



# **Gender Parity in Diversity Management**

## **A Qualitative Study into the Career Advancement Challenges amongst Finnish women**

Kaisa Valkonen

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# Degree Thesis

Kaisa Valkonen

Gender Parity in Diversity Management – A Qualitative Study into the Career Advancement Challenges amongst Finnish women

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## **Abstract:**

Today, organizations aim to ensure that they are considered inclusive and people with different backgrounds (eg. ethnicity, age, gender) are represented equally amongst their employees. Inclusivity amongst employees offers potential for benefits such as for example decrease in employee turnover, cost savings and a more diverse skillset. Despite this, the goal of inclusivity is difficult to meet. This study focuses on the shortcomings of gender equality in top-management positions within Finnish organizations. Different relevant theories are briefly discussed in relation to gender equality in diversity management.

Though the topic of women not being chosen for top management positions has been previously studied, the paradox amongst Finland ranking high in global gender parity reports in comparison to the low number of women in leadership positions justified additional research. This study focuses on finding the key challenges that women face in advancing in their career as well as when combining work and family life. To unveil these issues, women in top positions were interviewed regarding their personal experiences surrounding this topic. The study was therefore conducted as qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews, for which six women were chosen. The study took place in the academic year 2022-2023.

The study was conducted in order to answer the following two research questions: *What career advancement related challenges do female leaders experience at work?* and *What challenges do female leaders experience when combining work and family life?* The collected interview data was analyzed through thematic analysis, largely following the logic of the Gioia Method, by using codes and categories and presenting the key findings as first and second order codes and aggregate dimensions.

The findings suggest that most, if not all, of the main challenges that women face in advancing in their careers and combining their careers with their family life, can be associated with stereotypical, biased expectations and behavior by both men and women themselves. According to the collected data, the main challenges women face relating to career advancement are biased expectations and behavior, unequal parental leave system and other absences, the wage gap favoring men and higher education requirements. When it comes to combining work and family life, the main challenges were found to be absences relating to childcare, division of responsibilities at home according to stereotypical gender roles (favoring men), women supporting and prioritizing their spouses' career over their own, time constraints and pressure to meet all expectations and lacking support from the employer.

**Keywords:** Gender equality, Glass Ceiling phenomenon, prejudice, a career, the Motherhood penalty, diversity, inclusivity

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# 1 Introduction

Today, organizations aim to ensure that they are considered inclusive and people with different backgrounds (eg. ethnicity, age, gender) are represented equally amongst their employees. This goal is pursued by utilizing *diversity management* and its practices and processes. However, as this goal is difficult to reach, many companies lack in several of these sectors (Andrade, 2022). Inclusivity in work organizations offers potential for benefits like decrease in employee turnover, cost savings, a more diverse skillset amongst staff and an improvement in the company's reputation (Machado et al., 2022). This study focuses on gender equality in diversity management and the shortcomings of gender parity in top-management positions within Finnish organizations.

Throughout history, leadership roles, whether in business or politics, have mainly been occupied by male leaders (Lämsä et al., 2007). However, today more and more women aspire to achieve a leadership role in their career. Even though our society is constantly developing and redirecting itself towards gender parity, not many women achieve this set societal goal and female leaders can still be considered a minority (Spangsdorf et al., 2021).

According to the 2022 Global Gender Gap report, no country has yet achieved full gender parity. The Global Gender Gap Index scores 146 countries on a scale of 0 to 100 depicting the distance covered toward full gender parity. In their annual report, Finland is ranked second, only falling behind Iceland (Global Gender Gap Report, 2022). Even though gender equality in Finland can be seen as relatively high, this is not yet reflected in the business world. When studying all of the 130 listed companies in Nasdaq Helsinki in 2022, it was found that the number of women in their board of directors was only 31% (Kajala, 2022).

A study by Lämsä et al. (2007) that reviewed previous studies of female leadership in Finland throughout the years 1985-2005, showed that the discussion around women in leadership positions started in Finland in the 1980's, which is around 10 to 15 years later than the first international studies on the topic. These early studies have traditionally focused on women's positions, career, gender equality and discrimination in their workplace. Since then, studies on the topic of female leadership have increased and substantially diversified (Lämsä et al., 2007).

Research has shown that different qualities or personality traits in men and women (eg. career duration, education, level of intelligence) are not sufficient in explaining more than one eighth of the wage differences or career possibilities between men and women (Keloharju, Knüpfer & Tåg, 2016). This begs the question why are there more male than female leaders?

## **1.1 Research questions and the objective of the study**

While the topic of gender equality and female leaders' career development is a global issue, this study focuses on Finland, since while the country ranks high on the Global Gender Gap Index, this does not translate into corresponding numbers of women in leadership positions in business organizations (Kajala, 2022). Studies on other countries, mainly other Nordic nations, will also be presented and discussed, in order to come to more comprehensive conclusions, seeing as studies merely covering Finland are still slightly limited.

The objective of this study is to identify the career advancement related challenges that female leaders face in their career. The focus is on challenges relating to the workplace, but also on the potential challenge of combining a career and family life. The main research question of this study is:

- 1. What career advancement related challenges do female leaders experience at work?*

The main research question is further addressed by the following sub-objective:

- 2. What challenges do female leaders experience when combining work and family life?*

The chosen method for this study is qualitative research, performed through a series of semi-structured interviews with women in leadership positions in Finland. Hence, the findings of this study are based on personal experiences that aim to explain the phenomenon from the female perspective. Therefore, this study is not an objective overview on the phenomenon, but more so based on the interviewees' personal experiences.

## 1.2 Delimitations

Due to aspects such as time constraints and limited resources, there are certain limitations to this study, which are necessary to point out and take into consideration. For example, this study will not focus on other poignant challenges women face in the work environment, such as sexual harassment, discrimination or leadership styles. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the issues analyzed in this study are identified in one of the most progressive and advanced countries when it comes to gender equality. Therefore, the results from this study do not necessarily apply to all women in business globally, but rather a mere fraction.

## 1.3 Definitions of key terms

**Gender equality**, as defined by the United Nations (2022), alludes to the equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities of people, regardless of their gender. However, equality does not mean that men and women should become the same, rather that the interests, needs and priorities of both should be taken into consideration whilst recognizing their diversity (United Nations, 2022).

**Glass ceiling phenomenon** was originally presented in an article published in the Wall Street Journal in 1986, defining it as an invisible obstacle that women face when trying to climb the career ladder. Following the article, the term has been used to describe different barriers that women face during their career (Multisilta, 2018).

**Prejudice** refers to an unreasonable, unfair opinion or conclusion formed without enough knowledge or thought (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022).

**A Career** is traditionally defined as progressively moving from a job position to another, whilst climbing within the company's hierarchy. This progression is awarded with an increase in salary and a status symbol (White, 1995).

**The Motherhood penalty** refers to the issues women face in the business world following the birth of their children. The phenomenon is a result of the biased and stereotypical views on

mothers, and it effects women's wages and their ability to become employed, to name a few (Maddox, 2022).

**Diversity** can be defined as similarities and differences in characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, abilities and disabilities, race and sexual orientation amongst employees (Machado et al., 2018).

**Inclusivity** refers to including all people and ideas, and treating them equally (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023)

## **1.4 Thesis structure**

This thesis is divided into six chapters, the first being the introduction. In the introduction, the research topic is presented, and the chosen research method is briefly explained. Following the introduction, the literature review will provide background and discuss previous findings on the topic. After the relevant literature and previous studies have been presented, the third chapter will focus on the method of research chosen and present the conducted research in more depth. Subsequently, the key findings are presented and further discussed, followed by the conclusion.



## 2 Literature Review

This chapter presents prior research and literature related to the challenges female leaders face when attempting to advance their career. It seeks to provide an overview of the current situation and elements that affect female career advancement. Emphasis is placed specifically on diversity management, gender equality and the challenges of combining work and family life.

### 2.1 Diversity Management

As reported by Machado et al. (2018), diversity can be defined as similarities and differences in characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, abilities and disabilities, race and sexual orientation amongst employees. Inclusivity on the other hand refers to how well the organization utilizes different people. *Diversity management* aims to ensure inclusion within the organization amongst its employees (Machado et al., 2018).

According to Andrade (2022), studies have shown diversity within the company to result in many benefits, such as increased productivity and creativity, increase in revenue and results overall, loyalty amongst staff, also reflected by a decrease in employee turnover, more diverse skillset and cultural knowledge amongst employees and improvement in the company reputation and competitiveness. These benefits are also reported by Machado et al. (2018), adding cost savings to the list. Machado et al. (2022) also reported the same benefits for inclusion, as well as increased commitment and enhanced morale and satisfaction amongst staff. When focusing on gender equality, these benefits can be divided into two categories: justice gains (eg. decrease in sexual harassment within the work environment) and instrumental gains (eg. encouraging innovation, improved well-being amongst employees) (Andrade, 2022).

Machado et al. (2018) reports that the key to successful diversity management is not to embed diverse employees to the existing organization culture – instead, inclusivity and diversity require the company to adopt a new way of thinking and functioning. Though gender equality is a goal for most organizations today, it is difficult to reach (Andrade, 2022). To achieve gender parity, organizations on a European level have established rules and practices to eliminate the obstacles women face when aiming to advance in their career. The Treaty of the European Union in Equality is one of the main pillars in promoting gender equality (Cavero-

Rubio, 2019). Despite many organizations having put in place policies to enhance gender equality within the company, the gender gap remains, and progress is slow (Andrade, 2022).

Though diversity and inclusivity are generally thought of as desirable qualities within an organization, there are some challenges associated with them. Machado et al. (2018) suggests that diversifying their workforce might also cause new challenges for managers that are accustomed to managing a more homogenous workforce. The main challenges are found to be increased costs (eg. training and legal compliance), lack of senior management support, tension amongst staff, group agendas or conflicts between employees, change, fear of reverse discrimination and tokenism or loss of talent, both referring to when an individual is hired to promote inclusivity rather than for their capabilities (Machado et al., 2018).

When studying diversity management focusing on gender equality, many different theories can be applied. As reported by Memon et al. (2020), eight main theories used to study this phenomenon are: social comparison theory, social exchange theory, gender stratification theory, social role theory, social identity theory, resource conservation theory, role congruity theory and gender difference theory. For the purpose of this study, emphasis will be placed on the three commonly used theories when studying gender inequality: role congruity theory, social role theory and social identity theory.

### **2.1.1 Role congruity theory**

*Role congruity theory* suggests that stereotypical gender roles can cause biased attitude and behaviors towards women. These biased attitudes and actions can in turn attribute to inequality at the workplace amongst men and women (Memon et al., 2020). A study by Eagly et al. (2002), suggests that the role congruity theory finds two forms of prejudice against women: 1. Women are less likely to be viewed as applicants for leadership roles compared to men and 2. Behavior that can be considered that of a leadership role are less favorably viewed when it is done by a woman. These findings can result in less positive attitudes towards women and making it more difficult for women to reach, or succeed, in leadership positions (Eagly et al., 2002).

### **2.1.2 Social role theory**

According to the *social role theory* (Eagly 1987 in Memon et al., 2020), gender differences are caused by societal gender roles, rather than by biological differences between men and women. This could mean that gender roles are a product of socialization amongst other people and institutions, for instance the media. In the workplace, these issues can cause gender inequality, seen in for instance wage gap, opportunities such as training and promotion possibilities and development (Memon et al., 2020).

### **2.1.3 Social identity theory**

As reported by Roberson (2019), social-psychological theories have commonly been utilized in diversity research. Theories focusing on intergroup relations are studied, as they emphasize the formation of social stereotypes. These theories highlight how people are categorized into groups and how attitudes amongst these groups are formed (Roberson, 2019).

The commonly used *social identity theory* suggests that people define themselves by their group memberships. In order to improve their self-concept, they aim to benefit and improve the group that they belong to (*ingroup*), compared to the groups that they do not belong to (*outgroups*) (Tajfel, 1978). This in turn emphasizes similarities amongst group members and differences between different groups. Such differentiation can further develop into biases amongst different groups (*intergroup*) (Roberson, 2019). This could potentially lead to further strengthening of the existing gender inequality and stereotypical attitudes, if both genders strongly identify within their own groups.

## **2.2 Gender equality**

Finland is generally considered a rather equal country, close to full gender parity. As presented in Figure 1, The Global Gender Gap Index ranked Finland second in their annual report, only falling behind Iceland. According to the 2022 Global Gender Gap report, no country has yet achieved full gender parity. The Global Gender Gap Index scores 146 countries on a scale of 0 to 100 depicting the distance covered toward full gender parity (Global Gender Gap Report, 2022). However, this is not yet reflected in the business world. When studying all 130 listed

companies in Nasdaq Helsinki in 2022, it was found that the number of women in the board of directors of these companies was only 31% (Kajala, 2022).

