

Women in Positions of Influence  
Exploring the Leadership Journeys of Irish Women

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of a  
Master of Business Administration degree  
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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – Exploration of the reasons for a continued lack of progress in achieving gender equality is ongoing. This paper seeks to examine the barriers to career progression for women in large organisations by eliciting the views of women who have attained senior leadership positions. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the subjective, lived experiences of women who operate in senior leadership roles in their respective organisations. It seeks to establish whether barriers, recognised in literature, remain obstacles for women despite the passage of time since these barriers were first identified.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A small sample, qualitative study, using semi-structured interviews, with eight female senior leaders from large organisations, was undertaken in order to gain detailed insights into the women's experiences of gender and leadership. Confidential interviews were recorded, transcribed, reviewed and analysed. Findings were verified by reviewing them with the participants. It is not proposed that generalisations are extrapolated from the research, rather its value lies in the qualitative insight provided into the participants' work experiences.

**Findings** – Women continue to lag behind men in achievement of senior leadership positions in large Irish organisations. These organisations continue to be male dominated from mid-management grades to an almost exclusive male dominion at the highest levels. The findings demonstrate that gender is a significant contributory factor to this scenario in line with the literature.

**Originality/value** – This research adds knowledge and understanding to the area of gender and leadership experiences of senior female leaders in Ireland. When researching the theme of women in leadership, no qualitative studies, specific to Irish senior female leadership experiences, were found in peer-reviewed academic literature. This study may help to contribute to this knowledge taxonomy.

**Key words** – gender, leadership, women, women and senior leadership.

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents for their constant support of all my, and my siblings', endeavours. The dedication of this dissertation to them is a small way of acknowledging their enduring support for the whole family.

This one's for you both Terry & Ted!!

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

*'Where are the female leaders?'*

*Adi Ignatius, 2013*

### Introduction

The numbers of women who complete third level education is now higher (at graduate to doctoral level), or almost equal (at post-doctoral level), to the number of men (Catalyst, 2014). In Ireland, 55 percent of women between the ages of 25-34 hold a third level degree compared to 42.9 percent of men in the same age range (Central Statistics Office, 2017a). Similarly the number of women in the workforce has risen significantly over the past 50 years, with almost 60 percent of women in Ireland now in paid employment (Central Statistics Office, 2017a). Equality for women in the workforce, but more specifically for the purpose of this research, vertical gender integration, that is equality for men and women across senior leadership positions (Kossek, Su and Wu, 2017), has become a topic of global significance given women's tardy progression to these positions. It appears to be arduous for women to rise to positions of leadership in male-dominated environments, thus continuing the imbalance in diversity (European Commission, 2016; Ryan and Haslam, 2005) and gender segregation (Kossek *et al.*, 2017); regardless of country, sector or profession (Catalyst 2016; OECD 2016; United Nations, 2016).

The majority of leadership research has emanated from the United States where there remains a stagnant number of women in CEO positions. Women comprise half the global population yet currently hold 5.0 percent (25) of all CEO positions at Fortune 500 companies, (which will reduce to 4.8 percent when PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi steps down in October of this year); in comparison with 5.2 percent (26) in 2017; and 4.2 percent (21) in 2016 (Catalyst, 2016, 2017, 2018; Fortune, 2017). Irish women are faring better than their US counterparts when it comes to leading companies at c.10 percent, yet the figure still remains lower than it should be given the percentage of women in the workforce (Reddan, 2017). In short, it is still considered an anomaly when a woman occupies a senior

leadership position (Eagly and Karau, 2002) despite research showing that women aspire to be leaders to the same extent as men (Eagly, 2013, McKinsey and Company, 2017b).

The low number of female executives has instigated studies identifying a variety of obstacles for women. These include: access discrimination ('glass ceilings') (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Weyer, 2007); 'glass walls' where women are omitted from meetings or casual conversations which accelerate careers (Unerman and Jacob, 2016); less developmental opportunities for women to accelerate them into leadership roles (Ely, Stone and Ammerman, 2014; Ely, Stone, Shannon and Ammerman, 2015); work-family conflicts (Kossek *et al.*, 2017); labyrinths – multifarious challenges that prolong or prevent women's access to leadership, and undermine them should they reach this status (Carli, 2018; Eagly and Carli, 2007); the 'queen bee' syndrome where tensions between female managers and employees result in negative results (Hersby, Ryan and Jetten, 2009); the presence of a pay gap (Carli, 2018; Catalyst, 2018b, 2014; Joshi, Son and Roh, 2015; Paul, 2018); impact of the #MeToo movement where senior male executives exclude women from networking or mentoring events for fear of accusations of inappropriate behaviour (McGregor, 2017); and women choosing not to pursue leadership roles (Belkin, 2003; Hewlett and Luce, 2005). These reasons have been studied in recent years, resulting in a consistent theme of a greater number of obstacles faced by women over men for similar positions (European Commission, 2016; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell and Ristikari, 2011).

The ongoing shortfall of women in leadership roles in Ireland persists despite efforts to implement equality and diversity programmes (NWCI, 2015; Reddan, 2017). There are government policies designed to achieve the objective of advancing women in leadership (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017), and sectoral policies for areas such as education (IRC, 2013), however, there has been limited visible success in achieving this goal. Globally, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) has undertaken an effort known as HeForShe IMPACT 10×10×10 to have men in global corporations support gender equality by 2030 by highlighting statistics

such as 95 percent of the world's CEOs being male (Catalyst, 2018a; United Nations, 2016).

The issue is becoming critical as more millennial-age women enter the workforce. While 87 percent of CEOs across the globe report a focus on talent diversity and inclusion (Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2017); millennial women, entering the workforce in appreciably larger numbers than previous generations, believe that it continues to be more difficult for women to reach the most senior leadership positions in an organisation (Ely *et al.*, 2014; Ely *et al.*, 2015; Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2015).

In summary, the purpose of the dissertation is to identify whether the global trends in gender inequality are reflected in the Irish context. There are many factors which may contribute to the outcome and establishing which are the most pertinent, be they chosen or inflicted, is one of the goals of the research.

## **Dissertation Structure**

The paper is organised as follows:

**Chapter 1: Introduction** provides an introduction to the research paper, an overview of the purpose of the research and outlines the structure of the paper.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review** provides a critical review of the theoretical environment relevant to the research paper. It details the pertinent literature for the subject under review and highlights gaps in the literature which this research aims to narrow. The literature review focusses on articles, papers, studies and books addressing the subject of women in leadership. The most topical hypotheses appearing in the literature were chosen to form the basis of the empirical research.

**Chapter 3: Dissertation Purpose and Aim** outlines the research problem, states the research question and provides reasons for undertaking the research.

**Chapter 4: Methodology** details the chosen research approach, design and method; the associated rationale; the methods for data collection and analysis; the ethical considerations and limitations associated with the research.

**Chapter 5: Findings** details the sample set and analyses the main findings of the study.

**Chapter 6: Discussion** discusses the findings and correlates them with the reviewed literature and draws conclusions.

**Chapter 7: Conclusion** concludes the dissertation by restating the research question, presenting the conclusions of the study, details limitations of the research and presents recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

*'Women. Still pink collar workers in the pink ghetto?'*

*Louise Kapp Howe, 1979*

### Introduction

Despite comprising c.46 percent of the workforce in Ireland (NWCI, 2015), Irish women continue to lag behind men in senior leadership roles. The objective of the literature review is to establish what barriers may be encountered by women in their ascent to senior leadership positions.

Leadership is a gendered concept (Yoder, 2001); subject to stereotypes, (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt and van Engen, 2003; Schein, 1973). Leadership execution is different for women than men, and is dependent on context, thus what may prove effective for men in leadership roles in a particular context does not necessarily pertain to women (Eagly and Johnson, 1990; Oakley, 2000).

### Gender Fundamentals

Gender; a term which has been in use since the 1970s, refers to the notion of socially constructed roles which society deems appropriate for males and females (Holmes, 2007; Risman, 2004). Much of the literature in this area emphasises gender differences resulting from patriarchy; a social system where men predominate women (Holmes, 2007; Storberg-Walker and Madsen, 2017) which is embedded in society (Risman, 2004). Gender, as a social cue, impacts individuals' judgements regarding competence and skills, which has significant implications for women who wish to transcend the expected (hierarchical) status order in the workplace (Eagly and Steffen, 1984; Goldin, 1990; Ridgeway, 2001).

Contrary to this view, other researchers consider that gender is a product of sociological cultures and values, suggesting that innate gender differences cause women to choose more female oriented careers (for example, nursing, hairdressing or childcare), or opt for more caring, nurturing roles (Bass, 1990), while other fields including STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) tend to be male dominated, thereby continuing the gendered

perception of particular roles (Accenture, 2014; Barone, 2011). Looking at this critically, however, the strides made in educational equality, a continuing rise in female labour force participation and societal modernisation, render this explanation unlikely (Goldin, 2014; Inglehart and Norris, 2003) and the reason is more likely to be horizontal occupational segregation, where women remain in functional areas of the business from which executive leadership roles tend not to be chosen (Kossek *et al.*, 2017).

While the ‘grand gender convergence’ of equal access to education and employment opportunities has been achieved, with the numbers of women who complete third level education at an equal or higher level to the number of men; the reality remains that the final hurdle - professional gender equality - remains outstanding (Goldin, 2014). Professions characterised by long work hours and presenteeism, frequently required in senior management positions, tend to have a low number of women occupying these roles (Bertrand, Goldin and Katz 2010; Catalyst 2016; OECD 2016). These positions are typically remunerated more generously thus contributing to the gender wage gap (Carli, 2018; Goldin 2014). A key observation is that employed women, especially mothers, are responsible for a greater proportion of household activities than men, which precludes them from taking on roles requiring longer and more inflexible working hours, but offer improved career advancement and salary opportunities (Carli, 2018; Goldin 2014; McKinsey and Company, 2017a).

While the leadership opportunities for women have increased, the glass ceiling between upper-middle management and the executive level persists (Weyer, 2007). Equal access to education and employment opportunities have not resulted in a corresponding increase of women in leadership positions (Goldin 2014). While women comprise half of the Irish labour force, just over 30 percent of all managerial positions are occupied by women which has not changed in any meaningful way in the past 7 years (International Labour Organisation, 2018) (*See Appendix 1 – Management Positions in Ireland*). The percentage of women ascending to senior management roles globally has not significantly changed in the past forty years, rising from 5 percent in the 1970s to 20 percent in 2016 (Schein, 1973; Catalyst, 2016). Based on current estimates, if the current rate of

equality in access to management positions continues, parity between genders will not be reached until 2085 (Warner, 2014), or, worse still, it will take another 100 years as stated in the current Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2017) up from 83 years in the equivalent 2016 report (World Economic Forum, 2016).

## **The Masculine Hegemony**

Research on gender and leadership has evolved from women as managers (popular in 1970s) to address leadership and gender in organisations (late 1990s). The correlation between leadership and masculinity has been researched, (Eagly and Johnson, 1990; Yoder, 2001) promoting a masculine image of management resulting in an over-representation of men in management positions.

The masculine norm of leadership (Storberg-Walker and Madsen, 2017), the most well-known being Schein's seminal (1973, 2007) 'think manager-think male' paradigm, is utilised as the yardstick from which women's 'successful' leadership traits and behaviours are measured (Koenig *et al.*, 2011). Research continues to demonstrate the leadership construct as white and male which results in bias towards those that do not fit this image (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Koenig *et al.*, 2011; Martin, Edwards and Sayers, 2018) resulting in gender segregation and sex-typing of jobs (Gerson, 2002).

## **Gender Stereotypes**

Gender stereotypes can result in gender bias in the workplace (Eagly and Steffen, 1984; Insch, McIntyre and Napier, 2008) which may result in women experiencing the 'glass ceiling' phenomenon where women's access to executive positions is blocked by corporate culture (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Hymowitz and Schellhardt, 1986; Katila and Eriksson, 2013; Oakley, 2000) or through unseen barriers in seemingly equitable organisations where men appear to accelerate to senior leadership positions on a 'glass escalator' (Hoyt, 2010; Ryan and Haslam, 2005).

Research shows that women are less focused on power and money (Chira, 2017) and are more driven by the development of quality interpersonal connections (Hewlett, 2007). Their career ambitions tend to drop precipitously during their thirties - that is at the same time as maternal responsibilities tend to be at their peak - resulting in educated women settling for less demanding, more flexible and less time consuming roles (Hewlett and Luce, 2005; Hewlett, 2007; Ely *et al.*, 2014; Ely *et al.*, 2015). This phenomenon, known as the opt-out revolution, results in women choosing to leave organisations in their thirties and forties, usually after having children, but when leadership positions are more attainable for them (Belkin, 2003) resulting in the assumption that women who choose to be stay at home mothers have lower career aspirations than men (Sandberg, 2013; Slaughter, 2012). Care must be taken however, when making the assumption that women opt out of their careers as research has proven that while this is the outcome, the reality may be that workplace conditions have pushed them out (Kossek *et al.*, 2017; Slaughter, 2012) as motherhood, rather than fatherhood, is associated with working in roles that align with childcare and household activities (Bertrand *et al.*, 2010).

Gender stereotypes limit women's progression as masculine stereotypes, perceived as necessary for successful leadership, are negatively perceived when practiced by women (Brandt and Laiho, 2013; Catalyst, 2007; Williams and Tiedens, 2016). Women face distinctive challenges when operating in management positions as should they adopt more male-oriented characteristics (assertion and self-promotion), they are viewed negatively (Brandt and Laiho, 2013; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Eagly and Wood, 2012) as they fail to adhere to social expectations (Williams and Tiedens, 2016). In adopting stereotypical female behaviours, or more traditional (masculine) leadership behaviours, women encounter a double-bind being 'damned if you do, doomed if you don't' (Catalyst, 2007; Ibarra, Ely and Kolb, 2013; Martin *et al.*, 2018; Oakley, 2000; Williams and Tiedens, 2016). This results in the glass ceiling effect due to unwritten constraints for women resulting from breaches of the expected status order (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Ridgeway, 2001). In cases where women do achieve a leadership position, it can often be to a precarious/crisis role where

there is a high risk of failure, thus requiring negotiation of the 'glass cliff' phenomenon (Barreto, Ryan and Schmitt, 2009; Ryan and Haslam, 2005).

