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ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY IN CORPORATE LEADERSHIP: BARRIERS, STRATEGIES AND IMPACT ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

Despite widespread recognition of the importance of gender equality in organizational leadership, women continue to be underrepresented in senior corporate roles. This paper examines the structural, cultural and psychological barriers that hinder women's career advancement and evaluates the effectiveness of corporate strategies to promote gender equality in leadership positions.

Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study combines an extensive literature review with empirical data from nine semi-structured interviews conducted with HR professionals in Spain and Germany. Findings reveal that male-dominated organizational cultures, entrenched gender stereotypes, caregiving expectations, and internalized psychological barriers continue to impede women's advancement. While numerous companies implement leadership development programs, mentoring networks, and work-life balance policies, the lack of robust evaluation frameworks hinders the ability to assess their true impact.

The findings highlight the importance of leadership engagement, data-driven evaluation, and inclusive cultural transformation to ensure the long-term effectiveness and credibility of gender equality initiatives. This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how organizations can strategically foster sustainable gender equality in leadership.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Women in Leadership, Organizational Barriers, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Impact Evaluation

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DEI .... Diversity Equality and Inclusion

HR .... Human Resources

AI .... Artificial Intelligence

STEM .... Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose and Contextualization

Despite significant progress towards gender equality in the workforce, women remain markedly underrepresented at the highest levels of corporate leadership. While women account for nearly half of all entry-level roles across industries and economies, they comprise only approximately one-quarter of C-suite positions (*Global Gender Gap Report*, 2024).

Gender equality has emerged as an increasingly important and pressing issue in today's organizational discussions. Many companies have responded by establishing dedicated departments within their human resources (HR) divisions that focus explicitly on fostering gender equality initiatives (*Women in the boardroom: A global perspective*, 2023). Substantial financial resources have been allocated to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs. According to the World Economic Forum (2023), corporate spending on DEI initiatives was estimated at $7.5 billion globally in 2020, with projections indicating an increase to $15.4 billion by 2026. Although DEI encompasses a broad range of issues, gender equality remains a central pillar within these initiatives. According to the World Economic Forum (2023) despite increased awareness and financial investment, tangible advancements in the representation of women in senior leadership positions have been limited. Recent actions by U.S. President Donald Trump, are likely to have a significant impact on DEI policies. Through a series of executive orders, Trump has sought to dismantle institutional DEI frameworks within federal agencies and among government contractors, portraying them as ideologically driven and counterproductive (Hsu, 2025). These measures represent a substantial policy shift and have already begun to influence how private sector organizations approach gender equality and broader inclusion strategies (Dorn, 2025). Yet, even prior to Trump's interventions, the overall pace of progress remained slow. This stagnation highlights the ongoing need to critically examine the barriers that persist and to assess the actual effectiveness of corporate strategies aimed at promoting gender equality.

Therefore, the present study aims to identify and examine the key barriers that hinder women's progression into senior leadership roles within corporate organizations. It will examine the measures companies are implementing to address these barriers and how the effectiveness of such initiatives is being evaluated and monitored. By doing so, this research aims to contribute to a better understanding of how companies can more effectively foster gender equality at the executive level.

The central research question guiding this study is: How can companies effectively address organizational barriers to women's access to leadership positions, and how can the impact of related policies and initiatives on gender equality in leadership be evaluated?

1.2   Research Justification

The relevance of this research is twofold. Firstly, the persistent difficulties women face in accessing leadership positions represent a profound societal imbalance and injustice that must be addressed and rectified. Furthermore, ensuring equitable representation is not only a matter of social fairness but also of economic rationality. Excluding women from senior leadership roles means disregarding a substantial proportion of the available talent pool, which is particularly detrimental at a time when companies increasingly struggle to attract and retain qualified talent (Fehre, Lindstädt and Picard, 2014; Tsusaka *et al.*, 2019). Empirical findings further strengthen the economic case for gender-diverse leadership. Research conducted by Zenger Folkman (2015), based on a sample of 7,280 leaders assessed, revealed that women outperformed men in the majority of sixteen key leadership competencies. This provides compelling evidence that companies benefit from enhanced leadership quality when women are adequately represented at senior levels.

Secondly, while the barriers hindering women's advancement into leadership roles have been extensively studied, significantly fewer investigations have focused on organizational strategies to overcome these barriers (Fehre, Lindstädt and Picard, 2014). Existing literature addresses several measures that companies can implement; however, only a very limited number of studies systematically evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives (Kalev, Dobbin and Kelly, 2006; Hagerer, 2022; *Women in the Workplace*, 2024). Given the considerable financial investments that companies dedicate to DEI programs, it is crucial to understand whether these efforts produce tangible results. Addressing this gap, the present study aims to bridge theoretical insights with practical application. It synthesizes the most relevant academic findings on the topic and complements them with primary research data based on nine in-depth interviews conducted with HR specialists. Through this approach, the paper aspires to provide a comprehensive analysis that not only identifies effective measures but also critically evaluates their implementation and impact.

1.3   Research Objectives

To provide meaningful insights into the underrepresentation of women in corporate leadership, this study will be guided by four key objectives:

1. Investigate the structural and cultural barriers that limit women's advancement in professional careers, to uncover their root causes and inform targeted solutions.
2. Examine the policies and practices organizations employ to promote gender equity in leadership roles.
3. Analyze the methods and indicators used to assess the effectiveness of gender equality initiatives and determine their impact.
4. Explore organizational perceptions and attitudes toward gender equality efforts, identifying factors that influence their acceptance and perceived value.

1.4 Methodology

This study employs a two-phased research design, combining a comprehensive review of secondary sources with the analysis of primary data collected through in-depth interviews. The methodology is structured in alignment with the four objectives outlined in the previously, ensuring a systematic and coherent investigation of the research question.

The first phase of this research involved a comprehensive review of the existing literature. Two main types of sources were consulted. The first comprised academic publications, which were identified through databases such as Google Scholar and EBSCO. Search terms included "gender equality in leadership," "female leaders," "career advancement programs," "diversity policies and initiatives," and "gender inclusion." Emphasis was placed on selecting recent publications, with a particular focus on studies published within the last ten years to ensure relevance and contemporary insights. The second type of source consisted of sectoral reports produced by reputable consulting firms and foundations recognized for their work on gender equality. These reports were selected based on the prominence and credibility of the organizations involved, as well as the methodological rigor and thematic relevance of the research presented.

The second phase of the research consisted of the collection and analysis of primary data through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. A total of nine interviews were conducted with HR professionals who hold positions specifically focused on DEI within medium- and large-sized companies located in Spain and Germany. Participants were selected with the aim of achieving representation across a range of industries, thereby ensuring a broader understanding of DEI practices in diverse corporate contexts. The interviews were structured around the four key objectives of the study, allowing for a detailed exploration of each research dimension from a practical and corporate perspective. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically, focusing on extracting patterns, commonalities, and divergences across cases.

1.5   Structure

The first part introduces key concepts by identifying barriers that hinder women's advancement into leadership positions and analyzing organizational initiatives designed to address these challenges. Furthermore, it explores how progress towards gender equality can be measured and how the effectiveness of such initiatives is evaluated in existing research. Building on this foundation, the subsequent chapter focuses on empirical insights gathered through interviews with practitioners, examining how these barriers and initiatives are perceived and implemented in organizational contexts

In the following chapter, a comparative analysis brings together theoretical insights and empirical findings, highlighting both alignments and discrepancies between expectations and real-world experiences. This reflection provides a basis for deriving practical implications. The final sections summarize the main findings, offer actionable recommendations for organizations, and outline limitations as well as opportunities for future research.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Systemic and Cultural Barriers to Gender Equality in Leadership Profiles Barriers

While educational attainment and professional qualifications between genders have largely equalized, women continue to be significantly underrepresented in leadership positions. This persistent disparity stems from a complex and interrelated set of societal, organizational, and individual barriers (A.G, Rino and Wardi, 2025). This chapter investigates these structural and cultural obstacles that impede women's professional advancement. By identifying and analysing the root causes of these barriers, the chapter aims to provide a foundation for developing more effective, targeted strategies to support gender equity in career progression.

