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Breaking Barriers and Rising to the Top: An Exploration of the Factors and Strategies that Shape the Emergence of Female Leaders in Norway

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Abstract

Norway is recognized as one of the leading countries in achieving gender parity. Still, women continue to be underrepresented in top leadership positions compared to male peers. Although several theories have been proposed to explain the barriers women face in leadership emergence, recent research claim that a significant portion of the gender imbalance remains unexplained. This study aims to uncover key factors and strategies influencing female leadership emergence by exploring the personal experiences and perspectives of women who have successfully risen to the top.

This thesis adopts a qualitative approach and employs semi-structured interviews with seven female top leaders from a large Norwegian corporate group who were purposively recruited to participate in the study. The empirical findings shed light on some of the key factors contributing to leadership emergence for these women. Specifically, the significance of *male leader sponsorship*, and the impact of *luck* and *chance variations* have been identified as significant drivers. Additionally, the study explores essential strategies employed by the participants, particularly *choosing a leadership lifestyle* by recognizing the value of *flexibility* and *prioritization*. This thesis contributes with valuable insight into the attributes, challenges, and strategies of female leaders in a Norwegian context, thereby highlighting the need to alter conventional beliefs and develop new theories regarding gender in top leadership emergence.

Keywords: female leadership emergence, leader strategies, support, leadership lifestyle, luck and chance, male leader sponsorship, flexibility, prioritization, gender in leadership, glass cliff

1.0 Introduction

The gender gap among leaders in Norway has gradually decreased in recent years, and in 2019, 37% of all Norwegian top managers were women (Gram, 2021). According to the Global Gender Gap Report in 2022, the share of women hired into top leadership positions has seen a steady increase in recent years. Despite this improvement, women are still underrepresented in elite positions compared to men, and there are several theories as to why females face barriers in leadership emergence.

The overall conclusion among researchers is that men tend to ascend in leadership roles more often than women (Badura et al., 2018). Several suggestions have been made to explain the gender gap in leadership, among them are the famous phenomenon of '*the glass ceiling*' which later became '*the glass cliff*', *role congruity theory*, *societal role expectations*, *biases*, and *stereotypes*, as well as *personality* and *behavioural attributes*. There is agreement within the research community that there are small differences in leadership style and effectiveness between male and female leaders, concluding that women are no less effective, committed, or motivated for leadership roles (Northouse, 2022). On the other hand, there has been found evidence indicating differences in leadership behaviours, opportunities, and self-promotion between genders, strengthening the basis of *role congruity* as an obstacle for women obtaining top positions. Gender stereotypes are highly resistant to change (Northouse, 2022), and women will likely become more prominent in elite leadership roles if alterations occur in work-life balance expectations, and changes in the incongruity between women and leadership roles.

Several theorists have studied the phenomena of female leadership emergence, where most research has focused on gender differences, interpersonal attributes, leadership styles, and gender roles as barriers women face when pursuing top leadership positions. Badura et al. (2018) propose that even though leadership emergence is conceptualized to be a result of both gender role assumptions, personality, and leadership behaviour, a limitation of the current research is that theorists tend to examine previously studied relationships. Modern theorists believe that further research is needed to determine the influence of undervalued factors, such as network characteristics (Badura et al., 2022) and organizational support mechanisms and sponsorships (Ibarra et al., 2013). Additionally, most research on the topic has been conducted on American subjects, limiting the studies' transferability. Studying the phenomenon in a Norwegian context may be especially

interesting, considering the country is categorized as a ‘world leader in gender equality’ (Gram, 2021).

Eagly and Carli (2009) proposed that it may be beneficial for researchers to focus on female leaders’ experiences to determine additional factors for leader emergence. Similarly, Furst and Reeves (2008) proposed that studying the experiences of women who have successfully risen to top leadership positions can reveal insights into how some women have overcome gender-related barriers. Overall, modern research claim that a large share of the gender gap among top leaders remain unexplained (Keloharju et al., 2022), indicating that further research is needed. Based on these arguments, the following research question is defined.

1.1 Research question

“What are the key factors and strategies that contribute to the emergence of female top leaders in Norway?”

1.2 Purpose of the study

In this project, we have conducted a qualitative research study utilizing in-depth interviews with top female leaders from various companies within the same corporate group. The study sought to understand the specific factors and personal experiences that have played a significant role in the ascent of female top leaders in a Norwegian context. By emphasizing the perspectives and narratives of these women, the study aims to provide insight into the unique challenges, opportunities, and strategies that have contributed their career advancements. This will likely lead to a better comprehension of the various influences, including societal and organizational factors, that affect the emergence of female leaders. Through qualitative interviews, we sought to uncover unexplored factors that influence women’s career paths, as well as highlight the strategies employed by successful female leaders to navigate their professional journeys towards elite positions. By identifying commonalities among female leaders’ experiences and perspectives, we aim to contribute to the theoretical understanding of *how* some women have emerged as leaders where others have failed. The investigation of the interplay between societal expectations, support systems, and individual strategies can contribute to future research on the topic and a modernized view of female leadership and female leadership emergence for future generations. Additionally, these findings may lead to better comprehension regarding gender parity in elite

positions in Norway and aid younger women with top leadership ambitions in overcoming gender barriers.

This thesis will initially present a literature review of the current body of research on the topic of gender and leadership emergence. The chapter discusses popular phenomena such as the '*glass ceiling to glass cliff*', *role congruity theory*, *social role theory*, and *individual attributes* that are conceptualized to determine who ascends as leaders. The presented theory helps identify the current literature gap on gender and leadership emergence and creates the basis for the discussion. Secondly, the research method will be described. This study takes on a primarily inductive approach using qualitative interviews, where this chapter illustrates the collection of data, the coding method, and ethical considerations. Further, the empirical findings are introduced, highlighting the identified key topics from the study, illustrated with quotes from the interviews. In order to address and answer the research question, a discussion of the key influences on female leadership emergence is presented. A conscious choice was made to discuss both the presented theory as well as some new empiricism to avoid repetition in this chapter. Lastly, the limitations of this study are discussed, including constraints within the methodology and the chosen sample, as well as identified areas for further research.

2.0 Literature review

2.1 *From the glass ceiling to the glass cliff phenomenon*

Since the 1990s, the *glass ceiling* has been a widely used metaphor for explaining why women often fail to emerge in leadership roles (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). The phenomenon refers to the underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions (Bertrand et al., 2019) and the large gender gaps still dominating the labour market (Furst & Reeves, 2008). Even in female-dominated occupations, women seem to face obstacles related to the glass ceiling, whereas men, specifically white males, seem to ride a *glass escalator* to the top (Northouse, 2022). Even though the current study shows that the gender gap in leadership emergence is shrinking over time (Badura et al., 2018), it is still prominent in almost every industry, especially in the private sector (Gram, 2021). Modern and open-minded societies such as Norway are believed to have achieved extensive progress in terms of gender equality (Bertrand et al., 2019), but studies suggest that women are still underrepresented in top management positions. Saleem et al. (2017) found evidence of the presence of the glass ceiling in relation to the selection and promotion of female leaders and suggested a negative correlation between the phenomenon and leadership emergence. The authors further suggested that the remaining prejudice and stereotypical attitude toward female leaders in modern societies promote the presence of the glass ceiling. Furthermore, Adams and Funk (2012) found, consistent with previous studies, the presence of mechanisms in the labour market hindering women from reaching high-status positions and wages. These findings indicate that the glass ceiling phenomenon significantly influences female leadership emergence. Eagly and Carli (2009) identified several limitations with the metaphor, including the assumption that all individuals face equal obstacles. The authors rather propose the *leadership labyrinth*, conveying a road riddled with various challenges that can be and has been successfully navigated by women. Such findings establish the basis for future studies drawing on elite female leaders' experiences to determine mediators for leadership emergence.

In 2022, Iceland, Finland, and Norway hold the topmost ranks on gender parity in the world. According to the Global Gender Gap Report, the share of women hired into top leadership positions has seen a steady increase but is still below 40% (World Economic Forum, 2022). If the current pace of advancement continues, it will take approximately 132 years to reach complete gender parity.

Additionally, there is still a large gap between industries, and the majority of female leaders are found in industries where women are already highly represented. Even within these industries, female managers tend to receive greater scrutiny and criticism than male peers (Ryan & Haslam, 2007) and are still perceived as less effective and likeable (Sczesny, 2003). Despite Norway's high score on the Global Gender Gap Index, the report reveals that numbers from 2022 reflect lower proportions of women participating in elite roles such as senior officials and managers (World Economic Forum, 2022). Even though women have made steady progress and are moving into leadership positions, it is still an uphill battle: many are placed in precarious positions setting them up for failure and pushing them over the edge – a phenomenon coined as *the glass cliff*. According to Sabharwal (2015), glass cliffs seemingly arise because of social psychological and social constructs. The former can be considered a form of overt sexism, while the latter is a more subtle dimension reflective of a desire to appoint women to high-risk positions to await their inevitable failure (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Sabharwal, 2015). The term builds upon the glass ceiling but further describes how once they crack the ceiling; women are unable to exert authority the same way as men. Studies have also found that women are more likely to be hired in top positions when the company is performing poorly (Schultheiss, 2021), which has been related to gender biases and role congruity theory. Ryan and Haslam (2007) attributed the glass cliff to several factors, including gender institutions, organizational inequities, lack of empowerment, in-group favouritism, and lack of involvement in decision-making. Their study proposes the existence of additional factors causing women to 'fall off the cliff' beyond those explained by social constructs, and sufficient evidence has been found for the presence of the glass cliff. Still, the concept is relatively new, and most researchers believe additional studies are needed to further understand the dynamics of the glass cliff women face in top leadership positions.

2.2 Gender roles and biases

According to the intrapsychic perspective, gender-role characteristics can determine leadership access and emergence (Ayman & Korabik, 2010) as it affects the individual's preferred leadership style, behaviour, and outcomes. A common perception of gender and leadership is that men's gender roles are more congruent with the leadership role than those of women, resulting in prejudice against female leaders (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). Sabharwal (2015) argues that leadership is

considered a quality mostly associated with males due to the literature on effective leadership mostly focusing on typically masculine traits such as risk-taking, decisiveness and high ambitions. According to Eagly and Karau (2002), this prejudice stems from the tendency to give dissimilar views on leaders and women, but similar views on leaders and men. Thus, females must fulfil a higher standard than male peers in order to be deemed competent and capable in leadership roles and often elicit disapproval for behaving assertively (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Several meta-analyses support the notion that female leaders are typically perceived as less effective than men (Ayman & Korabik, 2010), even though most research suggests that there are no significant differences in leadership effectiveness between genders (Badura et al., 2018). Several studies have suggested that *agentic* traits such as masculinity and dominance are often associated with leadership (Goktepe & Schneier, 1989; Ayman & Korabik, 2010). There is overall agreement among researchers that women should *not* adopt the behaviour of men in order to increase their chances of emerging as leaders (Eagly & Karau, 1991), as there is a well-documented backlash effect in which women are perceived negatively for displaying masculine and agentic behaviours (Badura et al., 2018). This has been repeatedly proven in the literature, and a meta-analysis conducted by Eagly et al. (1995) found that women were consistently more effective in roles congruent with their gender. The authors suggest that women will likely face substantial scrutiny in masculinized roles, such as military positions, while in typically female-dominated industries, such as educational and social service organizations where typical ‘soft skills’ are appreciated, female leaders will likely be perceived as highly effective due to the feminine nature of the position (Eagly et al., 1995). These findings have been replicated in later years, and Northouse (2022) state that women still face significant social disincentives and gender biases when they engage in self-promoting, dominating, and masculine behaviour, resulting in being perceived as less attractive and hireable.

2.2.1 Role congruity theory

According to Koenig et al. (2011), challenges women face when obtaining leadership positions and succeeding in them are often related to the characteristics frequently attributed to women, men, and leaders. Stereotyping can give the impression that females are not suited for leadership positions, which is often described as *role incongruity*. Biased evaluations of women in leadership roles are

caused by this mismatch between women and the perceived demands of leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Men are frequently recognized as more equivalent to the typical leader stereotype than women due to the communal and agentic attributes prescribed to gender roles. As such, women face a disadvantage regardless of whether they possess the necessary qualities for the leadership role. Furthermore, such biases may have a direct impact on women, weakening their leadership abilities and influencing whether they identify as leaders (Koenig et al., 2011). This can be explained through *role congruity theory*.

