

Gender in Executive Ireland
An Exploratory Study into the Impact of Gender on Career
Progression

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Abstract

Purpose: This research study aims to explore the challenges facing women in attaining senior leadership positions in large Irish organisations by obtaining the experiences of both male and females who currently occupy executive level position. The objective of this qualitative based study is to investigate the individual experiences of men and women who currently hold the title of Chief Executive Officer (CEO). It seeks to determine if the challenges and barriers for female career progression demonstrated in the literature, are represented in the modern work place in Ireland.

Approach / Design / Methodology: A qualitative study, applying semi-structured interviews, with a sample of five Chief Executive Officers from Irish organisations was undertaken to gather in depth insight into the male and female experience of gender and leadership. Interviews were conducted confidentially and were recorded, transcribed, reviewed and assessed. It is not intended for generalisations to be extrapolated from the research as the true value of the study is found in the detailed qualitative insight offered by the participants' professional experiences.

Findings: Men continue to hold a distinct advantage in both the opportunity for, and achievement of, executive level positions in large Irish organisations. The small sample in the study, representative of Irish businesses, confirmed that men continue to occupy much of the senior leadership positions. These findings inform us that gender has a significant impact on career progression and concurs with the literature on the topic.

Originality / Value: This study enhances the knowledge and research in gender and leadership and the experiences of Chief Executive Officers in Ireland. When undertaking research under the topic of women in leadership, there was no evidence of a previous, peerreviewed qualitative study, specific to the senior executive leadership experience of Irish women. This research may help to close the gap in this knowledge taxonomy.

Keywords – gender, leadership, women, women in leadership, women and senior leadership

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter Molly, who unbeknown to me at the start of this MBA, was with me for the entire journey. Her arrival into our family helped me find an inner strength and determination I never knew I had. She made me realise that I am far more capable than I ever gave myself credit. I hope that by the time she is old enough to read this research paper, she is living in an Ireland where equal opportunities for working women are the status quo. This paper is her mother's contribution to help make that hope a reality.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"If Lehman Brothers had been Lehman Sisters would the world have ended up such a mess?" - Catherine Day, former secretary general of the European Commission in a speech to the 30% club (Fitzgerald, 2018).

1.1 - Introduction

The marriage bar was introduced in Ireland in 1932 and prevented any married woman from working in the public sector. It was abolished in 1973 and since then, the representation of women in the workforce has increased steadily. The latest statistics published by the Central Statistics Office (2019), indicate that nearly 60 per cent of Irish women are in paid employment. Underpinning this statistic, 55 per cent of 25 – 34-year-old women have a third level education in comparison to just 43 per cent of males in the same age category. The latest findings of Cross *et al.* (2017) indicate that women only occupy 13 percent of the Director's positions in ISEQ companies. Research by Catalyst (2018) and McKinsey (2015) has revealed that return on investment is stronger for organisations with female directors in comparison to companies without female directors. Furthermore, Terjesen *et al.* (2015) observed that organisations with more female directors have both higher firm performance by market and accounting measures. The literature also suggests that there are wider economic consequences of maintaining the male dominated leadership trend – it was not too long ago that the Irish economy paid the ultimate price for a 'groupthink' mentality within the banking system, the economic consequences of which are still wide felt by many citizens today. IBEC support the view that leadership which has a gender balance is essential for effective business performance, the wider economy and for an enhanced and unbiased society (IBEC 2015). Yet, women continue to be hugely underrepresented at senior leadership levels in Irish business. The Irish Times reports as recently as August 2019 that twelve companies trading on the Euronext Dublin, failed to list one single female director – including one company that produced treatments marketed specifically to females. This research proposes to examine women in executive leadership roles with specific emphasis on the challenges they face and how this compares to the male experience who occupy a similar role, to ultimately answer the research question, what do the experiences of Chief Executive Officers inform us about the impact of gender on career progression? In doing so, the research will draw upon the work of various authors via a literature review to understand some of the theories of leadership that have been put forward to explain the gender gap in leadership, for example Role Congruity Theory (Eagly&

Karau 2002), Gender Stereotyping (Bowman, Worthy and Grayson, 1965; Kazmi and Shasrma, 2014) and theories of patriarchy (Marshall, 1984; Strober, 1984). In addition, the metaphorical concept of the glass ceiling (Eagly & Karau, 2002), (Mavin *et al*, 2014) (Powell and Butterfield, 2015) will be considered, alongside the cultural notion of 'opting out' (Belkin 2013). Finally, the ambitions of women will be discussed within the context of the existing research. From reviewing the literature, it is evident that women do face considerable challenges in attaining leadership positions, despite their significant presence within the workforce. A large proportion of the research has emerged from the U.S which is culturally very different from Irish society and the findings of the literature review may not be relevant or can be applied in an Irish context. This research project attempts to fill this local knowledge gap and build on the limited research that has been undertaken on this topic in Ireland. The research will be tested among a small sample of senior executive currently occupying the role of chief executive officers to understand the impact of gender on career progression and to ascertain if the research found in the literature is relevant to Irish society.

1.2 - Dissertation structure:

The study will follow the following structure:

Chapter 1: Introduction gives an informed overview of the research study, a summary of the aim and purpose of the research and gives a summary of the structure of the paper.

Chapter 2: Literature Review details a critical analysis of the theories that are relevant to the topic. It provides a review of the literature that is pertinent with the subject matter and identifies gaps in the existent research - this study attempts to reduce the disparity. The review of the literature involved articles, journals, academic papers, studies and books written all in the topic of women in leadership. The empirical research was formed based on the most relevant hypotheses that emerged from the literature.

Chapter 3: Dissertation Purpose and Aim gives a summary of the research problem, specifies the research question and offers a rationale for commencing the study.

Chapter 4: Methodology outlines the research approach, design and method; the associated justification; the techniques used to gather and examine the data, the limitations and ethical considerations related to undertaking the study.

Chapter 5: Findings describes the interviewees who participated in the study and presents the key findings of the research.

Chapter 6: Discussion considers the findings of the research and draws correlations and distinctions between them and the reviewed literature and draw conclusions from the analysis.

Chapter 7: Conclusion brings the research paper to a close by reiterating the research question at the centre of the study, offers the conclusion of the study, outlines the research limitations and suggests recommendation for further research related to the topic.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 – Introduction

The topic of Leadership is discussed extensively throughout the literature – so much so, that it is difficult for the researcher to accurately characterise what exactly leadership is as it means different things to different people. Yukl (2006) defines leadership as “the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives” (p. 8). Northouse (2010) defines leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 3). Both definitions infer that there are several aspects that are central to the phenomenon of leadership, for example, leadership can be viewed as a process, leadership involves the ability to influence others, leadership occurs within the context of a group, leadership involves setting and achieving goals which are then shared between leaders and their followers. While the literature presents a broad and varied explanation, it is clear that leadership and effective leadership, are not determined by gender i.e. the literature fails to prove that leadership is a male dominated concept and that it is only males that are primed to aspire to leadership positions. Instead it focusses on the notion that leadership can be deemed as a transactional event that occurs between leaders and their followers and that leadership is (or should be) available to all.

2.2 - Theories of Leadership

The earliest theories of leadership emerged during the 1940's and centred on the personality traits and physical attributes of leaders. 'The Great Man theory' is known as the earliest leadership theory and used gender based terms as descriptions, such as 'Julius Caesar' which implied that leadership was linked to individualism and moreover, males, given that females were not included in the research (Stogdill, 1974). The literature was considered to be masculine in its classification as it focusses on skills that are stereotypically masculine, in organisations where the hierarchical leaders enjoy power over (mainly) male followers (Yoder, 2001). In more contemporary research, trait theories have returned to the literature through recognition of charismatic leaders (Haslam, Reicher and Platow, 2011) such as Steve Jobs and the introduction of the concept of Level 5 leadership (Collins, 2011) and the servant model put forward by Greenleaf (1977). Theories of behavioural leadership were created which concentrated on effective behaviours shown by leaders. Three key leadership styles emerged: Autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire (Lewin, Lippitt and White (1939). Under the autocratic style, leadership is defined by a 'command and control' approach. Gaining encouragement and engagement is central to the democratic style while the laissez-faire style requires the leader to delegate management and decision making to their team (Lewin *et al.*, 1939).

A deep-dive investigation into the use of transactional, transformational and laissez-faire leadership style by men and women found that males typically adopt the autocratic and laissez-faire styles, whereas females favour the democratic style and motivate their followers by displaying supportive behaviours and charisma through a collaborative style of leadership (Eagly *et al.*, 2003).

Modern theories of leadership support transformational leadership which emphasizes the importance of influence as opposed to power, and is concentrated on team achievements (Yoder, 2001). Transformational leadership is focussed on the motivation of followers (Helgesen, 1990) whereas transactional leaders count on exercising influence on followers through the provision of rewards or the threat of punishment (Conger and Kanungo, 1987). The literature describes transformational leadership as effective and women are more likely to adopt this style in comparison to their male counterparts (Eagly, *et al.*, 2003).

In the main, the literature depicts a male leadership advantage, however an alternative opinion suggests a female advantage (Eagly and Carli, 2003). In addition, more recent

research on leadership present leaders who place significant value on building collaborative relationships and disregarding their ego, to promote an emotionally intelligent, ethical and sustainable business (Ely and Meyerson, 2000). This style has been identified as transpersonal leadership and women have been shown to outperform men in the skillsets necessary to support this style of leadership (Knights, 2013). Exceptional levels of authenticity and emotional intelligence are required to embrace a transpersonal leadership style (Goleman, 2000), in addition to lifelong learning, ongoing personal development and the establishment of a 'web of inclusion' as opposed to an hierarchical structure in the organisation (Helgesen,1990).

