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Citation for published versión:

Domínguez-Soto, C., Labajo, V. and Labrador-Fernández, J. (2024), "Motherhood enrichment in leadership: exploring top female executives in Spain", *Career Development International*, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-10-2023-0383> (published on line 07/10/2024)

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# Motherhood Enrichment in Leadership: Exploring Top Female Executives in Spain

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Published 07-Sep-2024 by Career Development International

<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/CDI-10-2023-0383/full/html>

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Existing research suggests motherhood hinders women's advancement to top management roles, but its specific influence on women who have achieved senior leadership is unexplored.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This research uses a qualitative approach based on 34 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Spanish female executives who hold board positions or have the potential to become board members in male-dominated industries.

**Findings** – This study identifies motherhood as a key driver in career growth, countering the view of it as a barrier. Narratives from female leaders revealed that motherhood did not impede their careers, challenging the "motherhood penalty" notion. We introduce the concept of "motherhood enrichment," highlighting its positive impact on leadership skills and career progression in top executive roles.

Practical implications – These findings can challenge prejudices about the negative impact of motherhood on women's careers and support policies promoting work-life balance and family-friendly cultures in organizations.

Originality – This study suggests the "motherhood-work enrichment" (MWE) concept in leadership, recognizing motherhood as a catalyst for leadership qualities and offering a preliminary theoretical model to explain MWE in the context of concurrent mother-top manager roles.

Keywords – Motherhood; Leadership; Work-Family Enrichment; Female executives; Career development; Motherhood-Work Enrichment

## **1. Introduction**

Women continue to face obstacles in achieving top leadership positions despite significant progress in gender equality (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Globally, women occupy just 20.5% of leadership roles (BoardEx, 2023). In the European Union, female representation has slightly increased to 21% on executive committees and 32% on boards (EIGE, 2023), partly due to regulations mandating a minimum quota of women in some countries. In Spain, women held 19% of management and 36% of board positions in IBEX 35 companies in 2022, aligning with the European average (EIGE, 2023). These figures highlight ongoing challenges and signal a gradual shift towards more inclusive leadership.

Conflicting gender role expectations persist in Spain. While younger generations embrace egalitarian values (Hupkau & Ruiz-Valenzuela, 2022; Legarreta-Iza & Sagastizabal Emilio-Yus, 2023), enduring inequalities persist. Women face lower wages and higher unemployment and primarily handle monotonous household tasks (INE, 2022). During COVID-19, high-resource women notably diverged from traditional roles, challenging societal expectations that tether women to household responsibilities (Seiz, 2021). However, biases about commitment and ambition mean motherhood often acts as a barrier to women's corporate advancement (Lyness & Grotto, 2018).

Simultaneously, women juggle their managerial and maternal roles, often sacrificing personal and professional aspects due to limited support (Van Ness & Buff, 2023).

The academic literature illustrates work-family interactions through work-family conflict (Kahn et al., 1964) and work-family enrichment (WFE) theory (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Many studies highlight motherhood as a barrier to career progression, particularly for accessing high-level management positions (Hurley & Choudhary, 2016; Mohaidin et al., 2019). In contrast, empirical evidence indicates the positive impact of motherhood on female leadership in management roles (Bright Horizons, 2019; Ruderman et al., 2002; Schueller-Weidekamm & Kautzky-Willer, 2012). While studies increasingly note the positive influence of family roles on women's careers, the specific impact of motherhood on leadership in "top" or "senior" management positions has been relatively unexplored.

This paper addresses the following research questions: (1) How do top female executives experience the implications of motherhood in their professional environment? (2) What new insights can be drawn about the impact of motherhood on leadership within top management positions? Drawing on in-depth interviews with 34 female top executives in Spain, we answer these questions by exploring their narratives. Interpretative qualitative research through open interviews enables exploring unique and complex experiences (Wengraf, 2001). Our study fills a gap by scrutinizing the influence of motherhood on the career trajectories and leadership skills of senior female executives.

Our paper makes three contributions. First, at the theoretical level, we enrich the discourse on women and leadership by positing 'motherhood-work enrichment' (MWE) as a sub-construct within the broader WFE framework outlined by Greenhaus and Powell (2006), which serves as the foundational theory for this paper. MWE refers to the mutually beneficial interplay between motherhood and professional work, with a focus on work-related outcomes. By proposing a preliminary theoretical model of MWE, we aim to clarify how motherhood, often seen as a barrier, can become a crucial enabler for career growth and skill enhancement. We explore the roles of

"mother" and "manager" to demonstrate how these dual roles can improve women's skills, making them more balanced, empathetic, and fulfilled leaders. The novelty of the MWE sub-construct lies in its focus on the unique experience of motherhood, a topic often overlooked in WFE literature, which typically addresses a generic concept of "family domain experiences" (Lapierre et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2018). This approach responds to the growing need for a gender perspective in the field.

Second, we offer insights to dismantle prejudices about the impact of motherhood on women's careers, urging companies to promote work-life balance policies. Third, we shed light on the complex interplay between motherhood and top management roles, encouraging organizations and policymakers to leverage mothers' unique skills in top management roles.