Role congruity theory predicts that females will be less likely than male peers to emerge as leaders when expectations for the role are incongruent with gender stereotypes (Ritter & Yoder, 2004). Eagly and Karau (2002) developed this theory to explain how gender and leadership roles produce prejudice that supports a preference for male leaders. According to the authors, these expectations cluster into two broad sets of attributes: *communal* (associated with women and subordinated status) and *agentic* (associated with men and higher status). Accordingly, women are viewed as being high in communal and low in agentic traits compared to both men and leaders. The convergence of role expectations proves inconsistent for females, but not for males. The conclusion is that men have better potential to emerge as leaders than women and that female leaders will be evaluated more harshly than male leaders in elite positions. Additionally, agentic leadership behaviours are perceived as less desirable in females than males (Ritter & Yoder, 2004), resulting in women facing a predicament of whether they should maintain their gender roles, thus failing in leadership roles. Simply put, women seem to face a double standard in the leadership role; they must be perceived as extremely competent but also as appropriately feminine to gain respect (Northouse, 2022), a set of standards men are not held to. Despite literature suggesting that women and men are equally effective leaders in general, there is evidence supporting the idea that gender differences tend to make both females and males more effective in leadership roles that are congruent with their gender (Northouse, 2022).

2.2.2 *Social role theory*

A major source of discrimination in organizations is the strongly embedded beliefs and perceptions about the social role and behaviours of men and women (Sabharwal, 2015). The key principle of *social role theory* is that differences and

similarities arise primarily from the distribution of men and women into social roles within their society (Eagly, 1987; Solberg, 2017). Similar to role congruity theory, the approach distinguishes between agentic (e.g., dominance and assertiveness) and communal traits (e.g., warmth and nurturance), and predicts that gender differences in leadership emergence are smaller when there is compatibility between the female and the leader's perceived roles, as well as when there is a greater probability of basing judgment on the individual's qualifications rather than gender stereotypes. Badura et al. (2018) developed the Gender-Agency/Communion-Participation (GAP) model to further explain the gender skewness in leadership emergence. Their meta-analysis proposes that gender differences in this context can be predominantly explained by agentic and communal traits, both directly and through mechanisms of group participation. Additionally, several paths in their theoretical model are moderated by situational contingencies. Like role congruity theory, social role theory suggests that females may face disadvantages when it comes to leadership emergence because they possess attributes that are perceived as less consistent with leadership roles compared to men (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Badura et al.'s (2018) meta-analysis suggest that the gender gap in emergent leadership is a result of both women's lack of agency and abundance of communion. According to Lanaj and Hollenbeck (2015), communal behaviours can be devalued when making leader emergence judgments, which may explain why women tend to under-emerge as leaders despite their effectiveness in top positions. The authors speculate that even though communal behaviours are generally recognized as contributing to group success, these same behaviours "*do not trigger automatic perceptions of leadership emergence*" (p. 1488). According to current research, the negative effects of communal behaviours on leader emergence imply a cognitive bias towards promoting individuals who fit stereotypical notions of the ideal leader, but also lack the interpersonal skills required to succeed in elite positions. The general assumption in most research is that individuals are more likely to emerge as leaders when they simultaneously possess agentic attributes (Kent & Moss, 1994; Badura et al., 2018), but women still must overcome certain barriers, such as the glass ceiling, in order to obtain elite positions despite exhibiting attractive qualities.

Furthermore, Ibarra et al. (2013) discuss the challenge of a society where leadership and masculinity are highly linked. The ideal man is considered as strong, assertive, independent, and decisive, whereas the ideal woman is kind, caring, and selfless (Kubu, 2018). As a result, women who do not exhibit such ideal

characteristics are deemed unattractive and unfit for leadership roles, which is linked to both role congruity and social role theory. The authors state that this presents a challenge for women in establishing respect and credibility in a culture that is “*deeply conflicted about whether, when, and how they should exercise authority*” (Ibarra et al., 2013, p. 63). Ultimately, women still experience biases and barriers when it comes to leadership emergence, which is deeply embedded in traditional role expectations and stereotyped gender differences.

2.2.3 Gender norms and career trade-offs

Gender norms are often highlighted in research as a limiting factor for why women fail to emerge as leaders. This is conceptualized to be linked to gender differences in job preferences, where studies suggest that women have a stronger preference for family and ‘staying at home’ (Keloharju et al., 2022) and have a greater desire for taking responsibility for childcare tasks (Bleske-Rechek & Gunseor, 2022) than their partners. Hamplová et al. (2022) state that women seem to have to choose between a career or family life, whereas men can have both, and Cheung and Halpern (2010) concluded that highly successful women seem to have chosen between ‘baby or briefcase’. This notion can be explained by the findings of Ayca and Shelia (2019), who report that women may be less inclined to pursue leadership positions due to fear of work-life imbalance. Some researchers further claim that women tend to underestimate the effect of childbirth on employment (Kuziemko et al., 2018). Keloharju et al. (2022) state that women “*do not return to their prechildbirth levels during the 10 years following the birth of the first child*” (p. 712), claiming that the gaps in labour market attachment primarily arise following the birth of a woman’s first child. As a result, women accept a traditional gender role based on mis-calibrated career expectations. On the other hand, the same study also found that female CEOs are more likely to have children than not, concluding that having a family may not be a significant impediment to a top executive career for certain individuals. Additionally, it is plausible that an uneven distribution of family responsibilities, possibly brought on by gender norms, can have a disproportionately negative impact on women’s careers (Keloharju et al., 2022). Overall, there seems to be a double standard in the workplace when it comes to family life. According to Cheung and Halpern (2010), the presence of children signals stability and responsibility for men, while the identical situation for women has the opposite effect.

2.3 Personality and behaviour

As mentioned, masculine characteristics are highly associated with leadership (Kent & Moss, 1994), and even though contemporary research suggests changes in this trend, masculinity and dominance are still strongly associated with leader emergence. Some researchers have found that women have difficulty ascending as leaders even when their personalities, in particular dominance traits, are well suited for the role (Goktepe & Schneier, 1989). This is consistent with later findings, implying that leadership emergence is not assured even though women possess the dominance trait and are seemingly qualified for the position (Ritter & Yoder, 2004). The aforementioned linkages between leadership emergence and agentic traits are closely related to assumed personality differences between genders. Some researchers propose that men generally gain respect and are perceived as capable by expressing assertive and dominant behaviour (Neubert & Taggar, 2004), while women often express themselves in an egalitarian manner (Tannen, 1995, cited in Neubert & Taggar, 2004), resulting in being perceived as humble and reserved. Consistent with role congruity and social role theory, Neubert and Taggar (2004) suggest that females who inhabit traits typically associated with masculine leadership styles or who alter their behaviour to be more consistent with male stereotypes are likely to be perceived as less capable and receive less respect than male counterparts exhibiting similar behaviour.

Furthermore, there is general agreement that women are no less motivated for leadership roles than men (Northouse, 2022). Not much research has been conducted on motivation as a driver for leadership emergence (Hong et al., 2011), although researchers have conceptualized that it may be an important influencer when pursuing top leadership positions. Motivation can be viewed as one of the most proximal determinants in individuals' behaviour (Campbell et al., 1996), and affects an individual's career direction, effectiveness, and overall job performance (Hong et al., 2011). However, motivation alone is not likely to increase the chances of obtaining a leadership role (Aycan & Shelia, 2019), even though it does have a positive influence on job performance (Hong et al., 2011).

2.4 Leadership style

Some researchers argue that female underrepresentation in top leadership positions is a result of differences in leadership style, and that female leaders are more effective in contemporary organizations and societies (Northouse, 2022).

Contrary to stereotypical expectations, meta-analyses have found that women do not lead in a more interpersonally-oriented or less task-oriented manner than men (Northouse, 2022), and some studies have found that females take on a more participative manner (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Van Engen & Willemssen, 2004). These findings predict that women's more democratic leadership style is seemingly more adaptive to changing environments and produces favourable outcomes (Ayman et al., 2009). Furthermore, Eagly et al. (2003) found that female leadership styles tend to be more transformational than men and that women tend to engage in more contingent reward behaviours, similar to findings associated with the younger and more contemporary generation of leaders (Buengeler et al., 2016). Moreover, Eagly and Karau (1991) suggested that an underlying factor of the gender gap in leadership emergence may be explained by women not being given as much opportunity as men to state their ideas and opinions, resulting in females being less likely to emerge in leadership positions. On the other hand, the authors further state that women are more likely to achieve high-status roles under circumstances where tasks are socially complex and required skills are considered more feminine, strengthening the notion of how leadership effectiveness can be determined by feminine versus masculine leadership behaviours.

In general, leadership styles can mediate leader emergence, and some studies do indicate that an androgynous leadership style may aid women in overcoming stereotypes that prevent them from emerging as leaders (Kent & Moss, 1994). Based on such arguments, one would expect female leaders to have a slight advantage over male leaders concerning organizational outcomes (Kubu, 2018), but the tendency for men to emerge as leaders still seem prominent regardless of leadership style (Eagly & Karau, 1991; Solberg, 2017). Ayman et al. (2009) found that women exhibiting transformational behaviour with an emphasis on intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration were perceived as more effective by female subordinates, but less effective by male subordinates. Such findings support the notions of role congruity theory and social role theory. Consistent with previous findings, Kubu (2018) proposed that the extent to which the organization is male-dominated influences the role of gender in leadership effectiveness. In sum, women still face substantial obstacles compared to male peers when reaching for elite positions, making further research necessary to uncover factors and strategies influencing female leadership emergence.

2.5 Other potential influences

Even though there is limited work exploring the role of organizational components on female leader emergence, Ibarra et al. (2013) discussed how women's relative lack of access to networks and sponsorships may be an underlying factor influencing the gender gap in leadership roles. The authors claim that networks are crucial for aspiring leaders and that sponsors play a key part in supporting and promoting candidates. They further explain women's limited access to networks and sponsors through the *similar-to-me effect*, as the majority of sponsors in existing top positions tend to be (typically white) men. This ultimately decreases the likelihood of women being sponsored (Hewlett, 2013), which has been supported by Kubu's (2018) work discussing male leaders constrain in sponsoring female prodigies. Even in Western societies formalized mentoring programs tend to match individuals in same-sex pairs (Ibarra et al., 2010). Although this might be less of an issue in societies with overlapping norms for gender roles, such as Scandinavia (Ottson, 2019), there is still a tendency for men to sponsor male rather than female prodigies.

The influence of situational attributes on leadership emergence is so far considered rather 'untapped territory' (Badura et al., 2018) within leadership research. Wrzus et al. (2016) suggest that the path to leadership is not only determined by individual attributes and personality traits, but may also be influenced by motives, life choices, and serendipity. Similarly, Ottson (2019) argue that coincidence likely plays a much larger role in the 'pathway to power' than previously assumed. She further claims that more research is needed on leaders' unique perspectives and experiences to determine how much influence serendipitous opportunities have in determining leadership obtainment. While research suggests that chance and luck can influence leadership emergence (Berry & Fowler, 2021), most research on the topic still assumes that personality traits and attributes are the main contributors to why certain individuals ascend to leadership positions where others do not (Ensari et al., 2011).

Based on the presented literature review, existing theories seem to concentrate on *why* there is a gender gap in top leadership positions. Previous research has predominantly drawn on existing relationships to explain the barriers women face in leadership emergence. Thus, there seems to be a need to investigate *how* some women have risen to the top where others have failed through the exploration of successful female leaders' personal experiences and perspectives.

3.0 Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology for the research project. The literature review has provided evidence for the need to further study factors that influence female leadership emergence through the insights of women in top leadership positions. The research strategy and data collection method will be presented, followed by a description of the chosen sample and coding procedure. Lastly, quality criteria and ethical considerations will be discussed.

3.1 Research strategy and design

The aim of this study was to investigate factors and strategies that influence female leadership emergence within Norwegian companies. By collecting unique insights from participants, the ambition was to identify the specific elements that have contributed to their leadership emergence, as well as explanations for the current gender gap in such elite positions. Based on the formulated research question, this study takes on an exploratory qualitative research approach.

Qualitative research methods support theorizing, exploration, and sense-making of phenomena (Köhler et al., 2022), making it the ideal strategy for the project. The chosen research approach is characterized as *inductive*, as theory development is the outcome of the study. Such an open-ended and exploratory approach allowed for a deeper and more detailed understanding of the topic (Bell et al., 2019). Further, this study incorporates certain *deductive* elements to enhance the rigour, clarity, and focus of the research. Even though the data collection and empirical findings did determine the patterns, discoveries, and themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015) of the study, some topics and structure were derived from the preliminary literature review. This allowed the project to engage with existing theories while exploring new insights and contributing to the development and refinement of theoretical frameworks on the research topic.

