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Abstract

The purpose of this master thesis is to examine the barriers to leadership confronting modern-day women through a cross-cultural lens and, as such, enhance the understanding of women's most common barriers as well as provide substance to the recently established leadership labyrinth metaphor (Eagly & Carli, 2007a). The study applies a qualitative approach, collecting data through semi-structured interviews with twenty-nine female leaders working in Iceland, Norway, and Italy. The findings suggest four key barriers: (1) commitment to leadership, (2) self-promotion and negotiation behaviors, (3) the current leadership landscape, and (4) work-home conflict. The study further highlights the relevance of Hofstede's cultural dimensions model (6D model) for understanding cultural differences and the impact of those differences on women's perceived barriers to leadership. The study then offers practical recommendations to organizations on how they can help mitigate the main barriers confronting women by fostering a more inclusive and supportive leadership environment.

Keywords: Women in Leadership, Hofstede, Barriers to Leadership, Leadership Labyrinth, Career Advancement, Work-Home Conflict, Gender Equality, Gender Roles, Gendered Networks, Maternity.

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1.0 Introduction to the Research Topic

Although the topic of leadership has been of interest to academic researchers for decades, it wasn't until the 1970s that the issues related to gender and leadership sparked their interest (Hoyt, 2010). With more and more women taking on leadership positions, researchers started to wonder, "are women capable of leading others?" – and then later, "what are the differences between the leadership styles of men and women?" and "does gender impact leadership effectiveness?" Today, the main question of researchers focused on this topic seems to concern the underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions (Northouse, 2019). The gender gap, although smaller than ever before, is still far from being closed; despite the substantially improved status of women and changes in societal norms and gender expectations, women still face barriers that are rarely – if ever – experienced by men (Eagly & Carli, 2007a). As such, further research into why gender equality in leadership has not yet been reached is needed.

Historically, women were labeled as "caregivers," while men were labeled as "breadwinners." Attached to these labels were expectations; women were expected to assume domestic responsibilities, i.e., care for the children and keep a clean house, while men were expected to provide for and protect their families (Hoyt, 2010). Due to these societal assumptions that women's proper work was in the home, they were, for a long time, denied entry to both prestigious universities and careers. Women were happily accepted as secretaries and clerks, but they had no chance of attaining influential positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007a).

In recent decades, however, the percentage of women in leadership positions has improved significantly. Women now earn the majority of bachelor's and master's degrees, as many professional degrees as men, and make up approximately half of the workforce (Hoyt, 2010). Even so, women are a rare sight at the top leadership level. According to the 2022 Women CEOs in America report, only 8.8% of CEOs heading a Fortune 500 company are women (Women Business Collaborative, 2022) – which, although a significant increase from the 2.6% in 2020, is still very low (Stamper & McGowan, 2022). So, even though women have been making progress, the question remains, "why is it so difficult for women to reach top leadership positions?"

Since 1986, women have been said to face a *glass ceiling* – a metaphor that represents the "unseen and unsanctioned barriers, in an ostensibly

nondiscriminatory organization, that prevent women from securing top leadership roles” (Hoyt, 2010, p. 485). However, the widely accepted metaphor has lately been challenged by researchers Eagly and Carli (2007), who claim it inaccurately describes the barriers to leadership confronting the modern-day woman. They instead suggest that a labyrinth consisting of paths varied in difficulty and length better represents the complexity of women’s journeys to leadership positions; a passage through a labyrinth is neither simple nor direct, but all labyrinths have a way to the center (Eagly & Carli, 2007a). As such, the *leadership labyrinth* metaphor also inspires hope in women and encourages them to pursue leadership positions, contrary to the *glass ceiling*, which suggests women will never be able to rise to the top (Eagly & Carli, 2007b).

The current study aims to enrich the understanding of barriers to leadership confronting modern-day women and provide substance to the recently established labyrinth metaphor. Through interviews with women in leadership positions across various industries and levels in three European countries – Norway, Iceland, and Italy – we investigate the various barriers modern-day women perceive as hindering them from leadership advancement and discuss whether their perceptions may be influenced by their culture. To investigate this, the following research question is posed:

What role does culture play in how women perceive their barriers to leadership advancement?

As far as the writers of this thesis know, very few studies have been conducted on the linkage between culture and modern-day women’s perceived barriers to leadership advancement, particularly in the specific context of the three countries discussed in this study. This study thus extends the leadership labyrinth literature and provides researchers within the field with insights that may be valuable for future research.

2.0 Theory

The following chapter represents the central area of and provides the context for this thesis. It discusses the existing research relevant to the topic of this thesis and seeks to establish a sound foundation for understanding the different constructs researched. The first part of this section considers the various

metaphors used throughout history to describe the challenges women face on their journey to leadership positions, with emphasis on the leadership labyrinth. The second part of this section then considers the cultural context for the three countries studied.

2.1 Introduction to Metaphors Used to Describe Women's Access to Leadership

Metaphors are expressions used to describe concepts, persons, or objects by relating them to other concepts, persons, or objects with similar characteristics; they are symbolic representations rather than literal denotations (“Metaphor,” n.d.). Metaphors can help people organize their thoughts and make sense of their experiences because they allow people to substitute the unfamiliar with something well-known to them (“Metaphors of Women as Leaders,” 2017). For the same reason, metaphors are often found in academic literature. Academics use metaphors to present abstract concepts in such a way that they can be easily visualized and understood by readers (Smith et al., 2012). However, as metaphors can also shape people's attitudes toward the concept, person, or object they represent, they must be chosen carefully (Landau et al., 2010). Within the field of psychology, literature on leadership and gender is studded with metaphors. Those metaphors all serve the same purpose: to explain why women have a more difficult time rising through the ranks than men (Smith et al., 2012). The following sections will elaborate on the most commonly used metaphors for describing the gender gap in leadership, *the concrete wall*, *glass ceiling*, and *sticky floor* – as well as introduce the *leadership labyrinth*, which forms the basis of this current study.

2.1.1 The Concrete Wall, Glass Ceiling, and Sticky Floor: Metaphors Used to Describe Women's Access to Leadership

Going back to the 1920s, women's access to leadership positions was most commonly described by the *concrete wall* metaphor. As implied by the metaphor, women at that time were completely excluded from leadership positions. They faced an absolute barrier, a wall, indeed, built on stereotypical gender roles. In most countries, women lacked equal rights to men. They were neither allowed to vote nor were they allowed access to certain prestigious universities. The division of labor between men and women was clear, and even though some women

fought against it, most of society simply accepted the existence of this concrete wall confronting women (Eagly & Carli, 2007a).

It wasn't until the 1970s that the picture began to change as women started gaining access to some positions of authority and leadership. The barriers confronting women no longer resembled a concrete and impenetrable wall, but rather something later termed the glass ceiling (Eagly & Carli, 2007a). The *glass ceiling* metaphor was appropriate for a world in which women were given opportunities to advance their careers up until the point they reached an invincible ceiling that prevented them from attaining the highest positions (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). That is, although provided with increased opportunities, women were still excluded from the top positions within organizations as well as governmental positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007a). Contrastingly to the concrete wall – a normalized and absolute barrier to positions as low as entry-level – the glass ceiling represents an impenetrable and unforeseeable barrier existing at the highest level only. Still today, the glass ceiling, along with its many variations – the glass cliff, the glass escalator, glass walls, and glass door – is the most popular metaphor used to describe the barriers confronting women on their leadership journey (Smith et al., 2012).

As times have changed, researchers have tried coming up with new metaphors designed to better capture the reality of women pursuing a leadership path. One such metaphor is the *sticky floor*, first mentioned in 1995 (Smith et al., 2012). It quickly gained resonance among researchers as it presented a fresh viewpoint of the problem. Instead of looking at the higher end of the corporate ladder, the sticky floor focused on the women who lacked opportunities to move up from entry-level positions and never even got close to hitting the glass ceiling (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Differently from the concrete wall, however, the lack of opportunities was not considered a consequence of societal norms or prescribed gender roles. Rather the assumption was that the women themselves were responsible for their own sticky floor. The sticky floor metaphor thus also differs from the popular glass ceiling metaphor, as it implies that women face barriers unique to them and their individual situation; the sticky floor does not suggest a universal barrier like the glass ceiling does (Smith et al., 2012).

2.1.2 Helpful or Harmful: Are These Metaphors Misleading?

The *concrete wall*, *glass ceiling*, and *sticky floor* metaphors are memorable and helpful in the sense that they describe the gender imbalance found in leadership in a simple way. However, because of how they are framed and what they imply, they contribute little to reducing the gender gap in leadership positions or to combat the perception that women are less capable of leading others than men are (Smith et al., 2012). The *concrete wall* metaphor is rarely ever used anymore because times have changed; women are no longer denied educational opportunities or blocked from certain professions. The metaphor is obsolete, yet it still gets mentioned in modern-day publications, as it provides readers with historical context (Eagly & Carli, 2007a).

Contrary to the concrete wall, the *glass ceiling* metaphor is still widely used. Even so, it has its faults. First, the glass ceiling represents an absolute barrier blocking women from the highest-level positions in organizations. However, we've already seen women become chief executives, heads of state, governors, etc. As such, the metaphor is misleading; the glass ceiling cannot be an absolute barrier – more than a few women have broken through it. Second, the metaphor fails to consider that women and men do not have equal access to entry- and mid-level positions. Third, it assumes that the path toward leadership for women is linear up until when they hit the invisible glass ceiling, when, in reality, their journey toward leadership is complex, filled with unexpected twists and turns. Women on the path toward leadership don't just face one single barrier, once in their lifetime. Fourth, it assumes all the barriers faced by women as they move up the ranks are unforeseeable and thus unavoidable (Eagly & Carli, 2007b). Therefore, even though popular, the glass ceiling metaphor does not accurately reflect the reality of women in pursuit of leadership roles.

Similarly to the glass ceiling, the *sticky floor* metaphor paints a distorted picture of reality and has been criticized because of the message it sends. The sticky floor blames women for their own lack of advancement by suggesting that them being unable to detach from the sticky floor and climb the ranks is the consequence of their own decision-making – and while it is true that some women choose not to advance in their professional career, that choice does not always reflect their own volition, but rather societal or cultural norms and expectations (Smith et al., 2012). A message like the one communicated by this metaphor hinders, rather than supports, the reduction of the gender gap in leadership. In

addition – and similarly to the glass ceiling, the sticky floor suggests that women face a single barrier – simply at a different point in their careers. However, if that were the case, we would see a lot more women in top leadership positions; there would be nothing stopping the women able to break away from their sticky floor (Carli & Eagly, 2016).

2.1.3 *The Modern Metaphor: The Leadership Labyrinth*

To add to the understanding of challenges faced by women leaders in the contemporary context, Eagly and Carli (2007) put forth the metaphor of the *leadership labyrinth* (Eagly & Carli, 2007a). Labyrinths have a long history, dating back a few millennia, and have been used in pottery making, garden hedges, mythology, and architecture across the globe. The term itself has been used to refer to “complex situations and problems requiring particular skills and perseverance to solve” (Stamper & McGowan, 2022). Similarly, labyrinths as symbols have, throughout history, been depicted as representing complex journeys “with visible or invisible elements of entrapment or enlightenment” (Morrison, 2002, p. 98). In their work, Eagly and Carli encourage their readers to view the leadership labyrinth as conveying the idea of women’s complex journeys – full of challenges – toward a goal worth striving for. They further explain how a passage through a labyrinth is neither simple nor direct and requires both persistence and patience (Eagly & Carli, 2007a). Even so, every labyrinth has a viable path to the center, and, as such, Eagly and Carli’s newfound leadership labyrinth metaphor offers both hope and encouragement to aspiring women leaders. An exploration of the barriers that are a part of the leadership labyrinth and of how some women have managed to move past them could thus provide valuable insights for improving the gender inequality in leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007b).

Typically, the discussions of the gender gap in leadership revolve around three main types of explanations, (1) differences between men’s and women’s human capital investments, (2) gender differences between men and women, and (3) prejudice and discrimination. As seen in **Figure 1**, Eagly and Carli (2007a) took these three explanations and used them as umbrella terms for delineating their leadership labyrinth. They then sorted the most common barriers faced by women into the three categories sprung from the umbrella terms.

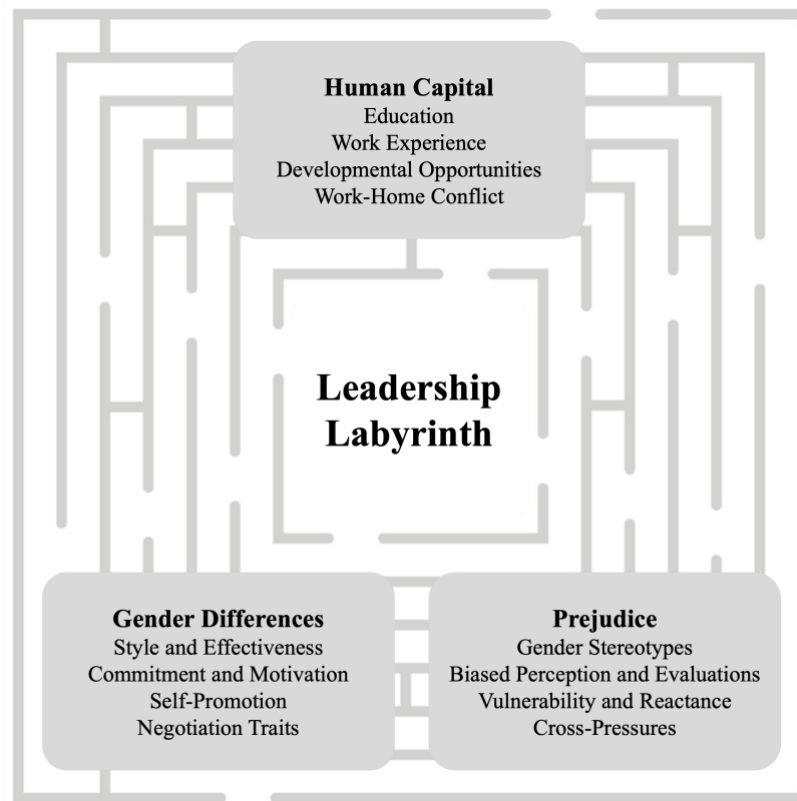


Figure 1. The Leadership Labyrinth

First, nested under the human capital category are four barriers: *education*, *work experience*, *developmental opportunities*, and *work-home conflict*. Although women earn the majority of university degrees today (Hoyt, 2010), their degrees are predominantly tied to some fields over others. Women are, for instance, underrepresented in STEM educational programs and careers (Casad et al., 2019), while they can be commonly found in the educational sector, accounting positions, and human resources functions. Many of the non-strategic departments in which women end up working offer fewer opportunities for leadership advancement with respect to other, more revenue-generating departments. Both education and work experience can thus play an adverse role in a woman's journey to leadership (Bowles & McGinn, 2005). Research has likewise shown that women receive fewer developmental opportunities than men. They are given fewer responsibilities compared to their male counterparts working in comparable jobs, they are considered as a part of less critical networks, and they receive less support and formal training (Hoyt, 2010). In addition – despite the changes in gendered expectations – women still assume more household- and family-related responsibilities than men (Craig & Mullan, 2010; Eagly & Carli, 2007a). Because of their high work-home conflict, many women could feel inclined to take on part-

time or lower-level employment that allows them a greater balance between their professional and personal life. The work-home conflict often constitutes a significant barrier for women, especially in organizations that do not allow flexible working hours or require expatriate assignments or permanent relocation (Hoyt, 2010).

