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Investigating the Queen Bee Phenomenon: Gender Differences in Perceptions of Female Leadership in Large Organizations

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MADRID | June 2025

Abstract

This thesis explores the Queen Bee phenomenon with a specific focus on gendered perceptions of female leadership in large organizations. While much of the existing literature concentrates on the behaviour of senior women, this study addresses a critical gap by examining how these behaviours are perceived across genders, an area that remains largely underexplored.

To investigate this, five semi structured interviews were conducted with both male and female employees across a range of industries. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data, drawing on social identity theory and gender stereotype frameworks. The analysis reveals that Queen Bee behaviours, such as distancing from junior women or adopting traditionally masculine leadership styles, are perceived differently by men and women. Male participants often interpreted these actions as expressions of individual competitiveness, while female participants more frequently linked them to organizational culture, identity threats, and systemic barriers.

The findings indicate that perceptions of the Queen Bee phenomenon are shaped by gendered experiences, with male participants demonstrating limited awareness of the structural challenges women face in leadership. This reinforces the need for inclusive leadership training and greater cultural awareness within organizations. Overall, the results highlight the importance of understanding female leadership within its broader social and organizational context, particularly how identity dynamics influence support or resistance to gender equity in the workplace.

Keywords

Queen Bee phenomenon, female leadership, gender bias, social identity theory, organizational culture

Abstract in Spanish

Esta TFG explora el fenómeno de la “Queen Bee” con un enfoque específico en las percepciones de género sobre el liderazgo femenino en grandes organizaciones. Mientras que gran parte de la literatura existente se centra en el comportamiento de mujeres en puestos superiores, este estudio aborda una brecha crítica al examinar cómo se perciben estos comportamientos entre géneros, un área que sigue siendo en gran medida inexplorada.

Para investigar esto, se realizaron cinco entrevistas semiestructuradas con empleados tanto hombres como mujeres de diversos sectores. Se empleó un análisis temático para interpretar los datos, basándose en la teoría de la identidad social y los marcos de estereotipos de género. El análisis revela que los comportamientos de abeja reina, como distanciarse de mujeres en niveles jerárquicos inferiores o adoptar estilos de liderazgo tradicionalmente masculinos, son percibidos de manera diferente por hombres y mujeres. Los participantes masculinos a menudo interpretaron estas acciones como expresiones de competitividad individual, mientras que las participantes femeninas las vincularon con mayor frecuencia a la cultura organizacional, amenazas a la identidad y barreras sistémicas.

Los hallazgos indican que las percepciones del fenómeno de la abeja reina están moldeadas por experiencias de género, con participantes masculinos mostrando una conciencia limitada de los desafíos estructurales que enfrentan las mujeres en el liderazgo. Esto refuerza la necesidad de formación en liderazgo inclusivo y una mayor conciencia cultural dentro de las organizaciones. En general, los resultados destacan la importancia de comprender el liderazgo femenino dentro de su contexto social y organizacional más amplio, en particular cómo las dinámicas identitarias influyen en el apoyo o la resistencia hacia la equidad de género en el lugar de trabajo.

Palabras clave

Fenómeno de la “Queen Bee”, liderazgo femenino, sesgo de género, teoría de la identidad social, cultura organizacional

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Introduction

Despite decades of initiatives aimed at promoting gender equity, women remain largely underrepresented in the highest levels of leadership positions in large corporations. According to the latest data in Ireland, a mere 28.3% of senior management and above roles are held by women (*Gender Balance in Business Survey, 2023*). This disparity is not merely a reflection of individual choices but a consequence of enduring structural, cultural, and psychological barriers that obstruct women's advancement and success in senior roles. Although the presence of women in leadership has increased, particularly within traditionally male-dominated industries such as tech, finance, etc, this progress has not translated into proportional representation or equal opportunity. Instead, the advancement of women has become a focal point of academic inquiry and organizational debate, revealing the complex and often contradictory dynamics that continue to shape gendered pathways to leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2018).

People often expect leaders to act in ways that are seen as traditionally “masculine,” adopting mannerisms associated with authority and control. As a result, both men and women sometimes judge female leaders unfairly if they don’t match these expectations (Eagly et al., 2020). The social identity theory helps explain this dynamic by suggesting that people evaluate leaders based on how closely they align with the norms of the dominant social group which is male in many workplaces. When women don’t fit this masculine leadership prototype, they are often perceived as less legitimate or less competent leaders, regardless of their qualifications or achievements (Lau et al., 2020). These biased perceptions are further reinforced by organizational culture, internal workplace dynamics, and broader societal norms, all of which shape how women are viewed, supported, and allowed to thrive in leadership positions (Romaniuk et al., 2023)

One of the more subtle yet impactful factors influencing female leadership is the “Queen Bee” phenomenon, an observation that some women in leadership positions distance themselves from other women in the workforce, adopting traditionally masculine-typed leadership behaviours (Derks et al., 2016; Kaiser & Spalding, 2015). This behaviour has been faulted for discouraging women from supporting one another in their professional development (Faniko et al., 2021). However, research suggests that systemic gender bias and identity threats, rather than individual preferences, may be the underlying causes of this behaviour (Diehl et al., 2024).

Despite the attention the Queen Bee phenomenon has received, there remain significant gaps in the literature. Most research has focused on the behaviours and motivations of senior women themselves (Corwin et al., 2021; Wuertele, 2017), with far less attention paid to how these behaviours are perceived by others, in particularly male colleagues. Moreover, while theoretical frameworks have proposed identity-based causes, empirical studies on how male employees interpret or react to the Queen Bee phenomenon are almost entirely absent from the academic discourse (Da Rocha Grangeiro et al., 2024). This gap is especially notable given that cross-gender perceptions of the Queen Bee phenomenon remain significantly under-researched. Understanding male perceptions is vital, as it could reveal whether the phenomenon perpetuates gender stereotypes or contributes to workplace inequality in ways not yet fully recognized.

Research Gaps and Justification for the Study

Despite the extensive literature available on the Queen bee phenomenon, the literature lacks a comprehensive understanding of how perceptions of the Queen Bee phenomenon differ between male and female employees. Existing research has majorly concentrated on the behaviour of female leaders to an extent that the organizational approach and its gender-related issues have been ignored. This difference in perception is important to note, as it explains the effect of social identity, stereotype threats, on women and their relations with professional colleagues in an acute gender imbalance.

Research Question

In order to address these gaps, this study aims to explore the gendered perceptions of the Queen Bee phenomenon and female leadership within large organizations. The general research question guiding this study is: How do male and female employees differ in their perceptions of the Queen Bee phenomenon and female leadership in large organizations? This study will examine how the Queen Bee phenomenon is perceived by top managers of both genders, with an emphasis on uncovering perceptual differences rather than measuring broader organisational outcomes. Moreover, this study seeks to clarify whether the Queen Bee phenomenon is more a result of individual preferences or a response to systemic forces that shape women's leadership experience.

Contributions of the Study

The study contributes to knowledge on gender dynamics in leadership by critically studying the Queen Bee phenomenon from a gender-based angle. It further advances the existing models that investigate the intersection between leadership identity, organizational behaviour, and gender prejudices (Carli & Eagly, 2001; Kremer et al., 2019). Practically, the findings of this study have important implications for corporate policies and diversity initiatives. According to the gendered perceptions of women as leaders identified in this study, organizations can construct more effective interventions for the formation of diverse work environments.

Methodology

This study will employ a qualitative research design within an inductive paradigm, by conducting in-depth interviews of male and female leaders in large organizations. The analysis will focus on recurring themes in perceptions of female leadership and the Queen Bee phenomenon, as well as comparing them across genders. A thematic approach will be employed to interpret the data, with the aim of developing a detailed insight into gender dynamics in the workplace.

The structure of the thesis is designed to systematically explore the Queen Bee phenomenon and its causes. It begins with an overview of the research question and the significance of the study. The literature review will present an in-depth analysis of existing research on female leadership, gender bias, and the Queen Bee phenomenon. The methodology section will detail the research design, data collection, and analytical approach. Empirical research findings will then be presented and discussed, followed by a conclusion of key insights, exploring theoretical and practical implications, and suggestion avenues for future research.

Literature review

Introduction

The Queen Bee phenomenon describes a pattern wherein senior women in male-dominated workplaces distance themselves from other women and conform to masculine norms to succeed at the cost of the furthered advancement of other women. This has strong implications for individual career trajectories and organizational culture in reaffirming gender stereotypes and

thereby perpetuating gender inequality (Derks et al., 2016). Additionally, Recent studies emphasize the ways in which male-dominated organizational cultures reinforce these behaviours, so that women feel they must distance themselves from their female peers in order to be successful (Faniko et al., 2021).

The aim of this literature review, therefore, is to discuss the aetiology, nature, and effects of the Queen Bee phenomenon and to establish how women's leadership development could be resilient. Resilience is an essential factor in mitigating the negative impact of the Queen Bee phenomenon, as it helps women cope with the pressures of maintaining their position in male-dominated environments while fostering collaboration rather than competition among women. This literature review also identifies research gaps, particularly with respect to how gender-based perceptions of the Queen Bee phenomenon impact organisational leadership experiences and how these perceptions could inform useful practical interventions. That will lead us to the specific hypothesis/propositions that we solve in the empirical part of the thesis.

Origins and Characteristics of the Queen Bee Phenomenon

The Queen Bee phenomenon can be viewed as a behavioural solution among women in a context where social identity threat exists. Derks, et al. (2016) show that older women may act in a masculine manner and separate themselves from other women in the workplace as well as even perpetuate the already existing gender structure. This negative outlook may not arise solely from interpersonal competition, but rather to entrenched societal barriers that require such survival strategies. Mumtaz (2023), develops this further by suggesting that female leaders within male-dominated working environments may experience what she describes as "*epistemological shock*," whereby the discrepancy of workplace culture and expectations becomes evident. Such shock may heighten threats to social identity so that women withdraw into more traditionally masculine behaviours because these dampen perceived exclusion and sustain status. Lau et al. (2020) further elaborate on social identity threats, highlighting how women modify their behaviours in response to perceived threats to their professional identity. This adaptation often involves adopting dominant masculine leadership styles, reinforcing existing workplace hierarchy.