3.2 Data collection

As the chosen research design follows an inductive strategy with an exploratory approach, *interviews* were viewed as an appropriate means of data collection. This method allowed us to gain rich and in-depth responses (Bell et al., 2019), and gave insight into emerging patterns of diverse opinions and perspectives (Diefenbach, 2009) that can help fill the gap in the current literature. More specifically, semi-structured interviews were utilized in which participants were

presented with pre-defined questions on fairly specific topics. The semi-structured interview approach allowed for flexibility, as it gave the subjects a great deal of leeway in their responses (Bell et al., 2019). One of the main advantages of the method was the enabling of reciprocity between the interviewer and participant (Galletta, 2013), allowing for the improvisation of follow-up questions based on responses when needed. In order to ensure that the topics of interest were covered, an interview guide (Appendix 2) was used as a tool to ensure a certain degree of structure and limit potential biases and noise.

3.3 Sample

The chosen sampling method was *purposive sampling*. All participants were carefully selected based on their relevance to the research question (Bell et al., 2019) to ensure valid and high-quality findings. Specifically, the sample consisted of female leaders within a male-dominated industry in a large corporate group in Norway. The subjects were chosen based on both their current position and availability. It should be noted that purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method, making the findings non-generalizable to the larger population (Diefenbach, 2009).

Prior to reaching out to candidates, a few criteria were set to ensure relevant subjects for the data collection: 1) They had to be female, 2) they had to attain top leadership titles (e.g., CEO, CFO, regional director, general manager) within the respective corporation or its subsidiaries, and 3) they had to have a minimum of 5 people directly reporting to them. Furthermore, a sample size of maximum ten participants was deemed appropriate to effectively manage the data. The chosen corporate group operates throughout Norway, with its headquarters located in Oslo. Therefore, the decision was made to conduct the study in Oslo for convenience. The participants were contacted directly through email, with a description of the project and an explanation as to why they were approached for the study. Additionally, the prospects received a formal document ensuring their anonymity and the possibility to withdraw at any time if they agreed to participate (Appendix 1). Our goal was that at least 60% of the potential candidates agreed to participate in the research project, allowing time for further data collection if necessary. All targeted subjects fit the criteria for “*women in top leadership positions*”. Our final sample consisted of seven individuals within the age group 40-60 years whom all fulfilled the described criteria.

3.4 Conducting the interviews

The interviews were conducted at the corporation's headquarters in Oslo to establish a more natural and 'safe' setting for the interview subjects. The meetings were arranged in private rooms to enable honest and open answers from the interviewees, as well as to protect their anonymity. The goal was to get the participants to speak freely and elaborate to a great extent, while simultaneously collecting data on key topics that would benefit the research project. Prior to the interviews, we made a conscious choice of conducting all the interviews face to face rather than through digital meetings in order to observe body language and other responses to questions that could be relevant to the study. On average, each interview lasted for an hour. With the subjects' written approval, the interviews were recorded to avoid excess noting and disturbance from the keyboard. We began each interview with a brief introduction of ourselves and the main purpose of the project, as well as repeating the points from the consent declaration (Appendix 1) all participants had signed prior to the interview. The interviews were structured in a way that intended to start off with easier and more open-ended questions to gain the subjects' trust and prime them for tougher and more direct questions in the later stages of the interview. The interview guide (Appendix 2) was designed as a framework and checklist to ensure that all relevant points were covered and included four main topics: 1) *personal experiences*, 2) *behaviour and leadership style*, 3) *challenges*, and 4) *women in leadership*. However, the guide was not used rigorously as we wanted the participants to speak freely to the largest extent possible. This strategy intended to grant a deeper understanding of the subjects' unique experiences and perspectives and avoid limiting their answers. The method also allowed for unscripted follow-up questions when necessary, and greater insights into the participant's personal attributes and backgrounds. To avoid influencing participants' responses, the questions were formulated as broad and open-ended as possible. Potential follow-up questions were only used as 'gentle nudges' (Kallio et al., 2016) if subjects had difficulties understanding the question or providing detailed answers. When conducting the interviews, a timeframe of 60 minutes was communicated to the participants. In the interviews that went over the time limit, the subjects themselves voiced that they had additional time and wished to continue the dialogue.

3.5 Coding and analysis of data

Shortly after each interview, the recordings were transcribed to ensure the responses were fresh in mind and that any other details from the interview, such as body language and tone of voice (Malterud, 2017), were included. We also took some of our experiences from the initial interviews into account and modified the interview guide for the remaining meetings. After transcribing the interviews, we began searching for methods to code the data. We aimed to find a tool that would make it easier to compare the data while simultaneously highlighting differences in responses and experiences. After the initial run-through of the empirical data, we chose to proceed with *systematic text condensation* (STC) (Malterud, 2017). After carefully examining and discussing the collected material and researching approaches for qualitative coding, we decided to utilize the program NVivo for further analysis. The process started by carefully reading through each transcription to get an overview and search for themes relevant to the research question. An inductive strategy was used to identify the most critical points in the empirical data (Bell et al., 2019) and determine tentative topics (Malterud, 2017) after the first read-through. Further, we reviewed the transcripts in more detail to identify meaning units, following the approach proposed by Malterud (2012). Followed by identifying meaning units, representative codes were formulated to highlight the underlying themes. After coding the data for the third time, we were able to find similarities and differences across the collected data and further determine key topics and patterns that were particularly relevant to the research question. The final step before analysis was condensation of the selected meaning units (Malterud, 2012), enabling interpretation of the data material. We ended up with 5 main categories which each had 2-3 subgroups derived from the codes. Table 1 provides an example of the coding process.

is a possibility that the subjects withheld information or limited their answers. Furthermore, the recordings and detailed transcription of the interviews were used to ensure that responses were interpreted correctly, meaning emphasis was put on body language, pauses, or other unconscious reactions to the questions or setting. These measures were taken to ensure the *dependability* of the study, which has been suggested as a parallel to traditional reliability within qualitative research (Seale, 2001). Moreover, the *internal reliability* of the study has been a large focus throughout the research process to ensure the quality of the results (Malterud, 2017). Coding was conducted in close collaboration and worked through several times to ensure compatible perceptions. Additionally, we discussed our separate views and understandings of the data prior to analysing the findings to ensure that we did not influence each other during this process. This strategy was used to strengthen the *inter-coder reliability* of the study (Bell et al., 2019). Still, the presentation of the empirical evidence may have been influenced by subjective interpretations which is inevitable in qualitative research (Bell et al., 2019).

A factor that is likely to influence the reliability of the study is the translation during the data analysis. All interviews were conducted in Norwegian, meaning the transcriptions were later translated into English. During the translation process, expressions and meanings might have changed. However, this has been carefully considered and we have attempted to ensure that the purpose and content of the material has not lost its true meaning and value. A measure that was taken to ensure this was direct translation of expressions, instead of focusing on correct grammar.

3.6.2 Validity

In order to ensure *internal validity*, the analysis and findings in the research must be well connected with the empirical data (Bell et al., 2019). To safeguard the internal validity of our study, empirical findings have been continuously compared with existing theory (Malterud, 2017). Furthermore, as semi-structured interviews were used as a primary source of data collection, misunderstanding and subjective interpretation have been counteracted by asking follow-up questions and continuously confirming during the interviews that we have understood responses correctly. Through such measures, the *credibility* of the study has been preserved (Bell et al., 2019).

A high degree of *external validity* should not be expected in qualitative studies using non-random sampling and smaller sample sizes (Bell et al., 2019).

The collected data is primarily concerned with obtaining subjective experiences and perspectives, making traditional generalizability irrelevant. Nevertheless, the selected subjects have a certain degree of heterogeneity in hopes of increasing the *transferability* of the study (Seale, 2001), which has been proposed as a parallel to generalizability within qualitative methods. The interview subjects have different backgrounds and distinctive career paths, in addition to obtaining different roles and positions within various companies, though they all operate within the same corporate group. Thus, one could argue that the study has sufficient transferability, at least within the studied industry and country. Seale (2001) argues that qualitative research findings can be both transferable and dependable if conventional validity and reliability are replaced with sufficient descriptions and information regarding the study setting, method, and sampling.

3.7 Ethical considerations

An integral part of research ethics is the consideration and comprehension of the individual perspectives, experiences, and attitudes people possess (Nair, 2021). As ethical issues can arise in research, especially between the researchers and participants (Bell et al., 2019), some ethical matters must be accounted for.

Firstly, this study has been approved by the Norwegian Centre of Research Data (NSD) and followed its guidelines regarding informed consent and participant protection. Prior to the interviews, the subjects received a consent declaration letter (Appendix 1) describing the purpose of the study and how the data would be utilized. The subjects were also informed multiple times that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw consent at any time during the study. Further, the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants and their organizations have been well protected, as promised in the declaration letter. The recordings from the interviews were stored on a device not accessible to anyone but the researchers and deleted after transcription. The transcriptions and empirical findings have been censored for information that might make participants or their organizations identifiable, including names of people, schools, companies, and geographic locations. Ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of both the subjects and their respective employers has therefore been a top priority throughout the research process.

4.0 Empirical findings

This chapter will present and analyse the main empirical findings from the collected data materials. The findings will be presented in five main categories with several sub-categories illustrating key topics on the participant's own reflections and perspectives. To ensure that the subjects' experiences are in focus and to avoid overlooking contextual nuances, longer quotations and relevant contextual observations are incorporated. The five main categories in this study are defined as follows:

1. Attributes of female leaders
2. Understanding what it takes to be a leader
3. Serendipity for the win
4. The power of support
5. Leadership is a lifestyle

These findings will form the basis for the later discussion on what factors and strategies may influence female leadership emergence in a Norwegian context. All interviewees are referred to as Subject A (SA) – Subject G (SG) to protect and maintain their anonymity.

4.1 Attributes of female leaders

The interviews revealed three prominent keywords used by almost every subject when describing themselves and their personalities: being *stubborn*, *hardworking*, and *confident*. Additionally, several participants voiced how their *drive* and *motivation* have helped them excel as leaders.

4.1.1 Being stubborn, hardworking, and confident

Throughout the interviews, most participants described themselves as “*stubborn*”, “*hardworking*”, and “*confident*”. These attributes were voiced both when the subjects were asked to describe themselves as leaders, and when telling stories about the career journey: “*I think I've gotten to where I am today because I am driven and very committed. And that I am clever, get things done, and that people know that I generate good results*” (SG, 2023). The subjects stated that they believe their stubbornness is part of why they “*get things done*”, and that being confident is key to “*make sure you're being heard*”: “*I am stubborn by nature and*

do not like to give in” (SB, 2023). SD stated that “*I did not let myself think that way*” (SD, 2023) when asked whether she ever doubted herself being able to cope with a top leadership position. These attributes are further expressed in relation to questions as to why they believe it may be difficult for women to reach the top. Several subjects stated that they feel some women yield to the pressure of societal norms: “*I think you have to be willing to stand your ground no matter how you look in other’s eyes*” (SB, 2023), and “*I think a lot of people thought I worked too much [...] but it’s what I enjoy*” (SA, 2023). SB further stated that “*I think for some people that’s the bigger burden – what others think or view your choices*” (SB, 2023). Most participants voiced that this did not bother them, and SD stated: “*At the end of the day, yourself is all you’ve got*” (SD, 2023).

Some participants voiced that gaining confidence is something their career journeys have thought them: “*I used to be so shy and introvert [...], now I think people would describe me as tough and confident*” (SF, 2023). SA further stated that you need confidence in order to succeed: “*I believe I am myself responsible for what I achieve. I am very goal-oriented and not afraid to say yes to new challenges*” (SA, 2023). She further claimed that caring too much about what everyone else is thinking or doing, will likely do more harm than good and that being “*over-confident*” should not always be viewed as negative.

