



Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales  
ICADE

**Removing Barriers and Building  
Opportunities:  
Influential Factors that Hinder and  
Promote the Career Success of Female  
Leaders Beyond Legal Mandates**

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines the main factors that hinder or foster the career success of women in leadership positions in Germany, beyond existing legal mandates. The primary objective is to identify and analyse internal company measures and structures that can effectively break down existing barriers to gender equality in leadership.

In order to gain a more profound understanding of the underlying mechanisms behind these challenges and to identify effective strategies for organisational support, this study employs a qualitative research design. To this end, expert interviews were conducted with female managers from various sectors of the German labour market.

The results indicate that career success is influenced by a complex interplay of sociocultural norms, organisational practices, and individual factors. Barriers include gender stereotypes, work-family conflict, traditional leadership ideals, limited access to mentoring and networks, and the “glass ceiling” phenomenon. Conversely, inclusive corporate cultures, flexible work models, structured HR processes, targeted leadership development, and visible role models are found to be crucial enablers.

These findings suggest that companies play a pivotal role in shaping equal career paths. Effective measures go beyond quotas, requiring a fundamental cultural shift and structural support. This study contributes to the academic discourse by linking literature and lived experiences, and provides practical recommendations for companies seeking to promote female leadership in a sustainable and authentic way.

**Key Words: Gender Equality, Female Leaders, Career Advancement, Hindering Factors, Supportive Measures**

## **Resumen Ejecutivo**

Este trabajo examina los principales factores que obstaculizan o favorecen el éxito profesional de las mujeres en puestos de liderazgo en Alemania, más allá de los mandatos legales existentes. El objetivo principal es identificar y analizar las medidas y estructuras internas de las empresas que puedan eliminar eficazmente las barreras actuales para lograr la igualdad de género en posiciones directivas.

Con el fin de comprender en mayor profundidad los mecanismos subyacentes a estos desafíos e identificar estrategias efectivas de apoyo organizacional, se emplea un diseño de investigación cualitativo. Para ello, se realizaron entrevistas a expertas con mujeres en cargos directivos de diversos sectores del mercado laboral alemán.

Los resultados indican que el éxito profesional está influenciado por una interacción compleja entre normas socioculturales, prácticas organizacionales y factores individuales. Las barreras incluyen los estereotipos de género, los conflictos entre el trabajo y la familia, los ideales tradicionales de liderazgo, el acceso limitado a tutorías y redes, y el fenómeno del “techo de cristal”. En contraste, se identifican factores facilitadores cruciales, como las culturas empresariales integradoras, los modelos de trabajo flexibles, los procesos estructurados de recursos humanos, el desarrollo selectivo del liderazgo y los modelos de conducta visibles.

Los estudios revelan que las empresas desempeñan un papel crucial en la creación de trayectorias profesionales equitativas. Las medidas efectivas, que trascienden las cuotas, requieren una transformación cultural profunda y un respaldo estructural. Este estudio contribuye significativamente al debate académico al establecer una conexión entre la teoría y las experiencias prácticas, y al proporcionar recomendaciones prácticas para fomentar un liderazgo femenino auténtico y sostenible.

**Key Words: Igualdad de género, Mujeres en liderazgo, Desarrollo profesional, Factores que obstaculizan, Medidas de apoyo**

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Jannika Brandis

Madrid, 26.03.2025

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## 1 Introduction

“At the current rate of progress, it will take 131 years to reach full gender parity.” (World Economic Forum, 2023)

Despite several decades of political discourse, governmental measures, corporate initiatives, and legal reforms, gender inequality, particularly in leadership positions, remains a persistent issue. Significant disparities within society and the labour market continue to impede the professional advancement of diverse population groups, including women.

According to the World Economic Forum (2023) meaningful progress towards gender parity has been slow, raising doubts about the effectiveness of current efforts. The implementation of measures such as gender quotas to increase representation in leadership positions have yielded only modest results. In order to effect lasting change, companies must go beyond mere compliance and implement targeted, strategic initiatives that truly enable equal access to leadership positions.

In light of the persistent inequalities between women and men, this study aims to identify and analyse the factors that hinder or promote the career success of women in German companies. The focus lies on internal company structures and measures that can go beyond legal requirements to help break down existing barriers and sustainably promote equal opportunities in a professional context.

From a corporate perspective, this leads to the following central research question: **Which measures, beyond legal mandates, effectively support women in advancing into leadership positions within the German labour market, thereby facilitating their upward mobility in corporate hierarchies?**

The examination of this question is not only of current relevance but also of particular importance for future generations entering the labour market. It is imperative that young professionals find a work environment in which their career development is not shaped by unequal treatment, systemic barriers or outdated role expectations. The present study contributes to the development of sustainable solutions for greater diversity and gender equality in companies and particularly at management level.

In order to explore this question in depth, the study adopts a qualitative research approach based on expert interviews with women currently in leadership positions. The insights garnered from these interviews offer a valuable complement to existing academic research, providing a nuanced perspective on real-life challenges and effective practices.

In the following theoretical section, the the terms “leader”, “professional success”, and “career success” are defined and contextualised. This is followed by an overview of the current representation of women in leadership positions in Germany, including relevant legal frameworks. The subsequent chapters examine both hindering and promoting factors that influence women’s career advancement. Chapter 5 outlines the methodological approach of the qualitative study, followed by the presentation of findings based on expert interviews. The discussion critically reflects on these results in relation to existing research and derives practical implications. The final chapter summarises the main insights and offers suggestions for future research.

## **2 Theoretical foundation**

The following section provides a conceptual clarification of the terms “leader”, “professional success”, and “career success” as used in this thesis. Subsequently, the current representation of women in leadership positions in the German economy and the relevant legal framework will be discussed.

### **2.1 Clarifying the role of a leader**

The term “leader” can be defined in various ways, leading to numerous interpretations over the past decades. At first traditional definitions often emphasize traits stereotypically associated with masculinity, such as assertiveness and dominance (Northouse, 2021). The Cambridge Dictionary for instance defines the term “leader” as “a person who manages or controls other people, esp. because of his or her ability or position” (Cambridge University, 2025). However, evolving workplace dynamics have shifted this perspective over time (Hunt & Fedynich, 2019).

In recent years, alongside numerous definitions from the field of economics, socio-psychological perspectives have also been considered. Instead of emphasizing static traits or fixed roles, the term “leader” is considered on a level that focuses on the dynamic interaction between the individual and their social environment. Katz (2024) drawing on Lewin's field theory, describes “leaders” as individuals who consistently and sustainably challenge the status quo. This trait is shaped not by inherent personal characteristics but by social forces, interactions, and perceptions within dynamic environments. Through their influence, leaders either stabilize or change social systems, guiding groups toward common or opposing goals.

Having established a differentiation of the term “leader” from conventional role models, it is now essential to clearly distinguish the role of the leader from other roles within an organization or group. Holst & Friedrich (2017) define “leaders” as people aged 18 and older who are employed in the private sector and hold significant management responsibilities or highly qualified positions. Furthermore, it is important to mention that leaders are not found exclusively in the field of economics. In fact, the concept of leaders can also be observed in a variety of other domains, including the military, religion, and sports (Morán-Martínez, 2022).

A comparison of “leaders” and other roles within an organisation, such as managers or superiors, reveals that the “leader” transcends the conventional relationship with employees

(Morán-Martínez, 2022). Instead of exerting control over others based on an ability or a specific position, the leader influences others with one clear purpose; The achievement of shared goals (Díez et al., 2023; Cambridge University, 2025).

In this regard, the “leader” functions as a motivator, inspiring others to perform at their best and to be committed to common objectives.

Furthermore, “leaders” establish a clear direction and provide guidance, assisting employees in navigating challenges and accomplishing tasks while inspiring and leading them toward the leader’s vision. As they guide, “leaders” lead by example, embodying the behaviors and attitudes they expect from others. In doing so, they demonstrate strong ethical capabilities, values and responsibility for the outcomes of decisions and actions, regardless of the outcome (Díez et al., 2023).

Despite that, effective communication is a hallmark of strong leadership. It facilitates unambiguous information exchange and clarity of roles, while enabling leaders to address the needs and concerns of their team members and to foster strong relationships (Díez et al., 2023).

In general, a “leader” is defined by self-awareness, resilience, curiosity, and the ability to adapt to changing environments and challenges, adjusting strategies as necessary (Morán-Martínez, 2022). It is important to highlight, however, that the characteristics attributed to a leader are not universal but evolve (Hunt & Fedynich, 2019). Moreover, leadership is not an innate trait but a skill developed through lifelong learning. To quote the business economist and pioneer of business psychology Peter Drucker: “I have not come across a single “natural”: an executive who was born effective. (...) Effectiveness can be learned - and it also has to be learned.” (Drucker, 1967, p. 9).

Overall, the approaches discussed in this chapter show how the understanding of the role of 'leader' has evolved. While traditional definitions often emphasise traits linked to stereotypically male characteristics, societal and labour market changes have fostered new perspectives. These no longer focus solely on an individual's authority, but instead highlight leadership as a dynamic process grounded on the interaction between the individual and the social environment. Modern leaders are seen as guides who provide direction, motivate others, serve as role models, and take responsibility for ethical behaviour, and the results of their decisions. They also ensure transparent communication so that team members clearly

understand their roles and expectations. Thus leadership is conceived not as an innate trait, but as a skill that is developed through self-awareness, resilience, and continuous learning.