There is also an argument to suggest that the contemporary insights on leadership could be reflective of the evolving stereotype concerning suitable leadership skills contingent on gender (Koenig *et al.*,2011). As more organisations place higher value on transformational and transpersonal leadership skills, which are recognised as being more feminine by nature, there may be more opportunity for women to take advantage of a reduction in bias in their ascension into a leadership role.

From a critical viewpoint, the superfluous gender stereotypes and trait theories of leadership are reinforced by focussing on the attributes of the individual, as they endeavour to apply preferred characteristics to a particular gender (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak and White, 2015). Leadership has been proven to be far more effective through a diverse combination of experience, perspective and skills rather than looking to one individual or gender to hold all of the necessary characteristics (Hannum, *et al.*, 2015).

If perceptions of leadership are viewed holistically, there is very little difference between the effectiveness of male and female leaders. When female leaders are evaluated in terms of effectiveness by others, they usually rate higher than their male counterparts. Interestingly, however, they continue to rate themselves lower than males and subsequently contribute to the glass cage syndrome (Paustian-Underdahl, Slattery Walker and Woehr, 2014). The concept of the glass cage is introduced and discussed in the next section.

2.3 - Gender stereotypes

Sheryl Sandberg (2013), Facebook's Chief Operating Officer, has famously encouraged women around the world to 'Lean In' – that is, to learn behaviours that will enable them to move up the career ladder. While this sounds like a very straight forward suggestion, the fact remains that women are continuously battling against an outdated, underlying perception that they do not possess the decision-making skills and competitive aggression that is normally attributed with a successful executive and are ultimately 'too emotional' for management positions (Bowman, Worthy and Grayson, 1965). More recently, Kazmi *et al*, (2014) highlighted how several research studies have highlighted how predominantly masculine attributes are accredited to successful managers.

If more women followed Sandberg's advice and chose to adopt behaviours and characteristics considered more common in men, this should result in a higher number of women in leadership roles. So why are there not a higher proportion of women moving up into the leadership ranks? One explanation put forward by the research is that women are subject to double binds and double standards – 'damned if you do, doomed if you don't' (Catalyst 2007). Gender stereotypes demonstrate that when evaluated, many high potential, accomplished women often fail the 'likability test, whereas likability and competence typically go hand in hand for similarly accomplished men. For women there is a trade-off between being respected and being liked (Ibarra, Ely, Kolb, 2013). The perception that stereotypes act as a potent barrier to the advancement of a position of leadership is also suggested by Koenig *et al*, (2011), as they also draw attention to an evaluative penalty being applied to potential female leaders, irrespective of whether they exhibit the appropriate qualities for a leadership role. The penalty they discuss is unfavourable expectations with regards to performance, which result in biased judgements and less favourable evaluations.

These arguments were conceptualised by Eagly & Karau (2002) who put forward 'role congruity theory'. They discuss how female leadership bias suggests that two forms of prejudice are developed from a perceived incongruity between leadership roles and the female gender role: (a) the less favourable perception of women as potential occupants of leadership roles than men and (b) evaluating behaviour less favourably when it is enacted by a women, with regards to the fulfilment of the specification of a leader role. Furthermore, Ibarra *et al*, (2013) suggest that for women in organisations, a subtle gender bias disrupts the learning cycle which is central to becoming a leader. They maintain that

while some organisations encourage women to proactively seek out leadership positions, they do so without addressing the current policies and practices that present a disparity between the experiences and qualities people typically associate with leaders and how women are seen. We have a tendency as humans to gravitate towards people who are similar to ourselves – this leads to powerful men advocating and leaning towards other men when leadership opportunities arise (Ibarra *et al*, 2013). Koenig *et al* (2011) do point out that some studies have hinted at a slight decline in the masculinity of leadership but overall, these generalizations remain the same.

The various pressures that women encounter pursuing a leadership role create a double bind in which women are discouraged from presenting themselves in such a way that others consider too masculine or feminine which results in women being forced into ‘an androgynous middle ground’ (Koenig *et al*, 2011). The literature strongly suggests that gender stereotyping is a significant barrier that women face in attaining leadership positions, given the sustained viewpoint that leadership is culturally masculine – a position that is unlikely to change for some time to come. Ely, Stone and Ammermann (2014) stress how companies need to be mindful about the unspoken but powerful perceptions that may limit women’s opportunities. They highlight that the erroneous notion that high-potential women can be “riskier” hires than their male peers because they are prepared to discard their careers after parenthood is yet another bias that women contend with.

This assumption that women leave organisations in favour of parenthood is discussed in the next section and the concept of ‘opting out’ is introduced.

2.4 - Opting out

Lisa Belkin discusses the notion of ‘opting out’ in a 2013 New York times article which discussed the misconception made by senior executives that women who had high potential who left organisations were doing so to care for their families. Belkin put forward the argument of the ‘Opt-Out Revolution’ which involved highly educated, high potential (and highly established) women making a conscious decision not to put themselves forward for leadership positions and in some cases to leave the work force completely. She challenged the idea that women, specifically educated, professional women were supposed to (want to) achieve like men. For many women, there is a serious gap between what they expected when they looked ahead to their careers and where they ultimately landed. The underlying essence of the ‘opt out revolution’ was the shift in how success was defined.

Belkin does draw on some statistics that illustrate the significant number of women who graduated from top U.S business schools but who only occupy a small percentage of the top leadership positions in their respective fields. But rather than focus on how women have been failed by the workplace she argues that it is women who are rejecting the workplace. Belkin uses anecdotal research to explore the idea that women look up at the top and decide they don't want to do what it takes to get there. They redefine success as satisfaction, balance and sanity as opposed to the traditional (male) definition of money and power. One of the reasons cited for leaving high powered jobs is that women want to live lives that are less intense and more fulfilling.

Interestingly, in a study conducted by Ely *et al.* (2014) of HBS graduates, they highlighted that fundamentally men and women have very similar values as well as life and career aspirations, and that differentials in the definition of success were not determined by gender, but rather the age and experience of the respondent. i.e. when asked to define what success meant to the respondent when they graduated from HBS, both men and women defined success by career success i.e. job title, professional achievements etc. When asked to reflect on the definition of success today, twenty years later, both men and women had less focus on career and placed more value on family, interpersonal relationships, work / life balance and giving back to society. However, while men and women had similar aims and aspirations, their ability to realise them has been heavily influenced by gender. Women place a higher value on job satisfaction with a higher proportion of women citing job dissatisfaction with their career in comparison to male counterparts – with the latter being consistent with Belkin's findings. Kazmi and Sharma (2014) also discuss the findings of a study that identified similarities between men and women in perceptions of rewards at work and values at work and the differences in the contributing factors towards work satisfaction.

According to Ely *et al* (2014), Deloitte created a task force in the 1990's to look into this area in more detail and realised that in fact only a small proportion (10%) of women who leave positions do so to take care of young children. The rest are most likely to have left their position due to high levels of job /career dissatisfaction. Despite the learnings from the Deloitte task force, this mistaken thinking persists today. The literature strongly suggests that there is still a deep-rooted attitude that women should be the primary care giver, resulting in an understanding that the pace of her career will slow down in comparison to male colleagues. Yet the research shows that of the high potential women

who leave jobs, only a very small proportion do so to fulfil caregiver roles. The clear majority have decided to leave employment as a reluctant last resort due to their unfulfilling roles with limited likelihood of progression or in Belkin's case, because they simply placed a higher value on other elements of their life, not linked to their career or their children.

2.5 – The Glass Ceiling

The reference to a 'glass ceiling' has appeared in countless sources within the literature and which has been depicted as one of the primary obstacles that inhibit women from accessing leadership positions. The term originated in the 1980's and extended to gender in management literature. The glass ceiling has been defined as 'a barrier of prejudice and discrimination that excludes women from higher level leadership positions' (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and 'a metaphor that is used to characterise what women encounter when they attempt to advance in hierarchies' (Powell and Butterfield, 2015).

The concept of the glass ceiling evolved from various theories within the literature - Theories of patriarchy (e.g. Marshall, 1984; Strober, 1984), suggest that female access to top management positions is limited owing to the preference of male decision makers to maintain authority and power over women (Powell and Butterfield, 2015). Kanter's (1977) theory of sex discrimination discusses the area of subjective appraisals in determining whether an applicant 'fits in' influences decisions on promotions for leadership positions, such that applicants who are considered similar to the incumbents and / or decision makers (primarily a male population) on the basis of gender, would be deemed as more suitable candidates to fulfil leadership positions and subsequently preferred over other (i.e. female) applicants on this basis (Powell and Butterfield 2015). Theories of unconscious bias by decision makers (Motowildo,1986: Perry *et al*, 1994), such as their having a predetermined representation that the ideal candidate for a top management position as being male, suggested that their judgements would be altered in a way that they unintentionally leaned towards male applicants over females (Powell and Butterfield, 2015).

Moving beyond the glass ceiling, Adams *et al* (2009) investigate the 'glass cliff' hypothesis, where females are appointed to senior leadership positions in organisations that find themselves in significant financial difficulty. The premise of their study is based on research that suggests that female leaders are believed to be less effective than men as workers

have a tendency to prefer male supervision and as such, female leaders receive a higher degree of scrutiny than men. They argue that the barriers they face could contribute to females accepting more challenging and precarious positions. A similar finding was also discussed by Gino, Wilmuth and Brooks (2015), who discovered that for the limited number of women who succeed to executive positions within the organisation quite often they can be relegated to divisions of the business that have little influence and less opportunity for professional progression.