Women tend to be seen as less effective leaders resulting from social biases where women are seen as more feminine and thus unsuited to a role which has become normalised for men (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Eagly and Carli, 2007; Ibarra *et al.*, 2013). This has resulted in a culture of 'fix the women' being fostered in organisations, rather than fixing a labyrinth (Carli, 2018; Eagly and Carli, 2007) which has led to almost 50 percent of the workforce being excluded from executive opportunities (Wittenberg-Cox, 2014).

Women may also be precluded from achieving leadership positions by the existence of second-generation biases in organisations, where work cultures which appear neutral reflect the domination of masculine practices and values (Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Ibarra *et al.*, 2013). Second-generation biases may be endemic where the status quo is maintained through a homogenous style of recruitment and promotion of predominantly male candidates with similar experience, behaviours and communication styles (Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Ibarra *et al.*, 2013). Women may also be impeded by overt discriminatory behaviours in their organisations (Marshall, 1984), to a lesser extent given the protections afforded by employment law.

## **Gendered Organisations**

Kanter (1977) noted that despite the opportunities which are available for women, gender stereotypes persist, and indeed organisational narratives have facilitated second-generation biases (Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Ibarra *et al.*, 2013), which diminish efforts for equal representation at executive level. While women have navigated the workforce in larger numbers since the 1970s, the organisations in which they work have remained entrenched in masculine hegemony ensuring, through cultural and structural methods, the majority status quo is maintained (Broadbridge and Hearn, 2008; Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Ibarra *et al.*, 2013; Kanter, 1977).

Critical mass, tokenism and lack of structured opportunity for women heralded a new era in gender research related to social change focused on economic

stability (rather than gender equity) in the 1970s (Kanter, 1977). This remains important as the talent pool comprises a rising percentage of highly educated women. If women continue to be excluded from leadership positions, it cannot be said definitively that the most intelligent and knowledgeable resources occupy these roles. Should this be the case, the global economy cannot be value maximising given the proven, positive impact on performance for those organisations which employ women in leadership roles (McKinsey and Company, 2018). Female talent continues to be under-utilised. At best, the lack of women in leadership is a poor economic allocation of resources and a missed opportunity to maximise human capital (World Economic Forum, 2016). This is shown by the economic participation gap reported at 58 percent (the highest gap since 2008) and deteriorating in terms of progress from previous years (World Economic Forum, 2017).

Organisational culture carries meaning as it dictates the customary practices and '*the story*' in which people become entrenched (Watkins, 2013). The rules and norms that reinforce organisations' stories remain subject to the persistence of gender stereotypes, and second-generation biases, which diminish women's efforts for equal representation at executive level (Eagly and Steffen, 1984; Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Ely *et al.*, 2014; Ely *et al.*, 2015; Ibarra *et al.*, 2013; Insch *et al.*, 2008; Kanter, 1977; Katila and Eriksson, 2013; Tinsley and Ely, 2018; Watkins, 2013). Any organisation in its pursuit of culture change must address the 'culture iceberg' analogy, that is the visible (behaviours) and invisible elements (biases) of the culture (Hall, 1976) to ensure that, at the very least, a more appropriate economic allocation of resources occurs and, at best, the continuing barriers experienced by women are eradicated.

While senior leaders, both men and women eulogise gender parity, conventional gender norms, facilitated by confirmation bias resulting from men and women behaving in gender stereotypical ways, and second-generation biases, ensure the status quo endures (Ely *et al.*, 2014; Ely *et al.*, 2015; Ibarra *et al.*, 2013; Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2017; Tinsley and Ely, 2018).

## Role Congruity Theory (RCT)

Role Congruity Theory (RCT) posits that descriptive and prescriptive expectations of others' behaviours are founded on gender based division of labour (Eagly, 1987; Eagly and Carli, 2003; Eagly and Wood, 2012). The division of labour has customarily correlated men with generating income through employment (being the breadwinners) while women remained focused on the household (Eagly, 1987; Eagly and Wood, 2012). As a result, men tend to see themselves in leadership roles more so than women.

Social roles ascribe communal characteristics to women and agentic characteristics to men (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Agentic characteristics such as ambition, competitiveness and control are congruent with males and leader stereotypes (Schein 1973, 2007) while communal, empathic, and inclusive characteristics (Eagly and Carli, 2003; Knights, 2013; Yukl, 2010) are more congruent for females. Congruity between gender roles and leadership roles is thus normalised for men (Eagly and Karau, 2002). RCT asserts that more favourable perceptions exist when an individual's characteristics align more closely with gendered social roles (Eagly, 1987, 2013). The more senior the leadership position, the more masculine is the perception of the role resulting in incongruence for women and senior leadership roles (Eagly, 2013; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012). This results in females being perceived as less effective should they attain these roles (Coder and Spiller, 2013; Eagly, 2013; Heilman, 2012) thus reinforcing prescriptive stereotypes for women (Eagly and Karau, 2002).

In contradiction to the view that women are incongruent with leadership, a meta-analysis of literature comparing male and female leaders showed women appeared more likely to adopt a transformational leadership style, (effective for leadership and consistent with the gendered social roles), thus surmounting the issue of role incongruity (Eagly *et al.*, 2003). Collaborative, relationship based approaches are proposed for women (McGregor, 2017) which results in a perception of authenticity (Pafford and Schaefer, 2017) eliminating counter-stereotypical behaviours (Eagly and Karau, 2002). However, prescriptive

stereotypes are proven by research to be resistant to change, and continue to inform individuals' beliefs, regardless of the occurrence of events which counter the stereotypes (Gill, 2004).

### **Realising Women's Ambitions**

Research has shown that women may prevent themselves attaining leadership positions through a combination of lack of self-promotion, not applying for senior management roles or delaying their progress to these roles by down-playing their abilities (Eagly and Johnson, 1990; Wallace, 2017) thus contributing to a phenomenon known as the 'glass cage' where women display reservations about their ability to be successful consequently preventing it (Paustian-Underdahl, Slattery Walker and Woehr, 2014). Women tend to be less confident than men, therefore, less ambitious and settling for opportunities that they have a firm chance of accomplishing (Sandberg, 2013). This was borne out by a study of personnel files at Hewlett Packard which demonstrated women applied for roles where they possessed 100 percent of the job requirements (qualifications and experience) while men would apply if they had approximately 60 percent (Kay and Shipman, 2014). The lack of confidence extends to a study of Harvard MBA students where 70 percent of female students rated their performance as equal to that of their colleagues, while in the same study, 70 percent of men rated their performance as exceeding that of their colleagues (Eagly and Johnson, 1990).

Social Role Theory, and RCT, posit that women's role expectations derive from historical undertaking of household activities rather than paid work outside the home (Eagly, 1987; Eagly and Wood, 2012). Women are seen to lack confidence to consider leadership roles (Kay and Shipman, 2014) which is then perceived as having low aspirations to leadership (Heilman, 2012). In order to realise women's ambitions to leadership, research shows that a number of initiatives would help, including the existence of female role models (Ely *et al.*, 2011). Given the paucity of women in executive leadership positions, there are limited female role models to encourage women to progress to this level and help other women navigate the political landscape to executive leadership (Ely *et al.*, 2011; Ibarra *et al.*, 2013; Sandberg, 2013). This can be addressed by the formalisation of

reciprocal, rather than hierarchical and unidirectional, mentoring relationships, where women are sponsored by influential colleagues who will advocate on their behalf (Johnson and Smith, 2018). With successful mentoring comes access to networks, many of which are informal, which are required to advance. Executive appointments are often made based on whom one knows and access to networks allows women to develop their political skills and potentially break the status quo of homogenous C-suites (Billing and Alvesson, 2014). This in turn may facilitate women supporting other women to reach the executive levels and eradicating the token label (Kanter, 1977).

## **Leadership Theories**

The early leadership theories of the 1940s focussed on the physical and personality traits that were displayed by leaders. The earliest of these theories – the Great Man Theory – applied a gendered term to the description and used examples, such as Julius Caesar, which gave the perception that leadership was related to individualism and, more specifically, males compounded by the fact that females were excluded from the research (Stogdill, 1974). Leadership literature was categorised into a masculine classification, drawing on stereotypically masculine skills, in hierarchical organisations where leaders hold power over (mostly) male followers (Yoder, 2001). More recently, trait theories have resurfaced through the identification of charismatic leaders (Haslam, Reicher and Platow, 2011) such as Steve Jobs and with the advent of literature such as Level 5 Leadership (Collins, 2001) and the servant model proposed by Greenleaf (1977).

Behavioural Leadership theories were developed which looked at effective behaviours displayed by leaders. This resulted in the development of three specific leadership styles: autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire (Lewin, Lippitt and White, 1939). Leadership involves a ‘command and control’ approach under the autocratic style. Group engagement and encouragement by the leader is to the fore in the democratic style while the laissez-faire style endorses delegation of decision-making and management responsibility to the team by a detached leader (Lewin *et al.*, 1939). A meta-analysis of men and women’s the use of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles found that the

autocratic and laissez-faire styles tend to be adopted by men while the democratic style tends to be favoured by women, who motivate followers through charisma and supportive behaviours in a more interactive style of leadership (Eagly *et al.*, 2003).

More contemporary leadership theorists propose transformational leadership which highlights influence, rather than power, and is concerned with team achievements (Yoder, 2001). This approach to leadership is focused on motivations of followers (Helgesen, 1990), as distinct from transactional leaders who rely on exerting influence over followers through the threat of punishment or provision of rewards (Conger and Kanungo, 1987). The transformational leadership style is effective and can be seen to be more often used by women leaders in comparison to men (Eagly *et al.*, 2003).

While the literature in the main expounds the male advantage in leadership, a contrary view details a potential female advantage (Eagly and Carli, 2003). Contemporary leadership research identifies leaders who engage in collaborative relationships, leaving egos aside, to build ethical, emotionally intelligent, sustainable businesses (Ely and Meyerson, 2000). This approach is known as transpersonal leadership and women have been proven to outshine men in the skillsets required for this style of leadership (Knights, 2013). Transpersonal leadership involves high levels of authenticity and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2000) in addition to ongoing personal development, lifelong learning and a 'web of inclusion' rather than a hierarchical organisation structure (Helgesen, 1990).

These more recent findings on leadership characteristics could be perceived as a reflection of changing stereotypes regarding appropriate leadership skills depending on gender (Koenig *et al.*, 2011). As organisations value more transformational and transpersonal leadership skills, which are often perceived as more feminine in nature, women may benefit from reduced prejudice in their ascent to leadership roles ensuing from a perception of men as incongruent with leadership roles!

Critically analysing this proposition, however, shows that focusing on individuals' characteristics reinforces trait theories of leadership, and associated

unnecessary gender stereotypes, by attempting to allocate desired characteristics to a particular gender (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak and White, 2015). Leadership is more effective when a diverse range of experiences, perspectives and skills contribute to the overall process of leadership rather than expecting one gender or individual to possess all of the required characteristics (Hannum *et al.*, 2015).

On the whole, perceptions of leadership effectiveness results in few visible differences between men and women. When rated by others, women receive higher effectiveness scores than men, however, they consistently self-rate lower than males contributing to the glass cage syndrome (Paustian-Underdahl *et al.*, 2014).

## **Context**

The global economy is now experiencing the '*Fourth Industrial Revolution*' (World Economic Forum, 2017) resulting in fast paced change for all businesses. Organisations that capitalise on the strengths of their leaders will increase their chances of thriving in the interconnected and changing business environment (Eagly and Karau, 2002; McKinsey and Company, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2017). The knowledge economy is characterised by the closing of the gender gap in educational attainment resulting in women with higher education levels comprising a more substantial employee group (Catalyst, 2018a; Reddan, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2016, 2017). More collaborative work environments should create an advantage for female leaders as they exhibit characteristics which are more communal, empathic and inclusive (Eagly and Carli, 2003; Knights, 2013; Yukl, 2010).

## **Summary**

Current research shows that many of the leadership challenges faced by female leaders result from persistent gender inequality, sexual stereotyping and gender bias (Hoyt and Simon, 2016, Eagly and Carli, 2007). Research also proves the movement of women into leadership roles is still not being realised and could in fact be said to have stalled (Huffman, Cohen and Pearlman, 2010). A new

approach is required to encourage women to adopt a 'leader identity' which has not yet been fully constructed theoretically (Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011) and integrate this into their core (Ibarra *et al.*, 2013). This finding was corroborated by Storberg-Walker and Madsen (2017) who acknowledged the ongoing gap in development of leadership theories targeted specifically at women (Ely *et al.*, 2011).

The next chapter details the purpose of the dissertation and the specific research question to be addressed.

## Chapter 3: Dissertation Purpose and Aim

*'Stop fixing women!'*

*Avivah Wittenberg-Cox, 2014*

### Introduction

This paper seeks to address a gap in research regarding the experiences of Irish women who have attained senior leadership positions, at the level directly below that of the C-suite, in their respective organisations.

The literature review consists of a majority of quantitative research addressing women and leadership, the bulk of which is set in the United States. Much of the literature on this topic relates to women's representation on Boards of Directors rather than in executive or senior leadership roles. In developing the core research proposition for this paper, the areas for future research in these studies were reviewed, many of which suggested that more in depth studies should be undertaken with women to assess their perceptions of why executive leadership positions continue to remain out of reach.

### Research Definition

Research is defined as *'the systematic collection and interpretation of data with a clear purpose, to find things out'* (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). Research is planned and aims to uncover new information about a specific phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). The research process requires the identification of the phenomenon to be explored, conversion of the phenomenon to a research problem, collection and analysis of empirical, and secondary sources of data, and the recording of research findings (Fisher, 2010).