## **2.2 Defining professional and career success**

Upon initial examination, the terms “career success” and “professional success” appear to be readily comprehensible and easily classified. In fact, a considerable number of individuals consider professional success to be an essential component of a fulfilling adult life, in addition to its social and economic implications (Dette et al., 2004).

Previous studies have shown, that while professional success is typically associated with a specific task or achievement that is measurable and clearly defined in time, career success refers to the actual, perceived outcomes a person has achieved throughout their professional career (Dette et al., 2004). This long-term perspective on career success is further elaborated by Steindórsdóttir et al. (2023) as “the accomplishment of desirable work-related outcomes at any point in a person's work experiences over time”. This definition acknowledges from a macro perspective both physical movements, such as transitions between hierarchical levels, industries or job roles, and the subjective interpretation of certain career experiences (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009).

After differentiating between the terms "professional success" and "career success", it is now essential to clarify the concept of "success" itself.

Xie, X. & Wu, Y. (2021) reveal that defining “success” in this context is challenging, as this term is subjectively characterized. The manner in which individuals perceive success is subject to a multitude of influences, including prior experiences, personal aspirations, and the professional environment (Metelski, 2019). In this context, the term has often been differentiated between objective success (e.g. job promotion or professional standing) and subjective success (e.g. job satisfaction and personal goal achievement) (Spurk et al., 2018). While objective career success is driven by measurable and observable indicators, which are often externally validated and accessible to third parties, subjective career success is shaped by an individual's personal feelings and job satisfaction. This, in contrast to the objective perspective on success, makes the existing indicators resistant to external evaluation (Metelski, 2019).

While this distinction is well established, research further highlights the interplay between objective and subjective career success. Some studies suggest, that objective achievements such as salary increases or promotion positively shape individuals' subjective perceptions of success. Conversely, other research emphasizes the decisive role of personality traits and individual attitudes in defining subjective success. Furthermore, recent approaches point to a dynamic relationship, indicating that experiences of objective success over time can influence how individuals develop their definition of success. This phenomenon is particularly evident in organisational contexts, where promotions to specific positions contribute to shaping personal perceptions of professional success (Metelski, 2019).

“Career success” can generally be interpreted as a perceived outcome that an individual has achieved throughout a career, such as being promoted to higher hierarchical levels or moving into different areas of expertise. It is also often associated with individually defined goals. This highlights the fact that success in particular is a dynamic concept, that encompasses both subjective and objective perspectives and can be influenced by, among other things, individual experiences or personal aspirations. Given that this paper aims to adopt a broader perspective, the terms "career success" or “career advancement” will be used further on.

### **2.3 The current state of leadership and gender inequality in German companies**

Current data from 2022 and 2023 underlines, that women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions in Germany, as well as across Europe and globally (Arndt & Wrohlich, 2019). While the proportion of women in executive roles and boards of directors has increased in recent years, a comparison with other European Union countries reveals, that gender diversity in management positions in Germany remains insufficient (see Figure 1 and Figure 3). The gender pay gap further reflects existing inequalities, showing a 16% difference in hourly earnings between women and men in 2024, though this marks a slight improvement compared to the previous year (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025).

In 2023, despite constituting 49.9% of the German workforce, women accounted for only around one-third (28.7%) of leadership positions (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025).

Moreover, Hammermann & Stettes (2024) confirm the well-established observation that men are significantly more likely to occupy leadership positions than women. As demonstrated in

Figure 2, the proportion of women in leadership decreases at higher hierarchical levels, with men being almost twice as represented in middle and upper leadership.

**Positions held by women in senior management positions**

Time frequency: Annual Professional position: Board members Sex: Females Unit of measure: Percentage Time: 2023

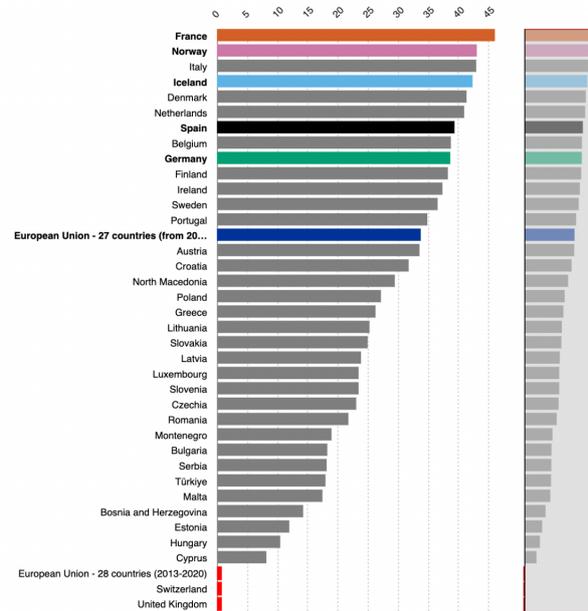


Figure 1: Positions held by women in senior management positions - Board members

(Data source: Eurostat, 2024)

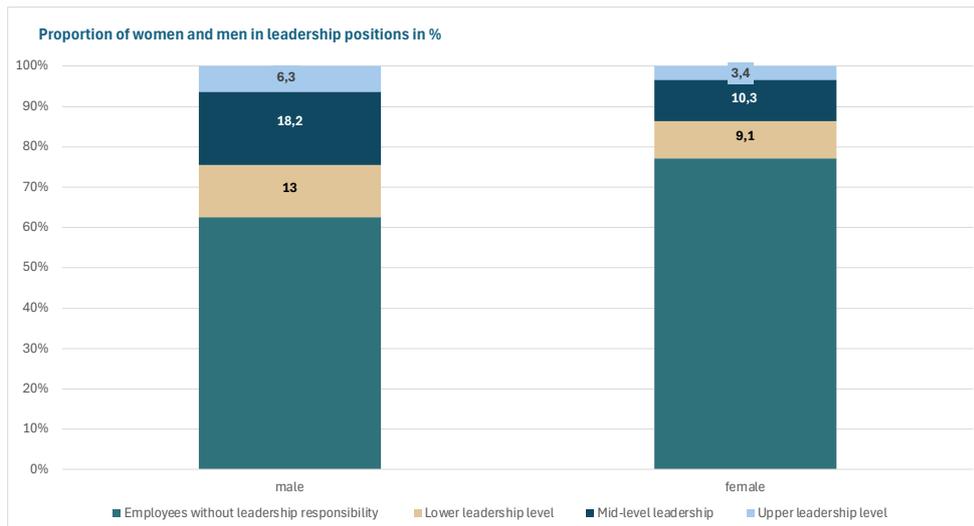


Figure 2: Leadership positions and gender

(Data source: Hammermann & Stettes, 2024)

Nevertheless, in Germany's 50 largest companies, there has been an increase in the proportion of women in senior management positions in recent years (Eurostat, 2024). While the proportion of women executives in 2021 (17,8%) remained below the EU average (20,2%), a significant improvement was observed by 2023. Germany has now reached a level of 23,5% of women in managerial positions, which is higher than the EU27 average of 22,2% (see Figure 3; Eurostat, 2024).

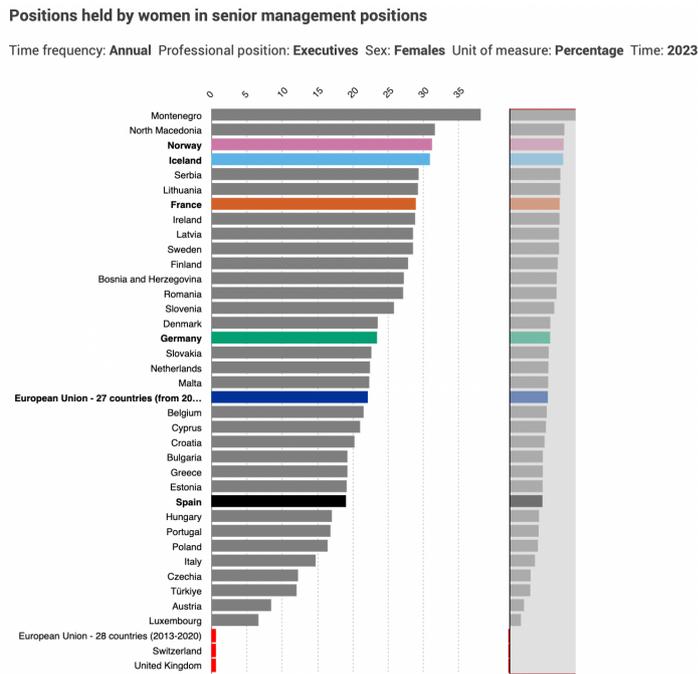


Figure 3: Positions held by women in senior management positions – Executives

(Data source: Eurostat, 2024)

In contrast, in Germany's boards of directors, a different pattern can be observed. For several years, Germany has maintained a position above the EU average (Sondergeld et al., 2024). According to the latest Eurostat (2024) data, the proportion of female board members in Germany in 2023 was 38.7%. Historical analysis indicates a close correlation between the significant increase in female representation since 2015 and the introduction of a mandatory gender quota for supervisory boards in the same year (Arndt & Wrohlich, 2019). As illustrated in Figure 1, by 2017, this quota had been met at 31.7%. However, subsequent progress has slowed, with annual increases of merely 1–2%, highlighting relatively slow advancements in recent years (Eurostat, 2024).