Second, nested under the gender differences category are four barriers: *style and effectiveness, commitment and motivation, self-promotion, and negotiation traits*. Across the board, research has found gender differences to be relatively small or not significant enough to constitute major barriers to women on their leadership journeys. For instance, women have been found to have similar levels of motivation and aspiration for leadership positions as men holding comparable positions (Hoyt, 2010). Similarly, there is little indication that the differences in men's and women's leadership styles have any significant impact on their effectiveness as leaders (Eagly & Carli, 2007a). Yet, gender differences remain a barrier for women, mainly due to societal and cultural assumptions about their personality traits, ambitions, and behaviors (Hoyt, 2010). Although many of these assumptions have been proven wrong by research, some are true, as is the case with both self-promotion and negotiation traits. Women more infrequently use self-promotion tactics and engage less in negotiations to obtain leadership positions respectively to men (Bowles & McGinn, 2005). It is likely that women's lack of participation in such behaviors is the result of them being incongruent with the socially accepted behaviors of women (Hoyt, 2010).

Third, nested under the prejudice category are four barriers: *gender stereotypes, biased perceptions and evaluations, vulnerability and reactance, and cross-pressures*. A significant amount of research has been done on the topics of prejudice, gender stereotypes, and biased perceptions in relation to the gender gap in leadership (e.g., Heilman, 2001; Shantz & Latham, 2012). Most of the said research has concluded that there is still a far road ahead until the world becomes rid of gender stereotypes and the prejudice and biased perceptions tied to those stereotypes. However, most also point out that organizational conditions can either help diminish the stereotypes or enhance them. For instance, imprecise guidelines for inclusive job descriptions and interview processes, ambiguous performance evaluation criteria, and vague promotional procedures are more likely to disadvantage women (Heilman, 2001; Shantz & Latham, 2012). When it comes to *vulnerability & reactance, and cross-pressures*, limited research

currently exists – and while these barriers are indeed relevant within the leadership labyrinth framework, extensively exploring those areas falls outside the scope of this thesis. As such, they will not be considered in the current study; further research is needed to delve deeper into these areas and their implications.

2.2 Stereotypical Perceptions of Leadership

People have developed their own ideas about which traits are important to leadership. Stereotypically, leaders are viewed as more agentic than communal, more masculine than feminine, and whenever people are asked to close their eyes and picture a leader, more visualize a man than a woman (Hoyt, 2010). Although some of these traits stereotypically associated with leaders have been found to be connected to leadership through research, others have no factual ground to stand on. However, because they are so widely spread, these stereotypes can largely influence the opportunities for leadership given to groups that do not meet them, making them an important consideration for researchers. In fact, these stereotypical views have been confirmed by multiple researchers relying on a variety of different methods and research paradigms (Koenig et al., 2011). One such paradigm, the role congruity theory, provides an interesting explanation for the discrimination faced by women in leadership, attributing it to a mismatch between stereotypes of women as communal and stereotypes of leaders as agentic (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This mismatch results in lower expectations for women's leadership abilities and less favorable assessments of their behavior, contributing to gender inequalities in leadership positions (Koenig et al., 2011).

2.3 Introduction to Culture

Culture can be defined as “the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede Insights, 2023b). It can influence a person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors – on a broad level; individuals tend to share the cultural beliefs of the group(s) to which they belong. Cultural dimensions are typically measured using either the GLOBE model (House et al., 2004) or Hofstede's 6D model of national culture, although the latter seems to be the more widely recognized (Gerlach & Eriksson, 2021). In this current study, Hofstede's 6D model will thus be used to examine the cultural differences between Iceland, Italy, and Norway and,

ultimately, the role of culture in how women perceive their barriers to leadership advancement.

2.3.1 Hofstede's Model

In 1980, Hofstede published one of the most extensive research projects on the influence of culture on workplace values. Analyzing a large database covering more than 70 countries, he was able to identify six dimensions of national culture and assign scores on these dimensions to 76 different countries (Hofstede Insights, 2023b). Since the study's publication, a number of subsequent studies have replicated and confirmed its results, and the model is now extensively used in scientific research (Gerlach & Eriksson, 2021).

The six dimensions of Hofstede's 6D model, (1) *power distance*, (2) *individualism vs. collectivism*, (3) *masculinity vs. femininity*, (4) *uncertainty avoidance*, (5) *long-term vs. short-term orientation*, and (6) *indulgence vs. restraint*, "represent independent preferences for one state of affairs over another" (Hofstede Insights, 2023b). Culture scores range from 0 to 100 on each of these six dimensions, depending on preferences. However, it should be noted that these dimensions are general tendencies, and one culture's score on each of the dimensions should always be analyzed relative to another culture's score (Hofstede et al., 2010).

The power distance (PDI) dimension classifies cultures based on their level of acceptance of unequally distributed power. In cultures scoring high on PDI, people are more likely to accept hierarchical division. In contrast, people in cultures scoring low on PDI seek a more equal power distribution and are more skeptical of power inequalities. The individualism vs. collectivism (IDV) dimension classifies cultures based on the extent to which people's self-image is more in tune with the pronoun "I" or "we." Individualistic cultures (high score) are more likely to prefer social frameworks where interpersonal ties are relaxed and individuals are responsible only for themselves and their direct relatives. Contrastingly, collectivistic societies (low score) prefer a system of mutual exchange and loyalty – highly reliant on social bonds – in which individuals share the responsibility of the group. The masculinity vs. femininity (MAS) dimension classifies cultures based on whether they are tough or tender. In a masculine or tough culture (high score), people tend to value ambition, assertiveness, and acquisition of material success, while in a feminine or tender culture (low score),

people tend to prefer caring behaviors, cooperation, and modesty. The uncertainty avoidance (UAI) dimension classifies cultures based on the extent to which a culture accepts the ambiguity of future situations (low score) or tries to control the outcomes of such situations (high score). The long-term vs. short-term orientation dimension (LTO) classifies cultures based on the extent to which they are pragmatic and future-oriented (high score) or normative and short-term oriented (low score). Finally, the indulgence vs. restraint (IVR) dimension classifies cultures based on the extent to which they try to control individuals' desires to have fun and enjoy life. In cultures that are indulgent, people's needs related to leisure are generally satisfied. Contrastingly, in cultures of restraint, those needs are typically suppressed by strict social norms (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Because cultures differ and can influence the extent to which certain behaviors are socially accepted or rejected (Hofstede et al., 2010), we imagine they can likewise influence the types of barriers confronting women on their leadership journeys as well as their perceptions of those barriers.

2.3.2 Iceland, Italy, and Norway: How Do Their Cultures Differ?

Table 1 shows Iceland's, Italy's, and Norway's scores on each of Hofstede's six cultural dimensions.

Table 1. Iceland's, Italy's, and Norway's scores on Hofstede's six dimensions

	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI	LTO	IVR
Iceland*	30	60	10	50	28	67
Italy	50	76	70	75	61	30
Norway	31	69	8	50	35	55

* estimated

As expected, Iceland and Norway score similarly on the different dimensions, while Italy scores quite differently (Hofstede Insights, 2023a).

3.0 Method

Based on the theoretical background presented, the following chapter will cover the methodology of the study – the design, data collection, and measures – as well as discuss the study's validity, reliability, and ethical considerations.

3.1 Research Design

To investigate the research question of this study, a cross-cultural study using a qualitative method was conducted. In qualitative research, as opposed to quantitative research, “meanings are derived from words and images, not numbers” (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 179). The emphasis of qualitative research is on gaining a deeper understanding of phenomena through exploration and interpretation (Bell et al., 2019). There are, thus, plenty of reasons why researchers may choose to use a qualitative design. In the case of the current study, such a design was selected because it allowed for an extensive exploration of the participants’ personal experiences and broader perspectives of women’s opportunities and barriers to leadership advancement. As qualitative research is focused on meaning rather than measures, we found it to be the most suitable design for enhancing the existing literature on the gender gap in leadership (Saunders et al., 2019).

Aligned with what is typical in qualitative research, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method. Mainly due to time constraints and the participants’ busy schedules, the interviews were conducted in one phase, making the study a single-phase design (Bell et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2019). This approach was chosen to accommodate the limited availability of the participants, who were all leaders with a lot on their own plates. Further, because the participants of the study were located in three different countries and various cities, all interviews were conducted via Zoom. To streamline the interview process, participants were also asked to fill out a short pre-interview questionnaire focused on demographic data within 48 hours of their scheduled interview. This allowed for efficient use of interview time while still gathering the relevant background information.

The study’s research design further followed an abductive approach. Such an approach has become increasingly popular in business research over the last couple of years because it allows for more flexibility than both the deductive and inductive approaches. An abductive approach is appropriate for research on a topic about which there is much information in a single context and limited information in another. In the case of this study, an abundance of information exists on the gender gap, but little research exists on the leadership labyrinth in particular and even less on the role of culture in relation to the gender gap. In short, in an abductive approach, data is typically collected for the purposes of

exploring a phenomenon to identify patterns or themes that can add to or modify an existing theory, and as such, it is appropriate for this study (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.2 Sample & Data Collection

To explore our research question, we gathered data from women in leadership positions managing at least one direct report in Iceland, Italy, and Norway. We chose to set our perimeters to “at least one direct report” because we wanted to reach women at all leadership levels to showcase how the leadership labyrinth metaphor is not applicable only to a single level, contrary to previously used metaphors such as the sticky floor and the glass ceiling.

The participants of this study were selected using snowball sampling. That is, the researchers initially contacted a few individuals and groups relevant to the research topic and then used those connections to establish contact with other potential participants. Participants were mainly sourced through the researchers’ private networks, as well as through an advertisement of the study on LinkedIn. The researchers additionally reached out to the chairwoman of the Association of Working Women in Iceland, *Félag Kvenna í Atvinnulífinu (FKA)*, for assistance with the sourcing of participants from Iceland. As participants were selected in a strategic way, the sample was likewise of purposive nature. That is, the participants had to meet certain criteria (gender, location, and number of direct reports) to be considered relevant to the research (Bell et al., 2019).

A problem qualitative researchers often face is determining the correct sample size. A rule of thumb is that the number of factors that are to be compared dictates the size of the sample. If multiple comparisons are to be made, e.g., between males and females, different age groups, and different nationalities, the sample size should be bigger compared to research that only compares one of these. Nonetheless, a sample of between 20 and 30 participants seems to be the generally accepted minimum for a qualitative study to be published (Bell et al., 2019). Thus, our goal was to obtain data from at least 10 participants from each of the three countries, 30 in total. However, one Norwegian participant withdrew from the study, resulting in a final sample of 29 participants.

Prior to their interviews, participants were asked to fill out a pre-interview questionnaire consisting of four demographic questions on the participants’ age, job title, tenure in current role, and number of direct reports. The questionnaire

was distributed using Qualtrics, a commonly used online survey platform free of use to those studying at BI Norwegian Business School. The sample demographics are presented below in **Figures 2-4**.

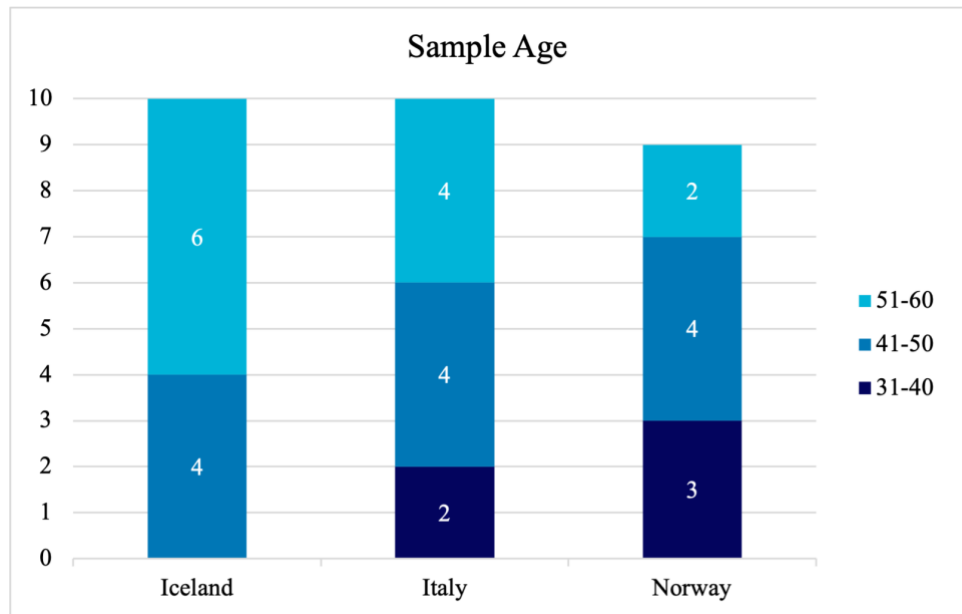


Figure 2. Sample Age

The participants' ages ranged from approximately 30 to 60, with most falling between the ages of 41 and 60. Notably, the Icelandic participants' average age was higher than their Italian and Norwegian counterparts.

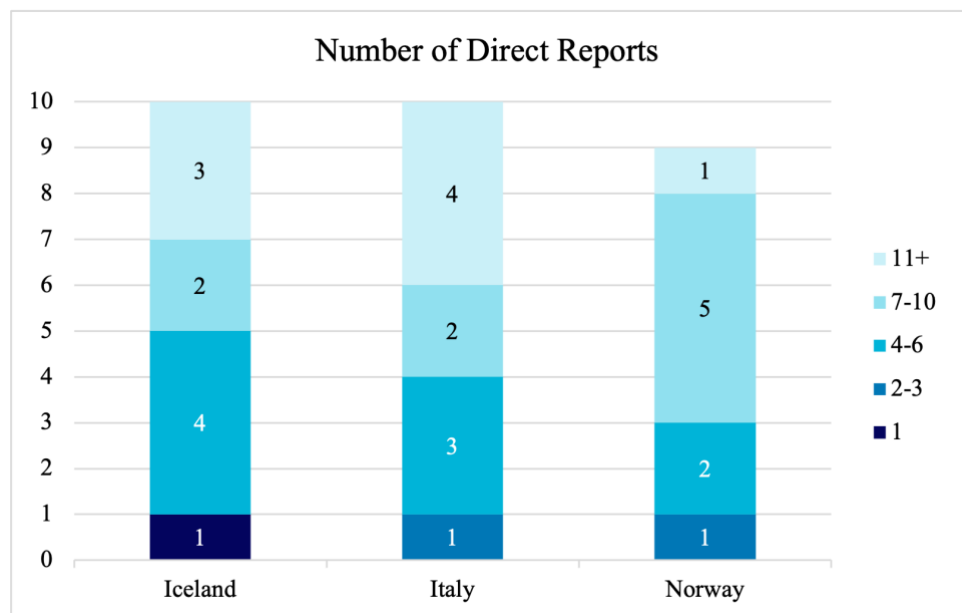


Figure 3. Number of Direct Reports

The participants had a diverse range in terms of span of control, with the number of direct reports ranging from 1 to 11+. The wide range of the number of direct reports suggests a varied distribution of leadership responsibilities among the participants, indicating the study covers the full spectrum of span of control, comprehensively representing the different levels of leadership in the sample.