### Research Aim

The research aim is to establish whether findings of previously undertaken qualitative research, (mainly in the US context), regarding the lack of ascension by women to senior levels of management, is replicated in the Irish context. A significant body of work emanating from the US has revealed reasons for the lack

of progression by women to the C-suite including: glass ceilings (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Weyer, 2007); glass walls (Unerman and Jacob, 2016); gender pay gaps (Carli, 2018; Catalyst, 2018b; Paul, 2018); labyrinths (Carli, 2018; Eagly and Carli, 2007); and #MeToo (McGregor, 2017). This does not discount the choice that some women make to not pursue leadership positions (Hewlett and Luce, 2005), however, it should be recognised that this may be a result of being '*pushed out*' rather than '*opting out*' (Kossek *et al.*, 2017; Slaughter, 2012).

The hypothesis underpinning this study is that the reasons which are propounded by US women for a lack of ascension to the executive ranks will be replicated in the Irish milieu (Chira, 2017; Koenig *et al.*, 2011).

## **Research Question**

This study aims to explore the continuing low numbers of women in senior leadership roles in Irish organisations; which is defined, for the purpose of this study, as one level below that of the C-suite. The main research question posed to the participants was:

Women in Leadership: what do the career narratives of women who have attained senior leadership positions in Ireland illustrate about the enduring lack of women in these roles?

This study seeks to undertake an in depth review of women's career paths, development and promotion opportunities which led to the participants' current roles. In order to frame the topic (Fisher, 2010), the participants were limited to women who had attained a leadership role one level below, and were potential aspirants to, the C-suite level in their respective organisations in Ireland.

The next section details the chosen methodology for the study, with a detailed rationale for the approach, design and method adopted, outlining its appropriateness for this study. The chapter concludes by addressing the ethical considerations and limitations associated with the research design.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

*'Not everything that can be counted counts; and not everything that counts can be counted.'*

*William Bruce Cameron - often erroneously attributed to Albert Einstein*

### Introduction

This chapter presents the research framework; philosophy; approach; and design for empirical data collection and analysis. The research strategy to analyse the association between gender and leadership is presented concluding with the research tool and the justification for this research approach. Potential limitations of the research are detailed as are the ethical considerations of the researcher.

### Research Framework

The research process onion (Saunders *et al.*, 2012) (*See Appendix 2 – Research Onion*) summarises noteworthy issues that must be considered before undertaking research and has been used to guide the selection of the most appropriate methodology for this research study. The layers of the onion enable consideration of: the researcher's philosophical orientation; the research approach adopted; appropriate research strategies; timelines for research; data collection; and data analysis techniques (Saunders *et al.*, 2012).

While the study aims to be unbiased, this may be unfeasible as the researcher has chosen the topic, decided on the objectives and the required data (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). As empirical research is influenced and impacted by the researcher's views, values and biases (axiology) (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), the philosophical framework which will be used to direct the approach to the research is detailed.

## Research Philosophy

Research philosophy is defined as the '*development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge*' while considering the assumptions held by individuals when viewing the world (Saunders *et al.*, 2012).

Ontology relates to the '*nature of reality and how the world operates*' (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). The researcher holds a subjective perspective, focussing on the creation of '*social phenomena from perceptions and consequent actions of affected social actors*' (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). The researcher must consider the meaning applied to different situations based on the participants' perception of their environments and how this shapes their reality (Yin, 2011).

The two main research philosophies are positivism and interpretivism. It is generally accepted that positivism tends towards quantitative methods, while interpretivism leans towards qualitative research (Quinlan, 2011). While positivist researchers contend that reality is objective, external and based on observations made with certainty (Bryman and Bell, 2015); interpretivists assert that reality is subjective and socially constructed by humans in their roles as '*social actors*' (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). Interpretivism promotes '*small sample, in depth-investigation*' which is appropriate for an exploratory study into the challenges faced by women scaling the leadership ladder (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). An approach to research reflective of humans' individuality is required for the epistemological view of interpretivism (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

## Research Approach

The overarching approach to this research is an inductive approach which interweaves detailed empirical data gathered from the participants with initial theoretical propositions extracted from the literature review (Yin, 2011). The inductive approach fits within the interpretivist philosophy and complements the objective to gain deep insights into senior female leaders' perspectives. This approach is appropriate for the study as it seeks to comprehend women's perceptions of experienced phenomena in their business lives and from this

develop categories, propositions and meaning rather than attempting to create causality between variables (Yin, 2011).

This approach will be supported by elements of a deductive approach as testing of theoretical hypotheses developed by other researchers, will form the basis for data collection and analysis (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). Empirical findings will be compared with the literature to establish whether the results endorse, or reject, the theoretical arguments therein thus narrowing the gaps in existing theory (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

## **Research Design**

Research design involves the planning of the study, including data gathering and analysis and the implementation of the research framework (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). Its goal is to achieve credible results and reduce the likelihood of drawing incorrect causal inferences from data (Bryman and Bell, 2015) therefore, some approaches may be more appropriate than others to the exploration of the research question (Willig, 2008). The appropriate research design allows the theories under investigation be tested thoroughly, and supported or disproved, through analysis of the data gathered (Fisher, 2010).

Quantitative and qualitative research or a mixed method - utilising both approaches - can be undertaken (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research explores meanings applied to social or human issues (Creswell, 2007). It involves gathering data, in a setting familiar to the participant and interpretation of the meaning of that data (Quinlan, 2011). Qualitative research empowers individuals to share their stories unencumbered by the constraints of a Likert (or equivalent) scale on a quantitative survey (Berg, 2007). Quantitative surveys and associated statistical analyses often do not capture the complexities inherent in the issues being examined, particularly those which relate to sensitive issues such as gender (Creswell, 2007, 2013).

Undertaking qualitative research is challenging as there is no guaranteed approach to deliver an irrefutable research paper! Qualitative research does, however, facilitate the recording of human perspectives, emotional reactions to complex issues and in depth experiences which do not easily translate to

statistics - being seen as undesirable biases in a quantitative methodology (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The conduct of interviews in context specific, natural settings allows for observation of non-verbal cues and behaviours, in addition to the answers provided, to allow interpretation of phenomena and the meanings ascribed to them thus enriching the data gathered (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Willig, 2008).

The researcher adopted a qualitative approach in this instance due to the exploratory nature of the research. The research was undertaken in the participants' natural settings and focussed on their perceptions of their lived experiences in order to gather specific data from which findings were extrapolated (Horn, 2009; Quinlan, 2011). The findings were then compared to the literature to establish concurrence or divergence.

### **Rationale for Research Design**

The qualitative approach to data gathering was selected for a number of reasons. While there exists a breadth of findings addressing the lack of female ascension to the ranks of executive leadership in the literature, the majority of these findings have been gleaned from quantitative studies (Eagly *et al.*, 2003; Eagly and Johnson, 1990; Koenig *et al.*, 2011). The purpose of undertaking a qualitative study is to establish whether the quantitative survey findings are substantiated or repudiated in a qualitative context through the exploration of in depth, lived experiences (Billing and Alvesson, 2014; Creswell, 2007; Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

A gap in the research, which this study attempts to address, is the limited number of qualitatively rich studies derived from in-depth exploration of the subtleties experienced by women in senior leadership roles (Billing and Alvesson, 2014) particularly in the Irish context. To address this gap, the researcher sought to create new learnings by analysing the experiences of the participants, unrestricted by the constraints of quantitative studies (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Qualitative research was deemed to be more conducive to this aim (Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Yin, 2011). Data were collected through scheduled participant interviews using a set of interview questions (*See*

*Appendix 3 – Interview Guide and Questions*) covering an array of topics amassed from the literature review (Berg, 2007; Fisher, 2010). The purpose of the detailed interview question list was to guide the progress of the interview to ensure coverage of relevant theoretical topics discovered during the literature review (Berg, 2007). It was not followed rigidly where the conversation moved to areas not specifically addressed in the questions, which offered further insights into the phenomena being discussed (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). This allowed participants relate their personal experiences of the environmental and organisational factors which shaped their careers (Creswell, 2007; Oakley, 1981). In addition, observation of non-verbal communication, such as behaviours and emotions of the participants, in highlighting personal feelings and viewpoints was facilitated through conversation flows in face to face interviews which provided further depth of coverage (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Further exploration of these areas occurred through the use of supplementary areas of questioning (probes) (Cohen, Manion and Morison, 2007; Creswell, 2013), additional to those documented in the semi-structured interview questions, allowing the researcher build individual case studies for each of the participants (Oakley, 1981).

While a qualitative approach was preferred in this instance to gather real, rich data associated with the participants' personal experiences; the researcher acknowledges there are associated limitations which are addressed later in this chapter.

## **Research Method**

The research method relates to how data is collected (Bryman and Bell, 2015). The primary data collection method for this study is semi-structured interviews as they allow greater opportunity to explore topics which evolve during the course of the interview (Fisher, 2010; Saunders *et al.*, 2012). An interview guide was developed from the broad areas discovered during the literature review to initiate the development of the semi-structured interview questions (*See Appendix 3 – Interview Guide and Questions*). The categories addressed in the interview guide were: Definition of leadership; Leadership skills; Gender and Leadership; Leadership Challenges. (*See Appendix 3 – Interview Guide and*

*Questions*). The semi structured interview questions were, in the main, open-ended to allow participants to unrestrictedly express their views (Fisher, 2010; Quinlan, 2011).

This research method was deemed appropriate as it aligns with the chosen research philosophy, approach and design (Bryman and Bell, 2015) and supports a combined inductive and deductive approach (Creswell, 2013). It also facilitates the provision of feelings and sentiments by the participants, enriching the depth of data collected (Walle, 2015; Willig, 2008). Given time constraints, very limited secondary data was used to augment the primary data collected, albeit the benefit of triangulation (the use of multiple data sources to increase credibility of the conclusions through convergence of findings) is recognised (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Saunders *et al.*, 2012; Walle, 2015; Yin, 2011).

The small scale study comprised eight participants, all of whom have reached one level below that of the C-suite in their respective organisations, each of which would be ranked as a ‘Top Employer’, or major corporation, in Ireland. (Central Statistics Office, 2017b). All participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity for their personal and professional data. Non-standardised, one-to-one, face-to-face, recorded, documented, and subsequently transcribed, interviews were conducted with all participants in early July 2018. (*See Appendix 4 – Dissertation Plan and Timeline*). Face-to-face interviews facilitated changes to the pace and direction of the interview based on nonverbal cues (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Yin, 2011). Each interview lasted between fifty to eighty minutes and each participant received a unique identifier, allocated depending on the order in which the interviews occurred, (P1-P8). (*See Appendix 5 – Participant Demographics*). A full transcript of all participants’ interviews are available.

In the selection of semi-structured interviews, the researcher rejected the alternative of structured (standardised) and unstructured interviews as both were deemed inappropriate for the participants given their rigidity and fluidity respectively. Similarly the use of a questionnaire was also rejected as the number of participants was low and the depth of information that the researcher

required from the participants would not have been achieved (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). The use of this method assumes interviewer experience, is time-consuming for the participants and the interviewer, and is subject to concerns regarding generalisability and reliability (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) as participants' responses may be biased due to the presence of the interviewer (The Hawthorne Effect) and the participants' views of the questions asked (Creswell, 2013). However, this method was chosen as the sample was small and it offered the potential to gather valuable data, which may not be available through more detached methods.

### **Population and Sample Size**

Once the interview questions were developed, the number of participants was identified and approached. Selection of the participants was based on appropriateness which derived from the position held in their respective organisations and their professional experience rather than focussing on the actual number of participants (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

The participants in the research study are female senior leaders in Irish companies that are classified as large organisations (greater than 250 employees (as per Structural Business Statistics Database (Eurostat) definition and turnovers of hundreds of millions of euro) (Central Statistics Office, 2017b). Each participant has between ten to fifteen years of senior leadership experience and fall within the age range of forty to fifty years. All participants are university graduates; some have master's degrees, or other professional qualifications; all hold a bachelor's degree. The women were selected by means of purposive sampling (Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Quinlan, 2011).

### **Purposive Sampling**

Purposive sampling was used to select the eight participants as key to this research was the extent of their experience at a senior level in large organisations in Ireland. The primary criterion for selection of the participant was membership of the senior leadership team, no more than one level removed from the C-suite, in her organisation.

While qualitative research has been undertaken at middle, or lower management levels in Irish organisations, the aim of this research was to explore the experiences of women at senior management levels in large Irish organisations.

<b>Id.</b>	<b>Current Role</b>	<b>Marital Status/ Family</b>	<b>Years in this role</b>	<b>Years as a Leader</b>	<b>Industry/Sector</b>
P1	Associate Director - Quality	Married; 2 ch.	3	12	Pharmaceutical
P2	Head of Transformation	Single	2	14	Financial Services
P3	Compliance Officer	Married; 2 ch.	2	10	Accountancy
P4	Head of Information Systems	Married; 1 ch.	5	12	Accountancy
P5	Head of HR Programmes	Married; 1 ch.	5	12	Financial Services
P6	Senior Development Advisor	Married; 2 ch.	5	10	Semi State
P7	Head of Finance	Single	8	15	Accountancy
P8	Head of Web Development	Single; 1 ch.	7	12	Financial Services

Table 1: Participant demographics

**Note:** This list is based on the order in which interviews were scheduled and conducted i.e. the first to the last participant interviewed.

## Pilot Study

Prior to commencing interviews with the participants, a limited pilot study was performed with an impartial female observer to check the research tool (interview questions) for issues with clarity, interpretation, perception and to establish the estimated duration of the interview (Quinlan, 2011; Robson, 2011). Resulting from the pilot sample, two questions were removed as potential duplicates; five interview questions were reworded; and probes were included to elicit more detail should this be required. The interview took fifty minutes to conduct, thus the target of one hour for participants remained reasonable.

## Data Collection

Semi-structured, qualitative interviews consisting of open-ended questions were used to gather data on the participants' leadership experiences (Creswell, 2007). The interviews were conducted in person, taking between fifty to eighty minutes, in meeting rooms located in the participants' own environments (organisations)

to ensure the context, related to the experiences being described, was forefront for the participants (Horn, 2009; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Quinlan, 2011). Permission was obtained from each of the participants to record the interviews. This allowed the researcher take note of key points, and engage in initial concept-driven coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006), while also enabling a rapport be built with the participant to facilitate a less formal, conversational style of interview (Yin, 2011).