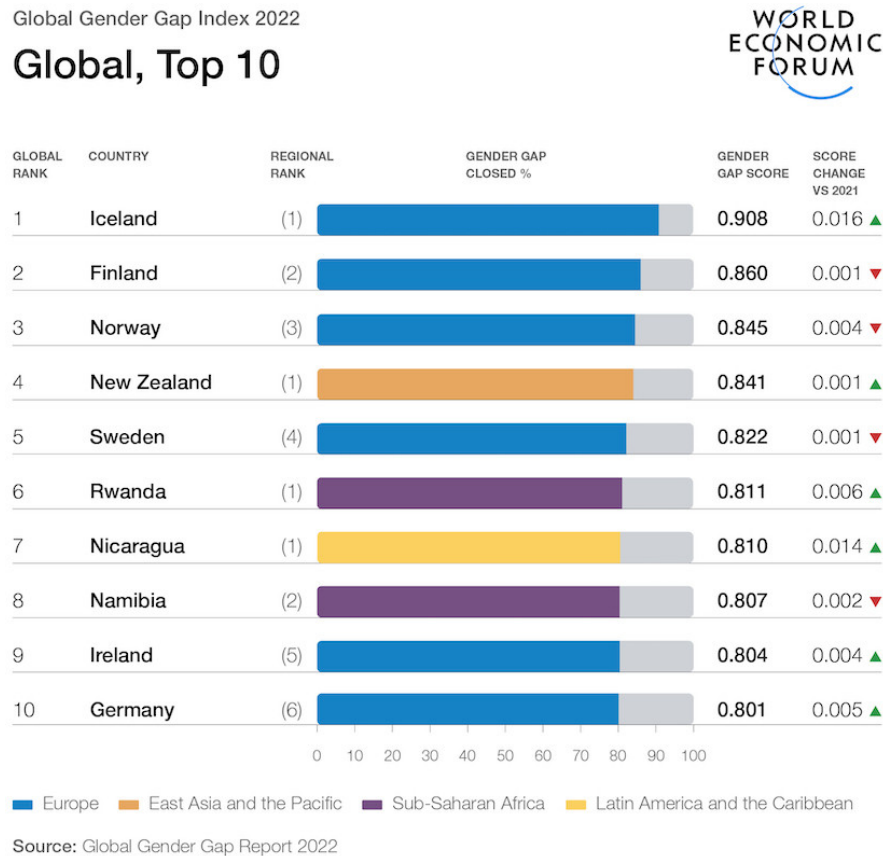


Figure 1: Global Gender Gap Index top 10 (Global Gender Gap Index, 2022)

Statistics Finland (2021) has studied gender equality in Finland focusing on factors such as employment rates and educational backgrounds. The Global Gender Gap Report findings are supported by the Statistics Finland study, suggesting that on paper Finland can generally be considered rather close to full gender parity. Statistics Finland's findings are presented in Figure 2. These findings show that when studying the Finnish population, there is nearly an equal number of men and women, with the female life expectancy being slightly higher. Both men and women are represented in the labor force almost to an equal extent. This nearly perfect gender parity is visible also in the Finnish parliament, as 47% of the elected members of parliament (MPs) were women in 2019 (Statistics Finland, 2021).

However, Statistics Finland (2021) reports that women are slightly more likely to have a tertiary level education than men. The bigger differences between men and women were found in the wage gap (1 euro in men to 84 cents in women) and in the time spent on domestic work. According to their findings, women spent approximately 3 hours and 41 minutes daily on domestic work, whereas the time for men was nearly an hour less, totaling to 2 hours and 33 minutes (Statistics Finland, 2021). This supports the conception that women are still considered to be more responsible for their family and home life than men (Maddox 2022).

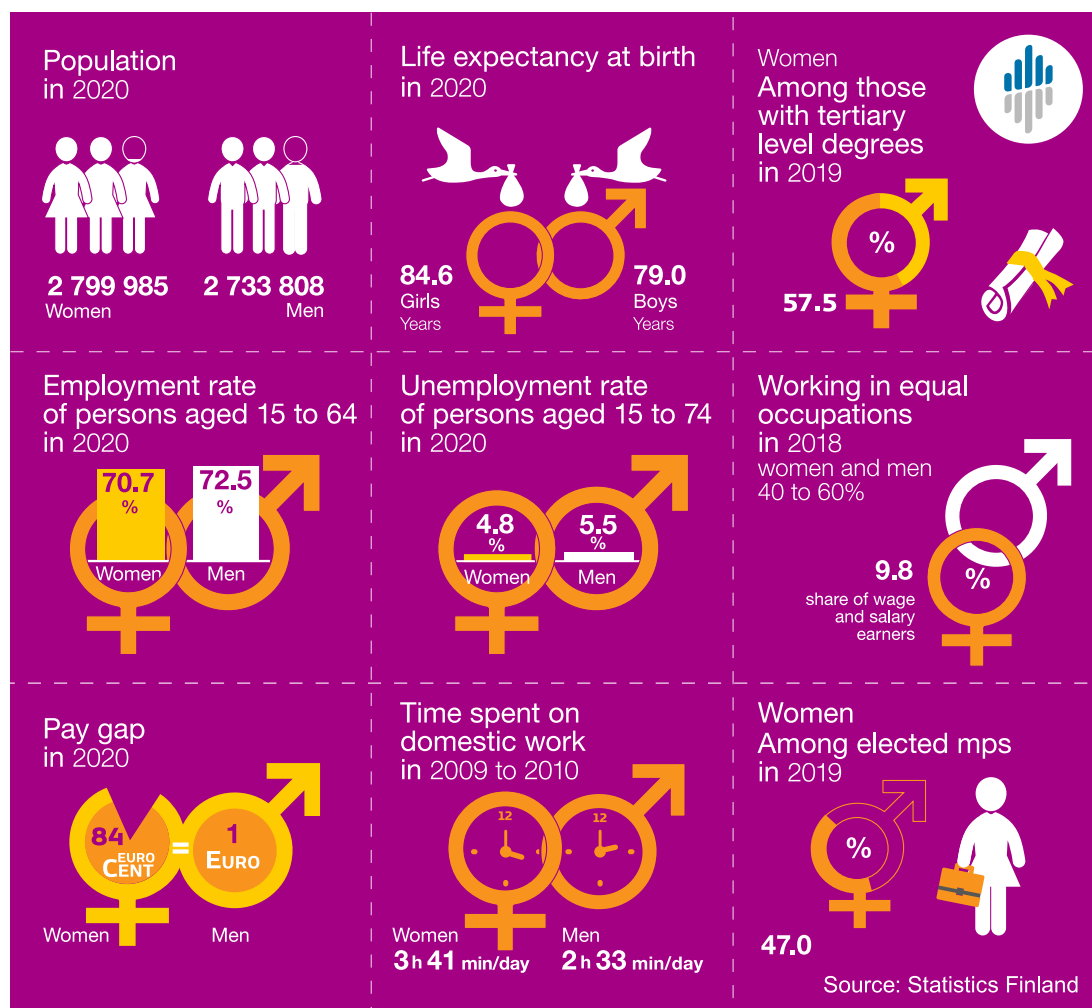


Figure 2: Gender Equality in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2021)

### 2.2.1 Nordic gender equality paradox

The Nordic countries are generally perceived as relatively equal when it comes to gender parity. They have a history of female entrepreneurs and their modern welfare systems have been built to support women in returning to work once they become a mother (Spangsdorf et al, 2021).

The Nordic countries are also well represented in the Global Gender Gap Index (2022), as presented in Figure 1, with Iceland, Finland, Norway and Sweden all ranking within the top 10 countries (Gender Gap Index 2022).

Despite this, as outlined by Spangsdorf et al. (2021), Nordic countries are also known for the “Nordic gender equality paradox”. This refers to the evidence that despite the high rates of women in their labor force, and more women than men having secondary and tertiary education, the number of female leaders is disproportionately low, and the labor market is drastically gender segregated (Spangsdorf et al., 2021). According to Sørensen (2019), the horizontal gender segregation in the Nordic countries is more significant than in any other European countries. This means that men and women tend to work in different occupations. This in turn may be one of the leading causes behind the wage gap amongst men and women. Women are often working in the public sector, more specifically within the education, care or health sector. Men, on the other hand, are more traditionally seen working in the private sector, for instance in the engineering and production fields. Educational levels do not seem to influence the horizontal gender segregation, as it is found in all educational levels (Sørensen, 2019).

According to the Nordic Council of Ministers (2019), as reported by Spangsdorf et al. (2021), women are not being selected for top management positions due to stereotypical views and biases, and it is therefore not due to the structures of the welfare state. This phenomenon is also referred to as the glass slipper effect (Spangsdorf et al., 2021). Sørensen (2019) suggests that these stereotypical ideas and biases which hinder women from being selected for management positions, can consist of fixed ideas on which sex does the given job best. This in turn leads to discriminatory practices at the workplace, favoring one gender over the other. Additionally, it has also been found that in some cases, men and women prefer different jobs. Moreover, different roles in the family can also influence the chosen career path. As gender roles in the Nordic families can still be considered quite traditional, where the man is considered the breadwinner and the woman the primary caregiver, women often tend to seek positions with the potential flexibility and family-friendly benefits and working hours (Sørensen, 2019).

Sørensen (2019) reports that another supporting indicator of stereotypical behavior being the primary reason for the gender segregation in the Nordic countries, is that these patterns are not identified in the ethnic minorities in the Nordic countries. Instead, for example men with

Middle Eastern backgrounds often seek employment from the healthcare industry, which is considered very female-dominated in the Nordic countries (Sørensen, 2019). This suggests that certain stereotypical views and behavioral models are characteristic to the Nordic countries specifically.

As outlined by Sørensen (2019), gender segregation in the workforce can also cause other issues, such as an inflexible labor market. As some industries and professions are traditionally related to a specific gender, this can cause unemployed people (both men and women) not to be open to changing professions. This in turn can lead to longer unemployment periods. Another possible outcome of the horizontal gender segregation is the possibility of losing or missing out on talent. As some positions are seen as meant for a specific gender, employers risk not recruiting the most qualified applicants. In addition, gender segregation in the labor market also further contributes to reinforcing stereotypical behavior. This is due to the segregated labor market leading to stereotypical gender roles at home as well. As women are often found in family-friendly occupations, they are still found to be the primary caregivers at home (Sørensen, 2019).

According to a study conducted by Statistics Finland in Katainen et al. (2015), the number of women in leadership roles has not increased significantly when comparing the current situation to the older generation. This can be considered rather alarming as it shows little to no advancement in gaining a more equal representation in leadership roles (Vasama, 2015). However, in the recent years a slight improvement has taken place. Currently the number of women in the board of directors in listed companies has grown annually by approximately 1-2% (Kajala, 2022).

### **2.2.2 Bias and stereotypes**

*“I don’t think a woman should be in any government job whatsoever...mainly because they are erratic. And emotional. Men are erratic and emotional, too, but the point is a woman is more likely to be.”* - President Richard Nixon on the White House audiotapes, made public through the Freedom of Information Act, saying that he would never appoint a woman to the U.S. Supreme Court. (Eagly et al., 2007)

Even though a number of studies have documented benefits of having a female leader, it is still more common to see male leaders in the business world (Madsen et al., 2018). The gender segregation in leadership roles can be largely explained through gender bias and stereotypical attitudes that women face to this day (Spangsdorf et al., 2021), as suggested by the quote from President Nixon. The fact that one of the world's most influential men was overheard saying this, even quite recently, showcases that these stereotypical attitudes against women are still relative today. Following the detection of this paradox, new leadership development programs have been made as a response to the issue. However, research has shown these to have little effect, suggesting that only providing more options is not the solution to the problem (Madsen et al., 2018). As reported by Katainen et al. (2015), despite the number of women in high-level leadership positions is slowly growing in Finland, it is still relatively low. This has been explained through biases, attitudes, career and educational choices as well as through the “tradition of having male leaders” and the slowly developing culture amongst employers where women are provided with less demanding work tasks (Katainen et al., 2015).

Women do not face bias and prejudice only from men, but also from themselves and other women. According to Madsen et al. (2018), bias can be divided into two types: conscious and unconscious bias. Unconscious bias refers to a phenomenon when a person consciously rejects presented stereotypes, but still behaves according to the stereotypes unconsciously. Hidden gender biases have been detected in people who view themselves as unbiased – even in women themselves. Addressing these stereotypes begins with detecting the issue both internally (bias within oneself) and externally (eg. actions and practices). Once the biases are detected, they can be interpreted and revoked using standard leadership tools, such as negotiations, leading change, feedback and networking etc. (Madsen et al., 2018).

Agarwal (2018) reports that unconscious bias is not deliberate. This happens as a person's brain makes a quick judgement of people and situations. These judgements and assessments are influenced and formed based on the person's background, experiences and their cultural environment. Furthermore, these biases are formed without control or awareness, and are to be separated from conscious biases, that an individual can conceal to appear more politically correct (Agarwal, 2018).

As stated by Agarwal (2018), research has shown that unconscious biases influence everyone. This alludes to the actuality that also women can be unconsciously biased against themselves,



considering men as more competent than women. This can cause a cycle of unconscious bias, in which workplaces are not inclusive to women, and men in leadership positions are less likely to support women in advancing in their career to reach leadership positions within the organization (Agarwal, 2018).

According to Diehl et al. (2022), it is often thought that by adding more women into the workplace, and hence creating a more gender equal working environment, biases would decrease and gender gaps close. However, studies show that this is likely not the case, as similar stereotypical biases are found in both male- and female-dominated industries (Diehl et al., 2022). A study conducted by Derks et al. (2016), suggests that when a woman is working in a leadership position in an organization where most executive positions are held by men, they often seem to distance themselves from their junior female colleagues. This in turn further increases the gender inequality in their organization. This phenomenon is referred to as *the queen bee phenomenon*. This behavior is thought to be a response to the discrimination that women may have faced in male-dominated organizations (Derks et al., 2016).

### **2.2.3 Impostor syndrome**

In addition to the biases and stereotypes that women face from the outside, Tulshyan et al. (2021) suggest that women might also be biased towards their own qualifications, doubting their own capabilities. The concept of impostor syndrome, originally known as ‘impostor phenomenon’, was first introduced in 1978 by psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes. The concept was developed in their study which focused on high-achieving women, who lacked confidence in their skills despite being both academically and professionally accomplished. Impostor syndrome can be defined as doubting oneself and feeling like a fraud. This phenomenon is present in many high-achieving people, leading them to question their own accomplishments (Tulshyan et al., 2021).

According to Williams (2019), the impostor syndrome should still be referred to by its original name, ‘the imposter phenomenon’, as it is not classified as a mental disorder according to the American Psychiatric Association (2013). However, both terms are currently used to describe the psychological pattern where a person fears being exposed as a fraud or simply doubts their own accomplishments (Williams, 2019). Whilst noticing the paradox in terminology, in this study I will be referring to this phenomenon using the term ‘imposter syndrome’, as it is

more established in terminology and therefore more commonly used to describe this phenomenon in for instance prior studies.

