with men.

This research validates the increased number of studies around the world, stating that millennials have different perceptions of gender diversity and leadership compared to the previous generations (Chou, 2012; Kowske, Rasch, & Wiley, 2010; Paludi, 2012). Based on such studies, the author suggests conducting studies about male and female millennial leaders' perceptions in other large businesses across various African countries to see what can be done to improve gender equality in leadership positions in both private and public organizations. Findings of such studies are expected to add important perspectives to the evolving field of women's studies locally, regionally, and globally.

As a historically disadvantaged group who suffered from systematic bias and gender discrimination, women in Mauritania should create a professional women's union that defends, helps, and promotes women's rights in the country. This union should connect female leaders in various organizations and issue periodic reports and flyers about women's progress in different fields, highlighting the sociocultural and economic obstacles that may impact future goals. Women in Mauritania should seize the opportunity of the current, progressive climate to benefit as much as they can from the ongoing sociopolitical environments that support women and understand the necessity of gender equality in the country.

This proposed union should reach out to regional and global female unions, seeking help and guidance. Female African leaders need to be a crucial part of the ongoing global women's movement, advocating for women's rights and speaking against all forms of injustice. The proposed women's union should raise awareness about the significance of gender equality in leadership positions in business organizations and other public organizations. Raising awareness campaigns should

extensively use social media, webinars, press releases, and conferences to attract more voices throughout the country. Since educated women have the best chances to emerge, influence, and lead, the author recommend female leaders launch initiatives for girl's education, especially in rural areas.

10. Conclusion

The author intended to explore male millennial leaders' perceptions of female leaders at Mauritel, a top technology organization in Nouakchott, Mauritania. He used in-depth interviews and archival records to collect data and capture the nature of the phenomenon. After careful analysis of data, three themes emerged: a) female leaders as transformational leaders; b) male millennial leaders have progressive, positive perceptions of female leaders; c) global influences are raising awareness about the significance of gender diversity in leadership positions. The research showed female leaders possessed all the mental competencies to qualify them to lead and manage in their ways and, sometimes, better than their male leaders' counterparts.

The findings of this study show how traditional gender role expectations, stereotypes, and outdated mentalities affected social and economic developments globally, and Mauritania was not an exception. The research (Gouws, 2008; Hassan & Marimuthu, 2016; Khosa & Thobejane, 2016; Madsen, 2017; Madsen & Scribner, 2017; Mendenhall et al., 2012) showed underrepresentation of women in leadership positions highlighted a "wasted opportunity" (p. 76) to benefit from qualified female professionals in various fields, especially in large businesses (Gorska, 2017). Therefore, the findings of this study significantly added new insight into male leaders' perceptions, which can assist other organizations in improving gender diversity and leadership positions.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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