## **1.1 Theoretical Background**

Women face numerous obstacles in accessing top management positions (Lyness & Grotto, 2018). Among these barriers is motherhood, often called "motherhood penalty" (Brown, 2010; Burgess, 2013). Contrasting this negative view, a growing number of studies supported the positive impact of motherhood on leadership development (Grzelakowski, 2005; Johnson & Williams, 2020; Ruderman et al., 2002; Schueller-Weidekamm & Kautzky-Willer, 2012).

In our paper, we adopt the WFE framework by Greenhaus and Powell (2006) to explore the interplay between motherhood and managerial skills. Historically, the conflict theory perspective, focusing on Work-Family Conflict, dominated studies of work-family interactions (Ford et al., 2007; Kahn et al., 1964). This perspective highlighted how competing demands between work and family create conflicts. Later research shifted towards positive intersections, examining how these domains enrich each other (Barnett et al., 2018; Grzywacz & Butler, 2005; Hanson et al., 2006). Like Work-Family Conflict, enrichment is bidirectional, including Work-to-Family Enrichment — where work benefits enhance family life — and Family-to-Work Enrichment — where family experiences improve work performance (Humphrey et al., 2024).

Drawing on early studies of role accumulation by Sieber (1974) and Marks (1977), WFE is defined as "the extent to which experiences in one role improve the quality of life in the other role" (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006, p. 73). This perspective explores how family life and work enhance each other, elucidating factors promoting enrichment and categorizing resources developed within roles: 1) skills and perspective, including cognitive skills and situational awareness; 2) psychological and physical assets, such as resilience and health; 3) social-capital resources, including influence and information; 4) flexibility, referring to control over timing and location; and 5) material resources. Carlson et al. (2006) defined a multidimensional measure of WFE, identifying three dimensions: "Family–work development" involves skills and knowledge gained from family that enhance work performance; "Family–work affect" refers to positive emotions from family that improve work outcomes; and "Family–work efficiency" highlights the focus and urgency from family involvement that increases workplace efficiency.

These seminal papers offer insights into the mechanisms underlying enrichment, also called "positive spillover." McNall et al. (2010), based on social exchange theory (Blau, 1968), allude to three categories of outcomes: work-related, non-work-related (family and life satisfaction), and health-related (physical and psychological). We also consider resource conservation theory (Hobfoll, 2002), which suggests that preserving resources, like social support, helps employees balance work and family responsibilities.

Waine (2009) distinguished Work-Family Enrichment (WFE) from positive spillover, noting that enrichment requires not only the transfer of resources between domains (positive spillover) but also the perception that this transfer enhances performance or quality of life. Similarly, Masuda et al. (2012) further refined the differentiation and measurement of these constructs, advancing the understanding of the positive aspects of the work-family interface.

Within the work domain, the meta-analysis by Zhang et al. (2018) synthesized the consequences of this interface into three categories: affective, performance, and resource outcomes. Recent works, such as Kalliath et al. (2019) and Schnettler et al. (2023), emphasize the importance of identifying

family domain factors that enrich work experiences. While the impact on affective outcomes like job satisfaction has been extensively studied, other outcomes related to work performance have been overlooked—a gap this investigation seeks to address. Transitioning to women's management context, Ruderman et al. (2002) explored how multiple life roles impact psychological well-being and managerial skills. They found that personal roles provide emotional support, multitasking practice, and relevant experience, enhancing leadership skills and improving managerial effectiveness.

Over the last decade, the literature has shifted to highlight the positive influence of women's familial roles on leadership performance. Schueller-Weidekamm & Kautzky-Willer (2012) emphasized the "spillover effect," underscoring the importance of resources — time, finances, decision-making autonomy, and physical, emotional, and social resources — in maintaining work-life balance.

Examining the post-COVID era has generated extensive literature on gendered work-life balance and the division of childcare and household duties. This literature accentuates women's dual roles as caregivers and professionals, while men adopt a more compartmentalized approach (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021; Van Ness & Buff, 2023). Additionally, there is a cultural bias towards viewing mothers as superior leaders, particularly in politics, due to qualities like selflessness and care (Johnson & Williams, 2020). To fully understand how motherhood enriches women's careers, it is essential to consider the various contexts influencing their work-family interface (Michaelides et al., 2023).

Beyond academia, the Modern Family Index 2018 study (Bright Horizons, 2019) reveals that 91% of working North Americans acknowledge the unique abilities mothers bring to organizational leadership roles, such as better listeners, calmer in crisis, more diplomatic, better team players, and better at multitasking and time management.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Approach and sample

We employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to gain deeper insights into the relatively unexplored phenomenon of leadership development among top female executives. Qualitative management studies provide rich exploratory opportunities (Locke, 2003). Semi-structured interviews with CEOs and top managers have effectively highlighted gender differences in career experiences and leadership (Cho et al., 2019; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021; Walsh et al., 2016). Through open-ended interviews, we explored their career experiences and influential factors. Surprisingly, motherhood featured significantly in their discourses, prompting us to include a question about its meaning in the protocol.