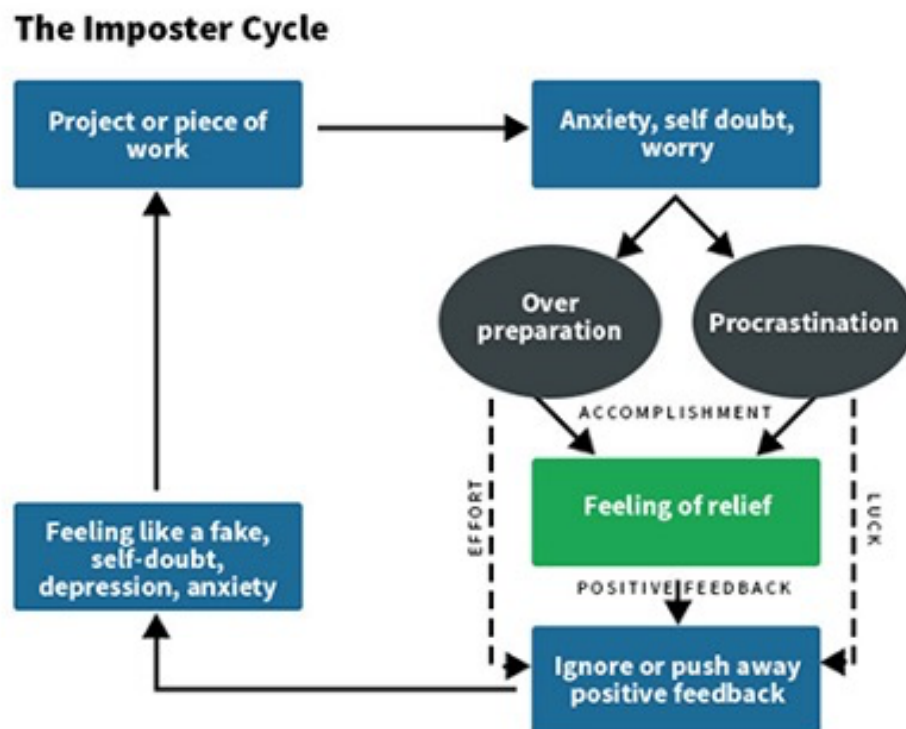


Figure 3: The Imposter cycle (Clance et al., 1995).

According to Williams (2019), a person suffering from the imposter syndrome often believes that they have somehow fooled others into overrating their capabilities. Other signs of the impostor syndrome include attributing their own accomplishments to luck, misjudgment, presentation skills etc. As presented in Figure 3, people suffering from the impostor syndrome often start off their given tasks by either procrastinating or overpreparing. Once the task is completed, a feeling of relief takes over. When the person is then faced with a new task, similar feelings of self-doubt and anxiety recur, and the cycle starts back up again (Williams, 2019).

The American Psychological Association (2021) states that the impostor syndrome might influence a person's performance. For instance, if a woman feels that the work environment is strongly male-dominated, they might feel that they do not belong there. These feelings can also interfere with the courage to take risks, as a result of fearing failure. This in turn might have a negative effect on one's career (Palmer, 2021).

#### 2.2.4 Glass ceiling phenomenon

The glass ceiling phenomenon was introduced by the Wall Street Journal in 1986, and it has since been used to describe the invisible barrier that women face when attempting to advance in their career and climb the corporate ladder (Eagly et al., 2007). According to Lockert (2022), women's ambition level, skills or talent do not explain the hindrance in their career development. Therefore, this invisible barrier preventing women from moving up the career ladder likely consists of factors such as unconscious bias and stereotypical attitudes. It has been found that in general, men are less likely to recognize a woman's merits (Lockert, 2022).

According to Eagly et al. (2007), even with the term still being in active use, some argue it no longer applies. As there have been women in executive roles in both business, and political positions, one could argue that the phrase is outdated. Also, the phenomenon fails to take notice in women's journeys to reaching a leadership role – these journeys often include a complex variety of challenges. Eagly et al (2007) suggest that the glass ceiling phenomenon is wrong as it implies that men and women have equal access to lower positions (entry- and midlevel positions). This is inaccurate, as studies have shown that gender bias is apparent even as early as during the hiring process. According to Isaac et al. (2009), studies have reaffirmed negative gender bias against women when applying for positions that are traditionally or predominantly held by men (Isaac et al., 2009). In turn, Eagly et al., (2007) state that the phenomenon should be referred to as the *labyrinth of leadership*. This would more suitably describe the detours that women face in their careers, once trying to gain more authority (Lockert, 2022).

However, Piha (2005), states that the existence of the glass ceiling phenomenon has been proven to be real by multiple studies, for instance by Lockert (2022), as well as everyday experiences that women face in their career. The existence of the glass ceiling phenomenon showcases that even though gender equality in Finland can be considered quite high, there are still issues that need to be addressed. This invisible obstacle is something which might prevent many capable female leaders from reaching their full potential and employment in positions of power. Hence, women should actively aim for higher positions in their career (Piha, 2005). According to the Chamber of Commerce Helsinki (2022), the number of female leaders has grown in the past years, especially in the mid-level leadership positions (Kajala, 2022). This in turn will likely provide an even higher number of women who aim for higher leadership positions in the future.

As stated by Lockert (2022), as a possible to solution to the glass ceiling phenomenon, companies are encouraged to review their practices and employee retention. Importantly, when the unconscious biases are recognized, men may start advocating for women in the work environment. In order to overcome the glass ceiling phenomenon, change starts from those in positions of power (Lockert, 2022).

### **2.2.5 Wage gap**

As outlined by Hyypä (2022), in Finland, employers have a legislated responsibility to expedite equality in collective labor agreements, especially in salaries. Yet, the wage gap between men and women is still one of the most pivotal equality issues in Finland today. Though fluctuation amongst salaries is desirable, the basis for these differences should be in the qualifications and competences, success in said job and the job description itself. Gender should not be one of these factors (Hyypä, 2022).

According to the Finnish institute for health and welfare, THL (2022), the wage gap between men and women in Finland is on average 16%, in favor of men. Men and women have traditionally gravitated towards different industries and positions. Many of the female dominated industries are paid less whereas the male dominated industries have a higher salary level (THL, 2022). It is also more common for female-dominated industries to provide part-time work, which in turn further contributes to the wage gap between men and women (Sørensen, 2019).

The Finnish institute for health and welfare, THL (2022), reports that in Finland, educational background does not explain the wage gap, as women are more likely to have a tertiary level education than men. On average, women of all educational levels earn less than their male colleagues. Men experience a more rapid and powerful development in their income than women, and men often reach the peak of their career earlier than women. One of the influencing factors has been found to be maternity leaves (THL, 2022).

The Finnish business school graduates, Ekonomit, study their members' salaries annually, and every fourth year they conduct a wage gap study, aiming to showcase possible differences amongst the salaries of men and women. According to their latest study conducted in October 2021, the current income gap between men and women is 22%. Once the known factors, such

as the industry in question, working hours, location of the job, etc., are removed, the unexplained wage gap between men and women is 9% - this has not changed much since the 1990's (Hyypä, 2022).

## **2.3 Combining family and career**

Lewis (2009) suggests that the asymmetric, stereotypical gendered behavior amongst men and women has caused a problem in reconciling work and family life. In all developed countries, women have increased their paid working hours in the recent years. However, men have not increased their hours of household work, at least not to the same extent. This alludes to the fact that even though women are more present in the work life, building their own careers, the responsibilities at home still fall mainly on them (Lewis, 2009).

### **2.3.1 Stereotypical gender roles**

Studies have shown that marriage and parenthood affect men's career development in an opposite way to that of women. Whereas men are found to have higher wages when married with children, the same factors are associated with lower wages when it comes to women (Eagly et al., 2007). It is also generally thought that combining family life and building a career is easier for men than it is for women, as it still seems that traditional gender roles hold great value amongst business leaders (Vasama, 2015).

According to a study by Heikkinen (2015), which Vasama refers to in their work (2015), women are still expected to primarily focus on taking care of the family and home, and only then worry about their own careers. It is also considered more acceptable for male leaders to work long hours, even if it means spending less time with their family. Additionally, it was also found that women were less likely to have their families' support, whereas successful male leaders were often supported by their families (Heikkinen 2015 in Vasama, 2015).

Vasama (2015) reports, that in 2015, Finnish female leaders had fewer children than male leaders, and fewer children than the average Finnish women. Women in leadership roles were also found to be more often divorced or unmarried. In 2013, when studying the biggest Finnish companies and their boards of directors, only 7% of the male leaders were divorced, while the

same applied to 20% of the female leaders. When narrowing the study down to women under the age of 40, the figure increased to 25%. It was also found that only half of these women had children, whereas the same number for men was 4 out of 5 (Vasama, 2015).

According to a study by Katainen et al. (2015), it was also found that in many cases male leaders' spouses did not work – only one of ten was employed. Instead, they were staying at home and taking care of the family. These findings suggest that when the man of the family is in a leadership position, no changes need to be made to the traditional gender roles. Hence the support that a female leader receives from her family is strongly influenced by how gender roles are viewed in their family (flexible vs. traditional views) (Katainen et al., 2015).

As further outlined by Katainen et al. (2015), studies have shown that in order to become a successful leader, support from the family and especially from the spouse, are of great significance. When studying the statistics, it is clear, that male leaders have an upper hand– as they more often have spouses that are staying at home taking care of the family. Female leaders were found less likely to have a partner, and if they did, the partner was more likely to be working in a leadership position themselves. This can be interpreted as male leaders receiving more support from their spouses and being less responsible for taking care of their family and homelife. It seems that combining career and a family life including small children, is more demanding for female leaders than it is for male leaders (Katainen et al., 2015).

### **2.3.2 Parental leave**

As reported by the Finnish institute for health and welfare, THL, (2022), in Finland, both parents are granted separate parental leaves (maternity leave and paternal leave) when their child is born. After these days are used, the parents can divide the remaining parental leave amongst themselves. In 2021, women used 97% of the parental leave days that can be divided amongst the parents. When comparing the parental leave statistics in the Nordic countries, Finnish fathers use less paternal leave days than fathers in other Nordic countries. One fifth of Finnish fathers do not use any of the parental leave days they are provided with (THL, 2022). In 2021, Finnish fathers used only 11% of the provided parental leave days (Moisio, 2023).

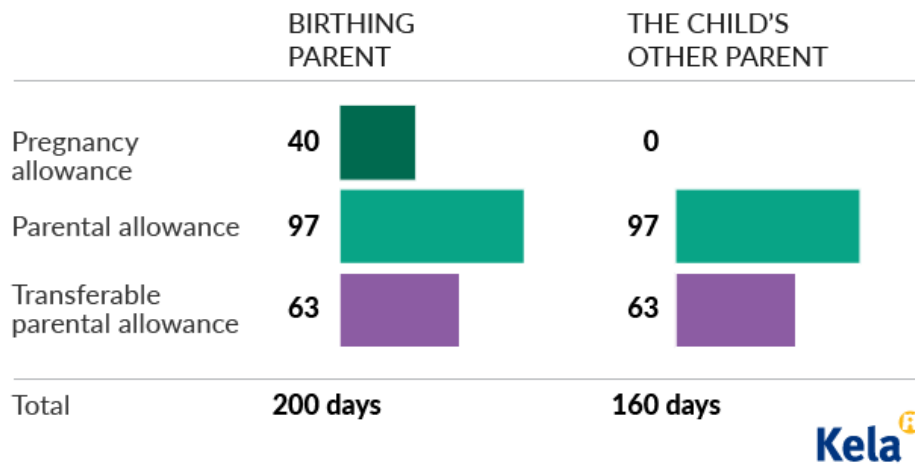
The Finnish institute for health and welfare, THL, (2022), reports that after the parental leave is used, a parent has the option to extend their stay at home with their child. In this case, the

parent receives benefits called the child home care allowance. In most families (82%), one of the parents will stay at home for at least a short period after the parental leaves are over – 92% out of these parents are women. In most families (60%) this time period is less than 12 months (THL, 2022).

According to a study by Hyypä (2022), a more even distribution of parental leave has a significant impact on wage equality. As the responsibility of taking care of the family is equally distributed amongst the parents, both have an equal possibility to focus on their career whilst still being a part of their everyday family life. Nonetheless, Finnish mothers are still using most of the available parental leave, meaning that the responsibility of taking care of the family falls mainly to them (Hyypä, 2022).

Long maternity leaves result in a decrease in mothers' income & pension levels, claims the Finnish institute for health and welfare THL (2022). After the break in their career, mothers' income development is hindered. When returning to their jobs after a maternity leave of less than two years, mothers earn on average 8-11% less than women without children. If a mother spends a longer time at home with their children (three years or more), their income level is approximately 19% less in comparison to women without children, once they return to work (THL 2022).

As explained by Hyypä (2022), Finland has adopted a new parental leave model, which came into effect in August 2022. This change aims to distribute the parental leave more evenly amongst both parents by increasing the amount of paternal leave days for fathers. However, as the parental leave days can still be distributed amongst the parents themselves, this might not fix the issue (Hyypä, 2022). The new parental leave model is designed to be more equal amongst parents, providing the mother with an initial 40 days of 'pregnancy leave' and after this, both parents are each provided with 160 days of paid parental leave. If one parent does not want to use their parental leave days, they can gift up to 63 days to the other parent, but not the entire 160 days (Kela, 2023). The distribution of parental leave days in this reform is presented in Figure 4. Even with this reform, 90% of fathers want to give as many parental leave days as possible to the mother, for her to stay at home instead of them (Moisio, 2023).



*Figure 4: Parental leave system in Finland (Kela, 2023)*

In 2023, an anonymous survey was conducted by Moisio in Helsingin Sanomat, aiming to uncover the reasoning behind fathers not using their provided parental leave days. The questionnaire was answered by 130 fathers and the most common reasons for not utilizing the offered parental leave days were money, stereotypical gender roles and prioritizing their own careers. Additionally, some men stated that they did not use their parental leave, because their spouses wanted to stay at home longer, hence they gifted their days to the mothers. The results of this questionnaire suggest that gender roles are still very prominent in the Finnish society. According to some answers, men feel that they are not as capable to take care of the children, and that in turn women are biologically more cable to do so (e.g. breastfeeding). Some also stated that as their income level is higher than that of their spouses, it was financially a more sensible decision for the mother to stay at home. Others felt that they simply enjoy their jobs and value their careers too much to take a break (Moisio, 2023).

