



Vaasan yliopisto
UNIVERSITY OF VAASA

Alma Näveri

Young women's perceptions of leadership

The perspective of Finnish women in their early careers

School of Management
Master's Thesis in International
Business

Vaasa 2026

UNIVERSITY OF VAASA**School of Management**

Author:	Alma Näveri		
Title of the thesis:	Young women's perceptions of leadership: The perspective of Finnish women in their early careers		
Degree:	Master of Science in Economics and Business Administration		
Degree Programme:	Master's Degree Programme in International Business		
Supervisor:	Vesa Suutari		
Year:	2026	Pages:	84

TIIVISTELMÄ:

Naisten johtajuus ja sukupuolten tasa-arvo organisaatioissa ovat saaneet viime vuosikymmeninä yhä enemmän huomiota. Vaikka naisten osallistuminen korkeakoulutukseen ja työelämään on kasvanut, heidän edustuksensa johtotehtävissä on edelleen epätasaista. Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on syventää ymmärrystä 25–30-vuotiaiden suomalaisten naisten johtajuuskäsityksistä uransa alkuvaiheessa. Tavoitteena on syventää ymmärrystä siitä, miten nuoret naiset suhtautuvat johtajuuteen, mitä esteitä nuoret naiset kohtaavat pyrkiessään johtotehtäviin sekä minkälaisen tuen avulla nuoret naiset voivat edetä kohti johtotehtäviä uransa alkuvaiheessa.

Teoreettinen viitekehys pohjautuu kirjallisuuteen, joka käsittelee naisten johtajuuden kehitystä, lasikattoilmiötä ja sen syitä, johtajuusidentiteetin muodostumista, uran alkuvaiheen kehittymistä sekä yksilö-, organisaatio-, kulttuuri- ja henkilökohtaisia tekijöitä, jotka muovaavat naisten johtajuuspyrkimyksiä. Tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena tutkimuksena, jotta osallistujien kokemuksista ja näkemyksistä saataisiin syvälinen ymmärrys. Aineisto kerättiin puolistrukturoidulla yksilöhaastatteluilla uransa alkuvaiheessa olevilta nuorilta naisilta, joilla on joko johtamiskokemusta tai kiinnostusta johtotehtäviä kohtaan. Haastateltavat valittiin tarkoituksenmukaisella otannalla siten, että heillä oli tutkimusaiheen kannalta relevantteja kokemuksia ja näkemyksiä. Haastatteluaineisto analysoitiin temaattisen analyysin avulla kuusivaiheista analyysiprosessia noudattaen sekä abduktiivista lähestymistapaa hyödyntäen.

Tulokset osoittavat, että uransa alkuvaiheessa olevat naiset kokevat johtajuuden ensisijaisesti mahdollisuutena itsensä kehittämiseen ja ihmissuhdepainotteiseen kasvuun, ei niinkään vallan tai statuksen tavoitteluna. Hyvään johtajuuteen yhdistettiin empatia, valmentaminen ja alaisten ammatillisten tavoitteiden tukeminen. Samalla tunnistettiin, että näitä yhteisöllisiä piirteitä aliarvioidaan organisaatioissa. Osallistajat kokivat kunnianhimonsa keinona haastaa sukupuolittuneita käsityksiä johtajuudesta. Esteitä koettiin yksilötasolla, jossa osallistajat raportoivat pysyvistä sukupuoleen liittyvistä odotuksista, kuten miesvaltaisilla aloilla koetusta tarkkailusta sekä ennakoivasta äitiysrangaistuksesta. Esteet organisaatiotasolla, kuten hierarkiat, epäviralliset miesverkostot ja perinteiset työkulttuurit rajoittivat naisten pääsyä johtotehtäviin. Tuen osalta jatkuva palaute, mentorointi ja johtamisen kehittämisohjelmat nousivat esiin keskeisinä urakehityksen mahdollistajina. Itseluottamus tunnistettiin tärkeäksi voimavaraksi, jota rakennettiin pitkäkestoisten mentorointisuhteiden ja naispuolisten roolimallien näkyvyyden kautta.

Tutkimus täydentää olemassa olevaa kirjallisuutta tuomalla esiin, miten rakenteelliset esteet ja ennakoivat huolet muovaavat nuorten naisten johtajuuskäsityksiä jo ennen kuin he kohtaavat niitä. Tulosten perusteella organisaatioiden, johtajuuden kehittämisen ammattilaisten ja päätöksentekijöiden tulisi priorisoida varhaista tukea mentorointiin, roolimallien näkyvyyteen ja inklusiivisiin kulttuureihin nuorten naisten johtajuuskehityksen tukemiseksi uran alku vaiheessa.

KEYWORDS: Leadership, Women's Leadership, Leadership Identity, Early Career, Gendered Expectations, Glass Ceiling, Leadership Aspirations

Contents

1	Introduction	6
1.1	Research purpose and objectives	10
1.2	Significance of the research and research scope	11
1.3	Use of AI	12
1.4	Structure of the thesis	12
2	Women in leadership	15
2.1	Evolution of female leadership	15
2.2	Glass ceiling and its causes	18
2.2.1	Individual factors	18
2.2.2	Organizational factors	19
2.2.3	Policy related factors	21
2.2.4	Social and cultural factors	21
2.3	Factors affecting young women's early careers	22
2.3.1	Leadership identity	22
2.3.2	Early career decision-making and development	23
2.3.3	Ambition and motivation	25
2.3.4	Organizational barriers: Factors slowing career development	26
2.3.5	Cultural barriers: Expectations, norms, and work-life balance	28
2.3.6	Personal-level challenges: Self-doubt and impostor syndrome	30
2.3.7	Supports: Role models, mentors, and leadership programs	31
2.4	Theoretical framework of the research	33
3	Methods	36
3.1	Data collection method	37
3.2	Sampling and participants	39
3.3	Data collection process	41
3.4	Data analysis	43
3.5	Trustworthiness	46
3.6	Ethical considerations	48

4	Findings	51
4.1	Leadership perceptions	51
4.1.1	Leadership aspirations: Self-development and challenging of gender norms	51
4.1.2	Perceived key leadership traits	53
4.2	Barriers	56
4.2.1	Gender expectations	56
4.2.2	Organizational and structural constraints	58
4.3	Supports	62
4.3.1	Support mechanism for career development	62
4.3.2	Support mechanism for self-confidence	64
5	Conclusion	67
5.1	Contribution and practical implications	72
5.2	Limitations	73
5.3	Suggestions for future research	74
	References	75
	Appendices	84
	Appendix 1. Consent form for research participation	84

Figures

Figure 1. Theoretical framework: Perceptions, barriers, and supports in young women's early career leadership adapted from Clarke (2011), Dixon et al. (2023), and Taparua and Lenka (2022).

Figure 2. Six phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Tables

Table 1. The interviewees' overview.

1 Introduction

Leadership continues to be one of the most widely discussed topics in business and organizational research. As organizations navigate globalization, digital transformation, and workforce expectations, effective leadership has become more critical. In recent decades, female leadership has become an important topic in discussion on workplace equality, diversity, and organizational innovation. Female leadership or women's leadership refers to the specific traits, behaviors, and styles that women leaders exhibit in leadership roles, which enable them to inspire and mobilize organizational members toward achieving common goals (Chen et al., 2025, p. 2).

Although women's participation in the workforce has increased, their advancement to leadership positions remains uneven compared with men (ILO, 2025a). Previous studies suggest that women globally are more educated and experienced than at any point in history, making them well qualified for leadership roles (McEldowney et al., 2009). In the Nordic countries, women are more likely than men to complete higher education (Nordic Cooperation, 2023). However, in some countries, universities appear to admit less qualified men instead of more qualified women in order to achieve gender balance, making it difficult for women to access the best universities, even if they are sufficiently qualified (McEldowney et al., 2009). Although the number of female university students increased from 15.1% to 46.4% between 1995 and 2024, they are underrepresented in particular in certain fields such as STEM fields, meaning science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (ILO, 2025a, pp. 5-6). Women are more likely to pursue studies in healthcare and nursing due to gender stereotypes, while men are more likely to choose STEM fields (Nordic Cooperation, 2023). Increasing the number of women in STEM education is a goal of gender equality policy in all Nordic countries (Nordic Cooperation, 2023). Although women have achieved better results and equality in education in many fields, even surpassing men, this progress has not been reflected in equality in the labor market (Beltramini et al., 2022). Women are still underrepresented in STEM fields and in high-paying leadership positions in those fields (UNESCO, 2024).

Despite the assumption that higher levels of education would naturally lead to a greater proportion of women in leadership positions, women remain significantly underrepresented (ILO, 2025a). Globally, women's labor force participation rate stands at 48.8%, while men's is significantly higher at 72.9% (ILO, 2025a, p. 2). In contrast, the female employment rate in the Nordic countries, meaning Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, was between 70.7% and 73.5% in 2021, and the employment rate in Finland for women is 70.7% and for men 72.6% (Nordic Cooperation, 2023). The female employment rate in the Nordics is significantly higher than in the EU on average, due to the Nordic countries' commitment to various initiatives, such as subsidized childcare, parental leave arrangements, equal pay, and education.

Although the gender gap in employment has narrowed, this development is primarily explained by a decline in the participation rate among men rather than a significant strengthening of the position of women (ILO, 2025a, p. 2). The gender pay gap also remains one of the most significant obstacles to achieving equality in the workplace, with women earning on average 20% less than men at all wage and income levels (ILO, 2025, p. 5). The gender pay gap also remains visible in the Nordic countries, even though it has generally decreased over the past decade (Nordic Cooperation, 2023). Globally, women hold fewer than 30% of senior management positions and only one in five companies has a female CEO (ILO, 2025a). In 2023, women represent only 9.1% of board chairs, 6.5% of CEOs (Chen et al., 2025), and 35.4 % of leadership positions globally (ILO, 2025a). In 2024, women accounted for 37.7% of leadership positions in Finland, and the representation of women on the board was 37-38% (STT, 2025). Consequently, researchers have considered whether underrepresentation is not only an ethical issue but also a concern related to performance, as evidence suggests that women may perform better than men in leadership roles (Buss et al., 2025).

According to the International Labor Organization (2025), organizations with women in decision-making and leadership roles and positions tend to be more successful, better managed, innovative, and adaptable to change. Women's leadership in organizations has

been found to improve employee engagement, performance, and social well-being (Dixon et al., 2023). Evidence shows that organizations with a higher proportion of women in leadership positions are 18-69% more likely to be profitable than the average company in the same sector (Clarke, 2011, p. 499). Furthermore, empirical evidence indicates that female leadership and gender equality are positively correlated with enhanced workforce outcomes, including higher levels of employee satisfaction, improved retention of employees, and reduced gender disparities in promotion rates (ILO, 2025b). Therefore, these findings highlight the key role of gender equality in promoting organizational efficiency and competitive advantage in today's business environments (ILO, 2025b).

Therefore, many organizations face challenges in realizing the benefits of gender balance in the workplace and in leadership positions, and women remain underrepresented in leadership roles due to several persistent structural and cultural barriers (ILO, 2025a). According to ILO (2025a) the glass ceiling remains a significant barrier to corporate advancement. The glass ceiling can be defined as prejudice or gender-based behavioral differences consisting of assumptions, organizational culture, and social expectations that silently hinder women's career development (Çitil, 2022). Over the past three decades, various measures have been implemented to improve gender equality. Despite these efforts, progress toward gender equality in senior roles has remained limited, and women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions across many sectors . In addition to the glass ceiling, research suggests that a range of factors shape how young women experience career advancement and develop interest in leadership roles. These include the formation of leadership identity, early career decision-making, and access to opportunities for professional development (Ibarra et al., 2013). Furthermore, individual factors such as ambition, motivation, and career aspirations interact with broader organizational and societal influences to shape women's leadership trajectories (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Previous research has shown the importance of contextual barriers that affect women's early career development. Organizational barriers, such as gender bias in promotion processes and limited access to networks, can slow down women's career development (Ely et al., 2011). Cultural expectations and gender norms, particularly those related to leadership stereotypes and work-life balance, can also influence women's perceptions of leadership roles and their willingness to pursue them (Eagly & Karau, 2002). At the individual level, challenges such as insecurity and imposter syndrome have been identified as factors that can affect women's confidence to pursue leadership roles (Ibarra et al., 2013). At the same time, research highlights the importance of support mechanisms such as role models, mentoring relationships, and leadership development programs in promoting women's leadership aspirations and facilitating career advancement in the early stages of their professional development (Ely et al., 2011; Ibarra et al., 2013).

Increasing women's participation in the business context is essential to tapping into a broader talent pool and ensuring the most qualified individuals are selected for leadership positions (Clarke, 2011, p. 498). For employers, investors, and stakeholders focused on performance and growth, women's advancement is not merely a matter of equity, it is a strategic imperative (ILO, 2025b). Consequently, the previous research has considered whether underrepresentation is not only an ethical issue but also a concern related to performance, as evidence suggests that women may perform better than men in leadership roles (Buss et al., 2025).

In this research, the focus is on young women aged between 25 and 30, and early career refers to a fundamental phase of early adulthood during which individuals take their first significant steps toward career advancement (Sean et al., 2014). Beaupre (2022, p. 1065) states that young women have strong leadership ambitions, but their ambitions can weaken as certain factors in early career experiences undermine their motivation. In addition, women in male-dominated industries often face cultural and structural obstacles and are still underrepresented in numerous business areas. This leads to a social problem: when men are more visible in leadership positions, many people assume that women do not have the opportunity to attain them (Bhat et al., 2022, p. 3590).

Various factors related to the early stages of women's careers help to understand how career advancement is achieved and what achievements can be made in the future. This is also essential to explain why gender differences in leadership positions persist and why eliminating them requires more than just encouraging women to pursue higher positions. Researching female leadership reveals new information that helps us understand the significant impact of women in leadership positions. Female leaders serve as important role models for younger, potential female leaders, which helps to inspire future talents (Clarke, 2011, p. 498). Therefore, this research attempts to gather deeper insights into young women's perceptions of leadership in the early stages of their careers.

1.1 Research purpose and objectives

The purpose of this research is to deepen the understanding of perceptions of young Finnish women aged 25-30 at the beginning of their careers. Understanding these perceptions is important because early career experiences and interpretations can shape long-term leadership goals, career development, and commitment to organizations. In this research, these perceptions are examined through a research question, and three research objectives. The research question of this thesis is the following:

What are young women's perceptions of leadership in the early stages of their careers?

In addition to the research question, the following objectives are included:

How do young women in their early careers perceive leadership?

What barriers do young women face in pursuing leadership in their early careers?

What supports help young women navigate toward leadership in their early careers?

Together, these objectives form a comprehensive framework for understanding young women's perceptions of leadership, what barriers they may face and what supports help them to navigate towards leadership in their early careers and answering the research question. This thesis also provide important insights into how organizations, decision-makers, and various forms of education can create a better environment for women who are emerging and advancing as leaders.

1.2 Significance of the research and research scope

Research on young female leadership is crucial, as it challenges existing stereotypes, promotes gender equality, and encourages more inclusive forms of leadership. Although women's visibility in professional roles has increased, pathways to leadership remain uneven, and young women often encounter systemic barriers that shape the early stages of their careers (ILO, 2025a). This makes it difficult for young women to attain leadership positions in organizations (Holton & Dent, 2016, p. 542). Although leadership has been extensively studied in organizational research, much of the existing literature focuses on individuals who already hold higher leadership positions (Dixon et al., 2023). Less attention has been paid to how leadership is interpreted by young female professionals who are still forming their career identity and future goals, who aspire to leadership positions or are already in early leadership roles (Dixon et al., 2023), and even fewer studies examine the leadership perceptions of young women at the beginning of their professional leadership careers. Focusing on young women in their early careers has long-term significance for leadership identity, attitudes, and aspirations that can be obtained.

From an organizational perspective, the findings of this research can help employers, human resources departments, and leadership development professionals understand the perceptions young women encounter in the early stages of their careers. This information is essential for developing measures, mentoring programs, and workplace cultures that genuinely support young women's career advancement and interest in leadership opportunities.