4.1.2 Drive and motivation as key ingredients

Two key topics that emerged during the interviews were the individuals’ drive and motivation: “*If I’m going to sum up why I made it to the top, then it is because I’ve wanted it*” (SF, 2023), and “*I have always been very driven, and I am very determined [...]*” (SG, 2023). Similarly, SB stated: “*I have a drive and am very ambitious because I want to be the best at what I do*”. She further voiced that “*I enjoy taking the initiative and have been more assertive. I am curious by nature and want to be the best at what I do, always chasing something*” (SB, 2023). One subject also emphasized the importance of taking initiative while being young and newly employed in a company with the following example: “*I see an unresolved task, I find a solution for it*” (SA, 2023). Further, the subjects stated that their drive would not have been as dominant if they were not passionate about or enjoyed their work: “*[...] and perhaps most importantly, I work with something I am passionate about*” (SA, 2023). The subjects’ discussed their drive in relation to their motivation: “*I step into the role; it comes natural to me – it’s a choice I’ve made. No one has asked*

me to do this, it's something I'm triggered by and something that gives me joy, motivation, and energy" (SB, 2023). Similarly, SD voiced that in order to obtain a leadership position: "You have to want it and be motivated for it [...]. If it motivates you and gives you energy and you enjoy it and you like people and developing things [...], express that you want it" (SD, 2023). SC gave similar answers to the question, saying that in order to become a leader, "you have to want it" (SC, 2023). Additionally, several participants described that their motivation was likely related to themselves as individuals and their personalities, and that motivation and drive make you "seek out challenges and dare to say yes" (SB, 2023). Several of the participants also mentioned that they get motivated by seeing their people thrive: "I get motivated by leading a team to success, which dates back to my youth [...]" (SE, 2023). The participants further voiced that they have always continued to acquire new knowledge throughout their careers and emphasized their motivation to always seek out new challenges and further develop as both individuals and leaders. SF stated:

I believe that human beings feel better when they learn something new every now and then [...]. If you stagnate, I think you get tired, and I don't think that's good for humanity. I often say "If water stops running, it starts to smell. Water must flow to stay fresh" – and humans are the same. (SF, 2023)

One of the subjects stated that she had always wanted to become a leader: "I think I wanted to become a business leader" (SF, 2023). The other participants voiced that, to them, the idea that 'I will become a leader' never occurred until they were put in that position.

4.2 Understanding what it takes to be a leader

Most of the interview subjects mentioned understanding the role of leadership, both in relation to skills, handling challenges, and how to succeed in a leadership position. The most reoccurring topics were the perceived high demand for *softer leadership skills*, how *handling challenges from an objective point of view* 'makes the job easier' and *avoiding micromanagement*.

4.2.1 Softer leadership qualities are in high demand

When asked about what they perceive as important for leadership, "inclusivity" and "the ability to listen" was mentioned by several subjects. SA stated: "I now feel that softer leadership qualities are in high demand" (SA, 2023),

and further elaborated that her employees had given her positive feedback for being such a “*humane and soft leader*”. She further described herself as being “*very sharp*” at times, and not afraid to speak her mind. Additionally, most of the subjects described themselves as being rational and thorough, attributes they expressed have been important in their role. Moreover, in response to questions related to what they wish they knew before becoming a leader, several participants voiced the importance of expressing kindness and being ‘a caring leader’: “*I believe that making a personal effort and being curious towards other people is crucial no matter what you do in order to be successful*” (SB, 2023). Further, SA elaborated on considering how all employees have different needs:

[...] expecting too much or too little from someone, both can be equally wrong and if you assume that all employees are the same, thinking that is fair leadership behaviour – then you treat everyone exactly the same. That is unfair, as individuals have different prerequisites and are at different places in life. (SA, 2023)

Similar statements were made by SC: “*I have seen the value of being a good listener and seeing my people*” (SC, 2023). Moreover, showing compassion for others was a reoccurring theme in the interviews, and SD told a story of an incident where an employee was not functioning well: “*I saw early on that it wasn’t going to work, and yet you try and try, and think it might work [...], in addition to hurting the person in question, it also hurts everyone around*” (SD, 2023). Further, the subjects stated that these lessons have often come from feedback from subordinates and team members, which they expressed as welcoming:

I want feedback – what do you require from me so that I can become a better leader, and you can function well? And what do I need from you? That mutual trust and respect make it easier, [...], after all, it is my responsibility, although not alone, to provide psychological safety. (SB, 2023)

The subjects’ leadership approaches were mostly described as *delegating*, *communicative*, and based on *mutual trust*: “*I think my employees trust me and that they find comfort in me [...]*” (SA, 2023), and “*I’ve gotten feedback [...] and I think my people view me as a good partner and that I care about them* (SC, 2023). SD voiced that, when starting in her new leadership position, her number one priority was establishing a trust-based relationship with her subordinates: “[...] *they must*

understand me as a person, and experience that I have no agenda, and feel safe. Because when you feel safe, you also have the courage to be honest, and small issues won't become big issues" (SD, 2023).

Being “trustworthy” was further used by the subjects to describe themselves as leaders: *“I think that those who work for me feel as if they can trust me and talk to me about anything”* (SC, 2023). Similar statements were voiced by other participants, whom all described that a trust-based relationship with their team has been key to both delivering good results and ensuring hard-working and satisfied employees.

4.2.2 An objective approach to challenge management

Another topic that emerged during the data collection was how the leaders manage challenges when they occur. When asked about how they have handled challenges or barriers related to gender during their career, none of the subjects recognized specific situations where they felt being a woman had set them back. The subjects did not recognize typical ‘tough leadership decisions’ as being challenging. SD exemplified an episode where she had to make a difficult decision, and elaborated on how she had developed techniques for such specific challenges:

[...], through my leadership journey I've evolved, [...], and there is something about being able to think objectively and refrain from taking things personally. As long as you have objective facts, it is what it is and keep the attention there, it works well for me. The rationality of it. (SD, 2023)

Similar statements were given by other subjects, who explained that in order to avoid “waking up in the middle of the night” thinking about tough decisions, you have to “focus on the statistics” and “what is best for the organization and its people”. SF voiced that focusing on the objective facts is something she has been praised for by subordinates: *“Sometimes it's simply a mismatch [...] and the employees agree with that”* (SF, 2023). The subjects further explained how they have handled challenges related to their own career. SB reflected upon working in a male-dominated industry, and how she managed that: *“It is important to have the courage to speak up and stand your ground with a slightly higher tone of voice at times, in order to be heard”* (SB, 2023). When asked whether they had experienced any unfortunate incidents or received negative comments during their careers, SC explained:

There was a leader I had for a short period of time in [company], he was not a good leader and I remember him. It was not really negative towards me, or he did not realize that what he said was not wise to say. He said: ‘You know, [name], as a leader you have to learn to kick downwards and lick upwards’. At that moment, I thought, and I even think I said, ‘You realize that what you are saying now, you are saying to one of those who report to you’. I could have been offended by such a comment, however, I just thought he was stupid. (SC, 2023)

She further elaborated on not being easily provoked and to “*take it with a grain of salt*”. When asked about whether they had experienced discrimination or stereotyping during their careers, most subjects explained that they attempted to either ignore such comments or “*refrain from interpreting them in the worst possible way*” (SD, 2023). SC and SA voiced that they have used humour or ignored offensive comments directed toward their gender, and rather focused on objective facts, such as: “*I was the only woman, of course it was easier to target me*” (SC, 2023), and “*They were from an entirely different generation [...], the comments didn’t really mean anything*” (SA, 2023). SG spoke about how she quickly learned to “*let things slide*” because “*the fight is rarely worth it*”. Additionally, the subjects emphasized the importance of speaking up when faced with behaviour they perceived as unacceptable. Most subjects voiced that they rarely allowed themselves to doubt their abilities throughout their careers, despite it being challenging. SC described a situation where she was offered a great but demanding opportunity: “*It might be that my career escalated quickly since I was offered jobs ‘all the time’, while being tough enough to accept the offers. I was not insecure, I accepted it quickly*” (SC, 2023).

Moreover, when asked about challenges related to motherhood and maternity leave, most participants voiced that they had handled the logistics “*quite well*” and did not perceive it as a challenge for their careers. Most subjects explained that splitting the leave between both parents was the logical choice: “*There are two employers, it’s not fair that only one of them loses an employee [...]*” (SC, 2023). SE was the only participant who decided to take full maternity leave, which was something she and her partner had agreed upon prior to having children. She did not perceive this as a challenge, but rather an opportunity for a “*full vacation*” before continuing to pursue her career. SD explained perceiving a setback due to having a child:

I was encouraged to apply for a position that became vacant when my son was eight months old and very sick, but I couldn't take it upon myself to apply for that position at the time, even though I wanted it. A couple of months later when the position was open again and I was ready, I wasn't even considered. At the time, that felt like a setback, and I got very angry. (SD, 2023)

Her body language indicated that this was a more sensitive topic and matched the frustration in her voice as she told the story. She did elaborate that more opportunities came around and she was able to further develop her career within the company and eventually become a top executive. She further voiced experiencing certain limitations after having her first child: *"I noticed that after your first child, everyone is waiting for you to get pregnant again"* (SD, 2023). She stated that it is partly the individual's responsibility to keep in touch and *"make it work"*. Similarly, SC voiced that *"it works both ways"* and believes that *"you can make it work if you truly want to"* (SC, 2023), and SB stated: *"It is easier to come back if you keep in touch and make an effort to feel included"* (SB, 2023). The subjects discussed the topic using hand gestures and smiling facial expressions. SB further told a story about her own experience with a subordinate who got pregnant only a couple of months after starting her position, which according to her *"worked out fine as we kept a good dialogue throughout the leave and had a sufficient plan for when she returned"* (SB, 2023).

4.2.3 Letting go of micromanagement

When asked about how they perceive themselves as leaders and how they lead their teams, all participants emphasized *"leading through others"* and *"avoiding micromanagement"*: *"I don't like micromanaging at all, you expect your team to be independent and drive things forward [...], and supporting them when needed"* (SE, 2023). Several participants stated that they prefer letting their team do the work while they stay on the side lines and monitor when needed: *"I present nothing myself, I let my people do it"* (SC, 2023), and *"I deal more with the administrative stuff of various concepts, while the team runs the project"* (SD, 2023). SG stated that a big part of her leadership approach is *"letting go"*, expressing that she establishes the strategy and goals for the company, but *"leaves the work to the employees"*. She further stated: *"I feel like there is an expectation of*

leaders to act more as coaches rather than managers. [...] you have to let go of control and just make sure results are delivered" (SG, 2023).

Moreover, the subjects emphasized the leader's responsibility of ensuring that their employees thrive: *"All managers in the organization play a part in lifting up their people [...] and to make them visible"* (SC, 2023). This was voiced as both a key facilitator for good leadership behaviour, and as a method to avoid burnout and promote good results for the organization as a whole. SG further stated that she does not believe that the traditional hierarchical organizational structures work as well as they used to, as employees now expect *"a more agile working method where responsibility is distributed across all levels"* (SG, 2023). She stated that micromanagement is no longer effective for delivering fast results and achieving *"good organizational flow"*.

4.3 Serendipity for the win

The interviews revealed three overarching themes in the subjects' responses when asked about their career advancement: *luck*, *chance*, and *opportunity*. These keywords were used frequently when the participants were asked why they believe they have achieved success and become leaders.

4.3.1 All it takes is a bit of luck

A prominent result from the interviews was the topic of *"luck"* and *"chance"*. These two keywords were mentioned multiple times by all participants, and most of the subjects voiced that some of their advancements were due to coincidence or *"simply being lucky"*: *"I think I was lucky with my first job"* (SC, 2023), *"I think sometimes it's coincidental [...], being at the right place at the right time"* (SD, 2023), and *"I think career-wise I've had a bit of luck"* (SA, 2023). The participants voiced that working hard, seizing opportunities where they could, and being lucky have been a part of their journeys: *"There are a lot of personal qualities too, working hard and being there, but you do have a bit of luck"* (SA, 2023).

Further, most subjects voiced that they believe some career advancements have been brought on by coincidence: *"I've been very lucky [...] and sometimes things just happen"* (SF, 2023), and *"It's probably a bit coincidental. But perhaps what is not a coincidence is that you express that you want it. That you dare to say yes"* (SD, 2023). When asked about her first experience in a leadership position, SA voiced that her promotion was partly due to coincidence and that she was at the right place at the right time when they needed a good candidate for a vacant

position: *“I believe it was somewhat of a coincidence. That they saw me as a good candidate because I was right there, doing the job”* (SA, 2023). Further, SF stated: *“I think it’s a lot of coincidences and luck, combined with the fact that I’ve said yes”* (SF, 2023).

4.3.2 Seizing opportunities and always saying “yes”

It was voiced by most participants that waiting around for opportunities to be handed to them is not something they have done. SC stated that not only do you have to *“apply for the job”* and continuously seek out career advancements, but you also need to *“seize the opportunities when they come”* (SC, 2023). She further stated that her career was likely fast-forwarded because she was *“tough enough”* to say yes whenever she had the chance. SD voiced that whenever she saw an opportunity, she took it without hesitating. The participants further stated how seizing opportunities through taking on responsibility has been a valuable lesson: *“At one point or another I was given a new title and it became clear that we needed to have licensing obligations, so I decided to take care of that too”* (SA, 2023), and *“I quickly realized that taking responsibility had its perks”* (SB, 2023). Furthermore, when asked about what advice they would give young women seeking leadership positions, the subjects voiced similar responses: *“You have to apply”* (SA, 2023), *“My advice is to take a chance and do it – seek opportunities when they arise”* (SD, 2023), and *“Be the one who seizes opportunities and says yes! Be a little fearless and have a little faith”* (SC, 2023). Further, SG voiced that she never had a specific plan for her career, but rather focused on *“doing a great job”* and *“saying yes”* whenever opportunities came along. When asked about whether being a woman has limited them in their careers, the subjects stated: *“I’ve never felt that I did not get opportunities for being a woman”* (SG, 2023), and *“My manager didn’t see gender, I got opportunities because I worked hard and showed initiative”* (SC, 2023). Further, the participants voiced that advancement opportunities arose at various times during their careers. Three of the subjects stated that they were offered leadership positions with companies undergoing changes, such as mergers or structural alterations. This was described as an opportunity to be part of something new and exciting: *“You have to think ‘what’s in it for me’ [...] and it was really fun! I developed something new and believe I did a very good job”* (SF, 2023).