On the other hand, Spangsdorf et al. (2021), found in their study that the structure of the welfare state does not explain the inequality amongst male and female leaders. According to their findings, the inequality is caused by biased attitudes and stereotypes. Hence, if the inequality of men and women in leadership positions stems from bias and stereotypes, the improvement in structure of the country's parental leave system may not address the problem sufficiently (Spangsdorf et al., 2021).



### 2.3.3 Motherhood penalty

As outlined by Maddox (2022), *the Motherhood penalty* alludes to a phenomenon where women are less likely to be hired, promoted, and are even paid less in wages compared to men. The motherhood penalty can simply be considered a wage penalty associated with being or becoming a mother. The root cause of the motherhood penalty is based on a stereotypical view, where women are expected to stay at home and take care of their children as the primary caregivers, whereas men are seen as the breadwinner of the family (Maddox, 2022).

The motherhood penalty is one of the main contributors to why women are often held back from being promoted to leadership positions, as well as for the wage gap amongst men and women (Zalis, 2019). Mothers with the same qualifications as their male colleagues are less likely to be recognized as capable (Miller, 2014). This bias has been found to affect all women – as even those who are not, nor ever will be mothers have to pay ‘the motherhood penalty’ (Zalis, 2019).

As reported by Vuori (2022), the employment rate for young women between the ages 25 to 34 is 7% lower when compared to men of the same age in Finland. This suggests that many young women are not participating in the workforce but are staying at home and taking care of their families instead. Vuori (2022) reports that the reason behind this disparity is the Finnish parental leave system. This, however, is contradicted by Spangsdorf et al. (2021), who claim that the structure of the welfare state does not explain the inequality amongst male and female leaders.

Vuori (2022) further claims that the parental leave system is to blame for the inequality, as the daycare expenses in Finland are higher when compared to the other Nordic countries (up to 288e/month/child, depending on the family’s income level), it is not compelling for the mothers to return to their jobs and start paying the expensive daycare fees. Many would rather stay at home and take care of the children by themselves (Vuori, 2022). This is also supported by Elliot (2017), as they suggest that two policy changes should be done in order to eliminate the motherhood penalty: nontransferable parental leave days for both parents, encouraging both parents to stay at home, and access to high-quality, publicly funded childcare (Elliot 2017).

Though Finland already offers publicly funded childcare, the monthly fees can still be considered high for some, as they are determined by the family's income level. Vuori (2022) compares the Finnish system to that of Sweden, where the highest monthly fee for daycare is 150e/month per child. In addition to lower fees, Sweden also offers 15 hours per week of free childcare to children between the ages 3 to 5. This can encourage young mothers to return to work sooner, at least part-time (Vuori, 2022).

#### **2.3.4 Fatherhood bonus**

The paradox is, that whilst women are somewhat penalized for becoming mothers, men are in turn seen as more reliable if they become fathers (Maddox, 2022). These findings are supported also by both Vasama (2015) and Heikkinen (2015). According to Maddox (2022), men are seen as reliable once they become fathers, relating back to the stereotype of men being “the breadwinner of the family”. Women in turn are seen as unreliable, devoted to their children, taking time off when the children are sick and requiring flexible work environments (Maddox, 2022). This phenomenon is also supported by Miller (2014), who claims that women get a 4% pay cut for each child they have, whereas men get a 6% raise. This paradox is referred to as the *fatherhood bonus*. Fathers are more likely to be hired for a position, in comparison to men with no children, and they are often paid more. High-income men have most likely received their biggest salary increases once they had children. This is due to assumptions made by employers; men with children can be considered dependable, as they have a family to provide for (Miller, 2014).

These findings are also supported by Fuller et al. (2018), as in their study of 18 730 men, it was shown that men were given a raise as they became fathers. They found that the fatherhood bonus was the highest (net wage premium of 6,9 percent) for men in high managerial positions. This income development can be linked to becoming a father, as their study showed that when comparing the wage development of men working in merit-based occupations, the fatherhood bonus was smaller. In fact, it was found that men with children tended to receive the raise, even if they were not considered harder workers (Fuller et al., 2018). This suggests that the fatherhood bonus exists, and the identified salary developments are not in fact performance related. Hence, one could argue that having children is one of the best things a man can do for their career, and for a woman, one of the worst things she can do to hers (Scanlon, 2018).

### 3 Method

The objective of this study is to identify different challenges that women face when aiming to advance in their career whilst simultaneously living a family life. The research method used is a series of semi-structured interviews with six women working in leadership positions in Finland. Through the gathered interview data, the research aims to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. *What career advancement related challenges do female leaders experience at work?*

The main research question is further addressed by the following sub-objective:

2. *What challenges do female leaders experience when combining work and family life?*

#### 3.1 Research approach

This qualitative research focuses on gender equality in the Finnish business world, more specifically on why the positive Global Gender Gap Report results are not reflected in the number of female leaders in Finland. As prior research provides contradicting results, the topic is further studied through semi-structured interviews with female leaders. Six women in different parts of their career were interviewed to provide extensive data and personal experiences on the possible challenges they have faced. As the study should not be conducted without sufficient knowledge and understanding of theory (Hirsjärvi et al., 2000), a thorough literature review was conducted prior to the empirical study.

According to Hirsjärvi et al. (2000), the research question is a key factor when deciding the suitable research method, as it dictates what data, and how much of it is needed, as well as how it should be collected. The first step in determining the suitable research method, is to conclude between qualitative and quantitative research methods. Quantitative research is based on a deductive method, narrowing the data down from general to specific information. It aims to predict, explain and understand using generalizations. Qualitative research is based on an inductive process. It expands from specific to general information and it is simultaneously interested in multiple different factors that affect the result. Qualitative research is contextual, aiming to uncover theories to understand the bigger phenomenon. Furthermore, qualitative

research aims to be specific and accurate by verifying its findings (Hirsjärvi et al., 2000). The research tools, such as interviews, allow the researcher to examine the interviewees' experiences in depth (Hennik et al., 2020), hence this method was found to be suitable for the purpose of this study.

### **3.2 Data collection**

The data was collected using semi-structured interviews. In a semi-structured interview only some of the interview questions are prepared beforehand, leaving room for open discussion and additional questions during the interview (Saunders et al., 2019). The interview questions were planned in a manner that supported the research questions, however as objectively as possible. According to King (2010), the key to a successful research interview is to avoid leading questions and letting the interviewee answer without any preconceptions. This way the data collected is as accurate and objective as possible (King, 2010).

As the topic of the study can be considered quite personal, the interviews were conducted anonymously. This way, the respondents were likely to speak more freely, and the collected data could therefore be considered more reliable and comprehensive. The chosen interviewees were contacted via e-mail, and the interviews were held between the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 2022 and the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 2023. The interviews were held via Microsoft Teams, and they were recorded. The obtained information was transcribed. This method is used especially in cases where results are conducted directly from recorded audio, such as interview tapes (Hirsjärvi et al., 2010). The recordings were transcribed promptly after the interviews, to ensure that all statements were understood correctly and came across as intended.

The conducted interview guide in Appendix 1 was followed in all the interviews, The intent of the interview guide was to stay on topic and to ensure that all the necessary topics were discussed. The interview duration varied, with the shortest interview lasting 45 minutes and the longest 95 minutes. Two of the interviewees also shared some of their experiences off-record, asking for these issues not to be included in the study – these were not transcribed. All interviews were held in Finnish; hence the findings & quotes are translated into English in Chapter 4. Although the translation aims to preserve the integrity of the statements and their intended meanings, some nuances might have been lost in translation. The interview guide, translated into Finnish, is also included in Appendix 2.

### 3.3 Interviewee selection

The aim of the interviews was to gather personal experiences and data from respondents regarding both research questions. As the study is focused on Finland and the gender segregation in Finnish companies, the chosen interviewees are all building their career in Finland. Secondly, as the study focuses on female leaders, the interviewees are all women and working in leadership positions.

In order to receive comprehensive data, the interviewees chosen are working in different companies – otherwise the data would have been reflective of only one specific company and its career possibilities for women. Even though the interviewees are working in different companies, they work in similar fields. The possibilities and challenges of women working in predominantly female dominated fields can be considered different from those working in predominantly male dominated industries. All interviewees chosen are working in Nordic companies, operating in Finland in the service industry (either business-to-business or business-to-consumer) in the private sector. This industry is traditionally not considered to be female dominated.

To receive inclusive data on the different challenges that female leaders have faced, it was deemed important to get a reasonable cross section of interviewees. Therefore, the chosen interviewees represent women of different ages and educational backgrounds. All chosen interviewees have tertiary level education, as this can be seen as somewhat of an indicator of ambition to advance in their career. Even though the study focuses also on combining family and work life, having children was not listed as one of the criteria when choosing the interviewees. Starting a family could also be considered a hindrance in one's career, as suggested by Vasama (2015) and discussed in the literature review and could therefore demonstrate possible sacrifices and decisions made. Despite this, all respondents in this research are mothers. Lastly, when choosing the interviewees, women with different leadership backgrounds were chosen, with the minimum criteria for leadership experience being 6 months.

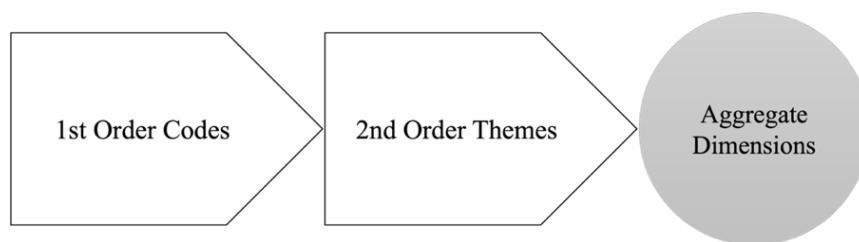
In Figure 5, relevant information on the interviewees is presented. To provide privacy, and ensure that the ethical guidelines are followed, they are kept anonymous, and their employers are not named.

Interviewee	Current position	Educational background	Number of years in a leadership position
Interviewee 1	Sales Director	Bachelor of Business Administration	2,5 years
Interviewee 2	Account Director	Bachelor of Business Administration	6 months
Interviewee 3	General Manager	Master of Science	10 years
Interviewee 4	Manager	Master of Arts	10 years
Interviewee 5	Communications and Marketing Director	Master of Arts	6 months
Interviewee 6	Human Resources Director	Master of Science	16 years

*Figure 5: Interviewees*

### 3.4 Data analysis

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, essentially following the logic of the Gioia method. The collected interview data is interpreted using codes and categories to demonstrate the findings in a visual matter, showcasing the links amongst the raw data and the derived concepts (Gioia et al., 2013). The different phases of the data analysis process using the Gioia methodology are presented in Figure 6.



*Figure 6: Data analysis according to the Gioia Method (Gioia et al., 2013)*

In the Gioia method, the collected interview data is first analyzed, the initial data coding is conducted, and a comprehensive compendium is developed. These findings are then combined and organized into second-order themes. The second-order themes are finally distilled into aggregate dimensions. Lastly the terms, dimensions and themes are assembled into a data structure and presented visually (Gioia et al., 2013). In practice, the Gioia method principles

were utilized. However, as the collected data was quite extensive, similar initial codes were combined and grouped into 1<sup>st</sup> order codes.

The interviews were transcribed using the Microsoft Word automatic transcribe tool. The transcriptions were then proofread in accordance with the original recordings, and manually corrected. Following the transcription, the statements were inserted into Excel. A total of 180 statements were found. Additionally, after the interviews, Interviewee 5 also sent an e-mail, explaining two more examples that she had thought of after the interview, bringing the total to 182 statements. However, not all of these 182 statements were directly related to the research questions, and some of them were repeating the same topic. Once completing the initial analysis of the data, irrelevant points were discarded. Out of the remaining statements 57 alluded to the first research question and 61 statements to the second research question. As some of the remaining statements were repetitive on the same topic, similar statements were combined. The results were then grouped into 1<sup>st</sup> order codes. There are twenty-one 1<sup>st</sup> order codes relating to challenges that women face when advancing in their career (research question 1) and eleven 1<sup>st</sup> order codes relating to the challenges in combining work & family life (research question 2).

The 1<sup>st</sup> order codes were reviewed, and codes of similar nature were combined into 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes. For the first research question, relating to challenges in career advancement, eight 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes were identified. As for the second research question, regarding challenges in combining work and family life, six 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes were identified. These findings were then refined into aggregate dimensions: five were found relating to career advancement challenges and four were identified relating to challenges related to combining work and family life.

### **3.5 Ethical aspects**

In Finland, guidelines have been put in place to ensure that studies are conducted in an ethical manner (TENK, 2021) – these guidelines were also followed in this study. According to the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, TENK, (2021), when conducting research with human participants, general ethical principles should be followed. The general ethical principles include respecting the participants dignity and autonomy, as well as the material and immaterial biodiversity, and cultural heritage, whilst conducting the research in a manner that

causes no significant risks, harm or damage to the participants. If the research is done involving minors or people with limited capabilities, the regulations and ethical principles are more specific (TENK, 2021). However, as this research is conducted on female leaders, the interviewees in this case do not include people from these groups, and hence, no formal ethical review or approval was needed.

When conducting research in an interview format, emphasis should be placed on forming trust amongst the researchers and the participants (TENK, 2021). This was done by allowing the interviewees to voluntarily participate or refuse participation. Interviewees were also allowed to drop out of the study at any given time. Interviewees were provided with a brief introduction to the topic of the study in an objective manner, to ensure that the introduction did not guide their answers in the interview.

The ethical principles also imply the interviewees & their employers are kept anonymous. The interviewees in this thesis are described only on a general level, explaining their current position, leadership experience, educational background and family situation, as this information is relevant for evaluating the study. This was however done in a manner that does not compromise their anonymity and their personal information is not revealed. This way their experiences and possible critiques cannot be traced back to them specifically.

### **3.6 Trustworthiness**

Credibility in qualitative research is achieved by explicating contextual meanings, presenting and comparing multiple types of data & a variety of participants (Tracy, 2013). To ensure trustworthiness of the research, the interviewees were chosen carefully according to the set criteria, presented in section 3.3. As the interviewees were kept anonymous, and they seemingly had nothing to benefit from entering the study, their statements can be considered reliable. The findings were proofread and studied extensively. All results, including any possible contradicting findings, were presented. The number of the interviewees was deemed sufficient for the study, as the collected data could be considered saturated – the same findings kept arising in the interviews. A comprehensive literature review was completed before the interviews, to ensure that the topic and its controversial opinions and definitions were familiar.