Actually, women in leadership frequently encounter a double bind, wherein they are expected to exhibit masculine traits to succeed but are penalized for doing so. Diehl et al. (2024) argue

that this paradox not only reinforces gender bias but also contributes to the Queen Bee phenomenon by pressuring women to conform to male leadership standards

In addition, research points to the notion of ‘climbing and kicking,’ in which women engage in individualistic competition, refusing help to other women, at times, even those who are less gender identified (Kaiser & Spalding, 2015). Such an attitude is more characteristic of women who view their gender as a disadvantage in a male dominated setting. Lau et al. (2020) argue that these reactions can be understood in terms of social identity theory whereby individuals comply with the behaviours encouraged by the larger social group in order to alleviate the threat caused to their social identity. Sterk et al. (2018) found that junior women, although not always recognizing Queen Bee behaviours as explicitly negative, still suffer from limited mentorship and career progression as a result.

Social Identity Threat and Gender Identification

Social identity theory, as investigated by Lau et al. (2020), postulates how individuals perceive themselves and others in terms of social categories by basing it on some characteristics they have in common. According to this assumption, specific group affiliations are partially responsible for an individual’s self-worth and therefore hold potential to adjust behaviours according to the group one belongs to in order to prevent social identity threats. In highly gendered environments, women leaders often develop what is referred to as a *"cultural toolkit"* to conduct navigation within male-dominated spaces while trying to hold on to parts of their identity (Mumtaz, 2023). The toolkit may include assuming male-aligned behaviours, which no doubt comes under the Queen Bee phenomenon whereby some women shift to male-aligned behaviours to fit into their work environment.

If a woman pursues her gender identification strongly, she will most likely support the cause of women more, while women, who view their gender as an impediment, tend to embrace more aggressive and masculine assimilative strategies in order to survive in a male-dominated environment (Kaiser & Spalding, 2015). This bifurcation indicates that the identity factors determine the way most of the women handle issues regarding society and gender in their careers and this affects the way they relate to other colleagues both male and female.

These gendered expectations are influenced by deeply ingrained stereotypes about leadership roles. Traditionally, leadership qualities are associated with masculine traits, such as decisiveness, assertiveness, and independence, which are seen as more 'natural' for men (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women are often stereotyped as more communal, being caring, nurturing, and collaborative. However, they frequently face a double bind, as they are expected to exhibit masculine traits to succeed in leadership, yet deviating from traditional gender norms can result in negative perceptions (Eagly, 2007). This societal bias places women in a challenging position, where they must navigate between conforming to gender stereotypes or facing backlash for failing to meet leadership expectations, thus reinforcing gender inequality in organizational settings (Diehl et al., 2024).

How Does a Queen Bee Behave?

In male-dominated work environments, the "Queen Bee" behaves in ways that reinforce traditional gender roles and male-centered leadership expectations. These women often distance themselves from other women by adopting traits typically associated with male leaders, such as being assertive, decisive, and dominant. This behaviour allows them to succeed in workplaces where masculine traits are more closely associated with leadership. However, in doing so, they may unintentionally reinforce the very gender inequalities they seek to overcome. (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Derks et al., 2016).

When interacting with men, Queen Bees tend to align with the leadership style most valued in these environments. This style is typically assertive, goal oriented, and competitive, and is often adopted in an effort to fit in and be taken seriously. However, this can marginalize qualities more commonly associated with women, such as empathy and collaboration, which are often undervalued or ignored (Diehl et al., 2024). The combination of assertiveness and warmth allows women to demonstrate both competence and relational skills, enhancing their leadership potential (Fragale, 2023).

Queen Bees sometimes show a competitive edge with other women, especially toward younger female colleagues. They may withhold support, downplay other women's achievements, or actively block their career growth. While this behaviour may appear negative, it's often a survival strategy in environments that prioritize male traits for success. This distancing isn't necessarily personal but stems from a deep-rooted pressure to conform to male-dominated

standards (Mavin, 2006; Ellemers et al., 2004). The pressure to exhibit assertiveness, while simultaneously maintaining warmth, may often lead to unintentional competitive behaviours between women (Fragale, 2023).

Men's Role Within the Queen Bee Phenomenon

Men play an indirect but crucial role in the Queen Bee Phenomenon. As leaders in most organizations, they maintain the gendered structures that women leaders must navigate. These structures often value masculine traits, and women are expected to adopt these behaviours to thrive. As a result, the Queen Bee phenomenon becomes a reflection of the broader organizational and societal norms that prioritize male leadership (Corwin et al., 2021).

While the Queen Bee phenomenon is most evident among women in leadership, men further perpetuate it by reinforcing gendered stereotypes and maintaining power structures that align with male-dominated leadership norms. Whether consciously or unconsciously, men contribute to this by offering mentorship and advancement opportunities predominantly to other men. This creates an environment where women leaders are pressured to adopt male-aligned behaviours to gain acceptance and power, further distancing them from other women (Diehl et al., 2024).

Moreover, men's expectations of female leaders often revolve around whether they conform to male leadership styles. Male colleagues are more likely to support women who adopt assertive, goal-driven behaviours, while women who embrace more relational leadership styles (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Consequences of the Queen Bee Phenomenon

The effects of the Queen Bee phenomenon stretch far beyond the individual woman in leadership. They ripple throughout the organization, impacting the culture, opportunities for junior women, and broader societal attitudes about gender and leadership. Junior women who work under Queen Bee leaders often experience fewer career opportunities, lower self-confidence, and a lack of positive female role models. This, in turn, undermines their development and their ability to succeed (Kremer, et al., 2019).

The Queen Bee phenomenon also reinforces the idea that success in leadership roles requires adopting male behaviours. This creates a limited view of what leadership can look like, excluding diverse leadership styles that could foster a more inclusive culture. By focusing on masculine traits like decisiveness and assertiveness, organizations miss the opportunity to develop more collaborative and inclusive leadership practices, which are often more aligned with women's leadership styles (Da Rocha Grangeiro et al., 2024). By fostering both assertiveness and warmth in leadership development, organizations can create environments that allow women to thrive without conforming to narrow gendered expectations (Fragale, 2023).

Moreover, the "Princess Bee" phenomenon, as described by Kremer, et al. (2019), highlights how younger women, when faced with hostility or competition from older women, may disengage from female leadership altogether. Instead, they may adopt male-aligned behaviours to fit in and reduce their perceived distance from male leadership styles. This behaviour not only weakens their own desire to seek leadership roles but also upholds the existing hierarchical structures that perpetuate gender inequality, ultimately limiting opportunities for other women in the process (Kremer et al., 2019).

The Need for Resilience in Women's Leadership Development

Resilience helps all women cope with the obstacles imposed by the Queen Bee syndrome. As Duchek, Foerster and Scheuch (2022) established, the internal development of resilience in women leaders happens in three stages: childhood, career initiation, and peak leadership. Each stage incorporates aspects such as sponsorship, active ways of dealing with an issue, and skills in separating work from personal life.

While the Queen Bee phenomenon can create significant barriers for women, resilience plays a crucial role in countering its negative impact. Duchek et al. (2022) identify a three-stage resilience framework, outlining how women develop resilience across different career phases. This framework suggests that resilience can be nurtured through early career experiences, mentorship, and institutional support.

Early on, women who possess a strong sense of resilience are usually benefited from role models, networks, and difficult experiences that enhance the levels of confidence and persistent behaviour. These help them through the career hurdles and even when there are

leadership roles despite the structural discrimination (Duchek, et al., 2022). When organizations foster resilience rather than allowing Queen Bee behaviours to emerge, they help women feel secure in their identities without needing to distance themselves from other women.

Instead of simply encouraging female leaders to embrace such Queen Bee behaviours, organizations can enhance their support for these women by implementing strategies aimed at improving resilience and thus, promote more inclusive leadership. Proactive socialization, such as relationship-building and mentorship, serves as a protective factor against social identity threats (Mumtaz, 2023). Encouraging such practices within organizations can support women leaders and reduce their reliance on Queen Bee behaviours, fostering a more inclusive culture.

Addressing the Queen Bee Phenomenon

To mitigate the negative effects of the Queen Bee phenomenon, organizations should work on several ways:

1. Social identity threats should be diminished: Implement measures that acknowledge and celebrate women's leadership, fostering an environment where competition among women is reduced and collaboration is encouraged.
2. Combat the stereotypes: actively challenge the negative stereotype that women are adversaries to one another. Educational initiatives can help women recognize and dismantle these harmful perceptions, promoting a culture of support and cooperation.
3. Encourage resilience building: Resilience-building programs such as mentorship and career advancement networks, are crucial in supporting women. These programs not only provide personal satisfaction but also strengthen women's ability to face career challenges without resorting to behaviours that perpetuate gender inequality. By fostering resilience, women can feel more empowered and supported in their leadership roles, reducing the likelihood of adopting Queen Bee behaviours (Mumtaz, 2023).

These strategies can help create an environment where women can advance without resorting to behaviours that perpetuate gender inequality (da Rocha Grangeiro et al., 2023). Addressing the root causes of the Queen Bee phenomenon enables organizations to pave the way for more inclusive and supportive leadership practices.

Such knowledge is essential in the movement towards achieving gender balance. The differences in perception of the Queen Bee phenomenon by male and female employees makes it possible for organisations to implement corrective action that minimises risk, avoids stigma and cultivates a healthy environment. This may lead to redistribution policies amongst women employees that emphasize teamwork and help negate psychological barriers hindering their progress.