Another topic that was mentioned by several subjects when asked why they believe women still perceive leadership emergence as a challenge was *“good-girl*

syndrome”. SB voiced: “*I think a lot of women are too careful and suffer from ‘good-girl syndrome’ [...], and I don’t think women are that good at breaking these patterns themselves*” (SB, 2023). Similarly, SA stated that she believes women refuse to seek out high-level positions unless “*they are 100% certain that they can do the job*”, and SC voiced that women too often expect not to get the job unless they are experts in every task required. SG elaborated: “*You have to be tough enough to say yes to opportunities as they come, even when you don’t know that much about what the job requires*” (SG, 2023). She further stated: “*Being 100% all the time in every aspect of life is impossible – sometimes 80% is good enough*” (SG, 2023).

4.4 The power of support

The *power of support* was a dominating topic throughout all the interviews and was expressed both when the subjects’ told stories of their journey towards leadership, and when asked about whether they view anyone as particularly important in their careers. Several participants voiced that if they had not received support from various arenas throughout their careers, they would likely “*not have made it*”.

4.4.1 It takes a village

During the data collection, a reoccurring theme was sufficient support from family members, specifically spouses or partners. SA, SC, SD, SF and SG all voiced that they have “*modern partners*” who have always supported their careers and ambitions: “*I have a husband who is quite modern, so we made it into something positive*” (SC, 2023), and “*When I had maternity leave [...] I started working earlier and my husband took a couple of extra months of paternity leave*” (SA, 2023). She further expressed: “*[...]my husband, he is extremely important. Simply because it is incredibly important that I can tell him that: next week is going to be crazy and he will understand*” (SA, 2023). The subjects described that parenting and family responsibilities are distributed based on both parents’ current positions and needs, and they make it work together: “*We are a team, and it requires continuous cooperation*” (SD, 2023). SF stated that both she and her husband have worked long hours and are very invested in their careers. She voiced with a smile that neither of them sacrificed their career for the other and that they have simply respected each other and made it work: “*My husband has always supported me, even though I sometimes worked too much*” (SF, 2023). Similarly, SA voiced that

her husband has always had her back, especially at times when she was criticised by many for prioritizing her career and “*leaving her husband to stay home with the children*”. One subject stated that she found career support in several family members in addition to her partner, especially through male role models: “*I think it helps to have role models, and in my case, that was my brother, my father and my grandfather [...] who always encouraged me*” (SF, 2023).

In addition to family, most subjects expressed finding support in friends and social networks: “*I have lots of resourceful, good friends, who know me well and whom I utilize a lot and with whom I can discuss with. They always back me up if I’m in a difficult situation*” (SA, 2023), and “*I have a network of girlfriends I used to study with whom I can talk to*” (SC, 2023). An emerging theme in the data collection was that the subjects find comfort in their friends for two main reasons: 1) they can reflect and discuss a variety of topics because their friends know them well, and 2) they find comfort in friends in similar positions who can relate to a large workload and hectic life. This was voiced in several interviews: “*I have a lot of friends who have similar roles as me*” (SD, 2023), and “*I have many good friends and they know me very well*” (SC, 2023). Moreover, SA and SB expressed that their main source of support was their partner and their colleagues, referred to as ‘friends at work’.

4.4.2 *The influence of male leaders and supporting colleagues*

In response to questions related to both career development and maternity leave, most subjects voiced that they have received support from their professional network. Most of the subjects expressed that, at some point in their careers, they have had good and supporting male leaders who have given them the necessary push to pursue promotions and high-level positions: “*I’ve had leaders who have seen me and given me opportunities*” (SD, 2023), “*I had a manager who meant a lot to me and who always supported me*” (SC, 2023), and “*The manager in my second job was a lot older than me, but he always supported me both in my career and as a mother*” (SA, 2023). Similar statements were voiced by SE, who described still having a good relationship with her former leader who has supported her entire career. SG stated that she always felt seen by her leader: “*he is a very busy man, but always available to me, I feel like*” (SG, 2023). Furthermore, all subjects expressed finding comfort and support in both current and former colleagues: “*I have a lot of former colleagues who have become friends [...] and I discuss a lot*

with them” (SD, 2023), and *“The journey and relationships I’ve built with former colleagues have been crucial to my career”* (SA, 2023). The participants voiced that they have used their networks both as a *“critical voice in difficult times”*, as *“support when making difficult decisions”*, and as a *“safe space”* and *“breath of fresh air”* when needed. Additionally, colleagues specifically were described as supportive not only during tough times but as someone to talk to and laugh with at the office: *“I think having someone to spar with and that can back you up has been important”* (SD, 2023).

4.5 Leadership is a lifestyle

When investigating why the subjects believe there are so few women in top leadership positions and their perceptions of modern leadership, a prominent topic was *“making choices”*. All the participants stated to have *“made certain choices”* that have determined their career paths and *“learned a lot”* on their journeys toward becoming top leaders. A great emphasis was put on the importance of *flexibility* and *prioritization* when obtaining a leadership role. It was further expressed that leadership is not only a position but rather a *lifestyle*.

4.5.1 Being a leader is a choice

The interviews revealed that understanding that leadership is a lifestyle choice has been an important lesson for the subjects: *“You have a whole department that expects you to deliver, deliver good results, and make tough decisions”* (SA, 2023), and *“At the workplace, you have to be there if something happens and be available when others need you”* (SC, 2023). The participants expressed that stepping into the leadership role and choosing to *“be there”* was experienced as natural: *“I step into the role, it comes to natural to me – it’s a choice I’ve made. No one has asked me to do this, it’s something I’m triggered by and something that gives me joy, motivation, and energy”* (SB, 2023). She further stated that understanding what it takes to be a leader is not always compatible with *“what some women view as their role in society”*: *“It is perhaps an expectation of women that they should manage everything: pick up the kids, deliver the kids, cook for the family”* (SB, 2023). SC voiced that some sacrifices must be made, as no one *“forces you to become a leader”*. Additionally, SB stated:

I think it's a lot about what gives you energy and motivation and what triggers you, that it is a lifestyle! When I look around, I think many leaders have a lifestyle and a role based on the choices they've made. (SB, 2023)

SG reflected that she perceives modern leadership as more demanding than the more traditional approach: *"Now, I feel like you have to be a good coach to be a good leader, and you have to choose to be there and take on that role every day"* (SG, 2023). She further voiced that it has been an important choice for her to be present at work with her team as much as possible because she cares about her people and the organization she works for.

4.5.2 Flexibility is the new currency

All seven participants voiced that *flexibility* was a key factor for how they are able to maintain a work-life balance and do their jobs: *"It takes a lot of effort and flexibility, it is a lifestyle – you cannot put on a mask from 8 to 4 and then take it off when you get home"* (SB, 2023). Flexibility was mentioned numerous times when the subjects discussed their careers, particularly in regard to balancing family life alongside their careers. Work-life balance was voiced as difficult at times and SD stated that a good work-life balance is *"nearly impossible most of the time"*. The subjects spoke about flexibility in how they manage their time both at work and at home: *"What I have typically done is that, when the children were small, I was quick on my feet in the morning and just went to work at 5 [...] and then I continued in the evenings"* (SC, 2023), and *"We both had office jobs, so one went to work early in the morning and came home for lunch while the other stayed up late at night"* (SA, 2023). In addition, several of the interview subjects described taking shorter maternity leave than what was normal: *"I started working after 6 weeks [...], my husband had to come by the office so I could feed her. And I worked quite a lot from home"* (SA, 2023). Both SC and SD expressed that their husbands took more paternity leave than initially planned so that they could get back to work sooner. Most subjects stated that they stayed in touch with their employers throughout their maternity leave: *"I kept very close contact with my employer [...] and had full control over the job while I was gone"* (SA, 2023), and *"You have to stay in touch and stop by"* (SB, 2023). The interview subjects further stated that *"flexibility goes both ways"*, voicing that it is both the employee's and the employer's job to facilitate flexibility and work-life balance.

The participants voiced that they believe they have managed to find a good work-life balance: “*It is entirely possible to balance life and work and be a leader and have a career. But it is challenging and requires a lot*” (SD, 2023). SE discussed flexibility in relation to being able to balance work and family life: “*You will manage to have a leadership position as long as you have that flexibility and can manage to be a mother at the same time. That has been important to me*”. Furthermore, when asked about sacrifices, none of the participants expressed a perception of having to make big sacrifices to maintain work-life balance – it simply requires flexibility: “*I’ve always picked up and delivered the kids – as long as you have some flexibility there is no reason why you wouldn’t make it work*” (SC, 2023). The subjects also mentioned several strategies they use to “*blow off steam*” or “*get away from work*”, such as physical activity, a weekend once a month for relaxation, or just spending time with family. Moreover, SD expressed that good work-life balance not only requires flexibility from the leader, but also flexibility from the employer and family members. She further stated, while smiling, that without work-life balance, “*I would not have the necessary energy to give my job 100%*” (SD, 2023). Additionally, SE expressed that: “*You can’t expect to leave at 3 PM because you have to pick your kids up in kindergarten or go to the gym, and not work in the evenings*” (SE, 2023). When asked about balancing motherhood and a high-level career, the participants voiced: “*I think there are a lot of people who think I work too much [...], but I enjoy it. But, of course, sometimes you do feel a bit alone in that*” (SA, 2023). SG stated that she appreciates flexibility at work as it allows her to eat dinner with the family and be more flexible with where and when she works. She further stated that there is such a thing as “*too much flexibility*”:

I think presence at work is important. I have no issues with home office and flexible days, but that shouldn’t be the rule, more the exception. I experience that it is expected a very large extent of flexibility all the time now. [...] We create results and innovate together, and that doesn’t happen on Teams or in your home office, it happens when we are together. (SG, 2023)

4.5.3 *You cannot have it all*

A common denominator among all subjects was the emphasis put on *making choices* throughout their careers and in their daily lives, and: “*This is a choice that I have made because I love it*” (SC, 2023), “*Stepping into that role, it comes so natural to me – it’s a choice I’ve made*” (SB, 2023), and “*I really enjoy my job, why wouldn’t I prioritize it?*” (SA, 2023). When asked about work-life balance and how

to manage a top leadership position, the participants emphasized prioritization in relation to several aspects of their lives: *“I’ve had to make some choices and have not been able to take part in what others have taken part in”* (SB, 2023). This was expressed both in relation to work and private life. Furthermore, the subjects described making personal choices that have enabled them to prioritize their careers. SF stated that if it were not for having an au pair, she *“would have had to say no to the opportunities I got”* due to family obligations: *“I don’t think I would be where I am today if I didn’t have an au pair”* (SF, 2023). She further emphasized that having help was perceived as crucial to her career, as it allowed her to further develop as a businesswoman by taking on an ex-pat role:

I got an apartment in [country 1] and commuted every week. I left Sunday evening or early Monday, and the deal was that I would be overseas to pilot a project in [country 2] and [country 3]. For the first 6 months, I was usually in [country 1] Monday through Thursday and was at the office in [city] on Fridays. (SF, 2023)

Additionally, SG stated that there was a time in her career when she prioritized working a lot, where her oldest son voiced; *“I know my dad, but I don’t know my mom that well” [...], that was only for a short period, so I think I’ve made up for that”* (SG, 2023).

SD spoke about how prioritization will also negatively affect one of the two aspects of life. When she was on maternity leave with her second child, the choices she made during this time affected her career: *“It was my choice to say this won’t work right now, because the most important thing for me then was my son. I had to prioritize my family no matter the consequences”* (SD, 2023). Moreover, when asked whether she feels like she is able to balance work and time off, SE voiced: *“Yes, for the most part it works out, but you have to prioritize. You become quite tough on what you prioritize [...] you don’t spend as much time with maybe peripheral friends and such”* (SE, 2023). Furthermore, multiple subjects voiced that even though work and career have been prioritized, they perceive family life as equally important: *“I need to feel like I’m present as a parent”* (SD, 2023). Some of the participants drew parallels between expectations at home and in the workplace, noting that managing a team can resemble managing a family: *“Different times call for different priorities”* (SD, 2023).

