

# Understanding the True Gender Equity Gap



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An Interdisciplinary Qualifying Project Report submitted to the faculty of Worcester Polytechnic Institute in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Bachelor of Science Degree.

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## **Abstract**

The goal of this project, in collaboration with Voces Vitales Costa Rica or VVCR, was to investigate gender equality in the business sector of Costa Rica and begin creating a gender equality assessment tool. We conducted ten interviews and a focus group with representatives from various companies. We obtained valuable information about the status of gender equality in Costa Rican companies, as well as opinions on already existing assessment tools. We used these findings to provide VVCR with gender assessment recommendations.

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Introduction**

Despite much progress in the fight for gender equality, women continue to struggle against unequal pay, a male majority in leadership positions, and an overall workplace culture of gender discrimination (Semykina & Linz, 2006). Restricting social norms and stereotypes can lead to fewer opportunities for women in workplace leadership positions and can also affect negotiations for pay raises or promotions.

Costa Rica is no exception to this universal issue. In 2021, the gender gap index in Costa Rica was found to be 0.79, meaning women are 21% less likely than men to receive equal opportunities (Romero, 2021). Additionally, a figure from the “Female Labor Force Participation, 1990-2013” survey showed that the participation of women in the workforce in Costa Rica was about 50%, just below the world average of about 55% (Jimenez-Fontana, 2016). The same measurement for males showed that participation was at about 82%, just above the world average of 81%. However, we wished to look further into this issue, beyond what can be communicated via statistics.

The aim of this project, in collaboration with Voces Vitales, was to begin creating an assessment tool that can determine how well companies have integrated women into their culture and leadership. The finished product will provide Voces Vitales with insights into the business culture in Costa Rica, but also indicate how the female employees themselves perceive this culture, regardless of impressive statistics and buzzwords provided by the company. To begin development of the assessment tool, our team conducted ten interviews and a focus group with employees of various companies that partner with Voces Vitales. This allowed us to obtain

insights into the perceptions of employees themselves, and how they varied based on position, gender, or other defining factors. With this tool, Voces Vitales will have a tangible way to evaluate gender equality in the workplace, and a great first step in closing the gender gap in areas such as employment conditions, advancement opportunities, salaries, and benefits.

**Results**

After proposing our areas of focus to companies, implementing our feedback into a potential assessment proposal, and facilitating a focus group for an open conversation, we have received extensive feedback on the topics we presented for Voces Vitales to include in their gender equality assessment tool. The two figures included below display the data from a survey given at the end of our focus group (refer to Figure 1) and after all of the interviews were conducted (refer to Figure 2). The survey included one objective which was for the participants to rank what they felt to be the three most important topics to investigate in the assessment tool.

**Please choose your 3 most relevant or important topics regarding gender equality in your workplace.**

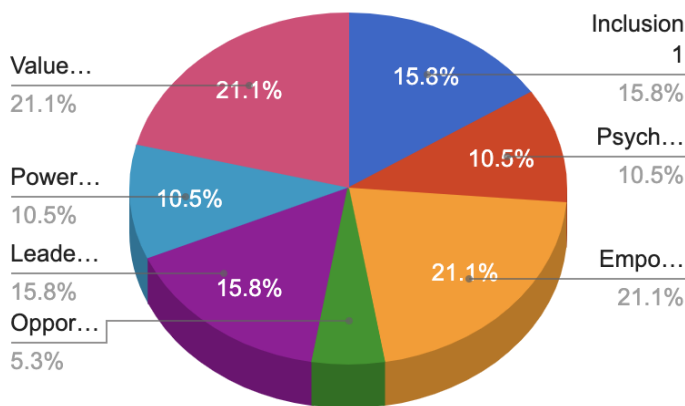


Figure 1: Responses given by Focus Group participants about the relevance of topics discussed (n=4).

Please choose your top 3 most important topics regarding gender equality.

7 responses

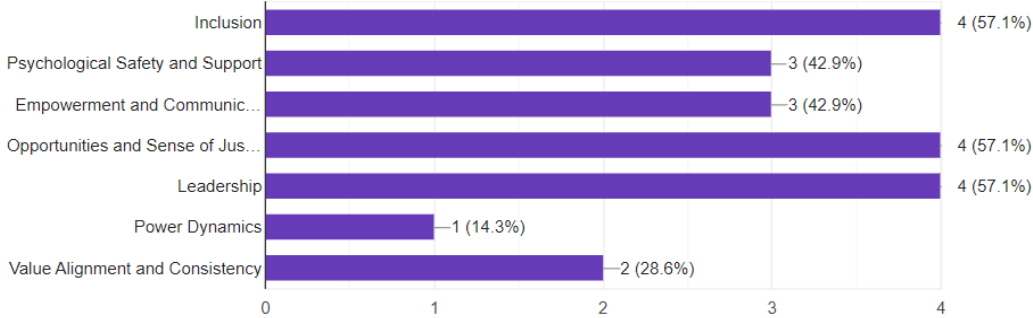


Figure 2: Responses given by interviewees about the relevance of topics discussed (n=7).

Though some topics were more frequently addressed than others, we received feedback on every one of the topics for the assessment tool. It is clear that Leadership and Opportunities & Sense of Justice are the most impactful, as they sparked the greatest amount of discussion, and therefore the most helpful information for this project. This was also reflected in results of the interview survey, with these two topics ranking among the highest. Power Dynamics and Value Alignment & Consistency were less popular, as demonstrated by the results of the interview survey, but they can definitely be utilized to further assist Voces Vitales in their goal of creating a better gender assessment tool. The results of the two surveys varied, which made it a bit more difficult to interpret the results. However, it seems likely that the ranking of the focus group participants was influenced by the discussion they had just finished, whereas the interviewees completed the survey after a bit of time had passed.

**Conclusion**

Based on our results, we have provided Voces Vitales with several recommendations for their assessment tool. As they are not yet sure the exact form their assessment will take, we have crafted our suggestions to be relatively universal. Firstly, we suggest that the assessment tool

should include some incentives and motivators to encourage companies to apply it within their workplace. If companies are aware of the benefits of investing time and effort into this assessment tool, it will be more widely accepted and utilized.

We also believe it would be beneficial for VVCR to tailor each assessment to its respective company. Every company has different needs and is in a unique position in their progress towards gender equality, so reviewing the options that are most relevant for their situation could motivate companies to implement the assessment.

To ensure that companies are completely aware of what they need to focus on, we recommend creating a framework that will lay out examples and explanations of different factors in each topic. This framework will create a baseline that lays out examples of certain micro-aggressions, derogatory forms of communication, and harmful behaviors for employees to recognize and understand as having no place in a work environment.