## 4 Results

This chapter presents the data that was collected through semi-structured interviews with the chosen six respondents, presented in Chapter 3. The findings are presented in accordance with the two research questions; 1. *What career advancement related challenges do female leaders experience at work?* and 2. *What challenges do female leaders experience when combining work and family life?*

### 4.1 Career advancement related challenges: Research Question 1

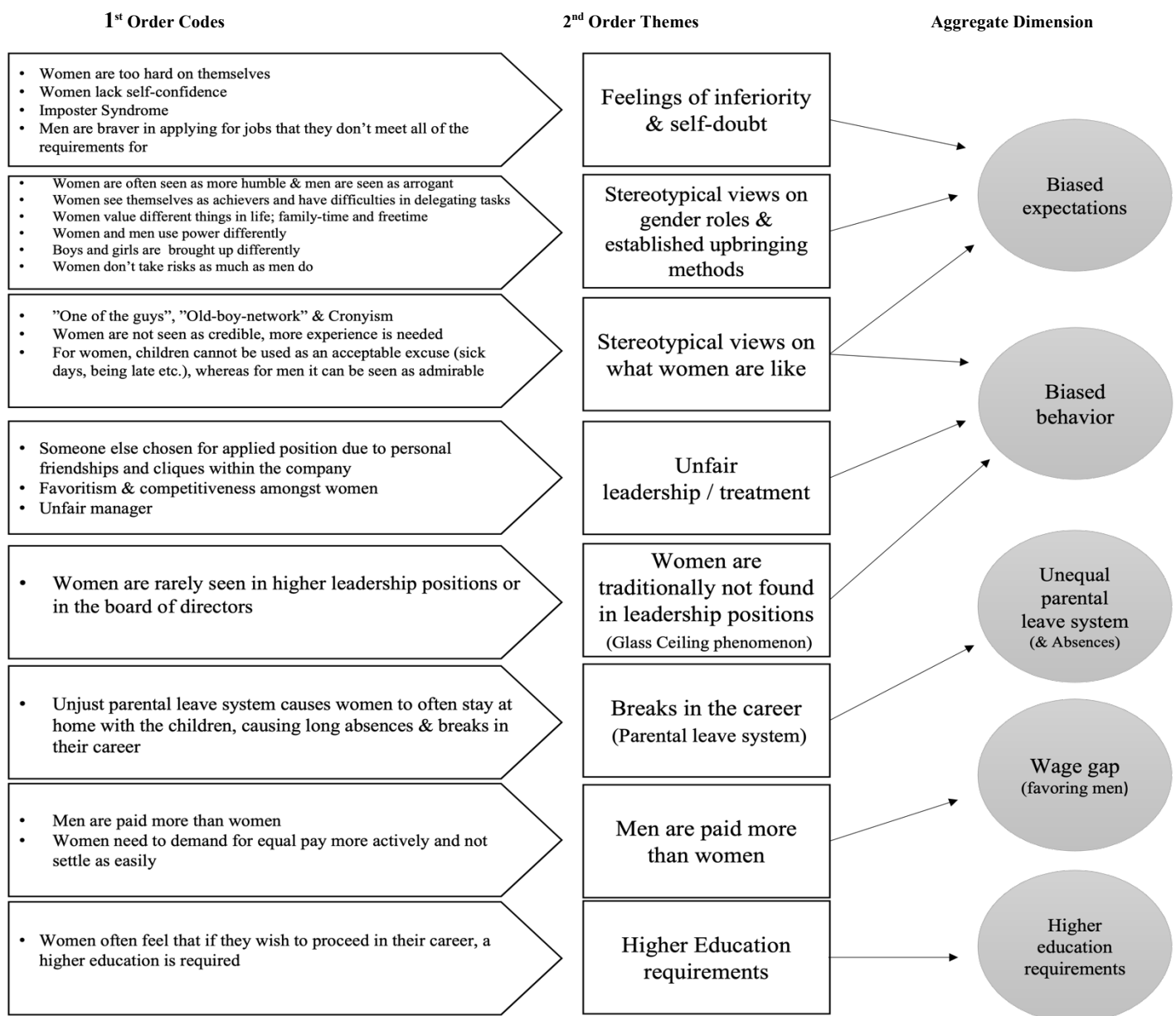


Figure 7: Research Question 1, findings presented in the code-aggregation data structure

The results for the first research question, *What career advancement related challenges do female leaders experience at work?* are presented in Figure 7. There were twenty-one 1<sup>st</sup> order codes identified relating to challenges that women face when advancing in their career. These twenty-one 1<sup>st</sup> order codes were then refined into eight 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes:

1. Feelings of inferiority & self-doubt
2. Stereotypical views on gender roles & established upbringing methods
3. Stereotypical views on what women are like
4. Unfair leadership / treatment
5. Women are traditionally not found in leadership positions (Glass Ceiling Phenomenon)
6. Breaks in the career (parental leave system)
7. Men are paid more than women
8. Higher education requirements.

These 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes were then further combined into five aggregate dimensions: *Biased expectations*, *Biased behavior*, *Unequal parental leave system (& absences)*, *Wage gap (favoring men)* and *Higher education requirements*.

## **4.2 Aggregate dimensions**

The results for research question 1, *What career advancement related challenges do female leaders experience at work?*, are now reported in the order of the five aggregate dimensions, which also serve as sub-headings.

### **4.2.1 Biased expectations**

The aggregate dimension, ‘Biased expectations’, consists of the following 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes: *Feelings of inferiority & self-doubt*, *Stereotypical views on gender roles & established upbringing methods* and *Stereotypical views on what women are like*. These 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes were identified to belong under the same aggregate dimension, as they all capture biased and stereotypical expectations that women face in their career; as unconscious bias from themselves and as conscious biases from others.

All the interviewees stated that they feel that one of the biggest challenges they have faced in their career, is self-doubt and feelings of inferiority. One of the interviewees also reflected on her own upbringing methods, stating that she even acknowledges herself that she is raising her sons differently compared to her daughter. Another reoccurring theme in all the interviews, was a stereotypical way that women are often still viewed. Many feel that there is a sense of an ‘old-boy-network’ still remaining, and women are left out because they aren’t considered ‘one of the guys’. Women also feel that there is a double standard when it comes to using their children as an excuse – women are often frowned upon when doing so, whilst men are praised for it.

### **Feelings of inferiority & self-doubt**

This 2<sup>nd</sup> order theme consists of the subsequent 1<sup>st</sup> order codes: *Women are too hard on themselves*, *Women lack self-confidence*, *Imposter Syndrome* and *Men are braver in applying for jobs that they don’t meet all of the requirements for*.

Most interviewees felt that women are often too hard on themselves.

*“My guess is that women are too hard on themselves. I myself have sometimes thought ‘I can’t apply for that job; I don’t meet all the requirements.’”*  
(Interviewee 1)

*“And it has been studied that women kind of underestimate themselves, in the sense that if a position has many requirements, they feel ‘if I do not meet them all, I shouldn’t even apply’.”*  
(Interviewee 5)

Additionally, many felt that women often lack self-confidence.

*“I myself experienced it for a long time, the feeling of ‘I’m not good enough, not educated enough’.”*  
(Interviewee 2)

*“Women should trust themselves, be brave and curious and trust themselves as a person.”*

*(Interviewee 6)*

*“Women, in my experience, they have to be somehow terribly sure that they know everything before they dare to throw themselves into it.”*

*(Interviewee 6)*

In relation to self-confidence issues, many felt that impostor syndrome is also often present.

*“And now we’re talking about some kind of ‘impostor syndrome’, these kinds of new terms. Women feel that they must somehow achieve much more and know much more. The thought that you must always be somehow better and prove more, because you are a woman.”*

*(Interviewee 4)*

*” I should have trusted my own capabilities and my own know-how more. Of course, the confidence in oneself builds up over time, but it might have been beneficial to start believing in oneself even earlier.”*

*(Interviewee 4)*

Contrasting to how women feel about themselves, it was also brought up that men are often braver in applying for jobs that they don’t meet all of the requirements for.

*“I feel that men are perhaps more courageous, of course not to generalize, I’m sure there are of course exceptions in men also, but they probably apply for more positions, even if they do not meet the set requirements.”*

*(Interviewee 1)*

*“It’s easier for men to throw themselves into things that they don’t really know anything about, but they just believe that they can manage.”*

*(Interviewee 6)*

## **Stereotypical views on gender roles & established upbringing methods**

This 2<sup>nd</sup> order theme covers the following 1<sup>st</sup> order codes: *Women are often seen as more humble & men are seen as arrogant, Women see themselves as achievers and have difficulties in delegating tasks, Women value different things in life: family-time & free time, Women and men use power differently, Boys and girls are brought up differently and Women don't take risks as much as men do.*

Several respondents alluded to women being more humble and men more arrogant.

*"I have a few trusted male friends that I can discuss things like money with. For example, they have just stated to their employer; 'I need a raise or I'm leaving', and I'm just like, 'I would never say that!'"*

*(Interviewee 6)*

*"Things that I consider as arrogant, men think 'of course that's how it's done!'"*

*(Interviewee 3)*

Many of the interviewed women stated that they are over achievers and even have difficulties in delegating tasks.

*"I am one of those straight A, achiever girls, who wants to do things well and perfectly and I demand a lot from myself. I wouldn't sleep well at night, if I had done things badly. But then on the other hand, it might also be somewhat of a lack of skills to delegate properly. So, I also need to develop myself or the confidence in not having to take care of everything myself, that tasks can also be delegated."*

*(Interviewee 3)*

*"I'm just a responsible person. So, I bring a lot of work home with me."*

*(Interviewee 4)*

Some also felt that women value different things in life, such as family-time and free time.

*“Women my age don't want to work so much, they value their free time and their family life.”*

*(Interviewee 3)*

*“For many, it is important to be a mother or to become a mother, to start a family. Then they are often scared, wondering if they are good enough, and how to combine soft values, such as motherhood and the so-called hard & cold business world.”*

*(Interviewee 2)*

*“Parenthood has, at least for me, reduced the importance of work.”*

*(Interviewee 5, via e-mail after the interview)*

It was also suggested that women and men use power differently.

*“If I think about myself, I'm much humbler and more modest and I don't wield power in the same way that maybe male colleagues in general do”*

*(Interviewee 3)*

*“Rarely do we have female leaders who speak over someone or, in my experience, interrupt or shout or raise their voices”*

*(Interviewee 3)*

Several respondents also brought up differences in girls' and boys' upbringing.

*“Us women have not been encouraged at home.*

*(...)*

*Encouragement in the sense that a woman can be a CEO, just as much as a man can be a CEO.”*

*(Interviewee 2)*

*“I myself have two boys and one girl, and I do realize that I am raising them differently”*

*(Interviewee 3)*

*"I don't really know if it comes from my own family background or my upbringing, it's a bit of a, you know, a modesty culture."*

*(Interviewee 2)*

It was also suggested that women don't take risks as much as men do.

*"Men are also more of risk takers than women."*

*(Interviewee 5)*

### **Stereotypical views on what women are like**

These 1<sup>st</sup> order codes make up this 2<sup>nd</sup> order theme: *"One of the guys", "Old-boy-network" & Cronyism, Women are not seen as credible, more experience is needed and For women, children cannot be used as an acceptable excuse (sick days, being late etc.), whereas for men it can be seen as admirable.*

A reoccurring theme in several of the interviews, was the idea of not being classed as 'one of the guys', and a sense of an old-boy-network, alluding to cronyism.

*"I'm not sure if this is still the case, but at least 10 years ago, there was a bit of an old-boys-network, so it was perhaps a bit easier for men to talk to each other, and you know, they might even get confused sometimes when a woman came into the fold."*

*(Interviewee 6)*

*"I'm not one of the guys."*

*(Interviewee 5)*

It was felt that women are not seen as credible, and they are required to be more experienced.

*"Even though I had the experience and achievements, they didn't always vouch for some of the decisions made, maybe because someone else wanted something else. Not necessarily in recruits but maybe some positions that have been delegated or reward-related matters. I don't feel that they have always gone as they should have."*

*(Interviewee 6)*

*“I was in a way required to prove myself and my credibility more, especially when I was younger, in comparison to for example my male colleagues.”*

*(Interviewee 6)*

Two respondents also felt that for women, children cannot be used as an acceptable excuse for absences, whereas for men it can even be seen as admirable.

*“When returning [to work from my maternity leave], my new boss didn't appreciate me at all. I could not come up with any reason for it in my actions. So, I thought that it was because of course, when you have small children, you also have some absences.”*

*(Interviewee 2)*

*“Something I've noticed, at least when I was younger, is that ‘I can't attend this meeting because I have to pick up the kids’ or ‘I can't because of my kids’ or ‘I'm not coming because my kids are sick’ was not really an acceptable explanation from a woman.*

*(...)*

*For men, it was more like ‘wow, you're taking part in taking care of the family’. So, then I decided as a young mother that I never used that excuse. So, I never said out loud that my kids were the reason, in a situation like that, I said I had an engagement. I didn't want it to become a situation where it was thought ‘let's not ask her to join this project, she has her kids’.”*

*(Interviewee 6)*

#### **4.2.2 Biased behavior**

‘Biased behavior’ as an aggregate dimension includes 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes: *Stereotypical views on what women are like*, *Unfair leadership / treatment* and *Women are traditionally not found in leadership positions (glass ceiling phenomenon)*. The 2<sup>nd</sup> order theme *stereotypical views on what women are like* was found to belong to both aggregate dimensions: biased expectations and biased behavior. This is due to stereotypical views influencing both actions done by others and thoughts and doubt within oneself. Findings relating to stereotypical views on what women are like were presented in Chapter 3.2.1.



