

## **WELCOME TO THE GIRLS' CLUB**

A qualitative study on the true motivations for organizational investment in  
Women Leadership Development Programs

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*For most organizations the reality is that women still remain underrepresented at senior levels. In combination with strategic challenges, initiatives that aim to reduce gender imbalances at the higher levels of organizations is both an ethically and strategically correct move to make. Therefore, companies devote much resources to the improvement of gender diversity and one commonly utilized strategy is to invest in Women Leadership Development Programs (WLDPs). Even though the aim of such initiatives is to increase the amount of women in senior leadership positions, there is little evidence showing that those kinds of programs actually reach this goal. Despite this, companies continue to invest in WLDPs. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to combine the organizational and member perspectives, thereby gaining a greater understanding of the true motivations behind organizational investment in WLDPs that goes beyond the obvious reason of an increased proportion of women at senior levels. The study adopts a qualitative approach and is based on thirteen interviews with women that have participated in a WLDP as well as people who are responsible for the design of or the investment in such programs. Empirical findings show that the main reason for organizational investment in WLDPs is to give women an opportunity to meet and interact with other female leaders, rather than increasing the amount of women in senior leadership positions. In addition, such investments signal commitment to the gender diversity issue and enables companies to avoid doing something about the real challenge of changing the corporate culture. Thus, the study contributes theoretically by explaining why companies choose to invest in WLDPs despite the fact that they do not fulfil their initial purpose, and empirically by suggesting that companies need to carefully consider whether the use of WLDPs is preferable in relation to company-specific circumstances.*

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Keywords: Women Leadership Development Programs, Gender equality, Female leadership, Second generation gender bias

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## DEFINITIONS

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| <b>High potential/Talent</b>                         | Employees that are identified as ready, willing, and able to perform in their immediate next role and/or possess latent, long-term quality to provide leadership in the future after being identified and nurtured (HayGroup, 2006)  |
| <b>Identity work</b>                                 | The range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept (Snow & Anderson, 1987, p. 1348)  |
| <b>Leadership development</b>                        | Expanding the collective capacity of organizational members to engage effectively in leadership roles and processes (McCauley et al., 1998)  |
| <b>General Leadership Development Program (GLDP)</b> | An activity of teaching leadership qualities to individuals with the aim of improving their capacity to successfully perform in leadership roles within organizations  |
| <b>Male-dominated organizational structures</b>      | Setting in which men predominate and where leadership is equated with behaviours believed to be more common or appropriate in men, thus communicating that women are ill-suited for leadership roles (Eagly & Carli, 2007)   |
| <b>Member</b>  | A woman that have previously been or currently are participating in a WLDP   |
| <b>Mixed-sex programs</b>                            | In this thesis, this concept is defined as GLDPs where the large majority of participants is men   |
| <b>Second generation gender bias</b>                 | Powerful yet invisible barriers to women's advancement that arise from cultural beliefs about gender, workplace structures, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently favour men while putting women at a disadvantage (Calás & Smircich, 2009; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Kolb & McGinn, 2009; Sturm, 2001) |
| <b>Transformative learning</b>                       | The process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162)   |
| <b>Women Leadership Development Program (WLDP)</b>   | A leadership program developed for women specifically and which only includes female participants  |

# 1. INTRODUCTION

*Organizations are increasingly taking the gender diversity issue seriously, dedicating valuable resources to the development of female leaders. However, there is little evidence of the return on this investment in terms of its impact on the number of females reaching senior leadership positions. This chapter addresses gender inequality in organizations and the efforts aimed at building and maintaining a strong pipeline of female talent. Furthermore, the theoretical and empirical problematization (1.1), purpose (1.2), expected contribution (1.3), research question (1.4), and delimitations (1.5) are presented.*

From the time of birth, males and females are socialized differently. While males develop masculine orientations and adopt masculine roles, females develop feminine orientations and adopt feminine roles (Ely & Padavic, 2007; Lorber, 1994; Ridgeway 2009; Sandberg, S. 2013). Masculinity is seen as hierarchically superior to femininity, which produces inequality between men and women (Gilligan, 1982; Lorber, 1994; Miller, 2006). Common for most cultures is that the perception of leadership is synonymous to maleness and is demonstrated through masculine behaviours such as assertiveness, aggressiveness, and competitiveness (Eagly & Wood, 1982; Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ridgeway & Correll, 2000). Despite this, previous literature points to the existence of a female leadership advantage (Eagly, 2007; Helgesen, 1990; Helgesen & Johnson, 2010; Rosener, 1990) by showing that women are more likely to pursue a leadership style that focuses on the mentoring and empowerment of followers (Eagly, 2007; Eagly et al., 2003). However, a discussion whether a female advantage exists becomes pointless in the light of today's reality, where a dominance of organizational hierarchies in which men predominate in combination with practices that equate leadership with behaviours believed to be more common or appropriate in men, communicate that women are not suited for leadership roles (Ely et al., 2011). When those beliefs accumulate, it creates a situation that complicates women's ability to see herself, and be seen by others, in a leadership role (Ely et al., 2011). The outcome is self-sealing: women's underrepresentation in leadership positions confirms the deeply rooted systems and beliefs that help and support men on their path to leadership (Ely et al., 2011).

Research that investigates why women remain a minority in leadership positions previously focused on systems and behaviours that were specifically intended to exclude women. Today, research has moved towards considering the impact of the so-called "second generation" forms of gender bias, which are defined as *"the powerful yet often invisible barriers to women's advancement that arise from cultural beliefs about gender, as well as workplace structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently favour men while putting women at a disadvantage"* (Calás & Smircich, 2009; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Kolb & McGinn, 2009; Sturm, 2001). Despite a lack of discriminatory intent, subtle second generation gender biases can inhibit women's leadership development, because constructing and internalizing a leader identity is central to the process of becoming a leader (DeRue & Ashford, 2010b; Ibarra et al., 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005). For the last 25 years, women have claimed managerial positions at approximately the same rate as men, but are still noticeably underrepresented at senior levels (Ely et al. 2011; SCB, 2014), proves the existence of second generation

gender bias. Furthermore, studies conducted during the last three decades, point to the stagnation of female advancement into top organizational positions (Vial et al., 2016). In a survey of more than 25,000 Harvard Business School graduates, Ely et al. (2014) found that even though male and female graduates have similar ambitions, women that are as educated as men in relevant fields and participate as much in the professional workforce are not reaching higher management levels at the same rate as men (Noland et al., 2016). In fact, the progress in women's advancement that has been accomplished over the past several decades, has experienced a significant slowdown in more recent years (Carter & Silva, 2010).

To no surprise, women in the US currently comprise about six percent of the CEO positions at S&P 500 companies and are still in a minority position throughout the organizational hierarchies (Catalyst, 2017a). The situation in Europe is just as dismal: among the largest publicly listed companies in the EU, women make up fifteen percent of executives and only five percent of CEOs (Catalyst, 2017b). In Sweden we feel proud of being one of the highest ranking countries in the world when it comes to gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2015; UNDP, 2016) and Sweden is often portrayed as being on the forefront of gender equality work (Lewis & Rake, 2008). Yet, a study that was carried out on behalf of the Swedish government shows that Sweden is still far from achieving gender equality in the labour market and that men are in majority in top management positions (SOU, 2014). According to a gender equality report from 2015, only ten percent of the CEOs of the 1050 largest companies in Sweden are women and only five percent of the 266 publicly listed companies in Sweden have female CEOs. The report also states that it will take another 50 years until there are as many female as male CEOs in Sweden (Ledarna, 2015).

Bearing in mind that organizations with a larger proportion of women perform better than those with a smaller proportion, makes it necessary for companies to take action (DDI, 2015). In fact, a recent study showed that a typical firm can achieve a fifteen percent increase in profitability by expanding its share of female leaders from zero to 30 percent (Noland et al., 2016). Furthermore, European companies are more likely to experience strong stock price growth when there is a higher proportion of women in senior management (Desvaux et al., 2007) and companies that have a gender diverse workforce perform better financially (Hunt et al., 2015). However, the trend reveals that organizations have started to realize that they cannot ignore the importance of connecting leadership development to invisible barriers to women's career advancement, emphasizing the significance of including female individuals in order to achieve an actual impact (Ely et al., 2011; Noland et al., 2016).

## **1.1 Problematization**

Diversity as an organizational phenomenon has evolved to become an important competitive differentiator that shifts market share toward companies with a more balanced approach to gender (McKinsey & Company/Lean In, 2015). A study conducted by PwC (2015) reveals that in 2011 *“only twelve percent of CEOs said they saw poor retention of female talent as a key business challenge over the next three years and only eleven percent were*

*planning significant change to policies aimed at attracting and retaining more female employees*". In 2016, World Economic Forum found that a majority of the 2,450 companies included in their survey, considered female talent as a key feature of future workforce strategy. Furthermore, 53 percent of the respondents had made the encouragement of female participation a priority at senior levels and 58 percent were convinced of the effectiveness of their current activities addressing the issue. Evidently, many companies take the gender diversity issue seriously and dedicate valuable resources to address the current state of gender imbalance.

The challenge for organizations to attract female talent and develop female leaders has resulted in a global trend where organizations are turning to leadership development programs designed specifically for women. Women Leadership Development Programs (WLDPs) have become common in order to increase the number of females that reach senior leadership positions, attract female talent for the future, enhance long-term career commitment, and ensure that women reach their full potential (Hewlett, 2007; Zahidi & Ibarra, 2010; Ely et al., 2011). In light of the existing gender imbalances at the more senior levels in organizations, the growth of WLDPs is understandable as they are thought to facilitate the process of balancing and managing a more diverse workforce and to attract, retain, and promote female talent.