Theoretically, this study enhances the gender and leadership framework by providing insights regarding the complexities of organizational culture in respect to gender. Understanding these differences, adds to the growing body of knowledge on how social identity determines the behaviour and dynamics of leadership, and such studies may enrich gender debates in the workplace and widen the focus on gender issues in leadership. These perceptions reflect a deeper understanding of how social identity shapes the dynamics of leadership and add richness to the broader discussions on gender in leadership, extending the focus on gender issues within organizational settings.

Conclusion

The Queen Bee phenomenon underscores the critical role of social identity and stereotypes in shaping women's experiences within organizational contexts. Most women who behave in a Queen Bee manner do so for defensive motivational reasons due to threats from social identity as they work to align themselves with male colleagues while distancing themselves from other women. These responses are partly shaped by the social identity challenges and psychological stressors unique to male-dominated settings, where women may feel compelled to adjust their behaviour to survive and succeed (Mumtaz, 2023). This perpetuates harmful stereotypes of women being competitive and unsupportive of each other, adding to undermining the effort toward gender equality. Examining to what extent women and men are perceive the Queen Bee phenomenon emerges as a first step towards its eradication.

Method

Study Design

This inductive study adopted an exploratory qualitative approach to capture participants' lived experiences about their leadership in organisations. This methodology was chosen to allow

participants to express their perspectives in their own words which allowed for a deeper understanding of their insights, emotions, and perceptions (Romaniuk et al., 2023). Thematic analysis was applied to the data in line with the approach outlined by Romaniuk et al. (2023), ensuring that the results were systematically derived from the themes that emerged directly from participants' narratives. By following this method, the study aimed to provide a transparent and robust framework for analysing and interpreting the data, ensuring the integrity and validity of the findings.

Recruitment and Data Collection

Participants for the research were recruited through referrals using a mix of convenience and snowball sampling. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Comillas University and participants signed an informed consent form. Eligible participants were required to be managers in large organizations with over 15 years of leadership experience. Potential interviewees received an invitation letter outlining the purpose of the research, which focused on how female leaders navigate organizations dominated by males. The letter also explained the interview process and assured participants of the confidentiality of their responses. The participants were required to be in a leadership position in a large organisation with a considerable experience as a leader.

The convenience sampling resulted in 5 Irish participants that formed the final sample. Table XX shows their socio-demographic characteristics. Names of participants used in the thesis are fictitious to make confidentiality prevail.

Participant	Sex	Age	Nationality	Educational background	Position	Tenure in leadership positions throughout professional life (years)	Company sector	Company size
Eugene	Male	58	Irish	Postgraduate degree	COO	20	Healthcare	Large
Monica	Female	56	Irish	Postgraduate degree	Marketing Director (CMO)	30	Software	Large
Caroline	Female	56	Irish	Postgraduate degree	Vice president and CFO	20	Technology	Large
Nicholas	Male	52	Irish	Postgraduate degree	Vice president	27		
Emily	Female	55	Irish	Postgraduate degree		32	Coaching	Entrepreneur

Before the interviews, the student had prepared a series of semi-structured interview questions that served as a guide for the interviews. These were intended to spark conversations about important topics like women's leadership in male-dominated settings and leadership in large organisations. The semi-structured framework allowed for flexibility, allowing participants to fully contextualise their experiences and consider what they felt was relevant to their leadership roles. Instead of restricting the conversation, the guide helped by offering a framework that made it possible to address the most important topics, like gender dynamics and difficulties faced by leaders. The concept of Queen Bee was never mentioned to the interviewees to allow it to emerge in the subsequent thematic analysis. In doing so, social desirability biases in their responses was avoided. The guide included some open-ended questions such as:

- Can you tell me about your career path and how you arrived at your current role?
- How difficult is it for a woman to reach a leadership position in an organisation?
- Do you currently support and protect others in their career advancement? If so, how?
- What has been your experience working with women in leadership positions? And with men?

- What have you noticed about how relationships are built between senior leaders and junior employees?

The interviews were conducted by the student and they lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were recorded with participant consent. Transcriptions were completed with Microsoft team transcription and the video interviews were also recorded to ensure accuracy for subsequent analysis. The transcripts of the interviews were not given back to the participants for revision or feedback (Romaniuk et al., 2023). Each participant was asked to provide a demographic background which included their gender, age, educational background, leadership tenure, and organizational sector.

Participants

The sample included a diverse group of professionals across various sectors. The majority of the participants were women (60%), with various educational backgrounds and professional experiences. The participants held positions in sectors such as healthcare, technology, finance, and engineering. Several of the women reported working in male-dominated industries, which shaped their experiences and perceptions of career development.

Setting

The interviews took place through Microsoft Teams the online video call platform. All participants were in professional workspaces and confidential environments to ensure that they were comfortable and open to share their thoughts and experiences openly. During the interviews, just the interviewer and the participant were present.

Research Team

The principal interviewer was a bachelor-degree researcher specializing in corporate governance and leadership approaches. This researcher had a strong understanding in qualitative research methods having undertaken specific modules through their degree on market research and having done research on how to conduct semi-structured interviews and analyse the findings. The second coder, who was a researcher with a PhD in Economics and Business Administration, had a specialization in equity in corporate power, governance, and management. The joined experience of the research teams boasted a multi-faceted level of analysis in which a full exploration of such themes conducted during the interviews was assured. Experience balance between the primary interviewer and second coder contributed to

a comprehensive and well-rounded approach to the process of interpreting data. The first researcher's comparative analysis of leadership styles and organizational dynamics, together with the second researcher's background in corporate governance and gender relations, enhanced the analysis by making it possible to ascertain subtle yet significant findings at various levels of corporate structure. Importantly, both researchers sought to avoid bias to a large extent when collecting and interpreting data. The varying experience and expertise were complementary, thereby limiting opportunities for preconceptions to influence the interpretation of the data. Although the first researcher had some prior personal relationships with a few of the participants, these were not related to their professional or business lives. Both researchers were careful not to let those personal relationships influence the participants' response or analysis. The objectivity and of the researchers was fundamental to maintaining the integrity of the study. Further, the research was designed to ensure that all participants were treated fairly and assumptions were not made about their experiences in the corporate world based on the backgrounds of the researchers. Participants were informed about the study's purpose and researchers' roles as well as the confidentiality and neutrality maintained in the interviewing process at the time of consenting. All interviews were conducted before any data analysis commenced to ensure that the analysis was based purely on the content of the interviews and not influenced by external factors (Romaniuk et al., 2023).

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted. We drew particular inspiration from the approach taken by Romaniuk et al. (2023), who applied Braun and Clarke's framework (2006, 2012) in their own analysis. Their five-phase method of developing and presenting themes informed our process of selecting illustrative extracts, as well as naming and defining themes and subthemes. The analysis included the following phases:

Phase 1: Familiarization with Data The student thoroughly reviewed all transcripts multiple times to develop a deep understanding of the content.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes The student systematically coded significant transcript segments related to the queen bee theory, leadership experiences, barriers, gender dynamics, and organizational influences. The second author independently reviewed the codes to ensure consistency.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes: During this stage, both authors examined the coded data to identify any areas within the coded interviews where codes overlapped or showed similarities, aiming to uncover broader patterns or issues around which the codes were grouped. This involved the development of initial themes and subthemes by organizing related codes or merging them based on common features. The student conducted this initial analysis, which was subsequently reviewed and refined by the senior researcher. An inductive approach guided the theme development, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data. No discrepancies between the coders were noted during this process.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes The student reviewed the themes and subthemes against the coded data to assess whether the final set effectively captured the most significant or relevant aspects related to experiences of leaders and the Queen Bee theory. During this stage, both coders made the necessary adjustments to the thematic structure individually and then consulted each other and agreed upon the final decision on the name and definitions of the themes and subthemes.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes This phase involved collaboration between both authors. The senior researchers initially selected extracts to illustrate each theme, which were then reviewed by the student, who made the final decisions regarding the naming and definition of the themes and subthemes.

This structured analytical approach ensured methodological transparency and reliability, providing a detailed exploration of gender dynamics in leadership within large organizations (Romaniuk et al., 2023).

Results

Upon reviewing the interviews of the five participants, a variety of themes emerged regarding the barriers and facilitators for women's career development in top management. These were categorized into barriers to career advancement, facilitators for progression, and perceptions about women in leadership roles. The key themes identified include family-work conflict, tokenism, gender biases, and the importance of mentorship, networking, and organizational support. Each theme had a number of Subthemes which were also explored below.

Theme 1: Barriers to Career Advancement

The first theme identified from the interviews and transcripts was barriers to career advancement, which includes four subthemes summarizing participants' views on how various factors hinder female leadership.

1.Context – Sector, Organization & Education

The context in which women work, specifically the sector, organization, and their educational background, was identified as a barrier. Many women worked in male-dominated industries, which presented additional challenges. For example, Caroline described the sexism in her industry: *“The industry is a traditionally very misogynistic industry,”* reflecting how sector-specific cultures can create obstacles. Nicholas also highlighted the lack of female representation in certain sectors, noting, *“If you go to marketing, there's going to be every female; you go to the tech section is going to be heavily male.”*

Moreover, several participants mentioned the role of education in shaping career paths, with some sectors requiring specific educational qualifications that women may have been less likely to pursue due to traditional gender roles. Nicholas shared, *“The women often haven't got the technologically backgrounds education to have the technologically career so that it sort of immediately limits them.”*

2. Family-Work Conflict

Family-work conflict emerged as one of the most significant barriers to women's career progression, with many participants highlighting how the challenge of balancing family responsibilities with professional duties often leads to career setbacks. Monica described the difficulty of re-entering the workforce after taking time off for children, saying, *“If you have two or three children, then you're out of the workplace for six or seven years, and you come back in and you're not where you were.”* Eugene further explained the disproportionate burden women face in managing both family and work, emphasising the difference with men. He stated, *“Women put themselves under tremendous pressure to progress... juggling many elements in life that a male is not necessarily juggling, and that comes down to child rearing.”* Caroline reflected on how her decision to work part-time for family reasons affected her career, saying, *“It made it much harder when I went back... I was so close to being a director, but I kind of cut myself off by doing that.”* These perspectives underscore the persistent challenges

women face in balancing career aspirations with family responsibilities, which can significantly hinder their professional advancement.