This research is limited to participants who are young women aged between 25 and 30. This age group has received less attention than other studies on women leaders or gender differences in organizational structures. This age group typically represents the first significant years of work with career development involving psychological changes, skill acquisition, self-efficacy, and peer support (Sean et al., 2014). Between the ages of 25 and 30, career paths, leadership identities, ambition, and long-term career goals and understandings begin to take shape (Holton & Dent, 2016, p. 552), which has a major impact on the direction a career takes and is of great significance in terms of where a woman will end up in her career. In addition, this research is also geographically limited and focuses on examining the situation in Finland, as all participants are Finnish. Limiting the participant group to the same national context ensures a more accurate analysis, as the participants experience a similar environment but may experience things differently.

1.3 Use of AI

This thesis utilizes artificial intelligence to improve the correctness of the text's spelling and the clarity and academic nature of the text. The Grammarly program has been used to ensure correct spelling and to create an academic style. Google One AI Premium Gemini 2.0 Pro have been used for word structures and checking. However, the thesis has been checked and confirmed to be original. The author of the thesis is also responsible for the content and conclusions of the thesis.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This research consists of five main sections. In the first chapter, the introductory chapter introduces the research by outlining its purpose and objectives, highlighting the significance of the research, and define its scope. It also discusses the use of artificial intelligence in the research. The chapter also provides an overview of the structure of the

thesis, guiding the reader through the organization of subsequent chapters and setting the stage for the theoretical, methodological, and analytical discussions that follow.

In the second chapter the theoretical framework provides the theoretical foundation for understanding leadership, focusing on female leadership and the early career experiences of young women. It presents the evolution of leadership, examines the glass ceiling and the individual, organizational, policy, and cultural factors that limit women's career advancement, and explores how leadership identity, ambition, and career decisions shape early professional trajectories. The chapter also addresses barriers such as organizational constraints, societal expectations, and personal challenges like self-doubt and impostor syndrome, while highlighting the critical role of supports including mentors, role models, and leadership programs in fostering growth. Together, these perspectives offer a comprehensive framework for analyzing both the obstacles and opportunities women encounter on the path to leadership.

In the third chapter, the methods outline the research design and methodology employed in the research, detailing the approaches used to collect, analyze, and interpret data. It begins by describing the data collection methods and the rationale for their selection, followed by an overview of the sampling strategy and participants involved. The chapter then explains the data collection process in practice and the analytical techniques applied to analyze the findings. Chapter also discusses ensuring the credibility, reliability, and validity of the results. Finally, it addresses the ethical considerations guiding the research, ensuring that the research was conducted with integrity and confidentiality. Together, these sections provide a systematic description of how the research was conducted.

In the fourth chapter, the findings present the results of the research. Section presents the findings from six semi-structured interviews, organized according to the three research objectives. It examines how young Finnish women in the early stages of their careers view leadership, what obstacles they encounter when striving for leadership roles,

and what kind of support helps them advance toward leadership positions. The results are presented through themes that emerged from a thematic analysis, with each section focusing on one research objective.

The fifth chapter, the conclusion chapter provides comprehensive conclusions of the findings. It presents the key findings, highlighting the most significant insights connecting with earlier research. The chapter also discusses the contributions of the research to both advancing theoretical understanding and practical implications. The limitations of the research are acknowledged, and factors that may have influenced the results and interpretation are examined. Based on these limitations and insights, the chapter offers suggestions for future research to explore and expand on the topic.

2 Women in leadership

This section presents the theoretical grounding of the research. This section is divided into four main chapters, followed by the sub-sections. The first main chapter examines the devolution of female leadership, current perspectives that recognize different leadership styles, examining gender differences and discrimination, organizational performance, and leadership effectiveness. The second main chapter introduces the concept of the glass ceiling and its causes, describing how individual, organizational, political, and sociocultural factors interact and create structural barriers that limit women's advancement to leadership positions. The third main chapter focuses on the early stages of young women's careers, examining the formation of leadership identity, decision-making in the early stages of a career, ambition and motivation, the impact of organizational and cultural barriers, and personal challenges as well as supports. The fourth main chapter, theoretical framework of the research examines the integrated framework that links the existing literature to the main research question using the three research objectives, illustrating how perceptions, barriers, and supports shape young women's early career leadership perceptions.

2.1 Evolution of female leadership

The concept of leadership began to shape in the early 1800s and has continued to emerge over time (McEldowney et al., 2009, p. 25). According to Chen et al. (2025, p. 2), leadership is a process through which leaders influence and motivate their followers to strive toward common organizational goals through interpersonal interaction and behavioral guidance. As previously explained in the research, female leadership consists of characteristics, behavioral patterns, and styles that are typical of women (Chen et al., 2025). Early studies on female leadership primarily focused on challenges women faced, including gender differences, prejudice toward female leaders, and male-female stereotypes (Chen et al., 2025). However, studies have shifted the focus to the organizational effects of female leadership and examined outcomes such as company and workforce

performance (Chen et al., 2025). Overall, research on female leadership has evolved from individual-level issues to a broader examination of its relationship to organizational performance.

Historically, leadership was seen as masculine, hierarchical, and authoritarian. It was associated with command, control, and autocracy, reflecting monarchies and patriarchal social structures (Goethals & Hoyt, 2016). Leadership was rooted in a male-dominated political context, later extending to the business world (McEldowney et al., 2009, p. 25). The earliest leadership model, known as "The great man theory", argued that the personal characteristics of exceptional men shaped the historical course and laid the foundation for leadership trait studies in the 1940s, which identified the key characteristics essential for effective leadership and success (McEldowney et al., 2009, p. 25). According to McEldowney et al. (2009) leadership research, initially focused on the theory that only innate characteristics could explain effective leadership, which led to a decline in the belief that leaders are born and cannot be trained. Attention shifted to the study of learnable and developable behavioral patterns, which led to the identification of different leadership styles. Behavioral theories emerged in the 1960s, but did not promote the representation of women in leadership positions (McEldowney et al., 2009, p. 26).

In the early 1970s, women gained access to their first official leadership positions, and feminism expanded women's access to education and working life, opening opportunities in politics, business, and academics (Goethals & Hoyt, 2016). However, the glass ceiling remained a major problem for women, and gender-based leadership norms were clear, resulting in leadership positions continuing to be held primarily by men. Gendered leadership norms are expectations that adult individuals are expected to conform to the gender roles assigned to them by society (Çitil, 2022, p. 381). In patriarchal societies, men tend to control women in various areas of life, and established gender stereotypes define women's responsibilities as housework, marriage, and motherhood (Çitil, 2022, p. 381). In a male-dominated social structure, men's role was to be leaders, authority, and financiers (Çitil, 2022, p. 381). This social structure has a decisive influence on

current gender-based leadership norms and the formation of gender stereotypes, in which men occupy leadership positions, and women participate in lower-level tasks.

Leadership positions remained at around 16% of the workforce until the 1970s (McEldowney et al., 2009, p. 26). Research on women's leadership was initiated in the 1970s, focusing on gender differences in leadership behavior (Chen et al., 2025, p. 2). Leadership was increasingly seen in the context of the organization and society, and gender roles influenced expectations about who was suitable to be a leader (Goethals & Hoyt, 2016). Later in the 1990s, the rise of feminism increased researchers' interest in the field (Chen et al., 2025, p. 2), and research into gender differences in leadership began (McEldowney et al., 2009, p. 26). Research on the subject found that men were more often task-oriented leaders, while women tended toward cooperative and socially oriented leadership behavior (McEldowney et al., 2009, p. 26). As perceptions changed, women's participation and advancement in leadership roles became more widely accepted (McEldowney et al., 2009, p. 26). From the mid-1990s to the late 1990s, research began to focus on the dynamics of leadership effectiveness (McEldowney et al., 2009, p. 26). Although women began to have access to leadership positions, issues such as balancing work and personal life, career advancement, and lack of mentoring remained (Goethals & Hoyt, 2016). Studies found that women were more effective leaders than men but progressed more slowly in their careers (Goethals & Hoyt, 2016).

In the 2010s, women achieved unprecedented levels of representation among executives and CEOs (Goethals & Hoyt, 2016). Although discrimination has decreased over the recent decades, it is still present in more subtle ways, such as double standards, or women being punished for violating gender roles. The historical barriers to women's leadership are not just isolated obstacles, but long-standing social, cultural, and institutional constraint that have shaped women's access to leadership positions to this day.

2.2 Glass ceiling and its causes

The glass ceiling phenomenon is generally presented as discrimination or gender-based behavioral differences. Discrimination and inequality emphasize employers' prejudices, such as favouring men over equally qualified women, as well as statistical discrimination based on stereotypes about women's productivity (Beltramini et al., 2022; ILO, 2025). Gender-based behavioral differences argue that women's greater participation in non-market activities leads companies to view their employment as more unstable (Beltramini et al., 2022). There has been controversy on at what stage of a career glass ceilings are visible. Some studies claim that the glass ceiling particularly reflects inequality increasingly apparent at the upper levels of an organization's hierarchy and senior leadership roles compared to the lower levels (Taparia & Lenka, 2022). Nevertheless, recent findings show that the glass ceiling can operate at multiple stages of career progression (Beltramini et al., 2022), having a strong impact on women who aspire to leadership roles or young women in their first leadership roles. Taparia and Lenka (2022) identify the underlying factors that create a glass ceiling for women, which they divide into four categories: individual factors, organizational factors, policy-related factors, and social and cultural factors.

2.2.1 Individual factors

Individual-level factors constitute deeply internalized barriers that significantly hinder women's career advancement and leadership aspirations. Individual factors include personal obstacles arising from circumstances, upbringing, and self-esteem (Taparia & Lenka, 2022). Individual factors also include women's multiple social roles, attitudes toward relationships, and self-imposed limitations (Çitil, 2022). These include gender differences in education, lack of self-confidence, weak leadership aspirations, weak career development motivation, preference for work-life balance, the burden of household responsibilities, and internalized gender roles shaped by socialization and culture (Taparia & Lenka, 2022). These reduce women's opportunities for career development, networking, and

promotion. These internalized beliefs, such as low self-confidence, acceptance of inequality, and the perception that the system cannot be changed, further reinforce the glass ceiling at the individual level and prevent women from pursuing or achieving leadership positions (Çitil, 2022).

2.2.2 Organizational factors

Organizational factors play also a significant role in the formation of the glass ceiling. These encompass structural and situational elements, including various barriers in the workplace that stem from culture, operating methods, and practices (Taparia & Lenka, 2022). Women may face a double bind, in which it is difficult to express their ambition subtly while resisting prevailing stereotypes. According to Eagly and Karau (2002), the double bind is a psychological and social trap that arises from a perceived conflict between two different expectations: descriptive beliefs and prescriptive norms. In descriptive beliefs, the women's gender role double binds where society associates leadership traits with agency, such as competitive, independent, and dominant (Heilman et al., 2024). Thus, according to Eagly and Karau (2002), feminine traits are associated with communality, such as caring and empathy. Because leadership is stereotypically defined as agency, women are automatically perceived as less competent for high-level roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

In prescriptive norms, a double bind in the leadership role is the penalty for success, where a woman overcomes the first barrier by acting powerfully, such as by being tough and authoritative (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women are expected to behave warmly, maintain harmony, and self-promotion (Heilman et al., 2024). In this phenomenon, women no longer act in a communal manner, which is a social expectation placed on women, and are often considered unpleasant, annoying, or unfeminine (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This means that they must operate in an environment where they are judged more harshly than men. They often struggle to find a balance between competence and overly aggressive behavior, or between empathy and overly passive behavior (Çitil, 2022).

Consequently, confident behavior violates feminine norms, while nurturing behavior conflicts with leadership expectations (Taparia & Lenka, 2022).

Furthermore, the stereotype of women as caregivers' conflicts with the ideal employee norm, which requires full availability and long working hours. The idea that women want to start a family and have children can be perceived as a limiting factor. The motherhood barrier refers to the intensified negative attitudes women encounter, reinforcing prejudices against working mothers (Çitil, 2022; Taparia & Lenka, 2022). These prejudices lead to the perception that women would be less committed to their careers and tend to focus on support roles rather than strategic tasks, reinforcing glass ceilings and limiting their advancement to leadership positions (Taparia & Lenka, 2022). In addition, masculine organizational cultures systematically exclude women, limiting mentoring and sponsorship opportunities for women (Taparia & Lenka, 2022), which are critical for advancement to leadership positions.

Particularly in male-dominated work environments, queen bee behavior can be seen among female leaders, where women leaders distance themselves from other women (Buss et al., 2025; Çitil, 2022, p. 387). Queen bee behaviour occurs in environments where there is discrimination and negative gender stereotypes, especially among women who do not identify themselves as representatives of their gender in the workplace. This behavior emphasizes individual female achievements rather than collective progress and can bring short-term benefits to individual females, such as improving chances of promotion (Buss et al., 2025, p. 11). Nevertheless, queen bee behavior undermines the support of leaders' subordinates and negatively affects the career development opportunities at lower levels of the organization (Buss et al., 2025, p. 11), reinforcing gender hierarchies in the organization (Çitil, 2022).

Organizational factors include weak gender equality reinforced by male-dominated cultures (Çitil, 2022), where companies do not actively support women in leadership roles (Taparia & Lenka, 2022). Limited awareness of glass ceiling issues means that systemic

barriers remain unchallenged. As a result, young women lack organizational support to overcome obstacles early in their careers, long-term employment relationships, career and promotion opportunities, and informal networks, all of which can contribute to making it more difficult for women to enter leadership positions (Çitil, 2022).

2.2.3 Policy related factors

Regulatory and legal frameworks play a key role in preventing gender discrimination and supporting women's career advancement reinforcement of labor legislation, support for female entrepreneurship, and maternity protection (Çitil, 2022). While many countries have introduced gender equality laws and government quotas, weak enforcement and a lack of strict penalties undermine their effectiveness (Taparia & Lenka, 2022). Glass ceiling issues are also often not sufficiently known or discussed publicly, especially in less developed countries, further slowing progress (Taparia & Lenka, 2022).

2.2.4 Social and cultural factors

Social and cultural factors are broader social norms and traditions that affect women's careers (Çitil, 2022, p . 381). These are defined by gender roles and stereotypes, such as women as primary caregivers, men as breadwinners, culturalization, and socialization that create expectations for individuals from childhood onwards, social stigma attached to women's employment or leadership roles, and gender-related values (Taparia & Lenka, 2022). Traditional gender roles, in which women are expected to prioritize motherhood, housework, and family over careers, can still place women at a disadvantage in both their leisure time and their careers (Çitil, 2022). The patriarchal social structure, in which leadership, authority, and decision-making are associated with men, is also evident as a social and cultural factor (Çitil, 2022). In these values, men are perceived as more competent and deserving, and these social pressures reinforce both individual and organizational barriers. Therefore, the glass ceiling remains a persistent and multidimensional barrier

that limits women's career advancement, and it is not solely the result of individual choices or abilities, but rather a complex interaction between individual, organizational, political, and sociocultural factors that together place women at a disadvantage.

2.3 Factors affecting young women's early careers

This section explores the key factors that shape young women's experiences in the early stages of their careers. The section begins by examining the formation of leadership identity, early career decision-making and development as well as ambitions and motivations. The section addresses the organizational barriers that can slow career progression, cultural barriers such as expectations, norms and work-life balance, then personal-level challenges, such as self-doubt and impostor syndrome. Finally, the section discusses the supports available to young women, including role models, mentoring relationships, and formal leadership programs.