Historical exclusion of women in the professional context has played a foundational role in shaping the gendered dynamics of contemporary leadership. Until the late 19th century, women were excluded from universities (Schiebinger, 2024) preventing them from accessing the advanced education required for entry into high-status professions. Later, when they were able to enter these higher-level jobs during the 20th century (Goldin, 2006), they encountered institutions structured around male norms (Acker, 1990; Irvine & Vermilya, 2019). These norms persist in form of broader cultural expectations that continue to hinder women's advancement (A.G, Rino and Wardi, 2025).

Gender stereotypes frame leadership as a masculine domain (Koenig *et al.*, 2011; Eagly *et al.*, 2019). As a result, the qualities typically linked to effective leadership tend to align more with stereotypically male traits (Crites et al., 2015). This dynamic gives rise to what is commonly referred to as the double-bind effect (Chikwe, Eneh, and Chidiogo Uzoamaka Akpuokwe, 2024), which places women in a paradoxical position. When women adopt an authoritarian leadership style, they are frequently perceived as unfriendly or unapproachable. Conversely, when they display empathy and emotional sensitivity, they are often viewed as lacking the assertiveness and decisiveness deemed necessary for leadership roles (Smith *et al.*, 2019). Implicit biases further exacerbate these issues. For example, Bigelow et al. (2014) demonstrated that identical initial public price offerings (IPOs) led by female CEOs were evaluated less favorably than those led by males, solely due to gender. Biases influence both formal evaluations and informal perceptions, often invisibly disadvantaging women despite equivalent performance (Lyness and Heilman, 2006).

Another significant gender disparity concerns the personal costs associated with professional advancement. For women, career success often negatively impacts their prospects for marriage, whereas for men, professional achievement tends to enhance their attractiveness as partners (Hewlett *et al.*, 2011). In their study Hewlett et al. (2011) highlight that forty-one percent of high earning women had no partner, and forty percent stayed childless, in contrast to that, eighty one percent of men in similar positions are married and seventy one percent have children.

Societal expectations continue to assign women primary responsibility for caregiving and domestic duties, contributing to lower rates of female workforce participation and significant underrepresentation in leadership roles (Goedderz and Calanchini, 2023). The challenge of balancing professional and family responsibilities remains especially pronounced for women. Most professional roles, and leadership positions in particular, require long working hours and frequent on-site presence, making it difficult to reconcile work and family life. Beyond official working hours, informal networking plays a critical role in career advancement and access to leadership opportunities (Abalkhail and and Allan, 2015). Women who are unable to participate in such events often face reduced visibility and fewer opportunities to build the social capital and strategic connections necessary for career progression.

In addition, the gender pay gap remains a persistent structural barrier (Kalaitzi *et al.*, 2017), partly driven by the disproportionate representation of women in lower-paid industries and their underrepresentation in leadership roles. Sectors with a higher share of female workers tend to offer lower wages, while male-dominated industries are often associated with higher pay (*Global Gender Gap Report*, 2024). Beyond occupational segregation, women frequently earn less than men for equivalent work, highlighting systemic pay inequalities that influence both career progression and family-related decisions (Leslie, 2019). When this economic disparity is considered alongside the biological reality that women are the ones who carry, give birth, and are often the primary caregivers during early child-rearing, it becomes more likely, within traditional heterosexual family structures, that women reduce or interrupt their professional engagement (Vink *et al.*, 2022). Such interruptions can hinder long-term career development and contribute to the continued underrepresentation of women in leadership positions (Gangl and Ziefle, 2009; Hewlett *et al.*, 2011).

Women continue to face numerous invisible barriers within organizations. As corporate structures and cultures are often male-coded, they tend to disadvantage women in subtle but impactful ways. Research indicates that individuals tend to prefer associating and collaborating with others who share similar characteristics or backgrounds (Ertug *et al.*, 2022). As a result, men are generally more likely to select other men as colleagues or collaborators, reinforcing existing gender biases in professional environments (*Mind the Gap*, 2024). This dynamic contributes to the significant barriers women encounter during recruitment processes and when attempting to advance to higher-level positions (Johns, 2013). This pattern is also evident in sponsorship dynamics: men are significantly more inclined to sponsor other men, which places women at a disadvantage by depriving them of critical support for career advancement (Hewlett *et al.*, 2011).

A concept that is widely adopted in this context and illustrates the mentioned barriers is the "glass ceiling" a metaphor for the invisible yet rigid threshold that prevents women from reaching top leadership positions (Johns, 2013).

In addition to structural barriers, individual-level factors further hinder women's progression. Studies show that women are often more self-critical and tend to underestimate their qualifications (Streibich and Desjardins, 2019). As a result, they are less likely to apply for positions unless they meet all listed requirements, unlike their male counterparts who may apply even when underqualified. Women report experiencing the impostor phenomenon more frequently, which can undermine their confidence and reduce their inclination to pursue leadership roles (Price, Holcomb and Payne, 2024).

Finally, these interrelated disadvantages give rise to self-reinforcing cycles of exclusion that sustain gender disparities in leadership. The limited presence of women in senior leadership positions reduces the availability of role models who can guide and inspire aspiring female leaders. This absence not only restricts exposure to diverse leadership approaches but also diminishes the support structures necessary for women's career advancement (Sealy and Singh, 2008).

2.2 Initiatives and Programs for the Promotion of Women's Leadership

Having identified the main barriers to women's advancement in leadership, this chapter now turns to the measures that organizations can implement to address gender inequality in the workplace. An initial and significant step adopted by many companies is the establishment of

concrete targets and goals related to gender diversity (*Global Parity Alliance: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Lighthouses*, 2023). This formal approach enables organizations to set clear benchmarks and monitor progress over time.

In addition to goal setting, some companies have created dedicated roles or departments within HR to oversee DEI initiatives. These structures aim to foster an inclusive organizational culture, which can mitigate many of the structural barriers previously identified. However, for such initiatives to be effective, they must be embraced and actively promoted by leadership across all levels of the organization (Bishop-Monroe, Wingender and Shimerda, 2021). As Castaño et al. (2019) emphasize, meaningful change is only possible when these measures are not isolated efforts but are embedded in the organizational leadership and strategic direction.

Training programs and standardized procedures play a crucial role in reducing implicit biases. In recruitment, for instance, training can raise awareness among employees about unconscious preferences (*Women in the Workplace*, 2024), such as the tendency to favor candidates who resemble themselves. The use of objective, measurable criteria in performance evaluations can help ensure a fairer assessment process and minimize the risk of discriminatory practices (Chamberlain, 2016).

Leadership development programs are often central to corporate gender equity strategies, offering targeted support to advance women within organizational hierarchies. These programs typically include training sessions, workshops, coaching, and career planning specifically tailored for women (Stephenson *et al.*, 2025). In addition, creating safe environments and more visibility for women is a popular action (Chikwe, Eneh, and Chidiogo Uzoamaka Akpuokwe, 2024). Networking events can help women to exchange their experiences and offer each other support.

Many companies also have mentoring programs, in which a senior employee offers guidance, advice, and feedback to a less experienced colleague, helping them navigate the organizational culture and develop professionally (Goehlich, Gilbertson and Bremser, 2019). Sponsorship, by contrast, entails a deeper and more proactive form of support (Hewlett *et al.*, 2011). While sponsors may also provide guidance, their role extends to actively advocating for their protégés by facilitating access to high-visibility assignments, promoting them within influential networks, and recommending them for advancement opportunities (Dixon and Lee, 2023). As such, sponsorship not only helps women build credibility and professional exposure but also

contributes directly to career progression in ways that mentoring alone often does not. However, research shows that women frequently face greater challenges than men in securing sponsors. According to Hewlett et al. (2011), 46 percent of surveyed women believe that men make better sponsors. Encouraging male leaders to actively sponsor and advocate for women has emerged as a promising and evidence-based approach to improving women's retention and advancement in male-dominated work environments (Moser and Branscombe, 2022). In contrast to mentorship, sponsorship requires a deliberate sharing of social capital, such as co-authoring projects, introducing protégés to key stakeholders, and nominating them for strategic roles. This makes sponsorship a powerful tool in addressing the structural barriers that often hinder women's career progression.

Another frequently discussed initiative in promoting gender equity in the workplace is the implementation of work-life integration policies and care-work support measures, also known as conciliation policies (Tomlinson and Durbin, 2010). These initiatives seek to alleviate the disproportionate burden of unpaid care responsibilities that often falls on women, by enabling them to better balance professional and family obligations. Companies may support this through various measures, such as providing on-site childcare, offering flexible working hours, enabling remote work, or promoting job-sharing arrangements (Parnow, 2022). However, as noted by (Garcia-Alonso *et al.*, 2019), the effectiveness of these measures depends significantly on their proper design and implementation. Poorly executed policies may lead to unintended consequences, such as reinforcing gender stereotypes or marginalizing those who make use of them. These issues will be further explored in the following sections.