Following an examination of female representation in leadership positions in Germany, the focus will now be shifted to other EU countries. This comparison reveals, that Germany continues to lag behind countries such as Norway, Iceland, Spain, and France in terms of the proportion of women in executive positions (see Figure 3).

As the first country to implement a mandatory gender quota of 40% in 2003, Norway serves as a striking example, achieving 43% female representation on boards of directors by 2023. France has surpassed this figure, with women holding approximately 46% of board seats, thus establishing itself as a frontrunner within the EU and bringing it closer to achieving gender parity in senior management (see Figure 1, Arndt & Wrohlich, 2019). This success can be attributed to the 40% gender quota and the strict sanctions for non-compliance, similar to the measures implemented in Norway and Italy (Arndt & Wrohlich, 2019).

Spain and Iceland, by contrast, introduced a 40% gender quota for supervisory boards in 2007 and 2010, without penalties for non-compliance (Arndt & Wrohlich, 2019). By 2023, the proportion of women in Spanish supervisory boards had reached 39.4%, and in Iceland, 42.4% (Eurostat, 2024).

Beyond the different trends observed across EU countries, there are also notable differences between sectors within Germany. Studies conducted by Holst & Friedrich (2017) reveal, that women only achieve comparable representation in the “Transportation and Storage” sector, while female representation in the finance and insurance sectors remains notably low.

This is corroborated by a study by Sondergeld et al. (2024) which shows that, despite recent improvements, women account for only 12% of board positions in banks and 8% in insurance companies. Similarly, female representation on executive boards remains particularly low in SDAX (Small-Cap-DAX) and TecDAX (Technology-DAX) companies, with only 7% of positions in SDAX companies and none in TecDAX by 2023. In contrast, supervisory boards show significantly higher female representation (Sondergeld et al., 2024).

Overall, these figures highlight the persistent under-representation of women in senior management, particularly in male-dominated sectors such as finance and insurance. While gradual progress is evident, Germany still lags behind countries such as Norway and France, where higher quotas and stricter enforcement have led to significantly higher female representation.

## **2.4 Political and economic measures against gender inequality**

For many years, equal rights have been firmly enshrined in German law. Article 3 of the German constitution (originally “Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland”) postulates the equal treatment of women and men, as well as the obligation of the state to take appropriate measures to eliminate structural disadvantages (Bundesministerium für Justiz, 2024).

This may lead to the assumption, that additional legal and operational measures have been introduced to promote diversity and equality. However, practical implementation has remained limited for decades (Burel, 2020).

At EU level, significant steps toward equality were taken between 2000 and 2004 (Franken, 2024). Among other measures, the Council of the European Union has established a general framework to combat discrimination in the workplace based on characteristics such as religious belief, age, disability or sexual orientation (“Employment Framework Directive”, 2000/78/EC) (Gärtner, 2020). Additionally, a Gender Directive was introduced to promote gender equality in the labor market (2002/73EG). Based on these directives, Germany implemented the General Equal Treatment Act (originally “Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz”) in 2006, which provides legal protection against discrimination both in the workplace and in the private sphere (Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes, 2024).

Despite early EU-wide legislation, it was not until 2015 that Germany introduced the “Act on the Equal Participation of Women and Men in Executive Positions in the Private and Public Sectors (FüPoG I)”, which introduced two key provisions. First, the law mandates a 30% quota for women on supervisory boards of fully co-determined and publicly listed companies. Secondly, it requires companies to disclose transparent, self-determined targets for the proportion of women in supervisory boards, executive boards, and the two management levels below the executive board in their annual reports or a separate corporate governance statement (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2025).

If companies fail to meet this minimum quota, the so-called “empty chair” rule applies, meaning that positions designated for the underrepresented gender remain vacant. In contrast, there are no penalties for failing to meet self-imposed targets - companies simply have to justify them under the 'comply or explain' principle (Arndt & Wrohlich, 2019).

Due to the legal gaps that became increasingly evident in the following years, the second Leadership Positions Act (FüPoG II) was introduced as an extension (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2021). This amendment requires companies with more than three executive board members to appoint at least one woman to the board (Sondergeld et al., 2024). Furthermore, the scope was expanded to companies with a majority state ownership as well as public-law entities (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2021). Since 2021, companies have also been subject to financial penalties in the absence of a defined target or if a zero target is not justified (Pissarczyk, 2022).

In addition to the two leadership position laws enacted in 2015 and 2021, the “Act to Promote Transparency in Wage Structures” (originally “Entgelttransparenzgesetz”) was introduced in 2017. The law aims to reduce the gender pay gap by granting employees in companies with over 200 employees the right to request wage comparisons (Ahrens & Scheele, 2022). Furthermore, employers are obliged to conduct reviews and make adjustments, while companies with more than 500 employees are required to report regularly on gender equality and pay equality (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2017).

Finally, reference should be made to the "Bridge Part-Time Work Act" of 2019, which allows employees in companies with more than 45 employees to temporarily reduce their working hours without providing specific reasons, with the option to return to full-time employment afterward (Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales, 2019; Ahrens & Scheele, 2022).

### **3 Factors hindering women’s career advancement**

The progression of women's careers is influenced by a complex interplay of individual, social, organizational, and structural factors (Hentschel et al., 2019). The following examination will focus on the hindering factors, providing a deeper understanding of the dynamics of women's career paths.

#### **3.1 Sociocultural factors and stereotypes**

Women aspiring to leadership positions face a range of invisible barriers deeply rooted in societal norms and traditional corporate structures. These barriers are often subtle and therefore challenging to identify (Schwanke, 2013). In particular, family structures and patriarchal

societal systems make it difficult for women to break out of traditional role assignments such as child-rearing or caregiving, which substantially hinder their career advancement (Sowjanya et al., 2017).

The perception of social groups, along with general assumptions concerning their characteristics and behaviour, is influenced by societal norms, even in the professional context. Gender stereotypes often arise from the categorisation of individuals based on external traits, specific abilities or everyday behaviours (Steffens & Ebert, 2016). While men are attributed characteristics such as assertiveness and performance orientation, women are more strongly associated with traits like warmth and caregiving (Kite, Deaux, & Haines E.L, 2008). Consequently, women and men, despite having comparable skills and ambitions, are assigned different roles that are often perceived as opposing (Ellemers, 2018). However, Kohaut & Möller (2023) suggest that there are no significant differences in the personality traits of leaders between genders.

In their studies, Koenig & Eagly (2014) demonstrate that the observation of societal role distributions contributes to the formation and reinforcement of gender stereotypes. As leadership positions have historically been predominantly held by men, traditionally “masculine” traits lead to a gendered perception of leadership, captured in the concept “think manager - think male” (Kohaut & Möller, 2023).

These assumptions significantly hinder women's progress to higher management levels, as they are often perceived as less suitable for leadership roles (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). This stereotypical perception, which can occur at all hierarchical levels, has the potential to lead to long-term effects on career development and income levels for all genders. Thus, deeply rooted gender inequalities can become entrenched throughout a career (Ellemers, 2018).

### **3.2 The Work-family-conflict**

The question “Career or family?” represents a central challenge for many working women (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). While previous generations of women often sacrificed family in favor of their careers, newer generations increasingly strive to reconcile their professional and family lives (Goldin, 2021).

However, research shows that parenthood often represents a pivotal turning point in women's careers, leading to wage losses and limited opportunities for career progression, particularly in reaching leadership positions. Parental leave and part-time phases not only intensify gender disparities in the workplace but also exacerbate the gap between mothers and their childless colleagues. Despite reforms in Germany, including parental leave, parental benefits, and the expansion of childcare provisions, parenthood continues to be a career barrier. This is especially true for academic women, whose professional establishment phase often coincides with starting a family (Brandt & Spangenberg, 2022). Numerous studies show that career prioritization and the associated pressures significantly influence family decisions, leading many highly qualified women to delay or forgo having children (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Brandt & Spangenberg, 2022).

Given this, studies also suggest that working women still bear the primary responsibility for household management and child-rearing (Molina, 2020). This often leads to a so-called “work-family-conflict”, which occurs when professional and family obligations compete and negatively affect each other. Women often feel that the resources available to them are insufficient to meet the demands of both roles (Isa & Indrayati, 2023).

These conflicts often arise around important decisions, such as choosing to pursue a career advancement that requires relocation or deciding who will pick up the child from daycare, and can lead to increased stress, decreased job satisfaction, and limited career advancement (Molina, 2020; Isa & Indrayati, 2023).

The work-family-conflict is further exacerbated by existing organizational and social frameworks. In particular, the still-prevailing culture of presenteeism and long working hours favors men, who are less likely to assume family responsibilities, leaving these duties largely to women (Ellguth et al., 2017; Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). Consequently, women are more likely to reduce their working hours or even interrupt their careers for caregiving, limiting their opportunities for advancement (Chisholm-Burns, et al., 2017; Molina 2020).

In this regard, it is also important to point out the absence of support structures within companies, a factor that can increase the pressure on employees (Molina, 2020). Research indicates that women in leadership positions can achieve a more balanced work-life balance when they receive support from their partner, family or employer (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). However, support in the private sphere is not equally available to all women, which further

exacerbates the conflict. This disparity is particularly pronounced among single mothers, women in low-income households, and women without family networks (Klenk et al., 2019; Schliffka & Hoyer, 2018; van Staa & Renner, 2024).

Finally, the work-family-conflict can be categorised in order to illustrate the diverse causes and effects of this conflict (Molina, 2020).