The suggestion of an action plan was also brought up in an interview, which is an idea we would like to pass along to VVCR. This action plan could include ways to combat certain issues like microaggressions or harmful behaviors, and lay out specific ways to recognize and diminish these behaviors.

Our last assignment from Voces Vitales was to draft a set of possible questions within each generated topic (refer to Appendix E). We attempted to create questions encapsulating experiences (e.g. “I am interrupted while I am speaking at work.”), feelings (“I feel motivated to be engaged with my organization.”), and knowledge of company policy (“I am aware that my organization has policies in place regarding gender equality.”). We believe this draft will provide an excellent starting point for VVCR as they plan their next steps in creating the assessment tool.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

For many years, women have fought to secure their place in the workforce. Despite progress, women continue to struggle against unequal pay, a male majority in leadership positions, and an overall workplace culture of gender discrimination (Semykina & Linz, 2006). In many societies, men are often seen as more aggressive or assertive, while women live under the stereotype of being more sensitive or less assertive than their male counterparts. These restricting social norms can lead to fewer opportunities for women in workplace leadership positions and can also affect negotiations for pay raises or promotions.

Statistics of workplace culture in Costa Rica show a clear trend of gender inequity. In 2021, the gender gap index in Costa Rica was found to be 0.79, meaning women are 21% less likely than men to receive equal opportunities (Romero, 2021). This number is a slight improvement from the index of 0.73 in 2017, but there is still plenty of room to improve. Additionally, a figure from the “Female Labor Force Participation, 1990-2013” survey showed that the participation of women in the workforce in Costa Rica was about 50%, just below the world average of about 55% (Jimenez-Fontana, 2016). The same measurement for males showed that participation was at about 82%, just above the world average of 81%.

Several groups across the globe have worked to find ways to track gender inequity in the workplace in order to find areas for improvement. One such tracking instrument is the “Sello de Igualdad” (or “gender equality seal”, in English), created by the Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres (“National Institute of Women”) in Costa Rica (Instituto Nacional de la Mujer, 2021). In July 2016, 45 organizations committed to work together towards gender equality and the economic empowerment of women. Another example from the United States is the Women’s

Empowerment Principles (WEPs) established by the UN Global Compact and UN Women (WEPS, 2020). These principles “are informed by international labor and human rights standards and grounded in the recognition that businesses have a stake in, and a responsibility for, gender equality and women’s empowerment” (p. 1).

The idea that there is no way to measure the success of the Sello de Igualdad is not unique. It is a common theme among instruments like this one to have idealistic plans or intentions, but no well-defined way of ensuring their presence inside the workforce (WGEA, 2019). Companies often boast good-looking statistics, which show how many women they have employed or what regulations they have in place; however, there is little accounting for the perceptions of the women who work there. Gender inequities will continue to exist as long as there is no concrete way of assessing workplace culture. Voces Vitales aims to tackle this issue by collecting data about businesses in Costa Rica and using this information to create a more accurate and informative assessment tool for measuring gender equity.

The aim of this project, in collaboration with Voces Vitales, was to begin the first couple of steps involved in creating an assessment tool that can determine how well companies have integrated women into their culture and leadership. The finished product will provide Voces Vitales with insights into the business culture in Costa Rica, but also indicate how the employees themselves perceive this culture, regardless of impressive statistics and buzzwords provided by the company. To begin development of the assessment tool, our team conducted interviews and a focus group with employees of various businesses that partner with Voces Vitales. This allowed us to obtain insights into the perceptions of employees themselves, and how they varied based on position, gender, or other defining factors. With this tool, Voces Vitales will have a tangible way

to evaluate gender equality in the workplace, and a great first step in closing the gender gap in areas such as employment conditions, advancement opportunities, salaries, and benefits.



## **Chapter 2: Existing Efforts to Address the Gender Equity Gap**

This chapter explains the current global efforts and gender equality assessments that we have researched and discussed in order to brainstorm our own list of important topics that assess gender equality. It is organized to explain the gaps we have found and how we reached the final list of topics based on those gaps. We felt that also including a background of Voces Vitales and their history of empowering women would show another clear example of the importance of gender equality and creating an assessment tool based on their work and values.

### **2.1 Global efforts**

There are many organizations around the world that have attempted to define, measure, and close gaps in gender equity in the workplace. One example is the Australian government workplace gender strategy toolkit (WGEA, 2019). This document, released in October 2019, defines gender equality in the workplace as being achieved when “all employees are able to access and enjoy the same rewards, resources and opportunities regardless of whether they are a woman or a man” (p. 5). Tools like this offer a highly systematic approach to addressing gender inequalities by providing clear steps that may be taken by businesses and companies of different sizes. The Australian government gender strategy toolkit details a change process that they believe should be implemented by organizations. This four-step process includes analyzing, designing, implementing, and reviewing. This means that after analyzing gender equality using diagnostic tools, an organization must design a strategic plan that is specific to its own circumstances. Beyond implementing this action plan, the toolkit advises reviewing progress annually, through a Competitor Analysis Benchmark Report provided by the Workplace Gender

Equality Agency. The toolkit also emphasizes the importance of inclusion in the workplace, which is defined as “‘listening to the quietest voice in the room’ and valuing and considering everyone’s ideas equally” (WGEA, 2019, p. 8). Analysis of the WGEA shows the value of shifting the culture in the workplace to promote real change, with inclusivity being one of the biggest foundations for doing so.

Lean In’s Allyship at Work program also emphasizes inclusion, but in a way that takes a deeper look at the inequalities within gender inequality itself (Lean In, 2021). For example, the program works to support women of color, women with disabilities, LGBTQ+ women, and other marginalized groups that lack the same opportunities for growth as other women. In an article explaining how this allyship program came to fruition, Rachel Thomas, one of the founders, focuses on the idea that marginalized women face “more barriers and discrimination” (Lean In, 2021, p. 6), and until gender diversity efforts are designed to address this, they will not help. The main goal of Allyship at Work is to empower employees to “take meaningful action and build an inclusive workplace culture” (p. 1), which coincides with the goals of the WGEA.

Other existing efforts to close the gender equity gap in the workplace focus more on leadership, as this is a very important aspect of some workplace cultures. The Barrett Values Centre (2021), for instance, provides tools that “highlight key attributes that support a leader’s ability to be impactful in their endeavors and promote an environment where trust, teamwork, productivity, and meaning are all tied together” (p. 3). This shows the importance of starting with the leaders themselves and providing them with the tools to be leaders that promote a healthy, positive work environment for all employees.