In line with the previously discussed formalized approaches to addressing gender inequality, companies can further reinforce their commitment by linking managerial compensation to the achievement of diversity targets (*Women in the Workplace*, 2024). By tying a portion of variable salary to progress in gender diversity, organizations create concrete incentives for leaders to actively engage in and prioritize inclusion efforts. This strategy signals that diversity is not merely a symbolic objective, but a measurable and strategic goal integrated into overall corporate performance.

2.3   Assessment of These Initiatives and Metrics for Evaluating Their Effectiveness

In order to draw substantiated conclusions about the effectiveness and long-term impact of an initiative, clearly defined objectives and appropriate instruments for measuring success are essential (Garcia-Alonso *et al.*, 2019). Although existing studies suggest a positive association

between gender diversity in leadership and firm performance, such claims can only be empirically substantiated through systematic measurement and evaluation (Zhang, 2020). If companies are unable to present concrete data on the impact of their gender diversity initiatives, it can be difficult to justify further investment in these programs (*Global Parity Alliance: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Lighthouses*, 2023).

Although measurement and objectification appear to be fundamental practices for organizations (Russell and Bennett, 2015), research indicates that many companies continue to face significant challenges in implementing effective evaluation mechanisms (Fernandez and Gallardo-Gallardo, 2020). Consequently, without systematic assessment, organizations risk implementing measures whose outcomes remain speculative rather than evidence based.

This argument is further supported by Howson (2021), who notes that in many companies, "the least prioritized analytics program is often people analytics". Similarly, Hagerer (2022) in her study on gender equality interventions from the perspective of German executives, found that numerous companies considered their measures effective, despite not systematically evaluating their outcomes. In cases where some form of measurement is conducted, it often focuses on input indicators, for example the number of workshops organized or the number of employees trained. However, only a minority of companies assess actual outcomes, such as the increased promotion of women, changes in retention rates, or broader effects on company culture and performance (*Women in the Workplace*, 2024). This suggests a significant gap between perceived and demonstrable effectiveness, underlining the need for more outcome-oriented evaluation practices.

Manalo and Manalo (2020) found that HR, which is typically the department responsible for managing gender equality initiatives, often devotes a disproportionate amount of time to transactional and administrative tasks, such as coordinating schedules or planning vacation leave. As a result, the department's capacity to engage in more strategic functions is significantly limited. Fernandez and Gallardo (2020) examined the key factors and barriers to the adoption of HR analytics. Their findings revealed the absence of a standardized framework for data collection, including a lack of consistency in terminology and metrics across organizations. This points to a relatively low level of maturity in the development and implementation of HR analytics. Similarly, other studies showed that current HR analytics tend to focus predominantly on internal HR concerns, with limited integration of metrics that link directly to broader organizational outcomes (Van den Heuvel and Bondarouk, 2017). A shortage of analytically

skilled professionals within the field of HR was identified (Stuart *et al.*, 2016), highlighting another key barrier to the effective implementation of data-driven practices.

In many organizations, HR analytics remain underdeveloped, which further complicates the evaluation of initiatives such as leadership programs, bias reduction training, and mentoring programs. The outcomes of these programs are inherently more difficult to measure than the objective outputs commonly assessed in other departments, especially as evaluating such initiatives requires a long-term perspective to capture their full impact (Black and Earnest, 2009). Nijah et al. (2021) point out that methods based on the Kirkpatrick model, such as 360-degree evaluations, are useful for assessing individual competency development. However, because leadership outcomes are strongly influenced by the organizational context, these methods often fail to capture the full impact of the program. As a result, the final effects are frequently not measurable using standard short-term evaluation tools. In response to these challenges, more comprehensive evaluation frameworks have been proposed. For instance, Phillips et al. (2015) outline a detailed approach that includes early integration of data collection, isolation of program effects, and systematic use of results for ROI analysis and continuous improvement. While effective, this method is data-intensive and requires substantial analytical resources.

Some organizations have developed practical metrics and evaluation approaches that go beyond basic input indicators and allow for a more nuanced assessment of gender equality initiatives. Among the most common quantitative outcome metrics are changes in promotion rates for women, developments in gender pay gaps, as well as retention and return-to-work rates following parental leave (Jourdan, 2023). These are often complemented by qualitative methods such as structured feedback interviews, focus groups, or ongoing employee surveys, which help capture subjective perceptions of fairness, inclusion, and cultural transformation (Grosser and Moon, 2008). Mixed-methods approaches offer the advantage of making both measurable progress and contextual mechanisms visible. Research also highlights how organizations can integrate artificial intelligence (AI) to optimize administrative processes, thereby freeing up resources for more strategic tasks (Basiru *et al.*, 2023). In addition, AI technologies are increasingly being explored as tools to support the measurement and evaluation of gender equality initiatives. For example, AI-driven analytics can be employed to identify patterns in promotion and employee turnover rates, uncover potential biases within decision-making processes, and generate real-time dashboards that illustrate progress toward achieving diversity objectives

(Ayanponle *et al.*, 2022). While still in the early stages in many companies, such applications offer promising approaches to enhance both efficiency and the depth of evaluation practices.

2.4 Perception and Subjective Evaluation

While formal equity measures have been widely implemented, perceptions of their necessity and effectiveness vary considerably. In the workplace, such divergence is particularly pronounced. For example, Tominc et al. (2017), in a study examining the perceptions of male and female Slovenian managers, found that women consistently perceived gender equality to be significantly lower than their male counterparts. This gendered perception gap is supported by additional research that highlights how men often underestimate structural and cultural barriers faced by women in professional settings (Villarroya and Barrios, 2022).

This discrepancy in perception is further compounded by what some scholars refer to as gender equality fatigue, a form of resistance or disengagement often observed among individuals who perceive gender initiatives as unnecessary, ineffective, or disconnected from their personal experience (Kamberidou, 2010). Gender equality fatigue may result in disengagement, diminished support for diversity programs, and even overt criticism of such efforts. Another important theme in the critical assessment of workplace gender policies is the "fix-the-women" approach (Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000), which implies that women are the ones that should adapt, and that they are in need of extra training and development programs. While such interventions may have individual benefits, Stephenson et al. (2025) argue that they shift attention away from the systemic barriers embedded in organizational cultures, structures, and leadership norms. As Meyerson & Fletcher (2000) state, this approach frequently fails to address the structural root causes of gender inequality, thereby reinforcing the notion that women must conform to existing environments rather than transforming these structures to foster greater inclusivity. In line with this perspective, the most effective flexible work programs are considered to be gender-neutral or "reason-neutral" as they are designed to benefit all employees equally and avoid reinforcing the marginalization of women (Tomlinson and Durbin, 2010; Garcia-Alonso *et al.*, 2019).

An additional challenge arises from the risk of symbolic compliance, where organizations adopt equality measures primarily for reputational gains without ensuring their effective implementation in practice. The perceived authenticity of organizational commitment plays a crucial role in determining whether employees engage constructively with these initiatives or dismiss them as superficial (Karmarkar, 2024).

The role of leadership is central in shaping how gender equality initiatives are received (Hagerer, 2022). Leaders not only set strategic direction but also serve as symbolic figures whose behavior signals organizational priorities. When senior managers visibly support and participate in equality efforts, they contribute to a climate of credibility and seriousness. In contrast, when leadership remains distant or silent, even well-designed policies may fail to gain traction among employees. Making the leaders engagement a critical condition for the success and legitimacy of organizational gender initiatives (Mohamed, Elsaid and Ela, 2021).

Leslie (2019) analyzed the unintended negative effects that can arise from gender equality initiatives and developed a typological theory to categorize these unintended consequences, including several well-documented phenomena. A central issue arises when organizations adopt a "fix the women" approach. It can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes of incompetence, leading to backfire effects, where initiatives worsen outcomes for their target groups. Furthermore, diversity efforts may be perceived by majority group members as conferring unfair advantages to others, fostering sentiments of reverse discrimination. Such perceptions can undermine organizational commitment, reduce employee engagement, and damage workplace cohesion.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The empirical data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews with nine participants. The interviewees were selected based on their professional experience in human resources departments and their specific focus on gender equality topics. To ensure a diverse sample, participants represented different sectors and company types. The interviews included professionals working in companies located in Spain and Germany. The interviews were conducted individually via video calls, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. The semi-structured interview format ensured a consistent framework across interviews while allowing flexibility to explore relevant topics in greater depth, depending on each participant's experience. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent to guarantee the accuracy of the collected data. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic characteristics and professional backgrounds of the participants in the sample.