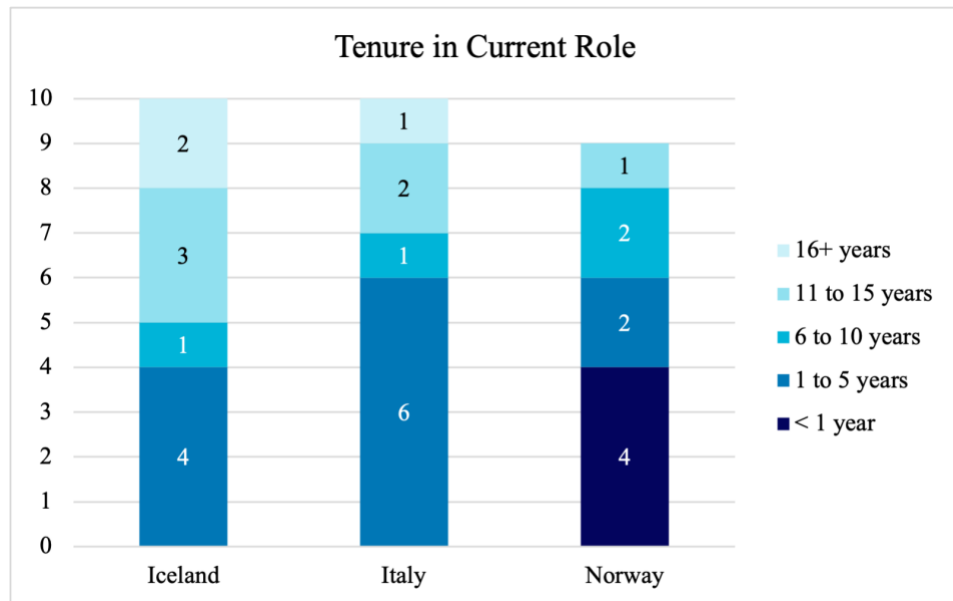


Figure 4. Tenure in Current Role

The participants' tenure in their current roles ranged quite a bit as well, from less than one year to more than 16 years. Across the three countries, most participants had held their current roles for one to five years. It is noteworthy that four participants from Norway had less than one year of experience in their positions. However, it is important to mention here that, with the exception of one participant, their current positions were not their first leadership positions (as later revealed in the interviews). As such, while their tenure in their current role may be relatively short, they have accumulated leadership experience through previous positions. In line with the variation in tenure, the job titles of the participants varied significantly, representing a wide range of leadership levels – from lower-level management positions to top management positions.

Interviews were conducted from 20.01.23 to 31.03.23. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed using Otter.ai, a secure online transcribing software.

3.3 Measures & Data Credibility

For a study to provide a valuable addition to its field of research, it must consist of credible measures. Credibility of research measures is typically determined by their reliability, replicability, and validity (Brahma, 2009). In this context, reliability refers to “the degree to which a measure of a concept is stable and consistent,” whereas validity refers to the extent to which the measures represent the variables they are supposed to represent – in short, the integrity of the results (Bell et al., 2019, p. 595). Replicability then refers to the extent to which the results of a study can be replicated by a different researcher (Bell et al., 2019). However, although the evaluation of the credibility of qualitative research often relies on these three aspects: reliability, validity, and replicability – it is worth noting that these aspects have roots in quantitative research, which raises concerns about the extent of their applicability to qualitative research (Bell et al., 2019).

Reliability and validity, as defined above, can be challenging to establish in qualitative research. In fact, qualitative researchers have been questioning the relevance of these criteria for establishing the credibility of their research. Lately, researchers have argued that trustworthiness and authenticity are better indicators of credibility in qualitative research (Bell et al., 2019). Trustworthiness is a measure combining dependability, credibility, and transferability, which correspond with the measures of reliability, internal validity, and external validity, respectively, in quantitative research. For research to be deemed trustworthy, it is important that it accurately reflects the reality of its participants. It must likewise include a detailed record of the research process, including a complete description of the research question, design, methodology, and findings so that the research may be understood, evaluated, and replicated by others. Authenticity then refers to the extent to which the research fairly presents different viewpoints (Saunders et al., 2019). When constructing the qualitative measure (interview guide) for this study, we thus focused on formulating the questions in a simple, clear, and non-leading way to satisfy both the trustworthiness and authenticity criteria.

Another aspect of importance is generalizability, “the extent to which the findings of a research study are applicable to other settings” (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 449). In qualitative research, generalizability is often compromised by the small sample size, particularly when the participants of the small sample are selected based on specific pre-defined criteria, as is the case with the current

study. However, as qualitative studies are typically conducted to explore a phenomenon and provide insights that can be used to develop or extend theory, the often-limited generalizability of qualitative studies does not take away from their value. Therefore, while the findings of the current study may not be directly applicable to other settings, they offer valuable insights that contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the topic of women and leadership (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.3.1 Perceptions of Barriers

Women's perceptions of their opportunities and barriers to leadership advancement were gauged through semi-structured interviews, which are commonly used in qualitative research based on a specific theoretical framework. Semi-structured interviews require the researchers to create a list of pre-defined questions, an "interview questionnaire" (Flick, 2022). The interview questionnaire used in this current study was constructed from the theory underlying the leadership labyrinth metaphor as put forth by Eagly and Carli (2007a). The interview questions were further developed with the research question in mind to ensure that the interviews would provide relevant insights into the interviewees' perceived opportunities and barriers to leadership advancement. The complete list of questions as well as how each of them connects to the theoretical framework of the study can be found in **Appendix A**.

While constructing the interview questionnaire, a focus was put on mitigating the potential limitations associated with the semi-structured interview data-collection method. For instance, semi-structured interviews have been criticized for lack of standardization, which can introduce biases – participation bias, interviewer bias, and response bias – and result in inconsistencies in the findings, limiting the transferability of the study (Saunders et al., 2019).

First, as the amount of time required for an interview can impact participants' willingness to participate and thus bias the sample, the interview questionnaire was constructed so that the interviews would not take longer than 45 minutes. With longer interviews resulting in lower willingness, the aim was to keep the interviews as short as possible to reduce participation bias, however, without compromising the quality of the research (Saunders et al., 2019). Second, elements such as the formulation of questions, as well as the tone of voice, comments, phrasing, and non-verbal behavior of interviewers, can result in a so-

called interviewer bias. To mitigate this bias, the interview questions were framed in a non-leading manner, with open-ended questions that were asked to each participant in the same exact way. Emphasis was also put on the fact that there were no right or wrong answers, and that the main objective of the interviews was to hear the participants' perspectives. By taking these steps, the aim was to avoid pushing own beliefs onto the interviewees, thus influencing their answers (Saunders et al., 2019). Third, the sensitive nature of the topics explored in the current research can cause participants to intentionally withhold certain information and lead to response bias in the sample. In the context of the current research, such a bias may come about in discussions on maternity, family situation, or workplace discrimination – just to name a few. To address this potential bias, participants were reassured their privacy would be protected through the anonymization of all data collected for the study. In addition, emphasis was put on creating a comfortable environment in which the participants felt secure enough to openly share their experiences and perspectives without feeling they would be met with judgment (Saunders et al., 2019).

By implementing these measures, both during the construction of the interview questionnaire and the interviews themselves, the aim was to mitigate these potential biases and their influence on the collected data. The purpose was to improve the validity and reliability of the data by reducing the chances of distorted or incomplete information. Further, these efforts were implemented to ensure the findings accurately reflected the participants' experiences and perspectives and thus enhance the overall quality of the study.

3.3.2 Culture

Culture was analyzed using Hofstede's cultural dimensions model (6D model). Since its original publication in 1980, Hofstede's 6D model has become widely recognized across multiple research disciplines, cited over a thousand times per year (Gerlach & Eriksson, 2021). Hofstede developed the 6D model while conducting one of the most comprehensive cultural studies of the relationship between national culture and workplace values. Hofstede's study has now been replicated and extended by multiple researchers whose results have validated his findings (Hofstede Insights, 2023b).

3.4 Research Ethics

This study complies with the ethical standards for business research as proposed by Diener & Crandall (1978). Participation in the study was voluntary and based on informed consent (the study's *Information & Consent Form* can be found in **Appendix B**). The participants were made aware that they could withdraw their consent at any time without providing a reason and without facing consequences. Participants were likewise made aware that they have the right to access their data or have it deleted at any point during or after the research project.

Prior to starting our research, we obtained formal approval for the project from the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD). The interview questionnaire was likewise constructed in a way that follows the NSD's guidelines and restrictions for the handling of personal data in research. In addition, all personal data was collected, processed, and stored in a confidential manner and in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act (GDPR). To ensure unauthorized individuals or groups were unable to access the personal data, the data was and is stored in an encrypted folder on the project's data controller's (BI) server. All data will be deleted no later than 03.07.23, as stated in the approval from the NSD (see **Appendix C**). The data will not be used in any future publications or presentations.

4.0 Data Analysis

The following chapter discusses the process used for analyzing the data collected through the study's interviews, as well as the limitations of the analytical method used. For the analysis of the data, Otter.ai and NVivo version 14.23.0.

4.1 Coding and Organization of Interview Data

As mentioned in section 3.3.1 *Perceptions of Barriers*, women's perceptions of their opportunities and barriers to leadership advancement were gauged through interviews. Those interviews were audio-recorded and afterward transcribed using Otter.ai. Each transcript was then reviewed by the researchers of this study and corrected where needed. To then make sense of the transcripts and filter out the information most relevant to the purpose of this study, each of the interview transcripts was thematically analyzed through coding (Saunders et al., 2019). "Coding," in this context, refers to carefully going through data to identify any emerging patterns or themes. It is an important means to manage qualitative

data sets, which are typically large and complex. Coding can be conducted in a multitude of ways; the most important consideration of coding is to find a way that appropriately fits the study (Bell et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the more systematic the process, the better (Saunders et al., 2019). To systematize the process of our coding, we used NVivo version 14.23.0, a qualitative and mixed-method research software that has been specifically designed to systematize the analysis of unstructured text.

Our approach to coding the interviews was guided by the study's exploratory nature and the specific components of the leadership labyrinth framework. We opted for an abductive approach, which we found to be particularly well-suited to our research goals, as it involved closely looking at our unique data to identify patterns or themes that could be narrowed down to a general conclusion. To do this, we first used open coding to independently code each transcript. During this initial stage, we drew on the main barriers outlined in the leadership labyrinth framework to guide our coding. Although applying such a technique is more common in deductive research approaches, it can provide a starting point for abductive research, provided the researchers remain open to incorporating new codes as they emerge during the analysis process (Saunders et al., 2019). By remaining open to discovering new codes during our analysis, we thus ensured a comprehensive exploration of the data.

Subsequently, we compared our notes to uncover the data's main themes. We then spent a significant amount of time systematically looking at how the identified themes related to one another to unveil any similarities and differences across the data. During this process, we decided to further segment our data into three groups – by country – to ensure we were able to capture any cultural nuances that could influence the findings. The main objective of our second round of coding was then to reduce the volume of our thematic categories and create a handful of highly relevant codes that captured the true essence of our data (Bell et al., 2019). After coding each interview twice, we were left with four main codes, derived from 11 sub-codes consisting of relevant quotes and statements, which we will later use to present our research's main findings.

Table 2. The study's main and sub-codes

<i>Main Code</i>	<i>Sub-codes</i>
<i>Commitment</i>	Learning Opportunities Motivation
<i>Self-Promotion and Negotiation</i>	Gender Differences & Expectations Opportunities
<i>Leadership Landscape</i>	Leadership Style Leader Effectiveness Presence in Top Management
<i>Work-Home Conflict</i>	Parental Leave Gender Roles Job Setting, Flexibility, & Boundaries Priorities & Values

Upon comparing our final codes and sub-codes with the categories outlined in the leadership labyrinth framework, it may appear as if we overlooked the category of prejudice. As such, we think it is important to mention that during our initial round of coding, we had identified a fifth category which we called “gender stereotypes and biases.” However, as we progressed in our coding, we recognized that this category was overly broad and often overlapped with some of our other categories. As such, we decided to dissolve that category and redistribute the relevant statements and quotes among the categories with which they shared commonalities. By taking this approach, we ensured we still adequately covered Eagly and Carli’s prejudice category within our analysis.

4.1.1 Limitations of Coding

Thematic analysis (coding) is a widely used method of data analysis in qualitative research due to its systematic yet flexible nature. It is systematic because it allows data to be analyzed in an organized and logical manner, but it is likewise flexible as it is not bound to a particular research philosophy or theoretical framework. It can be applied irrespective of whether the research follows a deductive, inductive, or abductive approach, making it a good method

for our particular research. As any other method, however, thematic analysis comes with some limitations that should be acknowledged. One limitation is that codes in thematic analysis are generated from a collection of individual statements and sentences taken out of the context in which they originally appeared – such as from an interview transcript – which poses the risk of losing the social setting and narrative flow of the data. This is perhaps the method’s biggest limitation as such fragmentation of data may not be suitable for every theoretical perspective or form of data. Another limitation arises from the flexible nature of thematic analysis, as researchers may inadvertently overlook certain aspects of their data, depending on how they choose to conduct their analysis process (Bell et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2019).

To address these limitations, we implemented specific strategies. We chose to code larger sections of text rather than isolate individual statements and sentences. This approach allowed us to maintain contextual awareness by considering the broader context of our data. We also decided to conduct the initial coding of each transcript independently before comparing notes. By doing this, we were better able to capture all the relevant information from the data and minimize the risk of overlooking important details. However, while it is important to be mindful of the limitations of the method chosen and take them into consideration when interpreting the findings, it is equally important to relate the findings to research conducted by others. Reflecting on, interpreting, and theorizing the gathered data in the context of existing knowledge enhances both the value and validity of the findings, as well as adds to their credibility and significance (Bell et al., 2019). In light of this, the following chapter covers both the presentation and contextualization of the data collected in this study.

5.0 Results & Discussion

In the following chapter, the trends revealed through the data analysis process will be presented and discussed. First, in section *5.1 Results*, the study’s findings will be presented as objectively as possible through direct quotes from the study’s participants. Some subjective interpretations of the meanings of used quotes will also be introduced, although the majority of the discussion of the meaning of the findings in relation to the study’s research question and existing theory will be carried out in section *5.2 Discussion*.

5.1 Results

As outlined in **Table 2**, the data analysis process revealed four main themes: (1) *Commitment*, (2) *Self-promotion & Negotiation*, (3) *Leadership Landscape*, and (4) *Work-Home Conflict*. Each of these themes sheds light on a component of relevance to the research question and significantly contributes to the understanding of the problem being researched in this study.

5.1.1 Commitment

The first apparent theme that emerged from the data analysis process was centered around women's commitment. This theme explores women's dedication to becoming leaders through a discussion of their educational background and motivational factors. Starting with education, most participants disagreed that women are less educated than men, even though they recognized the stereotype. In fact, most of the participants expressed a contrasting view, asserting that the educational gender gap was reversed in their respective countries.

“Women are not less educated than men. Even in Iceland, we are seeing the opposite.” (Participant 10 – Iceland)

“Women are now 70% of the population of the University of Iceland, and it's similar in any of the higher-level educational institutions. Women are educating themselves more.” (Participant 7 – Iceland)

“I would say that often women are more eager to get an education and to really do their best, while maybe men might take things for granted.”
(Participant 1 – Norway)

“Often women are more educated than men. But they need to be more educated to obtain the same results.” (Participant 5 – Italy)

Participants from Iceland and Norway hypothesized that this strong commitment to pursuing higher-level education could be attributed to women's belief in the importance of seizing every learning opportunity to acquire the necessary skills and competence to advance their careers.

“I think that women, in general, are willing to seek out both mentorship and development opportunities in work to progress to a more senior level.” (Participant 6 – Iceland)

“I know a lot of women in management positions that really would take any opportunity to develop. And maybe women tend to look for it a bit more because we know that we have to maybe work a little bit harder to get those positions.” (Participant 4 – Norway)

However, when asked about women’s motivation to become leaders, the participants’ answers were not as unanimous. A few expressed how they believed women are often motivated to become leaders at the beginning of their careers but that their motivation diminishes as they are met with hurdles.