Firstly, time-based conflicts occur when the time allocated to one role clashes with the demands of the other. A typical example is when long working hours conflict with family obligations (Isa & Indrayati, 2023).

A further category is the strain-based conflict, which occurs when work-related stress has a detrimental effect on the personal environment, particularly affecting women in leadership positions (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Isa & Indrayati, 2023).

Lastly, so-called behaviour-based conflicts emerge when role-specific behaviours, such as assertiveness in a professional context, are incongruent with expectations within the family environment. For instance, a professional who exerts authority may experience tensions in the personal environment due to unconscious behaviour (Isa & Indrayati, 2023).

### **3.3 Corporate culture and dynamics**

Another influencing factor is corporate culture, which shapes the values, principles, norms, and accepted behaviours in the workplace (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). As an ethical guide, corporate culture shapes decision-making processes and has a significant impact on both the long-term development and economic success of organisations (Wang & Huang, 2022).

The formation of corporate culture is influenced by various factors including leadership styles, organizational structures, company history, external conditions, and the cultural philosophy of the founders. Due to the historical dominance of men in leadership roles, many corporate cultures have developed male-oriented characteristics, with leadership styles reflecting traditional notions of masculinity and femininity (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). Consequently, normative expectations often promote men into leadership roles, limiting opportunities for women and other underrepresented groups (Crabtree & Shiel, 2019).

Moreover, research indicates that women in leadership roles frequently encounter a lack of trust, support, and resources compared to their male colleagues (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). This

absence of active gender equality within corporate culture hinders their professional development and restricts long-term career opportunities (Castaño et al., 2019).

In addition, it is also important to address the issue of discrimination, which can particularly arise in diverse work environments. Discrimination occurs when unjust conditions are created that prevent certain groups from achieving professional success due to their gender, ethnic background or other personal characteristics (Jahnke et al., 2019). Both discrimination and harassment often manifest in the form of hostile and degrading behaviours, which in turn negatively impact the work environment (Johnson & Otto, 2020).

### **3.4 Human resource practices and women's career development**

Another important aspect influencing the professional development of women is the Human Resource Management, as it supports employees throughout their entire career journey and thus significantly impacts career advancement opportunities and professional development (Gierke et al., 2024).

In many companies, the recruitment and selection process lacks a clear structure and criteria against which to assess candidates. As a result, organisations often tend to prioritise an idealised candidate profile over role-specific qualifications. This lack of clarity about the actual requirements of the role increases the risk of unconscious bias influencing the decision-making process. In many cases, this results in the preference of men for positions traditionally held by men, such as leadership roles (Hentschel et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the assessment of candidates is often based on first impressions without seeking additional information (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). Unstructured interviews have increasingly led to a preference for candidates, who share the same gender or certain personality traits as the person making the decision (Hentschel et al., 2019). Research has also shown that women are often judged primarily based on their appearance or gender rather than their professional performance, while this effect is less prominent for men. This bias systematically underestimates women's potential and hinders their career progression (Ellemers, 2018).

In addition to barriers in the selection process, studies also point to limited access to training and development opportunities for women (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). A study by Barkhuizen et al. (2022) highlights that female participants in professional development programmes face

various challenges. On one hand, access to effective training and development programmes is limited, while on the other hand, there is a lack of promotion opportunities based on these programmes. While the majority of respondents felt that existing programmes did not adequately prepare them for leadership roles, working women reported that it was difficult to balance access to training with family commitments and daily work routines.

### **3.5 The glass ceiling phenomenon and its dynamics**

Furthermore, the phenomenon of the so-called “glass ceiling” is often discussed (Ellguth et al., 2017). It describes invisible but effective barriers that prevent qualified women from advancing to higher leadership positions despite their competence and achievements (Babic & Hansez, 2021). These barriers persist regardless of legal equality measures and societal changes and are influenced by a combination of structural, cultural, and social factors. Contributing factors include stereotypical gender roles, unconscious biases, limited access to networks, and insufficient development programs for women (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017).

Unlike overt discrimination, the glass ceiling is subtle, often embedded in male-dominated corporate cultures or systemic barriers to women's career progression. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced at the highest management levels, where the proportion of female leaders remains low despite gradual progress. Research indicates that the challenges confronted by women intensify as they ascend through the hierarchy of an organisation (Babic & Hansez, 2021).

Whilst some women manage to break through the glass ceiling, for many the lower levels of management represent a “sticky floor” that holds them back and prevents career progression (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Ellguth, 2017). Not only does this phenomenon hinder equal opportunities, but it also limits the ability of companies to benefit from gender diversity in leadership positions (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017).

It is also important to emphasize that female leaders continue to face challenges even after breaking through the so-called glass ceiling, primarily due to the imbalanced gender distribution within organizational structures. In this context, the phenomenon of tokenism plays a crucial role, as women in leadership positions are often perceived as representatives or “symbols” of their gender rather than as autonomous professionals (Gierke et al., 2024).

Finally, empirical studies from recent years emphasize the “glass cliff” hypothesis, which suggests that women are more likely to attain leadership roles in economically unstable companies. While this may imply confidence in women's crisis management abilities, these roles carry a higher risk. Failures are often not attributed to external circumstances but interpreted as a sign of the leader’s inadequacy, reinforcing existing biases and discrimination (Ellguth et al., 2017).

### **3.6 Networks and mentoring**

Another significant factor that hinders the professional advancement of women is the limited access to networks, especially in male-dominated corporate cultures. Networks facilitate access to information, resources, and support, while also promoting trust and solidarity among their members (Purcell et al., 2010; Barkhuizen et al., 2022). These benefits contribute significantly to professional mobility, status, and salary development but also serve to further reinforce existing inequalities (Purcell et al., 2010).

Barkhuizen et al. (2022) highlight that networks are often exclusive and difficult to access. As crucial career opportunities are discussed and assigned within these informal structures, individuals without the right connections have limited opportunities for advancement. At the same time, particular cultures and behavioural norms are established within these networks, thereby preserving the collective interests of the members and resulting in the deliberate exclusion of outsiders from the “inner circle” (Rastetter & Cornils, 2011; Barkhuizen et al., 2022). Rastetter & Cornils, 2011 further explain this mechanism using Max Weber’s concept of “social closure”. This concept describes strategies by which certain groups secure their power, privileges, and resources by deliberately restricting access to outsiders.

In addition to the difficulty of accessing networks, a lack of targeted mentoring programmes can have a negative impact on female employees' job satisfaction, career development and productivity and is, therefore, a significant barrier to women in leadership positions (Cross et al., 2019). Moreover, the absence of female role models in leadership positions may limit reference points for career orientation and the development of a leadership identity (Chisholm-Burns et al. 2017).

### **3.7 Individual barriers and leadership identity**

Finally, in addition to societal and organizational factors, individual aspects also have a significant impact on women's career success.

One key factor is self-assessment, which differs significantly between genders. While women tend to underestimate their achievements, men often assess their abilities more realistically with external perceptions (Hentschel et al., 2019). This discrepancy can be linked to the “Imposter Syndrome”, where women doubt their abilities and fear they are not deserving of their position, despite having objective proof of their success (Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019). For instance, the belief that they have been hired solely because of a gender quota may lead women to underestimate their abilities and not assert themselves or seek opportunities for advancement. (Hentschel et al., 2019; Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019)

In this context, it is also important to note that women tend to take fewer career risks compared to their male counterparts and participate less in formal leadership training and activities (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). This hesitance can significantly restrict their career development, as they miss out on opportunities for professional growth (Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019). Furthermore, the horizontal segregation of the labor market results in women being disproportionately represented in certain occupational fields and industries while men dominate others (Ellguth, 2017). These gender-specific differences in career choices significantly contribute to disparities in advancement and earning opportunities (Kohaut & Möller, 2023).

Finally, the formation of a leadership identity for women is significantly impacted by societal norms and expectations, which often result in an internal conflict between their female identity and the leadership role. The association of leadership with masculine traits forces women, especially in male-dominated fields, to navigate between conforming to male norms or adhering to traditional gender roles, which affects their career paths and professional identities (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). Many women tend to adopt masculine behaviours, such as assertiveness and goal orientation, to be perceived as competent leaders and to gain better career outcomes (Karelaia & Guillén, 2014; Barkhuizen et al., 2022). However, these behaviours can lead to negative perceptions, which can result in women adopting stereotypical expectations (Karelaia & Guillén, 2014; Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Ellemers, 2018). As a

result, this identity conflict hinders the development of an authentic and solidified leadership identity and the overcoming of persistent gender stereotypes (Barkhuizen et al., 2022).

#### **4 Factors promoting women's career advancement**

After examining the factors that hinder women's career advancement, it is now essential to derive targeted implications for action by focusing on promoting factors.

##### **4.1 The promotion of an inclusive corporate culture**

As outlined in chapter 3.1 *Sociocultural factors and stereotypes*, the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions is due to deeply ingrained gender norms and expectations (Schwanke, 2013). These are manifested both in corporate cultures and the perception of leadership abilities (Schwanke, 2013; Barkhuizen et al., 2022).

In order to counteract these barriers, it is essential to foster a positive and inclusive corporate culture. A corporate culture that emphasises performance and equal opportunities can prevent discriminatory practices and break down stereotypical thinking. It is crucial that the establishment of such a culture begins at the management level, as leaders play a key role in embedding these principles through their function as role models (Castaño et al., 2019).