The sample consisted of 34 senior female executives in Spain, either with board roles or C-suite positions in companies exceeding €100 million in turnover. We began with purposeful sampling through the research team's network to maximize participant relevance and acceptance rates (Cycyota & Harrison, 2006). The first researcher (also the interviewer), leveraging her professional experience as a Supply Chain Director, initially contacted five female executives with whom she had previously worked and subsequently identified ten more through her network. This approach ensured that initial participants were highly relevant to the study. We then switched to snowball sampling for a diverse representation (Noy, 2008). Initial participants referred other suitable candidates, facilitating new interviews and broadening our reach across different industries. This referral process was effective as the first researcher established rapport by referencing mutual contacts and her senior management experience, fostering trust and encouraging candid discussions (Wengraf, 2001).

Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, as defined by Corbin and Strauss (2008) when no new data emerged and the categories were well-developed. The sample represented diverse industry sectors. Demographics, detailed in Table 1, include birth year, generation, education, number of children, industry, role, and CEO status. The average number of children was



2, above Spain's 1.24 average (INE, 2022), with 12 participants being CEOs or top executives at the time of the interview.

**TABLE 1. Detailed Demographic Data of Interview Participants (n=34)**

Code	Birth year	Generation	University education	# children	Industry Sector	C-suite function	CEO/ First executive
P1	1965	Baby Boom	Chemistry	2	FMCG	Operations	No
P2	1965	Baby Boom	Law & Business	2	Investment banking	General Management	Yes
P3	1973	Generation X	Maths	3	Consulting	General Management	No
P4	1965	Baby Boom	Chemistry	3	FMCG	Operations	No
P5	1964	Baby Boom	Engineering	0	Retail	General Management	Yes
P6	1958	Baby Boom	Business Administration	2	Investment banking	General Management	Yes
P7	1966	Baby Boom	Business Administration	3	FMCG	Human resources	No
P8	1972	Generation X	Law & Business	1	Retail Banking	Human resources	No
P9	1971	Generation X	Business Administration	2	Retail Banking	General Management	No
P10	1967	Baby Boom	Law	2	Third Sector	General Management	No
P11	1964	Baby Boom	Engineering	2	Technology	General Management	Yes
P20	1969	Generation X	Business Administration	5	Education	General Management	No
P19	1962	Baby Boom	Business Administration	1	Retail Banking	Finance	No
P16	1981	Generation X	Business Administration	0	Real Estate	Finance	No
P21	1966	Baby Boom	Business Administration	1	Retail	General Management	No
P12	1968	Baby Boom	Business Administration	3	Retail Banking	General Management	Yes
P13	1967	Baby Boom	Law	2	Public Administration	Legal	No
P17	1976	Generation X	Law	2	Public Administration	Finance	No
P14	1974	Generation X	Business Administration	3	Real Estate	Finance	No
EP22	1974	Generation X	Business Administration	2	FMCG	General Management	Yes
P23	1966	Baby Boom	Psychology	2	Retail	Human resources	No
P15	1969	Generation X	Marketing	2	FMCG	General Management	Yes
P24	1970	Generation X	Engineering	0	Technology	General Management	No
P18	1978	Generation X	Business Administration	3	FMCG	General Management	Yes
P25	1971	Generation X	Marketing	2	Retail	General Management	Yes
P26	1965	Baby Boom	Marketing	0	FMCG	General Management	No
P27	1975	Generation X	Business Administration	2	Public Administration	General Management	No
P28	1969	Generation X	Business Administration	2	FMCG	Marketing	No
P29	1963	Baby Boom	Law & Business	0	Investment banking	General Management	Yes
P30	1970	Generation X	Business Administration	3	FMCG	Finance	No
P31	1969	Generation X	Law & Business	3	Energy	Human resources	No
P32	1967	Baby Boom	Business Administration	2	Investment banking	General Management	No
P33	1965	Baby Boom	Engineering	3	Construction	General Management	Yes
P34	1979	Generation X	Engineering	4	Technology	General Management	Yes

Source: Authors own work

## 2.2 Data collection and analysis

This study is part of a larger research project examining how top Spanish female executives develop their leadership styles. Data were collected through in-depth face-to-face (14 women) and virtual interviews (20 women) conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing participants to describe their professional experiences and key developmental factors. Initially, the protocol did not include questions about motherhood, but as this topic emerged spontaneously, it was added (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The interviewer only interrupted to clarify comments related to key categories. If participants did not mention important concepts noted in previous interviews, direct questions were asked towards the end. The protocol, including main and follow-up questions, is detailed in the appendix.

The research included 2142 minutes of interviews, with individual durations spanning 30-90 minutes, averaging 63. All interviews were audio-recorded, with ethical approval ensuring response anonymization. Despite offering anonymized transcripts to all, only two requested them post-interview. The first researcher handled interviews, transcriptions, and annotations and then shared them with the team.