“Oftentimes, these hurdles sort of grind women down. Women who might at the start of their careers be very committed and motivated to become leaders give up on that path during their careers because of the friction that they face in the environment.” (Participant 6 – Iceland)

“To be here where I am now, I’ve invested so much, so strongly, and I’ve lost some time.” (Participant 6 – Italy)

“The thing is, how much am I willing to fight for something? (...) When you say, I want to go from the position I’m at to just one step up, that is not always easy.” (Participant 1 – Norway)

“It’s all about if you’re able to keep that motivation up. Some [women] just don’t commit to it because it is too hard to actually become a leader in some fields.” (Participant 4 – Norway)

The same participants also highlighted that these hurdles are often a consequence of unequal presentation of developmental opportunities.

“When you create opportunities – you have to do it in a way that everybody kind of thinks ‘I can do this.’” (Participant 5 – Iceland)

“Sometimes if you put an opportunity on the table, it’s not enough. You have to put the opportunity and the supportive surrounding for the woman to let her take the real opportunity.” (Participant 7 – Italy)

Others, however, believed women are not so motivated to become leaders from the get-go but become interested in leadership as their careers progress. The participants mainly attributed this lack of initial motivation to the scarcity of female role models in leadership positions.

“We don’t have so many examples of women leaders to relate to – to say ‘I would like to be like her.’” (Participant 8 – Italy)

“Women are not less committed or motivated to become leaders. I think they just need more role models. But this is changing – slowly but surely.” (Participant 10 – Iceland)

“I think it is so important that we try to get more women up to leadership positions; we need to get more female managers in the top positions – so that we can build more female managers from the bottom.” (Participant 5 – Norway)

5.1.2 Self-promotion & Negotiation

Another prominent theme that emerged from the data was the impact of self-promotion and negotiation on women’s leadership advancement. Participants from all three countries generally agreed women are less inclined to engage in self-promotion or negotiate for positions to the same extent as men.

“Women are probably less likely to self-promote than men.” (Participant 10 – Iceland)

“I think a lot of women don’t say what they need and how they want things to be.” (Participant 5 – Norway)

“Men ask, women don’t.” (Participant 1 – Italy)

When asked to reflect upon why this might be, the participants likewise gave similar answers. In fact, roughly two-thirds of the interviewees claimed the reason to be that, contrastingly to men, women lack the confidence to go after the position they want. They expressed that women are often hesitant to pursue positions unless they feel they meet all the requirements and “check all the boxes.” This behavior was widely recognized by the participants, however, the women from Iceland and Norway emphasized it as a more significant problem compared to those from Italy.

“We [women] tend to want to be perfect before doing it – or really prepared. But guys, they just go ahead.” (Participant 5 – Iceland)

“When you speak to women, sometimes they feel they can’t apply for certain jobs, e.g., because they don’t have all the things that are in the [job] advertisement (...) while men don’t think like that.” (Participant 9 – Iceland)

“We are one step behind in that sense, we have to be more sure, but we are more shy, and we are more taking everything into account. The men run without thinking.” (Participant 2 – Iceland)

“When I think about my own career, and maybe the last career move I made, I had to be really sure that I matched everything (...) I [was] like, ‘Okay, I can do everything – I can tick off everything on this list. I fulfill the requirements of the role, but I don’t have leadership experience yet’ So that was the only thing. Otherwise, I might not have taken on the challenge to apply.” (Participant 1 – Norway)

“If you have a job advertisement out, females will feel like they have to check 90% plus of what you need to have in terms of competence and capabilities, whereas men would say – out of a list of 7, they are like ‘Oh, I can do 2 of these. I can do this job.’ Of course, now I am stereotyping a little bit, but as a general rule, I have found that males are more willing to

take risks based on what they can and should – they just put themselves out there.” (Participant 2 – Norway)

“We are more focused on doing the work as precisely as possible, on working a lot, on showing our commitment as much as possible. But we spend very little time sponsoring ourselves and self-promoting.”
(Participant 3 – Italy)

In addition, the participants agreed that societal expectations, as well as cultural norms, play a big part in women’s reluctance to engage in self-promotional behaviors. They explained how self-promotion is often perceived as bragging, and women who actively self-promote are labeled arrogant, aggressive, or unrealistic.

“We have been kind of culturally taught that it would be bragging – and that is a negative thing.” (Participant 5 – Iceland)

“As women, we are conditioned to always think that we are not as good as men. Because society tells us that men are superior, men are the ones who should have leadership positions. So as women, we tend to be a little bit timid and shy, and we don’t take advantage of developing ourselves because we always feel like, ‘Oh, I’m not good enough, I’m not going to get it,’ because society has put it in our brains to doubt ourselves.”
(Participant 3 – Norway)

“My conclusion was that it [lack of self-promotion] must be a consequence of the way they [women] were brought up, of the picture they had of themselves, that they must have been culturally affected based on their upbringing.” (Participant 6 – Norway)

“I’m really bad at talking about my accomplishments at work. I think I’m a part of the generation that thinks you’re bragging if you’re telling people good stories about yourself.” (Participant 3 – Iceland)

“I talk about the projects, but I don’t talk about them as my accomplishments. That would feel like bragging (...) If they [women] are really good at presenting themselves, it is often considered as arrogance.”
(Participant 7 – Iceland)

“I do think that, unfortunately, it is very often the case of men being looked at as ambitious, and women being looked at as unrealistic when they are going for the same thing.” (Participant 4 – Norway)

“It is often that women might be perceived as being aggressive when they are assertive. While men are just [perceived as] competent (...). I cannot brag about myself. That feels uncomfortable.” (Participant 1 – Norway)

“Women generally are a bit less conscious or confident to say [they] are right over men who would generally be a bit more self-promoting (...). A lot of men that are coming in, they want to become leaders after a while, while women rarely mention those type of things (...). When asked, “what do you do?” I never say I’m the CEO, and I don’t know why, but I think it is just that I don’t want to be perceived as braggy or anything like that.”
(Participant 8 – Norway)

“I feel very shy about it [self-promotion] because it feels like boasting.”
(Participant 1 – Italy)

Approximately half of the interviewees claimed that the cultural perceptions of self-promotional behaviors, along with the negative labels associated with them, are a big hindrance to women aspiring to leadership positions. Some participants further explained that to avoid those labels, women often choose to wait for their efforts to get recognized – for the management team to notice their inputs and achievements. So, rather than putting themselves out there, actively advocating for themselves, and expressing what they believe they deserve, they sit back and wait, displaying a passive approach.

“We rather expect to be noticed and seen for what we are doing than actually saying ‘you know what, I am good at this, I know what I am doing.’” (Participant 3 – Norway)

“This was my experience – a lot of the males were very – almost bragging about what they did – and they were promoting themselves very hard. And a lot of the girls (...) were saying, ‘They’ll see what we do, and they’ll recognize what we do.’ And what I have seen later on is that leaders are bombarded with so much information, they don’t have the time, or they don’t have sufficient energy to get an overview of everything that’s happening.” (Participant 2 – Norway)

“I think women tend to sit and wait. Women often think, ‘They should have thought about me’ – and I’ve done that myself. I’ve been the stupid one myself before in my life, and no one will think about you, so if you are going to have a career (...), don’t do that. Let them know what you want early (...). The worst thing that could happen is that you get a no.” (Participant 7 – Norway)

“It is my experience that women, in general, have more faith in that they will be judged by the efforts of their jobs, rather than realize or accept the fact that they actually will have to make people aware of their achievements and communicate them.” (Participant 6 – Iceland)

“I think they [women] prefer to be recognized in terms of awareness, authority, and so on, rather than to be put in a particular position – and this is a pity – because that is sometimes the reason why we [women] are not in managerial positions.” (Participant 6 – Italy)

This passive approach is further emphasized by the participants’ own tendencies to highlight their team’s accomplishments over their own – even in instances where they themselves deserve credit.

“I don’t know to which extent I highlight my own accomplishments, but I do highlight the accomplishments that the teams have achieved under my

leadership. I probably could do more of highlighting my own part in those achievements.” (Participant 6 – Iceland)

“I do emphasize cooperation because we’re a team – everything is teamwork. So, I never say the word ‘I,’ I always say ‘we’ – we have accomplished this, we have accomplished that. I have had employers that say, ‘I,’ and it really annoys me because no one person has done this or that (...). Although there are some things that I do by myself, I always implicate someone else.” (Participant 4 – Iceland)

“I think maybe I have a tendency to – or I try to – think more about ‘our’ as in our team’s accomplishments, and not just my own, because most of the work that I do is in a team.” (Participant 4 – Norway)

“I don’t talk about my achievements; I talk about the team’s. Because being a leader, you don’t perform [tasks] yourself, you do through others. And I also try to encourage us to work together on things. So, I will talk about things we have achieved, and I will talk about things that people in my team have achieved because I want them to get credit – I want everyone to see it.” (Participant 2 – Norway)

“If I talk about accomplishments, I like to talk about the team. I like to talk about them as kind of general.” (Participant 1 – Italy)

For some, the decision to adopt a more passive approach and to highlight the achievements of others over their own could also be influenced by their awareness of other women’s negative experiences with self-promotion and negotiation. *Participant 4 – Iceland* personally had such an experience herself, not too many years ago:

“I negotiated a salary that was higher than I was used to but in accordance with what everyone else was getting there. And then I think five or six months later, they hired a male straight out of school, and (...) he was higher [in salary] than me (...). They had to raise me quite a lot over him because I was absolutely livid. And this salary followed me for a

very long time (...). There were all kinds of speculations circling about how this woman had managed to secure that kind of salary – I mean, it wasn't very high, but it was higher than other people – and explanations like 'she slept with someone' were put forth."

Following their reflections on why women don't self-promote or negotiate to the same extent as men, the participants were asked about their opinions on whether women could benefit from more frequent participation in such behaviors. While the majority believed that more frequent self-promotion would likely increase women's exposure to opportunities, some participants strongly emphasized that one's professional or informal networks played a bigger role – this role of networks will be further discussed in section 5.1.3 *The Leadership Landscape*.

"If you want something and you decide to actively go for it, you need to self-promote." (Participant 7 – Iceland)

"If you do a good job where you are and create the best connections and are a bit strategic about that, opportunities will come, that is my point of view." (Participant 9 – Norway)

5.1.3 *The Leadership Landscape*

When asked to describe the leadership landscape in their respective countries, the participants agreed that women continue to be underrepresented in top management positions.

"Here in Norway, there's still a lot more men that have manager positions, leader positions, particularly in top management." (Participant 4 – Norway)

"Within the Icelandic business life – if you will – I still think that opportunities more generally go to men than to women. And I think that is represented, as an example, in the number of women who are CEOs of companies versus the number of men, etc." (Participant 6 – Iceland)

“It is not yet the moment when we can say women are at the same level as men in the job environment.” (Participant 6 – Italy)

As the participants were asked to reflect upon the reasons behind this underrepresentation, the participants from Iceland and Norway explained how they believe women are not reaching the top management level because it is filled with men – and men tend to hire other men; people have a general tendency to hire those they perceive as similar to themselves.

“I think that the reality is that our informal networks, the people that we drink beer with, or the people we play golf with, or the people we go salmon fishing with – those tend to be the network we think of when we think of people. If someone asks you to suggest someone for a role, you’re going to go into your head, and you’re going to think about the people you know and the people you like. You are not going to recommend someone you do not really like, and you are going to recommend someone you know. So, the more of these sorts of gendered networks that we have, the more likely it is that men recommend men and are not aware of the women. And that is a problem if our leadership structures are predominantly staffed with men.” (Participant 6 – Iceland)

“It is easier for a man to hire a man. They don’t think so themselves, but I, as a woman, can see it. I think that is why it is hard for women to climb [the corporate ladder] because there are so many men in top positions – and you tend to hire people that you recognize and that are similar to you.” (Participant 5 – Norway)

“We people are very simple, if other people are a bit like us, then maybe we feel more comfortable hiring them. People tend to like someone that is a lot like themself.” (Participant 7 – Norway)

Approaching the issue from a slightly different vantage point, the Italian participants highlighted that the problem was mainly that the few women already at the top management level typically don’t provide support to other women striving to reach similar positions.

“Sometimes women are just focused on being better than other women because there is not enough space [at the leadership level] for all [women].” (Participant 10 – Italy)

“A woman was against me because she was the only young woman (...). I was [older] (...). It’s a different [type of] discrimination. Sometimes also the competitive women are not doing the best for our gender.” (Participant 6 – Italy)

“She said, ‘I don’t recruit women under 45 and with a steady relationship because I just want someone 100% committed to me,’ and I was like, ‘if a woman is the first enemy of other women, what can we do?’” (Participant 1 – Italy)

Moving on to another significant aspect, the representation of men in top leadership positions compared to women has often been attributed to differences in leadership style. To further explore the role of leadership style, participants were asked to reflect upon the statement, *“Women and men have different leadership styles.”* Interestingly, the participants’ answers varied quite a bit across the three countries. Half of the Icelandic and half of the Norwegian participants claimed that individual differences (e.g., personality) – not gender – are what cause people to have different leadership styles. However, only 3 out of the 10 Italian participants even considered that individual differences could be a factor impacting leadership style.

“‘Women and men have different leadership styles.’ I would say no. For me, it’s just a personality thing, not a ‘women and men’ thing.”
(Participant 3 – Iceland)

“‘Women and men have different leadership styles.’ That might be the case. But I also think that it is more personality than gender.” (Participant 8 – Norway)

“About the style of leadership, I don’t agree. There are directive leaders, there are frank leaders, it all depends on the personality, not at all on the sex or gender.” (Participant 1 – Italy)

The other half of the Icelandic and Norwegian participants, as well as 7 out of 10 of the Italian participants, agreed that, in general, men and women have different leadership styles.

“They [women] rely on different styles and methods than men often.”
(Participant 6 – Iceland)

“I think there are definitely differences between men and women.”
(Participant 1 – Norway)

“I agree with the fact that we have different leadership styles in general.”
(Participant 3 – Italy)

Those that believed that differences in leadership styles are attributable to gender also provided descriptions of the characteristics they believed are more commonly displayed by women leaders compared to men leaders. These descriptions encompassed both traits they had personally observed in their own leaders and qualities typically associated with each gender.

“Women might be the ones that care more about people (...). They might be more likely to be more concerned about relationships than men. While men might be more concerned about the outcomes and results for the business.” (Participant 1 – Norway)

“We [women] focus more on seeing each individual, both at the workplace but also privately, on having a deeper conversation with each one.”
(Participant 9 – Norway)

“Men tend to be more authoritative, assertive (...). When it comes to leadership styles, women are more understanding. They take more time to get to know the people who they’re leading.” (Participant 3 – Norway)

“We [women] have the more innate caring approach. Whereas men can be a bit more transactional.” (Participant 2 – Norway)

“We [women] are more able to work on networks and on relationships.”
(Participant 10 – Italy)

“Women generally have a way to approach people [that is] caring, they are not competitive, and they are not so aggressive.” (Participant 6 – Italy)

“The leadership style of women is, from my experience, less directive, more inclusive. Women are working as catalysts, leading by example (...). A man is probably more near to hierarchical leadership style from my experience.” (Participant 9 – Italy)

“Generally, women are more sensitive; they also consider the personal lives of their colleagues, while men are less caring about these aspects.”
(Participant 5 – Italy)

However, irrespective of whether the participants ascribed the differences in leadership style to individual differences or gender, there was widespread agreement that the stereotypical leader is masculine. This perception was reinforced by the prevalence of male leaders highlighted in both media and history books. The participants believed that such representation significantly shapes people’s perception of what leadership entails.