2.3.1 Leadership identity

Before and during the early stages of career, leadership identity and professional self-image begin to form between the ages of 14 and 24 (Dixon et al., 2023; Hartung, 2013, p. 94). Identity can be explained as a person's evolving perception of themselves, which is shaped through reflection, social interactions, roles, and groups they are part of (Dixon et al., 2023). Women's identity refers to how women understand and define themselves in relation to societal expectations, gender norms, and lived experiences across adulthood (Dixon et al., 2023). According to Dixon et al. (2023) the leader's identity is constructed through a dynamic interaction between internalization and external recognition. DeRue and Ashford (2010) suggests that leadership identity develops through experiences, social interactions, and self-reflection, whereby individuals begin to see themselves as leaders as they internalize leadership behaviors. Interactions with others shape professional self-image, cultural messages and power, and the need to navigate

gender prejudices while integrating personal values, roles, and a sense of agency (Dixon et al., 2023). Leadership identity is relative and depends on social reinforcement, often producing leadership patterns that strengthen or weaken leadership identity over time (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p. 633). The probability of building such a leadership identity depends on shared understanding of leadership, clear communication between individuals, gender, and relational history (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, pp. 632–636; Standish, 2023). When women's interests and abilities become clearer, it helps them plan their education and career and prepare for working life (Hartung, 2013, p. 94). Therefore, understanding when, how, and why young women begin to see themselves as leaders matters as these perceptions shape how they process information, set goals, make decisions, regulate motivation, and develop skills (Dixon et al., 2023).

2.3.2 Early career decision-making and development

In this research, early career leadership refers to individuals in their first leadership roles, such as team leaders, project managers, or supervisors. However, this research also examines those who are interested in leadership and aspire to future leadership roles. According to Clarke (2011) the early career stage is described as the first phase of professional life, typically the first few years after entering the workforce, rather than being strictly defined by age. However, Sean et al. (2014) describes the early career stage as a foundational period of adulthood typically occurring by age 30. The early career stages are characterized by learning the norms and expectations of the organization, developing professional identity and self-confidence, and gaining initial leadership experience (Clarke, 2011). When women in the early stages of their careers learn to utilize the above-mentioned factors, it helps them navigate their career paths more effectively and make decisions about their career advancement. Career choices are influenced by both personal factors, such as abilities, personality, values, interests, and self-image, and situational factors, including economic conditions, social expectations, cultural factors, and historical context (Super, 1980).

Super's (1980) theory examines career development as a multivariate lifelong process shaped by a person's evolving self-image and their various life roles. Early career development is a crucial stage, where women begin to form self-concept into work roles. During this period, women typically transition from the role of student to employee while balancing multiple life roles (Super, 1980). Their development is influenced by how they perceive themselves, the expectations others place on their roles, and how successfully they perform in the workplace (Super, 1980). Experiences and performance during these early career roles strongly influence future career aspirations, confidence, and leadership visions (Super, 1980). For women, these experiences may either strengthen a positive professional self-image or create role conflict, particularly when expectations across work and non-work roles intersect. As a result, successful engagement in early career roles is closely linked to later career satisfaction and success (Super, 1980, p.286).

Early career development is a crucial stage for young women, where self-confidence, goals, and leadership identity are either strengthened or weakened (Clarke, 2011). Although young women often have high leadership aspirations during their school years, these ambitions frequently decline in the early stages of their careers (Beaupre, 2022, p. 1065). Organizational environments may fail to recognize leadership potential at this stage, which can weaken women's leadership aspirations (Clarke, 2011). This suggests that perceptions that women lack interest in leadership roles are misleading, as early career experiences may instead discourage leadership ambition (Beaupre, 2022, p. 1065). Therefore, early work experiences play an important role in helping women see themselves as future leaders and pursue challenging roles (Clarke, 2011). Without support, women may underestimate their readiness for leadership despite strong performance, causing leadership to appear distant or incompatible with their self-perception. Therefore, supporting women's early career development should be viewed as a strategic organizational investment. By integrating leadership development early, organizations can build better leadership pathways, reduce accumulated disadvantages, and encourage women to see themselves as leaders earlier in their careers (Clarke, 2011).

2.3.3 Ambition and motivation

Despite persistent assumptions that women are less ambitious in pursuing leadership roles than men, research demonstrates that women report equal or greater ambition to attain leadership positions (Beaupre, 2022). Sealy et al. (2024) demonstrate that women working in early careers enter the workforce with high levels of ambition, motivation, and self-identification as driven individuals. Women conceptualize success not solely in terms of hierarchical advancement, but also through personal satisfaction, learning, influence, and work-life balance (Sean et al., 2014). Sealy et al. (2024, p. 25) also argue that women's ambition is significantly influenced by socioeconomic background, educational experiences, and parental upbringing. Consequently, educational frameworks that prioritize competitive environments and professional career trajectories serve to strengthen female self-efficacy and motivation. Furthermore, the parents' professional status significantly dictates the degree of vocational guidance and preparatory support accessible to young women entering the workforce (Sean et al., 2014, p. 15).

Ambition and motivation develop when young women are allowed to experience and actively participate in leadership experiences that allow them to see themselves as capable leaders (Dixon et al., 2023, p. 911). Even at an early stage, such as in school, women often see themselves as leaders, strive for high positions, and demonstrate strong self-confidence and motivation (Beaupre, 2022). Early responsibility provides opportunities to practice leadership, coordination, and community action, which serve as excellent practice for developing a leadership identity and help young women internalize leadership as part of their own identity (Dixon et al., 2023, p. 911). Motivation can also be increased through a safe environment, empowering young women to participate fully and receive feedback, which can boost self-confidence, encourage commitment, and set higher goals (Dixon et al., 2023, p. 911). These inclusive learning opportunities and environments allow young women to align leadership with their own values, strengthening both their confidence and motivation (Dixon et al., 2023). However, Beaupre (2022) states that when women's ambition weakens, it is linked to wavering self-confidence, feelings of undervaluation, and limited recognition in their first professional roles.

These early signs influence how women reevaluate their leadership aspirations, making ambition more fragile at this stage than later in life (Beaupre, 2022). Consequently, the prospects for success and confidence in individuals' skills and performance have a significant impact on women's interest in and aspirations for leadership roles (Sealy et al., 2024, p. 8). Therefore, ambition and motivation in the early stages of women's careers are not lacking, but depend greatly on the early workplace environment, recognition, role models, and whether leadership is presented as compatible with a sustainable and meaningful life.

2.3.4 Organizational barriers: Factors slowing career development

Women encounter organizational barriers in their careers that can slow their progress to leadership positions. As mentioned in section 2.3.2, women's early career development and leadership development opportunities remain significant organizational barriers to women's early leadership careers. Consequently, the development opportunities are often delayed until the more advanced stages of a woman's careers (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Therefore, women in their early careers have fewer leadership development opportunities, which is why women's first exposure to upper-level leadership positions come too late.

Organizational barriers include the impact of gender discrimination on recruitment and promotion. This gender discrimination in the early stages of a career creates a glass ceiling for women, preventing them from gaining the momentum they need to advance to leadership positions. As Thelma and Ngulube (2024) noted, biased recruitment processes reinforce existing stereotypes about women's professional competence, leading to an unfair evaluation system in which women are assessed using significantly stricter criteria and more rigorous scrutiny than male applicants. Studies have also shown that women often receive vague feedback on their performance, while men receive concrete, results-based guidance that directly supports their promotion (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

Empirical evidence also suggests that young women face disproportionate social and professional backlash in salary negotiations (Buss et al., 2025). Such penalties reinforce long-term economic disparities and undermine women's perceived value within the organization (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

Sponsorship and mentoring also play an important role in supporting career development. Sponsorship refers to strategic supervision in which senior management uses its organizational influence to support the career development of younger or lower-level employees (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Through sponsorship, senior management can help reduce systemic barriers and promote a more equal recruitment and promotion process. However, women often have limited access to such opportunities, and therefore, their opportunities to participate in high-profile projects or gain valuable work experience are limited. This exclusion is further reinforced by limited transparency in decision-making processes and the persistent pay gap (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Mentoring, similarly, represents an important developmental relationship in which experienced professionals provide guidance, information, and support to individuals in the early stages of their careers (Barkhuizen et al., 2022, p. 4). When organizations lack structured mentoring systems, women may have fewer opportunities to develop their leadership skills. Limited mentoring support also limits access to professional networks and informal organizational knowledge, which are essential for career development (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

According to studies, women may have fewer opportunities to build networks in the workplace (Butler et al., 2025). According to Butler et al., (2025), employees who have strong connections to informal networks are more likely to receive career information, mentoring, support, and visibility among decision-makers. Conversely, those who remain outside these networks may have fewer opportunities to receive informal support, strategic information, advance in their careers, and gain recognition, even if they possess similar qualifications or experience (Butler et al., 2025). According to research, one significant reason for women's exclusion from informal networks may be homophily, which

refers to the tendency of individuals to form relationships with others who are similar to them in terms of gender, background, or social identity (Butler et al., 2025). When leaders and influential employees form networks primarily with people like themselves, this can inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities (Butler et al., 2025). As a result, young women are less likely to be included in events where social interactions, mentoring relationships, and sponsorship take place. These are crucial for gaining visibility, challenging oneself, and obtaining new assignments, support for promotions or leadership development programs (Clarke, 2011). Women's early career development may progress more slowly due to limited access to career-advancing relationships, which can reduce their self-confidence, visibility, and willingness to pursue leadership roles early in their careers or in future.

2.3.5 Cultural barriers: Expectations, norms, and work-life balance

Young women also face cultural barriers as they advance in their careers. According to Thelma and Ngulube (2024, p. 275) cultural barriers are shared meanings or common beliefs, such as deeply rooted attitudes that often favor men in leadership positions. The imbalance in roles is reflected in the general perception that the role of leader is consistent with the gender role of men, leading to the belief that women are not suited to leadership positions. Buss et al. (2025) present the "think manager-think male" paradigm, where successful leaders are stereotypically associated with masculine traits. According to previous studies, both women and men consider masculine traits to be, at least to some extent, essential for leadership (Beaupre, 2022). Women may also encounter a conformity trap, whereby, to advance or obtain a position, many women feel compelled to abandon their natural relational leadership style and adopt more masculine traits to avoid being perceived as outsiders (Kiamba, 2008). In addition, women often have to demonstrate better performance than men to overcome stereotypical prejudices and get promoted (Buss et al., 2025).

Social norms in the workplace further reinforce these differences through subtle daily interactions. According to Beaupre (2022), the communication authority is still evident in the workplace, and studies show that men interrupt women more often, undermining women's perceived authority. The fact that women have unequal access to challenging tasks and projects early in their careers also hinders the skill development and visibility they need to move into leadership positions. These factors can be in constant interaction with each other and influence an women's opportunities, choices, and outcomes, and are determining factors in career development (Super, 1980, pp. 294-295).

Work-life balance is also a significant factor that can negatively affect women's desire and success in advancing their careers and pursuing leadership positions. Social expectations pressure women to prioritize family responsibilities, and women are expected to favor flexible working arrangements, which are mistakenly considered incompatible with leadership positions (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Previous studies reveal that women in leadership positions can struggle to meet the simultaneous demands of work and family responsibilities (Buss et al., 2025, p. 11), as they may have their own preconceptions about the high expectations or social pressure that work and family life cannot be combined. Women may also experience social stigma, where they risk being labelled as unsuitable mothers and wives because they are advancing or want to advance in their careers (Kiamba, 2008, p. 13). As a result, some women decide to work part-time, with the understanding that career advancement is unlikely without a return to full-time work. From the organization's perspective, this may be interpreted as a lack of commitment or organizational skills (Buss et al., 2025, p. 11). Although part-time work or leave can help women fulfil their family responsibilities, studies suggest that motherhood itself is not an obstacle to women's leadership development (Buss et al., 2025, p. 11). These kinds of thoughts about the future can influence young people's opinions and perceptions of leadership from an early stage.

2.3.6 Personal-level challenges: Self-doubt and impostor syndrome

The personal-level challenges experienced by women are accompanied by organizational and cultural barriers. Studies show that women and men generally have different perceptions of women's performance. Women often underestimate their own effectiveness, while men overestimate theirs (Buss et al., 2025, p. 6). The stereotypical threat is the fear of reinforcing negative gender stereotypes, which can also undermine women's self-confidence or doubt their own chances of success (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024, p. 258). This can lead to rejecting new opportunities, hindering career development, and missing leadership opportunities. Lack of self-confidence can occur especially in negotiation situations, which has also been identified as a significant barrier that can hinder women's career advancement (Buss et al., 2025, p. 6). All these factors together may lead to women being less confident about pursuing leadership opportunities and roles.

Another significant personal-level challenge for women is impostor syndrome, or the impostor phenomenon, which is a persistent internal feeling that an individual considers themselves a "cheater" in certain situations or positions, even though there is clear evidence of their success (Holm, 2022). According to Holm (2022) impostor syndrome is not a static personality trait, but rather a reactive process. As a result of impostor syndrome, individuals often attribute their achievements to luck, timing, or the deception of others, rather than their own competence. In impostor syndrome, the task associated with the achievement causes either excessive preparation or procrastination, because of which the individual is unable to internalize their own success and may fear that they will be exposed in the future, even though they have generally done nothing wrong (Holm, 2022). Although some studies suggest that impostor syndrome only affects women, recent research has shown that it affects all genders (Holm, 2022). However, the intensity and impact of the phenomenon often vary, and in young women's transition to working life and early career stages, impostor syndrome can be exacerbated by stereotypical threats. This means the fear of reinforcing negative stereotypes about women's competence in professional or technical roles, or they might be judged based on their gender (Bravata et al., 2019; Holm, 2022). Impostor syndrome can also create a feedback loop,

where success actually increases pressure for the next tasks, because individuals must maintain their successes and reputation for competence (Holm, 2022). This can increase fear and pressure to succeed, which can hinder an individual's performance. Studies show that in fields where success is attributed to natural talent or genius, such as STEM, philosophy, or finance fields, young women experience more impostor syndrome (Holm, 2022). This is often because stereotypes suggest that these traits are traditionally associated with men. Impostor syndrome is associated with decreased job satisfaction, increased burnout, motivation and career development toward leadership positions (Bravata et al., 2019).

2.3.7 Supports: Role models, mentors, and leadership programs

Role models, mentoring, and leadership programs play a crucial role in supporting young women's entry into early career leadership positions by enhancing confidence, building skills, and providing guidance and inspiration in navigating gender-based career barriers (Hill & Wheat, 2017). The presence of women role models in leadership positions is crucial in shaping the leadership and social identity of young women (Dixon et al., 2023), helping them imagine themselves as leaders and understand viable paths to upper-level positions that have traditionally been male-dominated (Hill & Wheat, 2017). Role models are an effective tool for building career self-efficacy, career advancement, and success (Clarke, 2011, p. 501). They provide concrete examples of effective leadership behavior and symbolic confirmation (Dixon et al., 2023). Such exposure strengthens leadership self-esteem, increases self-confidence, and promotes future leadership aspirations (Dixon et al., 2023).

Section 2.2.2 mentions the negative effects of a lack of mentoring. Thus, this section examines the supporting effects of mentoring on women in the early stages of their careers. Mentoring is described as a supportive relationship that focuses on guidance and skill development (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). According to Clarke (2011), mentoring can boost career growth prospects by raising individuals' visibility within the organization,

access to professional networks, and enhancing access to financial, material, and symbolic resources. Mentoring can also promote a shared sense of belonging between leaders and subordinates, as well as social identity with the people they support, strengthening identification and trust (Barkhuizen et al., 2022, p. 5). Clarke's (2011) study suggests that people who receive mentoring consistently report stronger career motivation, greater confidence in their professional abilities, and higher perceived career success. For female leaders, social identity can be a powerful mechanism for challenging structural and economic disadvantages, helping leaders overcome perceived limitations by adopting a leadership style that resonates with their own style (Barkhuizen et al., 2022, p. 5). Gender-responsive mentoring is particularly important for leadership development, as female mentors can help advance other women's careers. Mentors can also help women to adapt to the organizational culture and guide them through workplace norms, including expectations for balancing work and family life (Clarke, 2011).