A sustainable and impactful approach involves strategically leveraging diverse perspectives and competencies as a competitive advantage rather than merely fulfilling regulatory requirements. This can foster innovation, strengthen team dynamics, and promote new leadership approaches development (Vaz et al., 2017). In the long term, this can not only improve efficiency and competitiveness, but also contribute to more sustainable organizational development (Vaz et al., 2017).

A key lever for this cultural change lies in internal company initiatives to raise awareness of gender-specific challenges (Sridevi, 2015). Within the framework of "Corporate Social Responsibility", long-term programmes can be developed to promote the discourse on gender issues and sensitise employees to existing inequalities (Sridevi, 2015; Elprana et al., 2016). These measures support the critical reflection of stereotypical role models, enhance the

recognition of women's competencies and contributions, and help reduce gender-specific career barriers (Sridevi, 2015).

#### **4.2 Flexible work models and family support**

As part of creating an inclusive culture, it is also important to create the right organisational framework. In recent years, numerous initiatives have been taken to improve working conditions while ensuring efficiency. A key element of these initiatives is flexible working models, which facilitate work-life balance and enable employees to pursue their professional goals more efficiently while accommodating personal commitments (Alsulami et al., 2022).

Flexible workplace arrangements gained particular relevance during the COVID-19 pandemic when remote work became widespread. Home office models have been shown to improve work-life balance, concentration, work efficiency, and temporal autonomy by reducing distractions and interruptions (Brenke, 2016; Grenčíková et al., 2024).

Another flexible working model involves offering employees the opportunity to adjust their working hours individually. A common model is “flexitime”, where the start and end of the working day are flexible (Lott, 2017). Related models, such as core time reduction (e.g., 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.), provide additional flexibility. Additionally, extended professional breaks, known as sabbaticals, are particularly common in consulting and benefit both employees and organisations by promoting better work-life balance and positive economic effects (Davidson, et al., 2010; Hentschel et al., 2019). Furthermore, there are working time models that allow employees to fully manage their working hours (Lott, 2017). In addition, by reducing turnover, increasing productivity and motivation, and increasing the attractiveness of the company as an employer, companies also benefit from this model (Messal et al., 2021).

A further instrument to promote temporal flexibility and reduce workload is the possibility of part-time employment (Grenčíková et al., 2024). In 2023, 31% of employees in Germany worked part-time, with women being particularly represented. While some employees voluntarily work fewer hours, others rely on this work model due to family commitments, such as childcare or caregiving for relatives (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024). Despite the advantages of part-time employment, unchanged workloads frequently result in overtime, leading to increased stress and pressure (Wöhrmann et al., 2018).

As a result, the job-sharing model gained importance in recent years, particularly at higher hierarchical levels, as it allows for a reduction in weekly working hours while maintaining continuity in staffing. The motivations for job sharing are diverse and include family changes, corporate restructuring, gradual reduction of working hours in the transition to retirement, and a better work-life balance. In contrast to the widespread assumption, job sharing is not limited to support roles, but can also be successfully applied in leadership positions. To be efficient, job sharing requires that participants have sufficient knowledge to take on each other's tasks, as well as complementary skills, shared values, and aligned career goals. Moreover, diversity in both experience and working style can impact the efficiency of this model (Daniels, 2011).

Beyond flexible work models, organizational support offerings are also important, especially for reducing the work-family conflict (Hentschel et al., 2019). In this context, companies can offer external childcare referrals or company-run daycare facilities, which facilitate the return to work after parental leave and support female leaders in balancing career and family responsibilities (Elprana, 2016; Hentschel et al., 2019). Finally, organizational support can significantly influence the decision to join or remain in a company (Hentschel et al., 2019).

#### **4.3 Professionalization in human resource management**

Another important aspect is the personnel selection process within the framework of Human Resource Management, which encompasses attracting, selecting, motivating, and retaining human capital to ensure a higher level of sustainable performance (Alia et al., 2020).

As discussed in Chapter 3.4 *Human resource practices and women's career development* judgment bias in personnel selection is often attributed to unstructured processes. To address this issue, organisations should clearly define role requirements and articulate the rationale for these criteria before evaluating candidates. Otherwise, evaluators might apply inconsistent criteria, thereby confirming expectations that are often based on gender stereotypes. Supervisors should therefore regularly question and adjust their initial impressions and base evaluations on observable behaviors rather than assumptions. To enable such assessments, it is advisable to implement a structured approach that allows the evaluation of specific, observable behaviors. Furthermore, pre-arranged candidate lists including qualified women can foster a more balanced and equitable selection process (Hentschel et al., 2019).

Beyond the assessment based on first impressions, performance evaluations also play a central role, as they assess employees' performance based on defined tasks over a specific period (Ferris et al., 2008). A systematic and transparent performance evaluation not only positively impacts employees' self-esteem and motivation, but also increases productivity, which contributes to sustainable organizational growth and stable career prospects (Alia et al., 2020). In this context, evaluations must be guided by objective criteria rather than stereotypes and resulting expectations, requiring evaluators to consciously and accurately assess employee performance (Hentschel et al., 2019).

#### **4.4 Professionalization of professional and leadership development**

In addition to the previously mentioned measures, the promotion of women, particularly with professional training and leadership development, plays a crucial role. Research shows that many successful female leaders consider the targeted acquisition of new skills as a key factor in their career development. Therefore, organisations can strategically invest in training, workshops, and development programs to enhance employees' expertise and foster overall performance and innovation (Hentschel et al., 2019). However, flexible learning formats such as online or hybrid models, part-time options or compact programmes are important to consider, as they facilitate the balancing of professional development with work and personal life (Präßler, 2017).

Another central aspect in increasing the proportion of women in leadership positions is the establishment of leadership development programs. These programs aim to strengthen leadership capacity within organizations and encourage long-term employees to engage in further development (Hentschel et al., 2019). To achieve sustainable change, women's leadership programs should focus on three key approaches: Transformational Learning, Leader Identity Construction, and the contextual development of leadership competence (Debebe et al., 2016).

The approach of transformational learning aims to strengthen leadership skills by identifying and overcoming detrimental thought patterns and behaviors (Debebe et al., 2016). A protected space, gender-sensitive methods, and targeted training in areas like conflict management and harassment enable women to reflect on their leadership experiences, strengthen their confidence, and broaden their scope of action (Debebe et al., 2016; Sridevi, 2015).

Furthermore, Leader Identity Construction focuses on the social construction process of leadership. As women often face intrinsic challenges related to their leadership roles, these programmes support in shaping their leadership identity and integrating it into social and professional contexts (Debebe et al., 2016). In addition, they often assist in the development and implementation of a strategic career plan, helping women in particular to pursue their career goals in a structured and focused manner (Hentschel et al., 2019).

Lastly, the contextual development approach emphasizes adapting leadership competencies to environmental demands, balancing professional and private life, and strengthening authenticity and agency (Debebe et al., 2016).

In general, program design should reflect gender composition. Empirical evidence suggests that women-only programs create a safer environment for sharing experiences and fostering confidence, while mixed-gender formats may inhibit open discussion, despite their networking benefits (Debebe et al., 2016; Chasserio & Bacha, 2024). In addition, an intersectional perspective should be embedded in women's leadership programmes, as leadership experiences are also influenced by other social identities, such as ethnicity, sexuality or religion. Since some social identities are culturally privileged while others are disadvantaged, female leaders may face paradoxical situations where they are both empowered and constrained (Debebe et al., 2016; Walgenbach, 2011). Addressing these dimensions helps participants to develop targeted strategies to overcome structural barriers (Debebe et al., 2016).

Successful women's leadership programs are principally characterized by a holistic approach that combines individual skill development with structural change (Debebe et al., 2016). Programs that initiate both personal and institutional transformations contribute significantly to improving women's career advancement and dismantle structural barriers (Debebe et al., 2016).

#### **4.5 Mentoring programmes and networking**

In recent years, feminist research has increasingly highlighted mentoring as a central factor in the professional development of both, women and men. It is a relational process in which an experienced person (mentor) supports a less experienced person (mentee), particularly in early career stages (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Barkhuizen et al., 2022). A distinction is generally made between informal mentoring, which arises organically through participants' initiative,

and formal mentoring, which follows a structured framework with predefined content and duration (Lorenzen & Zifonun, 2011). Empirical studies highlight that informal mentoring positively influences career success, with women benefiting especially from such interactions (Hentschel et al., 2019). Furthermore, Barkhuizen et al. (2022) suggest that mentoring strengthens organizational efficiency by fostering talent retention and development.

The central functions of mentoring include career planning, coaching, risk management, and guidance in navigating professional environments. Particularly in male-dominated industries, mentoring supports women in building confidence, a sense of belonging, and balancing work-life demands, while facilitating access to leadership positions (Barkhuizen et al., 2022).

The reciprocal relationship between mentor and mentee can significantly strengthen the mentee's self-efficacy and creativity, especially in challenging tasks. Women, in particular, value relational aspects, with trust and support enhancing responsibility and positive workplace behavior (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). In general, gender-specific leadership styles and identity traits also play a decisive role in the dynamics of mentoring relationships (Barkhuizen et al., 2022).

Especially women benefit from same-gender mentors, as shared social identity amplifies mentoring outcomes (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Barkhuizen et al., 2022). Hoyt & Simon (2011) further suggest that women identify more strongly with mentors perceived as non-elite than with those in top positions.