Following the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. To protect the confidentiality and privacy of the participants, all identifying information such as names, company names, and specific job titles, was anonymized. This anonymization process was conducted carefully to ensure compliance with ethical research standards.

3.2 Data analysis procedure

The analysis of the interview data was conducted using a thematic content analysis approach. The process began with a thorough reading of each transcript to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the participants' responses. During this initial phase, relevant quotes were identified for each of the four predefined themes established in the research design. For interviews conducted in languages other than English, the selected quotes were carefully translated.

The data analysis was guided by a qualitative, interpretive approach informed by Grounded Theory principles, particularly drawing on Charmaz's (2006) methodological framework. The process began with an open engagement with the interview material, during which initial categories were developed through iterative readings. Focused coding then helped to distill key thematic areas and their internal differentiation. The analytical logic followed a dual path: while broader thematic categories were shaped by existing theoretical perspectives, more specific sub-themes emerged directly from the data. Throughout, the coding process remained adaptive and responsive to new insights, in line with the iterative principles proposed by Corbin

and Strauss (2008). Axial coding was ultimately used to refine the relationships between categories and to build a coherent structure that organized the emerging findings.

In the next step, the selected quotes were manually categorized according to recurring patterns, differences, and relevant nuances in the participants' answers. This manual categorization allowed for a close engagement with the material and ensured that interpretations remained sensitive to the specific context of each interview.

Following the categorization, a comparative analysis was carried out to identify similarities and differences across the participants. This comparison facilitated a structured examination of individual perspectives while also highlighting broader trends within the sample.

Table 1: Profile of Interview Participants and Key Professional Characteristics

Code	Country of Residence	Year of Birth	Position	Industry Sector	Size of the Company
P1	Spain	66-69	Head of Department	Professional Services	50.000+
P2	Spain	76-79	Senior Manager	Finance	5.000-49.999
P3	Spain	73-76	Director	Real Estate	100-499
P4	Spain	75-78	Director	Consulting	<100
P5	Germany	82-85	Senior Manager	Engineering and Technology	50.000+
P6	Germany	78-81	Senior Partner	Industrial Manufacturing and Technology	50.000+
P7	Germany	69-72	Head of Department	Finance	50.000+

| P8 | Germany | 85-88 | Head of Department | Travel and Tourism | 50.000+ |
| P9 | Spain | 73-76 | Chief Officer | Advertising, Marketing, and Communication | 5.000-49.999 |

4 FINDINGS

The analysis of the interview data is structured around four central themes, each corresponding to the core objectives of the study. These themes include barriers to women's career advancement, organizational policies and practices promoting gender equity, evaluation methods for gender equality initiatives, and internal perceptions of these efforts. The following sections present the findings according to this thematic framework, providing a coherent and focused exploration of each area.

4.1 Barriers Women Face in Accessing Leadership Roles

All participants reported experiencing some form of barriers in their professional lives. Their reflections primarily focused on personal experiences, often grounded in everyday workplace dynamics. Despite differences in context, several recurring themes emerged across the interviews. These can be grouped into six overarching categories that reflect both structural and psychological dimensions of gendered disadvantage and are presented in the following table. While presented separately for analytical clarity, these categories are closely interconnected and, in some cases, overlap, reflecting the complex and multifaceted nature of the barriers women encounter in their paths to leadership. The following sections analyze each of these categories in detail.

Table 2: Analysis Results Theme 1

Category	Number of Quotes	Number of Interviews
Male-Dominated Organizational Culture	17	7
Gender Norms and Stereotypes	15	8
Biological and Family-Related Factors	8	5
Internalized Psychological Barriers and Self-Exclusion	11	6
Economic Factors and Gender Pay Gap	2	2
Contrary Perspectives	1	1

The first barrier addressed is male-dominated organizational culture. This category captures participants' perceptions of the leadership environment as being shaped by masculine norms,

informal networks, and behaviors, which constitutes a barrier for women. A variety of concepts were mentioned by the participants. P1 began by explaining that organizational structures have historically been designed by and for men: "We develop our professional careers in a context that is masculine, to which we have been incorporated afterwards, with codes that are supposedly neutral, but which at the moment of truth are masculine." She emphasized that our notions of what is considered "leadership-worthy" are fundamentally based on masculine standards. Several participants agreed that unconscious bias constitutes a major barrier for women, often manifesting in the tendency of men to promote and sponsor other men. This is frequently done out of habit, without conscious intent to exclude, and results in the overlooking of capable female talent. P4 described it as follows: "No one discriminates against women from malicious intent (...) but they promote people who look like them, who have more affinity, who are their trusted people within the teams, who are the ones they go out for a drink, (…) and who they know better, so it is a less risky bet." This quote also touches on the topic of informal networking. Participants described how such networking often took place after long office hours and in contexts, like soccer games, that were not perceived as particularly inclusive or appealing to women. In addition to these exclusive settings, P2 highlighted that the overall working style was not supportive of employees with caregiving responsibilities: "My zone directors were (male) directors and it seemed that the achievement was not to go home. If you are being measured, whether your office light is on or not, it puts you in a difficult situation, especially being a mother."

Beyond work schedules and networking spaces, male-dominated cultural norms also influenced everyday interactions, including communication styles and perceptions of professionalism. P1 pointed out that informal workplace conversations often revolve around male-coded topics such as sports, noting that "you can talk about soccer all the time and nobody thinks it is bad, but if you talk about sales, or about children, then that is not professional." This dynamic, she explained, contributes to environments where women's concerns or interests are subtly devalued, creating fewer opportunities for them to engage authentically or be heard in informal settings.

Similarly, P9 reflected on how humor can serve as a mechanism of exclusion, particularly when it relies on outdated or gendered references. She remarked, "he still laughs at the same silly jokes, the same things. Sometimes they are hurtful because I don't find it funny when you talk to me about certain topics that maybe in the 70s you found very funny, but I don't find funny

anymore." Such interactions reinforce informal norms that alienate women and limit their full participation in organizational culture.

In addition to these subtle exclusions, several participants described a perceived need to conform to masculine behavioral standards in order to be taken seriously in leadership contexts. P9 illustrated this by explaining that women who succeed in reaching decision-making positions often display "a very common pattern which is the masculinization of their profile; they had to be more competitive, more brusque, more directive, more direct, more assertive, less warm, less friendly women." These expectations not only marginalize alternative leadership styles but also place emotional and psychological demands on women who feel compelled to adjust their behavior in order to gain legitimacy in male-dominated environments.

The second most frequently mentioned barrier was the persistence of gender norms and stereotypes. Several participants reflected on how early socialization and education contribute to gendered behavior patterns that extend into professional life. P1 noted that "certain issues that have to do with how we are educated and socialized" continue to shape women's perceived ambition and behavior in the workplace. These foundational influences reinforce traditional expectations, such as associating women with caregiving roles and men with professional advancement. Participants also pointed to the continued prevalence of benevolent sexism, which is described as well-intentioned but ultimately is a limiting behavior that disadvantages women in decision-making contexts. As P4 explained, such bias can manifest when "you would rather call the guy that just had a baby than the girl, with good intentions but not thinking about the consequences." Even when not malicious, these actions reinforce assumptions about women's primary responsibilities at home and their perceived availability for professional opportunities.

The norm of women as default caregivers was referenced repeatedly, especially in relation to its practical implications. P4 emphasized that "the issue of co-responsibility in the world of care, the overload of care, is clearly a factor that has a huge impact on this issue," highlighting the unequal distribution of domestic labor as a key barrier to women's full participation in leadership roles. Additionally, cultural comparisons were introduced by P5, who observed that "in Germany, for example, when I compare it with China, we are still partly stuck in traditional ways of thinking," indicating that the strength and expression of gender norms vary across national contexts. Motherhood and family responsibilities were frequently cited as factors that interrupt or constrain women's career trajectories. Participants acknowledged that, biologically, women are the ones who carry and give birth to children, and in the early months of a child's

life, they often serve as the primary caregivers. As a result, pregnancy and early motherhood tend to create unavoidable pauses in professional development and, in some cases, long-term disadvantages in career progression. P4 reflected on the broader inequality this creates, stating: "For me, the greatest inequality is that women have now occupied more professional spaces (...) and we are present in the organizations, but men have not occupied the more personal and private spaces in the same proportion, so in the end we women are overloaded."