“When I closed my eyes, and you said, ‘imagine a leader,’ I thought of a man because you think of famous people who are leaders who are in the news, who are saying big things that are influencing the world. So, I had like Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, and Simon Sinek in mind, very different people. But those are men, right? But they are influencing the world.”
(Participant 1 – Norway)

“Many people in society have the opinion that a leader is masculine, sort of alpha-male type, wearing a suit. I think that’s one type of leader, but there are many different types of leaders.” (Participant 6 – Iceland)

“They say ‘Oh, that one, he is really tough, he is a leader.’” (Participant 8 – Italy)

The Italian participants, in particular, explained how they have seen that some female leaders will suppress their feminine side and adjust their leadership style to better fit into this widely known, stereotypical, masculine leader mold.

“The real problem is when a woman who wants to lead forgets the female part of herself.” (Participant 7 – Italy)

“Anybody should have the possibility to choose their individual leadership style. If an aggressive leadership style is not my style, I don’t want to choose it (...). A kind leadership style, in general, is seen as a weak point for women. It is like, ‘Okay, you are not adequate to be a leader,’ and I don’t agree with this.” (Participant 3 – Italy)

Following the discussion of leadership style, the participants were asked to reflect upon the statement, *“Women are less effective than men as leaders.”* While all 29 participants disagreed with this statement, most recognized that this bias still exists and still affects women’s chances of progressing to leadership positions. One Italian participant shared her perception that many believe that – in general – a top management team becomes less effective as the number of female team members goes up. In contrast, participants from Iceland felt this was more of an outdated and less prevalent bias.

“Women are less effective than men as leaders? I don’t think so. But of course, I’ve heard it before. But this is getting said less and less. We’re making some progress with this. So hopefully, in a few years, it’s going to be really outdated.” (Participant 3 – Iceland)

When asked about the persistence of this bias, the participants most commonly attributed it to the masculine connotation of leadership. However, they also speculated that because men hold the majority of top management positions, leadership effectiveness is typically measured using criteria created by and based on men – criteria that is biased against women. The participants speculated that these criteria contribute to the perception that women are less effective as leaders.

“‘Women are less effective’. No, I don’t think there’s any difference at all. But it could be that if men are evaluating us [women], they may see it like that because maybe we are working in a different way.” (Participant 7 – Norway)

“I disagree that women are less effective as leaders. Too many times, men focus too much on things that have nothing to do with leadership.” (Participant 8 – Italy)

“‘Women are less effective than men as leaders.’ No, they are different. But there are unconscious biases on the feminine leadership.” (Participant 4 – Italy)

Some participants further pointed out that – when it comes to effectiveness – the focus is often more on women being women rather than on their actual performance and job-related accomplishments.

“Sometimes I feel that the focus is so much on that I’m a woman that they don’t realize that I do things differently.” (Participant 2 – Iceland)

“Women [have] now arrived to the [top] positions, but people are not speaking about their ability in their job, people still look at their nature as women (...). If a managing director is a woman, the first thing you can see is that people judge the way she dresses, how she speaks. What are we talking about? I mean, we should talk about the way of leading a company.” (Participant 7 – Italy)

Finally, the participants across the three countries stretched that although the stereotypically “female leadership style” differs from the stereotypically “male leadership style,” it shouldn’t be labeled as less effective.

“Women bring a different approach, and they are just as effective or maybe even more effective than men as leaders. They just have a different way of thinking and pay more attention to detail. They’re more empathetic. They are just as driven.” (Participant 3 – Norway)

“We are seeing in many areas where women more often are valued for their emotional skills, emotional intelligence, more empathy, and just are better able to be leaders.” (Participant 10 – Iceland)

“They [women] can be more effective than men in most situations because their way of being leaders is nowadays more effective than the [style] men usually have in the organizations.” (Participant 10 – Italy)

“But I think that the risk I see more is that women will lose that capability [empathy], the real nature of being a woman, which could be an added value, not a defect. It’s an added value.” (Participant 7 – Italy)

Further, the participants argued that a good variety of styles within an organization or a team should be seen as a good thing.

“It is an asset for a company to have both [male and female] styles.”
(Participant 2 – Iceland)

“We are driven in a different way compared to men (...). I think women do make great leaders because of the different qualities that we possess.”
(Participant 3 – Norway)

“There is not one single way of doing leadership. There are multiple ways that can work.” (Participant 2 – Norway)

“I like different leadership styles (...). Anybody should have the possibility to choose their individual leadership style.” (Participant 3 – Italy)

5.1.4 Work-Home Conflict

Finally, an undeniable theme that emerged from the interview transcripts was the issue of work-home conflict. Each of the 29 participants recognized that finding the right balance between work and home life was essential for career progression. However, they also acknowledged that finding such a balance was not easy, for instance, due to societal expectations and culturally accepted gender roles.

“I think that there is a societal expectation towards women, that they carry the majority of the sort of unpaid workload in society, which a lot of the time is the whole making of their families.” (Participant 6 – Iceland)

“We [women] have all these other things to tend to – family and kids and so on (...). If I just look at my friend circle, they all do – and they even sit in higher jobs and sometimes work more than their men, but they still do all the driving back and forth to things, and they buy the birthday presents, and they buy the Christmas presents, and all that (...). I think it is going to take a long time for this to get outdated.” (Participant 3 – Iceland)

“I’m sure there are families where it is 50/50, but there is more likely to be a 30/70 ratio for who is doing what when it comes to the children and the home.” (Participant 4 – Iceland)

“I feel like women, we take on so many hats. I think about, for example, my sister and my mom, they both have full-time jobs – but at home, they are the ones mostly taking care of the kids, doing most of the home chores – more than what the men do. That is a narrative I think we have to change.” (Participant 3 – Norway)

“As soon as there are kids involved, there’s definitely a bigger workload on women with the kids, and they tend to take more time off [from work]. I think that has to do with gender roles.” (Participant 4 – Norway)

“I think it is a cultural problem that is particularly evident in Italy. Even if, for example, in my family, I have the most important job, the highest-paid job – even if I do all of this, I do a lot more at home than my husband. I’m trying very hard to change this (...). It is very difficult to eradicate this behavior because it is deeply rooted in the nature of the Italian man.”
(Participant 5 – Italy)

The Italian participants, in particular, also felt that those societal expectations and culturally accepted gender roles frequently negatively influence women’s chances of reaching a higher-level position in their organization. They expressed a shared belief that these external factors imposed additional obstacles and barriers that hindered women’s career progression and limited their opportunities for advancement.

“They told me that they didn’t choose me [for a role] because I was a mother with a baby of one year, and they were very frightened that I would not be able to manage my new role – the new responsibilities – and my family life.” (Participant 5 – Italy)

“As a candidate, I might not be eligible because I am a woman, I am a mother – so I could not be at the top of the list of candidates. Because it is easier or it’s more convenient to [hire] a man.” (Participant 3 – Italy)

“They said, ‘Oh, yeah, but you’re not so interested in managing a team. You are more interested in managing your family, right?’” (Participant 6 – Italy)

Although more frequently mentioned by the Italian participants, participants from the other two countries also recognized the presence of these external factors and acknowledged their potential influence on women’s careers. They recognized that societal expectations and cultural norms, both from external sources and internalized within individuals, can impact a woman’s career advancement.

“I remember once, in an interview when I was applying for a job, I was asked – because I was at that age – I was asked if I was going to get pregnant soon. And I just thought, ‘You don’t ask questions like that,’ – it is discrimination.” (Participant 9 – Iceland)

“I have always had the thought that – when I have applied for a position or talked to people – every time I said that ‘No, I don’t have children,’ then I thought, ‘That is an advantage, right?’ Because no one will think that I need to leave immediately for home, so I can be more engaged in work.” (Participant 1 – Norway)

Irrespective of the societal expectations and cultural norms, however, the participants generally concurred that there could be some truth to the notion that women’s priorities are often influenced by their family situations.

“I have been offered – several times – very high and good jobs abroad. And I have always refused because I have a family (...). I decided that it [being there for the family] was more important than a nice career somewhere abroad. I would be happier at the end of the day if I focused on that rather than on a career for myself.” (Participant 2 – Iceland)

“Your family is a value as well – So, where do you want to put your values at each time in your life basically – because that changes over a lifetime as well. At a certain time, you may want to spend more time with your family, and that is just a personal choice.” (Participant 9 – Iceland)

“I wasn’t so interested in my career at that point in time, I was more interested in starting a family. I wanted babies, and I had small kids at home. Career was, at that point, not [a priority] in my head.” (Participant 6 – Norway)

“For me, the kids and family will always be more important than the job.” (Participant 5 – Norway)

“After having a kid, I think my priorities shifted a little bit (...). In some parts of their lives, especially when they have small children, women will prioritize differently – as a general rule.” (Participant 2 – Norway)

“I decided to split up with my ex (...), and then I decided for the first time in my career to not work internationally because I was alone with a child. So, I thought that it was not a good idea to travel too much.” (Participant 7 – Norway)

“Now the priorities are different than they were prior to motherhood.” (Participant 9 – Norway)

“Women bring a different perspective when it comes to work-life and balance. We [women] are driven in a different way compared to men.” (Participant 3 – Norway)

Many of the participants emphasized that – although family would always be high on their list of priorities – family as a value has the biggest effect on women’s prioritization of work versus home during the time their children are of young age. The participants also noted that one’s priorities can shift throughout one’s lifetime – and while the younger generation might be focused on their family’s needs, the older participants in the study explained how their focus had shifted to their own well-being – on having fun and taking care of their health.

“I think there are three aspects, maybe: quality of life, money, and professional experience – and at different points in your career, you have to decide which one is more relevant to you.” (Participant 1 – Italy)

“In the next five years, I want to work less than now. I want to have more balance between the time I spend at work (...) and my personal time, my family, and my health.” (Participant 10 – Italy)

“They [women] just want a more easy life the older they get.” (Participant 8 – Iceland)

“There is a lot I want to do, and I want to do it while I am still healthy.”
(Participant 4 – Iceland)

“I think I am at this stage in life where career is not the most important – having fun is just as important.” (Participant 7 – Norway)

“At some point, you say, ‘Okay, is this really what it is all about? Or do I want other things in my life as well and balance things differently?’”
(Participant 9 – Iceland)

However, work-life conflict is not only the consequence of shifting priorities. A lot of times, this conflict arises because there is a mismatch between women’s particular job settings and their personal needs. This point was emphasized by a few participants who stressed the importance of establishing clear boundaries early on in their careers.

“I have always said, ‘I have kids, I want to spend time with them. I will do all the work for the position, but I’m not going to stay at the office late or answer the phones regularly between 16:00 and 20:00.’ Of course, sometimes it is necessary, but it’s not supposed to be like that all the time (...). A lot of women I have met say that ‘Oh, it is not possible to have kids and work here’ – but if you set the limits yourself and tell people around you what they could expect – I haven’t been in a company that does not respect that.” (Participant 5 – Norway)

“You cannot complain if you don’t have the capability to say ‘Sorry, this is my limit, the sane limit I have put for myself and for my job.’” (Participant 7 – Italy)

Without boundaries in place, the participants acknowledged that the lines between work and home often blur, resulting in a loss of balance.

“At the end of the day, they [women] do extra work. They work also during the night to do everything – to work for the office and to work for the family. Ultimately the women who work at the office might leave

earlier, but then they get home, and then after the kids go to bed, they open up their laptop and continue to work – and nobody speaks about this.”
(Participant 3 – Italy)

However, the Italian participants likewise acknowledged that oftentimes, the problem of work-life conflict has nothing to do with boundary-setting. They pointed out that sometimes flexibility in terms of job setting simply does not exist. In those instances, the participants shared how women frequently resort to part-time employment, temporary work, or positions unaligned with their career aspirations just to make ends meet.

“I decided to join a research study because it was a part-time job, and I could stay at home [with my kid] and not ‘leave’ my career that I had just started at the time.” (Participant 10 – Italy)

“I started doing everything I could in order to help my family (...) taking on temporary jobs or whatever.” (Participant 1 – Italy)

“That [job] was not really my aim, but when I started it, it was meant as something [to do for] like three or four months just to cover the maternity leave, but then I stayed there for five years.” (Participant 7 – Italy)

As is evident from the data presented above, there is no denying that societal expectations, culturally accepted behavior and gender roles, shifting priorities, and boundary-setting all impact women’s work-life balance, as well as their opportunities for career growth. Yet, the participants’ biggest talking point in relation to work-home conflict as a barrier was maternity – and, in particular, maternity leave.

“One of the things that, of course, always puts us a little bit behind is the maternity leave. So, when you go to take care of your child, you’re going to miss out.” (Participant 5 – Iceland)

“As soon as you have kids, you’re put at a disadvantage at work because you have to stay away for a while. And then when you come back, you still have to take care of your kids.” (Participant 4 – Norway)

“We have to recognize that it [maternity] is a problem. It is a problem in the sense that one’s career can be delayed because of this interruption.” (Participant 5 – Italy)

“Between 30 and 40 years – which are the 10 years that are crucial for career development – women get pregnant, and so this really slows down their career.” (Participant 4 – Italy)

“I took longer maternity leave, so I was away for longer than I should have (...). Of course, you may have a little setback because of that (...). It is hard to come back. It takes a long time, and you are a little bit unplugged after you come back.” (Participant 3 – Iceland)

Besides slowing down women’s careers, taking maternity leave can have even greater consequences.

“I had a very senior role within a company, I went on maternity leave, and during my maternity leave, it was communicated to me that my role had been terminated and that I did not need to come back. While it was pretty obvious that what had happened was that the person who was standing in for me at that company was going to take over the role and keep it going forward.” (Participant 6 – Iceland)

“After my second maternity leave, when I came back, they told me, ‘You can no longer work in [department 1], you have to now work in [department 2].’ Another demotion.” (Participant 6 – Italy)

Considering the potential impact of maternity on women’s careers, the participants emphasized a growing trend where women are opting to delay starting their families until they have established their careers. This decision reflects

women's recognition of the potential challenges and obstacles associated with balancing motherhood and career aspirations.

“A lot more women are choosing to have kids much later. I think the average age for the firstborn has gone up a lot in the past few years. I think that is a sign of women being a lot more career-driven (...). The whole reason why I haven't had kids yet is because I felt like I needed to focus on my career first.” (Participant 4 – Norway)

“They knew how I worked, they knew they could trust me, I did my work well. And this gave me the possibility to balance my position as a mother with my position at [work].” (Participant 10 – Italy)

The participants did, however, also acknowledge that things are changing. They observed that men have started to step up and take on more of the stereotypically “women tasks.” More and more men are likewise taking paternity leave, allowing women to get back to work more quickly.

“The parental leave for men has helped women enormously as well because the disadvantage of the woman was that she would get pregnant and have children, etc. So, as soon as you change this balance, I think we are at a better place.” (Participant 9 – Iceland)

“We now have 50/50 maternal and paternal leave. This creates a new reality for our society.” (Participant 5 – Iceland)

“Norway is way ahead there. We have paternity leave – a higher paternity leave than other countries – and we have longer maternity leave, so Norway makes it possible to split time between work and home a lot better. You have a better work-life balance here.” (Participant 4 – Norway)

“I am married to a Norwegian – and I don't know if that makes a difference – but he's very good at taking part of the responsibility. And there was never a question mark if I should have a career.” (Participant 6 – Norway)

“In my relationship at home, it is my partner who actually takes more responsibility for the logistics with kindergarten and everything like that. So, I think that was maybe more of an old-fashioned way of looking at it. While the modern man – I think – is struggling as much as we do now, I still think there are probably a couple of men still who feel like that is a female responsibility.” (Participant 9 – Norway)

“The gender role is still that the woman is supposed to take care of kids and supposed to take care of the home. Even though that has really evened out in Norway, and I think now I see a lot of examples of the women working and the men staying at home with the kids (...), there is more of that balance in Norway.” (Participant 4 – Norway)

“I consider myself lucky because my husband helped me a lot, he supported me a lot with, for example preparing dinner during the week, he spends a lot of time with my [kid], etc., but there are women that do not have this kind of support.” (Participant 3 – Italy)

Just a decade ago, men were not necessarily given that same opportunity to take time off to care for their newest family member or their sick child.