After every six interviews, the other two researchers reviewed the transcripts, identifying new features and synthesizing significant aspects. Meetings were convened to share notes, during which the main concepts of the research emerged through discussion and comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This inductive, iterative approach, known as "constant comparison" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), was employed, with protocols refined and literature consulted as needed. Data collection ended after coding 34 interviews, confirming theoretical saturation (Locke, 2003).

Following Charmaz's (2006) steps, the content analysis began with initial coding, where researchers identified main categories through in-depth readings. Utilizing Nvivo 1.5, our coding process employed focused coding to identify themes and sub-themes through interview-based inductive coding. It is important to note that many themes were determined beforehand based on existing literature (theory-driven), while the sub-themes emerged from the interview data (data-driven). For

instance, 'harmony' acted as a sub-theme within the 'Acquired psychological and physical resources' theme under the 'Motherhood-work enrichment' category. Coding remained dynamic as interviews progressed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Axial coding, the third phase, involved a category-by-category coding review, aiming for coherence and data organization.

A triangulation approach was adopted during axial coding to ensure coding trustworthiness. The second and third authors independently analyzed two theme codes from random interviews, discussing any minor discrepancies to refine the coding. Any sub-theme level differences were discussed, leading to refined categories and adjusted decomposition into sub-theme codes.

### 3. Findings

Analyzing the narratives underscored the role of children in the professional lives of female managers, revealing both conflicts and benefits. Notably, the benefits of motherhood were extensive. Four major themes emerged: "Motherhood-work conflict" (MWC), "Motherhood-work enrichment" (MWE), "Support," and "Obstacles." The first two themes reflect personal experiences of balancing motherhood and top management roles and are depicted as dependent variables in the preliminary model (Figure 1), while the latter two act as moderators. Table 2 presents the themes, codes and participant quotes, illustrating the interplay between mother and manager roles.

**TABLE 2. Themes and codes identified (n=34)**

**Theme 1: Motherhood-work conflict (MWC)**

Codes	References (Participants)	Representative Quote
Delaying childbearing	5 (4)	"I thought about having a third child, and finally, because of my paranoia of organizing work,(...) and I missed the deadline, and I didn't have it anymore." (P17)
Waiving of maternity leave	4 (3)	"I shortened my maternity leave, which I have regretted all my life (...) The company is asking me, and it's an opportunity, and so on. And then with time you look at it, and you say 'opportunity,' there are a thousand opportunities." (P22)
Give up family time	13 (9)	"I went to pick up my son at the park, at 6-7 in the afternoon, because we had a dentist, (...)"Mom, what are you doing here if it's daytime? Of course,

		<i>imagine how hard he didn't associate seeing his mother in the daytime." (P15)</i>
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## Theme 2: Motherhood-work enrichment (MWE)

Codes	References (Participants)	Representative Quote
Acquired psychological and physical resources	<b>39 (16)</b>	
Harmony	12 (8)	<i>"My life wouldn't work if I didn't have both sides; if I didn't have the professional side, because I probably would be at home all day long, I would be a horrible mother, but without the personal side, the work would eat me up, and I would end up being very bad at what I do." (P22)</i>
Focus	16 (8)	<i>"You choose the battles you are going to play much more, you become a much more practical person. So, I think it has helped me prioritize and evolve my priorities in life." (P34)</i>
Resilience	7 (6)	<i>"The truth is that you spend years that are crazy, it's crazy. What happens is that it makes you a survivor. It's also true that it forges a spirit of self-reliant survival." (P31)</i>
Drive	4 (4)	<i>"It was an important decision that I wanted to continue taking on interesting professional challenges." (P10)</i>
Learned skills and perspectives	<b>36 (19)</b>	<i>"I think I have grown a lot, especially with my little daughter, (...) who has made me grow the most globally, at a transformation level and a patience level." (P9)</i>

## Theme 3: Support resources

Codes	References (Participants)	Representative Quote
Company support	<b>11 (10)</b>	<i>"Every time I have left for maternity leave, I have come back with a different position. My maternity has meant I did not want to leave the office at 9 p.m. as I used to leave prematernity (...). I am proud of it because it was quite a model for many women in the company." (P18)</i>
Family support	<b>12 (8)</b>	<i>"My husband has always taken care of them, if not 50 percent, then more, sometimes, depending on the moment." (P28)</i>
Domestic service	<b>9 (8)</b>	<i>"For me, a first point was how I organized myself from a personal perspective to free myself professionally. I looked for my formula, which cost me a lot of money, but it also helped me to be a boss because I managed to have a person at home with whom I am still 24 years later, giving me a lot of stability." (P31)</i>

## Theme 1: Motherhood-work conflict

Among the 34 interviewees, 12 reported challenges in reconciling the demands of motherhood with the pace of their professional trajectories. Sub-themes clustered under this theme include: (1) Delaying childbearing, (2) Waiving of maternity leave, and (3) giving up family time, identified as

the most prevalent conflict among Spanish women leaders. This aligns with the conflicts outlined by Ford et al. (2007), with sacrificing family time emerging as the most prominent.