The challenge is not limited to the biological aspect of childbirth but extends into long-term structural consequences. P8 pointed out that "a large part is actually due to the fact that women often work part-time when they reach the age at which the next career step is normally due," often because of childcare responsibilities or broader family obligations. She also noted that "part-time work is often perceived as an obstacle in this country, especially when it comes to management positions," underlining how systemic expectations clash with the practical demands of caregiving. These caregiving responsibilities not only impact women's availability for career advancement but also create significant psychological pressure. As P8 remarked, "many women feel they have to manage everything at the same time, being successful at work and being a full-time mother. And if they don't manage this, they believe they have failed. That is an enormous pressure."

Within the context of psychological barriers and self-exclusion, participants highlighted a range of internalized attitudes that can hinder women's professional advancement. P8 observed that women often hold themselves to particularly high standards and tend to be overly self-critical, noting that "of course, a certain amount of self-reflection also plays a role. Women tend to apply less for management positions if they feel they are not perfectly prepared." This pattern illustrates how perfectionism and self-doubt can discourage women from pursuing leadership opportunities, even when they are highly qualified. She added that many competent women do not receive the recognition they deserve simply because they fail to make themselves visible: "Many women are extremely competent and do great work, but they don't make themselves visible enough." These statements reflect a broader pattern in which modesty, self-doubt, and perfectionism contribute to women's underrepresentation in leadership. P5 introduced an additional dimension of internal conflict, highlighting the emotional and psychological cost of breaking new ground. She described how women may ask themselves whether they are willing to pay the price to obtain a leadership position: "Am I prepared to accept the uncomfortable aspects and perhaps fight my way through them to a certain extent in order to be

a pioneer or role model for the next generation?" She also observed that many women hesitate, expressing caution or exhaustion at the thought of the effort required.

Guilt was another recurring emotion. As P6 put it, "perhaps also a certain sense of guilt among the women themselves, who think they have to manage everything at the same time alone," pointing again to the overwhelming internal pressure to meet unrealistic standards in both professional and domestic domains. Anticipatory self-exclusion was captured powerfully by P1, who observed that women often begin limiting their ambitions even before motherhood becomes a concrete reality. Referring to Sheryl Sandberg's (former COO of Meta and author of *Lean In*, is a leading advocate for gender equality, whose experience in leadership makes her a key reference in discussions on women's careers and workplace diversity) concept of "don't leave before you leave," she explained: "But then they start to think, at some point I am going to want to be a mother, I am not going to be able to keep up with this pace. Then, sometimes, unconsciously, they start to say: I won't be able to, I don't say I want to be in this project because it's too demanding... Which is perceived that they do not have so much ambition, that they are not proactive, even before they start planning their family actively." These accounts underscore how internalized norms, fear of failure, and anticipated role conflicts contribute to self-imposed limitations, even in the absence of explicit external barriers.

Two participants identified the gender pay gap as a barrier to women's advancement. They pointed out that it is not unusual for women to receive lower compensation than men for performing equivalent work. As P7 stated, "For example, the inequality in pay. I have come across that. And it's very, very true that men and women are sometimes paid differently for the same work," highlighting the persistence of direct pay disparities. P4 approached the issue from a structural perspective, emphasizing that women are disproportionately represented in lower-paid sectors and roles. She noted that women are often "the ones who have the most precarious jobs, the ones who have the lowest pensions and the lowest salaries," drawing attention to the broader economic disadvantages women face across the course of their careers.

These financial inequalities frequently have consequences beyond the individual level. In dual-career households, the partner earning less is often the one who assumes greater responsibility for caregiving and domestic duties. As women tend to earn less, both due to wage inequality and occupational segregation, it is more often their careers that are deprioritized. This dynamic reinforces traditional gender roles and further limits women's opportunities for leadership and advancement.

Overall, the participants expressed largely converging views regarding the barriers women face in their pursuit of leadership positions. Many shared similar experiences and interpretations of structural, cultural, and psychological obstacles. However, P7 represented a notable exception in the dataset. Diverging from the dominant narrative, she explicitly questioned the relevance of gender-specific leadership measures, describing them as somewhat exaggerated. From her perspective, "there is no such thing as a glass ceiling for women," suggesting that opportunities are, in principle, equally accessible to both genders. While she acknowledged the existence of the gender pay gap, citing personal experience with unequal compensation for equal work, she did not identify other commonly cited factors, such as bias or organizational culture, as significant obstacles in her own career trajectory. Her perspective underscores the importance of recognizing variation within women's experiences and the influence of individual context on how structural dynamics are perceived.

4.2   Initiatives and Policies Supporting Female Representation in Senior Roles

The second analytical objective focused on identifying the policies, initiatives, and programs implemented by organizations to advance gender equality in leadership. During the interviews, participants were invited to reflect on the concrete measures their companies had adopted, as well as those they considered essential for driving progress. Their responses revealed a rich variety of actions, which were synthesized into six key thematic categories: Leadership development & career progression, mentoring & women's networks, bias awareness & inclusive practices, work–life integration & care support policies, leadership accountability mechanisms, and sponsorship & strategic allyship. The following table presents the results, followed by a detailed analysis of these categories.

Table 3: Analysis Results Theme 2

Category	Number of Quotes	Number of Interviews
Leadership Development & Career Progression	16	9
Mentoring & Women's Networks	14	7
Bias Awareness & Inclusive Practices	13	6

Work–Life Integration & Care Support Policies	8	6
Leadership Accountability Mechanisms	7	5
Sponsorship & Strategic Allyship	3	2

Leadership development programs and training emerged as the most frequently discussed category, mentioned by all participants, albeit in varying forms and degrees of implementation. Most interviewees indicated that their organizations offer targeted training initiatives specifically designed for women. In some cases, however, these efforts also included male employees, reflecting a broader, more inclusive approach to leadership development. For instance, one participant (P4) described a program that begins with separate training sessions for women and men to build awareness, followed by joint sessions that encourage dialogue and shared learning. Particularly among participants from larger companies, there was an emphasis on highly individualized leadership programs tailored to employees' specific needs, whether related to gender or other developmental considerations.

Mentoring and women's networks were also mentioned frequently across almost all interviews. Mentoring programs in which women mentor other women appear to be a widely established and valued practice. These initiatives often serve not only to provide guidance and support but also to strengthen professional identity and community among women within the organization. One interviewee noted that "women's mentoring has always been a key initiative from the very beginning," with programs available both "within the company, but also for young talents outside the company" (P5).

In addition to mentoring, several companies have established dedicated women's networks, where employees "meet from time to time, exchange ideas [...] in a relaxed setting" (P6). These initiatives were generally described as valuable spaces for dialogue, learning, and visibility, particularly in environments where women remain underrepresented in leadership roles.

Creating awareness and establishing inclusive practices were discussed by six of the nine participants, often through diverse and concrete examples. One particularly striking case was shared by P1, who explained that their company had identified a pattern in which women were being evaluated more harshly than men in performance reviews. This gender bias was uncovered through internal testing and data analysis, leading to the implementation of stricter evaluation protocols, including distribution curves by gender and age, to prevent such disparities

from persisting. This example illustrates how awareness initiatives can go beyond training and translate into structural corrections aimed at ensuring fairness. Other practices aimed at reducing unconscious bias were implemented in recruitment and selection processes. P3 emphasized that selection decisions are made independently of age and gender, focusing solely on "objectifiable variables, such as the curriculum or qualifications." Similarly, P4 reported that their company provides specific training for those involved in recruitment to help them recognize and avoid biased decision-making. In addition to that participant 3 described inclusive practices focused on compensation systems: "We are working hard on the transparency of salaries and determining which variables may have differences, but the important thing is that they are justified (...) the aim is to avoid that data such as gender or age may determine salary differences."