3. Tokenism

Tokenism was a significant issue for several women, as they felt included in meetings or decisions only to meet diversity quotas, without being genuinely valued for their input. Caroline shared her experience: *“I was asked to go to meetings to be seen that they had a woman in the room but not to say anything.”* Emily noted “Sometimes I felt like a decoration piece, like I was part of a corporate showcase rather than an actual contributor.” Monica added “I’ve sat in rooms where it was clear I was ticking a box. It’s hard to challenge decisions when you’re not really seen as part of the core team.”

4. Biological Factors

Participants discussed how women’s biological role in childbearing is often perceived as a barrier to career advancement. Monica explained, *“So that is the first factor that impedes your progression as a woman. Like your physic, the physical factor that we’re the ones producing the children.”* This reflects the perception that women’s capacity for motherhood limits their professional growth. Caroline added: “There’s an assumption baked into the system—if you’re a woman of a certain age, they think, ‘She’ll be off on maternity leave soon,’ even if you’re not even planning a family.” Nicholas commented: “Biology plays a part—it’s not discrimination per se, but practicalities. If someone’s going to be away for six months, it impacts the team. That’s just how it is.” These insights reflect the perception that women’s capacity for motherhood limits their professional growth.

Theme 2: Facilitators for Career Advancement

Facilitators in career development to top management were divided into two main categories: General Facilitators in Career Development and Women Facilitators in Career Progression. These categories encompass a range of factors that influence career advancement, from general professional growth to specific mechanisms that support women’s leadership in top management roles.

General Facilitators in Career Development

This category includes factors that contribute to career advancement in general, regardless of gender. These facilitators emerged according to the following subthemes:

1. Expertise

The first facilitator highlighted was the importance of sector-specific expertise in career development. Participants consistently emphasized that having specialized knowledge in one's field was a key factor in progressing to top management. Eugene explained, *"How we had grown a previous company and made various presentations to them, and they would have seen the value in taking somebody from the hospitality sector into the healthcare sector."* This underscores how transferable expertise and experience can help individuals move across sectors and enhance their leadership profiles.

Additionally, participants noted that self-awareness and the ability to manage one's growth were also critical aspects of developing expertise. Emily reflected, *"Managing myself to get over being comfortable being the manager or somebody when I didn't really know how they were doing was an insight."* This suggests that not only is technical knowledge important, but the ability to reflect on one's leadership style and growth is essential in refining expertise and progressing in one's career.

2. Networking

Networking was another essential facilitator identified by participants. Monica noted the importance of professional relationships, saying, *"I think there is always an opportunity to support each other the same way the guys would support each other and the same way that guys support women."* She emphasized that building a network of supportive colleagues, mentors, and sponsors helps propel career advancement.

Eugene also spoke about the necessity of nurturing relationships in the workplace: *"You're looking to nurture and grow to ensure that you retain staff as well because you know staff and employees."* This suggests that professional networks, both within and outside of the organization, provide valuable opportunities for career development, and having these connections can play a vital role in career progression.

3. Meritocracy

Meritocracy, or the belief in rewarding employees based on their performance and achievements, was another crucial facilitator. Monica noted, *“I do a great job at the job you're doing and then you get tapped for the next job.”* This indicates that individuals who consistently perform well are more likely to be promoted, regardless of gender. The belief in meritocracy within an organization ensures that those who demonstrate competence and capability are recognized and offered career opportunities.

In addition to performance within one's primary role, participants highlighted how industry knowledge and diverse experiences can open doors to leadership roles. Caroline reflected, *“I did a series of different jobs with different products... I typically was sent in where there was a problem and we would put in a team and work out how to make it profitable.”* Her statement underscores that the ability to solve complex problems and manage different functions is highly valued, and such experiences demonstrate leadership capability that facilitates career advancement.

However, it's important to note that the ideal of meritocracy may not always be fully realized, especially when unconscious biases exist. Despite this, several participants believed in the principle of meritocracy as a motivating factor for their career advancement..

4. Mentoring

Mentoring was seen as an invaluable resource for career development. Eugene shared, *“I always had one or two mentors that I could confide in... I find it really helpful to have a mentor who is not involved in the business that you're involved in, who can give you independent, clear advice.”* The importance of having a mentor who is not directly involved in the organization is underscored here, as it allows for independent guidance that can help shape career decisions.

Caroline also spoke about the importance of mentors: *“I've had some amazing mentors along the way.”* Mentoring relationships provide valuable advice, emotional support, and career insights that can help individuals navigate challenges and seize opportunities.

5. Context – Organization & Society

The broader organizational culture and societal norms also play a critical role in career development. Participants noted that creating an organizational culture that acknowledges and addresses gender differences is essential for supporting career advancement. Monica emphasized the importance of quotas, saying, *“Having quotas, which I actually was really supportive of because I think we needed them at the time in the 90s, we needed quotas to get to force things to happen.”* This highlights how organizational strategies like quotas can help women gain access to leadership roles.

Nicholas also pointed out that a combination of good training and autonomy is important for career growth, noting, *“And so that combination of those two things of getting a lot of good training, but also then being left a little bit to think or swim. It was good in a way. So that's probably helped.”* This shows how continued organizational support, along with the opportunity to grow independently, can both enhance career development.

Women Facilitators in Career Progression

This category focuses on the specific factors that facilitate women's career progression to top management positions. These facilitators are particularly relevant for women's unique experiences and challenges in the workplace.

1. Context – Sector

The sector in which women work can significantly impact their career progression. Eugene shared how sectors that actively promote women into leadership roles offer more opportunities: *“So throughout my career I've worked in sectors that have promoted women into leadership positions. And certainly the hospitality sector would be one.”* This indicates that certain industries prioritize gender equality and create pathways for women to advance into leadership roles.

2. HR Strategies for Gender Diversity

HR strategies play an essential role in promoting gender diversity and ensuring that women have equal opportunities for career advancement. Monica explained the importance of quotas, particularly in the past, stating, One participant emphasized the importance of intentionality in recruitment, stating, *“Being really thoughtful about who you hire and particularly that the process lends itself to start over the diverse pool of candidates. I think it's like a really, really, important thing.”* This highlights how deliberate efforts to diversify candidate pools can influence broader organizational equity.

Nicholas also highlighted the importance of diversity in hiring practices, saying, *“It's all the way through the hiring process. For example, when you're hiring, having diverse panels, so make sure that all your panels have men and women on them.”* This emphasizes the role of inclusive HR practices in ensuring women are fairly considered for leadership positions.

3. Internal Promotion

Internal promotion strategies were highlighted as key to fostering women's career progression. Eugene emphasized the importance of promoting talent from within the organization: *“I think you get a lot of allegiance to an organisation by having a strategy of promotion from within.”* He further added, *“You're best to do that by nurturing talent from within, and they understand the culture of the business, the values, they understand, the characters in the business, what's important.”* This highlights the value of internal promotion as a means to retain talent and provide equal opportunities for women to progress into leadership roles.

Theme 3: Perceptions About Women in Leadership Roles

A review of the interview data reveals several recurring themes regarding perceptions of women in leadership, especially in relation to gender stereotypes, unconscious bias, role modelling, and competition

1.Unconscious Bias and Gendered Stereotypes

Although most participants explicitly stated that they did not hold gender bias, their narratives often suggested otherwise, revealing subtle instances of unconscious bias. For example, Eugene asserted that “whether that's male or female makes no odds,” and insisted that leadership is about “ability more than anything.” Similarly, Caroline noted, “I’m not sure it’s

a gender thing,” and Nicholas stated, “gender probably isn't the predominant lens through which I do that.” However, such meritocratic framings often coexisted with comments that indirectly reinforced gendered assumptions, such as the idea that women must work harder or adopt particular strategies to be seen as equally competent.

2. Stereotypes: Female-typed behaviours at leadership positions

Female leaders were frequently described as more organized, empathetic, and prepared. Monica highlighted that “*women prepare more,*” which aligns with gendered expectations of emotional labour which is often seen as extra work without recognition (Gartiza, 2021). Nicholas described a female leader as “*very capable and... very organized,*” using these traits as a strength. Monica also discussed the extra emotional labour expected from women, explaining, “*You're doing a full-time job, you're doing your outside full time job, and then you're also doing extra stuff in the workplace to help other women... whereas nobody's asking [men].*” While these traits are often framed positively, they also suggest that women are burdened with additional expectations not placed on male colleagues.

3. Stereotypes: Male-typed behaviours at leadership positions (particularly referred to women behaviour masculine-typed)

In contrast, when women adopted male-typed leadership behaviours such as assertiveness or competitiveness, they were sometimes admired but also critiqued. Monica remarked that women “*have had to work harder to prove they deserve to be there,*” often resulting in behaviour that is “*not quite imposter, but... a bit of imposterism.*” Emily observed that “*some women become more like men*” to succeed, noting that this “*doesn't serve them well,*” even if it may be necessary to thrive in male-dominated environments. Caroline also reflected that some women “*mimic the worst traits of men in the 1950s,*” suggesting that such adaptations are not always authentic or desirable, yet may be perceived as essential for survival in competitive settings.