## **2.2 Identifying gaps**

In our exploration of gender equality tools like the Workplace Gender Equality Agency's Gender Strategy toolkit, we identified disparities that have thus far prevented businesses from reaching success in closing the gender equality gap. While existing instruments define the "how" in implementing strategies that will improve gender equality in the workplace, they do not assess the actual present behaviors of employees and how women perceive their inclusion in the workplace. The Women's Empowerment Principles Gender Gap Analysis Tool (UN Global Compact, 2021), for example, includes multiple choice questions about policies and approaches for achieving gender equality, but lacks investigation of perceptions of employees, especially women, which would reveal the true barriers women face in the workplace.

Gaps in other tools, such as the Boomerang inclusion survey, exist in the way they promote division among employees at different levels (Boomerang, 2021). This survey, in particular, asks questions that assess the presence of opportunities in the workplace, but does so in a way that focuses on individual hierarchical levels, rather than all employees as a whole, which can perpetuate negative power dynamics (Boomerang, 2021).

## **2.3 Empowering women**

As an organization, Voces Vitales Costa Rica emphasizes that the first step in helping women grow is empowering themselves (E. Gamboa, personal communication, November 10, 2021). Growth in the workplace can be measured in many ways, such as taking on a position of leadership. VVCR's aim is not just to encourage businesses to provide equal leadership opportunities, but also to empower women through mentorship to assist them in building their

confidence and strength to take on these positions of power. The United Nations Global Compact defines women empowerment using seven key principles:

- Principle 1: Establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality;
- Principle 2: Treat all women and men fairly at work – respect and support human rights and nondiscrimination;
- Principle 3: Ensure the health, safety and well-being of all women and men workers;
- Principle 4: Promote education, training and professional development for women;
- Principle 5: Implement enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women;
- Principle 6: Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy;
- Principle 7: Measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality (Galvin, 2021, p. 3).

These principles provide guidelines that can be used by various organizations to help define, measure, and improve gender equality in the business sector (Galvin, 2021, p. 3).

In order to understand how Voces Vitales works to empower its partnered women, we have examined some of the projects that VVCR has launched. Currently, VVCR partners with fundraising sites to allocate funding for some of its projects. In the past year, Global Giving has helped Voces Vitales raise over \$5,000 (Voces Vitales, 2020). One project has already been funded by this partnership, which focuses on mental health in Costa Rica, particularly the impact that COVID-19 has had on women. To carry out this project, VVCR implemented a virtual training platform in 2021 on which professional psychologists, coaches, and mentors volunteered to provide active listening sessions for women. Creating a non-judgmental environment for

women to receive emotional support is one of the many ways VVCR helps women empower themselves from a leadership perspective.

## **2.4 The mission of Voces Vitales**

Voces Vitales was founded in 1997 by Hillary Clinton, Madeleine Albright, and Melanne Verveer with the intent of creating a platform for women to be heard and supported. Since then, the program has allocated a network of over 18,000 women activists in over 185 different countries. In just the first three years after expanding to Costa Rica, women professionals and leaders had collectively volunteered more than 7,000 hours of their time to Voces Vitales Costa Rica or VVCR, benefitting over 1,600 women (Salas, 2014).

The mission of Voces Vitales as a non-profit organization is to support and empower women across the globe. They describe themselves as “venture catalysts, identifying those with a daring vision for change and partnering with them to make that vision a reality” (Voces Vitales, 2020, p. 1). Their areas of work include human rights, economic empowerment, political and civic engagement, and leadership development. Though VVCR is encouraged by the willingness of businesses to partner with such a female-empowering organization, they cannot be sure that their partners carry this attitude into their practices and procedures. As a result, Voces Vitales would like to create a new metric to measure gender equality in the workplace.

## **2.5 Topics for investigation**

There are seven topics we decided to include in our areas of focus based on our research of current gender equity gaps. The topics for investigation consist of Inclusion; Psychological Safety and Support; Empowerment and Communication; Opportunities and Sense of Justice;

Leadership; Power Dynamics; and Value Alignment and Consistency. They were included in our focus for the assessment tool based on research in general aspects of gender equality, discussions with our sponsors, and our own experiences.

Psychological Safety and Support was one of those topics we chose to include from discussions with our sponsors (A. Chaverri, personal communication, January, 27, 2021). We researched the main aspects of support and determined what our sponsors would want to measure with their assessment tool. Our first point of measurement is how and where employees receive support from their institution. Support should be present from all directions of the company whether it is through support systems, lower-level employees, leadership, and many more outlets. Another aspect to measure is if there is the presence of caretaking means of support like self-care or maternity leaves. The issues of any labor or sexual harassment can also affect the support received by employees, especially if they do not feel comfortable expressing these issues to the present support channels, or lack thereof. Similar to harassment, an institution's general methods for conflict resolution are important to measure, especially when comparing policies surrounding conflict resolution, and management's actual behaviors when addressing issues. The last point of interest in our Psychological Safety and Support topic is the language used throughout the company. The presence of any micro-aggressions, interruptions, or derogatory delivery of communication could hinder an employee's perception of the respect or support they are receiving, especially if there are unsatisfactory methods for conflict resolution and support channels.

The next topic of Empowerment and Communication is based on research of the Women Empowerment Principles or the "WEPs". The principles, like we mentioned previously, are based on basic standards of human rights and gender equality. Companies can sign a CEO

Statement of Support or submit progress reports, but the issue with this is that both are completely voluntary (UN Women and United Nations Global Compact, 2021). Since it is voluntary and free, it is more appealing to CEOs to easily sign the Statement of Support and move on acting or feeling as though they have made enough progress towards a more gender equal workplace. This is when we realized the importance of tracking progress and data for a company that decides to implement Voces Vitales' assessment tool.

The perspective of Voces Vitales is that women should have the ability and the self-confidence to empower themselves rather than relying on outside sources to empower them (E. Gamboa, personal communication, November 10, 2021); however, it should not be just on their shoulders. Women should also be provided with the assistance and availability of resources present in their institutions to feel empowered and important. Those resources could range from development or training programs, mentoring, sponsorship, networking, or even encouraging language from the leaders in their institution. It is important for women to realize the power they have and how they can make use of it. A good way for companies to track their progress towards gender equality is the use of KPIs. Key Performance Indicators are forms of quantifiable measurements to track short or long-term goals for departments or companies as a whole (Twin, 2022).

Leadership is another complex aspect of workplace culture to investigate, as it has large focuses on both the leadership and lower levels (Barrett Values Centre, 2021). This topic assesses if those in leadership positions feel confident and respected when supervising others, as well as if lower-level employees, especially women, feel supported and respected by those in higher-level positions. We felt this was important to include because employees with power are

those that determine whether or not the policies or company's promises regarding gender equality are actually implemented and carried out.