The findings of Eagly & Karau (2002) and Adams *et al* (2009) indicate a second wave of 'double bind' for females in leadership. The first wave, the gender stereotype double bind, was discussed in a previous section. Here, women need to somehow get beyond the impenetrable 'glass ceiling' to gain a leadership role and when they do, there is evidence to suggest that they may have only achieved these positions as the company was going through a period of financial uncertainty.

While the concepts of glass ceilings and glass cliffs metaphorically describe the organizational access discrimination women face, there are those who break through them. For the small minority that successfully penetrate the upper echelons of management, the consequences can be considered fundamentally negative as some have displayed intra-gender 'micro violence' by either manipulating relationships with other women, distancing themselves from them and / or hindering the advancement of lower level women (Mavin *et al*, 2014). Rather than shattering the glass ceiling for other women, these individual women may be contributing to keeping them below it. On the plus side, a higher representation of women in leadership have been found to reduce the impact of gender bases stereotypes in organisations (Ely, 1995) and to women in lower positions in the organisation feeling less competitive with each other (Ely, 1994). This in turn would reduce the micro violence tendencies that Mavin *et al* (2014) described.

2.6 – The Female Ambition

The concept of the 'glass cage' has emerged from the literature to explain how some women have reservations about their potential to be successful and consequently, prevent it (Paustian-Underdahl *et al*, 2014). The research suggests that women may inhibit their opportunity to attain a leadership position through a combination of failing to apply for senior roles, the absence of self -promotion or delaying progression to these positions by downplaying their capabilities (Eagly and Johnson, 1990; Wallace, 2017). Women have a

tendency to be less confident than men and, in some cases, less ambitious and are more likely to settle for opportunities where they feel they have a firm chance of success. (Sandberg, 2013). This opinion emerged from a study of human resource records at Hewlett Packard which confirmed that women applied for roles only where they held 100 percent of the requirements on the job specification (in terms of qualifications and experience) whereas men would put forward an application if they held approximately 60 percent (Kay and Shipman, 2014). This confidence deficiency was also observed in a study of Harvard MBA students where seventy percent of the female students graded their performance as equal to that of their MBA classmates, whereas the men in the same study graded themselves as exceeding the performance of their colleagues (Eagly and Johnson, 1990).

Role Congruity Theory and Social Role Theory suggest that female role expectations originate from the historical undertaking of household activities rather than from paid employment outside of the home (Eagly, 1987; Eagly and Wood, 2012). Females are deemed to lack the confidence required to consider leadership roles (Kay and Shipman, 2014) which directly leads to a perception that they also have similar, low leadership aspirations (Heilman, 2012). For women to realise their ambition for leadership, the research suggests that several initiatives would support this, including the prevalence of female role models (Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011). However, given the scarcity of women occupying executive leadership positions, there are a limited number of visible female role models to inspire other women to progress to this role level and support other females by helping them navigate the political landscape (Ely *et al.*, 2011; Ibarra *et al.*, 2013; Sandberg, 2013). A solution to this is the introduction of formal, reciprocal mentoring relationships as opposed to the traditional hierarchical model, where females in the organisation are executive sponsored by colleagues with influence within the business and who advocate on their behalf (Johnson and Smith, 2018). A key output of successful mentoring is access to networks, which in the main can be informal, but are also required to advance. Quite often, executive appointments can be made based on whom one knows, and network accessibility enables women to improve their political reading skills and potentially break the homogenous executive status quo (Billing and Alvesson, 2014). This can foster the environment for women to support other women who have aspirations at executive level and removing the 'token' label for good (Kanter, 1977).

2.7 - Summary

It is evident in the literature that women who aspire to become leaders have to contend with organisational cultures that are deeply rooted in gender inequality, stereotyping and bias (Eagly and Carli, 2007). To overcome this, business culture should actively promote women to assume a 'leader identity', however the theory supporting this idea has not been fully developed in the literature (Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011).

Chapter 3: Dissertation Purpose and Aim

3.1 - Introduction

The objective of this study is to address a gap that has been identified in the research, in relation to the professional experiences of women who have attained the role of Chief Executive Officer of their respective organisations. While the literature does detail quantitative research undertaken in the field of women and leadership, most of the research was conducted in the United States. In addition, a considerable amount of the literature focusses on the (lack of) representation of women on Boards of Directors rather than specifically, women in the role of Chief Executive Officer. To develop the central research proposal for this paper, future research suggestions were evaluated with many of the studies suggesting that more detailed studies should be conducted with women to assess their insights as to why senior executive positions appear to continue to be out of reach for women. Qualitative research in this space in Ireland has been identified as extremely limited and where studies have been undertaken, they have been restricted to female participants only. To fill a further research gap and also add originality to the study, the researcher decided to include men in the research in order to draw correlations and distinctions between the male and female CEO experience.

3.2 - Research Definition

The term research has been defined as *'the systematic collection and interpretation of data with a clear purpose, to find things out'* (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). Planning is key to undertaking research and has a basic objective to find fresh data about a particular phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). The process involved in research requires a phenomenon to be identified and explored, converting the phenomenon to a research problem, gathering

and assessing empirical, and secondary data sources, and recording the findings of the research (Fisher, 2010).

3.3 - Research Aim

The aim of this study is to understand if the findings of the previously research (mainly in the U.S context), concerning the limited number of women who occupy senior executive positions in organisations are also relevant in an Irish context. In addition, how do the experiences of male CEO's compare to female CEO's in today's modern society. The underlying hypothesis of the study is that the reasons which are proposed by the U.S research findings for the lack of women ascending to senior executive positions will be applicable in the Irish climate (Chira, 2017; Koenig *et al.*, 2011).

Research Question

The objective of this research is to investigate the continued lack of women in senior executive positions in Ireland, which, this research study is classified as Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The research question put to each participant was: what do the experiences of Chief Executive Officers inform us about the impact of gender on career progression? The study aims to conduct a detailed assessment of the career paths of women and men and their promotion and development opportunities which lead to the participants current role. Participants were restricted to men and women who currently occupy the role of CEO of their respective organisation to position the topic correctly (Fisher, 2010).

The next chapter discusses the methodology chosen to undertake the study, alongside a rationale for the research approach, design and method undertaken by the researcher and discussing its suitability for this research. The chapter is concluded by detailing the ethical considerations linked with undertaking the research.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 – Introduction

The methodology section sets out the framework used for the research, the research approach, philosophy and design for the collection and analysis of the empirical data. The research strategy used to assess the relationship between leadership and gender is introduced, supported by the research tool selected. A rationale for the research tool is

presented. Ethical considerations and limitations of the study are also detailed in this chapter.

4.2 - Research Framework

Saunders *et al.* (2012) present the research process onion (*See Appendix 1 – Research Onion*) and highlights the notable items for consideration ahead of undertaking a research study. The most suitable methodology selected to undertake this research study has been determined by the research onion. The layers of the research onion allow regard for: The philosophical orientation of the researcher, the adopted research approach, strategy of the research, appropriate research timelines, collection of data and data analysis methods (Saunders *et al.*, 2012).

While the intention of the research project is to remain unbiased, previous studies have determined that axiology (the views, values and biases of the researcher) influences empirical research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) therefore the researcher had detailed the philosophical framework which will guide the research approach.

4.3 - Research Philosophy

There are two main philosophies of research – interpretivism and positivism. From the literature it is acknowledged that interpretivism is associated with qualitative research and positivism is connected to quantitative methods (Quinlan, 2011). Interpretivists contend that life is subjective, and humans construct it in their role as ‘social actors’ (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). On the other hand, researchers who are positivist in nature maintain that reality is external, objective and built upon observations developed with certainty (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Interpretivist based research supports an in depth investigation of a small sample size, which is a suitable approach for an exploratory study into the leadership challenges facing women who want to climb the leadership ladder (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). A research approach that reflects human individuality is essential to satisfy the view of interpretivism through the lens of epistemology (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

4.4 - Research Approach

The researcher has used an inductive approach as the underlying research approach for this study as it connects theoretical propositions that have been extracted from a review of the literature with empirical data collected from the participants (Yin, 2011). As the interpretivist philosophy has been adopted, an inductive approach to the research dovetails effectively as it allows the researcher to gain key insights in the business leaders' perspectives. This approach complements the study as it attempts to understand the leaders experience of certain phenomena in their professional lives. From here, categories, propositions and meaning will be developed rather than creating a causality between the variables (Yin, 2011).

The literature will then be used to compare the empirical findings to determine if the findings of the study accept, or refute, some of the theory based arguments and subsequently narrow the delta in existing theory on the subject (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

4.5 - Research Design

The preparation stage of the study, which includes the collection and analysis of data and the utilisation of the research framework is referred to as the research design (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). The objective of the research design is to realise meaningful outcomes to mitigate the possibility of extracting inaccurate casual inferences from the data (Bryman and Bell, 2015). In this regard, certain methods can be deemed more suitable than others in the investigation of the research question (Willig, 2008). The theories that are being investigated will be examined thoroughly with a suitable research design and through an analysis of the data gathered will either be supported or rejected (Fisher, 2010).

The process of data collection involves several methods; quantitative and qualitative or a mixed method – employing both approaches - can be adopted (Creswell, 2013). Statistical analyses using quantitative methods of research can on occasion, fail to gauge the complexities that are ingrained in the issues being explored in the study, with reference to the more sensitive topics such as gender (Creswell, 2007, 2013). Qualitative research involves the exploration of meanings that have been applied to human or social issues (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research encourages participants to disclose their experiences

which are uninhibited by the restraints of a Likert (or similar) scale under a quantitative method survey (Berg,2007).

Commencing qualitative research is equally uncertain as it is challenging as there is no proven approach to producing an indisputable study. However, it does foster the recording of the human perspective, emotional reaction to sensitive and complex topics and detailed experiences which are difficult to translate into statistics – which in the context of a quantitative approach is deemed an undesirable bias (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Interviews that are conducted in a specific, natural setting promote foster the opportunity for non-verbal behaviours and cues to be observed and support the explanation of phenomena and the meanings associated with them, which enhances the quality of the data (Denzin and Lincoln,2011; Willig, 2008).