4. Competition for Leadership Positions

Several participants acknowledged that structural and interpersonal barriers still limit women's advancement. Monica emphasized the broader context of competition: *"Everyone's competing in the workplace. You're competing for attention. You're competing for salaries."* Caroline explored how opportunities can be shaped by both individual ability and workplace politics, stating, *"Some of it is literally just that there aren't openings."* She also reflected on how competition can be exacerbated among women themselves: *"She'd completely saw other women as competitors,"* and *"you can have women who don't value other women."* These comments illustrate how intra-gender competition and the Queen Bee phenomenon can hinder collective advancement

5. Role Modelling (women learn leadership skills by imitating others)

The importance of role models was emphasized throughout the interviews. Participants described learning leadership styles from observing both male and female leaders. Caroline attributed her decision-making approach to a former male manager, saying, *"That in hindsight is probably the way I still make decisions in work."* Emily remarked, *"I'd also know as the leader that people will copy your behaviour,"* highlighting the importance of setting an example.

Theme 4: Relationships with Younger Employees and Subordinates

1. Legitimate Power ("the boss has power")

Participants widely recognized that leaders hold legitimate power, but emphasized that this power must be exercised with intention and integrity. Eugene highlighted the importance of leadership presence at the top: *"Fish rots from the head down,"* underlining the responsibility leaders have in shaping organizational outcomes. Monica echoed this, stating that *"A leader can create or and destroy an organization,"* indicating the magnitude of influence that power carries. Caroline provided a cautionary example of leadership gone wrong, describing a manager who *"destroyed multiple people, really shattered their confidence,"* demonstrating how power, when misused, can have serious negative impacts on team morale and career progression. These reflections show that while the boss does have power, the quality of their leadership and not just their position, determines whether that power uplifts or undermines those beneath them.

2. Care

Supporting younger or more junior employees was a recurring theme. Monica described care as part of a leader's broader responsibility, not just to performance but to people: "*The responsibility is so massive to not just business performance, but people and people's well-being.*" Eugene also stressed the importance of empathy, encouraging leaders to "*have an interest in the employees that they work with... empathise with them.*" Caroline's example of a colleague who "*went to bat for me and got me to the right salary level*" illustrates how care can translate into real material support and advocacy. These narratives emphasize that caring leadership fosters trust, loyalty, and long-term development, which is especially critical for younger staff still finding their place in the workplace.

3. Culture – Sense of Cohesion

A strong, cohesive culture was consistently described as more impactful than strategy alone. Eugene and Monica both cited the phrase, "*Culture eats strategy for breakfast,*" suggesting that shared values, trust, and cohesion are the foundation of effective organizations. Monica reflected on a particularly strong culture as "*the most amazing time... where there is trust, where there is drive, where there is unity.*" Caroline provided a comparative view, highlighting how a woman's long-term leadership "*completely changed the way people communicate [and] the level of respect,*" reinforcing how leaders shape culture through their actions and tone. These insights highlight that younger employees thrive in environments with clarity, connection, and shared purpose — all of which stem from the culture leaders foster.

4. Direction

Providing direction was seen as a core leadership function, helping employees understand the wider vision and their role within it. Eugene clearly defined this responsibility: "*A leader's role sets the direction and figures out if your team can get you there.*" Caroline similarly emphasized that good leaders "*communicate [the vision] extremely well and help you understand what your role is in achieving that.*" Emily, while preferring a collaborative approach, acknowledged the value of clear communication and trust as part of building direction. Participants emphasized that visionary leadership is most effective when it includes clarity and inclusion.

Discussion

Structural Constraints on Women's Leadership

The Queen Bee (QB) phenomenon emerged in this study subtly and situationally, aligning with both traditional definitions (Derks et al., 2011) and more nuanced understandings (Grangeiro et al., 2024; Wuertele, 2017). To understand its emergence, it must be contextualized within the broader structural and cultural challenges shaping women's leadership trajectories.

Women often operate in male-dominated sectors where limited access to leadership networks and mentorship constrains their development and advancement (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Participants identified educational disparities, particularly in technical fields, as further barriers that are rooted in traditional gender role socialization (Diehl et al., 2024). Additionally, cultural assumptions about maternity leave and caregiving responsibilities reinforce structural disadvantages. These perceptions, as explained by role incongruity theory (Eagly et al., 2020) and the concept of the “maternal wall” (Williams, 2010), mark women as less committed, making leadership less accessible. In response to these barriers, some women adopt distancing strategies from other women or exhibit competitive behaviours that align with Queen Bee patterns. This pattern was more frequently described by female participants, who highlighted the emotional and structural pressures of navigating these constraints. Male participants, on the other hand, tended to focus on sector-based representation gaps rather than on systemic cultural barriers, reflecting a difference in how each group perceives the causes of gendered leadership inequality.

2. The Illusion of Meritocracy and Gender Neutrality

A second contributor to QB behaviour lies in the contradictory discourse of meritocracy. Participants expressed strong support for performance-based progression, yet often did so using “gender-neutral” language that inadvertently obscured underlying gender inequalities. This reflects Eagly & Carli's (2018) observation that meritocratic rhetoric can perpetuate inequality by masking it. Tokenistic inclusion, as discussed by Kaiser & Spalding (2015), can reinforce this illusion of fairness while pressuring women to emulate dominant leadership norms to gain credibility. Women in this study reported adopting assertive or emotionally detached behaviours, not out of preference, but rather to conform to biased expectations and succeed in competitive environments. Male participants were more likely to endorse the belief in objective meritocracy, often denying that gender plays a significant role in leadership access. In contrast, female participants nuanced this view by noting that performance alone is insufficient and that

alignment with dominant norms is often necessary — a perception directly linked to the emergence of Queen Bee behaviours as strategic, rather than personal, choices. Together, these systemic constraints and cultural contradictions create an atmosphere in which Queen Bee behaviours become strategic responses to organizational realities.

3. Behavioural Responses to Structural Inequality

Queen Bee dynamics were most evident in participant reflections on intra-gender competition and lack of peer support. These behaviours illustrate what Sterk et al. (2018) describe as self-group distancing, whereby women disassociate from other women to maintain or enhance their status in masculinized settings. This survival strategy aligns with Kaiser & Spalding's (2015) findings that Queen Bee behaviour stems from low gender identification and the pressure to conform in male-dominated spaces.

However, the narratives were not universally negative. Many participants described strong examples of mentorship, allyship, and role modelling from both male and female leaders—echoing Kremer et al.'s (2019) “Princess Bee effect,” where senior women actively support junior women. Importantly, when Queen Bee-like behaviours were described, they were typically interpreted as responses to broader structural challenges, such as limited leadership opportunities or persistent gendered expectations, rather than being attributed to personal hostility or internalized sexism. Here, women tended to frame Queen Bee behaviours within a context of survival and scarcity, recognising them as responses to environmental pressures. Men were less likely to recognise these dynamics and more inclined to see leadership tension as interpersonal rather than gendered, indicating divergent perceptions between genders on the origins and implications of the Queen Bee phenomenon.

4. Gendered Expectations and the Leadership Double Bind

Participants also identified double standards in how leadership behaviours are evaluated. Traits that are praised in male leaders, such as assertiveness and decisiveness, were often perceived as abrasive or inappropriate when exhibited by women. This observation aligns with Eagly and Carli's (2003) double bind theory, which highlights how women are penalized regardless of whether they lead with warmth or with dominance. These conflicting expectations compel women to carefully manage their leadership identity, sometimes by adopting behaviours traditionally associated with men in order to gain respect. However, this strategy can inadvertently reinforce perceptions of elitism or a lack of support for other women. Notably,

male participants did not report facing similar dilemmas. Their leadership journeys were discussed in terms of competence and opportunity, without reference to image management or interpersonal tensions. This contrast underscores the gender-specific challenges women face in navigating leadership environments.

5. Inclusive Leadership and Cultural Reproduction

Despite the presence of Queen Bee dynamics, several participants described inclusive leadership behaviours rooted in empathy, care, and mentorship. These traits reflect the principles of servant leadership, as articulated by Ducheck et al. (2022), and highlight the importance of emotional intelligence and ethical modelling. Participants explained that supportive leadership fosters trust and cohesion. This finding is consistent with Lau et al.'s (2020) research, which shows that leadership behaviour is socially contagious and plays a significant role in shaping workplace norms. One participant noted that when leadership is collaborative and transparent, employees are more likely to align with the organization's goals, further reinforcing the importance of inclusive leadership practices. Interestingly, women were more likely to emphasise the value of empathy and care in leadership, associating these traits with resistance to Queen Bee tendencies. Men generally highlighted structural direction and goal alignment, which may reflect different gendered assumptions about what leadership should entail. This suggests that gender not only affects how Queen Bee behaviours are perceived but also shapes how leadership itself is defined.

6. The Role of Organizational Culture in Reinforcing or Reducing Queen Bee Dynamics

Organizational context played a decisive role in determining whether Queen Bee behaviours were activated or diminished. Women working in more inclusive sectors, such as hospitality, described the presence of strong peer support networks, mentoring, and shared success strategies. This finding supports Corwin et al.'s (2021) argument that women are more likely to support one another when they are afforded managerial discretion and operate within a culture that values inclusivity. In contrast, women in male-dominated or highly competitive sectors, such as technology and finance, reported more frequent experiences of tokenism and intra-gender competition. These findings suggest that Queen Bee tendencies are not inherent personality traits but are situational responses that arise when organizational systems reward individualism over collaboration and fail to adequately address structural inequality.

7. Rethinking the Queen Bee: A Structural Perspective

Ultimately, this study does not present the Queen Bee phenomenon as a fixed personality trait, but rather as a context-dependent behavioural response to systemic barriers. The evidence

demonstrates that Queen Bee-like behaviours are frequently survival strategies shaped by conditions of scarcity, structural bias, and misaligned expectations. In many cases, these behaviours coexist with efforts to provide active support and mentoring, revealing the complexity and adaptability of women's leadership experiences. Addressing Queen Bee dynamics therefore necessitates structural and cultural transformation rather than criticism of individual behaviour. The implementation of inclusive leadership development, robust mentoring programmes, and gender-equity policies can help alleviate the competitive pressures that often give rise to these behaviours. By reshaping organizational culture, it becomes possible to create environments in which women are not forced to choose between personal success and mutual support.