In addition, leadership programs have been identified as one of the most effective support mechanisms in organizations. According to Clarke (2011), leadership programmes are designed to prepare individuals for leadership roles by developing skills, self-confidence, self-efficacy, and career development capabilities. It is essential to invest in developing women's leadership early in their careers and to provide women with structured programs that include clearly defined modules, workshops, coaching, and learning assignments offered by organizations (Clarke, 2011). The aim is to develop leadership skills, strategic thinking and decision-making, conflict management and communication skills, as well as an understanding of leadership styles. According to Lee et al. (2024), leadership development usually takes place too late. Most leadership programs are aimed at women in mid- or late-career stages, even though women in the early career stages have a greater need for such support. When leadership training is offered, many women may have already stopped pursuing leadership positions, as they have not received enough support and development (Lee et al., 2024). However, Clarke (2011) emphasizes that leadership programs are one of many strategies, alongside policy, mentoring, networking, and cultural change, to increase the representation of women in

leadership positions, and are not a standalone solution. Therefore, role models, mentoring, and leadership programs are important tools for supporting young women's advancement to leadership positions early in their careers. Together, these approaches create a support that strengthens leadership aspirations and career development.

2.4 Theoretical framework of the research

This research focuses on three interrelated theoretical strands that together explain how young women in their early careers perceive leadership, what barriers do young women face in pursuing leadership in their early careers, and what supports help young women navigate toward leadership in their early careers. The first strand examines the development of women's leadership and the formation of leadership identity. The second strand addresses the barriers women face early in their careers that explains the systemic discrimination limiting young women's advancement. The third strand focuses on support measures that promote leadership development and interest in it.

Leadership has historically been constructed as masculine, hierarchical, and authority-driven and later embedded in male-dominated organizational structures (Goethals & Hoyt, 2016; McEldowney et al., 2009). Early research on women's leadership focused on gender differences in behavior and finding women to be more cooperative and relationally oriented than men (McEldowney et al., 2009). As feminist movements expanded women's access to education and working life, leadership positions became more accessible, but gendered norms and the glass ceiling remained (Goethals & Hoyt, 2016). By the 2010s, women had achieved unprecedented representation in leadership positions. However, forms of discrimination were still evident (Goethals & Hoyt, 2016). Chen et al. (2025) note that research has since shifted from individual-level challenges toward the organizational and societal outcomes of female leadership, showing broader recognition that different leadership styles can be equally effective.

The glass ceiling was historically associated with upper levels, but according to Beltrami et al. (2022), it can operate at multiple career stages, directly affecting women in their early careers. Taparia and Lenka (2022) identify individual factors that include internalized barriers such as lack of self-confidence and limited leadership aspirations. Organizational factors include the double bind described by Eagly and Karau (2002), where women are expected to show more feminine and communal traits, which leads to stricter evaluation and limited opportunities for career advancement. These factors are exacerbated by the motherhood penalty, masculine organizational cultures, and limited access to mentoring, sponsorship, and informal networks (Çitil, 2022; Taparia & Lenka, 2022). Policy-related factors reflect the gap between gender equality legislation and its weak implementation in practice. In addition, socio-cultural factors such as patriarchal norms, the "think manager-think male" paradigm (Buss et al., 2025), and traditional gender roles shape expectations from childhood. These four groups do not operate separately but influence one another and maintain systematic discrimination.

The early career stage is a fundamental developmental phase in which leadership identity, ambition, and professional self-concept take shape (Clarke, 2011; Super, 1980). Super (1980) defines this period as a critical stage in the formation of identity and career roles. In addition, DeRue and Ashford (2010) and Dixon et al. (2023) explain that leadership identity is formed through social interaction, recognition, and internalization. Although there is evidence that young women enter the workforce with high levels of ambition and motivation (Beaupre, 2022; Sealy et al., 2024), early organizational environments often undermine these aspirations through biased recruitment, vague feedback, exclusion from informal networks, and limited sponsorship (Butler et al., 2025; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Cultural barriers, including social expectations regarding work-life balance and perception that leadership and femininity are incompatible, further constrain women's career decisions (Buss et al., 2025; Kiamba, 2008). Personal challenges such as imposter syndrome and stereotyping, increase these pressures in the early stages of a career (Bravata et al., 2019; Holm, 2022). Supportive factors such as role models, can boost leadership confidence (Dixon et al., 2023), mentoring provides visibility, guidance,

and networking opportunities (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Clarke, 2011), and leadership programs build skills and self-confidence.

This theoretical framework directly addresses the three research objectives. The literature on evolution of female leadership, leadership identity, early career decision-making and development, ambition and motivation supports the first objective by providing a historical and conceptual context in which young women form their conceptions of leadership. The literature on the glass ceiling and barriers in the early career's provides framework for the second objective by identifying the most significant individual, organizational, cultural, and political barriers in the early career stages. The literature on supports is in line with the third objective by identifying supporting mechanisms such as role models, mentoring, leadership programs, and organizational culture. Therefore, the research framework supports the thematic analysis of the interview data and enables the interpretation of the results based on existing theory. The figure 1 below illustrates the three interrelated research objectives: The factors that shape young women's perceptions of leadership, the barriers that women face in pursuing leadership, and the supports that help young women navigate toward leadership in their early careers.

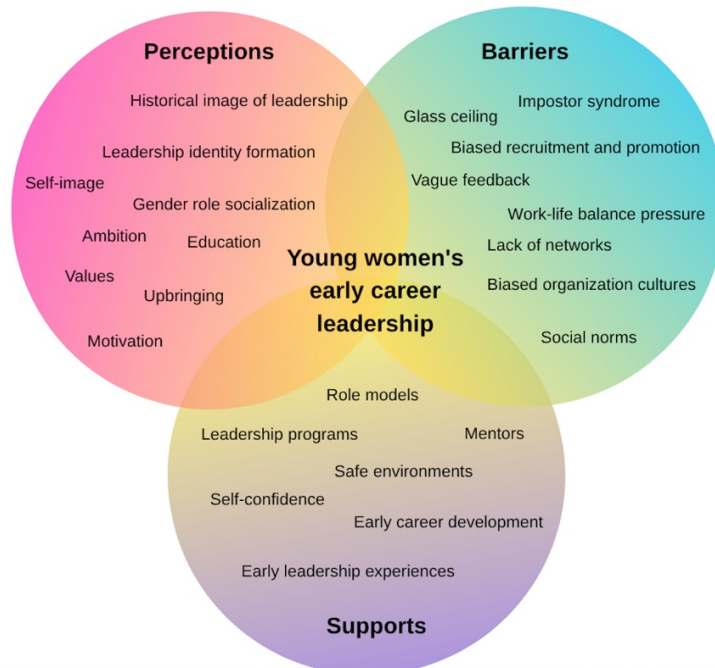


Figure 1. Theoretical framework: Perceptions, barriers, and supports in young women's early career leadership adapted from Clarke (2011), Dixon et al. (2023), and Taparia and Lenka (2022).

3 Methods

This section presents a data collection method in which qualitative research was used to examine young women's perceptions of leadership in the early stages of their careers. This section presents semi-structured individual interview method, the implementation of the interviews, sampling and participants, interview guide, the data collection process, data analysis with an abductive approach, as well as ethical considerations.

This research was conducted using a qualitative research method. Qualitative research emphasizes understanding lived experiences and perceptions, focusing on the social dimensions of research (Fossey et al., 2009; Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). A key part of high-quality qualitative research is the ability to record and illuminate participants' subjective meanings, actions, and social contexts as they themselves understand them (Fossey et al., 2009). According to Fossey et al. (2009) qualitative research usually focuses on how language is used to study communication and interaction within social groups, how people attach meaning to their experiences, and how theories can be built by uncovering patterns in qualitative data. Qualitative research allows deeper exploration of phenomena, the acquisition of new knowledge, and the development of theory (Willig, 2019). Moreover, qualitative research is characterized by its flexibility, adapting to emerging data, offering a holistic understanding of the topic, and enabling the researcher to become deeply engaged with the topic and the research (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018, p. 211).

The qualitative research method was selected for this research as it is particularly well-suited when the underlying problem is not fully understood and requires in-depth investigation (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). The flexibility of qualitative research and its capability to easily adapt the collected data to new information make it a valuable tool as a research method for this research. It also provides a comprehensive perspective on the subject under investigation, enabling an in-depth examination of the research (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). Therefore, the qualitative research method aims to better understand the quality, characteristics, and meanings of the research subject more comprehensively.

3.1 Data collection method

The research employed primary data, which refers to original and recent data collected specifically for the research in question (Mazhar et al., 2021). Primary data provided reliable data that supports the richness of the data and enables comprehensive conclusions to be drawn on this research. The primary data for the thesis were collected through interviews, which is one of the most widely used data collection methods in the social sciences (Karatsareas, 2022). In social sciences, interviews serve as a method in which information is gathered through a structured exchange of questions and answers between two or more individuals (Grossoehme, 2014; Sahoo, 2022). Interviews are a valuable method for gathering detailed information that requires an in-depth explanation (Sahoo, 2022). Interviews are ideal for investigating phenomena by asking "why" rather than "how many" or "how much" questions (Miles & Gilbert, 2005, p. 66). They involve the researcher requesting information from participants through questions, which frequently develops into a discussion (Karatsareas, 2022).

This research uses semi-structured interviews as a main data collection method. According to Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021), semi-structured interviews are a data collection method in which the researcher aims to better understand the participant's unique and personal perspective rather than gain a common understanding of the topic. Therefore, semi-structured interviews allow the collection of material that is as authentic and detailed about the interviewees' own specific experiences and perceptions. In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer follows pre-planned interview questions, but can change the order of the questions or modify them as the interview progresses, which provides an opportunity to deepen the discussion (Grossoehme, 2014; Sahoo, 2022). Semi-structured personal interviews are often referred to as individual interviews. Individual interviews are used to gather detailed information about participants' thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge about a specific phenomenon (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). In individual interviews, the interviewer asks questions and works directly with the interviewee, which is particularly suitable for in-depth research (Mazhar et al., 2021; Sahoo, 2022). Semi-structured individual interviews were selected for this research as

they provided the most accurate, up-to-date information and allowed for a deeper and personal exploration of the topic based on the individuals' own experiences (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). Since this research aims to answer research questions that gather information about young women's perceptions of leadership in the early stages of their careers, semi-structured individual interviews are a suitable method for investigating this research topic. The key strength of a personal interview is its flexibility, as it allows the interviewer to observe the participant and the surrounding context, as well as ask for additional information if the answers seem incomplete or unclear (Sahoo, 2022). This is important as this research focuses on the interviewee's own personal experiences, and the interviews must be as informative as possible.

Digitalisation has also changed the way research is conducted in the social sciences, enabling interviews to be conducted online (Sahoo, 2022). As a result, face-to-face interviews have decreased, and online interviews have increased. This makes conducting interviews easier and less time-consuming, regardless of the geographical location of the interviewee and the interviewer. This can also facilitate the storage and processing of interview data. All interviews for this research were conducted online using the Microsoft Teams, which made it easier to schedule and plan the research process.

The data and quality of the entire research depend greatly on the quality of the interview questions (Grossoehme, 2014, p. 2). The interviews aim to gather information using pre-designed and open-ended interview questions, which are known to encourage participants to provide detailed information while minimizing the potential impact of interviewer bias (Powell et al., 2014). This bias leads interviewers to concentrate on information that confirms their expectations and to pose questions that introduce details not previously mentioned by the interviewee (Powell et al., 2014, p. 4). Semi-structured interviews typically consist of open-ended core questions and related follow-up questions, allowing for flexibility during the interview, in contrast to closed-ended questions that elicit limited responses, such as only "yes" or "no" options (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 7). Through pre-designed interview questions, the aim of this research is to

discover real experiences of the participants and link them to the research question and three research objectives. Therefore, semi-structured individual interviews conducted online were chosen as the primary data collection method, as they allowed for a flexible, in-depth, and personal exploration of young women's own experiences and perceptions of leadership in the early stages of their careers.

3.2 Sampling and participants

Sampling plays a crucial role in qualitative research design, as it directly affects the trustworthiness of the research findings (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 4). According to Landreneau (2005), a sample is a subset of a population from which participants are selected for research, and sampling refers to selecting a sample from the population of the research field that represents the population. Choosing a sample in qualitative research starts with identifying who is eligible to take part in the research, based on the research questions (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018, p. 211). To obtain as diverse information as possible from the interviews, careful consideration was given to the selection of participants. In this research, participants were selected based on their prior knowledge and experience with the subject, enabling the researcher to obtain the necessary information through interviews. According to Mazhar et al (2021), participants must be genuine, sincere, informative, and impartial to obtain the necessary and appropriate information. The interviews conducted in the research will explore how participants have encountered the topic in question and how their personal experiences can be linked to the research questions.

Therefore, purposeful sampling, also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling (Rai & Thapa, 2015, p. 5), is used in this research. As qualitative research aims for an in-depth understanding, the purposeful sampling method is chosen to ensure its efficiency and validity, which is logical with the objectives of the research (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 2). Purposeful sampling in qualitative research focuses on selecting individuals or groups with relevant knowledge or experience for the research (Grossoehme, 2014,

p. 4) to provide rich and informative data within limited resources (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 2). Purposeful sampling refers to a group that represents different non-probability sampling methods, where the selection of samples is not based on the probability of each unit being included, but rather on factors such as the researcher's judgment, experience, intent, and expertise (Rai & Thapa, 2015, p.4).

Determining the sample size is also an important factor for the research and its results. In qualitative research, sample size should not be determined by statistical rules, but the adequacy of the sample depends on the quality and appropriateness of the data, not on the amount of participants (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025, p. 4). Even fewer than 10 interviewees or participants may be sufficient for good qualitative research (Leite, 2024, p. 20). Although larger samples are generally considered to be better in many research, they also require more time and effort to manage and may change the scope and size of the research more easily (Rai & Thapa, 2015, pp. 4-5). Therefore, this research is conducted using six participants, meaning six personal interviews, considering the scope of the research and time constraints.

The selection criteria for the interview participants required that all participants were young women aged between 25 and 30. The research also required that the interviewees were Finnish, as the research focuses exclusively on Finnish geographical population. The sample included young women who all had previously demonstrated an interest in leadership, who currently expressed an interest in leadership roles, or who aspired to pursue leadership positions in the future. In addition, participants were chosen based on their willingness to engage and contribute to the research topic. The table below shows information about interviews 1-6, their year of birth and age, the duration of each interview, and interviewees latest work experience and current roles explained shortly to understand the interviewee's background and connect it to their experiences.

Table 1. The interviewees' overview.

Inter- viewee	Year of birth, Age	Interview duration	Latest work experience and current roles
1	1996, 30	51min 1s	Experience in marketing specialist and marketing expert for eight years. Two years of leadership experience, direct team lead for two people, and supervisor for a team of six people.
2	1998, 27	49min 4s	Five years in specialist role, two years as part-time supervisory role and an assisting supervisor for the team in banking field. Experience in project management.
3	2000, 26	34min 4s	Finance, consulting, and internships five+ years. Full-time work, approximately six months. Experience in project management tasks.
4	2000, 25	1h 30s	Experience in project management, head of sustainability for one year, author of full-time doctoral dissertation.
5	2000, 25	38min 15s	Four years of experience in operations specialist in field of transportation, mobility and technology. Some experience in project-based team leadership.
6	1998, 28	36min 35s	Working in marketing for five years. Experience in in-house marketing, marketing coordinator and senior digital specialist. Team lead for three people about 4 months.

3.3 Data collection process

Semi-structured interviews often require the use of an interview guide, which helps the interviewer follow the conversation and ask questions that are relevant to the research objectives (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 7). In this research, the interview guide was designed so that the interview questions were linked to the research question and research objectives as presented in section 1.1. The interview guide ensured that all necessary information was collected and provided a sensible structure for the interviews, allowing each interview to follow a natural course of conversation.

The interview guide was structured around the three research objectives of this research. The introductory questions 1-5 gathered essential background information about participants' current roles, career stages, and any leadership experience to assess their current career situation. Using this information, the responses could later be interpreted in terms of each participant's professional background and leadership experience. In this way, the researcher was able to verify that the participants met the selection criteria.