As this study is exploratory, a qualitative approach was adopted by the researcher. The research focused on the participants perceptions of their lived experiences and took place in the participants natural settings to gather specific data. The findings of the research were extrapolated from this data and were evaluated in the context of the literature to establish a link or disagreement (Horn, 2009; Quinlan,2011).

4.6 - Rationale for Research Design

There were several reasons behind the selection of a qualitative approach. The literature is abundant with findings focussing on the lack of females in executive leadership however many of these have been extracted from quantitative research (Eagly *et al.*,2003; Eagly and Johnson, 1990; Koenig *et al.*,2011). The main objective of qualitative research is to understand if the findings of the surveys under a quantitative approach are demonstrated or rejected in a qualitative setting, through the investigation of personal experiences (Billing and Alvesson, 2014; Creswell,2007; Rubin and Rubin,2005). This study attempts to address a gap in the research, which has been identified due a limited amount of investigative qualitative research into the senior leadership experience by women (Billing and Alvesson, 2014), particularly in an Irish context. To close the gap, the researcher looked to build on the existing findings of previous studies while also developing new insights, by examining in detail the experience of participants which are unrestricted in comparison to the limitations of a quantitative study (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Yin,

2011). In this regard, qualitative research was deemed most suited to support this aim (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, Yin, 2011).

4.7 - Research Methodology

The selected method for research concerns how the data for the study is collected (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data gathering method as they afford the opportunity to develop topics of discussions that evolve throughout the interview (Fisher, 2010; Saunders *et al.*, 2012).

4.7.1 - Participants

This small scale study included five participants, currently occupying the role of Chief Executive Officer of their organisations. The participants invited to participate were from both the public and private sector. All participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality of their professional data. Personal data was not collected or retained during the study in light of the General Data Protection Regulation (2016). Each participant held experience ranging from ten to twenty seven years of senior leadership experience and held the role of Chief Executive Officer for the last two to five years (*See Table A – Participant demographics*). All participants are university graduates; all held at least one bachelor's degree (with some holding two or more): some held master's degrees, or other professional qualifications.

4.7.2 - Population and Sample Size

The researcher used purposive sampling as the chosen sampling technique to select the five participants in the study (Cohen, Manion and Morison, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Quinlan, 2011). The selection was based on appropriateness, which was determined by the participant's role in their organisation and the extent of their professional experience (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). For this study, each participant currently held the position of Chief Executive Officer or acting Chief Executive Officer. Whereas qualitative research has previously been undertaken in Ireland and has been focused on lower, or middle management role levels in Irish businesses, the objective of this research study was to investigate the female experience at Executive level. In addition, previous, similar studies that have been undertaken in this field have concentrated on using female participants only. The researcher chose to invite both males and females to participate in the study to

firstly introduce originality to the research, but also (and perhaps more importantly) to draw correlations and disparities of the female leadership journey through the prism of the male experience.

4. 7.3 - Materials

The method for data collection was qualitative, semi-structured interviews, involving open-ended questions. The researcher declined the use of a structured (standardised) and unstructured interview, in the selection of the semi structured interview process as both were considered unsuitable, given their respective restraint and uncertainty. Equally, the use of a questionnaire was dismissed given the low number of contributors involved in the study and the possibility that the researcher would fail to achieve the necessary level of detail required (Saunders, *et al.*, 2012). Utilising the semi structured interview method does assume the researcher is familiar with conducting interviews. It also requires a time investment from both the interviewer and the participant and is exposed to reservations regarding reliability and generalisability (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) as the responses from participants may be influenced due to presence of the interviewer (The Hawthorne Effect). However, the researcher proceeded with the chosen method given the small sample size of the participants and the opportunity to gather insightful, meaningful data that may not present itself through alternative detached methods

Researchers can adopt several validation strategies to enhance confidence in the research findings. Using interview questions that have been applied to previous studies is one such reputable method. In this regard, the researcher used previously selected questions from a prior study on this topic (Kenny, 2018) to ensure the research was robust and valid, build on existing research and apply it to the Irish context. Another approach is to ensure the sample of participants is random which removes the possibility of any researcher bias and facilitates the requirement that participants are representative of the population. Finally, affording all participants the option to decline partaking in the research all contribute the legitimacy and rigour of the research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). The interview questions were semi structured and primarily open ended to encourage participants to articulate their views without any constraint (Fisher, 2010, Quinlan, 2011). The semi-structured interview was considered the most suitable as it is aligned with the philosophy of the research, the research approach and design (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

4.7.4 - Procedure

The interviews were undertaken in person and were held in private meeting rooms in the workplace of each participant, to ensure the context, which is relevant to the experiences being recounted, was at the forefront for the participants (Horn, 2009; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Quinlan, 2011). The duration of each interview was between seventy to ninety minutes. The participants were allocated a unique identifier in line with the order in which the interview took place (P1-P6)- (*See Table A – Participant Demographics*). The researcher sought permission from each participant in advance to record the interviews. This enabled the researcher initiate concept driven coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006) by taking note of the key points raised but also allowed the researcher to build a rapport with the participant which fostered an informal, conversation-based type of interview (Yin, 2011). By recording the interviews, the researcher was able to precisely quote the responses of the participants as opposed to quoting the researchers interpretation of the response from their interview notes.

Data was gathered via pre-scheduled interviews using a set of pre-determined questions (*See Appendix 2 – Interview Questions*) from a previous study (Kenny, 2018) which covered a broad range of subjects that were developed from the literature review related to the topic (Berg, 2007; Fisher, 2010). The aim of the questions was to effectively navigate through the interview to ensure that the discussion comprised of references to the theoretical models that emerged from the literature review (Berg, 2007). The questions were not strictly adhered to throughout the interview as on occasion, the discussion digressed to matters not referenced in the question, but which presented additional insights into the topics being examined (Rubin and Rudin, 2005). This afforded the interviewees the opportunity to link their personal encounters between both the organisational and environmental based factors which shaped their respective careers (Creswell, 2007; Oakley, 1981).

The face-to-face interview supported changes to the direction and pace of the interview, depending on non-verbal cues (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Yin, 2011). The researcher was able to further explore these areas through the use of additional questions (probes) (Cohen, Manion and Morison, 2007, Creswell, 2013) which were supplementary to the questions detailed in the semi structured interview.

4.7.5 - Data Analysis

To analyse the data, the researcher used a method of thematic coding to identify themes and patterns in the interview responses and to create a matrix for analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). One of the advantages of using thematic coding is that it presents a useful framework when the researcher is unaware of the patterns they are looking for in the data. Thematic coding was chosen as the method for data analysis due to its flexibility, suitability for an explorative study of this nature and for its relative ease to adopt (Robson, 2011). The researcher followed the six phases of thematic coding set out by Braun and Clarke (2006), detailed below:

Phase 1: Familiarise yourself with the data

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

Phase 3: Searching for themes

Phase 4: Reviewing potential themes

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

Phase 6: Producing the report

Analysis of the data involved the researcher listening back to the recordings of the interviews and taking notes of the responses to each question and cross referencing this against the hand-written notes from the interview to ensure responses were captured accurately. The sentences and expressions from the participant's replies were examined to identify significant experiences and statements and to identify any cohesive responses across the interviews (Creswell, 2007). Notable responses were highlighted from the interview notes to assist with the cataloguing. The significant themes, corresponding to each interview question were then assessed. The researcher used an excel template to detail the interview questions and the corresponding key responses was recorded against the relevant theme (Creswell, 2007).

The alternative approach is to develop the codes from peer – reviewed studies found in the literature review. In a critical assessment of this approach, the literature suggests that in the absence of a universally accepted method to data coding, using themes that are pre-determined can influence the researcher's assessment of the data and as a result may fail to discover or realise some valuable insights as part of the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

4.8 - Ethical Considerations

It is imperative that when interacting with human participants as part of a study, researchers must adhere to ethical considerations at all stages of the information gathering process. At the outset, the researcher obtained both ethical approval and approval to undertake the research project from the School of Business, National College of Ireland, during the dissertation proposal phase. The next phase involved sending an email request for participation in the study to the sample group (*See Appendix 3 – Request for Participation*). Each participant was also sent a Participants Consent Form which outlined the objective of the study, the obligations of the participants, the commitment to confidentiality and how the output of the study would be used, to allow each person to decide if they wanted to partake in the study (Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Fisher, 2010, Yin, 2011) (*See Appendix 4 – Participant Consent Form*). Data anonymity and confidentiality was guaranteed to each participant in advance of the interview process. A hard copy of the consent form was completed by the interviewee and was retained by the researcher. Participants were permitted to withdraw their consent to participate in the study at any point given interviews could be deemed a burden on the time and privacy of individuals (Cohen *et al.*, 2007).

Chapter 5: Findings

5.1 - Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis of the findings from the data gathered. The main theme and sub-themes which were developed from the review of the literature are introduced, in addition to the interviews, the coding process and some interesting responses to the questions. The discussion of the main theme and sub themes is conducted through the participants sharing their professional experiences.

5.2 - Participants' demographics

To initiate the research study, a purposive sample of a group of Chief Executive Officers in large Irish businesses was selected. This sample presented a reasonable homogenous group to participate in the study.