Recording the interviews made their transcription more straightforward as the participants' exact words could be transcribed *verbatim*, as opposed to recording the researcher's interpretations from interview notes. Notwithstanding the availability of recorded interviews, the transcription process remained time-consuming, requiring approximately one day per interview conducted. On completion of the first draft of each of the transcripts, they were forwarded to each of the participants for review to ensure that the ascribed content was endorsed. On receipt of the returned drafts, data analysis, in earnest, commenced.

## **Data Analysis**

Thematic coding, was undertaken where the data was searched for themes (patterns) to establish a matrix for analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This approach to data analysis was chosen due to its appropriateness for the type of study undertaken, flexibility in application and, in part, due to its relative ease to learn and use (Robson, 2011).

In order to analyse the data, each approved set of interview notes were printed, and all of the expressions and sentences comprising the participants' responses were analysed to identify noteworthy statements and experiences and to identify and understand the nuances in the language and commonalities across interviews (Creswell, 2007). Key responses were highlighted, across the transcripts to aid categorisation. The key themes common to each interview question were analysed in addition to individual themes arising in each interview. An excel template was created containing all interview questions

against which each highlighted, key response was logged against the relevant theme (Creswell, 2007).

The initial codes for the data analysis were derived from themes proposed by peer-reviewed quantitative and qualitative studies, undertaken in other jurisdictions, examined during the literature review. Critically analysing this approach, researchers highlight that while there is no universally agreed approach to coding data, the use of pre-determined themes may result in the researcher's appraisal of the data being influenced, and consequently failing to perceive other insights during data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

### **Validity and Reliability**

Ensuring credibility of findings from qualitative research is critical (Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Robson, 2011). Researchers may adopt a number of validation strategies to increase confidence in their findings including: use of well-established research methods including the use of data gathering tools (questions) that have been successfully used in previous studies; developing a knowledge of the culture of contributing organisations before data collection occurs; random sampling of participants to negate possibilities of researcher bias during the selection process and to ensure that the participants represent the population; allowing participants the opportunity to reject participation; member checks of the dialogue gathered in interviews to ensure participant validation of the interpretations and inferences included in the transcripts; and finally, researcher credibility is vital (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004).

Prior to initiating the interviews with the participants, the researcher reflected on her similarities with the participants in order to consciously recognise any impacts her values and biases may have on the conduct of the empirical research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Saunders *et al.*, 2012; Shenton, 2004) and to be cognisant that the conclusions drawn must be objective and capable of withstanding scrutiny by researchers with other value systems (Yin, 2011). The researcher's interest in this particular study stems from the fact that she too operates at a similar level as the sample in a male-dominated organisation.

During the data gathering process, the researcher consciously maintained an impartial position, and used the semi-structured interview questions to guide the interviews, (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2011), rather than engaging in an informal conversational (unstructured) interview where her values may have steered the engagement in a particular direction (Turner, 2010). The researcher used a number of techniques to increase credibility, validity and reliability of the overall research paper (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Walle, 2015; Yin, 2011). These included: reflexivity, where the researcher remained aware of the ways in which her perceptions, reactions and biases may have affected the research (Turner, 2010); thick description, where the context, participants and themes of the qualitative study are described in prolific detail using the words of the participants (Holloway, 1997; Lincoln and Guba, 1985); verisimilitude, those statements that allow the reader feel they too have experienced the events being relayed (Creswell, 2012; Holloway, 1997); member checks of the collected data, analysis and interpretations (Shenton, 2004); and peer review by a researcher comfortable in conducting qualitative analysis (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2011).

## **Ethical Considerations**

Researchers must follow ethical considerations when dealing with human participants. Ethical considerations have been considered at all stages of the information gathering process. To commence, approval for the research project was obtained during the dissertation proposal stage. This was followed by an email request to the purposive sample group, (*See Appendix 6 – Request for Participation*) and subsequently, by the provision of a Participant's Informed Consent Form outlining the study purpose, requirements of the participant, confidentiality commitment and output usage to each research participant to allow them decide whether to participate in the research (Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Fisher, 2010; Yin, 2011) (*See Appendix 7 – Participant's Informed Consent Form*). A physical version of this form was completed at the interview and retained with the interview transcripts. Interviews are considered an imposition on individuals' time and privacy (Cohen *et al.*, 2007) thus participants could withdraw at any time. The participants reviewed the transcripts of their interview notes to clarify, expand or reject any points before the data was

analysed. Participant and data confidentiality and anonymity was guaranteed to the research participants before, and during, the interviews.

### **Limitations of the Research Design**

Qualitative research designs tend to draw samples from smaller scale data sets as there are cost and time implications to conducting labour intensive, large scale investigations. In this instance, the sample set is a relatively homogenous one of eight participants, all of whom perform an equivalent role, at a particular grade, in a specific organisation type, and are of a particular age and experience range.

As qualitative data is subjective in nature, questions regarding the reliability, validity and generalisation of data are raised (Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Studies are difficult to replicate because of the role of the researcher and the uniqueness of the situation, context or conditions of the test (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004).

Triangulation was not undertaken as part of this study although the associated benefits are recognised.

The dearth of a quantitative study is also recognised as a limitation and relates to the time constraints under which the research was undertaken.

A comprehensive list of interview questions was generated to ensure coverage in the interviews. When the interviews were actually conducted, the participants spoke at length about some of the areas and, as a result, some questions merged, and not all questions were asked. On reflection, there may have been a surfeit of potential questions when eight to ten may have been sufficient.

## Chapter 5: Findings

*'You cannot lead from the crowd.'*

*Margaret Thatcher, 1993*

### Introduction

This chapter addresses the analysis of findings presented by the empirical data. Key sections in this chapter include the main and sub-themes which emerged from the literature and interviews, associated coding, and the key responses from the participants' interviews. The main and sub-themes are discussed through the recounting of the participants' lived experiences.

### Participants' demographics

To commence the research, a purposive sample of a group of female senior leaders, one level below that of the executive leadership, or C-suite, in large Irish organisations was selected, which provided a reasonably homogenous group for the study.

<b>Id.</b>	<b>Current Role</b>	<b>Marital Status/ Family</b>	<b>Years in this role</b>	<b>Years as a Leader</b>	<b>Industry/Sector</b>
P1	Associate Director - Quality	Married; 2 ch.	3	12	Pharmaceutical
P2	Head of Transformation	Single	2	14	Financial Services
P3	Compliance Officer	Married; 2 ch.	2	10	Accountancy
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P5	Head of HR Programmes	Married; 1 ch.	5	12	Financial Services
P6	Senior Development Advisor	Married; 2 ch.	5	10	Semi State
P7	Head of Finance	Single	8	15	Accountancy
P8	Head of Web Development	Single; 1 ch.	7	12	Financial Services

Table 1: Participant demographics

## Coding

The initial approach to coding was concept driven, where terms which appeared in extant theory were used as the main themes for discovery. Each interview was treated as an individual case study against which the research objectives were examined. As the analysis progressed, a data driven approach emerged reflecting the *in vivo* codes which arose during the course of interviews (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). These informed the sub-themes below. Each of these sub-themes will be analysed in this chapter with supporting quotes from the senior leaders. In order that the commitment to confidentiality is maintained, the quotes are presented as those of the participants' allocated codes (P1, P2, etc.).

## Themes and sub-themes

Main themes	Sub-themes
Gender and Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Homogeneity of leadership</li><li>▪ Perceptions of female leaders</li><li>▪ Work/Life balance</li><li>▪ Women's leadership styles</li></ul>
Leadership challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Bias against female leaders</li><li>▪ Networks / Professional relationships</li><li>▪ Influential, and influencing, others</li></ul>

Table 2: Main themes and sub-themes

Analysing the data from the semi-structured interviews identified the sub-themes identified in Table 2 above. These themes reflect the experiences and narratives of the participants in their roles as senior female leaders. Each of the themes will be analysed in detail below, presenting the women's own descriptions using quotations from their respective interviews.

A conceptual framework was not used for this research paper, the data gathered steered the findings in accordance with the inductive approach. It should be noted that claims related to statistical significance of the data will not be made; its value lies in the in depth experiences of the participants.

## **Main theme: Gender and Leadership**

The main theme of gender and leadership relates to the participants' unanimous perception of leadership in large Irish organisations as a predominantly male bastion. The data related to this theme were coded as four sub-themes: the homogeneity of leadership; perceptions of female leaders; work/life balance; and women's leadership styles; each of which will be addressed in turn.

### **Gender and Leadership: Homogeneity of Leadership**

In the organisations represented by the participants, C-suite membership is almost exclusively male, save for one exception, where it is c.50:50 female:male. While diversity has been topical for a number of years, it has still not entered the mainstream of large organisations, which continue to be male-dominated at the highest level.

*Finding: Executive leadership remains primarily a male bastion.*

Of the eight different organisations represented, one of the financial services organisations has an exemplary approach to diversity amongst the executive team, while two of the other financial institutions have just one female executive leader. Whilst in all of these institutions diversity was said to matter, the reality behind the doctrine tended to be different. One financial institution stood out as particularly disposed to female leadership with P2 advising:

*'If you'd asked me this question a year ago, I would have said we had too many women!! There's been sort of a change of guard. So it's sort of, I'd say, it's 50:50 [female:male] now, whereas it was probably around 70:30 in 2017.'*

P5 and P8 who also work in a financial services organisations, both stated:

*'There's a woman – just one.'*

P3, P4 and P7 who work in professional services/accountancy firms stated respectively:

*'It's pretty much the same as it always was [at the highest level]. We recruit new trainees annually. For the past few years it's been about 50:50*

*female:male graduates – if there was a difference, there may be slightly more females. By the time you reach partner level there's about 1 in 7 or 8 that are women – definitely no higher.'* [P3]

*'It's absolutely an 'Old Boys' Club'! Unfortunately, at the most senior level, they're all men. They all tend to go golfing together, go to rugby matches together, they go for dinner together afterwards and then they socialise together over a few pints. I'm not sure I'd be invited, if I did get to that level and even if I did play golf, as they're just so comfortable with that arrangement. It's most definitely a Boys' Club mentality and approach.'* [P4]

*'There's a female CFO now so she'll hopefully get some more women up through the ranks. It's good to see a woman get to that level – it kind of gives the rest of us hope.'* [P7]

In the semi-state sector, the numbers are similar with P6 advising:

*'It's about 15% female I guess – basically there are 2 women on the executive leadership team.'*

The pharmaceutical company represented has long promoted its positive approach to diversity, but yet the numbers at the senior leadership level do not reflect this with P1 stating:

*'It's just me. Looking across the senior leadership team in my area of the business there are eleven senior leaders and I'm the only woman. Above me, it's all men.'*

In short, male leaders continue to dominate the executive grades of the sectors represented by the participants, notwithstanding the edicts regarding diversity and equality for employees of the organisations in question.

### **Gender and Leadership: Perceptions of Female Leaders**

As female leaders in the vast majority of the organisations were a rare occurrence, the next sub-theme related to the perceptions of women leaders in these organisations. The perception of female leaders, as a general concept, and that of the individual female leaders comprising the sample, was discussed.

***Finding: Women are 'scary' tokens!***

With reference to the *general perception of female leaders* in the organisations, the issue of 'tokenism' was raised by half of the women interviewed. Given the lack of females at the executive levels of each organisation, and the commitments which have been made to the diversity programmes common to all of the organisations represented, the women believed that, in a lot of instances, the occupation of a C-suite role by a woman held connotations of tokenism.

Some of the women felt that the focus on diversity in organisations actually hindered women's progress as they were now seen as being on a '*different track to the leadership suite*' [P7] meaning that it is '*now not about how well you do your job, or the results you achieve, progress is based on what's been committed to on the diversity targets*' [P4] with a similar opinion voiced by P8. One of the women, P5, was particularly frustrated by this as she felt she had reached her level of seniority '*by putting in the long hard hours and giving up my life*' [P5] and didn't necessarily want to see others rewarded for not having to endure the same, and achieving grade parity by being the '*token female*' [P5]. Two of the women stated that regardless of the work they had delivered or the people they had worked with and influenced, in terms of their ability and dedication, they still felt that recognition of their efforts would probably be couched in 'tokenism' [P2 and P6]. In contrast, two of the other women felt that it didn't matter how women got to the highest levels, with P7 stating '*the point is they get there and help to elevate others*', and from P1, '*it doesn't matter how women get there, it just needs to happen. It's taking too long trying the other route*' despite allegations of tokenism made toward her by members of the leadership team of which she is part. She believes that this has been exacerbated by the organisation's global diversity programme. One of the women, P3, felt that it was all just rhetoric. Diversity programmes have been running in organisations, in some form or other, for many years but they have not borne fruit '*we've been on this journey for a long time now but the number of women making partner is still nowhere close to 50 percent. I'm not sure it ever will be regardless of what's said. Female partners have to do all of the hours, bring in all of the clients and do all of the travel, and more, than the male ones just to get a seat at the table. Once they get it, they have to do even more to keep it.*' [P3]

Some consistent descriptions emerged in the comments made by the individual women when considering how they were perceived as female leaders. The word 'scary' was used by three of the participants to describe the **perceptions of the women as leaders** [P2, P3 and P8] while one woman knew her office nickname was 'The Rottweiler' [P7]. Similarly, other consistent descriptions were 'hard' [P1, P5 and P6] and 'tough' [P1 and P5] although P6 used the descriptor 'hard' in the context of being 'being hard on myself'. P5 felt she would be described as 'ruthless' [P5]. The women in IT both felt they would be described as professional; P4 felt she would also be perceived as 'nerdy' while P8 felt she would be termed 'stern' or 'square'. (See Appendix 8 – Participants' Commentaries for additional detail on this question).