### *Delaying childbearing*

A minority of female executives in our sample detailed the conflicts between motherhood demands and their career paths. Four participants (7, 8, 13, and 17) regretted delaying motherhood or not having more children due to professional commitments.

### *Waiving of maternity leave*

Three informants in our study sacrificed portions of their maternity leave under Spanish law due to career considerations. Specifically, Participant 22 shortened her leave for a promising job offer; Participant 30 didn't add accrued vacation to her maternity leave, and Participant 13 prioritized work commitments.

### *Giving up family time*

Sacrificing family time emerged as a recurrent theme among nine participants. They reported relinquishing everyday familial activities due to their professional obligations. Participant 19 highlighted the inability to conduct routine tasks such as school drop-offs and pick-ups. Participant 13 noted the difficulty in finding family leisure time. Participant 15 gave a vibrant account:

*“My whole obsession was to get home at 9 p.m. so I could bathe them, see them for a little while, tell them the story, and so on. It was tough for me.” (P15)*

Several participants lamented missed family moments. Participant 21 shared her child's written wish for her earlier return, while participants 25, 30, and 6 conveyed regrets over insufficient family time and acknowledged a desire for change. After negotiating a shorter work week, Participant 1 stated: “My life sucks because I'm traveling all day, and I have a baby, and I want to be with him” (P1). Lastly, Participant 8 mentioned feeling guilty but emphasized the importance of letting go of self-blame.

## **Theme 2: Motherhood-work enrichment**

Significantly, over twice as many participants (23) noted motherhood-work enrichment than conflict. Two main subthemes emerged from the resources identified by Greenhaus and Powell (2006): Acquired psychological and physical resources and Learned skills and perspective. MWE can be defined as the mutually beneficial interplay between motherhood and professional work, particularly for female executives. This concept recognizes how motherhood enhances both domains when integrated into professional life. It involves acquiring psychological and physical resources (such as work and family life harmony, prioritization, resilience, and courage), developing skills and perspectives, and accruing increased social capital. In the managers' discourses, social capital emerged as a source of mutual enrichment from their dual roles. However, the positive impact of work experience on family life was more evident. One participant illustrated this by describing how her executive role diversified her personal experiences, offering her daughters an undivided image of womanhood and enriching family life: “This is also transferred to the education of your children. The conversations in my house are of a different kind” (P20).

### *Acquired psychological and physical resources*

Sixteen mothers underscored the positive impact of motherhood on their managerial roles, mainly through resource generation. The interviews contained 39 references to acquiring psychological and physical resources, which can be grouped into four categories:

- **Harmony:** Eight participants described an enhanced sense of balance and completion, with one reflecting, “For me, motherhood provides a significant source of emotional and psychological stability. I feel good, complete. My children have granted me a sense of stability and harmony, removing my complexes” (P14). Participant 15 recounted a particularly challenging period when she was appointed CEO a month before her son was diagnosed with cancer. This intense situation, she believed, permitted her to maintain

emotional distance and balance in her professional life, “Being a mother has made me a better professional, and being a professional has made me a better mother” (P15).

- Focus: Motherhood engendered a capacity for focus, with one participant expressing, "My family centers me" (P22). Improved time management was noted, with Participant 27 elucidating, "You learn to understand much better the time you need to dedicate to each thing to get everything done." Including another life priority necessitates greater concentration, ensuring complete presence in each context, whether work or home. Participant 11 discussed how motherhood improved her decision-making and determination:  
*"Another takeaway for me is that sometimes you have to know where your red lines are. (...) Then I saw that in France, with two babies (...) I was heading towards professional suicide, so I said, 'hey, I want to go back to Spain..'"(P11)*
- Resilience: Many narratives highlighted resilience acquired through motherhood. Described as "a few years of madness... that makes you a survivor" (P31), participants acknowledged the tough juggling act, fostering resilience through significant effort, "I don't usually give up" (P22).
- Drive: Motherhood inspired drive and determination, with one participant stating, "My daughters are my driving force in life" (P23). This determination led to greater social engagement, as captured by Participant 20 "I have to get more involved".

### *Learned skills and perspectives*

After outlining the psychological resources, we explore how motherhood can shift life perspectives and skills through nineteen participants, challenging the belief that mother and professional roles are incompatible. Sixteen executives successfully integrated both roles while setting aside quality time for their children despite demanding work routines.

Specifically illustrating the contribution of motherhood, participant 33 noted, “I have learned as a mother and housewife, which greatly benefits my professional life”. Motherhood is perceived as a

transformative experience, “My daughter has fostered my greatest growth in terms of transformation and patience” (P9).

Three participants underscored empathy as a skill enhanced by motherhood. Participant 12 articulated, "I have learned what mothers learn, to be more patient, to listen more, to be more tolerant, to have more empathy, to try to put yourself in the other person's place".