I.D	Gender	Industry	Years in role as CEO	Years as a Leader
P1	Female	Food and Beverage	4	10
P2	Female	Semi State Body	2	12
P3	Female	Semi State Body	5	27
P4	Male	Tourism	9	20
P5	Male	Property Management	3	15

Table A: Participant demographics

5.3 – Coding

The researcher used the Braun and Clarke (2006) approach of thematic coding to develop the theme and sub themes of the study detailed below. To maintain the commitment to confidentiality, the quotes were detailed as those of the participants allocated codes. Participant ID's were assigned in order that the interviews took place – Interviewee 1 was assigned P1 and so on.

5.4 - Themes and sub-themes

Main theme	Sub-theme
Leadership and Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Neutrality of Leadership • The Perceptions of Female Leaders • The Work / Life Balance • The Female Leadership Style
Leadership challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Female Leader Bias • Professional Relationships / Networking • The Power of Influence

Table B: Main themes and sub-themes

The sub-themes mirror the narratives and the experiences of the participants in their role as Chief Executive Officer. Each sub-theme is assessed in the next section and presents the participants own experienced by using quotations from their interviews. The data gathered as part of study influenced the findings in line with the inductive approach therefore a conceptual framework model was not utilised. It should also be noted that there will not be any claims made relating to the statistical significance of the data. The value in the data gathered in this study lies in the rich experiences of the participants.

5.5 - Main theme: Leadership and Gender

The first of two main themes identified is leadership and gender and pertains to the opinion that executive leadership in Irish organisations has a predominantly male stronghold. The codes derived from the data were labelled as follows: The neutrality of leadership, the perceptions of female leaders, the work / life balance and the female leadership style. Each sub-theme will be explored in turn.

5.5.1 - Leadership and Gender: The Neutrality of Leadership

The participants in the study represent a range of industry types in both the public and private sector. While there does appear to be a higher number of females occupying leadership positions in the public sector, the executive leadership positions are dominated by males. Diversity continues to be a topical and trendy buzz word among Irish employers, however, it appears to have failed to penetrate mainstream organisations which continue to be dominated by males at executive level.

Finding: Leadership at executive level continues to have a male strong hold

From the organisations represented, there was limited female representation reported at executive level. The public-sector organisations did appear to have a higher number of females occupying leadership positions as opposed to the private sector. While it is encouraging to observe an increasing number of women in senior roles within the public sector, the explanation for the disparity with the private sector could be attributed to lower salary levels and more flexible working conditions as opposed to the active promotion of females to leadership roles with P2 advising: *'We had an all female leadership team until recently. The Head of HR is male. As we are in the public sector, wage levels are lower than in the private sector, so more women apply for the jobs as men tend to set themselves at a higher pay scale'*.

P1 highlighted one particular barrier for women in gaining leadership positions is the tendency for management to hire like-minded people: *'if you have a leadership team and they are all white, Irish men, and a space opens up on the team, the natural inclination is to appoint another Irish man'*. The mindset of the board was also mentioned by P4 who highlighted how he believed his board had a preconceived idea of what a leader should be and as a result automatically discounts female prospects: *'Our board have a fixed idea on what a leader should look like -they should be male and have a strong academic background. Below senior levels, there is less 'visibility' so this is less of a concern for them'*.

But at the higher positions, there is definitely a preference for males.' Board confidence was also mentioned by P2 even after she had successfully attained the role of CEO, stating: *'I felt like I had to prove myself. I felt I needed to reassure the board that they made the right selection for my role'*. P2 had applied for the position alongside another male colleague. She felt afterward that the board needed time to be comfortable with the decision that they had made to appoint her and that she was the right candidate of the role.

P5 confirmed that apart from one female, the entire leadership team was male *'Our board is all male and our leadership team is also all male, with the exception of our HR lead who is female. I'm not sure if that's just a reflection of the industry I work in but there is certainly a lack of female input at executive level'*.

In summary it is evident that male leaders continue to have precedence over females in both the access to and holding of, executive positions in the sectors represented by the participants.

5.5.2 - Leadership and Gender: The Perception of Female Leaders

As the number of female Chief Executive Officers is limited in the majority of organisations, the next sub-theme discussed is relative to the perceptions of female leaders within Irish businesses.

Finding: Female leaders are perceived negatively

All of the participants interviewed could relate to women being viewed negatively when asked to describe the perceptions of women as leaders.

P1 - *'It's a cultural thing that has evolved over a lifetime. If a man behaves like a stereotypical 'leader' everybody hails him. If a woman behaves the same way she is seen as a 'bossy cow'.*

P2 – *'If you a really strong, dynamic female leader who has "male" traits, she is often seen as a 'bitch' she's not described as just a strong woman who knows her mind. And I feel that sometimes women feel they need to soften their approach, so they are not 'the bitch'.*

That's unfair. If a man behaves in the same way, then he isn't portrayed the same way its fine for him to do it... Its a social pressure but its organizational aswell. There is this negative language associated with women.. There is a long way to go still.'

P3 – 'It is easy these days to know what a leader should not be – all of these men, Trump etc, showing the world what not to do. For me, I'm always included in the meeting but not in general conversation. Successful women are seen as formidable and domineering as opposed to capable.'

P4 – 'I certainly value being challenged in my role and am quite often challenged. What I do find also, is that if I am challenged by a woman, she can be viewed as 'shrill' by virtue of being a woman. I don't think male challengers of me are viewed the same'.

P5- 'I've observed female leaders falling into the role of fighting the gender battle and play into the narrative that women shouldn't be CEO or won't be able to make decisions and become too extreme in their behaviour - they are too bullish. Women are capable of doing the role and should do it in their own way.'

Two of the participants commented that on occasion women themselves can contribute to this perception by adopting behaviours that can be interpreted negatively by peers and colleagues. P1 stated: *'Women can be bad female leaders too. You can have this 'Alpha female', who is pregnant and who doesn't want her colleagues to know, goes and has her baby and is back in the office three days later. Or another alpha female who has a child's birthday party but doesn't tell anyone is work as it is seen as a sign of weakness'.* Similarly, P3 commented on female leaders who do not feel fully comfortable in their position, have a knock on negative effect on the business *'Female leaders wo are insecure have tendency to make others' lives miserable'.*

On the other hand, two of the participants admitted to an inevitable degree of unpopularity as it goes hand and hand with the role of CEO, with P4 stating: *'I don't have friends in work. I am less worried about my perception as I get older. I'm not concerned if I am liked or not.* This sentiment was echoed by P2 who stated: *'Ten years ago I would have struggled with what somebody thought of me or my decision. Now, I have had to learn to be comfortable with my decisions and that I may not be popular and I'm fine with that'.*

From the above findings, it is clear that the majority of females fall victim to negative perceptions when occupying a leadership role.

5.5.3 - Leadership and Gender: The Work / Life balance

The next sub-theme that was highlighted with participants was the work / life balance. This sub-theme was discussed in the context of family commitments and more specifically, children and childcare by all participants, irrespective of whether the participant indicated they had children or not.

Finding: Family commitments do affect a female's ability to progress her career

To frame the discussion correctly it should be noted that the participants referred to work / life balance as being linked to having family and childcare commitments when they were asked to consider what the work / life balance meant. While data relating to family status was not collected in the study, some participants voluntarily recounted personal experience of having to balance work commitments with home responsibilities while others acknowledged the affect that family commitments have on the female ability to progress her career.

There was a broad range of responses from the participants which varied from one end of the scale of the traditional role of a mother taking responsibility of the household work and balancing work to two participants expressing regret that they prioritised work over their home life. On the other end of the scale, one participant didn't feel that women were under any more pressure than anyone else in the workplace.

P1: 'There is a reality of choices to be made - if a woman wants to go in to senior leadership and have a family, it's a juggle and there is certainly a trade-off. If I hadn't of stepped out to have kids, I could have had a certain previous role. Having said that, if you want to be CEO, you can't be part time'.

P2 – 'I was a mum, I knew I needed to be at home, I didn't feel when my son was younger I could commit as much time to work but as he got older, I could spend more time in work and from there my ambition grew. We adopt family friendly practices here because I've been though it myself raising my son. I don't want someone to feel frightened to say they need to leave to look after a family member - I have empathy towards them'.

P3 – 'I don't really care what time people come in at and go home at, as long as they get the job done. My own experience was way back in the day, when my children were small, and I needed any kind of understanding, it wasn't there, and I couldn't come in at a certain

time to take my kids to creche or to school. Whereas now you can do that and its really good. I couldn't get a shorter working year or time off... I never brought my kids to the pool and to the football and all the things I should have done and I regret that very much and I would never want that to happen anybody here. And I know that they would work any hour of the day or night for me because I'm not clock watching..

P4 – 'There are huge unreasonable pressures on women. Men get away with murder in the workplace. It comes from society. What goes on in a woman's life is not reflected in work. There are no allowances or leeway and very little value given to her life outside of work.... Before my wife had our children she was the higher earner. The tables turned when she left the workplace to have our children... I should have taken more time to focus on my home life than the politics of work. I brought my 'A' game to work and my 'B' game at home. I'm trying to rectify that now.'

P5 – 'There are pressures on women but in any job, people have pressures. Different roles have different pressure points. Pressure is the same for a man and a woman. I don't expect different things from team members.'

The majority of participants acknowledged that family commitments do inhibit women from progressing in their career. So much so that the poor practices and lack of support shown to two participants in roles by previous employers, have directly shaped the family friendly policies they now provide to their own staff, to allow employees the flexibility to work around their family commitments.

5.5.4 - Leadership and Gender: The Female Leadership Style

The idea that male and female leaders utilise different styles of leadership was discussed with the participants. They were asked if they believed that males and females led in the same way.

Several of participants were forthcoming with their opinion on what they believed effective leadership is and some related this to their previous experience of good leadership.

Participants also reflected on their own leadership style and how this compared to their idea of effective leadership.