8. Perceptions of Queen Bee Dynamics: Gendered Differences

The main aim of this study was to examine how male and female employees differ in their perceptions of the Queen Bee phenomenon and female leadership in large organizations. The findings revealed a clear divergence in how men and women understood and interpreted Queen Bee behaviours. Female participants did not explicitly label themselves or other women as Queen Bees. Instead, they framed such behaviours as situational strategies shaped by systemic pressures, including exclusion from networks, tokenistic inclusion, and the need to overperform in male-dominated environments (Derks et al., 2011; Diehl et al., 2024). Women described these behaviours as adaptive responses to inequality, rather than as signs of personal disloyalty or internalised sexism, which supports Kaiser and Spalding's (2015) argument that Queen Bee tendencies can emerge from low gender identification under conditions of structural exclusion.

In contrast, male participants were more likely to interpret Queen Bee behaviours as expressions of individual personality or ambition. Several described women in leadership as competitive or dominant without acknowledging the broader gendered context that may influence such behaviours. This interpretation aligns with Eagly and Carli's (2018) critique of meritocratic discourse, which argues that treating leadership as a neutral and performance-based domain often obscures the persistent structural disadvantages women face. While men tended to accept meritocracy as fair and objective, women were more likely to question its validity and highlight the systemic bias embedded within organizational cultures.

These differing perspectives reflect wider scholarly consensus that Queen Bee behaviours are not fixed traits, but rather context-dependent responses to inequality (Faniko, 2021; Grangeiro

et al., 2024). Women in this study consistently described these dynamics as reactions to workplace scarcity, bias, and exclusion. Men, however, were more inclined to individualise them as reflections of temperament or personal leadership style. This contrast reinforces the study's central conclusion that perceptions of female leadership and intra-gender dynamics are deeply shaped by gendered experiences within organizations. Addressing these misalignments is critical for promoting more equitable and accurate understandings of women's leadership journeys.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how male and female employees perceive the Queen Bee phenomenon and female leadership in large organizations. The findings reveal a clear divergence: female participants viewed Queen Bee behaviours as context-driven strategies to cope with systemic exclusion, tokenism, and cultural misalignment. In contrast, male participants more frequently interpreted these behaviours as expressions of personality or competitiveness. These contrasting perspectives highlight how gendered experiences fundamentally shape interpretations of leadership and professional conduct.

Crucially, the research demonstrates that Queen Bee behaviours are not innate traits but rather adaptive responses to structural inequality and limited access to leadership pathways. These behaviours emerge in environments that compel women to conform to dominant masculine norms, often at the expense of solidarity with other women. As such, the Queen Bee phenomenon is best understood not as a cause of inequality but as a symptom of it. Addressing it effectively requires moving away from individual blame and toward the transformation of organizational culture and structures.

By bridging the gap between theory and lived experience, this research contributes meaningfully to both academic and practical understandings of gendered leadership. Drawing on interviews with male and female managers in large organizations, it presents a multifaceted view of how the Queen Bee phenomenon is perceived and the role it plays in shaping workplace culture and leadership development.

These findings have important implications for gender equity initiatives. Recognising the gendered differences in how Queen Bee dynamics are understood enables organizations to take corrective actions that reduce stigma, promote psychological safety, and encourage collaboration among women leaders. Interventions such as mentoring programmes, inclusive

leadership training, and targeted policy reform can help create environments in which women no longer have to choose between individual success and collective advancement.

Theoretically, this study deepens the leadership and gender literature by revealing the complex interplay between structural conditions, organizational culture, and gendered social identity. It reinforces that leadership behaviours are not simply individual choices but are profoundly shaped by the social contexts in which they emerge. These insights add richness to current debates on gender in leadership and offer a foundation for future research into how identity, power, and workplace culture intersect in leadership spaces.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size was small ($n=5$), limiting the generalizability of the findings. Though the participants came from diverse sectors and backgrounds, a larger, more geographically and demographically varied sample would provide more robust insights. Second, the study was based on self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by social desirability bias or retrospective reinterpretation. Third, all participants were mid- to late-career professionals; future studies might include younger professionals to assess generational differences in perceptions of female leadership and intra-gender dynamics.

Future Research

Future research should explore the Queen Bee phenomenon using mixed methods, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys across multiple organizations. Investigating how these dynamics differ across cultural and organizational contexts could provide deeper understanding of the structural enablers and inhibitors of gender equity. Further, research could focus on how resilience training, mentoring programs, and inclusive leadership development affect the prevalence and perception of Queen Bee behaviours. As suggested by Duchek et al. (2022), resilience can be a key buffer against identity threats that often trigger distancing behaviours. Additionally, studying male perceptions in greater depth could provide richer insight into how men either sustain or challenge the organizational conditions that make the Queen Bee phenomenon possible.

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Por la presente, yo, Juliet Catherine Stephenson, estudiante de 4E4 de la Universidad Pontificia Comillas al presentar mi Trabajo Fin de Grado titulado " Investigating the Queen Bee Phenomenon: Gender Differences in Perceptions of Female Leadership in Large Organizations" declaro que he utilizado la herramienta de Inteligencia Artificial Generativa ChatGPT u otras similares de IAG de código sólo en el contexto de las actividades descritas a continuación [el alumno debe mantener solo aquellas en las que se ha usado ChatGPT o similares y borrar el resto. Si no se ha usado ninguna, borrar todas y escribir “no he usado ninguna”]:

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Fecha: 04/06/2024

Firma: Julio Stephenson

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Annex

Table 1 to 4 summarise the results of our interviews. Columns capture the constructs that, either by similarity or by difference among interviewees, have emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. For confidentiality reasons, the names of the participants are pseudonyms.

Table 1. Results of interviews: barriers in women's career development to top management

Participant	Context – sector & organization & education	Family-work conflict	Tokenism	Biology
Eugene		“Women put themselves under tremendous pressure to progress, and succeed in organisations. And I think that's because		

		<p>they're juggling many elements in life that a male is not necessary juggling, and that comes down to child rearing. That tends to be disproportionately on the shoulders of a woman, and domestic issues as well.”</p> <p>“I think the reality is that an employer will choose somebody who is not going to end up in that position, IE pregnant, potentially over somebody who's potentially planning a family”.</p>		
Monica	<p>“There are not that many environments left where it's very male. Well sorry. There are some in some industries, but no, I don't work on them”.</p>	<p>“It's more difficult for women because the numbers are stacked against them. Because you've got, less women that are available because we have all the other things that we do for humanity, like produce</p>		<p>“So that is the first factor that impedes your progression as a woman. Like your physic, the physical factor that we're the ones producing the children.”</p>

		<p>children. And unfortunately, we still look after the running of our house.”</p> <p>“If you have two or three children, then you're out of the workplace for six or seven years, and you come back in and you're not.”</p> <p>“If you're on my team and you went out for maternity leave, I wouldn't be able to. I don't have budget to backfill you because I'm paying you while you're on maternity leave. That's a big problem for me as a manager, so that's going to drive a bias to me saying ‘Oh, will I hire early 30s who's probably going to get married and have children soon?’ That's the problem”.</p>		
Caroline	<p>“A lot of the sexism and stuff that happened went completely unchecked and when it was going on, there was no even proper format to really expose it. So, and to be honest, the stage that I was at with the kids, oh, I'm not going to be the whistle blower on this. Like I haven't got the energy”.</p>	<p>“When Ciara was baby just before I had decided to work part time and one of the senior VPS in the company around me he was like ‘hey listen, we want to make you a director, but you can't be a director if you're part time. So, if you go full time and apply for this job, we'll make you a director’. And I actually in hindsight, was too honest with them. I said ‘Look, I just want to be with my</p>	<p>“I was actually asked like to go to meetings to be seen that they had a woman in the room but not to say anything”.</p> <p>“And also kind of goes against positive discrimination, right? Like never give a woman a job just because they're a woman. Give them a job because they're the best</p>	

	<p>“It was also the industry is a traditionally very misogynistic industry”.</p> <p>“We were selling into the automotive like into the car manufacturers, which is a very male-run industry as well”.</p>	<p>kids. So no, I'm not going to do that. I'm actually going to resign in two weeks so'. But it's one thing that I kind of wish I had done.”</p> <p>“It made it much harder when I went back, I actually was so close to being a director. But I kind of cut myself off by doing that. But anyway it was the right thing to do at the time”.</p> <p>“I kind of did the right thing for the company, but the wrong thing for me”.</p> <p>“I'm not going to make excuses for balancing my life. I'm just going to show you that I can do both”.</p>	<p>thing. Now I would say I do think a lot of the time women have to be twice as good at the job”.</p>	
Nicholas	<p>“The women often haven't got the technologically backgrounds education to have the technologically career so that it sort of immediately limits them”.</p> <p>“Population and the technical sides and the very technical company”.</p> <p>“They've yet to see an HR department for this and largely female, for example. You know, if you go to marketing, there's going to be every female; you go to the tech section is going to be heavily male”.</p>	<p>“The obvious thing we didn't talk about is also time out to have children and sort of balancing that. That's obviously one of the other big friction points for people in terms of, you know, tends to slow people down, leadership”.</p>		
Emily	<p>“My background isn't engineering and isn't coding but being OK with that was the first leadership challenge to be able to ask the right questions to know that they were happy with it or they had</p>	<p>“It's only women who can have children. Then you need to take a break. Most women do play more of a family role. So there are the choices you make but, do I think the women can make? It does come back to personal choice</p>		

	any concerns was probably that first indication of leadership”.	of what I and my family late like, I was in my 40s when I had the two girls. That helped my career. That probably helped my career, but if I was choosing it, what I'd prefer to be a younger mum”.		
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Table 2. Results of interviews: Facilitators in career development to top management