Although many organizations aim for gender equality and commit to gender diversity issues, their good intentions and commitment do not always result in visible action as women still perform a "vanishing act" on their path to higher-level leadership positions (Visser, 2011). This is problematic as WLDPs require a rather large and long-term investment of time and capital. Consequently, most executives who put gender diversity on top of their strategic agenda by, for example, establishing goals for the proportion of women in leadership roles and ensuring that the group of candidates for senior positions consists of people with diverse backgrounds, will be left feeling unsatisfied (Ibarra et al., 2013). Together with research that shows positive effects of diversity on firm performance and profitability, this emphasizes the importance for companies to become more successful in producing gender equity (Noland et al., 2016; Debebe et al., 2016). Considering the disappointingly low numbers of women in senior positions, it is questionable if WLDPs effectively contribute to the organizational aim of improving gender balance at the more senior levels in organizations. The limited knowledge about the connection between WLDP outcomes, in terms of increasing the number of women in senior leadership positions, and the organizational choice of increasingly invest in such initiatives, is worrying, as the goal of these programs is to tear down barriers to female career advancement and help women grow, thus enabling them to reach leadership positions within the organization.

Despite some success cases, a recent study by McKinsey & Company and Lean In (2015) shows that a large number of companies express frustration over the absence of more concrete results from WLDP initiatives. In addition, a study by Silva et al. (2012) reveals that among those who participated in a leadership development program, 51 percent of men versus 37 percent of women were promoted within a year after



completion. They conclude that WLDPs alone will *“not fully develop the next generation of leaders, nor are such programs likely to close the gender gap”*. However, these findings do not necessarily mean that WLDPs are not important in developing female leaders. Since WLDPs fail to show satisfactory results in terms of increasing the number of women in senior leadership positions, a possible explanation for organizational investment in WLDPs is that they have indirect positive effects on both the organization and its members, which are difficult to discover.

There is still little understanding of why organizations increasingly invest in WLDPs despite the lack of concrete and satisfactory results on gender equality. Considering the importance and the many benefits of increasing the number of women in senior leadership positions discussed previously, it should be a higher priority to evaluate the effectiveness of approaches to establish gender equality. By reviewing existing WLDP research this study aims to find additional reasons for organizational investment in WLDPs. Furthermore, it will have the potential to explain how elements of WLDPs are perceived by a second group of stakeholders, namely the member participating in the program. Studies on WLDP members remain scarce, which is why we think that it is important to compare the organizational and member perspectives, seeking both similarities and discrepancies that can be of interest in moving forward with the use of WLDPs as a strategy for increasing the number of women in senior leadership.

## **1.2 Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to establish a greater understanding of why companies choose to invest in female-only leadership training. We want to gain deeper knowledge about the issue that goes beyond the obvious reasons for WLDP investment, namely to increase the number of women in senior leadership positions. The above sections present several factors that validate the relevance of the research topic as well as why it will add applicable knowledge since gender equality in organizational leadership is becoming even more important for the profitability and future success of companies. Meanwhile, available evidence reveals that WLDPs might not be the most suitable strategy in order to increase the amount of female leaders at top positions. As two young female students about to enter professional life, we hope to add to current literature on WLDPs by investigating whether there actually is a need for WLDPs. Our aim is to do so by critically examine the true motivation behind organizations' decision to invest in WLDPs as well as members' perceptions of participating.

## **1.3 Contribution**

The theoretical contribution is two-fold as the study will (i) result in a deeper understanding as to why organizations invest in leadership training unique to women, i.e. organizational outcomes that are difficult to detect by only measuring how such initiatives correlate with the number of women in senior leadership positions, and (ii) shed light on the role that WLDPs have in developing and retaining the organization's current pool of female talents. Thus, the study contributes theoretically to the rather scarce field of WLDP

research and empirically to organizations that want to make wise decisions regarding their investments in developing, attracting, and retaining female talent. By viewing WLDPs both through the perspective of the organization and the individual partaking in the programs, we hope to contribute with additional insights to guide WLDP thinking and practice that have the potential to support meaningful change for gender equity.

#### **1.4 Research question**

Taken together, this has led to the research question presented below:

##### ***Why do organizations invest in Women Leadership Development Programs?***

We divide this overarching question into four more narrowly defined research questions in order to examine possible explanations to why organizations invest in WLDPs.

- i) What are the underlying assumptions that motivate WLDP investment?*
- ii) What are the main organizational benefits of investing in WLDPs?*
- iii) What is the overall perception<sup>1</sup> of partaking in a WLDP for the member?*
- iv) What are the main benefits of partaking in a WLDP for the member?*

#### **1.5 Delimitations**

In this thesis, delimitations have been made to increase internal validity and ensure a realistic scope of the study. First, this study focuses on one orientation within leadership programs in general, namely those developed for women. Second, as these programs are mainly necessary and more common within male-dominated structures, this study is delimited to organizations that are characterized by those kinds of structures. Third, as national differences may exist, we have also chosen to limit this study to Sweden.

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis the generic term “perception” includes: member’s experiences, feelings, attitudes, and behaviours.

## 2. THEORY

*This chapter consists of a literature review that presents existing research within the field of WLDPs. In order to facilitate the reader's understanding of current WLDP research, the literature review will be divided into four parts. Section 2.1 introduces the topic by presenting the background. This is followed by section 2.2, which reviews the key contributions within WLDP research from both the organizational and member perspectives, and section 2.3, which presents the theoretical framework. The chapter ends with section 2.4 and the identified research gap.*

### 2.1 Background

The underutilization of the female workforce negatively affects business performance. This global trend must be regarded as a contradiction to a growing global marketplace (Schuler et al., 2011) in combination with a generation shift in the workforce (Tarique & Schuler, 2010) that together create an intense competition for talented people. Only the companies that can handle these two pressures at the same time and tap into the best talent, both women and men, will have an advantage over those that continue to rely on men to fill top positions. Reasons to why women remain underrepresented in leadership are complex (Ely et al., 2011). Ely et al. (2011) theorized that male-dominated organizational structures create organizational cultures that “*equate leadership with behaviours believed to be more common or appropriate in men, powerfully if unwittingly communicate that women are ill-suited for leadership roles*” (p. 475). Such organizational patterns where women are less integrated into dominant coalitions reduce their chances of being recruited for higher status positions (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003; Ely et al., 2011; Tessens et al., 2011).

Given the strategic importance of shaping tomorrow's leaders, many companies extend their traditional leadership development strategy and add initiatives such as high-potential programs as well as mentoring and skills training (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003; Garman, 2010; Kim & Thompson, 2012). By establishing those initiatives, organizations also aim to reach gender diversity and close the gender gap. Evidence shows that diversity initiatives could possibly result in crucial benefits for the promotion of more female leaders; an increased proportion of female employees in organizations make it possible for women to benefit from network support, reduced stereotypes and biases, as well as greater access to organizational resources (Ely, 1995; Bilimoria, 1995; Kanter, 1977; McKinsey & Company/Lean In, 2015). Increased organizational ability to recruit, hire, and advance women, is an additional benefit of more female promotions to leadership positions (Cohen et al., 1998). Thus, establishing initiatives that aim to reduce gender imbalances at the higher levels of organizations is both an ethically and strategically correct move to make (Mikkola, 2005; World Bank, 2012).

Even though leadership development programs are an important factor for stimulating future operational growth (Dragoni et al., 2014; Hirschfeld & Thomas, 2011; Kim & Thompson, 2012; Simmonds & Tsui, 2010; Smith-Doerr et al., 2011) most of these fail to meet the distinctive needs of women (Ely, et al., 2011; Hopkins et al., 2008; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003). The obvious solution has been the development of

unique leadership programs designed specifically for women, which aim to facilitate the emergence of new competent and female leaders (Dreher, 2003). Thus, organizations support the implementation of WLDPs to address the specific developmental and instructional needs of women (Anderson et al., 2008; Debebe, 2011; Hopkins et al., 2008; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003). In a recent study by Sugiyama et al. (2016), WLDPs and general leadership development programs (GLDPs) were compared to study significant differences. It was discovered that WLDPs better facilitate the development of women's self-awareness and leadership identity by focusing on relational connections and the identification of strengths, which emerge from navigating the challenges of contradictory expectations between women's roles in general and leadership roles in particular. GLDPs, however, support traditional masculine views of leadership where the desired outcomes are of a competitive nature. In line with these findings, Debebe (2011) concludes that WLDPs aim to provide members with the opportunity to interact with peers who are uniquely fit to give necessary support, validation, and social comparison in order to figure out who they are as leaders.

WLDPs are used by many organizations as a tool to change organizational culture for assumptions and norms that perpetuate gender inequality, which exclude and denigrate women (Debebe et al., 2016). But successful organizational change for gender equality is complex and includes the implementation of long-term, multilevel, simultaneous, and comprehensive structural and cultural change processes that embed WLDPs and parallel leadership development of employees at senior levels in the organization (Bilimoria et al., 2008; Bilimoria & Liang, 2012). While addressing elements such as recruitment processes, advancement mechanisms, job titles, work schedules, policies, and the physical environment is necessary to create structural change, cultural change includes initiatives that surface and challenge gendered assumptions shaping how people think, feel, and act (Debebe et al., 2016).

## **2.2 Review of key WLDP research**

In this thesis, we have chosen to divide the review of WLDP research into two connected perspectives. The organizational perspective focuses on past research from the angle of the actor designing or investing in the programs, while the member perspective concerns participants' perception regarding WLDPs and the outcomes of partaking in such a program. The review aims at providing the reader with an overview of important research pieces in order to construct a broad conception of how WLDPs are used to promote leadership development among women (Debebe et al., 2016). This will be achieved by examining the pedagogical assumptions underlying how WLDPs define leadership, how they address relational and identity-based approaches to leadership development, and how they create an understanding of oneself and others in the development of leadership.