### **Gender and Leadership: Work/Life Balance**

The sub-theme of work/life balance was discussed with each of the participants. Regardless of whether the women had children or not, this sub-theme was associated with family commitments, more specifically, children and childcare, by all participants.

#### ***Finding: Family commitments impact on women's ability to progress.***

Regardless of whether they were mothers (6) or child-free (2), the participants defined work/life balance as relating to children/childcare when considering what work/life balance meant. All of the mothers in the sample spoke of having to deliberately balance work and childcare responsibilities, while the child-free participants also referenced the impact that family commitments have on the ability of women to attain senior leadership roles. There was a range of approaches undertaken by participants to negotiate the demands of family and child care. This varied from one end of the scale where the woman took on the primary share of childcare, to a shared model between partners, to the other end of the scale where a partner took responsibility.

Those women who were primarily responsible for childcare recounted traditional experiences of the mother taking responsibility for running a household regardless of the work undertaken during the day/week. The reality of fitting the responsibilities of home around careers, and sometimes the

alternate view of trying to preserve a career while managing non-work responsibilities, was a principal concern throughout the career narrative discourse.

P1 described the lack of compatibility between children and her career and the pressure involved in trying to harmonise both responsibilities: *'It's hard to combine family life with the demands of this role. It [my role] requires me to travel globally – sometimes with just a few days' notice - but this can be hard because both of us work in similar careers (we're both in pharma and we both have to travel). When I'm at home I do have flexible working, in that I can work from home, so I take advantage of that to compensate for being away.'*

P3 reflected a similar view to P1 stating: *'The travel piece is a tough one for me to negotiate because I feel guilty about being away from the kids. Luckily it's at home – as in, Ireland. I used to have to travel abroad before I had kids which just wouldn't work now.'*

P8 described the arrangements that are required to balance her day: *'It's just me so I can't drop everything at a minute's notice for work. My day has to be rigidly planned and executed to make sure that none of the spinning plates fall!'*

A shared approach to childcare to enhance work/life balance was described by P4 who balanced childcare responsibilities with her husband: *'We have to divide it between us. We don't have family support so for the everyday stuff like drop-offs and collections, or if there's an emergency, we just have to work it between us but usually I'd say it's a 50-50 split.'*

Two of the married participants, with children, advised that the children had a more limited impact. P6, whose children are older, stated: *'One of my peers said to me 'well you obviously don't have any children' and I told her I had three which was a complete surprise to her as she didn't think I was a mother with the hours I was putting in. That was good for me as I don't want my work to be defined by my children'.*

P5 brought a different perspective to the conversation when she advised: *'My husband deals with the childcare/school arrangements. He was a stay-at-home*

*Dad for a while and his job now is more flexible than mine – it doesn't require such long hours – so he deals with that side of things.'*

For the two child-free participants [P2 and P7], they described the compromises as: *'I think, obviously, when people start having families, and they have commitments that they have to meet outside work, then that can be, you know, depending on their domestic situation, that can be tricky to manage.'* [P2]. P7 mentioned the carer requirements as well as that of childcare: *'The concept of the sandwich generation is a very real one. There are women dealing with grown children still living at home who are also looking after aging parents who may not both even live in the same location.'*

### **Gender and Leadership: Women's Leadership Styles**

The area of differences in styles of leadership utilised by male and female leaders was discussed. The participants were asked whether they believed that men and women led in the same way. The women's responses addressed both common, and divergent, behaviours used by men and women. Where behaviours were similar among men and women, observations were made on the perceptions of those behaviours by the women themselves or in some instances, the women detailed the perceptions that they believed their colleagues may hold.

#### ***Finding: Women lead differently to men.***

The responses to the question 'Is leadership gender neutral or is there a difference between male/female leadership styles?' are detailed below.

P1 – *'There's definitely a difference between men & women. I'm the only woman on a team of 11 and my approach and behaviours would be totally different to the men. My style would be very different - if I behaved the same way as them people would probably say I was hysterical!!! Maybe that's why I'm seen as calm when compared against my male colleagues!'*

P2 – *'I think I have more of a nurturing style. I'm keen to support people to help them get on with their careers. I recognise that it's a whole person that comes to work and not just face time from nine to five. I think if you enable people to live their lives as well as work, you will get 150% back from them.'*

*Having said that, if I decide that you're not working out for me, I will move you on.'*

*P3 – 'Definitely different. I like, and try, to support people in achieving their ambitions be that to rise up the career ladder or just do a good day's work. I probably have a more inclusive style than most men I've worked with previously.'*

*P4 – 'Women can say and do the same things as men but the reactions are totally different. If I went and banged my hand on the desk and a man did the same thing, it wouldn't be regarded as bad for him. But if it was me it would be 'Oh my God. Is she having a breakdown? Yeah. Yeah, she's crazy'. It's perceived differently. Being angry as a woman, you're hysterical, as opposed to if you're angry as a man, you're justifiably enraged. And I've seen both, I've seen both.'*

*P5 – 'Men and women's styles are definitely different. I'm a woman and I do things differently to men. It's not a one size fits all approach to leadership.'*

*P6 – 'I do think there is a difference. I think that there's a marked difference. I think part of it is women are too emotional. I've noticed also that often women who are in positions of power, they might come in and be powerful, but then they have to do the jokey stuff with the men in the room and, you know, almost ostracise the women in the room. Sometimes because women live in a world dominated by men they actually take on the characteristics that they perceive as required which seem to be those that the males display.'*

*P8 – 'For me it has been taking a reasonable approach to everything – working things through with people, working on projects, or with clients – finding a way through to the end and always taking a partnership approach with everyone – taking the long view. I think a male approach is completely different – much less patient, often less attention to details – trying to ignore issues and move on, more likely to take aggressive attitude with subordinates who don't or can't perform in a given situation.'*

In short the women believed that there were definite style differences between men and women with women being more inclusive. In addition, some of the participants referenced similar behaviour between men and women garnering different reactions.

### **Main theme: Leadership Challenges**

The main theme of leadership challenges relates to the difficulties faced by leaders in their roles. This is an area where the participants felt there were challenges to them as women in the roles that they occupy, and also the way in which organisation structures support, or inhibit, their leadership aspirations. The data related to this theme resulted in three sub-themes: bias against female leaders; networks/professional relationships; and influential/influencing others addressed below.

### **Leadership Challenges: Bias against Female Leaders**

The topic of bias and disparate treatment attributable to gender difference was discussed at length during the interviews.

#### ***Finding: Gender bias is alive and well.***

Each of the participants had examples of gender bias in their current and other workplaces. There was no assurance that the focus on diversity, specifically gender diversity, has necessarily improved workplace environments for women. Almost all of the participants had a variety of anecdotes they were happy to relay during the course of the interviews, however, the majority of which they preferred not to have transcribed.

One of the participants, P2, did not feel that bias was a feature of the organisations in which she had worked and professed that the financial institution for which she now works is very positively biased towards diversity, resulting in more women and minority groups progressing. *'There is almost, like, positive discrimination for women at all levels now... In addition there's also a diversity program and culture called the rainbow network to support our LGBT community because of the recognition that diversity in the financial institution is as important as the diversity amongst our customers'* [P2]. However, later in the

course of the interview, P2 reflected that *'there may be unfavourable bias in the organisations I've worked for, and maybe you don't even know sometimes that you're being biased against - probably because it's so ingrained into me I don't even realise it.'* See more detailed commentary from the other participants below.

P1 – *'Sometimes with the diversity angle, it's almost like I'm perceived as a token amongst my peers. I'm not sure if the focus on diversity is making things easier or harder for women to succeed. People think that I'm just making up the numbers which is frustrating so you have to work twice as hard and deliver twice as much to prove yourself when you get to the position you more than earned.'*

P3 – *'It's all about the Boys' Club. Women don't fit in that mould; there's still an impression that they should be at home taking care of the house and children. When I worked on an international assignment, the expat men would work and socialise afterwards, while the women would meet at the international schools and go for coffee or lunch together.'*

P4 – *'I've worked really hard to get where I am, taking on courses in my own time and being the 'go to' person over years so I know I have all of the technical knowledge and more, required for my role yet I go to a meeting with a room full of men and it's assumed that I'm there to take the minutes or something.'*

P5 – *'I've certainly experienced discrimination. A long time ago I suppose. As a young girl working in an office environment. Do you know what I mean? Like I'd be expected to order in the tea/coffee/biscuits, you know? Never once was one of the men around the table asked to do that. It could have been worse - you just got on with it you know.'*

P6 – *'Women are definitely treated differently – right from the early days. It started from being a child in school. I wanted to be a doctor, my (female) career guidance teacher said 'why not be a nurse?' Men are just assumed to want to be leaders and it's assumed they'll get there.'*

P7 – *‘Women who take time to advance their learning (like you doing your MBA) is somehow still special/different whereas it's the expectation for men.’*

P8 – *‘There’s a perception that women who get to leadership positions tend to be single with no kids as what else would they be doing with their time. This would never even be considered as a commentary for men.’*

(See Appendix 8 – Participants’ Commentaries for further detail on responses to ‘Was there ever a time you were treated differently because of your gender rather than your position in the organisation?’).

### **Leadership Challenges: Networks / Professional Relationships**

Another area of discussion in interviews was whether the women built and utilised networks or maintained formal/informal professional relationships.

***Finding: Women engage with networks in a limited manner.***

While all of the women recognised that networking was important, four of the participants didn’t network at all [P3, P4, P5, P8] – other than building connections in their own workplaces to get things done. Two of the participants felt that networking was required by their workplaces [P1, P2]; while the remainder engaged with networking when facilitated by their work environments through events or required professional training [P6, P7]. While most engaged in some way with an internal or external network, in the main they did so because they felt it was required rather than it being a natural thing to do; only one of the participants [P1] felt networking was important from a personal perspective. See more detailed commentary below.

P1 – *‘I have a professional network built up over the past 10-12 years in this industry and I make sure to keep that alive by reaching out to people to ask for and offer support. It’s important for me as an individual and it’s expected by the company also.’*

P2 – *‘I go to women’s only groups - for the promotion of women and work. It’s important to be seen to be there with the emphasis on diversity now. I*

*network with everyone in work. I join everything - I don't necessarily go to all things though.'*

*P3 – 'I network in house - mainly in my own organisation. To me it's about having working relationships to make sure the work gets done.'*

*P4 – 'I don't network really. Definitely not outside of work. Inside, at the level above it's a Boys' Club so the opportunity really isn't there. At the levels below, I suppose it could be called networking but to me it's just linking up with the people you need to, to get the job done.'*

*P5 – 'I don't do as much as I could or probably should. It's just not something I engage with unless I really need to. I tend to do focus more on catching up with people if I'm looking for new opportunities.'*

*P6 – 'I network at formal work events only, not outside of core hours. I recognise it as something I should do but I don't. I always had a work network when I was a smoker – it was great for hearing what was going on across all levels of the organisation. Smoking is a great leveller!!'*

*P7 – 'I do network a bit. There are informal internal ones – pretty much all the women at my level know each other well and meet up for coffee or lunch. It's just to discuss what's going on in each other's areas and to avail of sounding boards. I stay in touch with my peers from my training days also. CPD events are good for that - you never know when you'll bump into someone.'*

*P8 – 'I don't to be honest. I just don't have the time.'*

## **Leadership Challenges: Influential, and Influencing, Others**

The area of influential, and influencing, others – mentors, mentees - was discussed during the interviews. The conversation developed to include role models.

***Finding: Formal mentoring programmes are lacking.***

Six of the eight organisations representing the pharmaceutical, financial services and accounting sectors do not operate recognised mentoring programmes. Two

of the organisations, one financial services and one semi-state, run formal programmes in which the participants engage both as mentors and mentees.

For those women that are involved in formal mentoring programmes, there was a recognition of its value, however more as a recipient rather than a provider. Time is set aside in both organisations to engage with the programme and individuals are formally allocated to a mentor, and/or as a mentee so there is never a question regarding the time spent on, or validity of, the activity.

For the financial services participant, P2, the value of a previous **mentee relationship** related to a personal ambition regarding promotion opportunities, *'My mentor was a man who ensured as he moved through the organisation that the people who had worked well with him moved as well. So they were promoted and given an opportunity'*. In her current organisation, in addition to navigating the political landscape in the financial services institution *'it's usually somebody that's outside your function, and that, again, helps you and navigate your way through the broader organisation'* [P2]. In the semi-state sector, the participant, P6, realised how beneficial her first mentor/mentee relationship was on mature reflection, rather than at the time of the experience stating *'we're still good friends and can reach out to each other. I guess that person showed me there's a different way to do things. And that was something I really admired. And they chose me...'* [P6].

For those women who undertook a formal **mentor role**, hard benefits weren't articulated. There is a requirement in each of the organisations to become a mentor but the participants weren't vociferous articulating the benefits they delivered to their mentees. P2 advised that *'they provide you with all sorts of training and assistance to try to help you to take on that role'* but didn't emphasise the benefits she delivered to the mentee in the same way as she had when detailing the benefits she received as a mentee. Similarly, P6 downplayed her role as a mentor *'The most recent person was a lady not too much younger than me.... She already had a lot of experience, but just didn't know how to navigate the organisation so that was how I helped her.'*

Two of the participants mentored people on an informal basis, P3 and P4, who advised respectively *'I try to mentor younger members of the team... I found that*

*really enjoyable particularly for those team members following the same path, as I find I have a lot in common with them' and 'Now I mentor cross-team people, not in IT, so it's more general skills that I try to help them with.'*

One of the participants, in Financial Services HR, advised that mentoring others is not something in which she would be interested – *'I'm not sure my personality suits mentoring other people!'* [P5] while P8's financial services organisation focuses on *'on-the-job learning'*. However, P8 sought out a mentor, on an informal basis, last year but found the experience didn't work for her. Finally, P4 advised that an informal process tended to operate in her organisation through the *'Old Boys' Club'* where the younger men *'were probably casually mentored by some of the older guys'*. See detailed responses to the question *'Do/did you have a mentor?'* below.