The questions addressing the first research objective "how young women in their early careers perceive leadership" are covered in Part 1 of the interview guide. Questions 6 and 7 invited participants to define leadership in their own words and describe the qualities of a good leader, revealing how leadership is personally understood and valued. Questions 8 and 9 placed these perceptions in an organizational and industry context, examining whether valued leadership qualities are recognized or rewarded in practice. Questions 10-12 introduced the gender perspective, exploring whether leadership roles are seen as attractive to young women and whether leadership is perceived differently for women and men. Questions 13-15 examined leadership identity and aspirations, asking participants whether they see themselves as current or future leaders and what motivates them toward leadership roles. Question 16 further explored hesitations toward pursuing leadership, revealing factors that may weaken leadership aspirations at this career stage.

The questions addressing the second research objective "what barriers young women face in pursuing leadership" are covered in Part 2. Questions 17 and 18 explored the specific challenges and barriers faced in career development, as well as whether the young women's identity had affected their career development. Question 19 examined personal-level challenges, while question 20 addressed how organizational practices and workplace culture affect leadership opportunities. In addition, question 21 explored the influence of work-life balance expectations and family considerations on leadership aspirations.

The questions addressing the third research objective "what supports help young women navigate toward leadership" are covered in Part 3. Questions 22 and 23 examined the role of role models in shaping leadership perceptions and aspirations. Questions 24-27 focused on support mechanisms, asking what support is currently missing, and what role organizations play in supporting women's leadership. Questions 28-30 explored participants' perspectives on their future dreams and desired changes in leadership culture, as well as their advice for other young women considering leadership roles.

The same questions in the interview guide are used in all interviews, which means that each interviewee received the same treatment and the same interview stimuli (Sahoo, 2022). However, it was not intended to be read word-for-word in the same order in every interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 7). As mentioned in chapter 3.1, all the interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams, utilizing online interviews. The interview recording feature helps to preserve the participants' statements, words, and reactions, which later help in observing and analyzing the interviews (Stuckey, 2018, p. 7), as described in more detail in the following chapter 3.4. Recording the interviews allowed the interviewer to focus better on listening and responding to the participant without having to take lengthy notes, enabling full participation for the interview itself (Stuckey, 2018, p. 7). To make the interview situation as smooth as possible, the interviews were conducted in Finnish, which was the native language of all the participants. Speaking the participants' native language created a more open environment for the interviews.

3.4 Data analysis

This section covers the data analysis process of the research, including transcription, data familiarization, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and the final stage of producing the report. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data in this research, which is one of the most widely used methods in qualitative research. Thematic analysis involves analyzing, identifying, and reporting the key patterns or themes that emerge from the data (Braun & Clarke, p. 6, 2006; Gupta et al., 2019, p. 199). Thematization and coding are traditional tools used in qualitative analysis and are often considered forms of content analysis (Mannila, 2023). This research followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) systematic six-phase guide, which comprises six steps: Familiarization with data, creating preliminary codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and preparation of the report.

1. Familiarization with data. The focus was on the interview data, which consisted of six individual interviews. The interview data had to be converted into written form to make

it easier to process. Therefore, before starting the thematic analysis, the interview data had to be transcribed. Transcription refers to the process of converting speech and actions into written form to understand the subject and perform analytical tasks, which is usually the first step of data analysis (Mannila, 2023; Stuckey, 2018). The transcription for this research was carried out by the researcher, who reviewed the transcription data produced by Microsoft Transcribe while listening to the interview simultaneously. Transcription is a time-consuming process, as each interview generates a large amount of data, and all the data must be reviewed one interview at a time. This allowed the researcher to add all the missing essential elements to the transcript that were missing. Transcription is a crucial step in the analysis process, as its level of accuracy significantly impacts the validity and reliability of the data (Stuckey, 2018, p. 6). All relevant speech and nonverbal behavior should be included in the transcript (Gupta et al., 2019, p. 203), as omitting them may lead to bias if conclusions are drawn before the information is verified (Stuckey, 2018, p. 7). After transcribing the interview data, it was translated from Finnish into English to facilitate the analysis process and because the research is carried out in English. After transcription, the interview data could be read several times in written form and examined in detail, and additional notes could be made.

2. Creating preliminary codes. The idea was to create preliminary codes, in which the researcher identified and marked the basic elements of the data that were relevant to the research phenomenon. To find proper themes from the interview data, coding was used to combine the qualitative data collection phase with the data analysis phase. To create the codes, it is necessary to select the right approach for finding and creating codes from the collected interview data. In this research, coding was done manually using an abductive approach, without the use of any coding software. According to Saldaña (2021, p. 3), code refers to a word or short phrase that captures the essential meaning or key attribute of a segment of language-based or visual data, such as interviews or documents. Coding is based on the research problem and key research questions, which often develop as coding progresses and the researcher explores the data in greater depth. In qualitative research, coding is both an analytical and exploratory process used

during and after data collection. Although coding is not the same as analysis, it serves as an important heuristic tool that facilitates discoveries by linking data to emerging concepts of the thesis (Saldaña, 2021, p. 8). The abductive approach is a research logic in which theory and empirical observations are constantly contrasted and systematically combined, allowing the research problem, the boundaries of the research, and the theoretical framework to evolve in the process of theory development (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Abductive coding is appropriate for this research because it allows movement between empirical data and theory, enabling the research question and theoretical framework to develop during the study. The researcher acts as the primary instrument in the coding process, meaning that coding is interpretive rather than exact, and the analysis is influenced by the researcher's choices.

3. Searching for themes. Codes were sorted and combined into broader, potential themes. When the color codes were added to the transcripts, it helped the researcher to link the codes to themes and helped to clarify the overall view of the themes. Themes represent patterns in the data that are relevant to the research question, and the researcher's task in the research is to actively identify and construct themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finding themes required searching for repeated and meaningful patterns in the entire interview data, not just in individual interviews. Although themes arise from recurring patterns and appear multiple times in the interview data, there are no precise rules about how many occurrences are needed to form a theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4. Reviewing potential themes. The themes were examined, based on the coded excerpts and then on the basis of the entire data set, as guided by the Braun and Clarke's (2006) research. At this stage, all the interview data was reread to identify any additional information on the themes that may have been unnoticed in the earlier coding stages. At the end of this stage, the researcher should have a clear understanding of the different themes, their compatibility, and the overall picture they form, which tells about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5. Defining and naming themes. The researcher identified the areas covered by the data for each theme and gave the themes concise, memorable names that fit the style of each theme and reflected the themes that emerged from the interview data. This made it easier to include the themes in the research.

6. Preparation of the report. The final stage is to compile the research, selecting illustrative themes from the interview data and compiling them into a coherent story in the findings section, while linking them to the research objectives and research question. The figure below shows the six phases of thematic analysis, broken down into the following steps: familiarization with data, creating preliminary codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and preparation of the report.

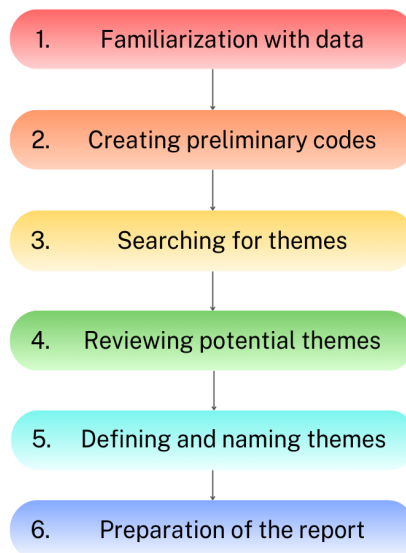


Figure 2. Six phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.5 Trustworthiness

This chapter examines the criteria underlying the trustworthiness of qualitative research to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of the results of this research. The four key criteria for the trustworthiness of qualitative research are credibility, transferability,

dependability, and confirmability (Anney, 2015). The trustworthiness of research depends on the use of the right criteria in the research approach, and research is only reliable when it is evaluated using criteria that correspond to its methodology. However, according to Anney (2015) qualitative research should not be evaluated on the basis of these quantitative criteria, as it is based on different philosophical assumptions. Therefore, trustworthiness is not about numbers or repeatability in a quantitative sense, but rather about credibility, transparency, and depth (Grossoehme, 2014). Previously qualitative research has been criticized for its reliability, but today this research method can be considered more reliable (Grossoehme, 2014, p. 3).

Credibility refers to confidence in the accuracy of the results and whether they accurately reflect the participants' views (Anney, 2015; Haq et al., 2023). The credibility of research increases when the researcher has relevant experience in the research subject, the results are clearly explained and easy to understand, as well as the interpretation of the research is based directly on the research data (Haq et al., 2023). In this research, credibility was ensured by the choice of data collection method. Semi-structured interviews were used to deepen and clarify the participants' personal views. The researcher's transcription also enabled long-term familiarization with the research data, and the research results were presented clearly.

Transferability refers to the extent to which qualitative findings can be applied to other contexts (Anney, 2015; Haq et al., 2023). It is supported by providing a comprehensive description of the research context and using appropriate sampling, allowing readers to assess transferability (Anney, 2015). According to Haq et al. (2023) research, it is transferable when readers can apply the results to their own situations. To assess transferability, this research provides a specific age group from 25- to 30-year-olds, and the career stage of the participants. Although the results specifically relate to these contexts, the detailed themes of the research offer insights that can be applied to similar professional environments worldwide.

Dependability, also called consistency, is the stability and consistency of data over time and across similar contexts (Haq et al., 2023). It is ensured through different methods, for example, coding and recoding strategies, as well as peer review (Anney, 2015). If the findings of one research are replicated in a similar population, condition, or context, the findings are dependable (Haq et al., 2023). Dependability in this research was ensured by closely following a six-step thematic analysis process, which helped to ensure reliable data analysis. The research also utilized an abductive approach, ensuring that even when the researcher used existing theories as support, the coding remained open to new topics and themes emerging from the participants' views, where dependability is assured.

Confirmability refers to the degree of neutrality or fairness of the findings (Haq et al., 2023), examining the extent to which the results are shaped by the participants rather than the researcher's bias. Although section 1.4 stated that AI tools were used to ensure linguistic clarity, artificial intelligence was not used in the interview data or their translation to ensure that the interviewees' own views and responses were preserved. Each theme identified in the results is also supported by direct quotes from participants, ensuring that the conclusions are consistently based on empirical data. For this research results, only real data was used, which was not influenced by the researcher's prejudices, making the results neutral. Overall, the trustworthiness of this research was confirmed by focusing on the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. By using appropriate qualitative criteria, transparent analytical and participant-centered methods in this research, it was ensured that the results are credible, justified, methodologically consistent, and based strongly on empirical data of the research.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Qualitative research should consider various ethical considerations, which are essential in in-depth research. The interviews were conducted anonymously, and anonymity was used to protect the participants' identities. According to Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021, p. 9), for research purposes, only the amount of demographic information that is

essential to the research objective and the theoretical framework used should be collected. Demographic data can be information from interviews, such as age, race, education, or years in their work role (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 8). This is important in semi-structured interviews, as demographic information can be collected either before, after, or during the interview, which may prevent the interviewee from feeling uncomfortable during the interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 8). However, the necessary demographic information was collected before and during the interview, which has greater significance related to the interviewee's arguments and the research results. The protection of participants' privacy was ensured, as interviews may involve the disclosure of personal information. To ensure the protection of participants' privacy, all collected data undergo anonymization through the removal of any identifiers that could reveal identities (Grossoehme, 2014, p. 9). In this research, the interviewees and interviews are identified by pseudonyms to maintain anonymity while facilitating the interpretation of the data and distinguishing between different interview situations.

TENK (2019) recommends the use of consent forms in research and the principle of informed consent in research involving human subjects. Therefore, this research uses a consent form, which the researcher gives to the interviewees to read. A consent form is a document used in the research process to ensure that participants know what they are agreeing to and give their consent voluntarily (TENK, 2019). In the context of thesis interviews, the purpose is ethical and practical (TENK, 2019). In this research, the consent form includes information about the research topic and explains how the interview will be conducted, the duration of the interview, and whether it will be recorded. It includes information on voluntary participation and right to withdraw, anonymity and confidentiality, how the interview data will be processed, and possible risks and benefits.

In summary, qualitative methodology was used to gain a comprehensive understanding of young women's perceptions of leadership in the early stages of their careers. By using semi-structured individual interviews as the primary data collection method, the research obtained personal stories that provided an in-depth understanding of the

participants' perceptions. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure that the participants had the necessary expertise to effectively address the research question. The data was analyzed using a six-step thematic process that employed an abductive approach to combine empirical observations with a theoretical framework. During the research, ethical integrity was prioritized by ensuring the anonymity of the participants and maintaining confidentiality.

4 Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the research, which are based on six semi-structured interviews. The objectives of the research were: How do young women in their early careers perceive leadership, what barriers do young women face in pursuing leadership in their early careers, and what supports help young women navigate toward leadership in their early careers. The results are divided into three sections in line with objectives of the research. Under each objective, the themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview data are presented.

4.1 Leadership perceptions

This section examines, through the lens of the first research objective, "how do young women in their early careers perceive leadership?" The analysis revealed two themes: Leadership aspirations: self-development and challenging of gender norms and perceived key leadership traits.

4.1.1 Leadership aspirations: Self-development and challenging of gender norms

According to interviewee 4, leadership aspirations are often linked to professional self-development rather than the pursuit of status or power, and leadership roles may be a natural step in her career later. She emphasizes her desire to "learning, developing and progressing". This shows that the interviewee 4 sees leadership roles primarily as an opportunity to grow, learn, and advance in career, rather merely as a means of gaining recognition through a title. According to Furtado and Henriques (2025) studies on women's leadership aspirations, internal motivational factors, such as seeking new challenges, learning, and working for the good of the organization, are emphasized more often than external motivational factors, such as power or status. Interviewee 4 response refers to a development-oriented perspective on career development, in which

leadership is seen as a natural step resulting from continuous learning and professional growth.

"It might be a natural role for me in bigger positions someday. I want to keep learning, developing and progressing in my career path. So in principle, yes, I aim for leadership, but not just for the title." (Interviewee 4)

Interviewees strongly emphasized that leadership can be promoted through coaching and feedback. Interviewees noted that leadership is not only about completing tasks, but also about pursuing dreams and moving forward in a career. Interviewees considered these goals as an important part of leadership, from both the subordinate's and the leader's perspective. Interviewee 5 emphasizes the importance of individual attention, where the leader acts as a bridge between the employee's current state and their future dreams, and the leader is an enabler of their subordinate's aspirations. In addition, the interviewees perceived that leadership involves understanding the team's internal motivations and providing individualized attention. Therefore, leaders act as coaches, paying attention to each person's need to achieve results and grow (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Interviewee 6 focuses on emphasizing the quality of relationships based on their own leadership experience, which is the interviewee's primary motivator in leadership roles. Interviewee 6 sees building strong relationships as one of the leadership aspiration and motivator.

*"[...] understand what they are (subordinates) striving for. You (as a leader) also need to **help move people forward toward their dreams** and understand what your team members want from the **future**."* (Interviewee 5)

*"Being able to **build good relationships and help others (subordinates) to move forward in their careers** is definitely what motivates most."* (Interviewee 6)

Interviewees also mention that good leadership involves giving subordinates the right tools, which can help them to pursue in their careers and succeed in their dreams. Tools in the context of leadership can be both tangible resources, such as software, budget, and training, as well as intangible resources, such as feedback, guidance, and autonomy

(Bass & Riggio, 2006). Interviewee 6 emphasizes leaders showing the right direction while giving team members the tools to advance in their own careers. This refers to a leadership style that provides a vision while allowing subordinates to navigate their own paths (Moldoveanu et al., 2019).

*"[...] someone who **shows the right direction** and **gives the tools** that my team members need so they can move forward in their own careers **and feel that they are developing.**" (Interviewee 6)*

According to the interview data, women's leadership aspirations extend beyond traditional career paths. Participants view leadership as a field in which gender norms can be challenged. Interviewee 5 demonstrates an awareness of structural inequalities and a desire to challenge them. Therefore, leadership is not seen solely as a personal opportunity for advancement but as a platform for challenging gendered expectations in professional environments. Interviewee's 1 leadership interest involves demonstrating women's competence in traditionally male-dominated environments. The participant challenges gendered assumptions about age and ability, emphasizing how pursuing leadership can serve both personal and social goals. These findings are in line with research by Eagly and Karau (2002), which suggests that women's leadership aspirations are shaped by both intrinsic motivation and structural pressures. Women are often perceived as less "suitable" for leadership due to prevailing gender norms, and this perception may influence both interest and confidence in pursuing leadership roles.