Finding: Women adopt a different approach to leadership than men

The participants were asked the question 'Do you think leadership is gender neutral or is there a difference between male and female leadership styles. Their responses are detailed below.

P1 – 'There's a difference between leadership and management. Management is about setting tasks and executing them. Leadership has more vision. More forward thinking and engaging people you are working with and bringing them on the journey with you. Leadership is about making hard decisions. A good leader stays calm in a crisis. Its inclusiveness, fairness, acting quickly and staying calm... The theory says it should be gender neutral, the reality is very different Generally women have higher EQ or emotional intelligence and they have a different style - generally they are more collaborative but in the main we are 'wired differently'. We all want to get to the same place, but we take a different route to get there... I'm similar to some and different to all. Leadership is sometimes a function of the culture of the organisation. I'm collaborative, fair, I listen. Every pair of hands comes with a free brain – a leader isn't expected to know everything. You need to trust in your team but also hold them accountable. You also need to recognise your team – saying thank you. Women are more intuitive, so they may say thank you more often.

P2 – 'There is a perception there is a difference - but I believe leadership is gender neutral. However, I have seen differences in the male and female approach. Women have open ear. Men will push through, even though it may not be the right thing, women will say, OK we are wrong and let's take another look at this. Women are quicker to adjust and adapt whereas men will keep going because it's what they have set out to do... I have an open-door policy, I'm happy to take ideas on board. I like a cohesive team. Setting strong examples at management level is important to me -I like to set the cultural tone at the outset so when new people join they know how things are done.

P3- 'The male style is more directive. The female style is more consultative. There is a lack of communication with men - they assume that as soon as staff have information they will know what to do with it. The 'closed door' policy of male leaders inhibits and impacts staff... Females bring a caring approach - thy bring empathy. They have a nurturing role with their children and that manifests in the workplace. Women 'do work' in work. Not in the pub or in

Croke Park or on the golf course. Women are focussed on productivity during working hours to get the job done.

P4 - I think there is a difference in the ability of women to become leaders. There is no huge difference in style. There is a tendency for men to be more confident in assuming leadership roles. Men want to be leaders more readily.. I can make decisions. I will never have all of the information I need to make a decision, so I just need to make it. I am good at sensing what would please the stakeholders and giving people the space to do their job well... I have worked with some previous good male leaders but also some very poor ones. A lot of them were frightful bullies. Having female leaders does create role models for other women.

P5 – 'I don't think that good female leaders bring anything more than good male leaders. A good leader is a good leader... I believe I work with integrity, but I am able to influence people in the organisation - I can get people to do things. I'm comfortable having the difficult conversations because not having them has knock on effects throughout the business.

The majority of the participants believed that there was a clear distinction between male and female styles, with one participant believing there was no difference.

5.6 - Main theme: Leadership Challenges

The second of the main themes identified concerns the challenges facing leaders in their role. This is a matter where participants believed that there were significant challenges facing female leaders and also in the manner in which an organisations' structures can support or inhibit leadership aspirations. The findings of the research generated three sub-themes: The female leader bias, professional relationships / networking and the power of influence

5.6.1 - Leadership challenges: The Female Leader Bias

The subject of bias and contrasting treatment that is attributable to gender disparity was discussed in detail with participants.

Finding: Gender bias remains prevalent in Irish business.

When discussing this topic, each participant spoke about their personal experience of bias along their leadership journey. Each of the participants had examples of bias in their current and other

workplaces with the majority having experienced gender bias, whether that be positive or negative.

P1 – *'Bias is a funny thing and we all have it. There are biases there (in current job). I don't believe there is nasty intent behind them. The motivation behind the bias impacts how you behave, and I've seen some pretty nasty experiences... There is a shift to a better balance, but there is a lifetime of bias to overcome'.*

P2 – *'I suppose I've fallen victim to the female Irish bias of ourselves – up until recently, I always thought of myself as a very strong second.. when the CEO role came up here, there were two obvious successors for the role, me and a male counterpart. I found out that I wasn't being considered and it was only when I challenged the board, when they looked at my application it turned out I had more experience and was more suitable for the role. I feel there was an automatic assumption and they were naturally leaning towards the male.... In the past I've been at meetings in certain departments and there has been a condescending 'tap on the bum, good girl, you are doing a good job there' undertone. Being a CEO in my 40's and female, people may have underestimated me'.*

P3 – *'There is a confidence that men have - they don't have to prove outcomes. Delegation is seen as a strength for men but a weakness for women - women are said to be lazy for delegating. Men are able to 'think bigger' because they have the freedom to do it. Whereas women have to prove they are productive. Women are intimidated out of applying for roles. Silence from men is misinterpreted as they know how to do the job. Women are more expressive'.*

P4 – *'I definitely feel that I have been treated more positively as a male due to the traditional views of the board. I'm not sure if a female would have gotten my job'.*

P5 – *'I have experienced bias but not related to my gender. It was related to my working-class background and the way I speak. There is an unconscious (gender) bias there though and it needs to be addressed by a willingness to accept the idea of a gender balance. But this needs to be talked about at senior level...It's not about ability. That's just simply not enough. Women want to do the job but there is a nonsensical mindset of the 'old boys club' where there is more opportunity for me to access senior leaders though the likes of drinking / playing golf - things that women can't do'.*

5.6.2 - Leadership challenges: Networks / Professional Relationships

The topic of networking was discussed with the participants to understand the extent to which each participant established and utilised networks of if they preferred to maintain formal / informal professional relationships.

Finding: Women have a limited appetite to engage with networks.

All five of the participants in the study confirmed that they did engage in networking to different extents. There was an acknowledgment from all participants that networking was a task they were required to partake in as part of their role. Some participants [P1, P2, P3] stated they did network but in a limited capacity. Whereas other participants [P5] gave the impression he was reluctantly a 'networker' but was a regular attendee at industry events. P4 was engaged proactively in network as it was central to his role and industry. The topic of gender reappeared during the discussion on networking with numerous participants referencing gender issues in their responses:

P1 -'I actively avoid women only gigs. Leadership, diversity, inclusion are for men and women and you self-select and isolate 50% of the population if you go 'women only' or 'men only' events and women only events are in danger of tarring themselves with the 'lipstick and handbag brush' so that its not seen as a business thing and more 'oh I love your dress / hair'. I've been to a few over the years and in my experience, they are a bit 'cringey'.

P4 stated that that he believed that a woman would not be able to access the same network as he did as he was privy to membership of 'men only' clubs that were a premium networking location – women are completely isolated. *'I pick certain events to go do as I have to be quite strategic with my network. While I have a good mix of gender within my network, there are barriers and challenges for women to enjoy the same network as me - for example, I frequent an 'unnamed' establishment in Dublin city centre which is extremely useful to me for networking however, it is a male only membership so automatically, women are disadvantaged as they are out of the loop and can't access the same people that I can.'*

5.6.3 - Leadership Challenges: The Power of Influence

The topic of influence was discussed at various intervals throughout the interview, when participants were asked what skills lead to gaining influence and if they felt they had been influenced by others. The conversation then progressed to discuss mentoring programmes and the participants experience of being both a mentor and mentee.

Finding: Formal mentoring programmes are not fit for purpose.

All five of the organisations represented in the study operated formal mentoring programmes. All five of the participants had either previously participated in or are currently engaged in a formal programme. There was a general consensus that there was significant value in undertaking mentoring programmes, however the majority of the participants felt that an informal approach to mentoring was far more effective than a formal approach:

P1 – *“I do participate in formal and informal mentoring of others. Inside and outside of the business. I’m a great believer in giving back. I’ve had a lot of advice and support in the past so when I see someone facing similar challenges to the ones I did, its nice to be able to return the favour and pay it forward. I’ve had an arranged marriage mentor – it was a formal programme and it was forced - it didn’t work. I didn’t know him, he didn’t know me, we had nothing in common’.*

P2 – *‘I mentor internally - two colleagues. We meet every 6 weeks and try to roll out mentoring to all staff. It’s not an official programme but its open to all people who want to participate. One participant who is moving on to a new opportunity has attributed her successful candidacy to the mentoring programme’.*

P3- *‘I participate in an official mentoring programme. Over my five years in this role, it has resulted in two people gaining promotion which om very pleased about. I undertake coaching sessions with mentees’.*

P4 – *‘I do mentor others. Supporting others is very important to me. I make an effort with younger staff members but it’s not a formal arrangement’.*

P5 – *‘I mentor a female colleague informally at mid management level. I encourage her to look at broader opportunities inside and outside the organisation. I reassure her it’s not selfish to do that’.*

The participants were also asked if they currently had a mentor and all five confirmed they did and most were mentors from outside their current organisations and as such were informal arrangements in the main. It is evident from some of the responses below that having a mentor is both valued and important to each participant. The subject of gender in the context of mentoring was also considered with P1, P4 and P5 maintaining that they didn't believe that gender was a determining factor in their choice of mentor and that 'fit' was more important to them. Whereas P2 and P3 indicated a preference for having a mentor the same gender as themselves.

P1 – 'I've had mentors in past who inspired me and at the time, I didn't realise they were doing it. My mentors are not in the current business. One is childhood friend, another is former client, former boss – they are all informal arrangements and they form part of my 'personal board of directors'. They all bring something different, so I approach a different mentor for different things'.

P2 – 'The best mentors are mentors where you don't realise you are being mentored. It's a nice safe space outside of work to think differently and think outside the box. I think it gives people the time to self-reflect to ensure they understand how hard everyone in the business is working. I have three external mentors -one is a fellow CEO, the second is a former colleague and third is an industry colleague who has huge experience in the sector. We meet for a coffee, they are very good sound boards for me. The fact that all of my mentors are women has naturally fallen that way however I do value the female perspective as they have been there'.