Some of the interviewees had experienced unjust treatment from their colleagues or their superiors. One interviewee also brought up unfair treatment by other women within the company in the form of networking and favoring. Some of the respondents also noted unfair treatment from their superiors when informing them of their upcoming maternity leave. One interviewee also had experienced unjust treatment after returning to work from her maternity leave. As her employer was not accommodating to her new situation as a young mother and not understanding of possible absences due to small children, the interviewee ended up changing her employer.

On the other hand, many of the interviewed women also expressed gratitude towards their employers. Many noted that they had felt genuine happiness from their employers when informing them of their maternity leaves. Several respondents had experienced flexibility and understanding in adapting to the change in their personal lives.

### **Unfair leadership / treatment**

This 2<sup>nd</sup> order theme consists of the 1<sup>st</sup> order codes: *Someone else chosen for applied position due to personal friendships and cliques within the company, Favoritism & competitiveness amongst women and Unfair manager.*

One of the interviewees had experienced not being chosen for applied position, as someone else had been chosen due to personal friendships within the company.

*“I have applied for a position for which I still think that I would have been a more qualified applicant and so on and so forth. But I wasn’t chosen for it then and it was certainly due to some personal relationships and networking behind the scenes”*  
(Interviewee 4)

The same interviewee had experienced favoritism and competitiveness amongst women during her career.

*“I wouldn’t want to say this as a woman, but I’ll say it anyway, but women in a way always have their own agenda.*

*(...)*

*Quite frankly, experiencing things like comparing, badmouthing and gossiping behind others’ backs has been very tough.”*

*(Interviewee 4)*

Two of the respondents had negative experiences with an unfair manager.

*“I experienced injustice and the feeling of not being appreciated because I had small children and a difficult life situation, I tried to work despite that. That was the driver why I also changed employers”*

*(Interviewee 2)*

*“When I came back [from maternity leave], it was quite difficult to combine work and family life and my new tasks, and there was a sense of pressure to meet all expectations. There was a momentary conflict that lapsed only when my previous superior returned to their position.”*

*(Interviewee 4)*

### **Women are traditionally not found in leadership positions (Glass Ceiling Phenomenon)**

The idea of a glass ceiling phenomenon was also brought up in some of the interviewees, as presented in the following quotes. This 2nd order theme consists of the following 1st order code: *Women are rarely seen in higher leadership positions or in the board of directors.*

Several of the interviewed women emphasized that it is still quite rare to see women in higher leadership positions or in the board of directors.

*“I can see that there is somewhat of a glass ceiling. In the mid-level management and in the management team there has always been a lot of women, but the board of directors and CEOs, they are more often male-dominated.”*

*(Interviewee 3)*

*“From that mid-level management point upwards, it starts to be very male-dominated”*  
(Interviewee 4)

*“Now that I started with my current employer as the Communications and Marketing Director, a few young women from our company came up to me and said ‘You are our idol from our organization! We just walked by the conference room and looked inside, and there were 12 men and you!’”*  
(Interviewee 5)

#### **4.2.3 Unequal parental leave system and absences**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> order theme, *Breaks in the career (parental leave system)*, solely makes up the aggregate dimension of unequal parental leave system (& absences). As all the interviewees are mothers, all of them had experience from maternity leaves. The duration of maternity leaves amongst the interviewees varied between 9 months and 5,5 years. One of the interviewees had experience from both the Finnish parental leave system as well as the Swedish parental leave system. In her experience, the system is more equal between men and women in Sweden than it is in Finland, ‘forcing’ the couples to divide the parental leave more evenly amongst themselves.

Many of the interviewed women experienced some unpleasant experiences relating to their maternity leaves. Some felt guilt when informing their employers of the upcoming absence, some were treated unfairly, and one was even encouraged to change employers due to the unjust treatment they experienced. On the contrary, many also had felt support and happiness from their employers. One of the interviewees also thought that the timing of her maternity leave had a positive influence on her career development as there were no breaks later on in her career and was therefore happy that she became a mother early on in her career.

##### **Breaks in the career**

The 1<sup>st</sup> order code: *Unjust parental leave system causes women to often stay at home with their children, causing long absences & breaks in their career*, makes up this 2<sup>nd</sup> order theme.

Another reoccurring theme in the interviews, was that the parental leave is usually divided unevenly amongst parents.

*” The parental leave policy being what it is, it has a major effect on it as well”*

*(Interviewee 4)*

*“Especially as someone who has also lived in Sweden, I find that the parental leave system in Finland also has a significant effect on it. I mean there [in Sweden] they divide the leave equally amongst them and both parents stay at home. I think that it has a significant effect on it as well.”*

*(Interviewee 5)*

#### **4.2.4 Wage gap**

Wage gap (favoring men) as an aggregate dimension consists only of the 2<sup>nd</sup> order theme *Men are paid more than women*. Several respondents stated that they know they are paid less than their male colleagues. It was implied that women are paid less by default. Respondents felt that for women to reach the same income level as men, women should be more aggressive, already in the beginning of their career, in driving their own salary development. Several respondents also suggested that women settle for less than men – if they make an inquiry regarding a raise and it is denied, men are more likely to readdress it, whilst women settle for the initial answer.

##### **Men are paid more than women**

This 2<sup>nd</sup> order theme consists of the following 1<sup>st</sup> order codes: *Men are paid more than women* and *Women need to demand for equal pay more actively and not settle as easily*

Respondents expressed that they know men are paid more than women.

*“The pay is significantly less. It is clear. And, when you are a young woman, not only a woman, but being a young woman, that also has an impact on your salary”*

*(Interviewee 3)*

*“I think men are paid more by default for some reason.”*

*(Interviewee 3)*

*“I know that my salary is not in line with my male colleagues”*

*(Interviewee 6)*

It was also suggested that women should advocate for equal pay, and not settle for less.

*“Well, maybe it's because in a way it's just the history. That one should have been more active in furthering their own salary development from the beginning”*

*(Interviewee 6)*

*“Maybe women still settle easier. I believe that women do ask for salary raises, but if they are told no, they might just settle for it. Whereas men are likely to continue their argument.”*

*(Interviewee 3)*

#### **4.2.5 Higher education requirements**

The aggregate dimension, higher education requirements, consist of the 2<sup>nd</sup> order theme, *Higher education requirements*. Out of the chosen interviewees, four had a master-level education and two of the women had a bachelor's degree. Both of the interviewees with a bachelor's degree alluded to the fact that they feel that they could benefit from a higher educational background if they wished to advance further in their career in the future.

##### **Higher education requirements**

This 2<sup>nd</sup> order theme consists of the 1<sup>st</sup> order code: *Women often feel that if they wish to proceed in their career, a higher education is required*. Some of the interviewed respondents felt that women often feel that a higher education is required, if they wish to advance in their career.

*” If I were to aim for higher positions than my current one, I feel that it would be good to have an MBA or another, higher degree. I do not know if it is a prerequisite, but I bet it would be easier to be promoted with it.”*

*(Interviewee 1)*

*“For a long time I felt that I wasn’t good enough, not educated enough.”*

*(Interviewee 2)*

*“It’s really important to maintain and uphold your own skills and education.*

*(...)*

*Continuous training is also important.”*

*(Interviewee 4)*

### 4.3 Challenges in combining work and family life: Research Question 2

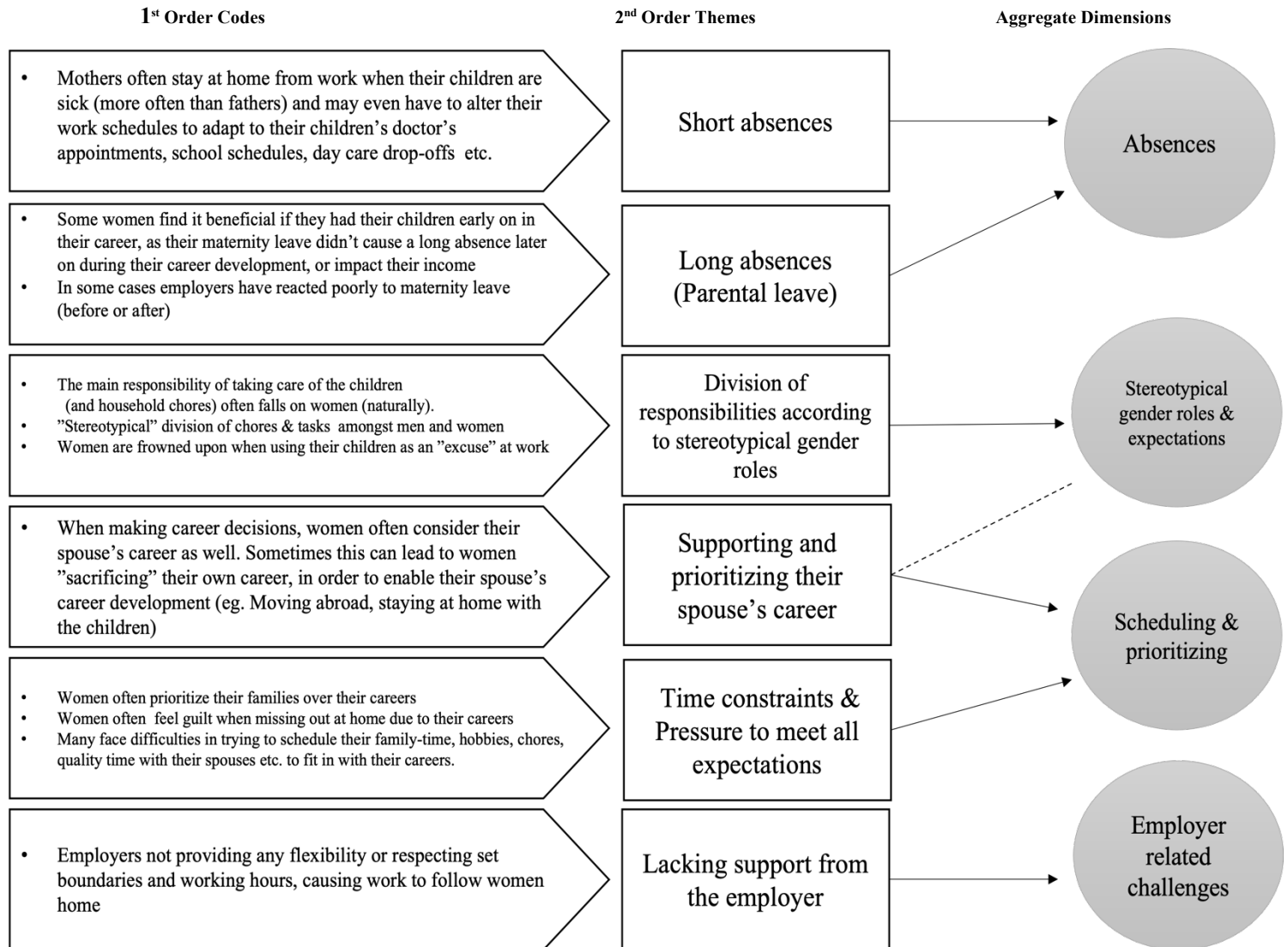


Figure 8: Research Question 2, findings presented in the code-aggregation data structure

The results for the second research question, *What challenges do female leaders experience when combining work and family life?* are presented in Figure 8. There were eleven 1<sup>st</sup> order codes identified relating to the challenges in combining work & family life. These eleven 1<sup>st</sup> order codes were then refined into six 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes:

1. Short Absences
2. Long Absences (Parental leave)
3. Division of responsibilities according to stereotypical gender roles

4. Supporting and prioritizing their spouse's career
5. Time Constraints & Pressure to meet all expectations
6. Lacking support from the employer.

These 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes were then defined into four aggregate dimensions: *Absences*, *Stereotypical gender roles & expectations*, *Scheduling & prioritizing* and *Employer related challenges*. The following sub-chapters aim to present these findings relating to the challenges that women have faced in combining work & family life.

## **4.4 Aggregate dimensions**

The results for research question 2, *What challenges do female leaders experience when combining work and family life?*, are now reported in the order of the five aggregate dimensions, which also serve as sub-headings.

### **4.4.1 Absences**

This aggregate dimension consists of the following 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes: *short absences* and *long absences (parental leave)*. These 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes were identified as belonging to the same aggregate dimension, as both cause women time away from their careers. As all the interviewees are mothers, also the effects of parental leave were discussed. Though some felt that their maternity leave did not influence their careers, others felt that the timing was off or that their employer reacted to it poorly, either before or after the maternity leave.

All respondents had experienced absences due to maternity leaves and many had been absent from work, staying home with their sick children. Many respondents felt that being absent from work can result in being left out from important discussions and meetings and even being considered unreliable.

#### **Short absences**

This 2<sup>nd</sup> order theme consists of the 1<sup>st</sup> order code; *Mothers often stay at home from work when their children are sick (more often than fathers) and may even have to alter their work*



*schedules to adapt to their children's doctor's appointments, school schedules, day care drop-offs etc.*

Several women had experienced short absences from their work due to taking care of their children.

*"I have always arranged my schedules in a way where I was taking care of the children if they were sick. I could say that for the past 16 years I have taken care of all school matters, clinics, doctors, dentists, absences. Yes, so they have all been my responsibility."*

*(Interviewee 2)*

*"However, maybe I was the one who would stay at home."*

*(Interviewee 4)*

*"Of course, I have also made such decisions that I have worked a four-day week and have been at home longer"*

*(Interviewee 5)*

### **Long absences (Parental leave)**

This 2<sup>nd</sup> order theme consists of the following 1<sup>st</sup> order codes: *Some women find it beneficial if they had their children early on in their career, as their maternity leave didn't cause a long absence later on during their career development or impact their income and In some cases employers have reacted poorly to the maternity leave (before or after).*

Several respondents alluded to it being beneficial that they became mothers at a young age, as the maternity leave didn't cause a long absence later on in their career, or a big cleft in their income level.

*"Of course, it has also been good that I became a young mother, so there is like, no mandatory kindergarten things anymore and that she is not completely helpless on her own."*

*(Interviewee 1)*

*“I also understand when you have children later during your career, it might be a more challenging decision to make, because you already have a good income level. We were only at the very beginning of our careers when our firstborn was born. So maybe living with a lower income level wasn’t much of an issue for us, we understood that we have time to earn money later on.”*

*(Interviewee 5)*

Some interviewees had also experienced negative reactions from their employers relating to their maternity leaves.