“He wasn’t able to take paternity leave at the time, he knew that he would probably just be cut off if he did. He wouldn’t hold on to his job if he would take a paternity leave.” (Participant 3 – Iceland)

“My husband is very present, but, for example, he didn’t take paternity leave, even if in Italy it is possible to take paternity leave. If he had taken this opportunity, he could have been discriminated against.” (Participant 6 – Italy)

“It may be kind of accepted for an employer to say to a female worker, ‘Yes, you can take some time off from work because you have a sick kid,’ but maybe they wouldn’t give the same [opportunity] to a man.”
(Participant 4 – Norway)

Looking ahead, the participants expressed a shared anticipation of a continued trend toward a more equal distribution of domestic responsibilities. They contributed their confidence in the continuance of this trend to the workforce's incoming generation's values and priorities, as well as increased opportunities for hybrid- and flexible working following the Covid-19 pandemic.

"I feel it with the younger generation, they value free time more, they are not willing to sacrifice the time with their families like, for example, my generation." (Participant 10 – Iceland)

"I think that in the next years, we could have a better situation due to the fact that the younger generations, when they manage family relationships, they are more equal in the division and splitting family- and home issues and work." (Participant 4 – Italy)

"One of the things that the Covid-19 pandemic taught us is that we can do a very good job also from home. If you want to do a good job, you can do it [from wherever] – and this is something that for Italy, and the Italian mentality has been a real revolution." (Participant 7 – Italy)

"It's just about being flexible, working when you can, and bringing your child to work if you need to. It's no problem (...) everything is possible if you really would like to do it." (Participant 7 – Norway)

However, although the participants reported seeing a positive progression towards a more equal division of parental leave and domestic responsibilities between men and women, the Italian participants emphasized that this progression was happening at a very slow pace in Italy. They attributed this slow progress to strong cultural norms that still uphold traditional gender roles, as well as inadequate support and infrastructure for childcare in the country.

"In a country like Italy, for the family perspective – this work-life balance – usually disadvantages women compared to men." (Participant 9 – Italy)

“In Italy, we don’t have much support. We don’t have great support from public institutions. We don’t have enough nurseries [kindergartens] and schools for children. Sometimes the weekly scheduling [of the nurseries/kindergartens/schools] is not adequate for the working hours of people – so lessons at school end at two o’clock, but people are still working then.” (Participant 4 – Italy)

“I was lucky because my father took care of them [the kids], so I didn’t need a nursery or a babysitter – and then my father was really flexible, so even if I arrived one hour later [than what I had told him], without informing him, it was not a problem.” (Participant 6 – Italy)

“I believe that, in Italy, we are in a peculiar position. I think we are behind.” (Participant 1 – Italy)

5.2 Discussion

In the following chapter, the meaning of the themes presented in the previous chapter will be discussed in relation to both existing theory and the study’s main research question. To facilitate a coherent and organized presentation, these themes will be discussed in the same order as they were presented above.

5.2.1 Are Women Truly Committed to Becoming Leaders?

To become a leader, one must first be committed to the pursuit of leadership. As such, despite previous research indicating that women demonstrate a comparable level of commitment to men when it comes to pursuing leadership positions, the theme of commitment remains a central topic in discussions on barriers faced by women in advancing their careers (Eagly & Carli, 2007a; Hoyt, 2010). The present study aims to add to the understanding of women’s commitment to leadership by examining their educational background and motivational factors.

On the topic of education, the participants across the three countries expressed they disagree with the stereotype that women are less educated than men. In fact, they highlighted the opposite to be true; they witnessed a reversed gender gap in their respective countries, with more women seeking higher-level

education than men. The participants' perceptions that women are now more educated than men align with findings from recent research (Hoyt, 2010; Matteazzi et al., 2018). The participants did, however, recognize that women across the globe may not have the same opportunities for education as they do in Iceland, Norway, and Italy, and as such, they acknowledge there could be some merit to the stereotype on a more global scale. Thus, even though *education* (or lack thereof) is a non-significant barrier for women residing in the countries considered in this study, the barrier should not be removed from the leadership labyrinth.

The participants attributed women's increased commitment to education to their belief in the significance of seizing every learning opportunity to acquire the relevant skills and competence to advance their careers. Some participants highlighted women's proactivity in seeking out mentorship and developmental opportunities because they recognize they need to work harder than men to reach the same level of management. This heightened commitment to learning opportunities could be justified by the lower support and formal training provided to women with respect to their male counterparts working in comparable roles, as evidenced by research (Hoyt, 2010).

The participants' similar responses regarding the topic of education are intriguing, considering the differences in their scores on Hofstede's cultural dimension of long-term orientation. As depicted in **Table 1**, Italy has a high score of 61 on this dimension, while Iceland and Norway have much lower scores of 28 and 35, respectively. Cultures that are long-term oriented, such as Italy, typically demonstrate perseverance in pursuing long-term goals. Conversely, short-term-oriented cultures, such as Iceland and Norway, tend to prioritize achieving quick results. Therefore, one might expect Italy to place greater emphasis on proactivity in pursuing learning opportunities as a necessity for progressing into leadership roles compared to the other countries. However, the participants from Iceland and Norway displayed a strong awareness of both the stereotype that women are less educated than men and the actual educational gender gap in their respective countries, providing concrete examples. For instance, one Icelandic participant mentioned that 70% of individuals pursuing higher-level degrees in Iceland are women (*Participant 7 – Iceland*). It is probable that the Icelandic and Norwegian participants' heightened awareness of stereotypes and challenges women may

encounter on their journey to leadership offsets the influence of their cultural inclination towards short-term orientation (Hofstede Insights, 2023a).

Moving to the topic of motivation, the participants reflected upon the potential factors that could contribute to low levels of motivation to pursue leadership positions among women. On the one hand, the participants noted that women may be initially motivated to become leaders, but that motivation may diminish over time due to the challenges and friction they may face on their journey. This proposition aligns with what underlies Eagly and Carli's leadership labyrinth: women's path toward leadership is filled with barriers (Eagly & Carli, 2007a).

On the other hand, the participants emphasized that women are not necessarily motivated to become leaders at the beginning of their careers but that leadership is something they grow to want to pursue as they progress. This lack of initial motivation the participants attributed to the scarcity of female role models in top leadership positions, as well as female leaders' hostility towards other women trying to climb the ladder. Women's hostility towards each other is well-known in research as the "queen bee" phenomenon. In short, the term "queen bee" is used to describe female leaders who, as they ascend to top management roles, distance themselves from other women. These women demonstrate unsupportive behaviors that can hinder the advancement of other women, particularly those in lower positions within the organization. This queen bee phenomenon is interesting as it highlights how women who have already achieved success may be perpetuating the gender gap in leadership (Derks et al., 2016). In regard to role models, research has consistently shown that it is important for women to have same-gender role models for career progression. Female role models in leadership are particularly crucial for women because they exemplify the possibility of overcoming gender-related obstacles and achieving success. In contrast, men do not necessarily need same-gender role models, most likely because they encounter fewer gender-specific barriers during their careers (Lockwood, 2006).

Thus, although research has shown that women exhibit similar levels of motivation and aspiration for leadership positions as men holding comparable positions (Hoyt, 2010) – indicating that *motivation* is a non-significant barrier – the participants' reflections present a contrasting perspective. The participants' observations suggest that women's motivation for leadership roles may fluctuate due to lack of support and role models, highlighting that motivation could indeed

stand in the way of women. Therefore, our findings suggest the barrier still deserves recognition within the leadership labyrinth.

5.2.2 Are Self-promotion & Negotiation Essential?

An aspect that has emerged from previous research on gender differences in leadership is the observation that women are less likely than men to engage in stereotypically masculine behaviors such as self-promotion and negotiation while pursuing leadership positions. This reluctance among women has been identified as a significant barrier to their leadership advancement and is a central concept in Eagly and Carli's leadership labyrinth framework (Budworth & Mann, 2010; Eagly & Carli, 2007a; Rudman, 1998). Building upon this existing knowledge, the current study aims to shed light on the factors contributing to women's decision-making regarding self-promotion and negotiation. The study's results, as presented in the previous section, reinforce the consensus among the participants across Iceland, Norway, and Italy that women are generally less inclined to engage in self-promotional behaviors or negotiate for leadership positions compared to men. These findings are in alignment with existing literature on the subject, further highlighting the importance of understanding the underlying reasons for and consequences of these gender differences for women's leadership advancement (Hoyt, 2010).

During the interviews, the participants were asked to reflect upon why they thought women don't partake in self-promotional behaviors or negotiate so frequently. Most attributed women's hesitancy to do so to their lack of confidence and their tendency to focus on meeting all the criteria of a role prior to pursuing it. This emphasis placed on perfectionism is likely rooted in societal expectations and norms, which reflect commonly ingrained gender stereotypes and biases (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). The participants' responses revealed that self-promotion is typically perceived as bragging, and women who actively use it to further their careers are often subjected to negative labels, such as arrogant, aggressive, or unrealistic. A few participants also highlighted the impact of women's upbringing and cultural factors on women's attitudes toward self-promotion and suggested those contribute to women's reluctance to pursue leader positions. The participants' reflections posited that women's tendency to wait for recognition and promotion opportunities is a consequence of these societal expectations and cultural norms.

When exploring the factors that influence women's engagement in self-promotional and negotiation behaviors, one aspect that warrants attention is Hofstede's masculinity-femininity dimension. The dimension offers insights into whether a culture values assertiveness, competitiveness, and material success – traits associated with masculinity – as opposed to caring, cooperation, and modesty – traits associated with femininity (Hofstede Insights, 2023a).

As can be seen from **Table 1**, Iceland and Norway score 8 and 10, respectively, on this dimension. Those scores are among the lowest in the world, making them two of the globe's most feminine countries. The cultural focus on modesty may justify the Icelandic and Norwegian participants' many mentions of self-promotional behaviors being perceived as bragging. Interestingly, this emphasis on modesty could create a cultural environment that is potentially more conducive to women. In a modest society, self-promotion is considered as bragging, irrespective of the gender of the individual engaging in such behaviors. As such, the women's reluctance to self-promote aligns with the cultural norms of modesty present in these countries. The cultural tendency for cooperation may likewise justify those participants' answers to the question, "*Do you openly talk about your accomplishments at work?*" as the participants, more often than not, acknowledged they feel more comfortable talking about their team's collective achievements than their own. In societies low on masculinity, such as Iceland and Norway, attributing success to the group rather than to the individual is the culturally accepted behavior (Hofstede Insights, 2023a).

Italy, however, exhibits a high score of 70 on Hofstede's masculinity dimension (**Table 1**), meaning its culture can be characterized as masculine. The country's cultural inclination towards competitiveness and acceptance of assertive behaviors thus contrasts the cultural norms of Iceland and Norway. In Italy, self-promotion and negotiation are considered necessary for achieving success, which could create an environment difficult for women. Another noteworthy cultural dimension that may impact the Italian women's reluctance for self-promotion and negotiation is Hofstede's power distance dimension. From **Table 1**, it can be seen that Italy has a moderate score of 50 on this dimension, which may suggest the culture is accepting of hierarchical divisions to a greater extent than Norway and Iceland, which score significantly lower on the same dimension. This interplay of masculinity and power distance in the Italian culture could reinforce traditional gender roles, where men are typically expected to be assertive, and women are

encouraged to embrace nurturing and caring roles. As Italy's cultural environment places a strong emphasis on self-promotion and adherence to traditional gender roles, women in Italy may face challenges as they strive for advancement in their careers (Hofstede et al., 2010).

5.2.3 What Does the Current Leadership Landscape Look Like, and How Does It Influence Women's Progression?

Today's leadership landscape continues to be predominantly occupied by men, particularly at the highest leadership level. This observation is not only supported by empirical data from reputable sources such as the Women Business Collaborative (2022) and McKinsey & Company (2022) but fortified by the perceptions of the participants of the current study. Despite remarkable progress in the most recent years, gender disparities in top management are still strikingly high. Research has revealed that women hold only 8.8% of CEO roles in Fortune 500 companies, highlighting the substantial gender gap in top management (Women Business Collaborative, 2022). A report from McKinsey & Company (2022) on the state of women in corporate America similarly revealed that women, on average, hold only 26% of C-suite positions, 28% of SVP positions, and 32% of VP positions, while men hold 74%, 72%, and 68% respectively. These numbers are striking, considering that at the entry-level, the split between women and men is relatively equal, 48% women and 52% men. The data clearly indicates that women are entering the pipeline at a similar rate as men, however not progressing at the same pace (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

In the interviews, the participants were not explicitly asked to describe the leadership landscape in their respective countries. However, when asked about the different barriers, the participants' answers naturally provided insights into their respective countries' current situations. Perhaps unsurprisingly – given what has been confirmed by research – the participants unanimously agreed that women are still underrepresented at the top management level. Delving into the reasons behind this underrepresentation, the participants' answers pointed in two main directions. The Icelandic and Norwegian participants emphasized the potential influence of informal networks, as well as people's general tendencies to favor and offer opportunities to people they perceive as similar to themselves. The participants explained how those informal networks, often formed through leisure activities, can influence recommendations for leadership roles. Consequently,

qualified women may be overlooked simply because they are not well-known within the “right” networks. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman described this phenomenon as availability bias, wherein decision-making becomes reliant on readily accessible information and familiar connections (Kahneman, 2012). In the context of gendered networks, given that men occupy the majority of top management positions, availability bias presents a significant barrier for women as they strive for leader positions.

Approaching the issue from a slightly different angle, the Italian participants highlighted another factor contributing to the underrepresentation of women in top management. They emphasized that the limited number of women already at the highest level of management often fail to provide support or offer opportunities to other women striving for the same. The Italian participants perceived women to be more focused on outperforming each other rather than focusing on fostering a supportive environment in which women can thrive. This competitive mindset they attributed to limited opportunities and insufficient space for women at the top level of management. In comparison to participants from Iceland and Norway, the Italian participants perceived this lacking support amongst female leaders to be a significant barrier to women’s career advancement. This difference in perception could be reflective of Italy’s larger gender gap – particularly in leadership (World Economic Forum, 2022). Even so, as a few participants from Iceland and Norway also recognized that women are not very good at supporting one another, this competitiveness could be a universal issue – potentially related to the queen bee phenomenon discussed earlier (Derks et al., 2016).

The difference in the study’s participants’ perceptions of the factors perpetuating the gender gap in leadership could also be attributed – at least partially – to cultural differences. In addition to scoring high on the masculinity dimension, Italy has a high score of 76 on the dimension of individualism (**Table 1**). Out of the three countries included in this study, it is the most individualistic. In individualistic cultures, people perceive their self-image in terms of “I” to a larger extent than they do “we” and believe personal fulfillment is the key to happiness (Hofstede Insights, 2023a). High scores on both the masculinity and individualism dimensions could thus explain the intense competition among female leaders. Although Iceland and Norway are also moderately individualistic, those cultures are feminine and, therefore, value collaboration. The combination

of femininity and individualism could thus be why the Icelandic and Norwegian participants perceived the existence of gendered networks to be women's Achilles' heel as they try to move up the ranks. Although there are differences in emphasis across the three countries, the participants' reflections highlight the importance of supportive interpersonal dynamics for women's progression, demonstrating what previous research has likewise shown (Dworkin et al., 2013).