### **2.2.1 WLDPs and the organizational perspective**

Existing literature from this perspective explores the organizational goals of WLDP investments, which includes the attraction, development, retention, and advancement of high-achieving women in the

organization (Hewlett & Rashid, 2011; Ely et al., 2011). Common for this branch of research is that authors ground their research on the presumption that the idea of leadership in most cultures is synonymous to maleness and is expressed through masculine behaviours such as assertiveness, aggressiveness, and competitiveness (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ridgeway & Correll, 2000). Women face an organizational reality where they have to negotiate to overcome disadvantage and unfair treatment, which raises awareness of and push back on gendered structures and work practices (Ely & Padavic, 2007; Bowles et al., 2010; Ely & Rhode, 2010; Ely et al., 2011; Sandberg, 2013; McKinsey & Company/Lean In, 2015). Consequently, in order to improve gender balance at top levels in the organization as well as make sure that high-potential women are not hindered by their gender but instead reach their full potential, companies look for programs aimed at female promotion in particular (Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Zahidi & Ibarra, 2010). Research from this perspective, highlights the objectives of WLDPs to promote women by letting them experience transformative learning in a supportive environment (Debebe, 2011), learn by being in a majority position (Ely et al., 2011), develop learning strategies, networks, role models, mentors, and a leader identity (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003), and find ways to stay true to themselves while at the same time developing as a leader (Anderson et al., 2008).

Research that belong to the organizational perspective is based on the assumption that the design on WLDPs must take into account how unfair gender dynamics negatively affect a woman and make it difficult for her to claim leader roles (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000). When such stereotypical roles are recognized by the organization, it is possible for women to circumvent the undesirable act of overcompensation by enacting hyper-masculine demeanour (Ely et al., 2011). Thus, by examining women's ways of acquiring knowledge, it becomes evident that their development needs in preparation for leadership in organizations differ from those of men (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003). Furthermore, WLDPs add to the elements of personal development and recognition of women's different ways of learning (Sinclair, 1995; 1997) a greater focus on talent management (Vinnicombe et al., 2013). To offer this crucial talent spotting mechanism, WLDP design should provide a diverse framework involving personal assessment, formalized training, feedback opportunities, experiential learning, coaching, mentorship, and network development, which are gender-distinctive and provided gender-sensitive instructional strategies (Debebe, 2011; Hopkins et al., 2008). In addition, Vinnicombe and Singh (2003) and Debebe (2011) argue that WLDP design should allow women to *“(i) personally develop and deeply assess their leadership philosophy; (ii) build greater effectiveness in their present positions; (iii) provide and receive feedback and coaching; (iv) participate in collaborative and experiential learning; (v) develop knowledge and expertise as a leader; (vi) connect with intentional mentors who provide candid and committed support; and (vii) internalize confidence needed for leadership success”*.

Although longstanding efforts made both within organizations and the academic field, Ely et al. (2011) conclude in their research that practitioners and educators lack a coherent, theoretically-based, and actionable framework for WLDP design and delivery. The lack of such a framework results in the adoption

of either an “add-women-and-stir” or a “fix-the-women” approach (Ely et al., 2011). The former means that organizations deliver the same programs to women as they do to men, assuming that gender does not or should not matter for leadership development (Martin & Meyerson, 1998). The latter is based on the assumption that gender does matter (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Organizations that adopt such an approach locate the problem in women and believe that females need to learn certain skills that come instinctively to their male counterparts, since they have not been socialized to compete successfully in the world of men (Ely et al., 2011). Ely et al. (2011) conclude that *“both approaches may impart some useful skills and tactics, neither adequately addresses the organizational realities women face not is likely to foster in participants a sustained capacity for leadership”*.

Consequently, a key issue within WLDP research is the overall focus on normative strategies to make participants reach intended leadership roles after completing the program. WLDP standardization may hinder leadership growth as it places women leaders within an impervious environment, and is therefore problematic (Debebe, 2011). Such “institutionalizing bias” provide organizations with counterproductive talent management systems that could possibly disrupt opportunities for women’s advancement, especially within male-dominated structures (Bauer & Baltes, 2002). Within the academic field, most researchers agree that WLDP design is ineffective if it lacks a sound pedagogical framework unique to women. Ely et al. (2011) points to a vital aspect of successful WLDPs, namely to add to normative leadership development strategies how women’s path to leadership is affected by gender, neither making women feel victimized nor blamed, and simultaneously cultivate in them a sense of agency. To reach the intended goals of promoting female talent, an essential WLDP design feature is to address the negative consequences that result from the encouragement of and expectations on women to exhibit those behaviours that are associated with traditionally male leadership (Ely et al., 2011; Mandell & Pherwani, 2003; Pratch & Jacobowitz, 1996). The implication for both practitioners and academics is that some design elements are essential to include in WLDPs to make them valuable for women. Reviewing approaches to design and delivery of WLDPs in light of impediments posed by second generation forms of gender bias, specifically three themes emerge as being essential to adapt from traditional leadership programs (Debebe et al., 2016).

The first design element to consider is feedback. Collecting, delivering, and processing feedback is necessary to build self-knowledge and increase awareness of the impact an individual has on others (Day, 2001, Conger & Toegel, 2003; Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007). Receiving and processing feedback should be closely related to developing member’s larger leadership purpose, which aims to shift their focus away from themselves, instead looking outward, and concentrate on shared goals and the work necessary to accomplish them (Morriss et al., 2011; Quinn, 2004).

The second design element to consider is networks. Exclusion from vital networks and a lack of occasions in which women get the chance to hear similar others reflect on their leadership development, are among

the most commonly cited barriers to women's leadership growth (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003). WLDPs acknowledge this barrier by including components to increase networking opportunities, expand the depth and range of developmental relationships, and highlight the advantages of networking (Day, 2001). WLDP design should encourage participants to explore how gender aspects affect their networks, pinpoint areas for improvement, develop strategies for building important relationships outside of the program (Ibarra, 1992; McPherson et al., 2001; Ibarra et al., 2010; Ely et al., 2011).

The third and last design element is the gender composition. This is especially important in the light of developing female leaders (Debebe et al., 2016). Research shows that women's safety in mixed-sex settings is reduced because of gendered pressures, which also disrupts the process of discovering the gendered aspects of their leadership experiences (Debebe, 2011; Ely, et al., 2011; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003). Tanton (1992) found that in leadership programs where the majority of participants were males, both men and women denied the existence of gender differences. Evidently, the context where learning and experimentation is happening is a critical element of effective WLDPs (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010; Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007). The WLDP setting must evoke the participants' motivation to lead, because identifying and infusing the appropriate skills and competencies as if in a social vacuum will not create much value (Ibarra et al., 2013). Hence, WLDP members say that they have experienced greater confidence, sense of agency, expanded networks, skill development, and self-awareness (Debebe, 2011; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003; Willis & Daisley, 1997).

### **2.2.2 WLDPs and the member perspective**

Whereas the organizational perspective concerns the actors that design or invest in the program, this perspective looks into members' perception of WLDP participation, including experiences, feelings, attitudes, and behaviours. While theoretical literature based on the practical design and delivery of WLDPs is growing, only preliminary empirical research has been conducted on the lived experiences and internalization of WLDP training (Ely et al., 2011). Although understudied, the fundamental question of the member perspective considers how women develop leader identities and the internal and external processes that women go through during the training (Lord & Hall, 2005; van Knippenberg et al., 2004; DeRue & Ashford, 2010a; Ibarra et al., 2013). Becoming a leader, i.e. developing a leadership identity, cannot be considered in isolation from the social connections and relationships that foster it. Consequently, in the member perspective, theoretical hypotheses and discussions about leadership development as an identity transition (Day & Harrison, 2007; DeRue & Ashford, 2010a; Ibarra et al., 2010) is extended by also considering how gender dynamics affect the process of obtaining a leader identity (Hogue & Lord, 2007; Ely et al., 2011; Ibarra et al., 2013).

Women that are typically nominated for partaking in WLDPs are those who the organization defines as talents i.e., *"individuals that are perceived to possess characteristics, skills, and abilities that are necessary for the*

*organization's long-term success*" (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). Talents are described as those who possess a higher degree of work effort compared to other groups of people (Gelens et al., 2014). Being identified as a talent has positive effects on job satisfaction (Gelens et al., 2014) and talents that are nominated for general leadership development programs specifically have demonstrated leadership potential (Ely et al., 2011). The organizational actors that are responsible for choosing whom to nominate for GLDPs, believe that those kinds of programs facilitate members' transitions to more senior leadership roles (Ely et al., 2011). In the case of WLDPs, female talents should be provided with tools for taking effective action towards reaching leadership positions (Ely et al., 2011). However, some organizations adopt approaches that are problematic because they disregard the fact that becoming a leader involves much more than being put in a leadership role, acquiring new skills, and adapting one's style to the requirements of that role; it involves a fundamental identity shift. The process becomes even more problematic as organizations encourage women to strive for leadership positions while at the same time ignore doing anything about those policies and practices that communicate a mismatch between how women are seen by others and the qualities that typically are associated with leaders (Ely et al., 2011; Hopkins et al., 2008; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003). According to this branch of research, an essential goal of WLDPs is to leave participants with a more nuanced understanding of the effects of gender biases in organizations, how these affect their leadership development, and how they can tackle them (Ely et al., 2011).

According to Ruderman and Ohlott (2005), men and women have different ways of processing information, handling stress, relating to one another, and experiencing leadership, which is the result of biological, neurological, psychological, and communication differences. The same researchers also note that *"women are more likely than men to seek social contact in stressful situations, respond quicker to positive feedback, prompt personal and group improvements, blame themselves for poor performance, and use communication in collaborative ventures"*. Contrary to these findings, Hyde (2005) suggests that male and female leaders are similar in most aspects and only small differences distinguish between the two. However, men and women are perceived differently despite behaving in the same way. Men that enact masculine behaviours are in line with cultural expectations and their actions are therefore seen as legitimate. On the contrary, women that enact the behaviours associated with leadership encounter a double-bind: while exhibiting feminine behaviours is seen as weak, enacting masculine behaviours in accordance with organizational role expectations is seen as aggressive (Catalyst, 2007; Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ibarra et al., 2013). Because of the double-bind, there is always some likelihood that any behaviour leads to a negative assessment of women's leadership capacity (Spender, 1982; Martin & Meyerson, 1998; Fletcher, 2004; Ibarra et al., 2010; Ely et al., 2011; Ibarra et al., 2013). Researchers have thus conceptualized two different types of female leadership styles that women utilize as a result of the above. One of them is directive and decisive and females that adopt this style are sometimes believed to lack empathy and inclusiveness (Ibarra & Sackley, 1995). The other style is sensitive and principled but also less energetic and visionary (Ibarra & Hunter, 2007). While WLDPs are based on the assumption that masculine leadership behaviours, such as assertiveness and powerfulness, do not match



well with the relational and collaborative strategies that female leaders utilize, traditional GLDPs value those kinds of traits (Berry & Franks, 2010; Boatwright & Egidio, 2003; Fine, 2009). With the aim of better fit a new leadership identity, women that are on their way to leadership often negotiate their gender identity and feel pressures to “fix” themselves (Ely & Meyerson, 2000).