*“I remember that my boss was happy [when telling them about my upcoming maternity leave], however, I do remember that I got comments along the lines of ‘you haven’t worked here for long’ and ‘I wonder how we’ll manage to organize these work tasks’. That stayed with me, causing me to feel like somewhat of a letdown and having a sense of guilt that I didn’t meet their expectations.”*

*(Interviewee 2)*

*“But then again with my second child, I had been sort of named for upcoming roles and projects, and then I had to say that well actually [I’m leaving]. They were happy, sincerely happy for me, but I could tell that they felt disappointed as they had already conducted the organization models and they had planned things for me.”*

*(Interviewee 6)*

#### **4.4.2 Stereotypical gender roles**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes *division of responsibilities according to stereotypical gender roles supporting and prioritizing their spouse’s career* were refined into an aggregate dimension stereotypical gender roles. These 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes were identified as belonging under the same aggregate dimension, as both can be considered stereotypical behavior when it comes to gender roles.

All the interviewees disclosed that they had undergone some sort of discussions with their spouses on how responsibilities at home should be divided. Some even noted that this had caused arguments. In many cases, women felt that their spouse also helped, and in some cases the respondents said that they felt that the responsibilities were divided equally amongst the parents. However, in most of the interviews, women emphasized that they were responsible for the majority of household chores and taking care of their children.

Additionally, all of the interviewees that claimed that their responsibilities at home were divided 50/50 with their partner, also stated later in the interview that the final responsibility was theirs. This suggests that even if the responsibility for children, chores etc. household tasks are divided evenly amongst the couple, women can feel that they are still more responsible for these issues.

One of the interviewees (Interviewee 5), explained that her spouse's career decisions have also influenced her decisions as well. For example, when her spouse had to move abroad, their whole family followed, and Interviewee 5 stayed at home with the children during this time period. However, she emphasized that this was her own decision.

### **Division of responsibilities according to stereotypical gender roles**

When it comes to challenges that women have faced whilst trying to combine their work and family life, stereotypical gender roles arise again. The following 1<sup>st</sup> order codes make up this 2<sup>nd</sup> order theme: *The main responsibility of taking care of children (and household chores) often falls on women (naturally), "Stereotypical" division of chores & tasks amongst men and women and Women are frowned upon when using their children as an "excuse" at work.*

Many of the interviewees expressed that the responsibilities at home often fall on them naturally, but also that they often take it upon themselves.

*"We have been quite traditional in this sort of men's roles and women's roles at least in the beginning. And to be honest, when it comes to these domestic chores and our children's matters, that I feel that only I know how to do it correctly."*

*(Interviewee 2)*

*"I've always had the main responsibility for our family affairs, regardless of if we were together or separated."*

*(Interviewee 1)*

*"I am still much more responsible for everything. My husband does what it is agreed and specifically asked for, but that's it."*

*(Interviewee 3)*

Several respondents felt that they are responsible for everyday tasks, whilst their spouses are often responsible for tasks like taking their children to their hobbies etc.

*"Of course, my spouse takes care of the so called, this is a bit boring, but the traditional men's chores, for example cars and lamps and whatever, these types of things."*

*(Interviewee 5)*

*"My husband is more responsible for taking care of our second child's football seasons and drop-offs."*

*(Interviewee 5)*

*"My boys play hockey and as my husband loves hockey, he often hung out with the kids at the rink."*

*(Interviewee 3)*

As presented in relation to Research Question 1, two of the interviewees felt that women are frowned upon when using their children as an excuse at work. This was found to be a challenge not only in career advancement, but also in finding a balance amongst work and family life, hence overlapping both research questions. The same quotes which were presented in Chapter 4.2.1 are presented again due to their relevance in this context as well.

*"When returning [to work from my maternity leave], my new boss didn't appreciate me at all. I could not come up with any reason for it in my actions. So, I thought that it was because of course, when you have small children, you also have some absences."*

*(Interviewee 2)*

*“Something I've noticed, at least when I was younger, is that 'I can't attend this meeting because I have to pick up the kids' or 'I can't because of my kids' or 'I'm not coming because my kids are sick' was not really an acceptable explanation from a woman.*

*(...)*

*For men, it was more like 'wow, you're taking part in taking care of the family'. So, then I decided as a young mother that I never used that excuse. So, I never said out loud that my kids were the reason, in a situation like that, I said I had an engagement. I didn't want it to become a situation where it was thought 'let's not ask her to join this project, because she has her kids'.”*

*(Interviewee 6)*

### **Supporting and prioritizing their spouse's career**

This 2<sup>nd</sup> order theme consists of the following 1<sup>st</sup> order code: *When making career decisions, women often consider their spouse's career as well. Sometimes this can lead to women “sacrificing” their own career, in order to enable their spouse's career development (e.g., moving abroad, staying at home with the children).*

*” My spouse's career has also influenced my own decisions”*

*(Interviewee 5)*

#### **4.4.3 Scheduling and prioritizing**

The aggregate dimension scheduling & prioritizing consists of two 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes: *supporting and prioritizing their spouse's career* and *time constraints & pressure to meet all expectations*. The 2<sup>nd</sup> order theme, *supporting and prioritizing their spouse's career*, was seen as fitting also this aggregate dimension, as the respondent emphasized that the decision to move abroad to support her spouse's career was made by herself.

All the interviewees expressed some form of role pressure. Many felt pressure in meeting all of the expectations set for them, not only at work, but also as a mother and a partner. All respondents stated that scheduling is one of the most important, but also difficult factors which impact how combining work and family life pans out.

## **Time constraints & pressure to meet all expectations**

Many of the interviewed women expressed a sense of role pressure to meet all the expectations set for them, wanting to succeed at work but also having quality time with their family. This 2<sup>nd</sup> order theme consists of the following 1<sup>st</sup> order codes: *Women often prioritize their families over their careers*, *Women often feel guilt when missing out at home due to their careers*, and *Many face difficulties in trying to schedule their family-time, hobbies, chore, quality time with their spouses etc. to fit in with their careers*.

Several respondents alluded to prioritizing their families over their careers.

*“No one is indispensable at work, that's good to remember, but at home you are irreplaceable.”*

*(Interviewee 4)*

*“But at the end of the day, work is always only work.”*

*(Interviewee 5)*

Many of the interviewees expressed feelings of being guilt when missing out at home.

*“I've really felt bad about the fact that I'm never at home and I always feel guilty. I always have a bad conscience, you know? But yes, I've also given up on things at work, because I sometimes must be at home as well. ‘Sacrifice’ is probably the wrong word, I'd say it has been my choice, I've chosen to do so”*

*(Interviewee 6)*

*“I've also given up a lot of other things, because I put my kids before my own free time. I think it's been a conscious choice, but it does require sacrifices, for example if you must decide whether to go to Barcelona with your girlfriends or stay at home with the kids, I've always been the one to stay home. But it's been my choice.”*

*(Interviewee 3)*

All the interviewees also expressed some form of stress over scheduling their family-time and free time to fit in with their careers.

*“During the Covid-time in some ways I experienced more time pressure than before. After being done with work, there was a terrible number of responsibilities: cleaning, shopping, cooking, and spending time with my child. And taking care of myself: exercise, meeting friends. A hell of a lot of things that should be done, but everything should be done alone, so it's a bit challenging at times.”*

*(Interviewee 1)*

*“Then you also wish that you would have more time together with your spouse”*

*(Interviewee 6)*

#### **4.4.4 Employer related challenges**

The final aggregate dimension, employer related challenges, consists solely of the 2<sup>nd</sup> order theme, *lacking support from the employer*. Flexibility from the employer enables scheduling and prioritizing, according to the respondents. Many felt that this is a crucial factor in combining work and family life, and unfortunately many had negative experiences.

Many respondents stated that their employers lacked flexibility. They expressed that work followed them home and their employers didn't necessarily respect traditional working hours. However, others stated that their employers' flexibility allowed them to schedule and successfully combine work and family life.

All the interviewees knew that the interviews and findings were kept anonymous. Nevertheless, out of the six interviewees, three started the interviews by complimenting their current employers. It was a common trend to see the interviewees speak more carefully in the beginning of the interviews, and only relax as time went by. This could certainly be caused by nerves; however, it was noted that all these interviewees mentioned that their employers' flexibility was a key factor in scheduling their work and family life.

## **Lacking support from the employer**

Some of the interviewees had experienced challenges in combining work and family life, when their employer wasn't flexible or accommodating to their current life situations. This 2<sup>nd</sup> order theme consists of the subsequent 1<sup>st</sup> order code: *Employers not providing any flexibility or respecting set boundaries and working hours, causing work to follow women home.*

Several interviewees had experienced challenges with their employers not being flexible or respecting boundaries, causing work to follow them home.

*"When I was younger, I couldn't leave work at work. That then led to work following me home and affecting my sleep."*

*(Interviewee 4)*

*"Amongst the set growth & internationalization phase, our new international CEO came with not-so-Nordic ways of working, including not following set working hours, things that we are used to. That then resulted in me noticing that I'm constantly receiving messages from my kids' school, when they did something stupid. That in turn caused my work input to suffer and I was receiving bad feedback from work. The balance is difficult to find sometimes."*

*(Interviewee 5)*

On the other hand, many of the interviewees also expressed gratitude towards their employers, stating that their employer has been flexible and understanding of their personal life. Some examples are presented in the quotes below.

*"Fortunately, I have an extremely flexible employer and quite a flexible spouse. I think that we have been very good at combining work and family life. The only thing is that of course I have brought quite a lot of work home with me, and then at some point I was guilty of doing a so-called second workday after the kids went to bed."*

*(Interviewee 4)*



*“The employer also enables it in their own way, but really I think that if you are in a manager position, at least in larger organizations, the explanation for a project or job is not progressing can never be that you had to take care of your children.”*

*(Interviewee 6)*

For some, flexibility from the employer was also a requirement in accepting the offered position.

*“Another thing I probably forgot to mention is that when I applied for my current employer, I talked very openly about combining family and work in the final round of interviews, because I realized that if it's not genuinely possible in this job, it's a deal breaker for me. My children were younger at the time and my spouse travelled a lot (e.g., I couldn't take a job where I had to travel a lot or work long hours regularly). So, I was already setting limits and clear expectations towards the employer. I also stuck to this and was always on time to pick up the children from the nursery, even though it sometimes seemed difficult in a hectic and male-dominated organization. Although I was often the first one in the office in the morning.”*

*(Interviewee 5, sent via e-mail after the interview)*

## 5 Discussion

The presented findings can be summarized shortly as follows: the interview data relating to the first research question suggests that the main challenges that women face when trying to advance in their career are *biased expectations, biased behavior, unequal parental leave system (absences), wage gap (favoring men) and higher education requirements*. Regarding the second research question, the collected data suggests that when combining work and family life, women face challenges such as *absences, stereotypical gender roles & expectations, scheduling & prioritizing and employer related challenges*.

These findings present absences and stereotypical or biased behavior as aggregate dimensions for both research questions. However, similar themes followed most of the identified challenges, as many dealt with objective, unjust phenomena, such as the wage gap and the parental leave system, or stereotypical behavior and biases. One could even argue that most, if not all, of the prominent challenges relate back to stereotypical expectations and gender roles.

*“Now that I started with my current employer as the Communications and Marketing Director, a few young women from our company came up to me and said ‘You are our idol from our organization! We just walked by the conference room and looked inside, and there were 12 men and you!’”*

*(Interviewee 5)*

Though Finland is one of the leading countries when it comes to gender parity, as found in the Global Gender Gap Report (2022), the concept of women in high leadership positions is still unusual, as suggested by Interviewee 5. The presented findings highlight the strong presence of stereotypical gender roles still today. This suggests that it is still very much the norm to associate women with taking care of their families and assume that men are the breadwinners. This is also supported by Maddox (2022), as according to them the root cause of the motherhood penalty is based on a stereotypical view, where women are expected to stay at home and take care of their children as the primary caregivers, whereas men are seen as the breadwinner of the family (Maddox, 2022).

These findings are also echoed by a recent study by Sievänen et al. (2023). Their research found that women traditionally take a more prominent role at home, and in turn men are more successful in their careers. These issues were also concluded in this study, as all the interviewees expressed that ultimately the main responsibility for their family and homelife falls on them naturally, instead of their spouses. This was expressed even by the interviewees that stated that they had delegated and divided the tasks amongst themselves evenly, one even noting that their husband would take care of the set tasks as agreed, but nothing else. Many of the respondents said that they had divided the tasks with their spouse, but that they followed ‘the stereotypical male and female roles’.

All respondents emphasized the importance of scheduling and prioritizing tasks in their lives in order to successfully combine their personal life with their careers. Many expressed guilt over missing out at home, but also in turn failing at work when their focus was elsewhere on their personal issues. Some of the respondents even claimed that they had previously planned their work agendas around their children’s schedules. Many felt that they were sacrificing their own hobbies and quality time with their partner in order to balance their career with their responsibilities at home – however all of them stressed that this was their own decision.

The collected data suggests that the stereotypical gender roles often come to play when one parent must stay at home with their sick child. According to the collected data, in most cases the one staying at home is the mother. Some respondents felt that they were frowned upon when it came to their absences relating to their children. Interviewee 6 expressed that during her career she had felt that men were praised when staying at home whereas women were criticized, hence she always used another excuse when having to decline something due to her children. Similar experiences with difficult managers and unjust treatment as a young mother, were experienced by a few of the respondents. This aligns with the *role congruity theory*, suggesting that stereotypical gender roles cause biased attitudes and behaviors towards women (Memon et al., 2020). The paradox is, that whilst women are somewhat penalized for becoming mothers, men are in turn seen as more reliable if they become fathers (Maddox, 2022). These findings are supported also by both Vasama (2015) and Heikkinen (2015).

One of the interviewees also reflected on her own parenting methods, noting that she herself realizes that she has different expectations towards her two sons and her daughter. Boys are expected to ‘be boys’ and girls are perhaps thought of as calmer. This is also echoed by the

*social role theory*, suggesting that gender differences are caused by societal gender roles, rather than by biological differences between men and women (Memon et al., 2020). This suggests that stereotypical gender roles are in fact learnt and not caused by biological differences.