Work–life integration and care support policies were also frequently mentioned by participants, often framed as essential mechanisms to address the persistent tension between women's professional aspirations and their socially ascribed caregiving roles. Many companies aimed to alleviate this tension by offering flexible working hours, hybrid arrangements, or remote work options, thereby enabling women to remain active in their careers. Particularly noteworthy was the contribution of P1, who emphasized the company's commitment to "promote co-responsibility" by actively encouraging "men to take their paternal leave," thereby challenging traditional gender norms and fostering a more equitable distribution of care duties. Additional strategies included the introduction of alternative leadership structures, such as "job sharing or part-time management positions" (P8), as well as the provision of on-site childcare facilities: "we have our own kindergartens for the children of our employees" (P6).

Another important theme that emerged was the role of leadership accountability in advancing gender equality measures. Some participants emphasized that initiatives such as mentoring programs or inclusive hiring practices are unlikely to have lasting impact unless they are supported and driven by those in decision-making positions. In this regard, accountability mechanisms such as setting measurable diversity targets and linking them to performance evaluations or financial incentives were seen as critical levers. As one participant explained, "whatever you want to put on the table and get it done, it has to hurt the top manager's pocket. If it's in their objectives, they will have to meet it" (P9). This quote underscores the belief that embedding equality goals into leadership performance structures significantly increases the likelihood of real commitment and implementation, transforming gender initiatives from aspirational to operational priorities. Similarly, P8 advocated for tying DEI targets to bonus structures.

Although less frequently addressed compared to other categories, sponsorship and strategic allyship were recognized by some participants as crucial mechanisms for advancing women into leadership roles. These practices differ from mentoring in that they involve active advocacy, risk-taking, and a willingness to use one's influence on behalf of others. As P1 explained, "a mentor is someone who is in a different place maybe at another company or in a different business area who shares their experience, gives you advice, and so on, but doesn't necessarily go out on a limb for you." In contrast, sponsors are individuals who champion talent by opening doors, endorsing candidates for opportunities, and leveraging their credibility to accelerate someone's advancement.

This distinction was reflected in the initiatives described by participants. P8 spoke of a structured program where "experienced managers specifically support female talent on their career path," and described an "Ally program" in which male leaders are trained to facilitate women's access to decision-making positions. Such efforts demonstrate a growing understanding that systemic change requires those in power to act intentionally and visibly in support of gender equity. As P5 put it, "without sponsorship and clear allyship from men for women, it can't work at all," emphasizing that cultural transformation must be accompanied by strategic backing from influential actors within the organization.

4.3 Assessing the Impact of Gender-Inclusive Leadership Policies

The third theme addresses how participants engage with the evaluation of gender equality initiatives in their organizations. Their responses were organized into three analytical categories: Current practices and tools used in evaluation, challenges and limitations of measurement, and perceived importance and strategic role of evaluation. The following table presents the results, followed by a detailed analysis of these categories.

Table 4: Analysis Results Theme 3

Category	Number of Quotes	Number of Interviews
Current Practices and Tools Used in Evaluation	20	6
Challenges and Limitations of Measurement	10	6
Perceived Importance and Strategic Role of Evaluation	8	5

Overall, the majority of participants encountered significant difficulties in providing a direct and immediate response to the question of how the success of gender equality initiatives in leadership is evaluated within their organizations. Many interviewees expressed that assessing the effectiveness of such measures is inherently complex, primarily due to the multitude of influencing variables and the extended time frames required for observable and measurable change.

Despite these obstacles, there was a general consensus among participants regarding the necessity of employing objective indicators to monitor progress. Key performance indicators (KPIs) were particularly emphasized as essential tools for ensuring accountability and providing tangible evidence of advancement. However, it is noteworthy that only a limited number of participants were able to describe systematically implemented measurement frameworks within their organizations. This indicates a gap between the recognized importance of evaluation mechanisms and their practical application in organizational contexts.

Participants from interviews P3, P4, and P9 did not contribute substantive insights on this subject, which may suggest either a lack of structured evaluation processes in their respective organizations or a lower personal involvement in such activities. In contrast, several other interviewees highlighted qualitative methods, for example interviews and surveys, as commonly used tools for gathering participant feedback. This approach was specifically mentioned by participants P1, P6, and P8, underscoring the value of subjective experiences and perceptions in complementing quantitative metrics.

A more data-driven perspective was provided by P7, who described the use of HR analytics and dashboards to systematically monitor KPIs related to recruitment efficiency and employee turnover rates. This reflects a growing trend towards evidence-based HR management, where data is leveraged to inform strategic decisions and evaluate the impact of diversity initiatives.

Particularly comprehensive was the contribution of P8, who outlined a multifaceted evaluation approach encompassing various quantitative indicators. These included the measurement of employee fluctuation rates, tracking the percentage of women who participate in leadership programs and subsequently achieve promotions, monitoring retention rates, and analyzing data from recruitment processes. The latter involved examining the proportion of women who apply for leadership positions, are shortlisted, and are ultimately selected.

A prominent challenge identified by several participants concerns the structural complexity of their organizations, which significantly influences both the implementation and evaluation of gender equality initiatives in leadership. Participant 1 emphasized that the effectiveness of such programs is closely linked to the specific characteristics of each organization, observing that "it depends a lot on the business and the structure." This remark highlights the contextual nature of diversity initiatives, where factors such as organizational size, sector, and internal governance profoundly shape the design and impact of interventions. Similarly, Participant 5 underscored the difficulty of establishing a unified evaluation framework in a company composed of numerous departments operating across diverse geographical regions.

Beyond structural factors, participants also emphasized the general complexity of measuring the success of gender equality initiatives, largely due to the interplay of multiple interdependent variables. Participant 1 illustrated this point by explaining that individual career progression often depends on external conditions, such as the overall economic climate, which directly affects business growth and the availability of advancement opportunities.

Participant 8 further elaborated on the challenge of defining evaluation metrics that are both fair and ambitious. They remarked that "it is also difficult to define truly measurable goals that are fair and at the same time ambitious enough to bring about real change. Particularly when it comes to soft factors such as corporate culture or the feeling of inclusion, it becomes very complicated to map this with figures." This statement captures a central tension in diversity measurement: the need to balance quantitative rigor with the inherently qualitative nature of many relevant outcomes, such as inclusion, belonging, and cultural transformation. The difficulty of translating these soft factors into measurable indicators often leads to an overreliance on easily quantifiable metrics, which may fail to capture the full scope of change.

Another complicating factor identified by participants is the unpredictability of leadership vacancies, which affects the timing and visibility of outcomes. Opportunities for promotion may arise immediately after a development program or be delayed for several years, depending on organizational dynamics and succession planning. This temporal uncertainty makes it difficult to establish direct causal links between gender initiatives and observed advancements in leadership representation.

Finally, participants noted the extended time horizons required to track leadership development effectively. Since career progression unfolds over many years, it poses a significant challenge

for organizations attempting to monitor progress consistently and systematically. This issue reflects a broader challenge in the field of diversity and inclusion, where the long-term nature of desired outcomes often contrasts with the short-term cycles of organizational reporting and performance assessment. As a result, the success of gender equality initiatives in leadership is frequently judged based on incomplete data or premature conclusions.

Although only a few participants were able to outline concrete measurement frameworks or fully developed evaluation plans, there was broad consensus regarding the importance of systematically tracking the effectiveness of gender equality initiatives. This shared perspective was particularly emphasized by Participants 6, 7, and 8, who articulated the critical role of data-driven evaluation in ensuring both the visibility and credibility of such programs within their organizations.

Participant 6 highlighted that the regular presentation of factual and objective data serves as a key mechanism for maintaining awareness of gender equality issues across the organization. By providing tangible evidence of progress data becomes a powerful tool for keeping these topics on the agenda and preventing them from being overshadowed by other business priorities. Similarly, Participant 7 stressed the necessity of quantifiable evidence to demonstrate the relevance and impact of gender equality initiatives within a business context. They emphasized that, in a results-oriented corporate environment, HR departments must be equipped to present clear and compelling data that illustrates program outcomes and supports informed decision-making. This perspective underscores the instrumental function of measurement practices, not only for internal reflection but also as a means to justify resource allocation and sustain organizational commitment.

Participant 8 expanded on these concerns by drawing attention to the link between measurable success and the long-term sustainability of gender equality programs. They noted that while the intention behind such initiatives is often commendable, their continued existence depends on the ability to provide evidence of their effectiveness. As they stated, "It's great to have programs and to specifically promote women, but if we can't measure the success, it's difficult to really assess the long-term benefits. And, to be honest, there is also a great risk that these measures will simply be discontinued at some point if no one follows up on what they really achieve." This remark illustrates a critical point: in the absence of systematic evaluation, gender equality initiatives risk being perceived as symbolic or short-lived, vulnerable to shifting organizational priorities and resource constraints.