Previous research on talent programs reveals that those employees that a company invest in are more likely to support the organization’s strategic priorities, show a higher degree of acceptance towards increasing performance demands, and demonstrate greater commitment to building competencies (Björkman et al., 2013). Organizational investments in their people are often followed by employee reciprocation (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), possibly requiring them to step outside of their comfort zone (Ely et al., 2011). Women that are anxious about their own capacity of remaining successful as they reach higher in the organizational hierarchy, may feel especially threatened by that need (Ely et al., 2011). This anxiety increases when the number of females at more senior levels is low, and make women even more vulnerable to the risk of failure (Ely et al., 2011). According to Ely et al. (2011), these worries and concerns emerge organically in the course of the WLDP. However, by talking to female peers about their experiences and strategies, women can overcome these negative feelings and learn how to effectively navigate the transition to leader roles (Ely et al., 2011). In doing so, participants are also able to better understand how personal and professional experiences have shaped them and how these experiences explain who they might become as leaders (Ely et al., 2011). Ruderman and Ohlott (2005) explains that such self-awareness supports WLDP members in their individual development by facilitating the process of recognizing their values, which leads to an improved ability to interact with and relate to others as well as choices that generate feelings of completeness.

High-achieving women who have put much effort into ensuring that their gender will not hinder them in their careers, sometimes find it difficult to admit that gender bias actually exists (Clayton & Crosby, 1992; Valian, 1998). On the other hand, some of them may blame gender bias instead of taking personal responsibility for obstacles that they have encountered throughout their careers (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). Therefore, WLDP participants are provided with the opportunity to “*surface, examine, and challenge these social defences [...] and construct coherent and actionable narratives about who they are and wish to become, grounded in candid assessments of the cultural, organizational, and individual factors shaping them*” (Ely et al., 2011). When participants understand that their experiences, which they previously thought were unique to them, are in fact shared with other women, they open up and become less defensive (Ely et al., 2006; Kolb & Blake-Beard, 2009; Davies et al., 2005). WLDP research also shows that participants have a tendency to show fear for the appearance of femininity: to perceived by others as un-leader-like (Bass, 1998; Spreitzer & Quinn, 1996). For this reason, WLDP participation should result in that female leaders develop and adopt identities that reflect and promote the values that they stand for, instead of defining themselves in relation to gender stereotypes, rejecting either stereotypically masculine or feminine orientations (Ely & Rhode, 2010; Morriss

et al., 2011; Ely, et al., 2011). Hence, an essential outcome for WLDP participants is to understand that gender and leader identities are formable (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Ely & Padavic, 2007) and that becoming a successful leader requires a strong willingness to learn and considerable amount of practice (DeRue & Ashford, 2010a). This is important as females have a tendency to reject strategies, such as networking and negotiating, because they feel inauthentic or believe that the use of them are what males do, instead searching for strategies that they are more comfortable with as women (Ely et al., 2011).

## 2.3 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework presented in figure 1 below was developed with the aim to guide the empirical research and enable a structured analysis of the collected data, thus facilitating the process of finding the answer to the research question and closing the identified knowledge gap presented in section 2.4. The framework illustrates our interpretation of the theoretical essence within WLDP research from an organizational and member perspective and is based on the previous literature review. However, the themes and categories are neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive. Rather, the framework is an attempt to concretize and structure the different themes of both the organizational and member perspectives, thereby facilitating our own process of developing the study as well as the reader's understanding of it.

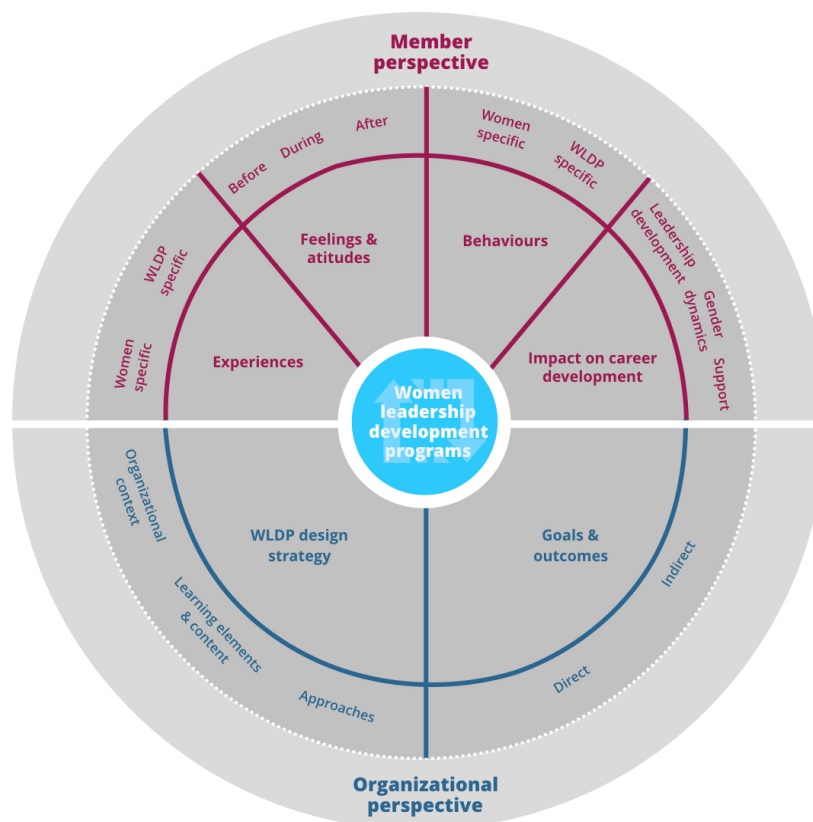


Figure 1: Theoretical framework

## **2.4 Research gap**

The above review of previous research within the literary field of WLDPs shows the existence of a knowledge gap. The identified gap is the result of a rather limited academic field that mainly focuses on understanding WLDPs from the perspective of the actor designing or investing in such programs, thereby contributing with only a limited explanation for organizational investment in WLDPs. On the other hand, the member perspective that concerns those individuals that partake in the program, is underutilized in trying to understand experiences and outcomes of WLDP participation. Reality reveals that even though WLDPs are designed with the aim of particularly promoting women, they do not result in improved diversity throughout senior leadership structures, which suggests that the latter vein of research might be insufficient.

By reviewing previous research, it becomes evident that these programs are based on assumptions about differences between men and women and women's inferior leadership situation compared to men. Organizations assume that women have not been socialized to compete successfully in the world of men (Ely et al., 2011) and therefore need to learn certain skills that come naturally to men (Ely et al., 2011). Furthermore, we can see that common for studies from both perspectives is that discussions are grounded in that WLDP participation has direct and positive effects on women's transition into leadership positions, thereby assuming that organizations are successful in recruiting and developing female talent in a way that increases business performance and aligns WLDP design with strategic goals of the organization. This, in turn, might lead to the assumption that investing in the development of high potential females, primarily through WLDPs, leads to a more gender diverse leadership composition. Yet, in most organizations women remain underrepresented at senior levels, which indicates that these programs may not play out according to expectations. The subsequent and only explanation as to why WLDPs fail, is that they do not efficiently handle the subtle gender bias that persists in organizations and disrupts the process of becoming a leader. This kind of theorizing about why WLDPs do not result in more female leaders take stance in the organizational perspective. In doing so, the thoughts and opinions of the women that participate in these programs are overlooked, with the result that possible experiences and outcomes not associated with leadership development per se, remain undiscovered. These in turn could be potential explanations as to why companies keep investing in WLDPs despite the fact that they do not contribute to an increase in the number of women in senior leadership positions. By combining the organizational and member perspectives, we hope to discover further reasons for organizational investment in WLDPs beyond increasing the proportion of female leaders in organizations, thus contributing to the existing research field by attempting to close the identified knowledge gap.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

*The following chapter discusses our choice of methodology. Section 3.1 presents the research considerations made, which is followed by section 3.2 that explains the research method and section 3.3 that concerns the chosen research approach. The chapter continues with section 3.4 that looks into the case study approach, section 3.5 that outlines the data collection process, and section 3.6 that explains how the data was analysed. The chapter ends with section 3.7 and a discussion on the quality of the collected data.*

#### 3.1 Research considerations

The ontology of this thesis assumes that social entities and their meaning are constantly shaped by the interaction between social actors, thus adopts a constructionist standpoint. Thereby, we question the view that phenomena such as organization and culture are pre-determined (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Therefore, this thesis focuses on the continuous organizational decision of investing time and money in WLDPs that results from the social interaction between individuals. In addition, the constructionist point of view facilitates the adoption of an interpretive epistemology, which focuses on understanding the social reality by looking into how individuals in a certain environment interpret that specific reality (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The interpretive tradition further challenges the positivistic view that advocates for complete scientific objectivity (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Together, these research considerations make it possible to examine the logic behind the organizational choice of investing and engaging in WLDPs.