In addition to mentors, sponsors play an active role in advancing women's careers by increasing their visibility and facilitating career opportunities (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). Similarly, female role models are critical, especially in early career stages, as they motivate women and reduce identity conflicts (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Barkhuizen et al., 2022).

However, the limited availability of female mentors and role models poses a challenge, as women are underrepresented in leadership, and those in such roles are often too busy or hesitant to mentor due to concerns about their qualifications or potential negative repercussions from failures (Hentschel et al., 2019).

Finally, given the importance of networks for career advancement as outlined in chapter 3.6 *Networks and Mentoring*, organisations should also actively promote formal networks aimed

at supporting women (Böröcz & Southworth, 1998). These increase visibility and thus contribute to sustainable leadership development (Barkhuizen et al., 2022).

#### **4.6 Individual opportunities**

In addition to organizational measures to promote women, women themselves can also actively influence their career development. One particularly relevant strategy is the targeted use of informal networks, which are based on personal and implicit connections outside institutional frameworks (Böröcz & Southworth, 1998). Networking itself is considered a skill based on trust, reciprocity, and relationship maintenance over time. It is essential to seize the opportunity to exchange information, offer support, and strengthen professional ties (Hentschel et al., 2019).

Complementary to networking, successful female leaders frequently emphasize the decisive role of individual ambition in achieving career success. Without the will to work hard, they could not have met the performance expectations required, which ultimately led to their career success (Hentschel et al., 2019).

A strong leadership motivation, defined as the intrinsic desire to assume responsibility and pursue leadership roles, plays a central role in this context. Especially in challenging situations, it fosters determination, engagement, and resilience. For women in particular, visibly demonstrating this motivation is important, as they are still often perceived as less leadership-oriented (Elprana et al., 2016). High levels of motivation also open up access to more challenging tasks and development programmes, which ultimately allow them to demonstrate their skills and competencies (Hentschel et al., 2019).

Moreover, empirical findings emphasises, that transparent communication about women's professional achievements can significantly improve their competence assessments for leadership positions. This reinforces the importance of external perception and underlines the relevance of strategic networking for the professional advancement of women (Hentschel et al., 2019).

Finally, recent research emphasizes that modern, value-based leadership styles, often associated with stereotypically feminine traits, are positively valued and contribute to the positive evaluation of women in leadership positions (Hentschel et al., 2019).

## **5 Methodological approach**

Although the factors influencing women's career success have been extensively researched, questions remain about the actual effectiveness of existing policies and approaches that may have been overlooked.

To address these questions in an in-depth manner and to integrate personal experiences and individual perspectives, a qualitative research design was chosen. Specifically, expert interviews were conducted, as they provide direct access to specialized knowledge and deep insights into individual career paths. This method captures not only standardized data but also subjective assessments and emotional experiences, which are essential for a holistic understanding.

Additionally, the flexible, dialogue-oriented format of the interviews allows for spontaneous exploration of emerging topics and adaptation of the conversation flow. The personal narratives of the interviewed women provide practical insights into the effects of structural barriers and reveal untapped potential for promoting women's careers. Thus, the qualitative study ensures that theoretical findings are linked to the actual experiences and needs of women, thus enabling well-founded recommendations for action to be developed (Silverlight Research, 2024).

### **5.1 Development of the interview guide**

The interview guide forms the methodological foundation of this study and was developed following an extensive literature review, relevant widespread theories, and the thematic framework of this thesis. It focuses on key factors influencing the interviewees' career success, as well as existing and potential measures to support women's career advancement.

Particular attention was paid to creating a trusting and respectful interview atmosphere that allowed participants to share open and personal experiences. The flow of the interviews was deliberately kept flexible in order to adapt to individual dynamics and permit additional questions. Additionally, questions that had already been addressed during the conversation or deliberately avoided by participants, such as those related to family planning, were omitted. The complete interview guide is provided in the appendix of this thesis (see Appendix 1: Interview Guide).

## 5.2 Sampling strategy and selection criteria

In this thesis, a purposive, critical sample was selected based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives.

This sample comprises 6 women aged between 35 and 53 years who were employed in the German labour market while the survey was carried out. Further, all participants hold leadership positions, managing teams within their organisations. The size of the companies was considered secondary to the career paths the women had taken.

The literature review confirmed the dominance of men in certain industries (see chapter 2.3 The current state of leadership and gender inequality in German companies). Accordingly, to ensure diversity and contrast, the sample includes women from male-dominated sectors (e.g. automotive) as well as from sectors with higher female representation (e.g. marketing).

Additionally, special attention was paid to including women employed by Germany's 40 largest listed companies (DAX40), as these corporations play a key economic and social role and are central to public discourse on gender equality (Rutkowska-Ziarko, 2022; Sondergeld et al., 2024). However, as the challenges analysed are not unique to DAX40 companies, women from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were also included. This provides insight into different organisational structures.

<b>Code</b>	<b>Field</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Years of experience in current company</b>
Interviewee 1 (I1)	Automotive	Head of Departement	15 years
Interviewee 2 (I2)	Aerospace	Senior Manager	19 years
Interviewee 3 (I3)	Media & Marketing	Director	2 years
Interviewee 4 (I4)	Automotive	Head of Departement	20 years
Interviewee 5 (I5)	Transportation	Head of Departement	9 years
Interviewee 6 (I6)	Automotive	Head of Departement	24 years

*Table 1: Profile of interview participants and key professional characteristics*

### **5.3 Data collection and documentation**

The expert interviews were conducted between December 2024 and the end of February 2025, with initial contact established with some participants in July 2024 through brief introductory conversations.

All interviews took place via video conferencing and were recorded as audio files for documentation and analysis. At the beginning of each interview, participants were explicitly informed about the recording and its intended use and gave their consent.

The duration of the interviews varied between 35 minutes and one hour, depending on the course and depth of the discussion. Following each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed, edited for readability, and subsequently permanently deleted. The analysis of the interviews was based solely on the final transcripts.

### **5.4 Data analysis procedure – Qualitative content analysis according to Mayring**

For the detailed evaluation of the expert interviews, Mayring's method of qualitative content analysis was applied. This systematic approach allows a gradual analysis of texts based on a category system derived both from theory and the material itself (Ramsenthaler, 2013).

Initially, the interview transcripts were divided into individual units of analysis. This was followed by a thorough and repeated reading of the transcripts to gain an in-depth understanding of the content and key statements. Relevant passages were identified, paraphrased, and documented in a structured table.

Subsequently, a category system was developed inductively based on the interview data. The main categories were initially aligned with the research question and the influencing factors identified in the theoretical framework. However, during the analysis it became evident that a more nuanced differentiation was necessary. Consequently, the categories were continuously refined and supplemented by specific subcategories to capture the diversity of the responses. This structured procedure made it possible to identify recurring patterns, relationships, and differences across the interviews.

## **6 Presentation of results**

The following chapter builds on the results of the analysis and presents the key findings in a structured manner.

### **6.1 K1 Individual factors**

Firstly, the conducted interviews revealed that professional success, for almost all interviewees, is predominantly determined by a set of individual traits and skills, which should ideally be present at the outset and further developed over time.

A recurring factor mentioned by nearly all interviewees is the strong will to assume leadership and responsibility. High motivation and determination were cited as crucial in enabling them to meet the demands of leadership roles. I6 emphasized that leadership roles must be actively pursued, as they are not “served on a silver platter”. Professional success requires initiative and the continuous use of development opportunities.

In addition, the courage to embrace new challenges is equally essential. In this context, I1 highlighted: “You have to have the courage to take risks and, if necessary, make mistakes”. Facing new tasks not only broadens knowledge and experience but also enhances visibility and effectiveness in leadership. Particularly in highly specialized fields, sound expertise is considered indispensable.

However, performance alone is not sufficient. Achievements must also be made visible. I2 emphasized the importance of actively promoting individual achievements to demonstrate competence and value to the organization.

Adaptability and flexibility are also regarded as key factors. Several interviewees seized opportunities to work abroad, which expanded their skills and increased visibility within the company.

In addition, assertiveness is seen as essential, especially in dealing with discrimination and prejudice. Almost all interviewees reported setbacks related to pregnancy or family planning and discriminatory remarks from colleagues. Some responded with counter-questions, prompting reflection on gender biases. I4 summarised: “As a woman, you have to expect to prove yourself twice as much”.

Moreover, many interviewees identified balancing career and family responsibilities as an additional challenge. Mothers, in particular, highlighted the need for strategic planning, with childcare playing a central role. At the same time, the majority of respondents emphasised that setting clear priorities is crucial, as companies will not make these decisions on their behalf.

Finally, leadership skills, emotional intelligence, and teamwork were considered crucial. Beyond process optimisation, the fostering of employee potential and team dynamics was perceived as central. I3 emphasized emotional intelligence as a leadership strategy, while I6 highlighted the importance of authenticity, although female leaders are under greater scrutiny.

## **6.2 K2 Sociocultural factors and stereotypes**

While some participants revealed that women leaders are still often perceived as the exception, others highlighted the positive impact of women in male-dominated sectors, particularly in critical situations. However, such perceptions are closely tied to organizational culture. For instance, I3 noted a higher representation of women in her current company and industry, where she no longer experiences gender-based disadvantages. In addition, she highlighted the disadvantages experienced by male colleagues concerning the gender pay gap.