In terms of leadership style, the participants' answers were also split, with some attributing differences in style to gender and others attributing it to individual differences, including personality. Previous studies have revealed a similar range of perspectives, with some researchers suggesting noticeable variations between men and women (e.g., Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Rosener, 1990) and others indicating minimal or no gender impact on leadership style (e.g., Bartol, 1978; Dobbins & Platz, 1986; Powell, 1990). While the Icelandic and Norwegian participants were split 50/50 in their belief of whether variation in leadership style is due to one or the other, the Italian participants predominantly attributed such differences to gender. Again, the difference in the Italian participants' perceptions, compared to the others, may be due to the culture's masculine nature and emphasis on traditional gender roles. Contrastingly, Iceland's and Norway's feminine orientation may result in the countries being more accepting of both traditionally masculine and feminine qualities in leaders. This difference is reinforced by the participants' reflections on the masculine connotation of leadership (Hofstede Insights, 2023a).

While all participants recognized that the association of leadership with masculinity influences people's mental images of leaders, the Italian participants felt the effects of this to a greater extent than the others. They explained how, in Italy, women often adjust their leadership style to better fit the stereotypical, masculine leader mold and avoid being perceived as weak or inadequate for leadership. This behavior is a response to the lack of role congruence – the mismatch between society's expectation of women and the stereotypical leader. According to the role congruity model, such a mismatch leads to lower expectations for women's success in leadership positions due to the perceived absence of abilities commonly associated with men (Koenig et al., 2011). Women's inclination to adjust their leadership style to be more masculine is particularly prevalent in contexts where women are in the minority, such as in male-dominated industries (Minelgaite & Edvardsson, 2012). This observation

further showcases Italy's belief that gender differences in leadership are rooted in inherent factors rather than based on stereotypes. In contrast, the Icelandic and Norwegian participants expressed a significant awareness of gender stereotypes and how they can impact people's perceptions of leadership style. The participants from Iceland and Norway further highlighted the importance of challenging those stereotypes to foster a more inclusive leadership landscape.

As presented in the literature review, the evidence indicating that the variance in leadership style between men and women significantly affects leader effectiveness is limited. Consistent with previous research, the participants of this study unanimously disagreed with the belief that women are less effective than men as leaders (Hoyt, 2010; Minelgaite & Edvardsson, 2012). Even so, the interviews revealed the presence of a bias in the modern-day work environment, where leadership styles diverging from the stereotypical masculine image of a leader are often questioned for their effectiveness. Consistent with other research findings (Koenig et al., 2011), the participants also recognized that the existence of this bias can hinder women's opportunities for advancement.

When reflecting upon the origin of this bias, the participants pointed out that criteria used to evaluate leader effectiveness have predominantly been shaped by men and are based on characteristics more commonly associated with men rather than women. However, intriguingly, research has shown that women who adjust their style to display more masculine behaviors aligned with the leader stereotype are still evaluated as less effective than men (Koenig et al., 2011). According to the participants, this lack of role congruity observed in evaluations of leader effectiveness is one of the main reasons women are perceived as less effective than their male counterparts. The participants' reflections additionally strengthen the point made by Heilman (2001) and Shantz and Latham (2012) – as presented in section 2.1.3 *The Modern Metaphor: The Leadership Labyrinth* – that ambiguous performance evaluation criteria tend to disadvantage women.

In addition to the biased evaluation criteria and processes, the participants felt that in discussions on leader effectiveness and women, the focus is often misplaced. They expressed how there is often more emphasis on superficial aspects, such as appearances, rather than on women's actual performance as leaders. The participants identified this misplaced focus as a factor influencing societal perceptions of women's effectiveness as leaders. These perceptions are consistent with previous studies on the portrayal of spotlighted women in the

media. As an example, a study by Van der Pas & Aaldering (2020) which focused on media representations of female politicians, found that women are predominantly depicted based on gender stereotypes and that coverage of them includes a greater focus on their appearance and family life compared to their male counterparts. The study likewise highlighted the frequent mention of gender in the discussions and coverage of those spotlighted women.

Lastly, in relation to effectiveness, the participants stressed the valuable qualities – such as empathy, emotional intelligence, and attention to detail – associated with the “traditional female leadership style.” They argued that these traditional female leadership styles should not be deemed less effective than others, pointing out that organizations should embrace diversity in leadership and recognize the unique strengths that different styles bring to the table. Interestingly, research on the topic has revealed that just as women are perceived as less effective than men in positions traditionally defined in masculine terms, such as CFO or CEO, men are likewise perceived as less effective than women in positions traditionally defined in feminine terms, such as HR Director (Koenig et al., 2011; Minelgaite & Edvardsson, 2012). This finding is interesting as it suggests that effectiveness in leadership is not so black and white; it is not “men are effective as leaders, women are not.” It suggests it is not the gender of the individual that determines their perceived effectiveness in a role, but rather the match between their gender and the stereotypical expectations associated with the role – known as role congruity. To mitigate this impact of role congruity on perceived leader effectiveness, research suggests increasing the number of women in stereotypically masculine positions, as well as increasing the number of men in stereotypically feminine positions. By breaking down these gender stereotypes and promoting a more balanced gender representation across different roles, the biases associated with role congruity may be eliminated (Koenig et al., 2011). Both the participants’ perspectives and research highlight the importance of moving beyond gender stereotypes and advocating for inclusiveness and diversity in leadership.

5.2.4 Is Work-Home Conflict Still the Biggest Barrier of All?

The interviews revealed that work-home conflict is a significant concern for the study’s participants across the three countries. In fact, most participants mentioned it to be the barrier that resonated with them the most due to personal

experiences or because of stories they had heard from others. A substantial portion of the participants highlighted the societal expectations placed on women, which often require them to carry the bulk of the unpaid workload, particularly in terms of family responsibilities, even when they occupy high-level positions themselves. This aligns with existing research findings that indicate that, despite some changes in gendered expectations, women continue to bear a greater burden of household and family-related tasks (Craig & Mullan, 2010; Eagly & Carli, 2007a). The participants further expressed how these persistent gendered expectations profoundly impact women's careers, creating hindrances to their professional growth. Once again, the participants' responses closely align with existing research findings (Hoyt, 2010). The participants' reflections further echoed existing research findings suggesting that to achieve a better balance between their professional and personal lives, they often choose to take on part-time employment, temporary work, or lower-level positions with less responsibility (Hoyt, 2010; McRae, 2003). Unfortunately, women's decision to do this may contribute to the perpetuated gender gap in leadership.

While the propensity for taking on part-time jobs or lower-level positions was mainly mentioned by the Italian interviewees, participants from all three countries recognized that the high work-home conflict that women experience could also be attributed to a mismatch between their job setting, expectations, and need for flexibility. To address this issue and create a healthy work-life balance, it appears that women typically tend to either opt for the above-mentioned flexible employment options (McKinsey & Company, 2022) or they will establish clear boundaries with their employer relating to their work commitments. Establishing boundaries is particularly relevant for women, considering the additional effort they often need to put in to gain the same recognition and value in the workplace, as discussed in section 5.2.1 on commitment (Hoyt, 2010). Women may feel the need to demonstrate constant availability, even when it would be more beneficial for them to have those boundaries in place for their overall well-being. One participant from Norway emphasized that she had never met an employer that did not respect the boundaries she set, demonstrating that employers may be more flexible than often is perceived.

It is interesting to note, however, that the participants from Iceland did not put the same emphasis on boundary-setting as participants from the other countries. Instead, many emphasized the Icelandic perspective of "Þetta reddast"

[English: It will all work itself out], accentuating the country's cultural inclination towards short-term orientation and indulgence. Iceland's high score on Hofstede's indulgence dimension combined with the country's low score on long-term orientation suggests a culture in which people generally have a more optimistic view of the future, not worrying about "tomorrow's problems" in the present (Hofstede Insights, 2023a).

However, it is not always the women themselves that choose to take lower-level, temporary, or part-time positions. The participants expressed that oftentimes, women are met with prejudiced assumptions regarding their ability to effectively manage both professional and family responsibilities that obstruct their chances of advancing to higher-level positions. Research corroborates the participants' observations, revealing that working mothers encounter greater obstacles in accessing advancement opportunities (Morgenroth et al., 2021) and that the presence of family responsibilities can lead to a negative bias in the workplace, resulting in perceptions of reduced commitment and competence (Miller, 2017).

The Italian participants, in particular, shared how womanhood often negatively affects women's chances of obtaining high-level positions within their organizations. As with other barriers, the persistent gender roles ingrained in the Italian culture may play a part here. Further, the high prevalence of Italian quotes discussing this topic suggests that prejudice surrounding work-home conflict may be more widespread in Italy in comparison to Iceland and Norway, impacting Italian women's lives in a multitude of ways.

However, while highlighting that the societal expectations and cultural norms relating to domestic opportunities are often unfair, the participants nonetheless acknowledged that women's priorities can often be influenced by their family situations, particularly when those include considerations of young children. The participants' answers nevertheless suggest that women's priorities are not fixed but can evolve over time. This became evident as the study's older participants explained how their priorities had shifted from family life to their own health and well-being. However, it is important to note that the Italian participants placed less importance on leisure activities and well-being compared to their Icelandic and Norwegian counterparts. This distinction can be attributed to Italy's low score of 30 (**Table 1**) on Hofstede's cultural dimension of indulgence, indicating a societal tendency to prioritize restraint and view self-indulgence as

inappropriate. This cultural perspective of indulgence could thus be the explanation for the observed difference in emphasis on leisure time and well-being. Contrastingly, Iceland has a high score of 67 (**Table 1**), implying a greater willingness to fulfill one's impulses and desires, particularly in terms of enjoying life and having fun. Norway has a score of 55 (**Table 1**) on this dimension, falling in between the other two countries, although leaning closer to Iceland than Italy (Hofstede Insights, 2023a).

Nested under the broad topic of work-home conflict is the subtopic of maternity leave and its implications for women's advancement to leadership roles. The participants across the three countries highlighted that taking time off for childcare tends to put women at a disadvantage. It not only slows women's career progression but also brings about more significant consequences, as has been supported by research (e.g., McIntosh et al., 2012). Several participants shared their personal experiences, revealing instances where their roles were changed or even terminated during their absence, showcasing how maternity leave can result in a loss of professional standing and limit opportunities for advancement within organizations.

In response to the challenges associated with maternity leave, the participants noted how more and more women are choosing to wait to have kids and start a family until they have established their careers. This decision reflects a shift towards a more career-focused mindset among younger women compared to previous generations. It further indicates that women are recognizing the conflict between motherhood and career progression and are strategically timing starting a family to minimize the impact on their professional growth. The participants' reflections are in alignment with what research has found – women across Europe are becoming more career-oriented and have started delaying their first childbirth as a part of career planning (Nicoletti & Tanturri, 2008).

The participants acknowledged that things are changing in terms of gender roles and traditionally ascribed responsibilities. Specifically, the participants from Iceland and Norway emphasized the increasing involvement of men in family life, including their willingness to shoulder parts of the domestic responsibilities and take paternity leave. This shift is likely influenced by the implementation of more equitable parental leave policies in these particular countries, where both parents are entitled to equal time off (Icelandic Ministry of Social Affairs, n.d.; Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), 2019). This has changed

from only a decade ago when men did not have the same right as women to parental leave and often hesitated to take time off because they were concerned about the repercussions it could have for their careers. However, despite these positive developments, the participants from these countries recognized that societal expectations regarding gender roles still linger and that some men continue to hold onto the belief that taking care of the family should be the responsibility of a woman.

The Italian participants also noticed a progression in the right direction, albeit not to the same extent as participants from the other countries. When asked to elaborate on the matter, the Italian participants attributed this slow progress to Italy's deeply ingrained cultural norms and the insufficient infrastructure for childcare in the country. The lack of nurseries and schools, along with the school hours conflicting with people's general work hours, the participants claimed, is a big obstacle to achieving a more equal division of parental leave and domestic responsibilities. In addition, and quite interestingly, the Italian participants that mentioned receiving support from their husbands in managing household and childcare responsibilities all regarded their situation as unique. They explained how such support was not the norm in Italy but that it significantly contributed to their ability to reach their current positions. This perception that men's involvement in domestic responsibilities is uncommon in Italy contrasts the views of the Icelandic and Norwegian participants, who considered it more natural for men to shoulder a part of those responsibilities.

Nonetheless, when asked about the future, participants across all three countries were optimistic. They believed the positive progression towards gender equality in parenting and family life would continue. This optimism they attributed to the priorities and values of the younger generation as well as increased opportunities for hybrid- and flexible-working following the Covid-19 pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way companies view work; many companies now recognize the feasibility and benefits of remote and flexible work arrangements (Agba et al., 2020). This newfound flexibility enables parents to work and care for their children simultaneously (Carli, 2020), something that the Italian participants, in particular, thought to be revolutionary for the Italian system.

6.0 Conclusion & Implications

The current study set out to explore and enrich the understanding of barriers to leadership confronting modern-day women and provide substance to the recently established leadership labyrinth metaphor. The study, which was of cross-cultural nature, aimed to explore the research question “*What role does culture play in how women perceive their barriers to leadership advancement?*” through interviews with women in leadership positions in Iceland, Norway, and Italy. As little research exists on the linkage between culture and modern-day women’s perceived barriers to leadership advancement, particularly in the context of Eagly and Carli’s leadership labyrinth framework, the study contributes to strengthening the applicability of the framework. By examining the influence of culture on women’s perspectives of their barriers to leadership advancement, the study further adds to the understanding of the complexities surrounding women’s leadership experiences.

The analysis of the participants’ interviews revealed four key barriers that women encounter on their journey to leadership, which align with the barriers outlined in the leadership labyrinth framework. The current leadership landscape is a hindrance to women because top-management positions are predominantly held by men. This gender disparity creates an environment where women often go unnoticed and struggle to break into the established networks dominated by men. In addition, conversely to what one might assume, the limited number of women in senior positions are often unsupportive of and hostile towards other women, further reinforcing the gender gap in leadership. The current underrepresentation of women in leadership thus creates a vicious cycle, perpetuating the continued underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. To break that cycle, our findings suggest that organizations should focus on two important strategies. First, they should strive to increase the representation of women in leadership positions, especially those defined in masculine terms. Second, they should aim to increase the number of men in roles traditionally associated with femininity. By promoting gender diversity in both directions, organizations can challenge and overcome traditional gender stereotypes and contribute to a more balanced and inclusive leadership landscape.

In terms of women’s commitment to becoming leaders, our findings suggest it is something that can fluctuate over the course of one’s lifetime due to barriers such as unsupportive work environments and lack of balance between

work and private life. These types of barriers have the potential to diminish women's drive and aspirations for leadership positions, particularly when they lack visible female role models to look up to. Again, the lack of female role models at the top-management level can be attributed to the vicious cycle of the current leadership landscape. Women's reluctance to self-promote and negotiate for leader roles is also a contributing factor here, although masculine cultures (Italy) may be more significantly affected by this reluctance than feminine cultures (Iceland and Norway). While our findings show women's reluctance to engage in these types of behaviors is largely a consequence of societal expectations and cultural norms ingrained during their upbringing, organizations nevertheless have an important role in addressing these challenges. By being aware of women's natural tendency to sit back and wait for their efforts to be recognized, organizations can take proactive steps to create an environment in which women are encouraged to assert themselves in leadership contexts and seize promotional opportunities. In addition, organizations should consider implementing mentorship programs that can offer women guidance and opportunities to develop their leadership skills. These programs could help bridge the gap between the lack of visible female role models and women's aspirations for leader roles, as well as help women break into the male-dominated established networks in top management.