#### 3.2 Research method

As we seek to gain a deep understanding of one subject specifically, rather than to investigate numerous subjects on a shallow level, a qualitative approach was deemed suitable. Such an approach creates good conditions for in-depth knowledge about the reasons for organizational investment in WLDPs beyond increasing the number of women in senior leadership positions, by allowing us to gather rich material through interviews. Furthermore, our choice is supported by the argument that a qualitative approach is preferable when adopting a constructionist and interpretive position (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Saunders et al., 2000) as well as when the research phenomenon is socially constructed (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2008).

#### 3.3 Research approach

The research approach of this thesis is of an abductive character, allowing the data collection process to take place in parallel with theory building (Taylor et al., 2002). In an abductive study, researchers develop the empirical scope successively and adjust theory accordingly. The choice of using abduction is justified by the argument put forward by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2008), stating that such an approach is appropriate when conducting a qualitative study. In addition, abductive reasoning is common in case study research (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2008; Dubois & Gadde, 2002). We began the research process by thoroughly scanning the literary fields of female leadership training, diversity management, gender equality, and barriers to female career advancement as well as other existing research relevant to the area of WLDPs. As the data

collection process began and the empirical scope started to take shape, we refined the theory section by removing research that we did not consider relevant enough.

### **3.4 Case study**

As the research question of this thesis is of an exploratory nature, examining why organizations characterized by a male-dominated structure keep investing in WLDPs, it was deemed suitable to use a case study approach to collect empirical data (Yin, 2013). Furthermore, it is appropriate to adopt this kind of approach as we investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2009). Rather than using a single case to gain deeper insights about that particular case (Yin, 2013), this thesis is of a cross-sectional nature, using several cases from which data is collected at a specific point in time (Bryman & Bell, 2011), as the aim is to delve deeper into a general phenomenon. In line with Stake's (1995) argument that the choice of case should be based on what could be learned from the study, we have put much effort into the process of evaluating and determining which cases to use.

#### **3.4.1 Selection of case objects**

As a result of the decision to use a cross-sectional approach, our initial idea was to select three companies of a similar nature and interview four employees responsible for WLDP investments and four program members per company. Before accepting a company into our study, a few requirements were set for the organization to fulfil. They had to (1) operate within the banking, technology, or management consulting industries because they are characterized by male-dominated structures, (2) offer leadership programs designed specifically for its female employees, (3) employ 40.000 people globally, and (4) be located in Stockholm. As the process of contacting case companies began, we put much effort into finding organizations that matched the pre-determined criteria and that were willing to participate in the study. However, we soon realized that we had to change approach as few of the requested companies that fulfilled the requirements were interested in being part of the study because of high workload or company policies that restricted them to partake in master theses. When realizing that it would be more difficult than expected we had to change the selection criteria. Instead of aiming for interviews with employees at three companies only, we contacted a larger amount of companies as the initial limit did not serve the purpose very well and would not help us reach better answers to the research question. We also relaxed the first criteria and decided that any company of male-dominated structures would be accepted into the study. In addition, the companies did not have to be as large as stated in criterion (3). As a result of this new approach, we came to consider each interviewee as single cases, which, according to Bryman and Bell (2011), is just another way of conducting a case study. The process of choosing the specific interviewees is further described in section 3.3.3. It is worth noting that the initial idea was to include a third perspective, female millennials, as we wanted to find out what future WLDP participants think of such initiatives in order to determine whether it will be beneficial for organizations to continue investing in those programs. We researched the literary field of millennial attitudes and behaviours toward gender equality and professional life, created an

interview guide, conducted eight interviews with female students at the Stockholm School of Economics, and coded the responses. Even though it was a tough decision to make, as the empirical findings were quite surprising and built a good foundation for an interesting analysis, the word limit of the thesis unfortunately kept us from including this perspective in the final product.

### **3.5 Data Collection**

Interviews are the most commonly used method within the qualitative field (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Based on the decision of research approach described in section 3.1.2, interviews were therefore deemed appropriate as the main data collection method for this study. Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted using pre-designed interview guides. Interviewees were selected based on snowball sampling, and all interviews were transcribed and analysed by both researchers as soon as possible after the interview had taken place, usually within one or two days.

#### **3.5.1 Semi-structured interview**

The aim of this study is to understand a phenomenon from the perspectives of two different stakeholders, which is why a semi-structured interview method was chosen. Such an approach is preferable because it offers great flexibility and leaves room for the interview participants to elaborate on topics as they wish, which is important to better understand their thoughts and opinions (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Furthermore, a semi-structured interview method is beneficial in this study since more than one researcher is involved, making it necessary with some degree of comparability (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Two separate interview guides were prepared in advance: one for organizations (Appendix 1) and one for program members (Appendix 2). Even though these were followed to some degree, we allowed ourselves to ask supplementary questions and did not always keep to the order of the guide.

#### **3.5.2 Interview design**

The interview guides were designed before the data collection process began. We decided to make the majority of questions rather broad with the aim of avoiding eventual influence on the respondent and thus receive answers that were a correct reflection of reality. We constantly reminded ourselves of the research question at hand in order to formulate questions of relevance and with true potential of contributing to the study. Furthermore, questions were made with theory in mind so that it would be possible to find links to reality, or the lack of them, in the subsequent analysis. In the interview guide for organizations, questions were related to (i) the underlying assumptions of female leadership and WLDPs in general, (ii) the content and design of WLDPs, and (iii) the benefits and outcomes of organizational investments in WLDPs. Questions in the interview guide for members were divided into five parts: (i) introductory questions, (ii) before WLDP participation, (iii) during WLDP participation, (iv) after WLDP participation, and (v) concluding questions. The questions in the interview guides also followed a logical order as suggested by Bryman and Bell (2011), although this was not strictly adhered to. Rather, the semi-structured approach

allowed us as researchers to build on the interviewees' responses and therefore ask further questions that we deemed relevant, which in the end proved advantageous for the study. To improve the relevance of the questions with regards to the research question, the interview guides were updated throughout the data collection process according to the participants' comments in the end of each interview.

### **3.5.3 Interview sample**

The majority of the data in this study is gathered from a total of thirteen interviews and interviewees were chosen on the basis of snowball sampling. Using this technique, researchers begin by approaching a smaller amount of people who are relevant for the study and then use these to get in contact with further respondents (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As the authors of this study, we initially asked our personal acquaintances if they knew anyone that (i) belonged to either of the aforementioned categories and (ii) that might be interested in participating in the study. We contacted them to find out whether they had the possibility of making time for an interview. These people then referred us to others in their network that could be interesting for us to meet. Even though we were provided with these referrals and necessary contact information, it was difficult to find women that had the time and were willing to participate in the study, as some do not feel comfortable speaking about the chosen topic. In addition, to ensure a certain degree of empirical relevance and up to date conclusions, a few people that showed interest in being interviewed were rejected because of different reasons. For example, some of them had participated in a general leadership development program designed for both men and women, while we wanted to meet those that had been part of a GLDP for women specifically. Please see Appendix 3 for complete information about the interview sample.

### **3.5.4 Setting and documentation**

We agree with Bryman and Bell (2011) that the identities, thoughts, and opinions of the interview participants should be kept confidential as it increases the chance of receiving honest answers. Therefore, the anonymity aspect was emphasized before we began asking questions. We aimed to conduct all interviews face-to-face as this would enable us to see and analyse the interviewees' body language. In the end, twelve interviews were carried out face-to-face and the remaining one was conducted over telephone due to practical reasons. In order to make the participants feel as comfortable as possible, all interviews were held in an environment familiar to the interviewees', more specifically, in their offices. To further increase comfort and avoid miscommunication, every interview was conducted in the native language of both the interviewees and researchers. Taking the advice of Bechhofer et al. (1984), both of us were present during all interviews, which enabled one person to lead the interview while the other one focused on taking thorough notes and studying the body language of the participant. The presence of both of us further contributed to a more relaxed atmosphere as the setting was perceived as a discussion rather than a formal interview. Following the approval of the interviewee, the interview was recorded and then transcribed

within 48 hours. After the transcription was finished, we analysed the answers separately and then discussed our interpretations.

### 3.6 Data analysis process

This thesis uses a thematic strategy for analysing gathered data, which Boyatzis (1998) defines as a process for encoding qualitative information. Boyatzis (1998) describes a theme as *“a pattern found in the information that at a minimum describes and organizes possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon”*. Codes, which should capture the qualitative richness of the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998), then emerge from the themes. There are two types of thematic analyses: the inductive approach generates themes from raw information while themes are generated from theory and prior research in the deductive approach (Boyatzis, 1998). In this thesis we use a deductive approach as we aim to empirically test current theory in order to find new explanations to the research question. Figure 2 below shows the thematic framework that was developed.

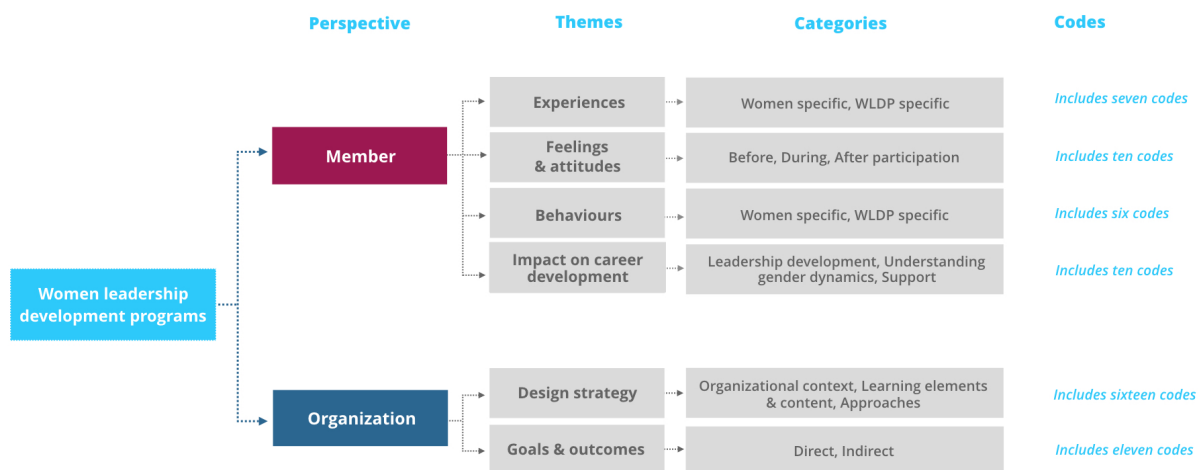


Figure 2: Thematic framework

The process of analysing the collected data included two steps. To begin with, we transcribed the interviews within 48 hours after they had been conducted. Even though this was time-consuming as each transcription required approximately five hours, the choice to do so proved valuable since it enabled a closer and more correct analysis of the gathered data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The next step in the process was to sort the collected data into themes that had been formulated prior to the beginning of the interview process. Having done that, the data within each theme were re-sorted into categories and then into codes. One set of themes, categories, and codes was developed for each group of interviewees. “WLDP effect on leadership and career development”, “Understanding of gender dynamics”, and “Critical reflection” are examples of one theme, one category, and one code included in the member perspective. As mentioned in the previous section, this step of the process was carried out individually before comparing results with each other. In



those cases where our interpretations differed, discussions were held until we could agree on the one that seemed to be the best reflection of reality (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Figure 3 illustrates the data analysis process and figure 4 exemplifies this process.