Moreover, motherhood amplified multitasking abilities, increasing work efficiency: “What motherhood does is make you much more efficient in your working hours (P27)”.

Two women discussed the grounding worldview offered by children. Participant 11 noted:

*“I arrived as president of Spain to the elevator of my house, when I entered the door of my house, I was the last in line. My daughters only wanted their homework, tummy ache, and drawing. It was also a way of anchoring and contact with the primordial.” (P11)*

### **Theme 3: Support resources**

Examining themes related to environmental or situational factors, we shift to 'support resources' crucial for work-family compatibility. These resources include: (1) Company Support, (2) Family Support, and (3) Domestic Services.

#### *Company Support*

Female executives stress the importance of flexible working hours. They consider this flexibility and a supportive organizational culture, often crediting their supervisors. Participant 1 highlighted her American boss's support, enabling reduced work hours and a better work-life balance:

*"I had to organize myself. I declined some things, which enabled me to remain in the same job. It gave me life, as I could take her to school, be with my daughter, and run errands without stress." (P1)*



Additionally, some executives perceive their companies as highly accommodating during pregnancies and early child-rearing, "The fortune we have in the company... it hasn't limited me" (P22).

#### *Family Support*

Participants find family support invaluable, "I could not perform my job with the intensity that I do if I did not have a refuge at home" (P22). Significant backing often comes from partners, while children and parents also provide support.

*"My daughters have greatly assisted me, despite my frequent travels and lesser physical presence. They adapt to my schedule, assist me with tasks, and manage their needs, like school materials" (P9).*

Another participant expressed her deep appreciation for the family: "I take pride in belonging, if you want to call it that, to a wonderful tribe – both the one I was born into and the one I've created" (P6).

#### *Domestic Services*

Reliable domestic help emerged as essential, with Participant 11 stating, "having reliable domestic help...I think I have changed 'girls' twice in 20 years". Another executive mentioned, "I managed to have a person at home with whom I am still at home 24 years later and who gives me a lot of stability" (P31). The accessibility to domestic services was influenced by location, as noted by Participant 12: "The luck of living in Spain, which is a country where domestic service is well regarded and you can afford it".

#### **Theme 4: Obstacles to the compatibility of mother and manager roles**

In our sample, significantly more women discussed the support they received to balance motherhood with a demanding work schedule than those who mentioned barriers they encountered. Only six

women highlighted obstacles from two primary sources: hostile organizational culture and a lack of partner support.

#### *Hostile Organizational Culture*

Several participants described encountering barriers due to a hostile organizational culture upon becoming mothers. Participant 30 recalled her apprehension when informing her boss about her pregnancy and facing an adverse reaction. Another participant noted tangible impacts on her career progression, citing a lack of pay rise post-maternity leave (P19). Presumptive behavior from superiors also constrained professional opportunities, "we have had bosses who have presumed to make decisions for us" (P31).

#### *No Partner Support*

Only two female executives revealed challenges stemming from a lack of partner support. For instance, one participant shared her experience as a single mother after her divorce, highlighting the additional demands faced without a supportive partner: "There were days when I was drained" (P32).

## **4. Discussion**

The findings highlight motherhood as a decisive lever in career growth, challenging the common perception of it as a barrier to senior positions (Lyness & Grotto, 2018). Exploring the narratives of 34 women leaders in Spain, we observe that motherhood has not hindered their careers, contrasting with the "motherhood penalty" view (Brown, 2010; Burgess, 2013). Our research underscores motherhood's positive impact on leadership skills and career development in top executive roles.