P1 – *'No, not formally. It's not something I've encountered on a formal basis in any of the organisations I've worked for. I'm sure I could find someone and ask them to be a mentor but it would be unusual.'*

P2 – *'My mentor was a man who ensured as he moved through the organisation, that the people who had worked well with him moved as well. So they were promoted and given opportunities. He would have been one of my preferred mentors - I suppose that I liked the good qualities that he brought to the job. Then you kind of internalise those almost and bring them with you. I chose a man as my mentor, and it's usually somebody that's outside your function, and that, again, helps you to navigate your way through the broader organisation.'*

P3 – *'No, it's not something that's done formally in the organisation.'*

P4 – *'I didn't have a formal mentor to be honest. People would have thought that my boss, who was there for years, was probably an informal mentor to me. I suppose he looked out for me, but then I suppose I was making him look good also. He was a great sounding board, but to be honest looking back I realise I was never going to move as long as he was there so while he was a kind of mentor he didn't help me develop or advance at all.'*

P5 – *'No mentor! It's something that's done on an informal basis in the organisation but the problem is that time isn't allocated to allow the mentor/mentee catch up as it's not recognised as part of development for either party.'*

P6 – *'I suppose I was very lucky when I first came into my company I actually was given somebody who saw something in me and chose to take on the role of mentor for me. Looking back on it now - and that person no longer works in our organisation, they've retired actually - we're still good friends and can reach out to each other. I guess that person showed me there's a different way to do things. And that was something I really admired. And they chose me rather than me seeking them or being appointed.'*

P7 – *'Mentoring for women wasn't really a thing that happened. There was a network for the men – sort of an 'Old Boys' Club' and from here some of the younger guys were probably casually mentored by some of the older guys but it wasn't a formal process.'*

P8 – *'I had one mentor most recently (in the past year). It was good for a while but it transpired he was a bit of a one trick pony. Once he started to repeat himself we stopped meeting up at my suggestion.'*

See detailed responses to the question *'Do you train/mentor other potential leaders?'* below.

P1 – *'Again, not formally. We're a global corporation so training is provided where skills are required to be developed. Maybe the channels are a bit more formal for skills development.'*

P2 – *'Everyone is encouraged to get a mentor and you're encouraged to be a mentor. You can put your hand up and say, I want to be mentor, and they generally come to see somebody who is in a different grade, usually more management grades to say 'Would you consider being a mentor?'. Then they provide you with all sorts of training and assistance to try to help you to take on that role.'*

P3 – *‘Yes, definitely. I try to mentor younger members of the team - male and female. I found that really enjoyable particularly for those team members following the same path as I find I have a lot in common with them.’*

P4 – *‘Not so much formally because the team is small so it gets covered by the more junior people. Now I mentor cross-team people, not in IT, so it's more general skills that I try to help them with.’*

P5 – *‘No, not really. I'm not sure my personality suits mentoring other people! It doesn't feature in my job description and to be honest, because of the kind of work I do (letting people go; exiting them from the organisation as we've been acquiring companies and consolidating them into ours), people don't really engage with me as I think they feel they're then on my radar which may not be a good thing.’*

P6 – *‘Yes, there's a formal programme for mentoring in the organisation. The most recent person was a lady not too much younger than me who was a single mother with children – one of them had special needs. She already had a lot of experience but didn't know how to navigate the organisation so that was how I helped her.’*

P7 – *‘Mentoring for women wasn't really a thing that happened. There was a network for the men – sort of an ‘Old Boys’ Club’ and from here some of the younger guys were probably casually mentored by some of the older guys but it wasn't a formal process.’*

P8 – *‘No, not a formal recognised approach to mentoring in the organisation. Focused on on-the-job learning.’*

The subject of **role models** was also discussed during the interviews. None of the participants specified role models in their current organisations; some chose well-known leaders but these were probably people they regarded as being inspirational rather than people on whom careers would be modelled. For example, P1 referenced Steve Jobs, P2 suggested Michelle Obama and P6 proposed Donald Trump, Nelson Mandela and Martin McGuinness as potential role models. P2 and P3 mentioned managers for whom they had previously

worked as potential role models although P3 felt that this perception had been tainted by certain behaviours that her supervisor had endorsed (when it came to being passed over for promotion). The remainder of the participants did not identify anyone in their organisations to whom they would refer as a role model. P7 mentioned the female CFO in her organisation but felt that she worked so hard to get to the position that this behaviour was not something to be modelled, *'I suppose I could look at the female CFO that we have now as occupying a role at the level to which I'd aspire but I don't think she's very inspirational, she just works very hard.'* (See Appendix 8 – Participants' Commentaries for further detail on the question *'Is there a particular leader that you admire?'*).

## Summary

This chapter has presented an analysis of the main findings and an associated analysis of the research undertaken with the eight senior female leaders.

Two themes and seven sub-themes were explored in detail with the women. The women were a homogenous group and their experiences, while gained in different large organisations in different sectors, were also reasonably homogenous. The structures in their respective organisations, shaped their experiences with very similar outcomes recounted by all of the women.

## Chapter 6: Discussion

*‘You’re not ‘having’ it all – you’re ‘doing’ it all.’*

*Anon.*

### Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings detailed in Chapter 5 with reference to the extant literature as discussed in Chapter 2. The chapter follows the format of a comparative analysis of the empirical data to the literature under of each of the main and sub-themes. In summary, the findings align with the literature: women continue to face barriers in their career progression to senior leadership roles.

### Gender and Leadership

The main theme of gender and leadership relates to homogeneity of leadership; perceptions of female leaders; and work/life balance. Regarding ***homogeneity of leadership***, the participants’ hold the unanimous perception of leadership in large Irish organisations as a male bastion. In the literature, the archetypal representation of a leader is male (Koenig *et al.*, 2011), which associates men with leadership ambition and hence the propensity of men to fulfil this ambition (Storberg-Walker and Madsen, 2017). The experiences recounted by the participants detail women’s continued incongruence with the leadership mantle, despite the prevalence of diversity initiatives in the organisations for which they work. The executive (C-suite) and senior leadership teams comprise mainly men in the organisations represented by the participants. This finding aligns with real-world data gathered in studies undertaken by professional service firms, intergovernmental and not for profit organisations, where up to 95 percent of CEOs are male (Accenture, 2014; Catalyst 2016; McKinsey and Company, 2017a, 2018; PwC, 2015; OECD 2016; United Nations, 2016; World Economic Forum, 2016, 2017) and in Ireland where c.90 percent of CEOs are male (Reddan, 2017). While women at entry level comprise up to 50 percent of the intake into the institutions represented, the dominant masculine norm of leadership prevalent in the 1970s (Schein, 1973) continues to prevail today. This is despite a

proliferation of diversity initiatives across the organisations, which supports the existence of the concept of second-generation biases in the literature (Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Ibarra *et al.*, 2013). Glass ceilings of the 1980s have transformed into complex labyrinths facilitated by glass walls (Unerman and Jacob, 2006) which must be navigated by women to get to senior leadership roles (Carli, 2018; Eagly and Carli, 2007).

The ***perception of female leaders*** as tokens is corroborated by the literature. This label was applied to half of the women [P1, P2, P5, P6] who had reached senior leadership roles. RCT, where male characteristics are aligned with leadership roles, continues to dominate workplaces, and thus incongruous perceptions of women in leadership roles continue (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Eagly, 2013), particularly in senior leadership positions, (Heilman, 2012; Hoyt, 2010) where prescriptive stereotypes, likely facilitated by masculine organisation culture and second-generation biases (Broadbridge and Hearn, 2008; Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Gill, 2004; Ibarra *et al.*, 2013; Tinsley and Ely, 2018; Watkins, 2013).

In terms of ***work/life balance***, the sample highlighted the impact of motherhood and family on women's career trajectories. Consistent with the literature review, the women in the sample are generally responsible for a greater proportion of household activities than men in addition to completing their day jobs (Carli, 2018; Goldin 2014). An area which did not arise in the reviewed literature, but was reflected in the response by P5, was that of the (temporary) stay-at-home father who assumed responsibility of the household tasks, facilitating career concentration by the woman (Kramer, Kelly and McCulloch, 2015) This can be considered a relatively non-traditional arrangement which has not been subject to a vast amount of research. Perhaps this arrangement may become more widespread when Generation Z females rise through the ranks.

All of the women believed that there are differences in ***leadership styles*** adopted by men and women. The literature states that women's style of leadership tends to be more inclusive and less directive than men's (Eagly et al., 2003; McGregor, 2017). The literature posits that women adopt transformational leadership styles more naturally than men, which is borne out by the findings

where a nurturing approach to leadership was relayed. Men tend towards transactional styles of leadership often adopting a command and control approach (Conger and Kanungo, 1987). The participants signalled that should they behave in the ways which have become normalised for male leaders they would be chastened, substantiating the dominant view in the literature (Eagly, 2013; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012; Smith, Rosenstein, and Nikolov, 2018). The fact that women occupied senior leadership roles tended to result in descriptors such as 'scary' which links to the prescriptive expectations of behaviours detailed in RCT (Eagly, 1987; Eagly and Carli, 2003; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Eagly and Wood, 2012).

### Leadership Challenges

The main theme of leadership challenges addresses the areas of biases against female leaders; networks/professional relationships; and influential and influencing others. In considering whether they had encountered gender biases on their career trajectories, of the eight participants, seven considered that there are fundamental *biases against women* in the workplace. One of the participants, P2, felt that there were no conscious impediments to women in the workplace, regardless of position, and that more opportunities have become available for women due to diversity initiatives. However, on reflection during the course of the interview, this participant voiced the '*denial of personal discrimination*' phenomenon, where women may be unaware of gender discrimination even when they have experienced, or seen, it themselves (Crosby, 1984, 2017; Ibarra *et al.*, 2013). In contrast, one of the women, P3, had personally experienced overt discrimination by being rejected for promotion to the C-suite level due to gender and presumed family plans. The findings align with the assertion in the literature that gender stereotypes result in gender bias in the workplace (Eagly and Steffen, 1984; Insch *et al.*, 2008).

When considering the sub-theme of *networks*, the women's experiences again align with the findings of literature, in that seven of the eight participants undertook networking activities as a requirement rather than an opportunity to build connections and profile. There were a number of allusions to 'Old Boys' Clubs' and informal networking between men, yet the participants, in the main,

chose not to enthusiastically engage with networking. While four of the women advised that they networked 'in house' (P3, P4, P6, P7) this engagement with a *'prescribed network – relationships between superiors and subordinates of functionally differentiated groups who must interact to accomplish an organisationally defined task'* is described as a requirement from a technical viewpoint, rather than as an opportunity for career advancement (Perriton, 2006). This was recognised as such by P4: *'I suppose it could be called networking but to me it's just linking up with the people you need to, to get the job done'*. The issue of working hard and building technical expertise rather than building networks and profile across the organisation is reflected in the literature. The women in the sample focused on being seen as 'experts', rather than navigating the political landscape of the organisation, which results in a lack of visibility when it comes to selection for senior roles (Wallace, 2017). Research has shown that networks help negotiation of political landscapes through building contacts and connections with influencers (Wallace, 2017). One of the participants, P2, advised that she joined women only networks but research states that frequently these can be perceived as perpetuating the view that women are different from men in the workplace (Perriton, 2006). One of the participants, P8, advised that she did not have time for networking activity which reflects the perception by women that this is just another pull on already stretched time, supported by the fact that six of the participants only networked during core work hours.

The sub-theme of *influential/influencing others* and *role models* was discussed. Given the lack of women on the C-suite in the participants' organisations, there exist few role models at that level to which the women could aspire. Regarding *mentoring* (influencing/influential others), the majority of women, six of eight, did not have access to formal mentoring programmes, thus did not have the benefit of an influential other, (most likely male), who would advocate on their behalf. For the two women that engaged with the formal mentoring process, they recognised it as beneficial to them personally, in alignment with the literature (Ely *et al.*, 2011; Johnson and Smith, 2018). The women displayed a lack of self-promotion when recounting their experiences as mentors stating that they *'didn't do very much'* for their mentees (Kay and Shipman, 2014; Sandberg, 2013). The lack of female C-suite representatives can

be seen to hinder the progress of other women as a female role model, and a potential female mentor for aspiring women leaders (Ely *et al.*, 2011), is foregone and thus makes the labyrinth more difficult to negotiate (Hoyt, 2010; Ibarra *et al.*, 2013).

## Summary

A range of experiences in their current and previous roles as leaders were relayed by the participants. The empirical findings derived from the lived experiences of the participants reflect the literature. While an alternative perspective was proposed regarding gender bias in one of the interviews, where a participant did not believe that gender issues existed in the culture of her organisation, on further reflection by the female senior leader during the course of the interview, she reconsidered her perspective, and reassessed it, with her final position corresponding to the literature. In summary, all of the women have experienced some, or all, of the impediments to leadership documented in the literature despite a recognition of these challenges and considered attempts to address them through diversity efforts across the organisations represented.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

*'There is a special place in Hell for women who don't help each other.'*

*Madeleine Albright, 2016*

### Introduction

This chapter revisits the key findings and draws a comparison with the research aim and objectives. The practical and theoretical implications of the findings are considered and research limitations are noted. Potential future research areas are proposed and finally, a learning reflection is included to close out the chapter and dissertation.

### Achievement of Research Aim and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore what the career narratives of women who have attained senior leadership positions in Ireland illustrate about the enduring lack of women in these roles.

This paper advances our understanding of this objective in a number of ways. When researching why women do not attain senior leadership positions it should be established whether women desire to lead at this level. Research undertaken in workplaces has proven that women and men, at mid-management levels, have similar ambitions regarding promotion to senior levels, with 79 percent of women as against 81 percent of men, aiming to reach the top management levels (McKinsey and Company, 2017a). However, women are less optimistic regarding the achievability of their ambition than men are with the same aspiration (Ely *et al.*, 2014; Ely *et al.*, 2015), with only 58 percent of women, as against 76 percent of men, confident of success despite ongoing proclamations regarding diversity (McKinsey and Company, 2017a; Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2017).