Another topic to assess is Opportunities and Sense of Justice. We also found that the presence of compensation, benefits, or performance appraisals, as well as respect for work hours and the need for caretaking leaves often favor employees in higher-level positions, which are more often males (A. Chaverri, personal communication, Jan. 24, 2022). Therefore, we wanted to assess whether the same opportunities are available for all employees regardless of gender, whether this may be through promotions, raises, special projects, or other growth-oriented opportunities. If such opportunities are given, it is important to also look at whether women have the confidence to actually pursue them. Due to the depth of the topic of Opportunities and Sense of Justice, we found that it would be useful for Voces Vitales to include in their assessment tool as it will reveal a variety of information relating to employees' perceptions of gender equality in companies.

Power Dynamics and their role in workplace gender equality is another topic that needed to be evaluated (A. Chaverri, personal communication, Jan. 24, 2022). This topic centers around the concept of mutual respect. In other words, do female employees feel respected by those who are "above" them, whether this refers to the organizational hierarchy, years worked in the organization, or any other source of authority. We wished to know if women feel that their ideas and thoughts are valued, regardless of their position (or gender). This topic is very relevant because a healthy power dynamic is key to having an open discussion of gender equality. If a woman feels intimidated by her superiors, she will not feel comfortable bringing up any ideas or concerns she has regarding workplace behaviors or policies.



A final topic for investigation was Value Alignment and Consistency. This considers the policies, procedures, and regulations of a company, and whether they align with their core values (WGEA, 2019). It also takes into account the values of the employees, and how well they align with those of the company. Here we are especially considering those values which relate to gender equality. This topic is crucial to consider, as values are at the root of decision-making, and hence define people's behavior (or the way a company is run). Therefore, it is critical for businesses to have well defined values that are consistently encouraged and practiced in everyday situations.

## **2.6 Summary**

Globally, women still face gender inequalities in the workplace that hinder an inclusive culture and inhibit women from achieving their full leadership potential in the business sector. Not only does this impact a woman's ability to succeed in her career, but it can also affect the way that women see potential in themselves to realize their strengths and capabilities. Issues like these are what inspired the formation of Voces Vitales and explains why VVCR places so much value on empowering women. It has also resulted in the creation of various assessment tools and strategy documents that aim to close gaps in gender inequality. Analysis of these toolkits provides some insight into what has helped the issue at hand, but it has also revealed the areas that need further investigation. In the next chapter, we will discuss the methods of research we used to assist Voces Vitales Costa Rica to create a better way to assess whether effective gender equity policies and practices have truly been realized in Costa Rica.

## **Chapter 3: Data Collection through Qualitative Methods**

The goal of this project was to assist Voces Vitales in designing an instrument to assess gender equity within the business sector of Costa Rica. Creating a finalized assessment tool is a long and complex process that we unfortunately did not have enough time to complete, so our assignment instead was to complete the first few steps to make the process easier for Voces Vitales. Our objectives were to draft a presentation of our proposed areas of focus, to present them to companies in pursuit of their feedback, and to facilitate an open discussion on gender equality. In this chapter, we will discuss the methods we utilized in beginning to develop the assessment tool.

### **3.1 Proposing areas of focus**

After brainstorming seven main topics with our sponsors, we included them, along with further explanations and examples, into a Powerpoint presentation to present to the employees of companies we interviewed. These seven topics included; Inclusion, Psychological Safety and Support, Empowerment and Communication, Leadership, Opportunities and Sense of Justice, Power Dynamics, and Value Alignment and Consistency (see section 2.5 for an explanation.) With the assistance of our sponsors from Voces Vitales Costa Rica, we held two prior interviews with representatives from UN Women and Boomerang in Costa Rica. Both of these companies have their own assessment tool or evaluation of gender equality available for companies to use. The purpose of these interviews was to review our topics for investigation with them and to receive their feedback. We asked whether we were missing any information or if there was anything that should not be included in our presentation for our future interviews. We gained a lot of crucial feedback that allowed us to think more about the wording of some of our questions

and to ensure that we were not providing information that is too similar to other assessments on the market. We aimed to help Voces Vitales produce something unique with the possibility of being complementary to other assessments. The interviewees also left us with advice to pass on to Voces Vitales including their opinions on how to create a successful assessment.

### **3.2 Gathering company feedback**

Our group was connected by VVCR with nine employees from eight companies throughout Costa Rica as well as a couple of global companies in order to receive more personal perspectives on what these companies' gender equality policies are accomplishing or not accomplishing. We tried our best to have interviews with people in a variety of positions at each company in order to receive different perspectives on gender equality from different levels in a company's hierarchy. The majority of our meetings were held virtually due to the pandemic and safety reasons, but some were able to be held in person. During these interviews, we started off by introducing ourselves and the purpose of our project followed by asking them a bit about themselves and their companies regarding their progress or current stance on gender equality. We then asked them for information, if they were willing to answer, on where they wanted to go regarding gender equality, meaning how much more progress they hoped to make. Depending on their answers, we asked them if they had taken or applied any of the existing assessment tools on the market, and if they had, how it went for them. Following these questions and subsequent discussion regarding examples or issues of gender inequality they have witnessed or experienced, we presented our areas of focus through a Powerpoint presentation (refer to Appendix B). We informed them that we wanted honest feedback about whether they felt their

company could benefit from an assessment tool including these topics and if they felt that any of our information should be changed or omitted (refer to Appendix A for interview protocol).

### **3.3 Facilitating an open discussion on areas of focus**

Our sponsors from Voces Vitales set up for us a focus group with four female employees using the connections they had made from their previous mentorship programs. The focus group was held virtually and in Spanish, and there were four women participants, not including our sponsors and team members. To begin the focus group, our sponsors gave a detailed introduction of their objective as well as how our contributions through our project would assist their end goal of creating their gender assessment tool. After introducing ourselves, we provided them with an agenda for the structure of the meeting (refer to Appendix C). We presented the same topics for discussion as in our interviews, but this time all discussion was in Spanish. Following the presentation was an open discussion about the topics which gave the female participants the opportunity to share their experiences. We ended the focus group with a one question poll where they were asked to choose their top three most relevant or important topics about gender equality. This experience allowed us to collect information on the same topics as the interviews, but it opened up a wider discussion regarding gender equality. We received more perspectives and opinions about the possible assessment tool as well as discussions about experiences these employees have lived through or witnessed.

### **3.4 Summary of Methods**

Our sponsors wanted us to identify topics not commonly measured in other assessments of gender equity in the workplace. This is why we chose to place a major focus on perceptions

and behaviors among employees. The interviews that we conducted included employees from very different positions, which gave us a variety of perspectives to consider. The focus group allowed us to have a discussion with several parties at once, increasing the number of contributing opinions. Holding the session in Spanish also helped all members to communicate their ideas more naturally and thoroughly. Having this variety of investigative methods provided our group with the widest scope possible in helping to create an assessment tool. In the next chapter we present the results of our research and their analysis as a means to achieving our goal.