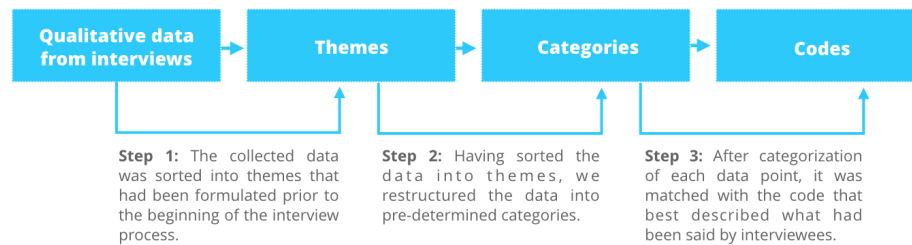


Figure 3: Data analysis process

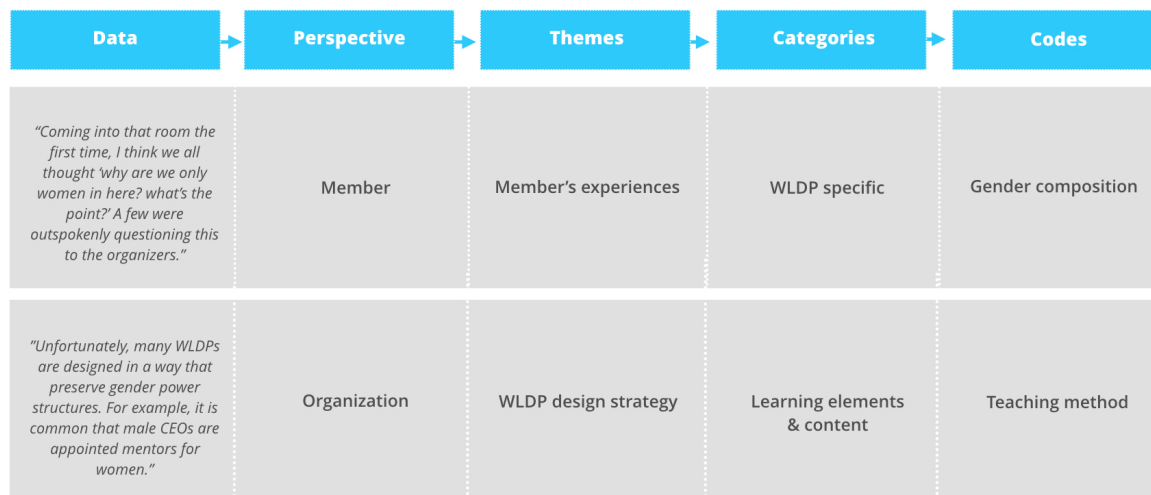


Figure 4: Example of data analysis process

### 3.7 Quality considerations

When conducting a qualitative study there are several quality aspects to take into consideration. While Bryman and Bell (2011) argue that validity, reliability, and replicability are the three most important criteria when evaluating research within the fields of business economics and management, these are more applicable on quantitative research. Others (Kirk & Miller, 1986; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982) have given the terms reliability and validity a different meaning in order to make them useful in a qualitative context. In addition, Yin (1984) defends the use of these criteria in case studies. However, for the purpose of this thesis we have deemed appropriate the subcategories of the trustworthiness criteria argued for by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as they are better adjusted to a social reality which is not absolute. Therefore, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study will be further elaborated on in the sections below.

### **3.7.1 Credibility**

Credibility is the equivalent to internal validity referred to by LeCompte and Goetz (1982) as the conformity between a researcher's observations and the theoretical ideas that this person develops. To ensure credibility of the results in a study, researchers must (i) adhere strictly to existing rules and (ii) submit the research findings to the people that are part of the social reality that has been studied, in order for them to confirm that the researchers have made correct interpretations, also referred to as respondent validation (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The credibility of this study was increased by giving the interviewees much freedom to develop their answers as preferred during the semi-structured interviews and by being flexible as interviewers with regards to asking questions. In addition, transcription of the responses was made shortly after the interviews had been conducted and both of us were present at all interviews to avoid misinterpretation of the collected answers. However, we did not follow the advice of Bryman and Bell (2011) to let respondents validate their answers and our subsequent interpretations, as this process may awaken defensive reactions and possibly lead to incorrect adjustments of what was said during the interviews.

### **3.7.2 Transferability**

Transferability is the extent to which the result of a study can be generalized to other social contexts and situations (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This subcategory often constitutes a problem in qualitative research as studies commonly include a small sample of individuals with the same kinds of qualities, creating depth rather than width (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Even though a sample of thirteen interviewees sharing similar characteristics may not be very different from studying only five or seven cases, it is an attempt to somehow increase transferability of the research.

### **3.7.3 Dependability**

Dependability corresponds to reliability within the quantitative research field and is concerned with whether the results from one study is consistent, would the study be repeated by another researcher (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As researchers we ensure dependability by presenting an extensive description of all parts of the research process including problem formulation, choice of interview participants etcetera. Furthermore, the interview guides used are attached in the end of this thesis and thus enable other researchers to more precisely replicate the processes of this study. Bryman and Bell (2011) suggest that researchers should approach colleagues and let them review the quality of the chosen processes. As this task is extremely time-consuming and requires careful assessment of every aspect of the study, we were not able to find people willing to help. However, throughout the research process we had regular email correspondence as well as feedback meetings with our supervisor, which potentially increased the dependability of the study.

### **3.7.4 Confirmability**

This criterion concerns objectivity and the researcher needs to ensure that he or she has not consciously let his or her personal values or theoretical orientation affect the process or conclusions of the study (Bryman

& Bell, 2011). As authors of this study, we took several measures to achieve confirmability. To begin with, both of us were present during each interview, enabling us to discuss responses and make sure that interpretations were not influenced by personal beliefs. In addition, transcriptions further increased the accuracy of the information received during the interviews. Finally, decisions on how to analyse the data once collected were made before the interview process began, mitigating the risk of favourably adjusting the analysis according to our preferences.

## 4. EMPIRICS

*The following chapter presents the empirical findings and is structured according to the theoretical framework. Section 4.1 starts with a presentation of the findings from the organizational perspective and is followed by section 4.2, which presents findings from the member perspective. For the majority of codes, we have included quotations from the interviews with the aim of exemplifying the findings. Please see Appendix 4 and 5 for a complete overview of identified codes and details on whom of the interviewees have mentioned which code.*

### 4.1 Organizational perspective

The following sections will feature empirical findings from the actors designing and handling investments in WLDPs. This perspective is built on two themes: “WLDP design strategy” (4.1.1) and “Goals and outcomes of organizational investment in WLDPs” (4.1.2).

#### 4.1.1 WLDP design strategy

Categories included in this theme are: “Organizational context”, “Learning elements and content”, and “Approaches”.

##### 4.1.1.1 Organizational context

This category includes six codes related to the organizational context in which women work.

###### 4.1.1.1.1 Maleness

Four interviewees confirm that leadership within their organizations is often expressed through masculine behaviours such as assertiveness, aggressiveness, and competitiveness. They indicate that male leadership traits are the norm, which women must either ignore or adapt to.

*“Women adopt masculine traits as a strategy to reach higher positions in the organization. If they would not do so, they would not survive in the male-dominated structures.” – Org\_4*

###### 4.1.1.1.2 Leadership needs

Three organizations agree that women have distinctive leadership needs, which differ from those of men. This is the result of the fact that women have been socialized in a certain way. Only one of these three say that they take into account such differences in WLDP design.

*“Men and women are shaped by society, which results in that we become skilled at very different things. A woman who has been taking care of others her whole life will certainly become skilled at that, while a man who is used to being seen and heard will continue developing those skills.” – Org\_4*

#### 4.1.1.1.3 Learning style

None of the interviewees think that women acquire and transform knowledge differently than men. Instead, they all agree that learning style depends on individual circumstances.

*“In our WLDP we talk about the different roles: the girl, the woman, the mother, the boy, the man, and the father. It is difficult for women to move from the role as a girl to a more professional adult woman. At the same time, it is common that males keep being boys for a long time.” – Org\_3*

#### 4.1.1.1.4 Gender barriers

Four interviewees say that gender dynamics make it difficult for a woman to claim a leader role and sometimes even reduce her chance of being recruited for senior leadership positions.