5.0 Discussion

In this chapter, the empirical findings from the data collection will be discussed and elaborated in accordance with existing theory and relevant empiricism. The presented theory from the literature review will be utilized, as well as some new empiricism to avoid repetition. This will contribute to a deeper understanding of the empirical material and help answer the research question:

“What are the key factors and strategies that contribute to the emergence of female top leaders in Norway?”

5.1 How personal attributes can influence female leadership emergence

As presented in the findings, being *stubborn*, *hardworking*, and *confident* were keywords used by the participants in describing themselves. According to their narratives, these attributes have been important contributors to their leadership journeys. The interviews arguably display that stubbornness can be an advantage in leadership emergence, as it has helped them overcome obstacles and navigate challenges. This is evident through the conveyed resilience and dedication demonstrated in the narratives of the subjects. Further, the emphasis on confidence in relation to ignoring societal expectations and gender stereotypes seems to be a valuable attribute to handling criticism and asserting authority in a male-dominated industry. It is both directly and indirectly stated that confidence and hard work have helped these women both prior to and after their leadership emergence.

The participants' stories and responses display specific agentic attributes associated with successful leaders. According to the literature on this topic, some successful female leaders tend to adopt masculine personality styles in order to be perceived as more qualified for leadership positions (Wille et al., 2018), despite role congruity theory stating that such behaviours may lead to women being deemed as unattractive and unfit for the role (Ibarra et al., 2013). Based on our empirical findings, possessing agentic characteristics does not seem to be a limiting factor for leadership emergence. Rather, it is evident that the subjects in this study have partly emerged as leaders because of their described attributes. Berkery et al. (2013) propose that the close connection between men and agentic traits and women and communal traits has weakened, signalling a modification to female stereotypes. Consistent with the findings of our study, Griffiths et al. (2019) suggest that there is an emerging preference for a mix of both communal and agentic qualities in

leaders. Moreover, the conventional belief that women are typically high in communal and low in agentic attributes (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 2002) is challenged, as the subjects of our study describe themselves in both communal and agentic terms. The notion that women are often viewed as having more communal than agentic traits may not be the case in contemporary societies, as our study highlights that a more feminine profile is in high demand. Arguably, agentic traits alone are no longer favoured, and a mix of both communal and agentic traits seem to have contributed to these subjects' leadership emergence.

Furthermore, the empirical findings revealed that all the subjects exhibit high levels of motivation and drive. Even though being a leader was not necessarily what they aspired to be, their strong ambitions and motivation to 'be the best' seem to be part of their success. Previous research has conceptualized that women lack leadership motivation, which has been theorized to be related to organizational climate, gender role socialization, stereotypes, and lack of female role models (Schultheiss, 2021). The subjects in our study do not recognize these factors as limiting nor do they demonstrate a lack of aspiration or motivation towards leadership emergence. Though the findings may suggest a lack of female role models, the participants' motivation and drive have not been impaired by organizational factors or gender stereotypes. Several researchers agree that motivation does influence confidence and ambition towards pursuing leadership (Ottsen, 2019), in addition to the individuals' traits and attributes (Ensari et al., 2011). Passion and motivation for one's own career are seemingly influencing factors in leadership ascendance.

As this study did not include an exploration into the specific personality traits of the subjects, no conclusion can be drawn on whether agentic and communal traits are a determinant for female leadership emergence. However, based on the descriptions and narratives provided by the participants, the findings indicate that women can possess agentic qualities such as assertiveness, persistence, and confidence, as well as communal attributes while still emerging as successful top leaders. One could argue that individuals exhibiting stubbornness, confidence, and hard work are more likely to ascend to top leadership positions. Additionally, high levels of motivation and drive seem to be influencing factors in the subjects' advancements.

5.2 How role comprehension can contribute to female leadership emergence

A dominating theme throughout the interviews was that the subjects have truly understood what it takes to take on a leadership role, especially in relation to soft skills and management strategies. It seems that these female leaders are utilizing more ‘feminine’ and ‘coaching’ leadership styles with an emphasis on soft skills to maximize effectiveness and organizational outcomes. The subjects described employing certain techniques to manage the demanding responsibilities of the leadership role while still maintaining work-life balance. These strategies seem to match the current direction of leadership research, indicating that the traditional authoritarian leadership approach, typically associated with men, is no longer in demand.

The literature review indicate that female leaders are more likely to be appointed within female-dominated industries (e.g., Eagly et al., 1995), whereas the subjects in our study operate within a traditionally male-dominated industry. Based on our findings, there seems to be a shift in the industry and maybe even in organizational values that call for female leaders. Consistent with these findings, Jian and Fairhust (2016) argue that there has been a shift in the preferred leadership style from a predominantly masculine approach to a more collaborative approach emphasizing communication, moral decision-making, and contribution to organizational change. The subjects in our study all highlighted the importance of effective communication, collaboration, and trust as pillars in their leadership approaches, providing further evidence for the preference for softer leadership abilities. These attributes were also mentioned by participants when describing their previous male leaders, indicating that attributes and strategies may have been partly influenced by male role models. Additionally, the interviews emphasized the importance of trust- and respect-based relationships at work, which is compatible with a high emphasis put on softer leadership skills. Marques (2013) state that the previous excessive focus on technical and ‘hard skills’ has resulted in the perception that leadership solely revolves around qualities such as boldness, charisma, and superior knowledge, rather than interpersonal relationships. Our empirical findings suggest that this notion may be outdated, as soft skills and feminine attributes are perceived as favourable within the subjects’ organizations. The softer leadership approach appears as both favourable and appreciated.

Furthermore, the theoretical model suggesting that communal leader behaviours exert negative effects on leader emergence (e.g., Badura et al., 2018) is

challenged by the findings in our study; all subjects express behaviours that are both considered agentic and communal, and all seem to thrive in their leadership positions. Both the agentic and communal behaviours conveyed by the participants indicate that a strategy of female leaders is to find a good balance between exhibiting nurturance and cooperation, and assertiveness and self-focus. These behaviours can further be seen in relation to the subjects' experience with family life, as the empirical findings revealed that certain skills and techniques were enhanced after having children. Nunes-Costa et al. (2020) argue that becoming mothers can aid women in succeeding in leadership roles, as it teaches them skills that are important for effectively managing a demanding role. As a mother, the family expects you to be present and take on the responsibilities that come with having children, while as a leader, it is expected that you show up, are available, and deliver results. The subjects in our study stated that their careers have not been impeded by their private lives, voicing that being a leader is not all that different from being a mother. The findings indicate that similar abilities and characteristics are expected in both arenas, and it was voiced that being a mother can make you a better leader. These findings are supported by Nunes-Costa et al. (2020), who found that being a mother increased both management skills and empathy levels. Based on these arguments, soft skills and feminine attributes seem to be in high demand among leaders, and having a family has arguably contributed to making these women better fit to lead.

An interesting finding was the development of strategies and techniques to manage challenges and responsibilities that arise with a top leadership position. As presented in the literature review, researchers claim that women encounter various barriers that may hinder their advancement to the top. These barriers are commonly referred to as the glass ceiling or glass cliff (Sabharwal, 2015). Though there is significant evidence for the existence of this phenomenon in current literature, the subjects in our study did not express experiencing barriers related to being a woman. Despite being met with arguably negative and discriminating comments throughout their careers, the subjects did not perceive this as limiting and rather utilized strategies such as refraining or simply ignoring them. This is evident through the emphasis on 'speaking up' and 'standing your ground' expressed by participants. One could argue that if it were not for these women's resilience and confidence, it may have affected them to a greater extent. Additionally, although the subjects in this study did not perceive such situations as challenging, other women may have

interpreted these comments and behaviours differently. Their lack of experience with the glass ceiling and stereotypes in general may reflect their personalities and mindsets rather than proof the phenomena is no longer present.

A prominent strategy used by most subjects was taking on an objective approach towards challenge management. When asked to exemplify situations they perceived as difficult, very few subjects expressed having experienced these as challenging. They rather stated that tough decisions are a part of being a leader and emphasized the importance of looking at the facts and understanding the needs of both the organization and its employees. Utilizing objective management strategies is likely to influence job satisfaction and workplace relationships and has been linked to positive leadership outcomes (Zaccaro et al., 2018). However, our findings did reveal that even though subjects attempt to stay objective when making tough decisions, it can negatively affect them at times. Specifically, situations where issues are associated with personal attributes of the employee were perceived as challenging, which is arguably a consequence of the subjects being highly invested in their interpersonal relationships. Still, the participants emphasized that these are challenges that one must expect in a top leadership position, and focusing on what is best for the organization as a whole is an important mindset.

The empirical findings further revealed an emphasis on 'leading through others' as a method for 'managing it all'. This provides further evidence for the strategies utilized by female leaders in order to sustain a top leadership position. It may also indicate that the lack of focus on micromanagement and trust-based leader-member relationships are strategies utilized by the subjects in this study to manage a demanding role while achieving work-life balance. Several subjects described letting their employees present and manage projects, highlighting their belief in the importance of fostering an environment where individuals can thrive without close supervision. Such leader behaviours have been closely related to positive organizational outcomes such as increased trust, better decision making, and better interpersonal relationships at the workplace (Owens & Hekman, 2012). This is further consistent with research suggesting that female leaders tend to trust their employees with greater responsibility (Griffiths et al., 2019), leading to positive outcomes for the organization as a whole (Owens & Hekman, 2012). Our subjects' emphasis on letting go of micromanagement and becoming less detail-oriented throughout their journeys seems a valuable facilitator both for leadership emergence, as well as a technique for managing work stressors. Additionally, the

focus on leading through others is likely something that has been passed on by supporting male leaders early in the participants' careers and can be linked to the subjects' leadership approach. Learning to lead through others is an important leadership skill (Ottson, 2019) and arguably a vital part of managing and succeeding in a leadership position. However, it should be noted that these strategies and their seemingly positive outcome on the organizations in question may not be applicable across industries. There seems to be a substantial focus on *teams* within these companies, and a more authoritarian leadership style might be needed in stricter hierarchical systems.

In conclusion, a commonality between the participants was role comprehension and understanding the demands of leadership. The subjects describe various strategies utilized to manage such high-level positions and awareness surrounding the leadership role seems vital. The large focus on soft leadership skills indicates a shift from the traditional leadership stereotype towards a more nurturing and 'coaching' leader preference. Although no certain conclusion can be drawn on whether this applies to leadership positions in general, it seems that an important ability for these leaders may be understanding the value of a softer managerial approach. Based on the empirical findings, it is probable to assume that organizations today value qualities that serve as a facilitator for trust-based relationships and cooperative company culture. Additionally, the management style expressed by the subjects indicates that leading through others and avoiding micromanagement are prominent strategies conveyed by these leaders. One could argue that such techniques have been valuable for them in order to manage the leadership role and maintain work-life balance. It may also have contributed to their attractiveness as top leader candidates.

5.3 How to take advantage of serendipitous circumstances

An interesting finding was that all subjects seem to partly blame their success on *luck* and *chance*. This was especially highlighted when they told stories about their journeys towards top leadership and were reoccurring keywords used in several contexts. Although there is no doubt that hard work, drive, and resilience have influenced the participants' leadership emergence, 'being lucky' seems a rather valued mechanism based on the subjects' narratives.

The role of luck and serendipity in leadership emergence has been explored by previous researchers, and Ottson (2019) argue that 'being in the right place at

the right time' constitutes an informal pathway to power. Similarly, Berry and Fowler (2021) state that some explanations as to why individuals succeed as leaders where others do not can be blamed on luck. The empirical findings of our study suggest that unexpected circumstances can greatly influence the path to leadership. On the other hand, one could argue that the subjects to a great extent have 'created their own luck' by simply utilizing effective strategies and exhibiting favourable behaviour. It can be difficult to distinguish between talent and luck on this topic, as the two can be intertwined (Berry & Fowler, 2021). Further, Ottsen (2019) claim that women are less likely to encounter luck in their careers than men due to their lack of confidence that serendipitous opportunities will arise. As the perception of luck is significantly related to achievement motivation (Young et al., 2009), the more the individual perceives luck as a stable force, the more it can be used as a resource to enhance feelings of agency and confidence (Ottsen, 2019). Therefore, our subjects' perception of luck and chance may have contributed to their high levels of motivation and drive, thereby affecting their ambitions towards pursuing top positions. Certain serendipitous circumstances have probably contributed to the participants' leadership emergence, and luck has likely influenced at least some career opportunities. However, the subjects' drive and hardworking efforts are arguably a contributing factor to both leadership emergence, and the overall perception of luck and chance.