	General Facilitators in career development					Women Facilitators in career progression		
Participant	Expertise	Networking	Meritocracy	Mentoring	Context – organization & society	Context - sector	HR strategies for gender diversity	Internal promotion
Eugene	“How we had grown a previous company and made various presentations to them (...), and they would have seen the value in taking somebody from the hospitality sector into the healthcare sector”	“you're looking to nurture and grow to ensure that you retain staff as well because you know staff and employees.”		“I always had one or two mentors that I could confide in.” “I find it's really helpful to have a mentor who is not involved in the business that you're involved in, who can give you independent, clear advice.”		“So through out my career I've worked in sectors that have promoted women into leadership positions. And certainly the hospitality sector would be”	“If you're looking at joining an organisation, one that was very family focused as opposed to the guy next door who would offer none of those facilities I think is a key advantage for any employer to be that way focused so”.	“I think you get a lot of allegiance to an organisation by having a strategy of promotion from within.” “You're best to do that by nurturing talent from within, and they understand the culture of the business, the values, they understand, the characters in the business, what's important.”
Monica		“You're never going to change the fact that guys like hanging out with each other and you're never going to change the fact that women like hanging out with each other	“I do a great job at the job you're doing and then you get tapped for the next job. And so all of my roles were, you know, people asking me to	“I've had sponsors, throughout my career, who generally were my superiors that I worked for and then they thought ‘I'm going to move over here. I'm	“Having quotas, which I actually was really supportive of because I think we needed them at the time in the 90s, we needed quotas to get to force and		“Some organisations have to mature and then make sure that they're budgeting for”.	“It's all the way through the hiring process. For example, when

		<p>that then you don't want to. So I think this is going to be a forever thing for us. So we have to what we have to do is be aware of it and consciously address it in organisations”.</p> <p>“I think there is always an opportunity to support each other the same way the guys would support each other and the same way that guys support women”.</p>	<p>apply for things or people asking me to move to work for them”.</p> <p>“It's not necessarily men don't not help women. Honestly, everyone helps people who do a great job. That's my fundamental belief”.</p>	<p>going to get Monica to come over with me’. And that has been extremely helpful. It's like an umbrella that protects you from the rain”.</p>	things to happen”.		<p>you're hiring, having diverse panels, so make sure that all your panels have men and women on them.”</p>	
Caroline		<p>“Sometimes it's not about you making your path. It's about being with the right person who's on the right path anyway”.</p> <p>“There's never something that isn't worth doing</p>	<p>“A woman who was working in the US office, she actually liked the work I was doing and asked me, would I come over and work in the states</p>	<p>“I've had some amazing mentors along the way”.</p>				

		<p>right because at the end of the day, the person who I met there and who hired me and saw my potential there, actually was the person who got me to the job and to the role that I loved”.</p> <p>“So I think things like women's networks within companies are really good to have”.</p>	<p>for a little while”.</p> <p>“And I did a series of different jobs with different products, and I typically was sent in where there was a problem and we will put in a team and we would work out how to make it profitable and also sometimes need to make the decisions of which products to get rid of, just to kill them. So I got a series of promotions within that”.</p> <p>“So that's actually advice that I give to people is make sure you don't become just a person who's good at</p>					
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			everything. Make sure you actually have something that people can promote you into”					
Nicholas		<p>“You were working with different leaders at different times and that was great to have just different perspectives, different experiences. And the few people in there who are probably just particularly talented people, particularly talented leaders, I would say that was a really good learning brand”.</p>		<p>“So I was a good example of getting supporters and of encouraged and pushed and so on”.</p> <p>“Lydia who is just really a superb coach and did all her one to one, to one through, a kind of a coaching style. So I learned a lot from her, which is great”.</p>	<p>“And so that combination of those two things of getting a lot of good training, but also then being left a little bit to think or swim. It was good in a way. So that's probably helped”.</p>	<p>“I think the fact that there's now typically paternity leave as well as maternity leave makes a big difference”.</p>	<p>“I think there's a lot more like women's like networking groups and things which, bring women along”.</p> <p>“Certainly just like workplace flexibility. I do think for example the return to work is going to be challenged for people”.</p> <p>“Being really thoughtful about who you hire and particularly that the process lends itself to start over the diverse</p>	<p>“Systematically is when they do promotions or when I do compensation reviews, I'll always review the gender balance with my team”.</p>

							<p>pool of candidates. I think it's like a really, really, important thing".</p> <p>"But also I think getting the experience right around that, so do you have a a slow ramp back for people when they come back so that they can come back into the workplace well".</p>	
Emily	<p>"Managing myself to get over being comfortable being the manager or somebody when I didn't really know how they were doing was an insight".</p>	<p>"One of my good friends in HR was managing that process and I knew him well, but this is kind of influence as well, so I think it's relevant".</p> <p>"To help them build their network both formally and internally and informally</p>		<p>"I've had loads of facilitators and mentors and I've really listened to them along the way. So that would be bosses".</p>	<p>"I think with the accounting thing, it is easy to work your ranks up if you stick with it. And then from there, there's so many opportunities".</p>			

		because that's what's going to sustain them with the chats that they have with their peers and also then with more senior mentoring or support networks".						
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Table 3. Results of interviews: perceptions about women in leadership positions

Participant	Unconscious bias (participant holds negative gender stereotypes towards women at leadership positions, but is not consciously aware of it)	Stereotypes: Female-typed behaviours at leadership positions	Stereotypes: Male-typed behaviours at leadership positions (particularly referred to women behaviour masculine-typed)	Competition for leadership positions	Role modeling (women learn leadership skills by imitating others)
Eugene	<p>“And whether that's male or female makes no odds.”</p> <p>“I certainly wouldn't distinguish between a male or a female in a role”.</p> <p>“I think it's down to ability more than anything you know.”</p> <p>“It's just important that decision making is balanced at a senior leadership level and I think it's healthy to have a mix of both perspectives, both male and female, and it's important that people listen to and you know the male macho decision is not always the right or correct way forward.”</p>	<p>“As a generalism that women tend to be more organized”</p>	<p>“Now people can use people to make themselves more successful. But in general whether they're man or woman, you go to work to be successful. So make money, ... whatever success is for you”.</p>	<p>“I think that women have to try really, really hard in certain sectors to succeed”</p>	<p>“They just have that, embassy to inspire people to go above and beyond. And I've come across a couple of people like that in in my career. Now I must say that the ones that come across happen to have been male”.</p>
Monica	<p>“It is difficult, but it's difficult for everybody. I think that's the first thing”.</p> <p>“Actually, the ones that helped me the most in my career were all men”.</p>	<p>“Whereas if you're more vulnerable, you are willing to accept the things your own weaknesses, you're willing to accept that you don't know everything, which is kind of important right</p>	<p>“I think women need to work harder. So I think because of that then it's actually really good working with women because they work harder, they're very detailed”.</p> <p>“And of course, you can't be like in the open, vulnerable all the time. But you have to moderate that”.</p>	<p>“Everyone's competing in the workplace. We're all competing. You're competing for attention. You're competing for salaries. You're competing in the outside. So, you know, you need a level of trust for people</p>	

	<p>"I think they're very different, you know, I think we bring different things to the table, but I don't have a bias towards one or the other, but they do behave differently, that's for sure."</p>	<p>now and you're willing to accept that you need help, then that's when you actually start building really strong relationships with your peers".</p> <p>"You might see that women prepare more".</p> <p>"They're a bit more insecure". (referring to women)</p> <p>"All people are always asking you 'because you're a female leader, can you help others?'" And so you've done. You're doing a full-time job, you're doing your outside full time job, and then you're also doing extra stuff in the workplace to help other women". whereas nobody's asking".</p> <p>"You're either clear on the fact you are different and your mind works in a different way. So you can bring different skills to the table. So either you and your kind have to gauge if the environment is</p>	<p>"I think women have had to work harder to prove that they deserve to be there, but the real thing, you know something, it's not quite impostor, but it's a bit of imposterism".</p> <p>"Whereas nobody's asking, 'Oh, because you're a male leader, can you help the other males?', like that isn't the thing".</p> <p>"And that's the big thing is you got to focus on what is the work we're doing and how can we help each other to make the work successful rather than the people".</p>	<p>and you're not going to trust everyone".</p> <p>"I'm not picking the males and the females out. I'm just competing with them all".</p>	
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		open to diverse thinking”.			
Caroline	<p>“Some of the absolute best leaders I’ve worked for have been women and some of the all-time worst person I’ve ever worked for is also a woman, right? So, I think I’m not sure it’s a gender thing”.</p> <p>“Tony let me be in the room for 10 years before I really deserved to be in the room. And I did not. And he would ask for my opinion. Whatever I was, I spent my whole time in that room”.</p> <p>“It’s less about the gender of who’s walking in and more about their experience and their view of women today”.</p> <p>“Whereas a man who’s grown up with sisters or a wife or a mother that they think hung the moon, they’re going to put every woman forward for the job”.</p>	<p>“He had no faith, and then it was when I realised his wife didn’t work. He had no belief that he was like ‘oh, she hardly gets done, which she needs to get done at home. There’s no way you could get this job done right”.</p> <p>“We had been brought up really not to be seen as pushy. And I don’t think it’s pushy. It’s actually just like you have value to a company and you should get paid for it.”</p> <p>“Part of it is that I was less aggressive with my asks, and I don’t know if that’s being a woman or just kind of culturally. I think sometimes, just not being seen to be fully yourself or whatever. But it’s not been full of you, It’s just asking to be paid for your worth”.</p> <p>“I’m very different in my style of communications than a lot of the men and technology, and that has often</p>	<p>“Just when I was over there, the first thing was I went in and I actually had moved over to work in a really profitable part of the business and I suppose that was probably the job where I decided that I really, really wanted to have a career as opposed to just have a job”.</p> <p>“He was extremely demanding. He worked everybody hard, but he really, really, really only looked at people’s capability and nothing else, which was fantastic, right? So he actually gave me a lot of opportunities, not necessarily in terms of promotions.”</p> <p>“The woman who I was working for, she was an engineer, and she said, ‘look, just do whatever you think is the right thing to get this on track”.</p> <p>“But basically that started me on being sort of a business manager. In terms of going in, managing the profitability of a business, working with the technology team to make sure we had the right product”.</p> <p>“I’m not sure it was necessarily a female trait. I think she was just like a piece of work”. (speaking about a woman leader mistreating team mates)</p> <p>“That was the thing in terms of that he actually didn’t see race, didn’t see gender, didn’t see age. All he saw was capability”.</p>	<p>“Some of it is around who’s around you at the same time and in the right track. Like, if there’s a lot of people, like say for example if you’re in product and there’s a lot of really, really, really strong product people, you’re maybe all functioning as an incredibly high level. But there’s just a lot of people who are performing at that level. So and there may not be an opening, right. Some of it is literally just that there aren’t openings”.</p> <p>“Being on a team where you have maybe a leadership ability within that team because your strengths are different to other people’s, so I think that can happen too”.</p> <p>“I think sometimes it can be down to actually just how cohesive the relationship is between you and the next person up, and whether or not they value what you can bring to the table or whether they’re threatened by it and that I think could happen with</p>	<p>“But actually that in hindsight is probably the way I still make decisions in work are totally based on the way that he made them”.</p> <p>“I would say that her approach to getting on was that she had decided to mimic the worst traits of men in the 1950s”.</p> <p>“People say to me, ‘you’re a great role model for Ciara as a working woman’, and I’m like, ‘no, I really hope I’m a great role model for Connor as well”.</p>