Taken together, these insights emphasize that evaluation is not merely an administrative exercise but a strategic necessity. The ability to track and demonstrate the outcomes of gender equality initiatives serves multiple functions, including legitimizing these efforts within the broader business strategy, ensuring accountability, and safeguarding the longevity of such programs.

4.4 Reflections on the Framing, Implementation, and Impact of Equality Initiatives

The final theme aimed to explore how participants evaluated the broader topic of gender equality in leadership. This included their views on specific initiatives implemented within their companies, the perceived feedback from others in their organizations, and more generally, how they assessed the overall state of gender-equal leadership.

Since the interviews were only semi-structured, a wide range of responses was gathered in an inductive manner. As a result, the participants' reflections will not be summarized in categories but rather discussed thematically. In general, participants expressed that such programs and initiatives were both helpful and necessary. However, many also engaged in critical reflection, voicing concerns about aspects such as fixed quotas, and suggesting areas where improvements could be made.

While many participants expressed general support for equality measures, one interviewee, P7, stood out for holding a markedly different view. Her perspective was explicitly business oriented. She questioned the overall necessity of targeted gender initiatives and emphasized that inclusion efforts should not override broader organizational goals. As she stated: "So yes, you have to support women in the workplace, but at the same time you also have to support all employees in the workplace. And then you have to strike a balance between company interests and individual interests."

Other participants also voiced critical positions, particularly regarding quotas. P9, for instance, explicitly rejected the idea of promoting women solely to fulfill diversity targets, stating: "If I have a qualified woman, I put a woman. And if a man is better, I will put him in the position." Similarly, P2 expressed skepticism toward quotas, arguing that they may lead others to question a woman's legitimacy in leadership positions, as if she were selected only to meet gender targets.

Several participants expressed critical views regarding how gender equality initiatives are framed and implemented. For instance, P1 questioned programs that focus exclusively on women, arguing that such approaches reflect a problematic "fix the women" logic: "This is an approach that I have tried to avoid because first of all, it sends a lot of very bad messages. The first one is that women need more development and training than men." In a similar vein, P8 emphasized the need to involve men in these efforts, stating: "If we only do women's programs, that's not enough. The changes must take place at all levels. It's about adapting the entire corporate culture, not just promoting individual women."

Despite these critiques regarding the implementation, most participants expressed support for equality measures overall. They noted that such programs were generally well received within their organizations and had been implemented meaningfully. However, even among supporters, there was a shared understanding that much work remains. Many emphasized that the success of these initiatives depends less on their existence and more on how they are communicated and implemented. As P8 reflected: "I believe that we have already achieved a lot with our initiatives and programs at our company, but also that there is still huge potential. It is important that we continue to work consistently to expand and further develop these measures."

Another area of debate concerned the implementation of flexible work measures. While such policies are often promoted as key tools for improving work-life balance, P4 highlighted potential unintended consequences. Based on her observations, these measures do not necessarily lead to greater representation of women in leadership roles. Instead, they may unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities by encouraging women to opt for reduced hours or less demanding roles: "I have seen that companies that have more work-life balance measures do not have more women in management positions. In the end, what that does is it pushes women away from the career path to management positions. It pushes them to stay 'comfortable', working fewer hours, instead of having more flexibility to organize themselves as they need to and work full time." This critique draws attention to the need for policies that enable flexibility without signaling a trade-off between career ambition and personal well-being.

Closely related to this issue is the perception that some development programs, while well-intentioned, place additional demands on participants' time. As P6 pointed out, these initiatives can seem overwhelming or impractical, particularly for women who are already managing significant professional workloads. She noted: "Over the years, I've noticed that women are relatively reluctant and often reject such development programs because they say, 'I can't fit it in

right now'. I don't have enough time right now. I have a big project at the moment. I get statements like that less often from a man than from a woman." This illustrates how structural workload expectations and confidence gaps can deter participation, suggesting that even supportive measures may inadvertently exclude the very groups they aim to empower if they are not adapted to real working conditions.

While some participants expressed critical views about the framing of gender-focused programs, others highlighted the value of women-specific initiatives such as mentoring and networking. P6, for instance, described the success of a mentoring program in her organization, stating: "Our own women mentoring program was a very cool program. It also received a lot of good feedback from many women." This perspective was echoed by P4, who emphasized the importance of peer support and connection among women: "So I believe a lot in the power of alliances between women, and I participate in all the initiatives that help to have a lot of connection between women because they also help me a lot when I need it." These reflections point to the social and emotional benefits of women-centered initiatives, especially in environments where female leaders remain underrepresented and may feel isolated.

However, other participants, such as P5 and P9, advocated for a broader framing of diversity efforts. Rather than focusing exclusively on gender, they recommended initiatives aimed at increasing overall diversity in leadership positions. This approach, they suggested, may help counteract what some referred to as "gender equality fatigue", a phenomenon where efforts to promote women are met with resistance or perceived as excessive. As P5 explained: "in my experience at least, sometimes it can almost backfire when people hear diversity and think of promoting women and say 'I can't hear it anymore, women are supported so much anyway,' which is only partly true, but in my experience it makes sense to generally go in a broader direction and women also benefit from this."

5 DISCUSSION

This section integrates findings from the literature review with insights from the interview analysis to highlight key points of alignment, divergence, and interpretation. Juxtaposing theoretical frameworks with professional experiences helps illuminate not only the structural challenges to gender equality but also how these are addressed by organizational practices.

While barriers were not the central focus of this study, they emerged as a relevant backdrop for interpreting the effectiveness of organizational responses. Both the academic literature and the interview responses indicate that women continue to face organizational cultures dominated by men, as well as implicit biases that hinder their professional advancement (Irvine and Vermilya, 2019). Participants described these barriers as embedded in everyday practices such as informal networking and promotion patterns. The interviews also added depth to the literature's account by pointing to emotional pressures, such as guilt, stress, and anticipatory self-exclusion which can deter women from pursuing leadership roles, even before family-related demands arise. These insights confirm the literature's argument that psychological and social norms continue to shape women's career trajectories in subtle but powerful ways (Goedderz and Calanchini, 2023).

Turning to the organizational responses, the interviews revealed a considerable degree of alignment with academic recommendations. Leadership development programs, mentoring initiatives, and inclusive recruitment practices were commonly mentioned and reflect efforts to address known structural disadvantages (*Women in the Workplace*, 2024). Yet participants stated clearly that formal measures alone are insufficient. They stressed that meaningful progress requires commitment at the leadership level and a shift away from symbolic gestures toward embedded accountability, such as tying diversity targets to managerial evaluations (Bishop-Monroe et al., 2021).

Work-life integration policies were another area of strong overlap. While literature emphasizes flexibility as a key enabling factor (Tomlinson and Durbin, 2010), interviewees added nuance by insisting that these policies must actively promote co-responsibility, for example, by normalizing paternal leave or restructuring leadership roles to support shared caregiving. Without such a shift, participants warned that flexibility can unintentionally reinforce traditional gender roles rather than dismantle them.

A more critical gap emerged in the comparison of findings on the topic of measurement and evaluation of the initiatives. While the literature strongly emphasizes the need for clear objectives and robust measurement tools to assess the effectiveness of gender equality initiatives (Garcia-Alonso *et al.*, 2019), most participants were either unable to describe concrete evaluation methods or admitted that this aspect was largely overlooked. In several cases, participants hesitated or gave vague answers, suggesting that measurement had not been a priority or was not actively considered within their companies. Only one participant clearly advocated for data-driven assessment, outlining the use of KPIs to track outcomes such as promotion rates and retention. The rest tended to frame evaluation as too complex, context-dependent, or time-consuming, particularly when it comes to measuring cultural change or the long-term effects of leadership development. These perceptions reflect broader challenges identified in the literature, including underdeveloped HR analytics, decentralized structures, and a lack of analytical capacity (Howson, 2021). The idea that change is difficult to quantify, especially in the short term, also appeared frequently in the interviews and supports existing critiques of standard evaluation models as inadequate for capturing nuanced progress. While the literature increasingly highlights the potential of artificial intelligence and advanced data analytics to support bias detection, performance evaluation, and the monitoring of diversity outcomes (Basiru *et al.*, 2023), this was not a topic raised by the interview participants. The absence of such references may reflect a gap between emerging academic or technological developments and their practical application or awareness within companies (Hagerer, 2022). At the same time, many participants acknowledged that without measurable results, initiatives risk losing visibility or institutional support. This reinforces the argument that developing tailored, outcome-oriented, and mixed-method evaluation strategies is essential for sustaining commitment and credibility.