The literature review suggests that women have a tendency to be placed on a 'glass cliff' (Sabharwal, 2015) as they are often selected for top positions when the company is performing poorly (Schultheiss, 2021). Our empirical findings do not support this notion, as the interviews revealed that the subjects were given opportunities regardless of the companies' current position. Even though certain leadership opportunities were offered when companies were undergoing structural changes, a shift in leadership regardless of gender can be expected in such situations. Literature suggesting that women are ultimately set up to fail when emerging as leaders is not recognized by our study, and the subjects expressed no perception of experiencing a 'glass cliff'. When the participants took on leadership responsibilities within companies or departments undergoing changes, the women were successful in their positions and were eventually rewarded for their efforts. Thus, none of the participants has experienced 'falling off the cliff' nor expressed that opportunities have been given due to the company performing poorly or when taking on a leadership role was viewed as high risk. The glass cliff cannot be viewed

as a barrier for the leaders in this study, suggesting that the phenomenon may not be as present.

A noteworthy finding was that, based on the perspectives of the subjects in this study, fearing rejection may provide an explanation for the gender gap in top leadership positions in Norway. A reoccurring theme was that participants believe that being risk-averse and afraid of ‘not being good enough’ is a mindset that can limit women from pursuing high-level positions. The so-called ‘good-girl syndrome’ may be hindering younger females from reaching the top. It has been conceptualized by previous researchers that women tend to shy away from leadership roles due to fear of failure (Aycan & Shelia, 2019). While men tend to take responsibility for creating their own path and taking risks, women seem more inclined to avoid situations where they do not have control over the outcome to a certain extent (Ottsen, 2019). The participants in our study do not seem afraid of either failure or exhibit risk-averse behaviours. Rather, they have taken responsibility for their own careers, taken risks, and seized opportunities whenever they came. It is further revealed that their greatest advice to young ambitious women is ‘simply saying yes’ and ‘be a little fearless’. These statements indicate that the feminine tendencies to have control and plan ahead may not always be favourable strategies when pursuing a high-level career. Seizing opportunities and ‘saying yes’ even when the outcome is uncertain seems a notable strategy utilized by the subjects in this study.

It is difficult to determine the true impact of factors such as serendipity, luck, and chance on leadership emergence as these influences are highly subjective to the individual. Though encountering a certain degree of luck and chance have likely had a positive influence, one could argue that these women have ‘created their own luck’ through the choices they have made. In sum, there are likely several other factors that have contributed to the perceived luck and serendipity in these women’s careers. However, seizing opportunities and ‘saying yes’ seems a prominent mechanism towards leadership emergence, and could be considered a strategy used by the subjects. Based on the findings in this study, we argue that fear of rejection and the ‘good-girl syndrome’ may be limiting factors for women seeking top leadership positions. Thus, exhibiting less risk-averse behaviour and letting go of control could be a contributing factor to leadership emergence.

5.4 How experiencing support can shape female leadership emergence

Prior to the data collection, it was conceptualized whether support could be a decisive factor for female leadership emergence, as it is likely to influence motivation, intentions, and opportunities to pursue top-level positions (Ottson, 2019). Our empirical findings reveal that all participants have received support from various arenas during their careers. A prominent similarity was that the subjects seem to experience support from their partners and former leaders early on in their careers, while they later sought out support from colleagues and friends in similar roles and with similar lifestyles.

A key finding was the subjects expressed to have ‘modern partners’ who have supported their career ambitions regardless of whether they shared similar career goals. Previous research indicates that women tend to prioritize their spouse’s career above their own (Keloharju et al., 2022), which is partly challenged by our study. Most subjects seem to have prioritized their own ambitions and focused on their careers, stating that cooperation between partners has made it possible for both to thrive professionally. Based on the empirical findings, it seems that having support at home has been an important contributor to how these women have been able to work long hours and travel to advance their careers. It is further prominent that having a supportive partner that exhibits flexibility in terms of family obligations and responsibility is vital. One could argue that women with less supportive partners may have a harder time pursuing a high-level career and maintaining a family life. Without spousal support, it would likely be challenging for the subjects to obtain a leadership position and the demanding responsibilities that come with it.

Several theorists believe that the gender gap in leadership is closely connected to social networking and mentoring opportunities (Konrad et al., 2008). Similar to spousal support, the interviews indicate that having a sufficient social support network consisting of friends and colleagues has a certain degree of influence on leadership emergence in our study. While partner support seems to have been an important contributor earlier on in the subjects’ careers, a noteworthy finding is that managing a leadership position can require support from peers who can relate to the demands and responsibilities of a top leader. Kwok et al. (2018) claim that having good social networks both inside and outside of the organization may be influential in leadership emergence and positive career outcomes. Our empirical findings indicate that receiving support from peers in similar positions

can counteract some of the stressors and struggles that come with being a top leader. Additionally, having someone inside the organization that can make work fun and who understands the high pace and demanding environment was perceived as a relief.

An important empirical finding was the subjects' emphasis on receiving support from former leaders, whom were all male. The interviews revealed that the leaders in this study have been both sponsored and pushed to chase high-level positions by former male leaders, indicating that there is no reason to assume women lack access to sponsorships as previously conceptualized. The findings challenge the research discussion that male leaders are insufficient mentors for female prodigies (e.g., Hewlett, 2013), as our subjects have received support from and view former male leaders as mentors. Male leader sponsorship has arguably had a significant influence on their careers and leadership emergence, indicating that the support of former male leaders has helped shape these women's careers. This is arguably reflected in the similarities between how the subjects have described their former leaders' practices and their own leadership behaviours, providing further evidence that male mentors have shaped their leadership ascendance. These findings may suggest that women who have not received support from former leaders may not have encountered the same opportunities as the subjects of this study.

In conclusion, an explanation as to how these women have emerged as leaders where others have failed may be due to sufficient support systems throughout their careers. The empirical findings indicate that experiencing spousal support has been an important contributor to obtaining a high-level career which is likely to influence the subjects' ability, confidence, and motivation to pursue top leadership positions. Additionally, a good social network seems important for managing a leadership role but does not seem like a key factor in leadership emergence for the participants. The most prominent finding on this topic was male leader sponsorship, indicating that experiencing support from former male leaders has been a key influencer in shaping the women's leadership emergence.

5.5 How to view leadership as an integrated lifestyle

During the interviews it became obvious that actually *wanting* a leadership lifestyle was a commonality between subjects and considered an important attribute in order to acquire and maintain a high-level position. Based on the narratives of

the participants, one can assume that the career choices they have made have contributed to their advancement. Becoming a leader is likely to entail making unpopular or unexpected decisions, and you must choose to make certain sacrifices in order to manage such a lifestyle. Aycan and Shelia (2019) conceptualize that leadership is not only about skills and attributes but also the choices made by the individual. This is consistent with the findings in our study, indicating that choices made on the pathway to leadership may influence the likelihood of assuming top positions. Even though there are undoubtedly other factors in play, it seems that the subjects have to a certain extent chosen the leadership role, based on prior decisions made in their careers.

Social role theory suggests that women tend to be perceived as unfit leaders due to societal stereotypes and the expectation of women's qualities and responsibilities compared to men (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Badura et al., 2018). The findings in our study indicate that societal judgement has been present during the subjects' careers but has not affected their choices. Rather, a strategy seemingly used is refraining from this notion and focusing less on other people's judgements and more on their own goals and needs. As revealed in the interviews, the leadership role is not always compatible with societal role expectations and certain sacrifices must be made. The goal is to be content with personal choices and advancements, which further emphasizes the notion that being a leader is partly a choice.

In relation to the conceptualized barriers women face when pursuing leadership positions, none of the participants expressed the perception of having to make big sacrifices to maintain a work-life balance while making career advancements. Arguably, individuals with a more traditional view may not agree with how these women have chosen to balance their lifestyles. Some might claim that choosing to hire an au pair or choosing career advancements requiring time away from home is sacrificing quality time with family. It is evident that even in today's society, women with ample opportunities for leadership careers may not choose to pursue them, as pointed out by Aycan and Shelia (2019). This further indicates that the desire to pursue a leadership career is based on individual choices and ambitions, suggesting that the true barrier for women may be internal rather than external. Even though there are other factors in play, one should not assume that every female aspires to become a top leader. For some, it may be more important to ensure stability and sufficient work-life balance.

McKinsey and Company's (2022) studies of female leaders suggest that women face a lack of flexibility at work, feel like they are 'always on', and confront additional housework and caregiving burdens. This is arguably supported by findings in the Global Gender Report (2022) stating that women report higher stress levels than men when it comes to their jobs. A prominent finding in our study is the high emphasis on flexibility in every aspect of the leadership lifestyle. There is no doubt that having a top leadership position is demanding and stressful at times, but it seems that the art of flexibility has provided these women with sufficient tools to 'manage it all'. Although it is continuously admitted that work-life balance can be difficult, the subjects seem to manage having a family while being present and efficient at work. Based on the interviews, flexibility seems a prominent reason as to how the subjects have been able to thrive as leaders. Even though support, personal attributes, and several other factors are mentioned as important contributors to sustaining good morale at work and at home, the importance of flexibility is a dominating theme. The empirical findings indicate that flexibility is a strategy utilized by the subjects in our study, and something that the individuals themselves have facilitated. Further, one could argue that exhibiting flexibility earlier on in the subjects' careers has been a contributor to their leadership emergence, as it has likely allowed them to exert additional efforts at work, making them more attractive leader candidates. This notion is strengthened by statements regarding motherhood, as flexibility towards the employer was offered by participants despite having maternity leave, indicating passion and increased effort. Thus, being as flexible as these women describe themselves to be is likely linked to their career advancements, as well as allowing them to remain present as parents and to maintain a social life.

Further, the empirical findings indicate that prioritization is another strategy utilized by the subjects both prior to and after their leadership emergence. Although not directly stated, career seems to have been a priority throughout their journeys, at least during times when this was necessary for professional progression. Contradictory to previous research, becoming a parent has arguably enhanced the subjects' ability to prioritize. Cheung & Halpern (2010) suggest that successful female leaders with children have clear goals and priorities, optimize time management, and view work and family as interdependent. These abilities and views are consistent with the descriptions and narratives provided in our study. Based on our empirical findings, prioritization is a strategy utilized by these women

in order to facilitate and shape leadership emergence. Additionally, previous research indicates that the gender gap in top leadership positions can be explained by women prioritizing ‘family life’ and responsibilities at home above their careers (Keloharju et al., 2022), which is not compatible with our empirical findings. The interviews demonstrate that the subjects have seemingly succeeded in being both good mothers and leaders, which is arguably a result of their focus on flexibility and prioritization. It should also be noted that the importance of prioritization in relation to work-life balance may explain why these leaders have been able to thrive both at work and at home without experiencing burnout or failure.

The empirical findings indicate that the leadership lifestyle is ultimately a conscious choice and priority these women have made. Based on the narratives, their leadership emergence may be a consequence of certain career and lifestyle choices that at times have contradicted societal norms. Sacrifices are inevitable, but there is seemingly no reason to believe that having a top leadership position entails that you cannot have a family or social life. According to these leaders, it is all about learning to prioritize and being flexible in every aspect of life. One could argue that prioritization and flexibility are prominent strategies utilized by these female leaders, who view leadership as an integrated lifestyle rather than a work-related role. Although flexibility and prioritization cannot be said to directly influence leadership emergence in our study, these strategies seem important for managing a leadership role and may therefore be considered contributing factors.

6.0 Limitations

As with any research method, qualitative studies carry limitations and potential issues that may impair their quality and contribution. Firstly, this study relies on self-reported experiences and perspectives, which are subjective and can be influenced by *recall bias* (Rice et al., 2014). There is a risk that subjects may have varied interpretations of the questions and experiences related to their leadership journeys, leading to potential discrepancies and inconsistencies in the data material. Secondly, the method of semi-structured interviews may exert a certain degree of bias from the interviewers. The interview guide might have limited the degree of insight and depth in the subjects' narratives, considering both inductive and deductive elements were utilized. The interview guide is likely somewhat affected by existing theory and research conducted prior to the data collection. Additionally, some responses may have been given in accordance with what is socially desirable (Bell et al., 2019) as the participants could have been inclined to respond favourably towards their employer and to maintain face.