## Chapter 4: Results and Analysis

After proposing our areas of focus, implementing our feedback into a potential assessment proposal and facilitating a focus group for an open conversation, we have received extensive feedback on the topics we presented for Voces Vitales to include in their gender equality assessment tool. This chapter presents the ideas we concluded based on this feedback, organized by each topic of investigation presented to company representatives. The two figures included in this chapter display the data from a survey given at the end of our focus group (Figure 1) and after all of the interviews were conducted (Figure 2). The survey included one objective which was for the participants to rank what they felt to be the three most important topics to investigate in the assessment tool that we are assisting Voces Vitales to create.

**Please choose your 3 most relevant or important topics regarding gender equality in your workplace.**

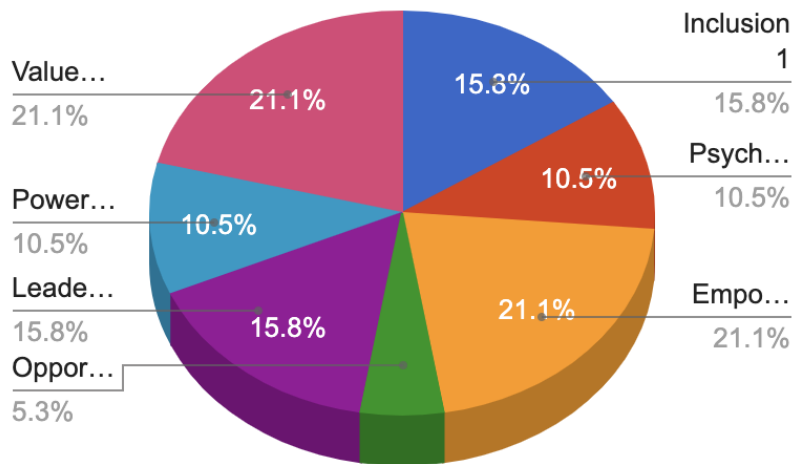


Figure 1: Responses given by Focus Group participants about the relevance of topics discussed (n=4).

Please choose your top 3 most important topics regarding gender equality.

7 responses

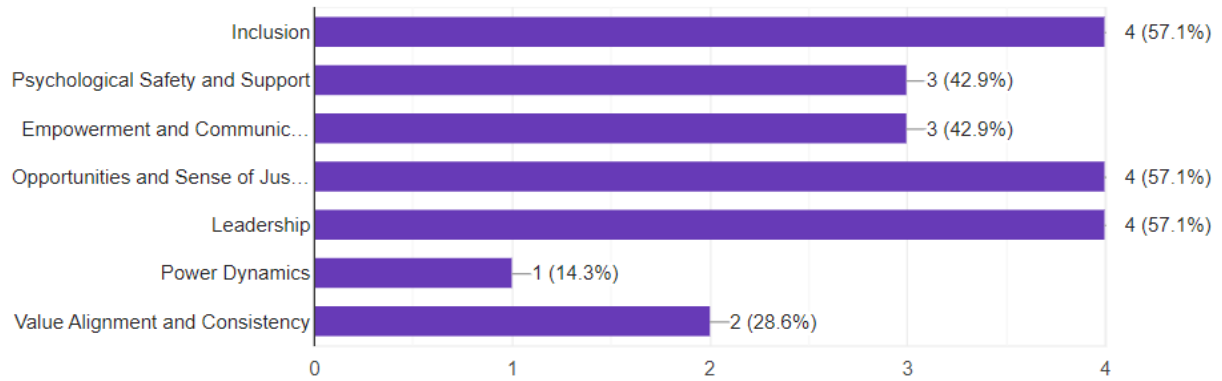


Figure 2: Responses given by interviewees about the relevance of topics discussed (n=7).

#### 4.1 Inclusion

The feedback we received about the topic of Inclusion for women in the workplace was relatively positive, but was followed by a couple of suggestions on where to place more focus. For example, in one of the earlier interviews, the importance of intersectionality, such as women of color, the LGBTQ+ community, and individuals with disabilities was brought up to keep in mind when Voces Vitales is conducting their gender assessments. Although Voces Vitales is focusing on gender as a broad category, it is definitely important to keep all marginalized groups in relation to gender in mind when doing any diagnosis or assessments to address other possible inequalities within each company. Many of the women in the focus group shared their experiences of having to fight for their position and the ability to be heard and valued within their institutions. One of the women mentioned that even when she was a co-chair of an assignment with a male co-chair, all of the communication tended to go through the male co-chair as if they did not trust her work or value her contributions.

Another key perspective was the idea of separating unconscious biases to possibly be its own topic in the assessment. In almost all of the interviews, the employees mentioned that many of the gaps in gender equality within their workplace stem from the presence of biases among men or individuals who hold higher positions. “It’s not about never having these biases,” said one of the women of the focus group, “it’s about recognizing it and saying from now on I will educate myself and do better.” This willingness to learn is important from all employees when working towards a more gender equal workplace. From all of the comments, it became clear that inclusion and unconscious biases are both very intersectional and could have a place in each of our topics of research for the assessment.

#### **4.2 Psychological Safety and Support**

The topic of Psychological Safety and Support included more of the sensitive topics that tend to be measured mostly through statistics, while the focus of Voces Vitales’ assessment is to measure perceptions and turn perceptions as well into measurable data. We asked about the presence of harmful language and microaggressions and whether they could hinder the support women feel around their company. One of the interviewees expressed that he has witnessed many microaggressions towards women throughout his workplace from men in leadership positions who may not intend to be harmful, but that their ignorance outweighs their ability to realize that certain language could affect the mindsets and work of women who are victims of these microaggressions, stereotypes, etc. With the focus being on perceptions and actual behaviors in the assessment, there is the possibility of employees realizing the way they carry themselves and the language they use in their workplaces needs to change to a more inclusive and open-minded tone.



A shared perception from all interviews was about the importance of a company's methods for conflict resolution. It was mentioned that many companies either do not have much knowledge on how to resolve specific conflicts, they are often "swept under the rug" to avoid bad publicity, or they do not want to "waste time" on issues such as harassment to not take away working hours. It is common for issues like these to be put aside or not taken seriously by management or senior level employees, which creates a sense of distrust and tiredness from lower-level employees to speak up about what they are experiencing in their workplace. The same goes for the employees' need to have time for caretaking and other means of support. A woman during the focus group mentioned that the idea in her company is that women are told they can either be a mother or an engineer, but not both. Oftentimes when there is support granted for maternal leaves, other factors like general self-care or mental health leaves are not given the same attention, even though they could be just as important to a person's well-being. Providing a gender equal emphasis on leaves for any necessary reason should be present in companies to create a supportive and safe environment for all employees.