*"I think it is partly **challenging gender norms**. I cannot accept that men always get those positions more easily and are generally treated better." (Interviewee 5)*

*"Well, maybe it is just that you can advance in your career and **also challenge the idea that young women are not capable of leading large teams**. And there are components such as **men of the same age or older men.**" (Interviewee 1)*

4.1.2 Perceived key leadership traits

Interview data revealed that young women shared their perceptions of leadership through leadership traits. Interviewees described their perceptions of ideal leader and

traits they personally value in a good leader. Four of six interviewees considered empathy a key personal trait for a leader. According to Lanier's (2025) research, affective empathy is an emotional reaction or "feeling the pain of others", which is most useful when dealing with individual needs or social relationships in the workplace. Cognitive empathy, on the other hand, refers to understanding another person's perspective through intellectual understanding (Lanier, 2025), which is a particularly important trait in today's business world. Consequently, according to the interviewees 5 and 2, empathy gives leaders the ability to "put themselves in other people's shoes", and empathy is also part of a people-oriented approach and situational awareness in different environments.

"[...] you need to be empathetic (as a leader) and be able to put yourself in another person's position [...]" (Interviewee 5)

"[...] first word that suddenly came to my mind was empathetic [...] but good leader in my experience is empathetic. A lot of different kinds of situations come up in working life where you need good empathy skills and a people-oriented approach, so I would say situational awareness and empathy." (Interviewee 2)

Although the interviews revealed that empathy is a quality of a good leader, empathy as a good leadership trait can be seen as controversial, as it is not always valued or rewarded in an organizational context. Interviewee 1 discusses the stereotype experienced by women that empathy is a leadership weakness, which stems from the historical stereotype that empathy is associated with femininity. This creates a false dichotomy in which leaders are seen as either masculine, which is seen as a strength, or feminine, which is seen as a weakness (Lanier, 2025). This is also described in the "think manager-think male" paradigm presented Buss et al. (2025) in section 2.3.5, where stereotypical characteristics associated with successful leaders, such as decisiveness, emotional distance, and effectiveness, are closer to traditional masculine stereotypes than to feminine ones, such as empathy. Because empathy can be considered "weaker", it is often seen as contradictory to "effectiveness", which leads to prejudices against women in the leadership positions. Interviewee 1 states that this perspective is incorrect, and from the employee's perspective, an empathetic leader who can understand their subordinates

directly increases job satisfaction. Interviewee 2 highlights a problem in which empathy is often taken for granted rather than rewarded as a skill. Although it is expected of women in particular, it is rarely classified as a key performance indicator and since empathy is not an official KPI from an organizational perspective, it becomes an invisible contribution (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This suggests that while women bring these skills to leadership roles, they may not receive professional recognition for them.

*"I think empathy is part of working life, and that is why **people do not want to promote women to these leadership positions**. They say **it hurts efficiency**, but the truth is that when your boss understands you and is more empathetic towards you, your job satisfaction is much better." (Interviewee 1)*

*"I would say that the things I mentioned, **empathy, for example, are not necessarily rewarded as such**. It is more kind of an assumption that **those skills should be there**. But from an organizational perspective, it is **not really a performance indicator**." (Interviewee 2)*

In the current leadership debate, empathy and approachability are considered essential components of emotional intelligence. However, as mentioned in section 2.2.2, descriptive beliefs create a double bind of women's gender, as society is stereotypically defined as a place of agency, women are often seen as less suited to high-level roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Interviewee 1 notes that subordinates challenge her much more easily than her male colleagues. This points to an imbalance in how authority is granted, with men's power often protected by their position, while women's authority is perceived as relative, making it more negotiable in the eyes of subordinates. Thus, women's approachability was seen as a deviation from the traditional requirements of agentic leadership, which can also lead to subordinates questioning a woman's authority in a way that they would not do with a man (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Interviewee 4 describes their thoughts on the empathy trap. In this dichotomy, men are seen as action-oriented and women as empathetic (Eagly & Karau, 2002). According to Eagly and Karau (2002), women are expected to display socially communal traits, such as caring, rather than agentic traits, such as assertiveness. When a female leader's empathy is confused with

professional weakness, it can lead to a loss of authority, with "people walking over you", as interviewee 4 described.

*"[...] they (subordinates) dared to **challenge me much more easily** because they felt that **I was more approachable** than a man in a higher position."* (Interviewee 1)

*"A good leader has empathy, which **stereotypically is more associated with women**, and that is a very good trait in leadership. [...] **Men are stereotypically confident and just act**, while women may think more about the common good. Empathy is a good trait, but **being too nice can mean people walk over you.**"* (Interviewee 4)

4.2 Barriers

This section examines, through the lens of the second research objective, "what barriers do young women face in pursuing leadership in their early careers?" The analysis revealed two themes: gender expectations, and organizational and structural constraints.

4.2.1 Gender expectations

The interviewees highlighted various gender-related expectations that were perceived as barriers to young women's understanding of leadership. Interviewees 4 and 3 suggest that young women at the early stages of their careers feel that leadership is closely linked to gender-related visibility and legitimacy. Participants working in male-dominated fields, such as in STEM fields as well as the financial sector, reported being subject to increasingly scrutiny and feeling the need to constantly prove their competence, which is perceived as a burden of visibility. The glass ceiling has a major impact on this phenomenon, in which stereotypical perceptions of women reinforce stereotypical views of women's competence in leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which can lead to the above mentioned experiences such as scrutiny and the need to constantly prove their competence (Heilman et al., 2024). As mentioned in section 2.3.6, this may also lead to fear of

reinforcing negative stereotypes about women's competence or to being judged based on their gender (Bravata et al., 2019; Holm, 2022). According to interviewee 4, being "one of the first" or in a clear minority created a feeling of deviating from the norm, which increased performance pressure and caused mental strain. According to Heilman et al. (2024), when women are underrepresented, their gender becomes more visible, causing them to "stand out" more and making stereotypes more likely to be activated. As a result, they are more likely to be seen as representatives of their gender rather than as individuals (Heilman et al., 2024), which may increase their need to prove themselves to others.

*"[...] related to data centers, and that field is also very male-dominated. There are very few women. So when you are **one of the first**, you kind of have to pave the way. [...] people have assumptions about what someone looks like or who is a good candidate, and those prejudices can surface. If you stand out from the norm, you **have to prove yourself a lot**. It can even be exhausting, even if you are fully competent for the role."* (Interviewee 4)

Interview data also suggest that gendered expectations and attitudes toward leadership and parenthood continue to influence perceptions and employment opportunities. Interviewees described experiences or observations that suggest that women may still face subtle forms of discrimination, particularly due to stereotypes about leadership suitability and parental leave. Interviewee 5 feels that she has heard a lot of derogatory comments about female leaders and maternity leave, especially from men. She emphasizes that she has heard that a woman who takes maternity leave cannot be in a leadership position. Interviewee 2 also notes that if a woman is at an age where family planning may be relevant, this may be considered a risk. This can be illustrated by how the expectation of motherhood can affect perceptions of women's commitment to their careers. Even if there is no discrimination, such assumptions can affect hiring, promotions, or access to leadership positions, even though this should not be the case in practice. This phenomenon described in the interviews has been identified as the "motherhood penalty" in which women who are expected to become mothers are perceived as less competent or less committed employees (Correll et al., 2007, pp. 1298-1326). According to

Correll et al. (2007, pp. 1298-1326), women with children are often evaluated less favourably in recruitment processes than otherwise similar candidates without children.

*"I have heard a lot, especially from men, quite degrading talk about female leaders [...] I have also heard a lot of **things related to maternity leave**, like that someone who has to go on maternity leave cannot be a leader. I have heard quite a lot of all kinds of ****." (Interviewee 5)*

*"I believe **discrimination still exists, especially regarding parental leave**, which women usually take longer. Stereotypically, if a woman is at an age where family plans might be relevant, it may be **seen as a risk**. I can see it potentially affecting me too. I fear we have not eliminated that issue yet." (Interviewee 2)*

Interviewee's 1 illustrates how expectations regarding workplace flexibility can put women at a disadvantage. The participant suggests that men may be considered easier to recruit because they are less likely to need flexible working arrangements related to family responsibilities. Such assumptions reflect gender-based expectations of nursing work and reinforce workplace norms that prioritize employees who can conform to the model of the "ideal employee". This is also supported by Correll et al. (2007) research, which shows that employers may discriminate against women who are expected to become mothers because they assume that these employees need more flexibility. This contributes to discrimination based on motherhood in hiring and promotions.

*"I think companies are **not very flexible toward women**, because a **male candidate can do the same job without needing flexibility**, so it is probably easier for companies to choose men." (Interviewee 5)*

4.2.2 Organizational and structural constraints

There were differences in the interviewees' views on how they perceive leadership in their organization. Interviewee 6 noted that she has not experienced any stereotypes or glass ceilings while working as a team leader in a smaller marketing organization. According to Hurst et al. (2024), organizational size and hierarchy levels influences how gender equality is perceived and reinforced. It shows that flatter and less hierarchical structures are associated with more equal perceptions of gender, while steeper

hierarchies can reinforce traditional gender patterns (Hurst et al., 2024). This suggests that smaller, less hierarchical organizations may offer fewer structural barriers and less opportunity for gender stereotypes to emerge.

*"No, not actually [...] we are such **a small company**, and **everyone is quite close and more like friends** than just colleagues. Of course, I guess if it were **a bigger company** and I was sitting on some board or somewhere with many more people in the same role, then there could be something."* (Interviewee 6)

However, larger and more hierarchical organizations with formal decision-making systems are more likely to have structural glass ceilings (Hurst et al., 2024). It is consistent with interviewee 5 prediction of such dynamics in a larger organization, where women are represented in entry and middle leadership positions, but the entire upper management team consists only of men.

*"**Our organization has many layers**, with many supervisors and subordinates. We have women in supervisory roles and as leaders, but our **entire management is only men.**"* (Interviewee 5)

Interviewee 2 states that women are strongly represented in team leader positions in the banking sector. According to Sahay and Cihak (2018), women's participation in the financial sector has grown significantly in recent decades, and they are also well represented in entry-level leadership positions. However, gender differences are still more pronounced in the mid- and upper leadership positions (Sahay & Cihak, 2018). Thus, interviewee's 2 experience seems to reflect progress in entry and middle leadership positions, but overall gender equality in leadership positions has not yet been achieved. Furthermore, having women in leadership roles within an organization can be an influential factor in shaping young women's positive perceptions of leadership positions, as they feel they have opportunities to achieve them. These organizational factors also influence whether women remain interested and move into leadership roles in all sectors in general.

*"In the banking sector, it has become surprisingly **female-dominated**. Many women are **interested in leadership** [...] there are **many young women in team leader roles**." (Interviewee 2)*

According to interviewee 2, traditional, male-dominated environments can inhibit participation, while inclusive and modern workplaces attract women to leadership roles. At the same time, according to interviewee 6, societal perceptions are changing positively, normalizing women's leadership aspirations and supporting the growth of gender equality over time. Together, these factors suggest that inclusive cultures and evolving norms are key to promoting female leadership.

*"It might depend on workplace atmosphere if there is an **old-fashioned old men's leadership club**, then it might not be so attractive to join. A **more modern workplace and the more liberal the values** represented there, the more likely I would see young women being interested in leadership roles." (Interviewee 2)*

*"[...] many people have a goal of wanting to be in a leadership role. I think this is also constantly **changing for the better**, in the sense that it is viewed more positively that **women can also be in leadership roles**." (Interviewee 6)*

The interviewees also encountered certain structural constraints. Interviewee 4 describes her experience of a flat organizational structure, where interaction with members of the executive team is informal and accessible. Interviewee 6 felt that corporate hierarchies would become weaker and leaders would be treated more casually. These insights can refer to the observed shift towards less hierarchical workplace structures, in which managers interact with employees more informally and no longer appear fundamentally different from employees. According to Hurst et al. (2024), flatter organizational structures, characterized by easier access to the top management, can weaken these boundaries and create more inclusive organizational environments. Thus, a reduction in hierarchical distance can also be seen as a factor promoting more equal gender dynamics, with flatter, less hierarchical structures associated with more equal gender representation (Hurst et al., 2024).

"The hierarchy is quite flat. I have seen different types of organizations. I can easily talk and have lunch with executive team members. There is no massive gap." (Interviewee 4)

*"I see that it will move even more strongly in the opposite direction, that **hierarchy decreases and leaders are approached more casually**. Maybe leaders are no longer seen as being completely different than other employees."* (Interviewee 6)

Interviewee 1 acknowledges that leadership positions are attractive and beneficial for career advancement, but at the same time feels that women have fewer opportunities than men to attain these positions. This suggests that although leadership itself is not considered a negative, organizational practices and attitudes may limit women's advancement. The interviewee's 1 perception that men are offered more opportunities reflects a phenomenon commonly discussed in gender and leadership research, where women encounter barriers to career advancement, and this understanding is consistent with the concept of a glass ceiling in section 2.2.

"Yes, I can see that they (leadership positions) are attractive. They can really advance your career if you end up doing them. I just feel that men are offered more opportunities than women to rise to leadership positions. It is as if there is a fear of letting young women into management positions." (Interviewee 1)

Interviewee 1 also refers to structural constraints that appear as gender inequality in the workplace. Informal male networks, or "old boys clubs," influence pay, career development and career aspirations. Interviewee 1 states that even though she had more experience, she received a lower salary. This is due to reinforced gender stereotypes, which reinforce gender pay gaps (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). It can also be explained due to gender-based favouritism, homophily, and exclusion from informal networks, as mentioned in section 2.3.4. This shows that people in positions of power can favor those who resemble themselves, which can increase gender inequality in organizations (Butler et al., 2025). Such informal networks can put women at a disadvantage by limiting their access to resources, recognition, and opportunities for advancement (Butler et al., 2025). The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions reinforces gender

stereotypes, creates a symbolic barrier for new female professionals, and increases wage gaps (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

*"I have been at a workplace where there were two people in the same position. I had more experience than the man in the same position, but he got a higher salary than me. [...] partly because my boss was a man, they got along well, and they had this kind of **good old boys club** that I could never join because I was not a man."* (Interviewee 1)

4.3 Supports

This section examines, through the lens of the third research objective, "what supports help young women navigate toward leadership in their early careers?" The analysis revealed three themes: support mechanism for career development and support mechanism for self-confidence.

4.3.1 Support mechanism for career development

Interviewees 5 and 4 emphasize that leaders must understand the strengths and weaknesses of individuals and teams, as this is seen as a significant source of career development support. This suggests that providing employees with the right tools helps their advancement and development as individuals, which in turn helps build a good team. As Goleman (2017) stated, understanding strengths and weaknesses is the responsibility of leadership, which involves adapting to people and situations. A leader can observe performance patterns, listen carefully to subordinates, understand each individual's strengths, weaknesses, and motivators, and connect work tasks to personal potential and long-term growth goals (Goleman, 2017). Through these factors, a strong team can be built through individual abilities, where they can perform at their best, which has an impact on both the individual and organizational levels.

*"Being able to give them the **right tools**. You also need to **understand your team's strengths and weaknesses** so you can build a good team." (Interviewee 5)*

*"They recognize **team members' strengths** and place them in roles where they perform best." (Interviewee 4)*

Interviewees highlight continuous feedback as central element of career development support. As interviewees 2 and 3 state, leaders should give feedback to gain tools for development and learning. According to Goleman (2017), continuous and long-term development of employees is important, as improving existing skills and learning new ones will help them grow into future roles. Interviewees 3 and 1 also state that giving feedback to subordinates enables their learning and career development. Feedback can thus take the form of guidance and clear communication, which helps individuals better understand their strengths and weaknesses, allowing feedback to be used not only as an assessment tool but also as a means of supporting development, growth, and learning (Goleman, 2017).