P3 – 'Yes I have a mentor in the form of a professional coach. I felt the advantage of her being a woman. I've experienced male mediators in the past who were not as effective'.

P4 – 'Yes, I do have a mentor. A previous male board member was very generous with his time towards me. The board is primarily male, so it opened up a new world. I chose a mentor not because of their gender but the level of input they could give me'.

P5 – 'I do have a mentor. He is a former male director of previous employment. Gender wasn't important for me, it's more about getting value from the relationship'.

5.7 - Summary

An examination of the main findings was presented in this chapter with an associated analysis of the research undertaken with each of the participants. Two main themes and seven sub-themes were investigated with each participant. The group of contributors were

a homogenous group as they all held the same position in their respective organisations. Their experiences, while gained in a variety of large organisations across a multitude of industries was also relatively homogenous. The structures of their current organisations shaped certain events, with broadly similar experiences recounted by participants.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 – Introduction

In this chapter, the findings outlined in chapter 5 will be discussed and will be linked back to the outcomes of the literature review. The data will be compared to the literature review under the two main themes and seven sub-themes that were presented in the findings chapter. To summarise the analysis, the findings of the research concurs with the literature to support the position that gender continues to have a significant impact on career progression.

6.2 - Leadership and Gender

The first of the two main themes identified in the study is leadership and gender and from there, the sub themes of the neutrality of leadership, the perceptions of female leaders, the work / life balance and the female leadership style were developed. With regards to the first sub-theme, the **neutrality of leadership**, all five of the participants in study agreed that in the main, leadership at executive level continues to have a male strong hold. The literature depicts the traditional view of a leader as male (Koenig *et al*, 2011), which creates the link of men to leadership ambition and subsequently the tendency for men to realise this ambition (Storberg-Walker and Madsen, 2017). Despite the participants being both male and female, they all identified the disproportionate leadership opportunities for men, despite working in an age where there is an increased focus on diversity in the workplace. These findings support the results of various global studies previously undertaken by professional services companies which confirmed that women make up only 5% of CEO positions worldwide (Catalyst 2019, PWC, 2015, 2017) and more specifically in Ireland, where women occupy a mere 11.5% of CEO positions (Central Statistics Office, 2019). Despite women in Ireland making up fifty percent of the entry level positions in the workplace, the trend that emerged in the 1970's (Schein, 1973) of the male dominance of leadership positions is still evident in today's modern workforce. The importance of diversity programmes has been highlighted as a key initiative for many organisations, so the prevalence of bias identified in the literature (Eagly & Karau, 2002, Ibarra *et al*, 2013, Ely

et al, 2014) is clearly palpable in Irish business today. The traditional barrier of the Glass Ceiling, which was identifiable by all five participants in the study, has evolved further to create a second and third layer, glass cliffs and glass cages, all of which, must be overcome by females in order to achieve a senior leadership position (Carli, 2018, Eagly and Carli, 2003). The finding that female leaders are perceived negatively is supported by the literature. RCT demonstrates how traditional male attributes are commonly linked with leadership roles which results in a negative perception of females who choose to occupy the leadership role. The negative **perception of female leaders** is reinforced further for women who occupy senior leadership roles where these stereotypes, have manifested in a male dominant organisational culture (Ely and Meyerson, 2000, Ibarra *et al*, 2013, Watkins, 2013).

With regards to the sub-theme **work / life balance**, the participants recognised the impact of parenthood and family commitments on the trajectory of women's career paths. This finding was consistent with the literature where the sample accepted that women take ownership of the majority of household and childcare activities in comparison to males, while also fulfilling their day jobs (Carli, 2018). The literature introduced the concept of 'opting out' (Belkin, 2013, Ely *et al.*, 2014) which is a trend of consciously stepping away from roles due to a shift in the definition of success however this was not heavily representative in the sample. Only one of the participants, P1, recounted consciously opting out of a role, as she placed a higher value on factors outside of the specifications of the role such as organisational culture and flexibility.

There was a consensus among the sample that men and women adopted different **leadership styles**. The narrative from the literature indicates that the female style of leadership leans towards being more democratic, inclusive and less directive than the male style (Eagly *et al.*, 2003). Furthermore, the literature suggests transformational leadership was more common among women and this was corroborated by this study, where a more nurturing approach was linked to the female leadership style. The female participants in the sample concurred that this was their preferred leadership approach. The findings of the study with regards to the male leadership approach reiterated the conclusions from the literature review where a more transactional, autocratic style is found to be prevalent, with men quite often adopting a command and control approach (Conger and Kanungo, 1987). Both male and female participants validated the dominant view from the literature, that should female leaders adopt behaviours that are traditionally male, they would be

chastened (Eagly, 2013; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012; Smith, Rosenstein and Nikolov, 2018). The practice of using negative language to describe senior female leaders that emerged in the literature was verified by the sample, with words such as 'formidable', 'shrill' and 'bossy' being quoted by the participants which further substantiates the findings of the RCT in the literature (Eagly, 1987, Eagly and Carli, 2003, Eagly and Karau, 2002, Eagly and Wood, 2012).

6.3 - Leadership Challenges

The second of the main themes identified in the research is leadership challenges and focusses on the female leader bias, professional relationships and networking and the power of influence as the three sub-themes.

When considering if they had been confronted with gender bias throughout their career, all five of the participants believed there is underlying **female leader bias**. The extent to which each of the participants experienced the bias varied, from P2 personally experiencing negative gender bias by being overlooked for the position of CEO over a male colleague, despite having superior qualifications and experience to fulfil the role, to P4 who believed he benefits positively from gender bias as he ascertains that one of the key considerations for his appointment to CEO was the fact that he was male and he does not believe a female applicant would have secured the role, despite their ability to fulfil the job specifications. The conclusions made by the participants is aligned to the findings in the literature which asserts that there is a correlation between gender stereotypes and gender bias in the workplace (Eagly and Steffen, 1984; Insch *et al.*, 2008).

Moving to the penultimate sub-theme of **professional relationships and networking**, there was a mixed view from the participants. Two out of the five participants, P2 and P5 supported the literature as they engaged in networking as a requirement of their role, rather than viewing it as an occasion to help boost their profile and expand their connections. P1 and P3 were more proactive in the networking space as they both expressed the importance of having connections, with P1 stating that she networks at every opportunity, whether it be in a formal setting in the business environment or informally '*on the side line of a GAA pitch chatting to other parents*'. P1 confirmed that she actively avoided women only events and her position in this regard corresponded with research in the literature which proposes that women only networks can be deemed to be

perpetuating the view that in the workplace, there is a fundamental difference between men and women (Perriton, 2006). Research from the Institute of Directors from July 2019, claims that 54 per cent of females cite lack of access to the same networks as men as the main barrier (Paul, 2019). There were several references from the female participants to the existence of the 'old boys club', which is the casual, informal networking among men that women are traditionally isolated from. P4 and P5 are testament to the continued prevalence of the 'old boys club' as both confirmed they participated in informal networking events that were exclusively male with P4 adding that he regularly attends a 'men only' club which has proven to be a highly valuable networking location. The literature suggests those who do not engage in networking are doing themselves a disservice when it comes to the opportunity for promotion as not having the ability to navigate the political landscape of the business can result in a lack of visibility when candidates for senior roles are being selected (Wallace, 2017).

The final sub-theme under the main theme of leadership challenges is ***the power of influence***. The topic of influence, gaining influence and influencing others was discussed at various intervals with the participants. The discussion evolved to role models and the lack of an influential female role models at executive level for younger females to aspire to. P1 commented that *'being the first of anything is never easy..but having said that, if you can't see it, you can't be it'*. The lack of an influential female role model in the early days of her career had a significant impact on the confidence of P2 *'I always considered myself a very good second best*. P3 attributed the lack of influential female role models as one of the significant reasons why there are not more women occupying executive positions *'Women are intimidated out of applying for roles because they are dominated by men'*. The literature identifies that a formal mentoring programme as a potential solution to issue (Billing and Alvesson, 2014; Johnson and Smith, 2018). However the experience and insight gained from the data subjects of participating in mentoring programmes throughout their career contradicted the literature, as four out of the five participants [P1,P2, P4 and P5] found informal mentoring arrangements far more effective that formal programmes. Despite the lack of appetite for formal mentoring programmes, the participants did agree with the literature in that engaging in a mentoring programme did benefit them personally (Ely *et al.*, 2011).

6.4 - Limitations of the Research

As there are cost and time implications of undertaking a large scale, labour intensive study, qualitative research studies are inclined to extract samples from smaller scale data sets. In this instance, while the sample set can be deemed homogeneous as all of the participants hold the position of CEO, it can also be considered a heterogeneous population as the participants vary in gender, age, years of experience, industry and sector type. Gaining access to any CEO is a challenge, given their limited availability in a working day, so a larger scale study was not possible. The relatively short duration of this quantitative study is also considered a limitation and is linked to the time constraints under which the study was undertaken. This was also a consideration for the researcher in their decision not to transcribe the interviews in full. The interviews have not been fully transcribed as all interviews were fully recorded and the researcher took a comprehensive note of participant responses during the interviews.

A comprehensive list of interview questions from a previous study was used in this research as part of the researcher's objective to close the local research gap. Given the scarcity of qualitative research studies in this specific area and the fact that no qualitative studies have been undertaken in an Irish context exist, the questions used by the researcher were taken from an unpublished, non-peer reviewed study (Kenny, 2018) and was a significant limitation in carrying out the research.