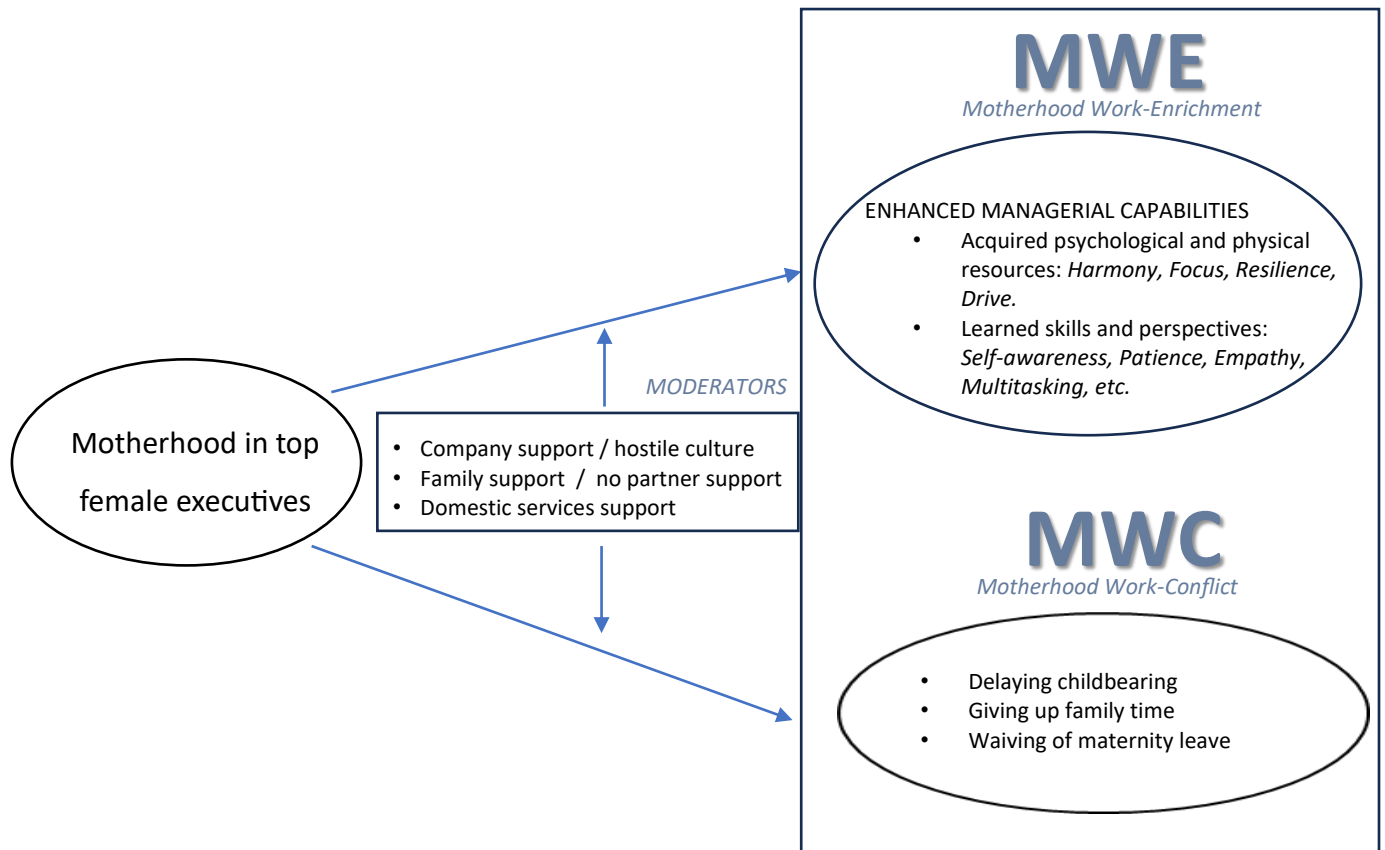
The results of this study align with existing proposals that suggest a positive relationship between the work and family environment, referred to as positive contagion (Hanson et al., 2006), facilitation (Grzywacz & Butler, 2005), and the widely accepted concept of enrichment (Lapierre et al., 2018). The interviewed women acknowledged the conflicts and obstacles that arise from balancing family

life and careers, but they constructed a discourse emphasizing the enriching nature of integrating these roles. Active participation in both managerial tasks and family responsibilities increases the likelihood of positive experiences and enhances women's well-being (Barnett et al., 2018). The accumulated experience was evident in the accounts obtained, with successful outcomes being a common theme in the discourses. Despite describing the MWC, they experience MWE to a greater extent.

The WFE framework, as Greenhaus and Powell (2006) outlined, has significantly advanced our understanding of the intricate interplay between work and family roles. However, within this comprehensive framework, the specific role of motherhood has not received the nuanced scrutiny it deserves. Our paper seeks to address this gap by introducing the concept of MWE as a sub-construct within WFE, acknowledging the unique impact of motherhood on women's professional lives. The rationale for this new sub-construct MWE lies around the idea that the role of motherhood possesses distinct characteristics that set it apart from other components within the work-family interface.

From this point, our contribution crystallizes in the preliminary proposal of a theoretical model (Figure 1) that represents the balance between conflict and enrichment in the experience of managing the roles of mother and top manager. In this model, MWE and MFC are represented as dependent variables, while the support received —from the family environment, the organization, and domestic services— and its counterpart, the obstacles, act as moderating factors. Moreover, the presence or absence of this support determines whether the dual role results in a perception of enrichment or conflict. The model encapsulates senior executives' experiences of the positive impact of motherhood on their leadership, illustrating the dynamics of MWE, and highlighting the psychological and physical resources acquired, as well as the skills and perspectives learned.

**FIGURE 1. Balancing Motherhood and Top Executive Roles**



Source: Authors own work

The narratives of these women challenge traditional notions of the dichotomy between professional roles and motherhood, portraying a more flexible and inclusive model where both roles coexist harmoniously. We have identified the five theoretical categories exposed by Greenhaus & Powell's (2006) framework and grouped them into two main areas: MWE, which encompasses the categories 1) Skills and perspectives, 2) Psychological and Physical Resources, and 3) Social Capital; and a second group "Support" which includes 4) Flexibility and 5) Material Resources.