		<p>worked very well to break into making change or doing things differently”.</p> <p>“Women are by their nature used to being inclusive”.</p>		<p>the man or a woman”.</p> <p>“The worst person who I ever worked with, flip-flopped on what the vision was, couldn't communicate. And then only presented herself as the solver of the problem. So the entire team who were working on us had no visibility at the next stage of leadership”.</p> <p>“She'd completely saw other women as competitors”.</p> <p>“Because you can have women who don't value other women. If so, if women have grown up in an extremely competitive environment with other women, they're probably not going to promote women any better than a man would”.</p>	
Nicholas	<p>“I would say gender probably isn't the predominant lens through which I do that, if that makes sense”.</p>	<p>“If I take the leader who said who's like I thought was pretty good at coaching for example, she doesn't take any of this sort of stereotyped boxes that it might otherwise think. And you know what was probably distinctive about her for example is she just was very capable and she</p>	<p>“I mean, you definitely get some like men who do like fulfil the classic kind of alpha male type role in teams. And you know I think it's rare to guess women who behave in sort of the same way”.</p> <p>“I've worked with some I would say very strong personalities who are female leaders and they can be probably how that might show up in terms of the equivalent behaviour might be, say, being very demanding”.</p>		

		<p>was very organized. She definitely, in her particular case, used that as a strength. That meant there was a bunch of things she didn't do, for example, and one of the things she didn't do, which was super interesting I thought, is in the context of multinational company is that she barely travelled”.</p>	<p>“If you're doing something where the path isn't easy, it probably means you need to be smarter or harder working or more organised or something, right to make it all balanced”.</p>		
Emily	<p>“But on the female-male thing, she said that's not an issue anymore. That was her position. There's loads of other inequalities in the world, but she really doesn't feel that the male-female is now. She's also a senior female leader there”.</p>	<p>“If you're too open and too nurturing nothing might get done either”.</p> <p>“She's leaving the men in the wake behind her even though that's not the stereotypical, you know what I mean?”</p> <p>“In my career I used my femininity at times like I was working in that GE. It was very male and I used that in terms of influence. And I was young and everybody likes to chat to young, pretty well, you know, that was my view of myself anyway”.</p>	<p>“And this is my real belief in leadership: understand your strengths. Play to your strengths. Don't worry too much about your development needs because no matter what work you put in, what effort you put into them, you're never going to be great at them anyway, so get somebody else in your team in terms of balance, who might complement you and your weaker areas or your opposite points to your strengths”.</p> <p>“Danuta was very nurturing, very creative, very good drive in terms of delivering numbers and that type of thing but in a creative nurturing in some ways, sometimes it wasn't as nurturing because she could be if she had to be cut throat”.</p> <p>“That's what I've admired about male leaders. Is that clarity of thought that they can have”.</p> <p>“I think you you've seen that some women become more like men. Try to replicate that behaviour, which I don't think serves</p>		<p>“The other thing about leadership is you learn an awful lot from the people that work for you. So if you're open to listening to this and if you're not caught in your in yourself”.</p> <p>“I'd also know as the leader that people will copy your behaviour”.</p>

			<p>them well. I think some women do that because that's more how they're made. So they're not changing themselves. That is just more at the made maybe they grew up in a family of old boys”.</p>		
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Table 4. Results of interviews: relationships with younger employees and subordinates

Participant	Legitimate Power (the boss has power)	Care	Culture – sense of cohesion	Direction
Eugene	<p>“If you're in a sector that is dependent on talent, unless you are eating, sleeping, drinking it from the very top, I don't think your reach it”.</p> <p>“Fish rots from the head down”</p> <p>“If you're down there with the team and doing the nitty gritty you're not, probably spending your time or energy in the right direction”.</p>	<p>“People that I know have worked with would say organisations like PwC, they seem to have a huge focus on talent and ensuring that Junior employees have a good experience and are valued.”</p> <p>“I think it's really important that people have an interest in the employees that they work with, that they know what's going on in their lives, they empathise with them and spend time with them to get to know them”.</p>	<p>“And you know, you can have all the strategy you want, but culture eats strategy for breakfast.”</p>	<p>“They understand the importance of vision, the importance of direction. A leader's role sets the direction and figures out if your team can get you there and if they can't, you've got to put the right skills into the team, the right people into the team to get it there. That's your job.</p>
Monica	<p>“He first promoted me to a director and then he moved me to a different job. Then he moved companies and he totally was like ‘you can do this, come and help me with this’. And it was all because . he said to me like ‘you just make all the noise go away, hit the numbers, make the noise, go away, you don't bother me.”</p> <p>“The leader sets the tone for an organization.”</p> <p>“A leader can create or and destroy an organization”.</p> <p>“I think the relationship, you know there needs to be upward respect and trust. And same downward”.</p>	<p>“They are the people you end up then looking after making sure you're identifying opportunities for them and developing their careers where you know you can see that they're going to do great work for whatever organisation you're in.”</p> <p>“So the responsibility is so massive to not just business performance, but people and people's well-being, you know, and work help”.</p>	<p>“When I think back of 30 years, the most amazing time and when we did the best work and we had the best time, was when the culture was strong, so the leader can have the most impact by building a strong culture, and that means, you know culture, where there is trust, where there is drive, where there is capability and where there is you know unity so that everyone wants to do the same thing and they're clear on the vision”.</p> <p>“So yeah, culture beats strategy any day”.</p>	
Caroline	<p>“She was not good at what she was doing. She wasn't running the business well and I just went and asked to be changed into another role, and now the head of our company at that time and he was like ‘well, if you ask to be moved out of</p>	<p>“You had to keep everybody really happy and you had to find the right job for them that they do really well”.</p> <p>“What I want from my leader is to help knock</p>	<p>“But the difference in that culture by having been led by a woman for the 10 years previously is unbelievable. The way people communicate, the level of respect”.</p>	<p>“They know they have a clear vision for what needs to get done and they communicate it extremely</p>

	<p>the role, I can't promote you for a year'. And I was like, 'that's fine. I'm just not going to work for her'".</p>	<p>obstacles out of the way that are in my way".</p> <p>"But actually she just didn't really care about the team. That was the bottom line, which she didn't. She wasn't trying to have her rise with the tide. She wanted to just rise and she didn't care who she stood on to get there. She didn't empower them. She actually destroyed multiple people, really shattered their confidence."</p> <p>"My friend she looked at and she said 'you're being really underpaid and you're not at the right level within the company for what you're doing', and she went to bat for me and got me to the right salary level. So she actually doubled my salary. And if she hadn't done that, I would still be way underpaid".</p>		<p>well. And they help you understand what your role is in achieving that right".</p>
Nicholas	<p>"They have a lot stronger influence than they probably realise in the sense of every little thing they do is what's been observed and diagnosed and reads like even if you don't realise they're doing this, they are".</p> <p>"You know the toughest decisions tend to make their way up to leaders, so they operate in grey zones a lot more than people who are like in more junior worlds or who aren't in leadership roles".</p> <p>"But equally for every time you do that, there's a lot of decisions you have to make where you're saying no, are you taking resources away or you're deprioritizing something that's important to people".</p>	<p>"It's one of the nice things about being leader or manager is you get to help people and encourage them along and it comes down a little bit to".</p>	<p>"If I was to take some of the times when I felt my career really accelerated, I think the key, the crux of it was that you're working really hand in hand".</p> <p>"I don't how many years a long time he used to review every like hire and before they were hired to make sure that the culture fit was right".</p>	
Emily	<p>"Probably my leadership style would be more collaborative, more work</p>	<p>"It has to start small and it has to start with building trust. So one to one conversations can help with</p>		

	with me rather than directional”.	that and being open to let me know what you think”.		
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Table 5. Gender Breakdown by Senior Roles

Gender breakdown by senior roles in business, 2019, 2021 and 2023						%
	2019		2021		2023	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Chairpersons	92.6	7.4	86.0	14.0	81.3	18.7
Boards of Directors	80.4	19.6	78.2	21.8	75.4	24.6
Chief Executive Officers (CEOs)	88.5	11.5	86.6	13.4	81.0	19.0
Senior Executives	71.7	28.3	70.3	29.7	69.6	30.4
Chief Financial Officers (CFOs)	70.3	29.7	71.9	28.1	74.3	25.7

Source: Central Statistics Office