Women, despite the advances which have been made in equality, are expected to '*adapt to a man's world*', or behave like men, to fulfil their ambition and overcome second-generation biases (Ely and Meyerson, 2000), yet are censured when they do (Eagly, 2013; Heilman, 2012; Martin *et al.*, 2018). When gender

diversity targets, or quotas, are used to support women's ascension through the leadership ranks they are taunted with tokenism. A particular challenge for women relates to work life balance, as 57 percent of women at senior levels have a working partner on a similar career path as against 38 percent of men (McKinsey and Company, 2017a). These women are also, in the main, responsible for parenting, and often carer roles (Diehl and Dzubinski, 2016; McKinsey and Company, 2017a). However, when women choose to leave their organisations '*to spend time with family*' they are pronounced as lacking in ambition, or assumed to have been '*fired*' (Slaughter, 2012). This scenario is unlikely to change as recent US research shows that 73 percent of male and 85 percent of female Harvard Business School MBA graduates state that ranking family higher than work prevents attainment of women's ambitions (Ely *et al.*, 2014; Ely *et al.*, 2015).

Organisations must improve on ad-hoc efforts to increase the pipeline of women leaders by focusing on culture and structural change to remove barriers and prejudices to nurture women's ambitions to leadership and support their achievement of it (Diehl and Dzubinski, 2016). This involves the provision of tangible supports for women's progression through corporate ranks, as opposed to a 'making up the numbers' approach (Brands and Fernandez-Mateo, 2017). Should this not occur, the prophecies of C-suite parity taking anything from 67 years (Warner, 2014), to 100 years (World Economic Forum, 2017), to achieve may be borne out.

## **Research Limitations**

The research executed for this exploratory study is not without limitations. It relies on participants' recollections of their perceptions of personal and professional experiences which may be amplified, or downgraded, with the passage of time, or indeed these recollections may be subject to inaccuracies. Questions of generalisability, reliability and validity must be acknowledged due to the difficulty in replicating this research exactly, in the exact context (Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Furthermore, the findings of the research cannot be generalised due to the small number of participants comprising the sample.

The researcher is greatly interested in the field of study, hence its choice as a dissertation topic, thus while being cognisant of this fact while conducting interviews, a categorical statement of neutrality cannot be made. While the number of participants was small, the output of the research has contributed to reducing the paucity of academic qualitative research on the subject of female senior leadership in the Irish context.

The researcher was acquainted with all of the participants which could be seen to introduce a potential for bias from the perspectives of the researcher and the participants (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

Time was a significant constraint which impacted on the ability of the researcher to undertake supplementary interviews. As the purpose of the research was to gain in-depth descriptions of the participants' lived experiences, ancillary interviews with some of the participants would have allowed a deeper insight into a selection of the experiences worthy of further discussion.

The research relates to women in senior leadership positions in large Irish corporations and semi-state organisations which comprise c.0.2 percent of all businesses in Ireland accounting for 30.9 percent of total persons engaged in 2015 (Central Statistics Office, 2017b). It does not include female political representatives, entrepreneurial women, employees of SMEs, owners or employees of family businesses or those working for the Civil Service. The purpose of this research is to establish the manner in which women scaled the career ladder in large organisations.

The age range of the participants is in the range of forty to fifty years and each has been in a leadership position for a period of between ten to fifteen years. The researcher selected the most appropriate candidates for interviews to ensure the provision of credible data through the sharing of their experiences (Creswell, 2007) through a purposive sampling approach (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). A wider age range of participants may have yielded different results.

The country of Ireland is the context for the research as there are limited qualitative studies about the experiences of women in senior leadership positions in large Irish organisations. This research attempts to contribute to the closing of this gap.

## **Suggestions for Further Research**

The body of literature on this subject would benefit were this study replicated using a mixed method approach with a larger group and greater diversity of participants across the same, or wider variety, of organisations.

This research has shown that women remain a minority group when it comes to leadership at the most senior levels of organisations. Research into organisations' recruitment strategies would be useful to establish whether recruitment processes are gender inclusive.

Promotion processes could also be reviewed to establish whether the potential female leaders' pipeline is being maintained. This research would also lend itself to a review of the gender pay gap.

Another area of potential future research relates to the experiences of younger women (Generation Y/Z), who aspire to leadership positions, to investigate whether generational differences exist. Generation X, which formed the majority of the participants and Generation Y/Z, the upcoming female leaders, could be compared in areas such as Generation Y/Z experiences of leadership education for women, female role models and ascension to leadership versus that experienced by Generation X.

The impact of flexible work patterns for women and men, to facilitate women's ascension of the career ladder, is another topic which would be worth research given this is an enabler for balancing of family commitments with career progression.

This research did not take into account the male perspective on women in senior leadership roles. Future research could examine males, in the same organisations to compare the findings reported in this study with the outcomes of the male perspective. An exploration of the similarities, or otherwise, between the two studies may be informative for diversity or other corporate programmes.

Six of the eight participants are married. Conducting research with the participants' husbands could yield insights into the spouses' perceptions of female leadership; and the impact on them and, where pertinent, their children's lives.

The final area of potential future research is to establish the impact, if any, of global diversity policies (for example *UN Women's HeForShe IMPACT 10x10x10*) on male executive leaders' behaviours.

## **Reflection on Personal Learning**

At the outset, this dissertation was a mandatory deliverable to fulfil the requirements of the MBA degree. When tasked with considering the subject of the dissertation, it took a very short period of time to decide upon the topic. While growing up the rhetoric was that women could have it all: career, great house, partner and family. However, the reality was that 'having it all' meant 'doing it all'. As a result, when selecting the dissertation topic, I chose to complete one that reflected my professional life, (a level below C-suite), to investigate, study and reflect upon; in short, to see if my personal and professional experiences were reflected in literature and, on a more personal level, in other women's realities.

The introduction to this dissertation stated:

*Leadership is a gendered concept (Yoder, 2001); subject to stereotypes, (Eagly, et al., 2003; Schein, 1973). Leadership execution is different for women than men, and is dependent on context, thus what may prove effective for men in leadership roles in a particular context does not necessarily pertain to women (Eagly and Johnson, 1990; Oakley, 2000).*

As the research progressed through the re-reading of interview transcripts to analyse the data, I found that I was more engrossed in some of the narratives and would have liked, had there been sufficient time available on both parts, to explore ancillary areas with them. In hindsight, establishing the views of men occupying similar roles, in the same organisations, would have provided a comparative dimension to the overall study, which may advance (my potential) future research in this area. Another area which would have been worthy of inclusion for comparison purposes is that of a female C-suite member being interviewed to establish her perspective on the same themes and sub-themes.

To conclude, through the literature review, and the empirical data relayed by the women who graciously gave their time to relate the experiences which form the

basis of this study, this introductory paragraph holds true at the end as it did at the beginning. Gender stereotypes continue to confront female leaders across a spectrum of institutions. Women may adopt particular styles of leadership but their styles continue to be evaluated on perceptions of what roles women should inhabit, and how these roles should be performed, thus reinforcing the construct of leadership as a gendered concept.

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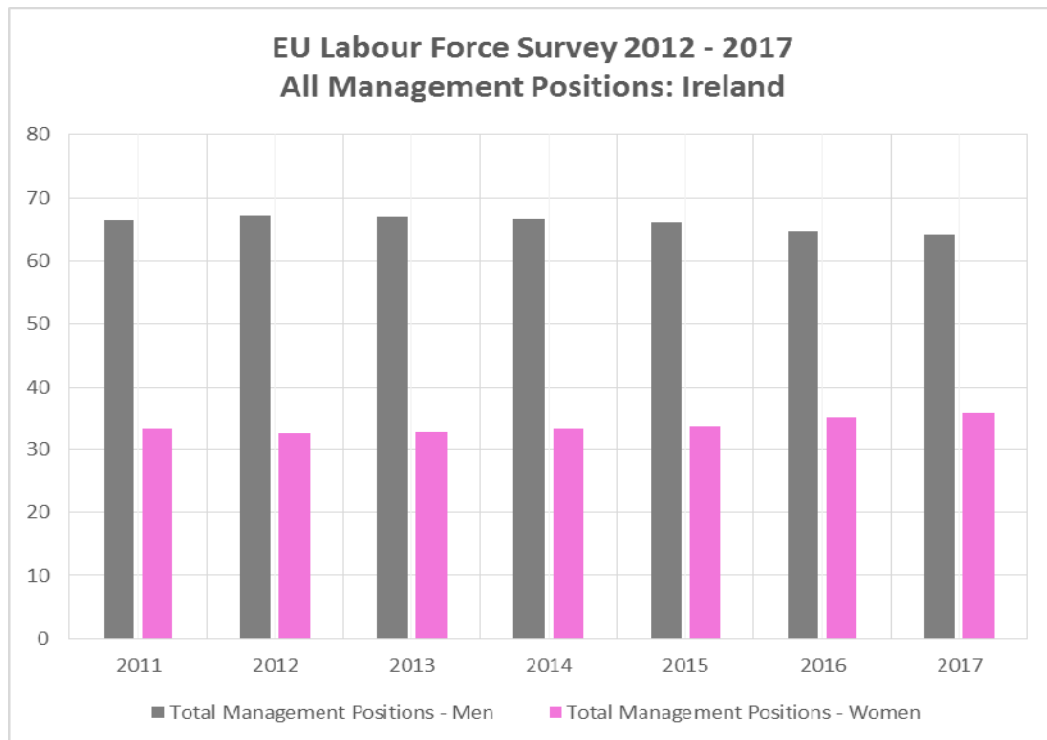
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## Appendix 1 – Management Positions in Ireland



Data mapped from International Labour Organisation (2018) ILOSTAT Database.

## Appendix 2 – Research Onion

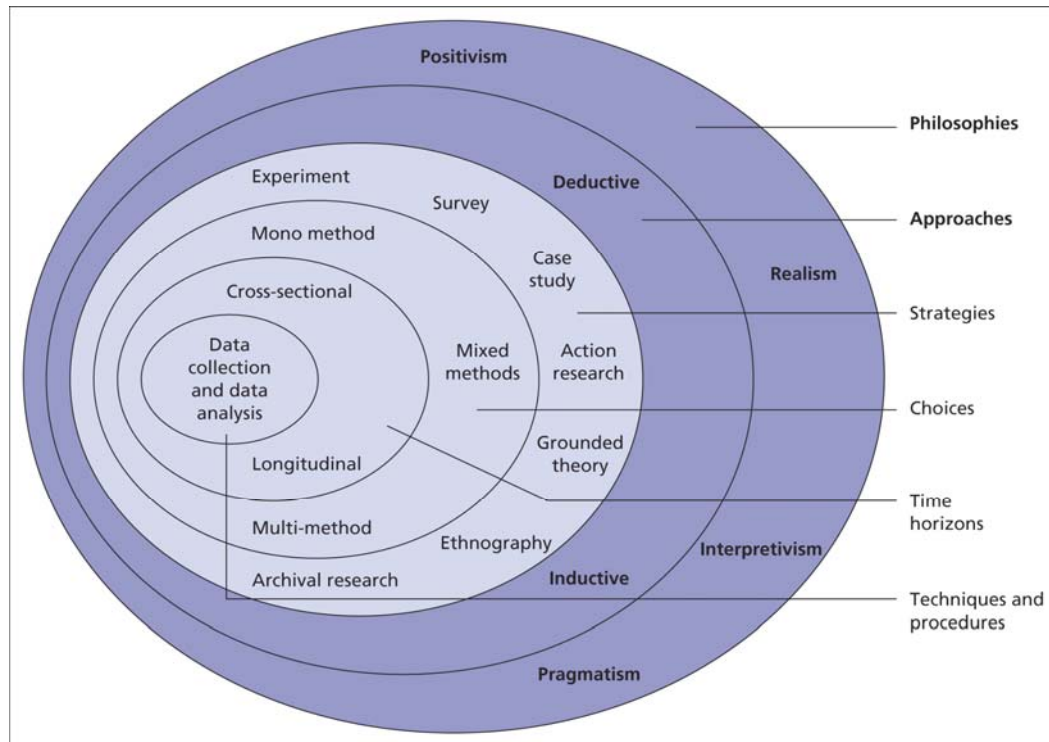


Figure 1: The Research Onion (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012)

## **Appendix 3 – Interview Guide and Questions**

### **Interview Guide**

An interview guide was created identifying areas to be addressed with each participant during the interviews. These were derived from recurring themes on gender and leadership which appeared during the literature review.

The structure of the interviews was:

- General conversation to relax participant
- Introduction to the study, its purpose and confirmation of consent
- Communication of key areas to be covered in interview i.e.:
  - ♦ Background information on career progression to date
  - ♦ Definition of leadership – what it means to participant
  - ♦ Leadership skills – skills and style of the participant and of her leaders
  - ♦ Gender and Leadership – questions on biases and stereotypes
  - ♦ Leadership Challenges – any challenges encountered as a leader
- Wrap Up

## **Interview Questions**

The interview questions comprised, mainly, broad open-ended questions to allow the participants flexibility to respond based on their experience. Questions were added/removed during the course of the interview depending on the direction the interview took as it progressed.

### **Section 1: Background Information**

1. What is your present role in the organisation?
2. How long have you been in this role and what are the responsibilities associated with it?
3. Can you tell me how you made the journey to your present leadership role?  
Probe: What has your career path to date looked like? What helped/hindered you climb the career ladder?
4. What made you want to be in a leadership position?
5. What do you feel are the advantages/disadvantages of working in a corporate/semi-state environment as opposed to a different one (e.g. education setting)?  
Probe: How does the organisational culture facilitate/hinder your leadership?

### **Section 2: Defining Leadership**

6. How do you define successful leadership?
7. Are people born to be leaders?
8. What qualities does your organisation look for in leaders?

### **Section 3: Leadership Skills**

9. Is there a particular leader that you admire/that you look to as an example of the type of leader you aspire to be?  
Probe: Who inspires you?
10. What training/skills development did you receive/undertake?

Probe: Did you undertake a formal leadership training programme? What education/training do you feel would have been beneficial to receive that you did not?