Female managers feel they sacrifice their family more than their male counterparts due to the societal expectation of caregiving, creating a career barrier and highlighting the conflict between motherhood and management. Two polarities emerge: some interviewees associate motherhood with sacrifices and the distress of 'not being able to reach everything,' termed MWC. At the same time, a larger group sees it as a catalyst for professional growth. This aligns with Ruderman et al. (2002), who argue that different roles can enhance leadership skills. We name this positive impact on career

progression as MWE. In the narratives of these senior executives, specific mechanisms emerge that enhance leadership competencies. Aligned with Carson et al.'s (2006) framework, particularly its three family-to-work dimensions, their improved ability to manage urgent tasks—optimizing workdays and minimizing distractions—reflects Family Work Efficiency. Motherhood shifts their perspectives, deepening self-awareness and interpersonal skills, strengthening relational competencies, and aligning with Work Family Development. Moreover, the emotional bonds formed with their children enhance resilience and promote a more harmonious work-life balance, corresponding to the Family Work Affect, while increasing drive and determination in both professional and personal realms.

Following Lapierre et al. (2018), who differentiated between personal and contextual characteristics among the antecedents of WFE, we distinguish two themes from a personal perspective: MWE and MWC, and two more themes related to situational conditions: Support and Obstacles, represented in our proposal as moderators. “Support” is the second most significant node in the female executives' narratives, representing external resources that help reconcile the mother and manager roles. This aligns with findings by Michaelides et al. (2023), as it encompasses the family context and company dynamics, where a culture of flexibility and support from the line manager is crucial. Our results also echo the research conducted by Khattar & Agarwal (2023) on Indian women entrepreneurs, where spousal and family support at emotional and instrumental levels emerged as crucial factors in the context of motherhood and career progression. Notably, our participants introduced domestic service as a cost-effective support in Spain, where outsourcing domestic tasks to migrant workers plays a critical role (Hellgren & Serrano, 2019).

Our study builds on the benefits Grzelakowski (2005) identified in his interviews with 50 women leaders. In the context of MWE, our executives emphasize acquired psychological and physical resources. These include compatibility of managerial and maternal roles, harmony from thriving in both realms, prioritization skills, resilience, and the drive to face challenges. “Harmony”—a sense of balance and completion in the interplay of motherhood and managerial roles—echoes Schueller-

Weidekamm & Kautzky-Willer's (2012) findings, where female physician leaders recognized maternity as fostering a positive 'spillover effect.'

#### **4.1 Practical implications**

Our study offers an insider account of motherhood experiences among top female executives, inspiring women in managerial positions aspiring to advance their careers while balancing personal lives. Having women role models in leadership positions is important (Johnson & Williams, 2020).

In terms of organizational implications, our insights can help companies dismantle prejudices about the negative impact of motherhood on women's careers and strongly support policies that facilitate work-life balance. Companies aiming to attract and retain the best talent must implement flexibility policies and offer additional support for women facing motherhood (Schueller-Weidekamm & Kautzky-Willer, 2012), such as marital counseling. Moreover, creating peer support groups would help women enhance their coping resources when facing these challenges (McLeish & Redshaw, 2017).

Transitioning to family-supportive cultures is essential, as motherhood can foster women's leadership qualities. Highlighting the positive influence of motherhood on professional growth challenges the conventional view that it restricts women's career progression. The insights from this study can be generalized to women in other contexts, as Spain's situation is representative of other developed countries. The gender equality figures in Spain align with the European average (EIGE, 2023), and some findings are consistent with evidence from the Bright Horizons (2019) study in North America.

#### **4.2 Limitations and future research lines**

Three crucial considerations contextualize these narratives of successful work-family integration and guide future research. First, our sample includes only successful female top executives with a healthy socio-economic status, providing access to material resources that support work-family compatibility. For a more nuanced understanding of motherhood's impact on career paths, studying

middle-management women and those from diverse socio-economic backgrounds could be revealing. Investigating whether motherhood hinders their progress could offer key insights into tackling the gender disparity in upper management.

Second, a potential limitation is social desirability bias, where participants may adjust responses to align with societal expectations. However, this bias is likely minimized in this study as references to motherhood emerged organically rather than through direct questioning. Future studies could mitigate this using anonymous surveys.

Third, our study included 34 female Spanish managers, a limitation due to its cross-sectional design. Future research should expand with larger, diverse samples across industries and countries to confirm motherhood's positive spillover on career growth in top executive roles.

Finally, our preliminary theoretical model of MWE could inspire future studies, as a more experimental approach to understanding the behaviors exhibited by effective leaders is necessary (Banks, 2023). Establishing causal relationships between maternal role behaviors and leadership, alongside longitudinal designs, could examine how top women's experiences impact MWE over time.

## **5. Conclusion**

The narratives highlight the positive integration of motherhood with managerial roles, enriching professional life and reframing career obstacles as growth opportunities.

This paper introduces the novel sub-construct of MWE within the WFE framework (Humphrey et al., 2024; Lapierre et al., 2018; McNall et al., 2010) and proposes a preliminary model to explain MWE in the context of mother-top manager role concurrence. These leaders have utilized motherhood to enhance leadership capabilities, thus supporting female career advancement.

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