Lastly, our findings show that work-home conflict is still the biggest barrier faced by women. Maternity leave, in particular, causes instability and uncertainty in women's lives, slowing down their career progression. However, the findings also suggest that the impact of this barrier varies across different countries and that this variation can largely be attributed to the availability and quality (or lack thereof) of infrastructure for childcare in the country. Other factors that influence the size and impact of this barrier are the division of parental leave and domestic responsibilities between men and women. As these factors are largely influenced by societal and cultural norms and thus beyond the direct control of organizations, the barrier may be more difficult to break than others. Organizations can nonetheless play a role in addressing this barrier by implementing policies that support work-life balance. This includes offering flexibility and support for childcare, as well as ensuring fair and transparent selection and promotion processes. By actively working to create equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their gender or parental status,

organizations can help counteract the influence of societal expectations and cultural norms. It is important that organizations recognize all these challenges faced by women – mothers or not – and take proactive steps to provide them with the necessary support they need to overcome their barriers and pursue leadership positions on an equal footing with their male counterparts.

Based on the findings of this study, the leadership labyrinth framework is a good framework applicable across different cultures. It covers a variety of barriers that women may face on their path to becoming leaders, although not all are universally applicable to every country. *Education*, for instance – although included in the labyrinth – was not identified as a barrier by the participants of this study. However, this does not imply education is not a barrier in other countries; the absence of education as a barrier in this study may be specific to the context of the participants.

The study likewise revealed cultural differences between the participants' answers, suggesting culture does indeed play a role in shaping women's perceptions of their barriers to leadership advancement. These cultural disparities imply that the experiences and perspectives of women from different cultural backgrounds may vary based on their social and cultural contexts. However, it is important to note that this study was not able to determine the exact extent of those differences, highlighting the need for additional research on the topic. As such, while the current study provided valuable insights into the existence of such cultural disparities, further research into the specific cultural factors that contribute to varying perceptions of barriers to leadership is necessary.

7.0 Limitations & Future Research

7.1 Limitations

In addition to the limitations inherent to qualitative research (outlined in section *3.0 Method*), this study has several other limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study's cross-cultural nature introduces certain considerations. Conducting research across different cultures can introduce biases due to variations in societal norms and tendencies, which may affect participants' answers to interview questions. Subtle differences in response patterns among cultures make it challenging to control for these biases. For example, certain societies may have a tendency to respond more positively or agreeably to

interview questions, aligning with their cultural expectations (Gobo, 2011). These cultural disparities can also impact the interpretation of the interviewees' words and meanings by the researcher, potentially leading to misunderstandings. It is, as such, crucial to recognize the implications of operating as either a cultural insider or outsider, as these factors can influence the research process (Court & Abbas, 2013; Saunders et al., 2019).

A second limitation of this study is that all the interviews were conducted in English. This decision was made to maintain consistency in the wording of the interview questions and to enable comparability of the participants' answers. However, as English is none of the participants' mother tongue, conducting the interviews this way may have introduced language barriers and potential limitations in the participants' ability to express themselves fully. In addition, those language barriers may have influenced the participants' interpretations of the questions, potentially leading to different answers compared to interviews conducted in their native language. While efforts were made to ensure clarity and understanding during the interviews, and questions were repeated and rephrased when they were unclear to the participants, English proficiency could have impacted the richness and depth of the responses. Specific cultural nuances and subtle meanings might have also been lost (Bell et al., 2019).

However, it is worth noting that the two researchers conducting the interviews had a good understanding of Icelandic (native), Italian (native), and Norwegian (intermediate). This linguistic background may have helped counterbalance the limitation of language proficiency to some extent, as the participants could use words or phrases from their native languages to better express themselves. Even so, the potential influence of language proficiency on the data should not be underestimated.

In the context of cross-cultural research, a potential third limitation of this study is the cultural framework selected. The use of Hofstede's cultural dimensions model – while well-established, appropriate, and valuable – may not fully encompass the intricate and diverse nature of cultural influences on perceptions of barriers. Cultural dynamics are complex and vary across different contexts, warranting the consideration of alternative or complementary cultural frameworks that incorporate a wider range of factors.

A fourth limitation of this study is the use of the Zoom videoconferencing platform for conducting the interviews. In-person interviews are typically

considered a better alternative to digital interviews, as they allow for a more comprehensive understanding of participants' expressions, both verbal and non-verbal (Bell et al., 2019). This limitation may have had a greater impact on the Italian participants of the study compared to the others, as Italians are known to be quite reliant on gestures and body movements to convey their thoughts and emotions (Hofstede Insights, 2023a). It is plausible that the digital interviews were not able to fully capture the richness and nuances of these non-verbal cues, potentially impacting the depth of the data collected. Even so, it is worth noting that as people have become more accustomed to using digital tools, e.g., for work meetings, following the pandemic, this limitation may not be as significant now as it used to be (Bell et al., 2019; Keen et al., 2022).

A fifth limitation worth noting relates to the selection criteria used in this study. Specifically, the decision to only interview women who currently hold leadership positions, with a minimum of one direct report, may have implications. Although focusing on the perceptions of female leaders provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge that this criterion limits the study by excluding the perspectives of women unable to obtain leadership positions due to the different barriers examined in this research. By solely examining the leader perspectives, the study may not fully capture the range of obstacles faced by women who did not make it to leadership roles.

In addition to the aforementioned limitations specific to the current study, it is important to also acknowledge the presence of researcher bias – a common limitation in any type of research, despite researchers' efforts to maintain objectivity. Researcher bias occurs when the personal beliefs, experiences, and perspectives of researchers unintentionally influence the interpretation and discussion of the findings, potentially compromising the integrity and validity of the study (Saunders et al., 2019). In this study, the researchers were aware that their prior knowledge and expectations about the topic could potentially impact the emphasis placed on certain themes during the analysis. To mitigate this bias in the current study, focus was put on contextualizing the findings by comparing and aligning them with previous studies. This approach helps identify potential areas where researchers' personal biases may have influenced the interpretation of the findings.

7.2 Future Research

Based on the limitations of this study, we suggest that future researchers aiming to further explore the topic of the gender gap in leadership consider the following. In the case of a cross-cultural qualitative design, future researchers should consider conducting interviews in participants' native language or using interpreters to overcome language barriers and capture a more accurate representation of the participants' perspectives. In addition, future research could focus on developing frameworks specifically designed for understanding cultural differences in perceptions of leadership and gender roles, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. Furthermore, future research should consider expanding the participant selection criteria to include female non-leaders – and even male leaders – to paint a more comprehensive picture of the issue.

Moreover, in addition to examining cultural factors and group differences, future research could delve deeper into the role of individual differences, such as personality traits, in shaping women's perceptions of their barriers to leadership. By considering both group and individual influences, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the barriers women face on their paths to leadership roles. Findings from such research would provide valuable insights and potentially facilitate the development of targeted interventions and strategies that address these barriers effectively, not only at the cultural but also at the individual level. By incorporating these recommendations, we believe future researchers can further advance our understanding of the gender gap in leadership and contribute to the development of interventions and strategies aimed at promoting gender equality in leadership roles. These interventions and strategies, once developed, can then be adopted and implemented by organizations to foster positive change and more inclusive and equitable leadership environments.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

The primary aim of the interviews was to gain insights into the interviewees' perceptions of barriers to women's leadership advancement. This interview questionnaire was designed based on the leadership labyrinth framework created by Eagly and Carli. It includes questions that cover the three categories of barriers outlined in the framework, with an emphasis on those barriers that emerged as the most prominent barriers facing modern-day women from the literature review.

Theme		Question
Career/Background (Education/Work Experience)		Can you tell us a little bit about your career and how you have progressed/How you got to the position you are in today?
Career Development (Developmental Opportunities and Motivation & Commitment)		What are your personal goals for career development? Where do you see yourself in, e.g., 5 years?
Recogniti on of Barriers	Human Capital <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Education •Work Experience •Developmental Opportunities •Work-Home Conflict 	<p>We are going to read out a couple of statements. We want you to listen to them and, afterwards, tell us about whether you've heard any of them before.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Women are less educated than men •Women don't have the relevant work experience to be leaders •Women don't take advantage of developmental opportunities available to them •Women have to split their time between work and home more than men do <p>Which ones have you heard? Can you tell us a bit about them?</p>
	Gender Differences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Effectiveness •Style •Commitment and Motivation •Self-promotion •Negotiation Traits 	<p>We are now going to read a couple more statements and ask you to do the same thing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Women are less effective than men as leaders •Women and men have different leadership styles •Women are less committed and motivated to become leaders •Women are less likely to self-promote than men •Women don't negotiate as aggressively as men for leadership positions

	<p>Prejudice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Gender Stereotypes •Biased Perception and Evaluations 	<p>These are the last statements we are going to read for you. And, again, we ask you to do the same.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Gender stereotypes disadvantage women •Perceptions and evaluations of women in the workforce are often biased by gender roles
<p>Personal experience (combination of all categories)</p>		<p>Do you believe you have faced barriers to leadership advancement in your career? Can you elaborate?</p>
<p>Leadership role and stereotypes (Gender Differences and Prejudice)</p>		<p>We are now going to ask you to close your eyes and picture a good leader. Can you describe that leader to us? What do they look like? What do they do that makes them a good leader?</p>
<p>Work-life challenges (Human Capital)</p>		<p>Has anything in your personal life ever stood in your way or stopped you from taking on a leadership position? What was that?</p>
<p>Self-promotion (Gender Differences)</p>		<p>Do you openly talk about your accomplishments at work?</p> <p>If yes: How do you think that has helped you progress in your career?</p> <p>If no: Why do you think that is?</p>

Appendix B

Information and Consent Form

Are you interested in taking part in the research project

“The role of personality and culture in how women perceive their opportunities for leadership advancement”?

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to examine how women perceive their opportunities and barriers to leadership advancement. In this letter we will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

Purpose of the project

We are Alessandra Bottelli and Hildur Davíðsdóttir, two M.Sc. students at BI Norwegian Business School, currently pursuing our degree in Leadership and Organizational Psychology. Working with our Thesis Supervisor, Øyvind Lund Martinsen, Head of the Department of Leadership and Organizational Behaviour, we would like to invite you to take part in our Master Thesis research, which concerns women and leadership across cultures (Norway, Italy & Iceland). The study aims to examine the question: *“What role do personality and culture play in how women perceive their opportunities for leadership advancement?”*

Who is responsible for the research project?

BI Norwegian Business School is the institution responsible for the project.

Why are you being asked to participate?

For our research, we are looking at female managers working in Norway, Italy, and/or Iceland. “Manager” in this context refers to anyone overseeing a minimum of one direct report. We are looking for a total of 25-30 participants, 8-10 from each of the three countries.

What does participation involve for you?

If you chose to take part in the project, we will ask to schedule a phone or video interview with you, whichever one you prefer. The interview should take approx. 45 minutes and will be conducted in English. The interview questions would be

on your perceived opportunities and barriers to leadership advancement. If you consent, the interview will be audio recorded. In addition, we will ask you to fill out pre-interview and personality questionnaires prior to the interview. It should take you no more than 7 minutes in total. Your answers to the questionnaires will be recorded electronically. Following the completion of the personality assessment, we will provide you with your results.

Participation is voluntary

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you chose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will then be made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data

We will only use your personal data for the purpose specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act).

- The data collected will be accessible to Øyvind Lund Martinsen (Thesis Supervisor), Alessandra Bottelli and Hildur Davíðsdóttir (Student Researchers).
- We will replace your name and contact details with a code. The list of names, contact details and respective codes will be stored separately from the rest of the collected data. The data stored will be encrypted and password protected.
- We will use Qualtrics to collect data on personality and the participants' background.
- We will use Otter.ai to transcribe the participants' interviews.
- We will use OneDrive to store the data.
- We will use SPSS to analyse the data on personality.

All data will be anonymized in publication and no participant will be recognizable.

What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?

The project is scheduled to end on July 3rd, 2023. All data will be anonymized at the end of the project. Digital recordings will be deleted.

Your rights

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

What gives us the right to process your personal data?

We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with BI Norwegian Business School, Data Protection Services has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more?

If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- BI Norwegian Business School via Øyvind Lund Martinsen, by email: oyvind.martinsen@bi.no.
- Alessandra Bottelli, by email: s2111912@bi.no, and Hildur Davíðsdóttir, by email: s2111764@bi.no.
- Our Data Protection Officer: Vibeke Nesbakken, by email: personvernombud@bi.no.
- Data Protection Services, by email: (personverntjenester@sikt.no) or by telephone: +47 53 21 15 00.

Yours sincerely,



Øyvind Lund Martinsen,
(Supervisor)



Alessandra Bottelli & Hildur Davíðsdóttir
(Student Researchers)

Consent form

I have received and understood information about the project “*The role of personality and culture in how women perceive their opportunities for leadership advancement*” and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

- to participate in an interview and online survey

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, approx. July 3rd, 2023

(Signed by participant, date: / /2023)

Note: The information & consent letter mentions a personality questionnaire (BFI). This questionnaire was distributed to participants, however, mainly due to time constraints, the data was not used.

Appendix C

NSD Approval



[Notification form](#) / [Master Thesis - The role of personality and culture in how wo...](#) / Assessment

Assessment of processing of personal data

Reference number 999419	Assessment type Automatic	Date 16.12.2022
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Project title
Master Thesis - The role of personality and culture in how women perceive their opportunities for leadership advancement

Data controller (institution responsible for the project)
Handelshøyskolen BI / BI Oslo / Institutt for ledelse og organisasjon

Project leader
Øyvind Lund Marinsen

Student
Hildur Davidsdottir

Project period
18.11.2022 - 03.07.2023

Categories of personal data
General

Legal basis
Consent (General Data Protection Regulation art. 6 nr. 1 a)

The processing of personal data is lawful, so long as it is carried out as stated in the notification form. The legal basis is valid until 03.07.2023.

[Notification Form](#)

Basis for automatic assessment

The notification form has received an automatic assessment. This means that the assessment has been automatically generated based on the information registered in the notification form. Only processing of personal data with low risk for data subjects receive an automatic assessment. Key criteria are:

- Data subjects are over the age of 15
- Processing does not include special categories of personal data;
 - Racial or ethnic origin
 - Political, religious or philosophical beliefs
 - Trade union membership
 - Genetic data
 - Biometric data to uniquely identify an individual
 - Health data
 - Sex life or sexual orientation
- Processing does not include personal data about criminal convictions and offences
- Personal data shall not be processed outside the EU/EEA, and no one located outside the EU/EEA shall have access to the personal data
- Data subjects will receive information in advance about the processing of their personal data.

Information provided to data subjects (samples) must include

- The identity and contact details of the data controller
- Contact details of the data protection officer (if relevant)
- The purpose for processing personal data
- The scientific purpose of the project
- The legal basis for processing personal data
- What type of personal data will be processed and how it will be collected, or from where it will be obtained
- Who will have access to the personal data (categories of recipients)
- How long the personal data will be processed

- The right to withdraw consent and other rights

We recommend using our [template for the information letter](#).

Information security

You must process the personal data in accordance with the storage guide and information security guidelines of the data controller. The institution is responsible for ensuring that the conditions of Article 5(1)(d) accuracy and 5(1)(f) integrity and confidentiality, as well as Article 32 security, are met.