*“All women that I have met have reached the glass-ceiling in one way or the other. They have felt an imaginary wall between themselves and the rest of the management team that consists of men only. Being the one woman in the group you are seen as the exception and do not really have any influence.” – Org\_4*

*“We always face resistance as soon as we start talking about gender structures. As women, it is tough to see those structures because it makes us feel victimized.” – Org\_1*

*“I strongly believe that the existence of gender-specific barriers is just a myth.” – Org\_2*

#### 4.1.1.1.5 Cultural expectations

Three interviewees agree with that certain cultural expectations result in that when men enact masculine behaviours, their actions are in line with with these expectations and considered legitimate. They also say that as long as male behaviours are seen as being correlated to leadership, these become part of the organizational culture and difficult to change.

*“Our program is designed for top executives and at that level it is more relevant to talk about other things than male and female behaviours because the women have already found their own way of leading.” – Org\_2*

*“Research shows that your personality is highly influenced by gender and that is something we cannot ignore.” – Org\_4*

#### 4.1.1.1.6 Feminine leadership

All five interviewees confirm the existence of stereotypical feminine leadership qualities. Consequently, these feminine qualities do not match the organizational norm and expectations where the majority is men. According to two interviewees, most women choose to hold on to these qualities because they feel authentic to them. They also agree that this is not always beneficial.

*“Women face a sensitive situation in which they are easily rejected because of their feminine behaviours, which men perceive as problematic. I usually tell my female colleagues to play the same game that men do in order to get what they want.” – Org\_3*

*“As a woman you will probably encounter the dilemma of either being too feminine or masculine. Therefore, it is important to follow your own compass.” – Org\_5*

#### **4.1.1.2 Learning elements and content**

This category includes eight codes related to the learning elements and content that organizations believe are important to include in a WLDP.

##### **4.1.1.2.1 Transformative learning**

Three interviewees state that their WLDP design aims at expanding women’s perspectives by giving them time to critically reflect upon the assumptions, values, and habits that steer their action.

*“Gaining awareness through reflection is an important part of our program. As a woman you have to be aware of the social structures that form you in order to better navigate and understand why things turn out the way they do.” – Org\_4*

##### **4.1.1.2.2 Feedback**

Four of the programs include exercises in receiving, delivering, and processing feedback. This aims at supporting women to build self-knowledge and to identify and deal with barriers they may face on their path to leadership.

*“It is important to include feedback exercises in the WLDP as women are not very good at handling negative feedback in particular.” – Org\_5*

##### **4.1.1.2.3 Networking opportunities**

All interviewees say that helping women expand the range and depth of developmental relationships and highlighting the benefits of networking are essential WLDP features. This is extremely important because men have always been good at building informal networks, which have accelerated their careers.

*“Especially for women higher up in the organization, where they are in minority, they meet very few women that they can have a valuable exchange with from a career perspective.” – Org\_5*

##### **4.1.1.2.4 Leader identity**

All interviewees confirm that WLDPs should provide women with knowledge and expertise needed to develop as a leader and internalize confidence for success. Nevertheless, the majority of WLDP participants

have already reached a high level of leadership when partaking, which means that they have had time to develop their leader identity.

*“It is important that the WLDP facilitates women’s search for their true north, where they feel that their leadership is authentic and where they don’t blame themselves for not being enough.” – Org\_1*

#### **4.1.1.2.5 Framework**

All five organizations build their WLDPs around a structured framework. However, only one WLDP is based on a framework that is gender-distinctive and provides gender-sensitive instructional strategies. The others say that their programs are purposely designed not to put gender in focus, but rather aim at providing the participants with a holistic understanding of leadership.

*“Our program touches upon gender but it is mostly focused on the other elements, such as improving business skills.” – Org\_2*

*“An extremely important part of our program is to talk about the societal structures linked to gender that affect you as a woman whether you like it or not.” – Org\_4*

#### **4.1.1.2.6 Experience sharing**

All interviewees state that an essential feature of the WLDP is to provide opportunities for women to interact with peers who can give support, validation, and social comparison.

*“WLDPs are not about giving instructions like ‘do this, but not that’. Such awareness is gained through conversations with other competent women.” – Org\_3*

#### **4.1.1.2.7 Teaching method**

None of the WLDPs adopt specific gender-sensitive teaching methods that honour women’s individual modes of learning, because they believe it is outdated to think that women learn in a different way than men.

*“We believe that everyone needs to find their own way of leading and that leadership is dependent on personality.” – Org\_2*

*“Unfortunately, many WLDPs are designed in a way that preserve gender power structures. For example, it is common that male CEOs are appointed mentors for women.” – Org\_4*

#### 4.1.1.2.8 Gender composition

All interviewees agree that female-only programs have many important benefits. Even though they know that those programs do not mirror reality, participants dare to be more transparent and honest in such a setting.

*“After talking with females and our customers, I realized that there actually is a need for a female-only program.” – Org\_3*

*“Female-only programs make it possible to avoid spending energy on the gender aspect and instead focus on what is truly important. Women find themselves in a safe environment where they can help each other discover those patterns that are not always visible to the single individual.” – Org\_4*

#### 4.1.1.3 Approaches

This category includes two codes related to the organizational approaches to WLDPs.

##### 4.1.1.3.1 Add women and stir

One organization delivers a program that takes stance in the existence of clear gender differences. The other four organizations use almost the exact same structure and content in their WLDPs as in mixed-sex programs, with only small changes to better fit women's needs.

*“The purpose of our program is to create a greenhouse for leadership, regardless of gender. We want the participants to have air, light, energy, and nutrition to grow and be prepared to take the next step in their careers.” – Org\_2*

##### 4.1.1.3.2 Fix the women

None of the interviewees say their approach to WLDPs locates the problem in women or that women are not competent enough to compete successfully in the world of men. However, two interviewees say they have noticed that men in their organizations tend to see WLDPs as a tool to “fix the women”.

*“I do not believe that women need to be fixed. Instead, organizations must work with their cultures and both men and women need to learn about their own patterns.” – Org\_3*

*“In one way, I think that it is a form of organized hypocrisy. ‘Let’s send our female employees to a WLDP and then we have done our part’. The men turn it into a female problem.” – Org\_5*

#### 4.1.2 Goals and outcomes of organizational investment in WLDPs

Categories included in this theme are: “Direct” (4.1.2.1) and “Indirect” (4.1.2.2).



#### **4.1.2.1 Direct**

This category includes six codes related to the direct goals and outcomes of organizational investments in WLDPs.

##### **4.1.2.1.1 Talent management**

Four interviewees say that WLDPs put the organization in a better position to attract, develop, retain, and advance high-achieving females across the organization. The other interviewee agrees that talent management is a desirable outcome, but that it is not prioritized.

*“The main goal of our WLDP is to increase the amount of women in senior leadership and board positions. Therefore, we ensure that our members really have the potential to take on greater leadership responsibility within the near future.” –*

*Org\_2*

##### **4.1.2.1.2. Cultural change**

Three interviewees believe that WLDPs can be part of a solution to change the organizational culture and thus erase assumptions and norms that perpetuate gender inequality. The others feel ambiguous because WLDPs may signal to the rest of the organization that there is something wrong with female leaders.

*“I think that WLDPs are an efficient component in working with the organizational culture and inclusion.” – Org\_1*

##### **4.1.2.1.3 Structural change**

One interviewee mentions that WLDPs can improve, for example, recruitment processes and work policies that perpetuate gender inequality. The other interviewees think the opposite; structural change will only happen if men with power take action.

*“If we want change, men and women must work together. Only using WLDPs will not lead to any considerable structural change. Women cannot take all the responsibility.” – Org\_4*

##### **4.1.2.1.4 Female promotion**

Two of the organizations say that female promotion is a desirable outcome that motivates investment in WLDPs because it supports the achievement of equality through gender balance. However, most of the nominated women have already reached a high leadership position. Therefore, WLDPs are rather about developing those women in their current leadership commitment.

*“Our WLDP enhances women’s ability to lead themselves and increases their chances of claiming higher leadership positions.” – Org\_2*

#### 4.1.2.1.5 Business performance

None of the organizations confirm that they have noticed a connection between WLDP investments and improved financial results. However, they all believe that by embracing a diverse workforce, improved performance will follow.

*“Enhanced financial results are not a goal in itself. Rather, we hope that investments in WLDPs will give women an opportunity to develop personally and bring new knowledge into the company that can be used for improving operations.” –*

*Org\_3*

#### 4.1.2.1.6 Create awareness

Three organizations believe that WLDPs create awareness throughout the whole organization by identifying unfair gender dynamics. One interviewee does not agree but says that participants can influence women on lower levels in the organization and thus facilitate awareness. Furthermore, WLDP participation often results in that individuals become more aware of their own work situation.

*“We cannot force change. It will happen when individuals themselves realize what is going on. Our WLDPs aim at creating discussions about employee variety, which hopefully lead to the beginning of a change process.” – Org\_3*

#### 4.1.2.2 Indirect

This category includes five codes related to the indirect goals and outcomes of organizational investments in WLDPs.

##### 4.1.2.2.1 Improved work environment

Three of the organizations believe that WLDP investments indirectly improve the work environment through network support, reduced stereotype biases, and greater access to organizational resources.

*“We carefully make sure to always include a broad perspective in our WLDPs with a “Sustainable Business Through Diversity” theme in the centre. By developing leaders that have a sustainable business mind-set, it will positively affect not only the member but everyone in the organization as well as the work environment.” – Org\_2*

##### 4.1.2.2.2 Dealing with external demands

Three organizations agree that WLDP investment results in an improved ability to handle pressuring external demands and competition through diversified leadership, advancement of talented female leaders etcetera.

*“Men often say that they want women in their team but they have difficulties finding individuals who want to join. This signals that the company makes sustainability its priority and that it is an important area.” – Org\_3*

#### 4.1.2.2.3 Recognition of stereotypical roles

Two organizations say that they have seen examples of that WLDPs give women a deeper understanding of gender stereotype biases and how these have shaped who they are as leaders.

*“Women that have worked in a male-dominated environment during their whole careers adopt the male jargon without even noticing it.” – Org\_4*

*“After a WLDP you return to work with new glasses and really understand how much time and effort women put into supporting quite mediocre men.” – Org\_3*

#### 4.1.2.2.4 Help other women succeed

All five interviewees emphasize that WLDPs have positive effects on other women. When WLDP members gain awareness, they feel an obligation to act as role models and support especially younger female colleagues.