Several interviewees emphasized being expected to conform to male leadership ideals, particularly assertiveness and strong presence. I3 challenged this notion, advocating instead for the legitimacy of emotional expression in leadership. I2 added that women's decisions are often scrutinized more heavily, recounting situations where male colleagues sought the opinion of other men, despite her expertise.

Furthermore, subtle sexist comments and assumptions embedded in company culture were frequently reported. I2 noted that such remarks often come from individuals who consider themselves progressive. Similarly, I3 observed that women are frequently judged based on appearance rather than performance, admitting to an internal conflict in distancing herself from gender roles while still critically assessing women who adhere to them.

Another recurring theme concerned assumptions about family planning. I6 remarked that women are often seen as primarily responsible for childcare, leading to career disadvantages. I4 shared her experience of facing setbacks during pregnancy and parental leave, noting that

even after returning to work, she encountered subtle rejection, particularly from another woman during a hiring process.

I5 expanded this issue to a societal level, emphasizing that care work is undervalued economically, despite its crucial role. She argued that balancing family and career is not merely an individual challenge but has broader economic implications, as sustainable economies rely on both social care and future generations.

Lastly, some interviewees reported that their male partners face societal pressure when taking on caregiving roles. While progress has been made, full equality requires that neither women nor men are subjected to societal expectations based on their professional or family roles.

### **6.3 K3 Navigating career and private life**

Furthermore, several women describe the balance between work and family as a “constant struggle” or “daily balancing act,” often accompanied by the feeling of falling short in either their maternal or professional roles.

To mitigate these challenges, I6 accentuates the importance of organizing childcare, relying not only on partners but also on family, friends or external caregivers. In this context, most participants confirm that either their partners reduced their working hours or they depend on family support.

Another mitigating factor is the access to company-sponsored childcare facilities. While many respondents mention these services, staff shortages in both public and company daycare centres limit their reliability.

Moreover, I2 and I5 criticise that existing company benefits often fail to address family-friendly needs. Traditional benefits, such as company cars, overlook practical support options like childcare subsidies or domestic assistance. I5 points out that while her company offers external career coaching, essential services such as emergency nannies are not considered, despite their potential to ease unplanned childcare disruptions.

Most interviewees further emphasize the necessity of setting clear priorities. According to I6, leadership positions inherently demand high availability, regardless of family responsibilities. She notes: “If you want both, that’s the price. You have to be aware of that”.

I4 illustrates this point, recounting how she returned to work soon after parental leave and, while not regretting her decision, in retrospect, would have preferred a slower reentry. Conversely, I2 emphasised that women should not feel guilty for sometimes prioritising their careers over their personal lives, highlighting the need for a wider societal shift to legitimise such decisions.

#### **6.4 K4 Corporate culture and structural frameworks**

In addition to targeted support programs, all interviewees emphasize the crucial role of a supportive and inclusive corporate culture as a foundation for career advancement.

I3 highlights that a culture based on mutual respect and transparency benefits all employees, ensuring that individual skills and achievements are recognised and actively supported. Accordingly, companies should consider the specific needs of their teams and select leaders based solely on professional expertise and interpersonal skills.

Some women also note that in highly hierarchical organizations, career paths are often predetermined. I4 points out that this may lead to the advancement of only those who fit seamlessly into the existing system, leaving little room for alternative career paths or individual development opportunities.

Moreover, flexible work models such as flexible hours, part-time roles or remote work are seen as key to balancing career and personal life. I4 particularly values job sharing, which allows her to work part-time while her colleague assumes leadership duties, enabling her to fully disconnect. However, several interviewees note that leadership roles still demand high availability regardless of flexible arrangements. I2 emphasises that expectations of responsibility remain unchanged, and I5 similarly reports that they are expected to remain available even on days off. While job sharing is frequently highlighted as a viable alternative, it requires strong trust and collaboration. I4 describes her experience as highly positive, although acknowledging that success depends on the specific partnership. Nevertheless, the interviewees agree that such models are still rarely offered in practice.

Additionally, I3 points out that a shared leadership role, particularly between a woman and a man, fosters complementary strengths to promote mutual support and productive collaboration. As I6 emphasises that women in particular demonstrate strong organisational skills acquired through balancing work and family responsibilities, which significantly enhance the effectiveness of diverse teams.

Alongside alternative work models, several participants report a lack of support programs for women's career advancement within their organizations. Furthermore, I5 criticizes that after reaching an initial leadership role, further support is often lacking, leaving women to navigate this phase independently.

Furthermore, I3 criticises traditional leadership programmes that aim to adapt women to male-dominated behaviours. It advocates a leadership culture that embraces diverse leadership styles, such as emotionality.

Nevertheless, I2 highlights positive examples of targeted programmes supporting women's leadership ambitions, focusing on networking, self-promotion, and salary negotiation. Similarly, I1 mentions structured initiatives fostering soft skills and leadership competencies. However, all interviewees emphasize that such measures are only effective when embedded in an inclusive corporate culture and supported by long-term cultural change.

Finally, opinions on gender quotas differ. While I5 emphasizes their relevance in achieving gender equality, I6 fears positions might be filled solely based on gender. Moreover, I4 points out the potential disadvantage for men during recruitment due to the quota system.

### **6.5 K5 Mentoring and networking as drivers of career progression**

Most interviewees regard mentoring as an effective tool for gaining access to relevant networks and leadership positions. I1 emphasises that mentors not only provide orientation but also offer long-term guidance by recognising and fostering individual strengths. I6 further highlights that mentoring supports self-reflection and aids in developing a leadership identity.

While exchanging with other women is seen as particularly valuable for balancing career and family life, some interviewees note that the mentor's gender is secondary. I4 emphasises the importance of open, regular dialogue, and I6 values including male perspectives.

However, the design of many mentoring programmes is often criticised. I4 notes that women, unlike men, are often required to complete mentoring before being offered leadership roles, while I3 advocates external coaching to ensure unbiased exchange.

Moreover, I2 emphasises the strategic value of networking, crediting past contacts for facilitating career moves, and emphasises authenticity. I5 adds that she still benefits from a network established through mentoring. With regard to women-only networks, I6 insists that networks should be accessible to all genders. However, I5 notes that informal networks, particularly in male-dominated industries, are more accessible to men. Here, several participants underline the need to actively promote women's participation in networking and mutual support.

The interviews also reveal that almost all participants benefitted from supervisors who recognised and supported their potential early on. I5 notes that managers often favour employees who resemble themselves, typically advantaging men. She benefitted from a supervisor who prioritised motivation and performance over gender and further stresses the importance of continuous feedback and career development discussions.

Additionally, coaching is seen as a valuable complement to mentoring, offering a holistic view that includes personal challenges. However, I5 notes insufficient preparatory coaching for emerging leaders and suggests improvements.

Most interviewees also stress the importance of visible female role models. Furthermore, I2 criticises the focus on top leaders, calling for more relatable examples, while I6 highlights the influence of personal role models like family members.

## **6.6 K6 Future prospects for an equal leadership culture**

Finally, several interviewees acknowledge visible progress in terms of gender equality in the workplace. They highlight not only the introduction of gender quotas but also the implementation of additional measures and a growing openness toward diversity.

Nevertheless, all participants emphasise that achieving true equality requires fundamental changes in both corporate culture and societal structures. As I5 asserts, while the advantages of diverse teams are well documented, the perception of the "strong male hand" persists, especially in crises. Consequently, several interviewees express a desire for leadership appointments to be based solely on qualifications and competence, regardless of gender.

Furthermore, despite some ambivalence, the majority see gender quotas as essential to drive sustainable structural change and agree that companies often fail to promote women's advancement without legal mandates. Large corporations, in particular, are regarded as key role models capable of setting significant precedents.

However, participants caution against complacency. I5 warns that progress may easily be reversed in times of crisis or political change, citing the recent removal of women from Daimler's executive board. She concludes by expressing concern over current political developments and regressive gender narratives that threaten to undermine equality efforts.

## **7 Critical discussion**

The central aim of the present paper was to identify the factors that promote or hinder women's career success beyond legal regulations. Against the background of this research question, the results of the expert interviews conducted provide valuable and multifaceted insights. The following critical discussion interprets these findings in the context of current research and assesses their practical relevance.

### **7.1 Critical discussion on hindering factors**

Although the literature highlights sociocultural factors, stereotypes, and inadequate support, results from the conducted study emphasise the crucial influence of corporate culture alongside sociocultural norms and stereotypes. According to the participants, these factors have been significant barriers to their career progression and continue to be part of their daily work.

Due to the "think female - think male" mentality, which is still deeply rooted in many corporate cultures, women are often perceived as less suitable for leadership roles (Kohaut & Möller,

2023). Consequently, women leaders are frequently seen as exceptions to the norm and face the added pressure of having to prove their competence and abilities twice over.

These expectations not only affect their leadership behavior but further influence expectations about their general presence in the workplace. According to Sowjanya et al. (2017), traditional role expectations, particularly regarding childcare and caregiving, significantly impede women's career progression, as they are often expected to leave the labour market temporarily or permanently. The findings reveal that such stereotypical expectations often lead to assumptions and inappropriate remarks regarding family planning, as well as setbacks during pregnancy or parental leave. Similarly, these expectations frequently result in subtle forms of rejection by both men and women of women pursuing career ambitions despite their role as mothers.