11. Do/did you have a mentor?

Probe: Who mentored you? Was it important that it was a man/woman?

12. Do you train/mentor other potential leaders?

13. Do you network?

Probe: if yes, where do you network? Do you maintain/initiate contact with other leaders in similar/other organisations? Are the groups predominantly comprised of women, men, those in same profession, sector?

14. What skills lead to gaining influence in your organisation?

Probe: Are these the same for women & men?

15. What characteristics do you possess that make you an effective leader?

16. How do people perceive you? How do these perceptions affect your actions?

#### **Section 4: Gender and Leadership**

17. Is leadership gender neutral or is there a difference between male/female leadership styles?

Probe: Does being a woman influence how you lead? There are some opinions which describe women having a different style of leadership to men. Do you think that men's leadership styles are different to women's? What attributes/characteristics of leadership would you ascribe more to male/female leaders? Examples: Communication (listening, empathy); Employee involvement (team-work, individual); Intermediary skills (negotiation, conflict resolution); nurturing, sensitivity, compromising, caring, cooperative, Emotionally Intelligent; Autocratic, Structural; Transactional; Command & Control.

18. What benefits do female leaders bring to organisations?

19. What would your followers say about your leadership style/characteristics?

20. If you compare yourself with male leaders/bosses you worked with in the past, would you say your leadership style is similar to theirs or different?

Probe: How is it similar or different? Why is this the case? Is it deliberate?

21. Why are there so few women in senior management roles?

Probe: How could this be improved? What ways do you think would work best to achieve this - quotas, mentoring etc.)

22. Are there pressures on women in the workplace?

Probe: as senior managers/other grades? Is it work/home/societal?

23. What biases or stereotypes have you encountered in your position?

### **Section 5: Leadership Challenges**

24. What challenges do you face in your current position as a leader? What challenges have you faced in your journey to become a leader?

Probe: Has anyone questioned your authority?

25. Was there ever a time you were treated differently because of your gender rather than your position in the organisation?

Probe: More/less favourably? What was the outcome?

26. Can you tell me about a time when other people's power or influence was used against you or to limit your success?

Probe: can you give me an example of when someone has used rank to influence a situation? Can you give me an example of when someone used punishments or rewards to influence a situation?

### **Section 6: Wrap-up**

27. What advice would you give to your younger self were you starting out on your leadership journey?

Probe: Is this advice the same as you would give to a young man?

28. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences that has not already been covered?

## Appendix 4 – Dissertation Plan and Timeline

Activity / Deliverable	Proposed Timeline	Actual Timeline
<b>Proposal Development</b>	<b>November '17 – January '18</b>	<b>November '17 – January '18</b>
Exploratory reading & research	November – December '17	November – December '17
Outline the research question	December '17	January '18
Preparation & finalisation of proposal	December '17 - January '18	December '17 - January '18
Submit proposal	February '18	February '18
<b>Literature Review</b>	<b>January – February '18</b>	<b>March – July '18</b>
Commence detailed literature review to evaluate relevant theoretical concepts	January '18	March '18
Establish desired sample population	January '18	May '18
Confirm access to sample population	February '18	May '18
Continue detailed literature review	February '18	March - July '18
<b>Research and Findings</b>	<b>February – May '18</b>	<b>June – July '18</b>
Design the confirmed research methodology	February – March '18	June '18
Develop interview questions	March '18	June '18
Conduct interviews	April '18	July '18
Commence data analysis	May '18	July '18

Activity / Deliverable	Proposed Timeline	Actual Timeline
<b>Composition of Dissertation</b>	<b>May – August '18</b>	<b>June – August '18</b>
Commence writing draft dissertation chapters	May '18	June '18
Finalise data analysis & draw conclusions	June '18	June '18
Continue drafting dissertation	July '18	July '18
Submit first draft for review	End July '18	Mid August '18
Further revision	Mid August '18	End August '18
Final submission	End August '18	End August '18

## Appendix 5 – Participants’ Demographics

<b>Id.</b>	<b>Current Role</b>	<b>Marital Status/ Family</b>	<b>Years in this role</b>	<b>Years as a Leader</b>	<b>Industry/Sector</b>
P1	Associate Director - Quality	Married; 2 ch.	3	12	Pharmaceutical
P2	Head of Transformation	Single	2	14	Financial Services
P3	Compliance Officer	Married; 2 ch.	2	10	Accountancy
P4	Head of Information Systems	Married; 1 ch.	5	12	Accountancy
P5	Head of HR Programmes	Married; 1 ch.	5	12	Financial Services
P6	Senior Development Advisor	Married; 2 ch.	5	10	Semi State
P7	Head of Finance	Single	8	15	Accountancy
P8	Head of Web Development	Single; 1 ch.	7	12	Financial Services

Table 1: Participant demographics

## **Appendix 6 – Request for Participation**

Dear <Name of Participant>

As a senior leader, I would like to invite you to participate in a research study to investigate the professional work experiences of women in senior leadership positions in large Irish organisations.

Participation in this study will take the format of a one-to-one, face-to-face interview that will not exceed one hour of your time. All of your personal and professional data will be kept confidential and anonymised in writing up the research study. You will be allocated a participant identifier in the final written research paper and any comments/experiences shared will be reflected against that participant identifier. I will gather all data to support this research study and will securely maintain and store it and use it only for the purpose of this study.

Thank you in advance for your contribution to this research project.

Kind regards

Ashley

## **Appendix 7 – Participant’s Informed Consent Form**

Dear <Name of Participant>

You have received an email invitation to participate in a research study to investigate the experiences of women in senior leadership positions in large Irish organisations. The following information is provided to allow you understand what is required and decide whether you wish to partake.

**Title of Research Project:** Women in Positions of Influence - Exploring the Leadership Journeys of Irish Women

**Name of researcher:** Ashley Kenny (supervised by Dr. Colette Darcy, Dean – NCI School of Business).

**Purpose of the Study:** The objective of this study is to explore the experiences of women who occupy senior leadership positions, one level below executive (C-suite) level, within their respective organisations.

**Your contribution:** To undertake an interview related to your professional work experience, current and previous roles, leadership style and challenges.

**Process:** A face to face interview that will take no more than one hour of your time. It is proposed to record the interview which will take a mutually agreed location. During the interview, you may choose not to answer any of the questions. If necessary, you may be contacted with some follow-up questions, for clarification purposes, after the interview.

**Confidentiality:** Your personal details while collected will be kept private and will not be used in the written research study. All interview notes and recordings will be used for the purpose of the research project only and will be securely stored at all times.

**Questions:** Should you have any questions about this research study before or during the process, please feel free to contact me on my NCI email address: x16115121@student.ncirl.ie at any time.

**Withdrawal:** Should you decide, you are free to withdraw from participating in the research project at any stage. Assuming you proceed, your participation remains voluntary. Your signature certifies that you have willingly decided to

participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

**Authorisation:**

- I confirm that I have read this information sheet
- I understand that my interview will be used solely for the purpose of this research project
- I understand that my personal data will be confidential and anonymised in writing up the research project
- I give my permission to the researcher to use direct and indirect quotes from my interview in the research project
- I give my permission to the researcher to take notes during the interview; record it; and transcribe the audio recording afterwards
- I understand my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw consent at any time.

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Signature of Participant

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Date

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Signature of Researcher

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Date

## Appendix 8 – Participants’ Commentaries

The following selection of commentaries from the interviews are included as they provide additional detail on the main themes covered in Chapter 5.

Detailed below are extracts from the individual responses to the question <b><i>‘Is there a particular leader that you admire?’</i></b>	
P1	<i>‘Steve Jobs. He was a visionary. His vision to have a computer in every home and the invention of the smart phone meant he was ahead of his time or at the very least saw things that others couldn’t see but also made them happen. Closer to home, my sister in law is the CEO of a hospital who says that if you treat people with respect they’ll deliver for you 150% of the time. For those that don’t, manage them out.’</i>
P2	<i>‘Michelle Obama. She’s incredible, from the point of view of women, women of colour, to see the possibilities basically. I think she was great. But in a work context, I often think of a person that I worked with previously, who I always admired as a leader. And the reason being, I always found that, first of all, he was very calm, second of all, he had absolute faith in his team. And, and he would, would walk the talk in terms of, you know, ensuring that at the team were included and well represented, and recognised within the business for their efforts. He was always very respectful to people even though he was incredibly busy and very senior, he was very approachable.’</i>
P3	<i>‘I probably admired my CFO until he allowed me be horizontally moved into a [this] role which was not the one for which I was qualified. No-one really in my work life at present.’</i>
P4	<i>‘No-one really in the organisation that I work for at the moment. Perhaps that’s a sign that it may be time to move on.’</i>
P5	<i>‘There’s nobody in a leadership role in the company that I aspire to be or who really inspires me to be honest.’</i>

P6	<i>'In a perverse way I actually respect Trump! The only reason being he made promises before he got elected and has actually delivered on those promises - be they right or wrong - he kept his word to his followers. I admire Mandela also. He was a quiet man who tried to change centuries of a mindset, I actually really admire that. I like that possibility, that he had a big personality but achieved change quietly. I admire Martin McGuinness also - for the same reason. I think that he moved away from violence, changed completely and became a critical player to bring about peace. I don't admire or endorse what he stood for but I admired the person. I really admire the power that those kinds of people have.'</i>
P7	<i>'In short, no, not really. I think maybe in the non-corporate world you'd look at inspirational leaders but thinking about my own organisation not really. I suppose I could look at the female CFO that we have now as occupying a role at the level to which I'd aspire but I don't think she's very inspirational, she just works very hard.'</i>
P8	<i>'Sorry but no, there's no-one that I can think of off the top of my head that I'd find inspirational or would motivate me. Definitely not in my current organisation and probably not the other ones I've worked for either. That's terrible isn't it?'</i>

Detailed below are extracts from the individual responses to the question <b><i>'Was there ever a time you were treated differently because of your gender rather than your position in the organisation?'</i></b>	
P1	<i>'In the main, there's nothing overt but I think there's always that underlying bias in my field.'</i>
P2	<i>'I have found myself in circumstances where I felt I believed I was being bullied because I was a woman in the role I was in. I suppose it changed me - I went through a time where I doubted my own capability and my own ability to manage situations. But once I remembered that I got to where I got for a reason, I'm cool. Always! Always! My whole my whole</i>

	<i>career, I've been treated differently long before long before there was a #MeToo, there was a Me! You know, and I know, it's nothing to do with harassment in the workplace but I've never felt anything other than a girl in the workplace. I mean I'm very much aware that I'm not a man. It's okay - I don't want to be. I don't want to interact like a man in the workplace. I don't want to be what is perceived as the way you should be. Because I'm not a man, I'm a woman, you know - I have a naturally different way of approaching things than a man would have.'</i>
P3	<i>'Definitely! Getting this job was driven by the fact that I was a woman. It was a bit of a non-role to be honest. I tried to make it into a role, to do the right thing to bring the professionalism of my previous role to it, but I'm not sure I applied myself in the same way as I would have if I had got the role I looked for.'</i>
P5	<i>'Yes and there was really nothing I could do about it. It was by a female boss who sacrificed me to secure her own position. Looking back on it I felt that there was no loyalty to people in the organisation - that we were all pretty disposable and that changed my perspective on work and loyalty and allegiance to a company as I feel it isn't returned. That's probably why I've ended up doing what I do (down-, right-sizing).'</i>
P6	<i>'Sometimes but it's often more by female managers.'</i>
P8	<i>'I generally do client meetings myself for the last 10+ years. I recently brought a less experience male colleague along to one. I sat at the top of the boardroom table he sat to my right, the client ignored me for most of the meeting and looked at and addressed questions to him – even though I was the senior person and did almost all of the talking. Last time that happened to me was 10 years ago – obviously not much has changed in the meantime.'</i>

Detailed below are extracts from the individual responses to the question ' <b>How do people perceive you?</b> '	
P1	<i>'Feedback provided in formal, annual reviews is that I'm capable of leading in stressful situations. Staying calm and getting to the root of issues seems to be a skill I'm recognised for. In terms of subordinates or peers, the perception is that I'm hard, tough and not to be crossed.'</i>
P2	<i>'Willing to do what has to be done to get the job done. Scary is another word that's been used to describe me (to my face)! But I believe it's in a determined way.'</i>
P3	<i>'I've probably got a reputation for getting the job done. People think I'm a bit scary.'</i>
P4	<i>'My team would say I'm always very busy and focused and determined as an individual. From an upward perspective I don't exactly know to be honest. I have a work relationship with the executive, I don't have a personal / social relationship with them so it's always kept at a very professional level.'</i>
P5	<i>'I think that people would see me as hard, tough and ruthless. I get the job done every time and make sure there's no exposure for the company.'</i>
P6	<i>'People think I'm very hard on myself. That I always do more than what's required as I question my validity for the role (and level) that I'm in.'</i>
P7	<i>'Apparently I'm known as the Rottweiler!! I'm not sure there's anything to add to that description.'</i>
P8	<i>'I've been described as 'almost too professional' – (I'm guessing that this is meant as a bad thing) – and maybe a bit scary / stern / square!!'</i>

## Appendix 9 – List of Abbreviations/Glossary

C-suite	<p>The executive leadership team of an organisation e.g.: Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Commercial Officer (CCO), Chief Financial Officer (CFO), Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO), Chief Information Officer (CIO), Chief Operations Officer (COO), Chief Risk Officer (CRO).</p> <p>(See Executive Leadership Roles below).</p>
Gender	<p>Defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as <i>‘the fact of being male or female, especially when considered with reference to social and cultural differences, not differences in biology’</i> (Weiner and Simpson, 2004).</p> <p>While the definitions of ‘female’, ‘woman’, ‘women’ and ‘male’, ‘man’, ‘men’ are different; the terms are used interchangeably through the course of this study.</p>
Executive Leadership Roles	<p>Those roles which are known as the C-suite in organisations.</p> <p>(See C-suite above).</p>
Senior Leadership Roles	<p>For the purpose of this research, those roles which are one level below that of the C-suite, or executive leadership, in organisations.</p>