#### **4.3 Empowerment and Communication**

Although we did not receive as much feedback as we hoped for on the topic of Empowerment and Communication, the little that we did receive was very insightful and helpful in our investigation. One of the interviewees mentioned that there is a general misconception about women being seen as aggressive when they assert themselves such as speaking up or talking over someone in a meeting, but that the public doesn't think twice when a man tries to assert himself. Another interviewee mentioned the invisibility of empowerment and how it is difficult for men, for example, to realize that language or even just the delivery of what they are saying could be seen as harmful communication that hinders a woman's ability to feel

empowered. It is important for any assessment tool that Voces Vitales is creating to have a way to measure women's perceptions of their empowerment and the way with which they are being communicated, so that these derogatory behaviors do not continue in a workplace.

Empowerment and Communication was one of the two most popular topics covered in the focus group based on the final survey of the participants (refer to Figure 1) and was also quite popular in the post-interview survey (refer to Figure 2).

#### **4.4 Leadership**

There is clear evidence that the topic of Leadership is of high importance to representatives from several companies. This is demonstrated by its high popularity in both surveys. It is perhaps one of the most complex topics, as there are perspectives to consider from both the leaders as well as the lower-level employees. The feedback from interviewees helped to create a clearer definition of how Voces Vitales should investigate the topic of Leadership in their gender equity assessment tool.

One of the main points that was mentioned in relation to leadership is the idea of biases. In our initial presentation, we spoke about the importance of focusing on the perceptions of lower-level employees, as they are often women whose ideas are not always heard compared to those from higher positions in a company, who are more often men. However, some representatives pointed out that because it is the higher-up leaders who hold these biases, it is more important to focus on the higher levels and how to reduce their biases, while improving leadership styles. Oftentimes the reason leaders cannot improve is due to their perception that they do not need to make any changes to their leadership styles, according to a representative from one of our interviews. He admitted that it can be difficult to have to relearn certain behaviors, and many leaders do not try because it puts them outside of their comfort zone.

While acknowledging these biases and challenges, many representatives emphasized the benefit of inclusion training programs. Some leaders may feel that they do not have to take these gender equality trainings because they “have more important things to do,” but if employees see that it is not a priority to their higher-ups, then it loses its importance on lower levels in a company’s hierarchy as well. This conversation about training and mentorship were of high interest to them, as it is one of the main existing focuses and services of Voces Vitales. One organization’s representative agreed that follow-up is key to training programs, with consistent post-mentorship to track the progress of leaders.

A final part of leadership that was discussed was the concept of empathy. A representative from a global agriculture company was strongly opposed to including empathy under the leadership category, while others pointed out how important it is. Notably, more often women were less fond of the idea of empathy while male interviewees showed more positive interest. In general, the women we interviewed felt that the key to being a strong female leader is to never expect empathy, or to even present oneself in the opposite way. For example, the representative from the global agricultural company said that if women allow emotions, values, and expression into their leadership styles, they will never reach their goals or will be seen as weak. In contrast, a representative from a different company agreed that empathy is something that men and leaders need to start practicing more, as he admitted it is more of a buzzword in companies right now rather than something leaders actually practice. As the feedback on the topic of empathy as part of leadership was very mixed, Voces Vitales will decide how to approach the concept in the creation of their gender equity assessment tool if they choose to do so.

The main takeaway from the conversations about leadership is that awareness is the first step. Making employees, regardless of position, aware of the challenges and biases that exist in companies will shed light on where leaders can improve to create a more positive, inclusive workplace culture. From there, training and mentorship programs can be developed in order to create real changes that address these issues.

#### **4.5 Opportunities and Sense of Justice**

Opportunities and Sense of Justice was another topic of considerably high interest among the people we interviewed, with the interviewees ranking it the highest in our Post-interview survey (refer to figure 2). It was surprisingly least popular in our focus group survey, however this is likely because the conversation did not move in the direction of this topic and the participants took the survey directly after discussion. Initially we presented these topics separately, but after finding many similarities in the conversations surrounding these themes, we chose to combine them for the remaining interviews. While they may cover different aspects of gender equality in the workplace, opportunities and a sense of justice both emphasize the overarching goal of assisting Voces Vitales in analyzing the presence of equality in the opportunities and support that all employees, regardless of gender or position, receive.

The recruiting process is certainly an important aspect of measuring gender equality in companies. The goal for companies is not to assess the policies and procedures of the process itself, but to see how employees feel about the process. We felt it was important to determine if women feel they are being treated equally to men throughout the hiring process. One difficulty that arises, as some interviewees pointed out, is that oftentimes, even if a company wants to hire more women or members of other marginalized communities into higher level positions, the

availability of qualified candidates is very inadequate. This reiterated the necessity for women to have the resources needed in order to empower themselves, as Voces Vitales emphasizes, so that they can have the confidence to pursue more positions or opportunities when available.

Some feedback from other interviews showed ties between opportunities and leadership, and one company representative even considered combining these topics. The main connections were in relation to training, as leadership training is an opportunity that perhaps not all employees receive due to their gender, identity, etc., but it is something that can greatly benefit someone to grow and learn in their position so they can more easily make progress in their career.

Some companies stated that a sense of justice is the most important thing that organizations have to work on, as underneath it all is bias. Companies may have good looking statistics and numbers, but this means nothing if injustices are still present. A suggestion we received was for Voces Vitales to assess the presence of “moral recognition”, or whether women are being as equally recognized for their work as men. Aspects like this are part of what makes women feel appreciated within a company, and therefore, this can be an encouragement factor for pursuing opportunities further.

All of this feedback cultivated positive conversation that coincided with Voces Vitales’s goals. All company representatives agreed that the best way to assess the topic of Opportunities and Sense of Justice is by looking at people’s perceptions, which is the exact aim for the gender assessment tool that Voces Vitales is creating.

#### **4.6 Power Dynamics**

There was an interesting variety of feedback on the topic of Power Dynamics. On one end, a representative from a global agriculture company shared that they believe there is no work to be done in this area. They have personally never witnessed women being afraid to speak up in their place of work. When women do face microaggressions, such as interruptions, the representative stated that what all women have to do is advocate for themselves, and this would no longer be an issue. Additionally, they believe that women actually have *more* confidence than men in certain situations. Since they initially feel less qualified, women will prepare much more than men, and end up feeling significantly more confident in the end.