However, in contrast to previous research, the study conducted revealed that men also experience societal pressure when taking on caregiving roles. Moreover, in some sectors women are more strongly represented, leaving men at a relative disadvantage. This highlights the tendency to focus solely on the discrimination of underrepresented groups while overlooking the importance of fostering an inclusive corporate culture. Genuine equality requires that neither women nor men are subjected to societal expectations based on traditional gender roles.

Overall, it becomes clear that structural frameworks and traditional corporate cultures with hierarchical structures make it difficult for women to break out of stereotypical roles, even when they demonstrate competence and strong performance (Sowjanya et al., 2017; Babic & Hansez, 2021). The constant confrontation with barriers, such as unequal treatment or discrimination, further negatively affects their self-perception regarding their achievements and leadership identity. This, in turn, hinders their emancipation from traditional gender roles and can further reinforce them (Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019). For mothers, in particular, reconciling professional and family life forms an additional challenge (Goldin, 2021). The daily balancing act often leaves them feeling as though they are falling short in both their maternal and professional roles. A lack of supportive environments, combined with inappropriate comments, intensifies this conflict, leaving women caught in a constant tension between emancipation and adapting to stereotypical expectations.

In light of these findings, the study implies that the subtle “glass ceiling” influenced by a combination of structural, cultural, and social factors is still present (Ellguth et al., 2017).

## **7.2 Critical discussion on Promoting factors**

Against the barriers discussed previously, the study highlights that a supportive and inclusive organizational culture is the foundation for women's career advancement. Such a culture has been shown to shape values, principles, norms, and accepted behaviours within the workplace (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). To foster fundamental cultural changes, Sridevi (2015) identifies long-term internal initiatives as crucial, as they raise awareness of gender-specific challenges, encourage reflection on stereotypical roles, and promote the recognition of women's competencies. Similarly, the present study suggests that support programmes alone are insufficient within traditional corporate cultures. Instead of learning to navigate within existing frameworks, structural changes are necessary to sustainably eliminate gender-based career barriers.

Building on cultural transformation, companies should adjust structural conditions to enable employees, in particular women and mothers, to pursue their professional goals more effectively while accommodating personal commitments (Alsulami et al., 2022). In this context, flexible models, such as job sharing, are highlighted in the study as being particularly beneficial. However, while Daniels (2011) outlines their theoretical benefits, implementation remains limited due to the high level of trust and cooperation required, as confirmed by the findings.

To further facilitate work-life balance, company-sponsored childcare is seen as a key facilitator. However, despite offering daycare centres, they are not always reliable. Other practical support options such as childcare subsidies, emergency nannies or household assistance are often overlooked. Instead, conventional male-oriented benefits such as company cars remain popular. The findings further emphasise that women must consciously set their own priorities, as companies cannot offer complete support. Leadership positions entail certain expectations on the part of the company, so this step must be carefully considered.

Once structural conditions and an inclusive, supportive corporate culture are established as a foundation, further initiatives such as professional development opportunities, networks, and mentoring or coaching programmes can be effectively integrated. These initiatives contribute to skill enhancement and peer exchange. In particular, mentoring programmes and the resulting networks ensure access to information, resources, and support (Purcell et al., 2010; Barkhuizen et al., 2022). While existing literature often views the lack of mentoring programmes and networks as a barrier, the findings of this study underline their effectiveness in facilitating access to leadership positions. Additionally, external partners are identified as an important factor in counteracting the lack of preparatory support.

Furthermore, fostering motivating role models can reduce identity conflicts (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Barkhuizen et al., 2022). The studies emphasise that more relatable examples should be promoted. However, Hentschel et al. (2019) note the limited availability of female role models, largely due to the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. This underlines the importance of better communicating the benefits of such initiatives. Moreover, the findings indicate the importance of personal role models, such as family members.

Lastly, the quota regulation is widely viewed as necessary to drive structural change, incentivising companies to act. However, concerns persist that quotas may reinforce the perception that women attain leadership positions due to mandates rather than merit. Critics also argue that quotas could disadvantage men solely based on gender, challenging the principle of equality.

In addition to organisational measures, the findings underline the significance of individual strategies adopted by women themselves. Strong leadership motivation, ambition, and an accurate self-awareness of professional abilities are of central importance (Elprana et al., 2016; Hentschel et al., 2019). The findings reveal that all participants strongly displayed these characteristics. This implies that the absence of such determination and self-awareness can significantly hinder progress towards a leadership role. Ultimately, leadership motivation, combined with ambition and self-awareness, shape women's career trajectories.

## **8 Conclusion and Outlook**

This study explored the factors influencing women's career advancement into leadership positions and revealed significant findings on how barriers, regardless of legal mandates, can be effectively addressed. It became evident that women's career advancement is influenced by a multitude of interrelated inhibiting factors, fundamentally rooted in traditional role expectations and stereotypes. These are deeply embedded both within corporate cultures and society. As these often manifest through assumptions and inappropriate remarks, profound measures that go beyond legal frameworks such as gender quotas are of particular importance.

In terms of promoting women's career advancement, companies have a crucial role in implementing initiatives that challenge outdated mindsets and position diversity as an economic advantage. In addition to the implementation of cultural transformation companies should further adapt structural conditions to offer flexible career paths. Particularly work models such as job sharing, which support the work-life balance, encounter stereotypical expectations and are therefore crucial in enabling equal opportunities.

Building upon the implementation of structural and cultural changes, further support measures such as mentoring or coaching, sponsorship, networks or professional development programmes can be effectively developed. Without an inclusive, supportive organisational culture as a foundation, such initiatives risk being ineffective and may even reinforce existing stereotypes. Consequently, whilst motivation and personal initiative are integral components, these are insufficient if individual skills remain unrecognised.

In general, companies that foster a supportive and inclusive culture, where individual skills and achievements are recognised, are more likely to attract, develop and retain top talent, regardless of gender or background. In addition, the combination of different experiences and perspectives strengthens team dynamics and improves business results in the long term.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that due to the focus of this study on supportive factors beyond legal frameworks, aspects such as the effectiveness of existing legal mandates were not examined in depth. Hence, future research is encouraged to investigate this area and assess not only the impact of current legal mandates on women's representation in leadership roles, but

also their influence on perceptions of competence, workplace dynamics, and opportunities for male employees.

Moreover, while the findings of this study highlight the importance of fundamental cultural change within organisations, it remains unclear to what extent an inclusive corporate culture can be sustained over the long term. In the light of political and societal developments that could potentially lead to setbacks in gender equality, it seems particularly important for future research to focus on identifying enabling factors that demonstrate long-term sustainability and resilience in the face of changing external circumstances.

Overall, it becomes clear that the existing inequality of opportunities between genders is not only an issue within the professional environment but is deeply rooted in broader societal structures. Despite numerous measures implemented by both politics and businesses, there remains a significant need for action. Initiatives must be carefully designed, both in terms of their content and long-term impact, and pursued consistently. Responsibility should not rest solely with companies. Only through the combined efforts of politics, business and individuals a sustainable gender equality can be achieved, both in the workplace and in society at large.

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## **Appendix**

### **Appendix 1: Interview Guide**

#### **Consent Statement**

Before we begin, I would like to inform you that this interview will be recorded for documentation purposes. The information you provide will be used exclusively for academic purposes within the framework of my bachelor's thesis, which focuses on the factors that hinder and promote the career success of women in leadership positions beyond legal mandates.

Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may choose to skip any question or end the interview at any time without providing a reason. All data will be anonymised, and your personal identity, as well as any identifying details about your company, will be kept strictly confidential. The audio recording will be securely stored, used only for transcription and analysis, and permanently deleted after the completion of the thesis.

Do I have your consent to record this interview and use the anonymised data for my research?

#### **General Questions**

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself by stating the industry you work in, your current position, and how long you have been employed at your current company?
2. How did you come into your current position? Could you summarise your career path?
3. What educational background do you have, and how has it influenced your professional development?
4. What motivated you to pursue a leadership position?

#### **Thematic Questions**

##### **1. Career Beginnings and Development**

5. Were there any milestones or key moments in your career that were particularly important for your progression into leadership?
6. Which factors do you believe have contributed most to your professional success?

## **2. Challenges and Support**

7. Do you believe that your gender has influenced your career? If so, what specific challenges or obstacles have you encountered, and how did you deal with them?
8. Have you developed personal strategies to address gender-specific biases or expectations? If yes, could you elaborate on them?
9. Have you had mentors or role models who significantly supported your career? If so, how did they contribute to your development?

## **3. Corporate Culture and Organisational Measures**

10. How has the corporate culture within your company influenced your career? Could you provide examples of how it was either supportive or obstructive?
11. Which initiatives or organisational measures have been particularly helpful in attaining or maintaining your leadership position?
12. Have you participated in specific programmes, such as leadership trainings or mentoring schemes? If yes, how have they benefited you?

## **4. External and Social Influences**

13. To what extent have external factors, such as societal expectations or personal networks, influenced your career development?
14. How do you prioritise your professional goals compared to other areas of your life? Has this balance changed over time?

## **5. Perspectives and Recommendations**

15. In your opinion, what actions or changes are necessary for companies to sustainably promote women in leadership positions, increase their job satisfaction, and ensure long-term retention?
16. Why do you think some women leave leadership positions earlier than their male colleagues?
17. How do you envision the future of women in leadership roles? What changes in society or the world of work would you consider necessary to better support them?

## **Closing**

Thank you very much for taking the time to share your experiences and insights.