6.5 – Summary

The participants recounted a broad range of experiences in both their current role as CEO and previous roles as senior business leaders. In the main, the findings from the empirical data gathered from the lived experiences of the participants supports the literature. There was an alternative position offered from the sample where only one of the participants concurred with the literature with regards 'opting out' of certain roles and while the participants did support the idea that there was huge value in the running of and participation in, mentoring programmes, the majority disagreed with the literature and found that mentoring was more effective on an informal than formal basis. In concluding the analysis, the participating CEO 's have, to varying degrees, faced some if not all of the leadership barriers detailed in the literature.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion

7.1 – Introduction

The final chapter of this research paper returns to main findings of the study and highlights the correlation between them and the aims and objectives that were set at the outset of the study. The researcher puts forward some future research suggestions and closes out the paper with personal learning reflection.

7.2 – Achievement of Research Aims and Objectives

The main objective of this study was to understand if gender had a significant impact on career progression. This study enhances our understanding of this subject in several ways. When comparing the differences in the number of women who occupy senior executive positions in Irish Business in comparison to men, it is important to firstly understand if the women in question have aspirations to become senior leaders rather than make assumptions regarding their ambitions. The literature illustrates how at certain points in their career, men and women who hold similar levels of experience and expertise, also hold similar leadership aspirations (McKinsey, 2017). Yet, the literature also tells us that is women who are more likely to re-evaluate their values as they move through their career and therefore, opt out of becoming a senior leader. The participants in the study concurred with this while also acknowledging the trade-off between their home life and their career and accepted that they had each made significant sacrifices to reach the role they currently occupied (Ibarra et al, 2014). The literature also demonstrates some significant challenges that women face in aspiring to a leadership position such as gender stereotyping, (Bowman, et al, 1965; Koenig et al, 2011; Kazmi et al, 2014), Role Congruity Theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002) and the cultural phenomenon such as ‘glass ceilings’ and ‘glass cliffs’. The participants in the study all identified with the barriers classified in the literature. The female participants acknowledged their existence but also recounted experiencing each one first hand. The male participants acknowledged the existence of each barrier but did not recount experiencing the barriers to the same degree as the female participants. Therefore, the key finding of this study is that gender does have a significant impact on career progression. So, what is the solution? The literature has proposed one suggestion that formal mentoring programmes should encourage more females to assume leadership roles and will also provide role models for younger females to aspire to. However, this research has found that formal mentoring programmes are ineffective. Perhaps the change that is needed to support women requires a lot more thought and consideration? Perhaps

the change that is required does not involve short term, quick fix models? Perhaps it's a change of mindset that is required? By evaluating the literature and the lived experiences of the participants, a change in mindset could be the key to unlocking gender as a barrier for career progression. Until both men and women believe there are no fundamental differences in the approach, ability and capability of males and females, they are equally perpetuating the gender divide in the workplace.

7.3 – Suggestions for Further Research

A clear gap in the Irish knowledge taxonomy has been identified by the researcher. This topic would benefit from future Irish qualitative studies, replicating the methods adopted by this study and Kenny (2018). A female only and a mixed participant sample have been utilised so it would be interesting to understand if the same outcomes were reported in a male only study. A study that applied an age limit (assessment over CEOs's aged under 45 for example) might produce differentiated insights and may be used to investigate if a culture of diversity and equal opportunity has assimilated into Irish business as the 'old guard' who are subconsciously rooted in gender bias and stereotypes make way for the new generation.

7.4 – Reflection on Personal Learning

This research was undertaken as a compulsory MBA requirement. While I had a keen interest in the topic, I didn't fully appreciate the extent of the issue. It was only when I began researching the topic that I began to understand how much of an issue this was in Irish society. Furthermore, I was surprised at the lack of research that had been done in Ireland, firstly to address the issue, but secondly to provide some rationale for why the problem persists. Having initially been quite overwhelmed of the prospect at taking on such a big gap in the literature, the experience was extremely rewarding, having interviewed some incredibly talented people and learning about their career journeys while hopefully taking a small steps to closing the local research gap.

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Appendix 1: The Research Onion

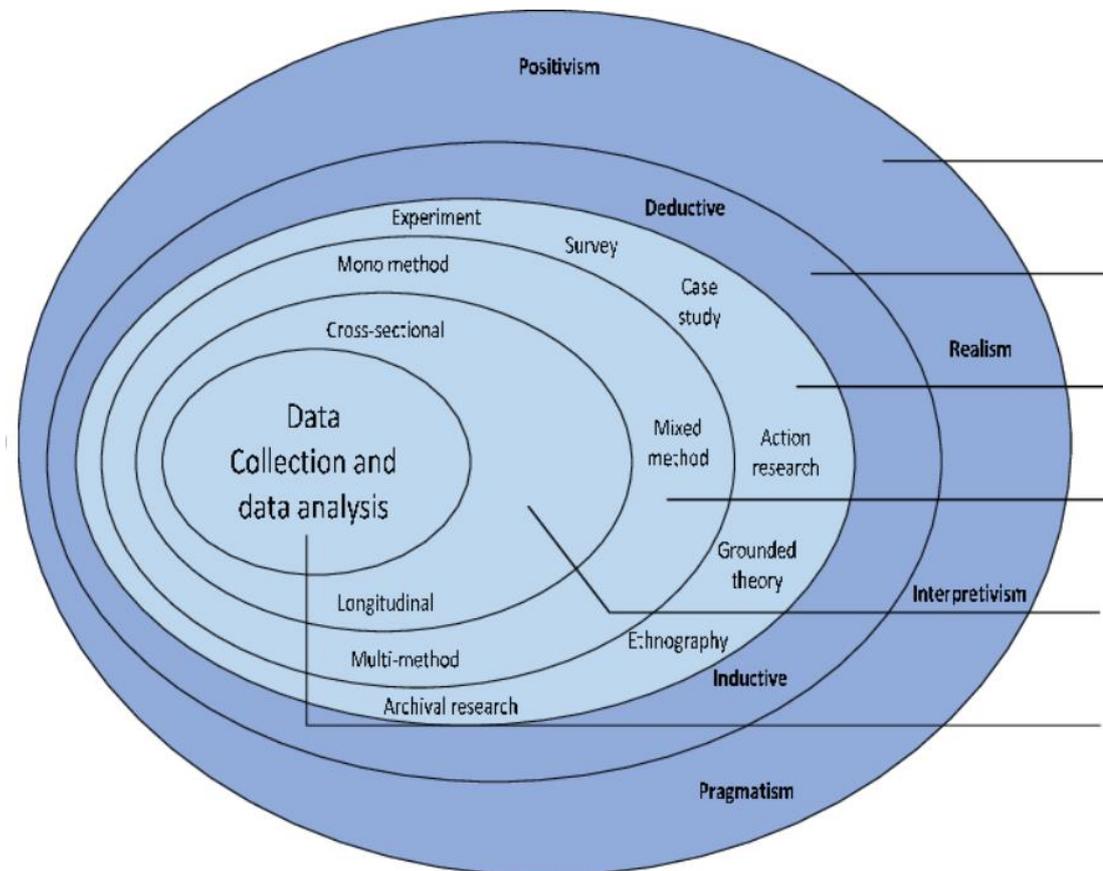


Figure 1: The Research Onion (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012)

Appendix 2: Interview Questions (Kenny, 2018)

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 3: Request for Participation

Dear < name of participant >

As a senior business leader, you are invited to participate in a research study to investigate the working experience of professional women occupying senior leadership positions in large Irish firms.

In order to participate in the study, you will be required to attend a face-to-face, one-to-one interview with me, which should not exceed one hour in duration. Any personal or professional data that is collated as part of the study will be kept confidential and will be anonymised in writing up the research study. As a participant, you will be allocated a unique participant identifier and any comments or experiences you share as part of the study and that are detailed in the research paper will be denoted against your unique identifier. The data gathered will be used to support this research study, will be maintained and stored securely and will be used only for the purposes of this study.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Kind regards

Linda Cummins

Appendix 4: Participant Consent Form

Dear <name of participant >

You have received an email invitation to participate in a research study research study to investigate the working experience of professional women occupying senior leadership positions in large Irish firms. Please see the information below which is provided to give you an understanding of what your participation in the study entails and for you to decide if you which to participate.

Title of Research Project: Gender in executive Ireland - An investigation into the career progression of Ireland's business leaders

Name of researcher: Linda Cummins (supervised by Dr. April Hargreaves, Programme Director for Psychology/Lecturer in Psychology, National College of Ireland).

Purpose of the Study: The intention of this research is to explore the reasons why so few women occupy executive, leadership positions in Irish business.

Your contribution: To participate in an interview related to your current and previous roles, business experience, leadership style and your views on the challenges of being a business leader.

Process: A one-to-one, face- to -face interview with the researcher, which will take approximately one hour to complete. The interview will be recorded and will take place at a mutually convenient location. You are under no obligation and you may chose not to answer any of the questions put to you during the interview. After the interview, the researcher may contact you again for clarification on some points and / or for some follow up questions.

Confidentiality: Any personal details collected as part of the study will be kept confidential and will not be applied to the written section of the research. Any interview notes and / or recordings will be taken for the sole purpose of the research study and will be stored confidentially and securely at all times.

Questions: If you have any questions or queries regarding the research, you can contact me at x17105455@student.ncirl.ie

Withdrawal: You can choose to withdraw your participation in the research study at any time. Assuming you do choose to proceed, your ongoing participation remains voluntary throughout the course of the research. Your signature confirms that you have consented to participate in the research having read and understood the information detailed above. You will be presented with a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Authorisation:

- I confirm that I have read the information presented
- I understand that responses in my interview will be used for this research project only
- I understand that my personal data will be confidential and any reference to my participation in the study will be anonymised in writing up the research project
- I consent to the researcher using direct and indirect quotes from my interview in the research project
- I consent to the researcher taking notes during the interview; to recording it; and to transcribing the audio recording afterwards
- I understand my participation in the research is voluntary and I may withdraw consent at any time.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