*"You can always **learn and improve**. [...] **Feedback from my supervisor reinforces that**." (Interviewee 2)*

*"These are things we invest in strongly, specifically continuous development and supporting it, **giving feedback** to everyone so that through **that you get tools to develop and learn**." (Interviewee 3)*

*"Being able to **communicate clearly** and [...] **give feedback**, both positive and negative. But also in the sense that they know how to do it well. [...] and told clearly what you need to do to be able to **advance or what you should develop**." (Interviewee 1)*

Interviewee 3 also highlights that larger organizations have programmes that provide a formal support for professional career development. However, in smaller organizations, formal programmes may not exist, and support tends to be more individualised and often takes the form of one-to-one mentoring or sparring. This suggests that the size of the organization and the availability of resources play a significant role in shaping the type and extent support available to young women. As mentioned in section 2.3.7,

development programmes help prepare individuals for career advancement by developing skills, confidence, self-efficacy, and career development capabilities (Clarke, 2011). In addition, interviewee 3 notes that there is still considerable room for improvement in organizations in terms of structured support for women's career development.

*"It varies. Some organizations have more **structured programs supporting women's career development**. For example, we have a leadership program for university students aimed at developing and addressing this topic. But **in smaller organizations there may not be resources for larger structured programs, so it is more personal one-on-one sparring**. [...] **I believe many organizations still have room for development there.**" (Interviewee 3)*

Interviewee's 6 quote also highlights the role of organizational support in leadership, particularly the role of Human Resources in supporting leaders. The participant suggests that HR could provide training for leaders where they can ask questions and receive guidance. This indicates the need for structured support systems within the organization. Section 2.3.7 highlights that leadership is not only dependent on individual contribution but also on organizational structures that enable managers to effectively support employees. Leadership programs and training initiatives can strengthen leader's ability to mentor early-career professionals (Clarke, 2011). In this context, training by HR can serve as an additional support mechanism that improves leader's ability to mentor and support employees, contributing to a more supportive environment for young women's career development and leadership aspirations.

*"[...] HR could arrange some **training for supervisors, where you could ask questions and get more support.**" (Interviewee 6)*

4.3.2 Support mechanism for self-confidence

The interviews revealed that self-confidence play an important role in young women's career opportunities and perceptions of progressing into leadership roles. Interviewee 4 emphasized that young women need encouragement and to build self-confidence, but also acknowledged that women may encounter "comments", suggesting that self-

confidence is needed not only to gain opportunities but also to navigate gendered comments and biases in professional environments (Keenan et al., 2025). These experiences point to the interaction between an individual's self-confidence and broader social contexts and reflect how internalized insecurity can shape decisions about taking job opportunities. Similarly, Hofer et al. (2025) research has shown that women often evaluate their abilities more negatively than men, even when their performance is at the same level, suggesting that gendered self-evaluation patterns can influence self-confidence and career choices. In chapter 2.3.2, Super (1980) argues that early career experiences significantly shape professional self-image and future career aspirations. Encouragement and building confidence at this stage can play an important role in strengthening young women's leadership aspirations and supporting their long-term career development.

*"Young women **need encouragement and confidence**. You will hear strange comments. It is a fact. You need to know how to respond."* (Interviewee 4)

Interviewees also highlight the importance of female role models as key forms of support for young women's confidence building. Interviewee 12 highlights the combined role of leadership programs and mentoring in supporting young women's early leadership development. Although the participant describes leadership training as a "springboard", she emphasizes that the mentor was the most significant source of support because they recognized her potential and invested in her self-development. According to section 2.3.7, leadership programs can provide structured opportunities for skill development, networking, and confidence building (Clarke, 2011). However, interviewee 2 also illustrates how mentoring relationships often provide deeper and more personalized support through encouragement and guidance. Therefore, mentoring can improve career motivation and professional self-confidence (Clarke, 2011; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

*"The six-month leadership training was a great **springboard**. But especially **my mentor has been the biggest support**. Someone who sees your potential and invests time in your development is invaluable."* (Interviewee 2)

Interviewee 4 also explains the importance of female role models and mentoring relationships in strengthening young women's self-confidence and leadership aspirations. She notes that female leaders share certain similarities, which emphasises how the example and support of experienced female leaders can strengthen a young woman's belief in their own leadership potential. These findings are in line with section 2.3.7, which highlights the importance of role models in shaping young women's leadership and career identities. Hill and Wheat (2017) argue that visible female role models help women envision themselves in leadership roles and understand viable career paths in fields that have traditionally been male-dominated. Similarly, Dixon et al. (2023) emphasizes that observing successful female leaders provides symbolic validation that leadership roles are attainable, which strengthens self-confidence and leadership aspirations.

*"I notice female leaders more, especially those with similar backgrounds. **One mentored me and congratulated me when I got my role. She was very confident, which helped build my confidence.**"* (Interviewee 4)

Interviewee 3 believes that young women's interest in leadership positions is determined by the visibility of role models and the existence of established paths to leadership positions. When there are no female role models in the field and no clear practices for advancing to leadership positions, women may consider these positions less attainable or attractive. As mentioned in section 2.3.7, role models are a powerful tool in building career self-efficacy and success (Clarke, 2011, p. 501), providing concrete examples of how leadership roles are within the reach of young women, supporting young women's leadership identity and social self-confidence (Dixon et al., 2023; Hill & Wheat, 2017). When there are no female role models in the industry and no clear procedures for accessing leadership roles, women may find these roles less attainable or attractive.

*"Yes, I believe so. I think it affects (young women) significantly. Especially in fields where there are **no established role models** or practices yet, there is **no full adaptation to make it attractive to strive toward it**, and in practical terms how you can function in certain roles or how people apply for them."* (Interviewee 3)

5 Conclusion

This chapter presents the research conclusions and provides a summary of the key empirical findings in relation to the theoretical framework presented in chapter 2. The main research question was: "what are young women's perceptions of leadership in the early stages of their careers?" This question was examined through three objectives which are discussed below, followed by a discussion of the research's contribution to existing theory and its practical implications. The chapter concludes with the research's limitations and suggestions for future research.

The first research objective examined how do young women in their early careers perceive leadership. Interview data revealed two themes that together address this objective: Leadership aspirations: self-development and challenging of gender norms, and perceived key leadership traits. Theme leadership aspirations: self-development and challenging of gender norms, reveals that participants framed their leadership aspirations primarily around growth, learning, and purpose rather than around hierarchical advancement or status. Leadership was viewed as a natural progression of continuous professional development. This is consistent with the research by Furtado and Henriques (2025) and Sealy et al. (2024), suggesting that young women's motivation for leadership is driven strongly by internal factors, such as learning and participation. In addition, several participants explicitly described a normative motivation, which is a desire to challenge gender-related expectations about leaders. Seeking leadership positions was a conscious act of resistance against the structural underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. This finding adds a new dimension to the existing theoretical literature. Although previous research has addressed women's leadership aspirations primarily from the perspective of individual psychological processes, such as the formation of leadership identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Dixon et al., 2023), these findings suggest that for young Finnish women in their early careers, leadership aspiration may also be a socially motivated and politically conscious choice. Structural changes in leadership have received limited attention in the literature on the early stages of women's careers, and this

research provides insight into the motivational factors of female leaders in the early stages of their careers.

Theme perceived key leadership traits, was addressed in all six interviews, consistently linking good leadership to interpersonal and relational qualities. Empathy was described not simply as a soft quality, but as a functional leadership skill that helps leaders understand subordinates, provide support, and navigate work relationships. Participants linked empathy to situational awareness, people-centered leadership, and the ability to build trust within teams. This finding aligns with previous research, which emphasizes inspiration, consideration for the individual, and emotional intelligence as key leadership traits (Bass & Riggio, 2006), and showing that women tend toward collaboration, interpersonal relationships, and socially oriented leadership behavior (McEldowney et al., 2009). Although participants valued empathy as a good leadership trait, it is not always rewarded or recognized as a competency within organizations. Empathy was described as an expected trait among women, but it was rarely measured as a performance metric. This finding extends existing theory "think manager-think male" (Buss et al., 2025) and double bind (Eagly & Karau, 2002), showing that communal traits, such as empathy, are undervalued in many organizations. This indicates that young women are themselves aware of the phenomenon. Rather than internalizing the assumption that empathy is a weakness, the participants criticized the organizational culture that makes it invisible. This awareness represents an evolving form of leadership among young women that has not been comprehensively described in previous literature.

The second research objective investigated what barriers young women face in pursuing leadership during the early stages of their careers. The thematic analysis identified two themes addressing this objective: gender expectations and organizational and structural constraints. Theme gender expectations emerged as a broad and multifaceted barrier. Participants experienced increased scrutiny and constant pressure to prove their competence, particularly in male-dominated fields. Belonging to a minority imposed a burden that was not due to an individual's lack of ability but to structural

underrepresentation. This finding is consistent with Heilman et al. (2024) research on the gender stereotypes, as well as with Bravata et al. (2019) and Holm (2022) research on the fear of reinforcing negative stereotypes when women are underrepresented. However, the detail which the participants described this burden of visibility early in their careers expands the existing literature. The glass ceiling and its causes is often discussed in the context of senior leadership (Taparia & Lenka, 2022), but Beltramini et al. (2022) support these findings by noting that the phenomenon affects several stages of a career and that its effects are strongly felt even in the early stages of a career. The disadvantage of motherhood emerged as a significant barrier even among participants who did not yet have children. The participants reported hearing comments that linked maternity leave to an inability to handle leadership roles, and they expressed concern that simply being at an age when starting a family is common might be viewed as a professional risk. This finding supports the concept of the "motherhood penalty" and the "ideal employee" norm presented by Correll et al. (2007) which reflects broader observations on how gender-based assumptions about caregiving responsibilities influence recruitment and promotion decisions (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). A particularly significant finding of this research is that the "motherhood penalty" is not just an experience, but rather a concern about the future that shapes young women's perceptions of leadership opportunities even before they have not yet experienced it, which has received less attention in the existing literature.

Another barrier relates to theme organizational and structural constraints. At the organizational level, participants in smaller, flatter organizations reported fewer experiences of gender-based barriers, which aligns with findings by Hurst et al. (2024) that flatter structures are associated with more equal gender dynamics. However, participants from larger and hierarchical organizations reported clearer experiences of structural inequality. This was also linked to male-dominated senior leadership positions, even though women were present in lower-level leadership roles. Informal networks and homophily were identified as additional structural constraints. The exclusion from male-dominated informal networks was linked to tangible disadvantages in salary, access to opportunities,

and career visibility. These findings are consistent with the research of Hurst et al. (2024) on the relationship between organizational hierarchy and gender equality, as well as with the research of Butler et al. (2025) on exclusion from informal networks through homophily. Workplace culture was also identified as a structural constraint of women's leadership interest. Participants noted that traditional, male-dominated organizational cultures could prevent young women from pursuing leadership positions, whereas more inclusive environments actively attracted them. In summary, the findings both support and expand existing theory. The barriers identified in this research, such as gender stereotypes, motherhood penalty, exclusion from informal networks, and masculine organizational cultures, are well established in the literature on the glass ceiling (Çitil, 2022; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Taparia & Lenka, 2022). However, this research provides a more detailed view of how these barriers are experienced in the early stages of careers, and highlights predictive barriers.

The third research objective examined what supports help young women navigate toward leadership roles in the early stages of their careers. The thematic analysis produced two themes in response to this objective: support mechanism for career development and support mechanism for self-confidence. In theme support mechanism for career development participants highlight feedback, mentoring, and structured development programmes as key supports for young women's career development. Participants emphasized that effective leaders play a crucial role in identifying individual strengths and weaknesses and directing team members. Leaders who provided clear and constructive feedback, understood individuals' strengths and weaknesses, and offered appropriate tools and resources for advancement were perceived as supporting career development. This finding is consistent with Clarke's (2011) argument that early career development opportunities have long-term implications for women's leadership trajectories. In addition, formal leadership development programmes were identified as important supports, particularly in larger organizations. According to Clark (2011), formal leadership development programs can build skills, self-confidence, and career development capabilities. At the same time, participants noted that such programs are not widely available and

smaller organizations generally use more individual support. Consequently, the availability of career development support itself depends on the size and resources of the organization, which may reinforce existing disparities across sectors.

Theme support mechanism for self-confidence was identified both as a critical resource for navigating leadership aspirations and as a component of professional identity. The participants emphasized that young women need encouragement not only to build self-confidence in their own abilities, but also to develop the coping skills needed to respond to gendered comments and prejudices in professional environments. This finding is consistent with the research by Hofer et al. (2025) and Keenan et al. (2025), which found that women assess their abilities more negatively than men, even when performance is at the same level, which suggest that this gender difference may influence career choices and leadership aspirations. Female role models emerged as a confidence-building source of support. Participants described how significant it was to see women in leadership roles who had similar backgrounds or career paths, which they saw as concrete proof that it is possible to reach leadership positions. This is consistent with the research findings by Dixon et al. (2023) and Hill and Wheat (2017), showing that visible female role models strengthen career-related self-efficacy by providing symbolic validation of women's leadership potential. Participants also noted that the lack of visible female role models, particularly in fields where women's representation in leadership roles remains low, can undermine young women's belief that a leadership roles are attainable or attractive. This suggests that the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions reinforces the perception that leadership roles are not suited to women, which in turn reduces the number of women who aspire to leadership positions. Efforts to build self-confidence must focus not only on individual women but also on the structural aspects of representation within organizations and across various sectors.

Overall, the research findings both support and expand upon the existing theoretical literature on young women's leadership. Gender stereotypes, the double bind, the motherhood penalty, exclusion from informal networks, and biased organizational structures,

are consistent with the existing frameworks (Çitil, 2022; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Taparua & Lenka, 2022). The importance of role models, mentoring, and organizational culture as enabling factors are supported by Barkhuizen et al. (2022), Clarke, (2011) and Dixon et al. (2023).

5.1 Contribution and practical implications

This research has focused on the formative stage of professional development that is the period when leadership identity and long-term career aspirations are most vulnerable to external influences. While existing literature frequently examines women who have already attained senior leadership positions, this thesis provides new knowledge regarding the experiences of Finnish women aged 25-30 as they navigate their first significant steps toward their careers.

The empirical findings of the research confirm and support established theoretical perspectives, and several findings extend beyond existing theory. First, the participants indicated that the underestimation of empathy in organizations had not previously been explicitly addressed. Rather than experiencing the double bind only as a constraint, participants were able to identify and criticize it, which represents a potentially significant resource for navigating inequalities within organizations. Second, the predictability of certain obstacles such as the anxiety associated with motherhood and the psychological burden of belonging to a visible minority underscore how structural inequalities shape young women's perceptions even before they encounter these barriers. Third, the finding that young Finnish women's leadership aspirations may be motivated by a conscious desire to challenge gender norms and increase representation adds a sociopolitical dimension to psychological frameworks for the formation of leadership identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Ibarra et al., 2013).

The findings highlight several practical implications for organizations, leadership development programs, and policymakers. Early career experiences strongly influence

leadership identity and career aspirations, making supportive environments and development opportunities essential. Organizations should increase the visibility of female role models, invest in mentoring and sponsorship programs, and create inclusive leadership cultures with transparent promotion processes. Leadership development programs should focus on strengthening confidence at the early career stage, addressing challenges such as self-doubt and impostor syndrome while developing relational and communication skills. Policymakers can support these efforts through structural initiatives such as promoting flexible work arrangements, parental leave policies, and leadership development programs specifically targeted at young professionals. Continued efforts to advance gender equality in leadership representation remain important not only as an ethical imperative but as strengthening organizational performance and innovation.