Power Dynamics was one of the less popular topics among the focus group participants, and the least popular among our interviewees. This was reflected by its relatively small, though existent, presence in discussion. One member of the focus group shared her experience with performance reviews, stating that she would consistently display excellent work, entirely deserving of a promotion; however, the superior would brush this evidence aside due to her gender. This appears to be a clear instance of misusing power and allowing biases to influence decision making. Another experience shared by several participants was that they were consistently being assigned service tasks, such as decorating or cleaning up after events. They felt as though they were being belittled by their superiors via these assignments, which communicated the message that a woman's purpose is to perform chores.

#### **4.7 Value Alignment and Consistency**

Value Alignment and Consistency was one of the most popular topics among the focus group members, tied with Empowerment as the most selected topic (refer to Figure 1). A shared

sentiment among the participants was that companies often boast and advertise their progressive values, but women do not actually sense these values from others in their work environment. The participants felt there is much more work to be done, as companies need to enforce the practice of these values in everyday situations. This topic was much less discussed in interviews, reflected by its low popularity in the post-interview survey, though one representative from a global executive search firm did emphasize the relevance of this topic. He stated his belief that the most important thing in this effort is to create values in a company, and overall gender equality improvements will follow. Values are at the root of business operations. Therefore, defining them with gender equality as a priority is key to a healthy work environment.

#### **4.8 Summary of Results**

Though some topics were more frequently addressed than others, all meetings were completed with feedback on every one of the topics for the assessment tool. It is clear that Leadership and Opportunities & Sense of Justice are the most impactful, as they sparked the greatest amount of discussion, and therefore the most helpful information for this project. Power Dynamics and Value Alignment & Consistency were less popular, but they can definitely be utilized to further assist Voces Vitales in their goal of creating a better gender assessment tool.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Throughout our ten interviews and focus group, there were many inquiries from interviewees about the format of the assessment tool, which is still in the development process for VVCR. Considering this uncertainty, we have generated several recommendations that can be universally applied. Firstly, we suggest that the assessment tool should include some incentives and motivators to encourage companies to apply it within their workplace. For example, it could be beneficial to display statistics that show higher employee retention rates or stronger performance in organizations that are farther along in their effort of achieving gender equality. The hardest part of the process for companies is often taking that first step and becoming aware of what they have to work on. So if they are aware of the benefits of investing time and effort into this assessment tool, it will be more widely accepted and utilized.

We also believe it would be beneficial for VVCR to tailor each assessment to its respective company. Many interviewees mentioned the benefits of the assessment having more of a “personal touch” as opposed to a lengthy, generic document. Every company has different needs and is in a unique position in their progress towards gender equality, so reviewing the options that are most relevant for their situation could motivate companies to implement the assessment. One difficulty with tailoring the topics, however, could be that some executives may not recognize the areas which need improvement in their company if they do not consider the perspective of lower-level employees, especially women.

To ensure that companies are completely aware of what they need to focus on, we recommend creating a framework that will lay out examples and explanations of different factors in each topic. For example, one representative expressed that they are aware of and often witness



micro-aggressions or other injustices around their workplace and the hardest part is getting the leadership in their company to realize that those behaviors are unacceptable. This framework will create a baseline that lays out examples of certain micro-aggressions, derogatory forms of communication, and harmful behaviors for employees to recognize and understand as having no place in a work environment.

The suggestion of an action plan was also brought up in an interview, which is an idea we would like to pass along to VVCR. This action plan could include ways to combat certain issues like microaggressions or harmful behaviors, and lay out specific ways to recognize and diminish these behaviors. This may be more applicable for a consultation-style assessment, where the previous recommendations could be presented and discussed in-person, rather than a survey of questions.

Our last assignment from Voces Vitales was to draft a set of possible questions within each generated topic that assess gender equality within an organization (refer to Appendix E). We attempted to create questions encapsulating experiences (e.g. “I am interrupted while I am speaking at work.”), feelings (“I feel motivated to be engaged with my organization.”), and knowledge of company policy (“I am aware that my organization has policies in place regarding gender equality.”). We believe this draft will provide an excellent starting point for VVCR as they plan their next steps in creating the assessment tool.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Interview Protocol

#### Agenda for interviews

- Introduction of students and our project
- Introduction of interviewee
  - Name
  - Position at company
- Discussion about Gender equality
- Questions (if applicable)
  - What is your company's current stance on gender equality (i.e. are there policies in place?)
  - Has your company ever utilized a gender assessment tool that is currently on the market (if so, how did it go?)
- Presentation of areas of focus
- Time given for questions, comments, and feedback about areas of focus.

#### Informed Consent

Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this interview. All of your answers and information will be anonymous and if you feel comfortable, we will refer to you by your pronouns in our report if we decide to include any comments.

If there are any other questions, comments, or feedback, please feel free to reach out to us;

Emily Giancola ([egiancola@wpi.edu](mailto:egiancola@wpi.edu)) Rachelle Gonzales ([rgonzales@wpi.edu](mailto:rgonzales@wpi.edu)) Gianna Viele ([gviele@wpi.edu](mailto:gviele@wpi.edu))

## Appendix B: Topics Presentation for Interviews (English)

# Our Goal



# WPI

## Topics for investigation

- Inclusion
- Psychological safety and Support
- Leadership
- Empowerment and Communication
- Opportunities and Sense of Justice
- Value Alignment and Consistency
- Power dynamics

## Inclusion

- Valuing and considering contributions equally
- Organizational Culture
- Unconscious biases, stereotypes
- Lean in's Allyship work

## Psychological Safety and Support

- Support from all directions
- Internal Communication
- Caretaking/leaves
- Harassment
- Conflict resolution
- Language
- Mental Health impact

## Empowerment and Communication

- Self Confidence
- Trainings and programs
- WEP's- "Equality Means Business"
- External communication
- KPI (Key Performance Indicators)

## Women Empowerment Principles

- Principle 1: Establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality
- Principle 2: Treat all women and men fairly at work – respect and support human rights and nondiscrimination
- Principle 3: Ensure the health, safety and well-being of all women and men workers
- Principle 4: Promote education, training and professional development for women
- Principle 5: Implement enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women
- Principle 6: Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy
- Principle 7: Measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality



## Opportunities and a Sense of Justice

- Equal opportunities for all genders
  - Promotions, raises, special projects, etc.
- Confidence of women to pursue
- Equal hierarchical opportunities
- Recruiting process
  
- Compensation and benefits
- Performance appraisals and recognition
- Respect to work hours
- Parenting/Caretaking

## Leadership

- Confidence and Respect
- Perceptions of Leadership
- Empathy
- Room for expression

## Power Dynamics

- Respect from those in higher positions
- Ideas and thoughts considered regardless of position
- Healthy power dynamic is key for open discussion of gender inequality
- Perspective of lower level shows where leaders can improve

## Value Alignment and Consistency

- Policies, procedures, and regulations (existence and application)
- Alignment of personal values and organizational values
- Barrett Values Centre definition of values

# Questions and Feedback?

Thank you!