Third, a limitation of the chosen sample in this study is its lack of diversity in demographics. Although there is a certain degree of heterogeneity, all subjects are ethnically Norwegian and within the age group of 40-60 years. A larger sample consisting of a more heterogeneous group in relation to ethnicity, cultural and religious background, age, and industry could have improved the study's transferability. It should also be mentioned that there are cultural differences that should be considered in relation to the findings. As stated, Norway is categorized as a 'world leader in gender equality' (Gram 2021) and the culture is characterized as rather feminine and individualistic (Hofstede Insights, 2023). Our study's emphasis on favourable leadership attributes and strategies may not be transferable to masculine cultures or societies that place a stronger emphasis on gender roles.

Lastly, the chosen research question has certain limitations: "*What are the key factors and strategies that contribute to the emergence of female top leaders in Norway?*". A broader research question can potentially lead to superficial findings and a lack of focus in the study (Bell et al., 2019). The project may have benefitted from focusing on specific factors, such as sponsorship, barriers, or personal attributes. A narrow scope could have led to more in-depth insights into specific factors that could have influenced the subjects' ascendance to top leadership positions, which may have uncovered larger differences in the subjects' perspectives and experiences.

7.0 Implications for practice and further research

Despite its limitations, this study contributes to several new and unexplored factors that seem likely to influence female leadership emergence. The broadness of the research question allowed for rich data collection and a more holistic understanding of the topic. The empirical findings imply that the traditional theoretical framework on the gender gap in top leadership positions needs to be modified, and further research should be conducted on the impact of *male leader sponsorship, the role of flexibility and prioritization*, as well as the effect of *luck and chance variations* in relation to career choices. Compared to conventional views, there seem to be several underexplored factors influencing how some women ascend to top leadership where others fail, although this study does support previous statements that personal attributes appear to play a significant role in leadership emergence.

For future research, we propose collecting further data on the influence of organizational sponsorships, specifically between male leaders and female prodigies, motivation and will to pursue leadership, and the impact of flexibility and prioritization in relation to work-life balance among female leaders. Additionally, this study suggests that luck and chance variations, especially regarding opportunities and ‘saying yes’, might impact women’s career paths more than initially anticipated. Therefore, future research should look beyond the scope of the existing body of literature and seek out unexplored variables that likely affect who ascend to leadership positions. It should also be considered to conduct a comparative study on male top executives, utilizing the same methodological framework. If such a project were to yield similar results, it may help unveil the true role of gender in leadership emergence. Furthermore, we argue that it may be relevant to examine cultural influences on leader emergence, as research demonstrates that leadership behaviours are not culturally universal (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). As our study demonstrates that favourable leadership attributes are not compatible with current claims, more culturally specific research is needed to create a representative framework. Several cultural factors may determine the probability of women emerging as leaders, especially in societies where role incongruity still seems prominent. One can assume that in contemporary and equal societies such as Norway, the gender gap and eminent differences in gender roles may be less detectable.

8.0 Conclusion

Traditional theories conceptualize that women face barriers when ‘climbing the ladder’ towards top leadership positions due to deeply embedded generalizations regarding gender roles and societal expectations (Badura et al., 2018). Conventional research concentrates on *why* women fail to emerge as leaders, whereas our study has focused on *how* top leaders have broken barriers and risen to the top. Contemporary studies claim that further research is necessary to determine whether unexplored mechanisms may influence female leadership emergence (Badura et al., 2022), specifically by investigating the experiences of women who have successfully climbed to the top (Furst & Reeves, 2008).

Our study contributes to highlighting key factors and strategies that remain undervalued in the current body of literature and challenges conventional theories on gender and leadership. The empirical findings are consistent with current research claiming that certain personal attributes correlate with leadership emergence, but there are indications that there may be a shift in the preference for the masculine leadership stereotype. Additionally, the thesis challenges the belief that glass cliffs, role incongruity, and motherhood pose significant barriers for female leaders. Our findings indicate that motherhood, while undoubtedly demanding, does not hinder career progression. On the contrary, it highlights the resilience, adaptability, and management skills exhibited by the subjects. It is also important to highlight that this study demonstrates that Norwegian female top leaders are able to balance work, family, and personal time. A support system consisting of modern partners, male leaders, and social networks has been crucial in this context. These findings indicate a likelihood of qualified and competent female leaders arising in the future.

The empirical findings shed light on key factors of female leadership emergence, particularly in relation to *male leader sponsorship* and *luck and chance variations*, in addition to vital strategies utilized by our subjects, including *choosing a leadership lifestyle, flexibility, and prioritization*. These factors and strategies are closely related to how the individuals were given and seized career opportunities, which is seemingly undervalued in the current literature. Although no certain conclusion can be drawn on whether these factors and strategies shape the emergence of female leaders, the findings indicate that these have been prominent contributors to the women in our study. The interplay between support, personal choices and attributes, and serendipity in leadership outcomes underscores the

complex nature of leadership emergence. This study does not recognize the claimed pattern of male mentors not sponsoring female prodigies, as all participants voice experiencing support from male leaders throughout their careers.

These findings contribute with valuable insights into the factors and strategies utilized by the female leaders in our study. The emphasis on soft leadership qualities, the power of support, and the role of serendipity in leadership emergence contribute to future research by providing a more nuanced understanding of contemporary leadership dynamics. Additionally, this study demonstrates promising possibilities for the trajectories of young aspiring women, as there is seemingly no reason to believe that gender attributes inhibit women from reaching the top. As Norway is ranked as one of the top three countries in the world on gender parity, other countries and researchers should aspire to and learn from these findings.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Declaration letter

Vil du delta i forskningsprosjekt som omhandler kvinner og ledelse i forbindelse med masteroppgave?

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å innhente detaljert informasjon om ulike erfaringer og oppfatninger til kvinner i lederstillinger. I dette skrivet gir vi deg informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

Formål

Vi er to masterstudenter i Ledelse og Organisasjonspsykologi ved Handelshøyskolen BI, og dette forskningsprosjektet gjennomføres i forbindelse med vår avsluttende masteroppgave. Det overordnede temaet for oppgaven vår er kvinner og ledelse, mer spesifikt hva som har gjort at enkelte kvinner har tilegnet seg lederposisjoner, utfordringer de har møtt, samt deres erfaringer. Vi er interessert i å høre intervjuobjektens egne tanker og refleksjoner om dette temaet, samt avdekke attributter som avgjør hvorfor det er identifiserbare skjevheter i kjønnsfordeling i toppstillinger i norske selskaper.

For å besvare problemstillingen vår ønsker vi å intervju respondentene for å få detaljert informasjon om deres tanker om temaet.

Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?

Handelshøyskolen BI Oslo er ansvarlig for prosjektet, og ansvarlig veileder er Mette Marthinussen Aanes, Førsteamanuensis ved institutt for ledelse- og organisasjon ved Handelshøyskolen BI Bergen.

Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?

Du får spørsmål om å delta fordi du innehar en høy lederposisjon i et norsk konsern, og vi er interessert i dine refleksjoner og tanker rundt temaet. Det er flere andre personer i konsernet som har fått samme henvendelse som deg.

Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?

Dersom du velger å delta i prosjektet vil det innebære ett intervju på ca. 60 minutter, hvor vi sammen avtaler tid og sted. Under intervjuet vil vi benytte båndopptaker, samt ta notater. Grunnen til at vi benytter båndopptaker er at det vil forenkle metoden for å registrere svarene, og gjør det enklere for oss å gå tilbake for å forsikre oss om at vi har oppfattet svarene riktig. Sensitiv informasjon som gjør deg som deltaker gjenkjennbar er ikke relevant for forskningsprosjektet, og innhentede svar vil ikke kunne spores tilbake til verken deg eller din organisasjon.

Det er ønskelig at intervjuet blir gjennomført i løpet av februar/mars 2023.

Det er frivillig å delta

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke samtykket tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn. Alle dine personopplysninger vil da bli slettet. Det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg hvis du ikke ønsker å delta, eller senere velger å trekke deg.

Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger

Vi vil kun bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene vi har fortalt om i dette skrevet. Vi behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket. Under utarbeidelse av masteroppgaven er det kun vi og vår veileder som vil ha tilgang til informasjon som innhentes om deg. Navnet ditt vil i oppgaven og på lydopptak bli erstattet med en kode som lagres på en egen navneliste, adskilt fra øvrige data. Lydopptaket vil bli behandlet som sensitiv informasjon, og oppbevares innelåst med passordbeskyttelse– utilgjengelig for andre enn de nevnte tre som er deltagere i prosjektet. Lydopptaket vil slettes så fort resultatene fra masteroppgaven fremlegges (innen utgangen av 2023). Vi vil ikke innhente opplysninger om deg fra andre, og resultatet fra prosjektet kan distribueres til intervjuobjektene dersom det er ønskelig. Som deltaker vil du ikke kunne gjenkjennes i publikasjon. I tillegg vil vi ikke nevne noe om bransje eller oppgi navn på selskapet.

Hva skjer med personopplysningene dine når forskningsprosjektet avsluttes?

Prosjektet vil etter planen avsluttes når masteroppgaven blir godkjent, og senest ved utgangen av 2023. Etter prosjektslutt vil datamaterialet med dine personopplysninger anonymiseres. Dette gjøres som nevnt ved å erstatte navn med uidentifiserbar kode.

Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

På oppdrag fra Handelshøyskolen BI har Personverntjenester vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Dine rettigheter

Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:

- innsyn i hvilke opplysninger vi behandler om deg, og å få utlevert en kopi av opplysningene
- å få rettet opplysninger om deg som er feil eller misvisende
- å få slettet personopplysninger om deg
- å sende klage til Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger

Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å vite mer om, eller benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med Mette Marthinussen Aanes ved institutt for Ledelse- og Organisasjon, Handelshøyskolen BI Bergen (mette.m.aanes@bi.no).

Du kan også kontakte Mari Sofie Vestneshagen (Tlf: 92498313) eller Siri Tordal Norman (Tlf: 40557011)

Vårt personvernombud: Vibeke Nesbakken, personvernombud@bi.no.

Hvis du har spørsmål knyttet til Personverntjenester sin vurdering av prosjektet, kan du ta kontakt med:

- Personverntjenester på epost (personverntjenester@sikt.no) eller på telefon: 53 21 15 00.

Med vennlig hilsen

Mette M. Aanes
(Forsker/veileder)

Siri Tordal Norman
Mari Sofie Vestneshagen

Samtykkeerklæring

Dersom du ønsker å delta på intervju ber vi deg om å underskrive vedlagt samtykkeerklæring. Da underskriver du på at du har lest og forstått informasjonen i dette skrevet og ønsker å delta i studien om kvinner og ledelse.

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet *kvinner og ledelse* og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

- å delta i intervju
- at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet

Dato, sted:

Signatur

Appendix 2: Interview guide

Innledende spørsmål

- Vil du starte med å fortelle litt om deg selv og din reise?
- Hvordan fikk du stillingen du er i nå?
- Hvordan er familiesituasjonen din?

1. Personlige erfaringer

- Kan du fortelle litt om hverdagen din som leder og hvordan du balanserer det med å ha en familie?
- Hva anser du som dine styrker og svakheter?
- Er det noen situasjoner i karrieren din hvor du føler du har bommet litt/ville gjort ting annerledes? Fortell.
- Hva er den største lærepenge du har erfart som leder? Hvordan gjør du ting annerledes nå? Forklar.
- Er det noen som har vært viktige for deg gjennom karrieren din? Hvordan?
- Har du noen tips til unge kvinner som ønsker å bli ledere?

2. Atferd og ledelsesstil

- Hvordan vil du beskrive deg selv som leder?
- Hvordan tror du andre ville beskrevet deg som leder?
 - Har du fått noen tilbakemeldinger? Hvordan håndterer du disse?
- Hvor mye av hverdagen din går til jobb?
- Hvordan håndterer du tøffe beslutninger på jobb?

3. utfordringer

- Kan du beskrive en situasjon hvor du har opplevd motstand i din karriere?
- Har du opplevd hindringer i din karriere relatert til å være kvinne?
- Hva har vært den største utfordringen i din karriere?
- Har du noen gang følt at du har blitt utsatt for stereotyper eller diskriminering/urettferdig behandling? Beskriv/forklar.

4. Kvinner og ledelse

- Er det noen du anser som rollemodeller?
- Hva tror du er grunnen til at det er færre kvinnelige ledere enn menn?

- Vi ser at det er få kvinner i toppledelsen, hva tror du er grunnen til det?
 - Forskningen tilsier at det er vanskelig for kvinner å nå til toppen, har du noen tanker om det?
- Opplever du noen forskjeller på kvinner og menn som ledere?

Avslutningsvis:

- Er det noe annet du vil tillegge?
- Kan vi ta kontakt dersom vi har noen oppfølgingsspørsmål?