5.2 Limitations

This research has limitations in terms of its demographic and geographical scope. It focuses only on women aged between 25 and 30, so the findings may not apply to women at different career stages. Because leadership perceptions develop over time, the results reflect only one formative period of career. In addition, all participants are Finnish, meaning that cross-cultural perspectives are not considered and the findings may not be transferable to contexts with different gender equality policies or cultural norms. The purposive sampling method may also introduce researcher bias, as participants were selected based on the researcher's judgment rather than randomly (Rai & Thapa, 2015, p. 10). Furthermore, the small sample size of six participants makes the results contextual and limits their statistical generalizability, although this is consistent with the standards of in-depth qualitative research. Thematic analysis also has limitations that must be acknowledged. Although it is a widely applicable method, its flexibility places significant responsibility on the researcher to ensure accuracy and theoretical transparency (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The quality of the analysis is therefore dependent on the researcher's skills and choices, and without careful reflexivity, the analysis may lead to biased theme selection or unexamined assumptions. These limitations were addressed through a

systematic six-step analytical process and by using participants' quotes to connect them to the empirical data.

5.3 Suggestions for future research

Based on the findings and limitations of this research, possible directions for future research can be recommended. The research is geographically limited to Finland and focuses on Finnish participants. Future research could expand this field through comparative cross-cultural analysis and investigate how different national contexts, gender equality policies, and cultural norms shape young women's leadership perceptions. For example, comparing the Finnish context to countries with gender equality, such as Southern Europe or East Asia, could reveal how the political and institutional environment can shape leadership perceptions in the early careers. Since this research describes a specific point in time in the professional development of young women, following the same population for 10-15 years would provide valuable insights into how leadership identities and aspirations evolve as women progress from the early stages of their careers to leadership roles. Such research would help identify more accurately when and why leadership ambitions may weaken or strengthen because of various organizational experiences over time. In future research, a cross-sectional approach could also be employed, involving women from more diverse socioeconomic, educational, and cultural backgrounds, as the research participants were primarily educated, middle-class Finnish women. Increasing the sample size and potentially incorporating quantitative methods would also allow for stronger generalizations and enable statistical testing of the relationships between the leadership aspirations, barriers and supports identified this research.

References

- Adeoye-Olatunde, O. A., & Olenik, N. (2021). Research and scholarly methods: Semi-structured interviews. *Journal of the American College of Clinical Pharmacy*, 4(10), 1358–1367.
- Ahmad, M., & Wilkins, S. (2025). Purposive sampling in qualitative research: A framework for the entire journey. *Quality & Quantity*, 59(2), 1461–1479. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-024-02022-5>
- Anney, V. N. (2015). Ensuring the Quality of the Findings of Qualitative Research: Looking at Trustworthiness Criteria. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, 5(2), 272–281.
- Barkhuizen, E. N., Masakane, G., & Van Der Sluis, L. (2022). In search of factors that hinder the career advancement of women to senior leadership positions. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, 48. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v48i0.1986>
- Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006). *Transformational Leadership* (2nd ed.). Psychology Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410617095>
- Beaupre, J. G. (2022). To lead or not to lead: Exploring how young women’s early career experiences impact their leadership ambition. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 37(8), 1064–1079. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-11-2021-0344>
- Beltramini, L. de M., Cepellos, V. M., & Pereira, J. J. (2022). Young Women, “Glass Ceiling”, And Strategies To Face Crystal Walls. *Revista de Administração de Empresas*, 62(6) <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0034-759020220608x>

- Bhat, B. A., Majid, J., Gurumayum, K., Dar, M. A., & Mary, P. R. (2022). Promoting Gender Equality for Women's Leadership. *International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education, 14*(05).
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bravata, D. M., Watts, S. A., Keefer, A. L., Madhusudhan, D. K., Taylor, K. T., Clark, D. M., Nelson, R. S., Cokley, K. O., & Hagg, H. K. (2019). Prevalence, Predictors, and Treatment of Impostor Syndrome: A Systematic Review. *Journal of General Internal Medicine, 35*(4), 1252–1275. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-019-05364-1>
- Buss, M., Andler, S., & Tiberius, V. (2025). Female leadership: An integrative review and research framework. *The Leadership Quarterly, 36*(3), 101858. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2024.101858>
- Butler, T., Falk, E., & Kleinbaum, A. M. (2025). Workplace inclusion: A social network perspective. *Research in Organizational Behavior, 45*, 100221. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2025.100221>
- Chen, C., Lai, I. K. W., & Kuang, T. (2025). A Systematic Literature Review of Female Leadership in Business (2014–2023). *SAGE Open, 15*(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/215824402513401>
- Çitil, E. (2022). Women in Working Life and Overview of Studies on This Theme with “Glass Ceiling” Concept. *Selçuk Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi, 49*(49), 379–391. <https://doi.org/10.52642/susbed.1153160>

- Clarke, M. (2011). Advancing women's careers through leadership development programs. *Employee Relations*, 33(5), 498–515. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01425451111153871>
- Correll, S. J., Benard, S., & Paik, I. (2007). Getting a Job: Is There a Motherhood Penalty? *American Journal of Sociology*, 112(5), 1297–1339. <https://doi.org/10.1086/511799>
- DeRue, D. S., & Ashford, S. J. (2010). Who Will Lead and Who Will Follow? A Social Process of Leadership Identity Construction in Organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 35(4), 627–647. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.35.4.zok627>
- Dixon, S., Niewoehner-Green, J. E., Smulowitz, S., Smith, D. N., Rutstein-Riley, A., & Thomas, T. M. (2023). Girls' and young women's leader identity development: A scoping review. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 38(7), 896–924. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-03-2022-0108>
- Dubois, A., & Gadde, L.-E. (2002). Systematic combining: An abductive approach to case research. *Journal of Business Research*, 55(7), 553–560. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963\(00\)00195-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963(00)00195-8)
- Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2007). Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1108/gm.2009.05324aae.001>
- Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review*, 109(3), 573–598. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.109.3.573>

- Ely, R. J., Ibarra, H., & Kolb, D. M. (2011). Taking Gender Into Account: Theory and Design for Women's Leadership Development Programs. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 10(3), 474–493. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2010.0046>
- Fossey, E., Harvey, C., McDermott, F., & Davidson, L. (2009). Understanding and evaluating qualitative research. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 36(6), 717–732. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1440-1614.2002.01100.x>
- Furtado, M., & Henriques, P. L. (2025). Leadership, Aspirations and Coping Mechanisms of Female Leaders. *International Journal of Business and Management*, 20(2), 39. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijbm.v20n2p39>
- Goethals, G. R., & Hoyt, C. L. (2016). *Women and Leadership: History, Theories, and Case Studies*. Berkshire Publishing Group.
- Goleman, D. (2017). *Leadership that gets results* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315250601>
- Grossoehme, D. H. (2014). Overview of qualitative research. *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy*, 20(3), 109–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08854726.2014.925660>
- Gupta, M., Shaheen, M., & Reddy, K. P. (Eds.). (2019). *Thematic Analysis in Qualitative Research*. IGI Global Scientific Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-5366-3.ch009>
- Haq, Z. U., Rasheed, R., Rashid, A., & Akhter, S. (2023). Criteria for Assessing and Ensuring the Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Business Reflections*, 4(2), 150–173. <https://doi.org/10.56249/1.04.2.7358>
- Hartung, P. J. (2013). *The life-span, life-space theory of careers*. John Wiley & Sons.

- Heilman, M. E., Caleo, S., & Manzi, F. (2024). Women at Work: Pathways from Gender Stereotypes to Gender Bias and Discrimination. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 11(1), 65–192.
- Hill, L., & Wheat, C. (2017). The Influence of Mentorship and Role Models on University Women Leaders' Career Paths to University Presidency. *The Qualitative Report*, 2091–2111. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2017.2437>
- Hofer, G., Hünninghaus, M., Platzer, J., Grinschgl, S., & Neubauer, A. (2025). Women's Humility and Men's Lack of Hubris: Gender Biases in Self-Estimated Spatial Intelligence. *Sex Roles*, 91(29). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-025-01572-8>
- Holm, I. (2022). *The Imposter experience among high-achieving young women* [Master's thesis, Hanken School of Economics]. <https://helda.helsinki.fi/items/fd789846-5130-4e6a-bf9f-15b8f5bbccb7>
- Holton, V., & Dent, F. E. (2016). A better career environment for women: Developing a blueprint for individuals and organisations. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 31(8), 542–561. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-08-2015-0074>
- Hurst, R., Lee, S. (Ronnie), & Frake, J. (2024). The effect of flatter hierarchy on applicant pool gender diversity: Evidence from experiments. *Strategic Management Journal*, 45(8), 1446–1484. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.3590>
- Ibarra, H., Ely, R. J., & Kolb, D. M. (2013). *Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers*. 91(9), 60–66.
- ILO. (2025a). Women in business and management: Building on the legacy of the Beijing Declaration. *International Labour Organization*. <https://www.ilo.org/publications/women-business-and-management-building-legacy-beijing-declaration>

- ILO. (2025b). *Women in leadership roles*. International Labour Organization.
<https://www.ilo.org/bureau-employers-activities/areas-work/women-business-and-management/women-leadership-roles>
- Karatsareas, P. (2022). Semi-structured interviews. *Research methods in language attitudes*, 99. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108867788.010>
- Keenan, C., Masser, B., Neall, A., & Barlow, F. K. (2025). Recognizing Gender Harassment in the Workplace: A Qualitative Analysis. *Sex Roles*, 91(67).
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-025-01617-y>
- Kiamba, J. (2008). Women and leadership positions: Social and cultural barriers to success. *Wagadu Volume 6 Journal of International Women's Studies*, 10, 7–26.
- Lambert, S. D., & Loiselle, C. G. (2008). Combining individual interviews and focus groups to enhance data richness. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62(2), 228–237.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2007.04559.x>
- Landreneau, K. J. (2005). *Sampling strategies*. *Studies in Methods (Ser. F)*, 25–73.
<https://doi.org/10.18356/5191cd3f-en>
- Lanier, D. (2025). The Role of Empathy in Strategic Thinking: Women Leaders Championing Change and Cultivating the Next Generation of Leaders. *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal*, 44(1). <https://doi.org/10.21423/awlj-v44.a568>
- Lee, J. K., Tackett, S., Skarupski, K. A., Forbush, K., Fivush, B., Oliva-Hemke, M., & Levine, R. B. (2024). Inspiring and Preparing Our Future Leaders: Evaluating the Impact of the Early Career Women's Leadership Program. *Journal of Healthcare Leadership*, 287–302.
- Leite, E. (2024). *Wrap-Up & Feedback: Business Research and Analysis*.

- Mannila, M. (2023). *Työkaluja laadulliseen tutkimukseen*. <https://lehti.seamk.fi/yrittajyys-ja-kasvu/tyokaluja-laadulliseen-tutkimukseen/>
- Mazhar, S. A., Anjum, R., Ibne Anwar, A., & Khan, A. A. (2021). Methods of Data Collection: A Fundamental Tool of Research. *Journal of Integrated Community Health, 10*(1), 6–10. <https://doi.org/10.24321/2319.9113.202101>
- McEldowney, R. P., Bobrowski, P., & Gramberg, A. (2009). Factors affecting the next generation of women leaders: Mapping the challenges, antecedents, and consequences of effective leadership. *Journal of Leadership Studies, 3*(2), 24–30. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.20105>
- Miles, J., & Gilbert, P. (2005). *A Handbook of Research Methods for Clinical and Health Psychology*. Oxford University Press.
- Moldoveanu, M., Narayandas, D., Hoffman, R., Yeh, C., & Casnocha, B. (2019). The Future of Leadership Development. *Harvard Business Review, 97*(2), 40–48.
- Nordic cooperation*. (2023). <https://www.norden.org/en/statistics/labour-market>
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health, 42*(5), 533–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
- Powell, M. B., Hughes-Scholes, C. H., Smith, R., & Sharman, S. J. (2014). The relationship between investigative interviewing experience and open-ended question usage. *Police Practice and Research, 15*(4), 283–292. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2012.704170>

- Rai, N., & Thapa, B. (2015). A study on purposive sampling method in research. *Kathmandu: Kathmandu School of Law*, 5(1), 8–15.
- Rutberg, S., & Bouikidis, C. D. (2018). *Focusing on the Fundamentals: A Simplistic Differentiation Between Qualitative and Quantitative Research*. 45(2), 209–213.
- Sahay, M. R., & Cihak, M. M. (2018). *Women in Finance: A Case for Closing Gaps*. International Monetary Fund.
- Sahoo, R. K. (2022). Interview as a Tool for Data Collection in Educational Research. *Lucky International*, 120–143.
- Saldaña, J. (2021). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publ.
- Sealy, R., Forsblad, C., & Worts, N. (2024). *Women’s leadership ambition in early careers in: Handbook of Research on Gender and Leadership*. <https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap/book/9781035306893/book-part-9781035306893-22.xml>
- Sean, T., Lyons, E. s. N., & Schweitzer, L. (2014). *Launching a career*. Routledge.
- Standish, M. P. (2023). *Leader Identity Claiming and Granting Process: The Role of Gender on Perceptions of Leadership* [Doctoral dissertation, Illinois Institute of Technology]. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/dc1aee4aa15db36a15b3b69b5593beb2/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>
- STT. (2025). *EVA: Naisjohtajien osuus Suomessa pienehieman – toimitusjohtajaksi ylittää edelleen vain harva*. <https://www.sttinfo.fi/tiedote/71543034/eva-naisjohtajien-osuus-suomessa-pienehieman-toimitusjohtajaksi-yltaa-edelleen-vain-harva?publisherId=3848&lang=fi>

- Stuckey, H. L. (2018). The first step in Data Analysis: Transcribing and managing qualitative research data. *Journal of Social Health and Diabetes*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.4103/2321-0656.120254>
- Super, D. E. (1980). A life-span, life-space approach to career development. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 16(3), 282–298. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791\(80\)90056-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791(80)90056-1)
- Taparia, M., & Lenka, U. (2022). An integrated conceptual framework of the glass ceiling effect. *Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance*, 9(3), 372–400. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JOEPP-06-2020-0098>
- TENK. (2019). Guidelines for ethical review in human sciences. *Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK*. <https://tenk.fi/en/advice-and-materials/guidelines-ethical-review-human-sciences>
- Thelma, C. C., & Ngulube, L. (2024). Women in Leadership: Examining Barriers to Women's Advancement in Leadership Positions. *Asian Journal of Advanced Research and Reports*, 18(6), 273–290. <https://doi.org/10.9734/ajarr/2024/v18i6671>
- UNESCO. (2024). New UIS data show that the share of women in STEM graduates stagnant for 10 years. *World Education Blog*. <https://world-education-blog.org/2024/04/25/new-uis-data-show-that-the-share-of-women-in-stem-graduates-stagnant-for-10-years/>
- Willig, C. (2019). What can qualitative psychology contribute to psychological knowledge? *Psychological Methods*, 24(6), 796–804. <https://doi.org/10.1037/met0000218>

Appendices

Appendix 1. Consent form for research participation

Researcher: Alma Näveri

Supervisor: Vesa Suutari

Participation in the Research: Your participation involves taking part in an individual interview. The interview will focus on your personal experiences, views, and aspirations related to leadership. The interview is expected to last approximately 60 minutes and will be conducted online. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription. You may choose not to answer any question you are uncomfortable with.

Voluntary Participation and Right to Withdraw: Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the research at any time without providing a reason and without any negative consequences.

Anonymity and Confidentiality: All interviews are anonymous. Your name and any identifying information will not appear in the thesis or any publications resulting from this research. Pseudonyms will be used, and identifiable details will be removed or altered to protect your identity. Only gender, age, and amount of leadership experience are shown in the research.

All data will be handled confidentially and stored securely. Only the researcher and the supervisor will have access to the data. The data will be used solely for academic purposes related to this thesis. All the interview recordings will be automatically deleted after 60 days of the recording.

Risks and Benefits: There are no anticipated risks associated with participating in this research beyond those encountered in everyday conversation. While there may be no direct personal benefit, your participation will contribute to research on early career leadership and the experiences of young women in Finland.

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact the researcher. Please read the statement below to agree to participate.

I have read and understood the information provided above. I have had the opportunity to ask questions, and my questions have been answered satisfactorily. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research and understand that I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I consent to the anonymous use of my interview data for this master's thesis.