Despite these constraints, participants agreed that without clear evidence of success, initiatives risk being deprioritized. This reinforces the literature's call for more outcome-oriented and mixed-method evaluation strategies, which can demonstrate both progress and relevance over time (Phillips, Phillips and Ray, 2015).

While most participants expressed general support for gender equality initiatives, their reflections also revealed ambivalence, echoing debates in the literature around perception gaps, implementation quality, and the framing of such efforts. A recurring theme was skepticism toward programs perceived as "fixing the women." Several interviewees criticized initiatives that focus exclusively on women, suggesting they may unintentionally reinforce the assumption that

women need to adapt to male norms rather than addressing structural inequalities which matches the critique found in the literature (Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000). The suggestion to involve men and frame efforts more broadly reflects a growing call for systemic, culture-wide change.

The notion of "gender equality fatigue" also surfaced, particularly among participants advocating for broader diversity approaches. Their comments resonate with studies highlighting resistance to initiatives perceived as excessive or misaligned with organizational realities (Karmarkar, 2024). This fatigue underscores the importance of careful framing and communication, ensuring that initiatives are seen as inclusive and relevant rather than imposed.

Finally, participants agreed that leadership commitment is essential, not only in initiating programs but also in legitimizing them. This confirms the literature's finding that visible leadership engagement is a key determinant of whether diversity measures are taken seriously or dismissed as superficial (Mohamed, Elsaid and Ela, 2021).

6 CONCLUSION

The research has fulfilled its objectives by identifying key structural, cultural, and psychological obstacles, such as male-dominated corporate cultures, gendered leadership norms, and internalized self-doubt that continue to limit women's professional advancement. It has further examined a range of organizational strategies, including leadership development programs, mentoring networks, inclusive recruitment practices, and flexible work arrangements. Importantly, the findings underscore that the success of these initiatives depends not only on their design but also on their strategic integration and leadership endorsement. One of the most significant insights concerns the widespread gap between the perceived and measurable effectiveness of equality measures. Despite broad recognition of their value, few companies employ systematic evaluation tools to monitor progress. This highlights the urgent need for more robust, outcome-oriented assessment frameworks that can guide and legitimize corporate efforts. Overall, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the conditions under which gender equality in leadership can be meaningfully advanced, emphasizing that sustained progress requires both cultural transformation and structural accountability.

6.1 Recommendations for Organizations to Advance Gender Equality in Leadership

Drawing from the study's findings and insights provided by interview participants, several recommendations emerge for companies aiming to reduce gender inequality in leadership roles. While many of the identified barriers are deeply embedded in societal norms and will require broader regulatory or governmental interventions, the results clearly indicate that companies also possess significant agency in driving change. Even organizations that are relatively advanced in their gender equality efforts show potential for further improvement.

The most critical recommendation arising from this research is the implementation of structured and objective systems for evaluating the outcomes of gender equality initiatives. Establishing reliable metrics and dedicating resources to data collection and analysis would allow organizations to identify which measures are producing tangible results and which require revision. This evidence-based approach can help shift the focus from symbolic actions to strategies that deliver measurable impact.

Closely linked to this is the role of leadership support, which emerged as a recurring theme throughout the interviews. Strong endorsement from senior management is essential for legitimizing equality efforts and ensuring their long-term sustainability. Moreover, demonstrating

the organizational benefits of such initiatives through concrete data may help secure this support, particularly by showing how gender equality can contribute to broader business performance and strategic goals. An additional area that offers significant potential for advancing gender equality is the use of artificial intelligence and advanced data analytics. Despite their promise, such tools have not yet been widely implemented.

In addition to improved tracking and evaluation, the way gender equality policies and measures are communicated and implemented plays a critical role in determining their effectiveness. Poorly framed initiatives risk provoking unintended resistance or reinforcing the very biases they aim to address. A key element in preventing such "backfiring" is the recognition that gender equality is not a women's issue alone. Effective transformation requires the active involvement of men and the promotion of shared responsibility in fostering inclusive and equitable workplace cultures. Positioning gender equality within the broader context of diversity and inclusion can help reduce resistance, mitigate perceptions of preferential treatment, and enhance strategic alignment across the organization. Importantly, internal communication should avoid reinforcing traditional gender roles for example, by presenting flexible work arrangements or part-time leadership not as accommodations for women, but as viable options for all employees. Encouraging men to make use of such policies contributes to a more balanced distribution of care responsibilities and supports longer-term structural change.

At the same time, the principle of meritocracy must be critically reassessed in light of persistent structural inequalities. Promoting women into leadership roles is not about compromising standards or fulfilling quotas at the expense of competence but about acknowledging that access to leadership opportunities has not been equally distributed. Simply increasing the number of women in senior positions to meet numerical targets is insufficient if the underlying organizational culture remains unchanged (Edmans, Flammer and Glossner, 2023). Representation must be accompanied by genuine inclusion. For diversity efforts to be truly effective, individuals must feel safe and supported within the workplace and be able to exercise their own authentic leadership style without feeling the need to adapt themselves to dominant norms or suppress key aspects of their identity.

6.2   Limitations of this Study

This study is based on a relatively small number of interviews, which means the findings cannot be generalized to all organizational contexts. The interview sample is not representative in a statistical sense and reflects the perspectives of a specific group of individuals. As such, the

conclusions should be understood as exploratory rather than definitive. The sample includes participants from a range of sectors, including male-dominated fields such as STEM; however, it does not represent all industries, and the study was not designed to conduct a sector-by-sector comparison. While sectoral insights emerged throughout the interviews, the analysis does not systematically explore how industry-specific structures or cultures shape the implementation and effectiveness of gender equality initiatives. Similarly, as the interviews were conducted primarily in Spain and Germany, the findings are embedded in specific cultural and institutional contexts. Norms, expectations, and policy frameworks around gender equality vary significantly across countries, which limits the transferability of the results to other national or regional settings. This research emphasizes what companies can do to advance gender equality, but many structural barriers are shaped by broader societal, legal, or economic forces (Parnow, 2022). The study does not fully explore the interaction between organizational practices and external policy environments. Finally, as the interviews were conducted in different languages and translated during analysis, there is a risk of nuances being lost or misinterpreted.

6.3   Future Lines

Looking ahead, future research should explore in greater depth the potential of artificial intelligence and big data to support gender equality within organizations. While digital tools offer promising avenues for identifying patterns of inequality, standardizing decision-making processes, and evaluating the long-term impact of diversity initiatives, their practical implementation remains limited. A critical next step lies in investigating how such technologies can be ethically and effectively integrated into corporate structures to enhance transparency and accountability without reinforcing existing biases.

In parallel, political developments must be closely monitored, particularly the influence of policy shifts such as those initiated under former U.S. President Donald Trump. Efforts to dismantle institutional DEI frameworks reflect a broader ideological backlash that may have long-term consequences for corporate diversity agendas. Understanding how these shifts affect organizational behavior, resource allocation, and public discourse will be essential for contextualizing future trends in gender equality. As this thesis has shown, progress in representation remains slow and uneven. Continued empirical research is needed to assess not only what initiatives are in place, but whether they are producing meaningful change and under which conditions they are most likely to succeed.

Furthermore, future research should give greater attention to the fact that not all women experience workplace inequality in the same way. Differences in race, ethnicity, and other social factors often intersect with gender, resulting in unique forms of disadvantage. For instance, Black women face distinct challenges that stem from the combined effects of racial and gender-based discrimination (Smith *et al.*, 2019). These overlapping barriers are frequently overlooked in mainstream gender equality initiatives, which tend to focus on women as a single, uniform group. Therefore, it is essential that upcoming studies adopt a more differentiated perspective, examining how multiple identities shape women's experiences in the workplace and influence the outcomes of diversity and inclusion efforts.

7   REFERENCES

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8   APPENDIX

- The interview transcripts and interview analysis can be found in [this folder.](this%20folder.)