Some of the respondents felt that there was still an old-boys-network, or other forms of personal cliques within the company, that hindered their career advancement goals. Interviewee 5 stated that she felt she was not ‘one of the guys’. These findings suggest that the concept of old-boys-network is still relevant. This can also be viewed from the *social identity theory* viewpoint as intergroup friction (Tajfel 1978). In male-dominated organizations women can feel as if they are not accepted. In their study, Sievänen et al. (2023), had similar findings. Their study concluded that the lack of networking as well as the existence of male networks in the business world have a negative impact on women being chosen for top leadership positions. According to them, it seems that there is an unconscious factor in the recruiting process, that is not based on the applicant’s competences, that favors men. They found that even though female applicants do not fall short on their capabilities and experience compared to the male applicants, they are rarely hired. However, they also concluded that in addition to the companies providing an equal recruiting process, women themselves can improve their prospects of being hired for top management positions by being more active themselves in for instance networking (Sievänen et al., 2023).

Interviewee 4 had experienced biased behavior also from other women during her career. As Interviewee 4 is the only respondent working in a female-dominated organization, it is possible that this is merely an anecdotal finding. However, this would support the findings of Diehl et al. (2022), in that gender biases are present also in female-dominated organizations.

Multiple respondents stated that it was common to see women in leadership positions in the mid-level management. After that, higher positions such as the board of directors and CEOs were most often found to be men. This alludes to the existence of *the glass ceiling phenomenon*. This is also supported by Piha (2005) and Lockert (2022). However, when taking into consideration the other challenges that women face outside of work that can have an impact on their career advancement goals, it can also be argued that *the labyrinth of leadership* is also a suitable term to use to describe this phenomenon, as it represents the detours that women face in their careers more comprehensively (Eagly et al., 2007).

All the interviewed women stated that they feel that one of the biggest challenges that women face in their careers is self-doubt. Women often feel insecure of their capabilities and feel that they must prove themselves to succeed. Many alluded to women having to be sure of themselves in order to accept a position or having to meet all the set criteria for a position in order to even apply. This is supported by prior research on the impostor syndrome. According to the American Psychological Association (2021) and Palmer (2021), the impostor syndrome might influence a person's performance. For instance, if a woman feels that the work environment is strongly male-dominated, they might feel that they do not belong there. This in turn might have a negative effect on one's career (Palmer, 2021).

As presented by THL (2022) and Moisio (2023), it is objectively clear that parental leave is divided unevenly amongst parents. This study shows that long absences stemming from maternity leaves, are considered one of the main challenges in women advancing in their careers. The collected interview data shows that long absences result in not only falling behind on certain projects and self-development, but also in a reaction from their employers. Short absences in turn, mainly caused by staying at home with sick children or prioritizing their children's appointments etc., can have a similar effect on a woman's career. Women can be seen as unreliable due to frequent absences. These findings are also supported by all Maddox (2022), Vasama (2015) and Heikkinen (2015), all claiming that mothers are seen as unreliable whereas fathers can be seen as more dependable as they have a family to support – reflecting to the motherhood penalty and the fatherhood bonus.

Much like the unequal division of parental leave, the wage gap amongst men and women can also be objectively acknowledged. As shown by the Finnish institute for health and welfare, THL (2022), the wage gap favoring men, is present in all industries and educational levels. According to the conducted interviews, women feel that men are paid more by default. Though some interviewees felt that they should have been more aggressive in demanding more pay and equal compensation as to their male colleagues, it is also possible that this might not have had an impact on their salary development. According to THL (2022), one of the main factors in the wage gap amongst men and women, has been found to be maternity leaves. Also as reported by Hyypä (2022), once the known factors, such as the industry, working hours, location of the job, etc., are removed, the unexplained wage gap between men and women is 9% - this has not changed much since the 1990's. This suggests that the wage gap between men and women is not necessarily due to actions taken by women, but more so in biased behavior and

expectations in our society. Aligning with the findings presented by Hyypä (2022), *the social role theory* also suggests that the wage gap between men and women is due to gender inequality at the workplace (Memon et al., 2020), instead of factors such as capabilities or experiences. These findings are also supported by the recent study conducted by Sievänen et al. (2023), as they also found that the uneven distribution of the parental leave has a direct impact on women, as it hinders their career development (Sievänen et al., 2023).

Many of the interviewed women felt that for them to be able to advance in their career, emphasis should be placed on education. Two of the interviewees had a bachelor-level study background and both alluded to feeling insecure about their education levels. Interviewee 1 stated that she felt that for her to be able to advance in her career, she felt that a higher education was required, even if it was not a prerequisite for the job, she felt it would be needed. These findings are supported by Spangsdorf et al. (2021), as even though more women than men have secondary and tertiary education, the number of female leaders is low, and the labor market is drastically gender segregated. This could suggest that the education requirements for men are not as high as they are for women. However, it is also worth noting that in some cases this might be an example of women demanding more from themselves and doubting their capabilities, linking back to the impostor syndrome.

As the presented findings suggest, the initiatives in work organizations called for by the diversity management theories are difficult to meet in full. It can be suggested that this results in gender segregation in top-management positions in organizations. Interviewing six women in leadership positions and hearing about the challenges they have faced revealed that factors such as governmental structures and stereotypical attitudes can contribute to women still not being chosen for top-managerial positions as often as men. Despite diversity management ambitions calling for inclusivity amongst all people, including both or all sexes, on all organizational levels, it can be difficult to achieve. These findings are also supported by prior studies by Andrade (2022) and Cavero-Rubio et al. (2019). For organizations, not meeting inclusivity amongst employees could result in missing out on the potential benefits of inclusivity, such as winning the talent war, improving company reputation and staff loyalty amongst other presented benefits (Machado et al., 2018).

To conclude, these findings suggest that many of the challenges that women face in their careers are due to stereotypical behavior – both in prejudiced actions but also objectively in

governmental issues like the wage gap favoring men. According to the Nordic Council of Ministers (2019) in Spangsdorf et al. (2021), women are not being selected for top management positions due to stereotypical ideas and biases, and it is therefore not due to the structures of the welfare state. This suggests, that even though Finland is amongst the most equal countries in the world, gender parity does not extend to the business world due to biased and stereotypical attitudes.

## **5.1 Recommendations for managers**

As the findings of this study suggest, in addition to the objectively proven challenges that women face, such as the wage gap and an unjust parental leave system, many of the challenges seem to relate back to deeply rooted stereotypical and biased behavior from both men and women themselves. To work towards inclusivity, organizations should aim to raise awareness of these biased and stereotypical attitudes. By acknowledging the issue, organizations can work towards becoming more inclusive. This can be done by for example improving the company's recruiting processes and providing more flexibility to employees.

As reported by Andrade (2022), studies have shown effective methods of working towards gender equality within the company to ensure that the hiring process is as unbiased as possible. This is supported also by Sievänen et al. (2023), as they found that one of the challenges women face is not being hired due to male-dominated networks. Andrade (2022) suggests, that organizations can develop their hiring processes to be free of gender biases by for instance using different screening tools and composing their hiring committee to be as diverse as possible.

The findings of this study suggest that one of the biggest challenges women face when aiming to combine work and family life is the difficulty of prioritizing and scheduling. Hence, the employer providing flexibility in work arrangements is one of the key methods in increasing gender parity within the company. This is also supported by Andrade (2022), as they report flexible work arrangements as being one of the key concepts in diversity management to ensure high productivity and satisfaction within staff. As suggested by the findings of this study, women who feel that their employer is accommodating, are in fact more loyal to their

employers – all of the women that felt accommodated and supported by their employers also spoke highly of their employers in the interviews.

## **5.2 Recommendations for future research**

In order to deepen the understanding of challenges that women face in advancing in their careers at work and at home, a larger number of women should be interviewed. This might disclose more challenges that this study has not identified, moreover it might emphasize the importance and magnitude of already discovered challenges. This in turn would shed light on the key challenges that should be focused on to resolve the paradox between the low number of women in leadership positions, compared to the high gender parity in Finland overall.

The study could also be extended to different groups and minorities. Differences or possible similarities between different social groups, industries, age groups, educational backgrounds etc. could then be differentiated. Extending the study to single women or women without children could possibly also provide information on any possible sacrifices women make when prioritizing their careers.

Additionally, as the Nordic gender equality paradox is found not only in Finland, but also in other Nordic countries, the study should be expanded to other Nordic countries as well. The results of this study suggest that one of the main challenges women face is absences during their career and an unequal parental leave system. As the parental leave system in Sweden can be considered more equal, but the gender equality paradox is still present in Sweden as well, additional research amongst Swedish women could unveil other contributing factors.

## **5.3 Limitations**

Due to time constraints and limited resources, there are some limitations to this study, which are necessary to take into consideration. This study does not focus on other poignant challenges women face in the work environment, such as sexual harassment, discrimination or leadership styles. The study was conducted as semi-structured interviews, interviewing six women. Hence, the number of respondents is limited. However, the collected data was deemed saturated, as the same challenges were brought up by multiple respondents.



This study was conducted as qualitative research, using interviews as a tool to collect data. Hence, the findings are based on collected experiences and opinions of the respondents and can therefore also be considered subjective to a certain extent. This study focuses on the phenomenon from the female perspective.

All the interviewed women are mothers; hence it does not necessarily showcase challenges that single women, or women with no children face. Furthermore, no limitations were made regarding interviewees families. Issues that for example single parents, same sex couples or parents of special needs children face, are however not included in the results, as only one of the interviewees was a single mother.

Additionally, it is worth noting that the study has been conducted by analyzing some of the most progressive and advanced countries when it comes to gender equality. Therefore, the results from this study do not represent all women in business globally, but rather a mere fraction. As all interviewees are Finnish, the study is limited to Finland.

## 6 Conclusion

In global gender equality studies, Finland is ranked high (Global Gender Gap report, 2022). When studying gender parity in Finland, women seem to be represented well, as nearly full gender parity is displayed in for instance the Finnish Parliament (Statistics Finland, 2021). However, these figures are not echoed in the business world, where women are still rarely seen in top management positions or in the board of directors. Though slight improvement has been made in the recent years, the situation has overall not changed much since the 1990's (Kajala, 2022).

Women in leadership positions were interviewed on their experiences and possible challenges that they have faced, and continue to face, in their careers. These experiences were similar to one another, suggesting that the biggest challenges that women face in their careers include self-doubt, biased behavior and stereotypical assumptions from both their work and homes. Other challenges included unjust parental leave system, wage gap favoring men and time pressure to meet all the expectations whilst balancing work and family life. Even when women are aiming high in their careers, it seems that the main responsibility for their families and homes still falls on them. This strongly suggests that the old, stereotypical gender roles of men being considered the family's breadwinner and the woman is seen as responsible for their households, still holds great value even today in Finland, which can be considered one of the most advanced countries in the world when it comes to gender equality.

As shown, the inequality in male and female leaders cannot be solely explained by factors such as experience, capabilities and education. This suggests that stereotypical biases and gender roles vouch for the unexplained reasoning behind this disparity. Hence, it can be concluded that women are just as capable as men, they just face different challenges and biases along the way. This was simply phrased by Interviewee 2 as follows:

*"A woman can be a CEO, just as much as a man can be a CEO."*

*(Interviewee 2)*

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## **8 Appendices**

### **8.1 Appendix 1: Interview Guide in English**

#### **Background:**

1. Tell me about your current job
2. How long have you been in a leadership position?
3. What is your educational background?

#### **Career:**

4. Tell me about your career development
5. How would you describe your career path? Can you use a metaphor?
6. Has your career development always gone to plan?
7. How about the things that didn't quite go to plan? Why do you think that is?
8. Is there something that you wish you had done differently?
9. Studies have shown that there are significantly more male leaders than there are female. Reflecting back on to your own career, why do you think this is?
10. Do you believe that your gender has played a role in your career?

#### **Personal life:**

11. Tell me about your family
12. (If you have children, how long was your maternity leave?)
13. (When you returned back to work, how were the household responsibilities divided?)
14. (How was this decided?)
15. (How was work after you returned from your maternity leave? How did your maternity leave affect your work? How did your maternity leave affect you?)
16. How have you managed to combine work and family life?
17. Has everything gone to plan?
18. How about the things that didn't go to plan, why?
  
19. What would you say to your younger self?



## 8.2 Appendix 2: Interview Guide in Finnish

### Taustatietoa:

1. Kerrotko minulle nykyisestä työstäsi?
2. Kauan olet työskennellyt esimiesasemassa?
3. Mikä on koulutustaustasi?

### Ura:

4. Kerrotko minulle urakehityksestäsi?
5. Miten kuvailisit urapolkuasi? (Keksitkö urallesi metaforaa? Onko urasi ollut tasaista vai epätasaista?)
6. Onko urakehityksesi edennyt aina toivomallasi tavalla?
7. Entä asiat, jotka eivät menneet suunnitellulla tavalla, mistä luulet sen johtuvan?
8. Onko jotain, mitä toivot tehneesi toisin? (Miksi?)
9. Tutkimukset osoittavat, että Suomessa on tällä hetkellä merkittävästi vähemmän naisjohtajia, kuin miesjohtajia. Kun reflektoit omaa uraasi, mistä luulet sen johtuvan?
10. Luuletko että sukupuolesi on vaikuttanut urakehitykseen?

### Henkilökohtainen elämä:

11. Kerrotko minulle perheestäsi?
12. (Jos sinulla on lapsia, miten pitkään olit äitiysvapaalla?)
13. (Kun palasit töihin, miten vastuu kodin asioista jaettiin puolison kanssa?)
14. (Miten tähän ratkaisuun päädyttiin?)
15. (Millaista töissä oli kun palasit äitiysvapaalta? Miten äitiysvapaa vaikutti sinuun ja/tai uraasi?)
16. Miten olet onnistunut yhdistämään työ- ja perhe-elämän?
17. Onko kaikki sujunut kuten toivoit?
18. Jos joku on ollut erityisen haasteellista, mistä uskot sen johtuneen?
  
19. Mitä sanoisit nuorelle itsellesi, joka on vasta urapolkunsa alussa?