## **Appendix C: Agenda for Focus Group**

### **Agenda del grupo de discusión (14/02)**

- Introducción para el propósito de nuestro proyecto y grupo de discusión
- Introducciones para ustedes
  - Nombre y apellido
  - Empresa para la que trabaja
  - Posición en esa empresa
  - ¿Cuál es el lugar que siempre ha querido visitar?
- Presentación de los temas comunes y más importantes de la igualdad de género que utilizamos en nuestras entrevistas
- Comentarios y discusiones de temas
- Preguntas sobre sus experiencias e ideas sobre la igualdad de género
- Una encuesta que clasifica sus temas más relevantes o importantes
- Comentarios o preguntas finales

## Appendix D: Topics Presentation for Focus Group (Spanish)

# Our Goal



# WPI

## Temas

- Inclusión
- Apoyo Psicológico y Seguridad
- Empoderamiento y Comunicación
- Liderazgo
- Oportunidades y Sentido de Justicia
- Dinámica de Potencia
- Alineación y Consistencia de Valores

## Inclusión

- Evaluando y Considerando contribuciones de igualdad
- Cultura de organización
- Estereotipos y prejuicios

## Apoyo Psicológico y Seguridad

- Soporte de toda direcciones
- Cuidado de todos/ ida del trabajo
- Acoso
- Resolución de conflicto
- Lenguaje
- Salud mental

## Empoderamiento y Comunicación

- Confianza propia
- Entrenamientos y programas
- Principios de Empoderamiento de la mujer
- KPIs

## Principios de Empoderamiento de la mujer

- Principio 1: Establecer un liderazgo corporativo de alto nivel para la igualdad de género
- Principio 2: Tratar a todas las mujeres y hombres en el trabajo de manera justa: respetar y apoyar los derechos humanos y la no discriminación
- Principio 3: Garantizar la salud, la seguridad y el bienestar de todas las trabajadoras y los trabajadores
- Principio 4: Promover la educación, la formación y el desarrollo profesional de las mujeres
- Principio 5: Implementar el desarrollo empresarial, la cadena de suministro y las prácticas de marketing que empoderen a las mujeres
- Principio 6: Promover la igualdad a través de iniciativas comunitarias y promoción
- Principio 7: Medir e informar públicamente sobre el progreso para lograr la igualdad de género

## Oportunidades y Sentido de la Justicia

- Igualdad de oportunidades para todos los géneros
  - Promociones, subidas, proyectos especiales, etc.
- Confianza de las mujeres para perseguirlos
- Proceso de contratación
- Compensación y beneficios
- Evaluación del rendimiento y reconocimiento
- Respeto a las horas de trabajo
- Paternidad/cuidando

## Liderazgo

- Confianza y Respeto
- Percepciones de liderazgo
- Empatía
- Espacio para la expresión



## Dinámica de poder

- Respeto de los que están en posiciones más altas
- Las ideas y los pensamientos se consideran sin importar la posición
- Una dinámica de poder saludable es clave para una discusión abierta sobre la igualdad de género
- La perspectiva de los niveles inferiores muestra dónde pueden mejorar los líderes

## Alineación y consistencia de valores

- Políticas, procedimientos y regulaciones (existencia y aplicación)
- Alineación de valores personales y valores organizacionales
- Definición de valores de Barrett Values Center

## **Appendix E: Potential Assessment Questions**

### **Assessing Employee-Level Perceptions**

#### **Psychological Safety & Support**

- Have the demands for your gender roles changed during the COVID-19 Pandemic?
- Have you received the support you needed and expected during the COVID-19 Pandemic?
- My institution has provided mental health resources
- How have you witnessed or experienced behaviors like these in your organization?
- I experience interruptions while I am speaking at work that feel related to my gender.
- I have experienced a form of sexual harassment in my organization.
- I have experienced labor harassment in my organization in relation to my gender.
- I am comfortable with the way my organization handles situations of sexual/labor harassment.
- I have experienced violence in my place of work.
- I am given time to care for myself and/or my loved ones outside of work.
- I have experienced violence in my place of work.
- I am given time to put personal wellness first.
- I am given the opportunity to care for my loved ones.
- I am aware of the proper support channels present to express any issues.
- I am comfortable to speak up or come forward about any issues.

#### **Empowerment & Communication**

- My organization provides me with resources to empower myself.
- Empowerment and encouragement are equally promoted in my organization.
- I have the capability to empower myself when at my organization.
- Internal communication in my organization promotes gender equality.

#### **Opportunities & Sense of Justice**

- I am confident to take on a position which allows me to supervise others
- My contributions and ideas are relevant to my organization.
- I motivate others in my organization.
- I feel motivated to be engaged with my organization.
- I have been given opportunities in my organization to be promoted.
- I feel confident to seek opportunities for promotion in my organization.
- I feel confident enough to negotiate my salary and benefits in my organization.
- I am given opportunities in my organization to complete special projects or assignments.

- I am recognized for my accomplishments in my organization.
- I am given opportunities to take time off from work when I need to care for myself or others.

### **Leadership**

- In my organization responsibilities are delegated reasonably
- Work/life balance taken into consideration
- My superiors lead with empathy.
- I feel comfortable expressing my feelings and needs to my superiors.
- I feel trusted by my superiors.
- My leaders motivate me to succeed.

### **Power Dynamics**

- I have as much say in decisions as others in my hierarchical level.
- I am respected by others in my organization, regardless of position.
- I am supported by others in my organization, regardless of position.
- My ideas are considered in group meetings.
- I feel comfortable voicing my ideas in my organization.
- I am comfortable with the way I am led in my organization.

### **Value Alignment & Consistency**

- I am aware that my organization has policies in place regarding gender equality.
- My organization takes serious action regarding gender equality.
- I value equality in my organization.
- My organization values equality.
- My peers in my organization value equality.
- There are standards of equal pay for all genders in my organization's gender equality policy.
- There is equal pay granted in my institution for equal positions.
- My personal values align with those of my organization.

### **Inclusion**

- My contributions are valued equally in my institution.
- I make a conscious effort to be inclusive to others.
- My organization has an inclusive culture.
- I make a conscious effort to contribute to the inclusive culture in my organization.
- Members of my organization are making an effort to unlearn unconscious biases.
- The contributions of everyone in my organization are valued equally, independent of gender identity.