*“WLDP participants make it their mission to support younger female colleagues in their organizations.” – Org\_1*

*“WLDPs have strong effects in that participants realize how important it is to have female role models.” – Org\_5*

#### 4.1.2.2.5 Work attitudes

Four organizations see positive results from WLDP participation in terms of increased commitment to the organization. Nominating female talents is an organizational strategy to show these women that they are valued.

*“Almost all show excitement when they find out about their nomination. Getting a little special treatment certainly has positive effects on our organization and that is something we keep in mind throughout the nomination process.” – Org\_3*

### 4.2 Member perspective

The following sections will present empirical findings from the members participating in WLDPs. This perspective is built on four themes: “Member’s experiences” (4.2.1), “Member’s feelings and attitudes” (4.2.2), “Member’s behaviours” (4.2.3), and “WLDP impact on career development” (4.2.4).

#### 4.2.1 Member’s experiences

Categories included in this theme are: “Women specific” and “WLDP specific”.

#### **4.2.1.1 Women specific**

This category includes five codes related to the specific experiences of being a female organizational member.

##### **4.2.1.1.1 Gender identity negotiation**

Four members agree that they have felt pressures to “fix” themselves to fit into a leadership identity that matches organizational expectations.

*“I had a boss a couple of years ago that used to say that, in order to succeed in our company, no matter gender, you had to behave in a typical male manner.” – Memb\_6*

*“I have worked with other women who have consciously behaved in a masculine, tough manner and made it their thing to be worse than the men. Such women are often very talented but everyone perceives them as annoying and rude.” – Memb\_1*

##### **4.2.1.1.2 Contradictory expectations**

Two members confirm that masculine leadership behaviours are the organizational norm and that these do not match with the more relational and collaborative strategies that female leaders utilize.

*“Our company culture rewards forward-going, analytical, and visionary leadership. If you fit that profile it is rather easy to reach a leadership position. However, women often prefer a much softer leadership style.” – Memb\_2*

##### **4.2.1.1.3 Rejection of leadership**

Only two members have experienced that contradictory role expectations of being a woman has resulted in rejection of her leadership claims.

*“At my previous job, the environment was extremely male-dominated and the jargon completely awful for us women. What I did not understand then was that this hindered almost all women to reach leadership positions because we were not in the boys’ club.” – Memb\_8*

*“I have never felt the need to change myself to fit how men behave. Ensuring authenticity in everything I do, including leadership, is my mantra and has probably taken me where I am today.” – Memb\_6*

##### **4.2.1.1.4 Gender differences**

Five women agree that gender differences exist, and that these might sometimes influence e.g. the way men and women think, feel, behave, and experience leadership.

*“Yes, differences in that male leaders are tougher and less understanding of personal issues or if someone is having a bad day, while women have a tendency to be more human and can relate to others’ feelings.” – Memb\_7*

#### **4.2.1.1.5 Network challenges**

All eight women confirm that they, due to being women, have been excluded from vital networks, which have hindered personal leadership growth.

*“The old boys’ network still excludes those who are different simply on the basis of their categorisation of women as ‘other’ than the norm.” – Memb\_2*

*“Men have always been great at networking, which has sparked their careers. As women we must learn to support each other if we want to succeed in the world of men.” – Memb\_6*

#### **4.2.1.2 WLDP specific**

This category includes two codes related to the specific experiences of being a WLDP member.

##### **4.2.1.2.1 Expectations**

Seven members felt that WLDP nomination resulted in that organizations increased their expectations on them regarding e.g. work effort.

*“Expectations that I would strengthen my leadership skills, be able to take on more responsibility without feeling overwhelmed.” – Memb\_6*

*“I also understood that there are expectations on me as one of the strong women in the company. They expected me to come back and continue to invest more in the company than before.” – Memb\_3*

##### **4.2.1.2.2. Gender composition**

Five members agree that WLDP gender composition matters because gendered pressures persist in mixed-sex settings and limit women capacity to explore their leadership experiences.

*“Female-only programs are good because they facilitate and enable a special type of discussion. However, men have to be involved in these discussions if we want to see a higher ratio of female leaders in the future.” – Memb\_2*

*“Coming into that room the first time, I think we all thought ‘why are we only women in here? what’s the point?’ A few were outspokenly questioning this to the organizers.” – Memb\_1*

#### **4.2.2 Member's feelings and attitudes**

Categories included in this theme are: "Before participation", "During participation", and "After participation".

##### **4.2.2.1 Before participation**

This category includes four codes related to the feelings and attitudes of members before participation in a WLDP.

###### **4.2.2.1.1 Worry**

Three members confirm that they felt worried about being overly masculine/feminine and not perceived as leader-like, thus unable to sustain success in a leadership role.

*"I have felt some worries of being unable to inspire, motivate, and empower others to perform." – Memb\_2*

*"I have never felt worried when it comes to leadership. I have always been a leader, from the first day I started working. I believe it might be unusual for a woman to feel this way." – Memb\_3*

###### **4.2.2.1.2 Vulnerability**

Four women felt vulnerable to the risk of failure because they were one of few women in the organization's upper echelons.

*"Being the only woman in a leadership position made me think about how everyone would notice if I made one mistake. So, I started thinking that it might be better to take on a role where I would feel less vulnerable and more in control of the situation." – Memb\_5*

###### **4.2.2.1.3 Proud and honour**

All eight women felt proud and honoured about being nominated to participate in the WLDP.

*"Of course I was proud and honoured to be selected out of many. For a consultancy firm it is a huge investment to 'give away' so much of an employee's time. Knowing this made it hard to say no." – Memb\_8*

###### **4.2.2.1.4 Disrespect**

Two women felt disrespected from being nominated to participate in a WLDP. The other ones were positive and had high expectations on being inspired, creating a larger network, and developing as leaders.

*"I was a bit disappointed that I was not asked to attend our internal executive program. It would have been better for my career at that time." – Memb\_1*

#### **4.2.2.2 During participation**

This category includes three codes related to the feelings and attitudes of members during participation in a WLDP.

##### **4.2.2.2.1 Identification**

Six members identified with other women during the program, which increased their willingness to talk openly without fearing that others would misunderstand or judge them.

*“There is value in being able to open up about things that matter and problems that you might see, and you will have another kind of discussion than if there are men in the room. All women told personal, interesting stories.” – Memb\_3*

*“I did not want to discuss personal matters because there were only women I did not know. I had no idea how they would react to what I would have told them.” – Memb\_8*

##### **4.2.2.2.2 Resistance**

Five members confirm that they felt resistant when discussing sensitive topics such as gender bias or when reflecting on one’s personal leadership challenges.

*“Women do not need help to understand what the problem of being a female organizational member is. There is no need to feel sorry for us. What we need is inspiration and energy from other women and an opportunity to strengthen relationships.” – Memb\_3*

*“I felt resistant during the program, but not before. It just felt so wrong to sit there and talk about women as victims. It made me crazy and I am sure the other women felt the same.” – Memb\_8*

##### **4.2.2.2.3 Understanding of self**

Four women said they gained a deeper understanding of how their personal and professional experiences have shaped them and how these experiences explain who they have become as leaders.

*“I gained insights into why I have succeeded in my career, who I am, and what the general perception and experiences of women are. But I don’t think that there was much great theory or knowledge that helped.” – Memb\_1*

#### **4.2.2.3 After participation**

This category includes three codes related to the feelings and attitudes of members after participation in a WLDP.

#### **4.2.2.3.1 Engagement**

Six women state that being part of a WLDP increased the feeling of devotion and engagement toward their organization.

*“Yes, it increased my loyalty. However, if I had not been promoted afterwards it would have decreased my motivation to stay in the company. I do not think my company has considered that kind of negative consequences.” – Memb\_6*

#### **4.2.2.3.2 Reciprocation**

WLDP participation increased five of the members’ inclination to give back to the organization by stepping out of their comfort zone, become better employees, and work harder.

*“I know that the company that I work for invested much resources so that I could attend the WLDP. Therefore, it was important for me to prove that it was worth.” – Memb\_8*

#### **4.2.2.3.2 Sense of agency**

Three members agree that participating in a WLDP increased the feeling of control over their career situation. However, the others say that they already had that feeling before partaking and nothing really changed during the program.

*“Most women I know do not need to sharpen their skills. They work so hard every day to be good at what they do. What they need is to sharpen their career strategy, which men are very good at by, for example, networking a lot.” – Memb\_6*

### **4.2.3 Member’s behaviours**

Categories included in this theme are: “Women specific” and “WLDP specific”.

#### **4.2.3.1 Women specific**

This category includes four codes related to the specific behaviours of being a female organizational member.

##### **4.2.3.1.1 Masculine demeanour**

Only two members agree that it is common to see women overcompensate for stereotypical role expectations by enacting extremely masculine behaviours.

*“I have never felt the need to behave like a man. I have been in many meetings where old men with huge Rolex watches have been genuinely interested in my opinion as a young woman” – Memb\_2*



*“If I can convince a man by playing the game according to his rules, using the same language and behaviour as he does, then it is worth it to get what I want.” – Memb\_7*

#### **4.2.3.1.2 Collaborative strategies**

Four members believe that they are more likely than men to lead in collaborative ways, hence focusing more on values and purpose, seeking social contact in stressful situations, and mentoring followers.

*“I would describe myself as more including and open to other people’s feelings than a male leader is. I believe it is very important to get everyone on board to be successful in what I do.” – Memb\_3*

#### **4.2.3.1.3 Denial**

We notice in at least five of the members that they deny the existence of gender barriers as something that might hinder women on their path toward leadership.

*“I do not think that your career depends on your gender, rather on personality. Therefore, it is one’s personal responsibility to reach the position one want. Blaming failures on being a woman is just a bad excuse.” – Memb\_2*

#### **4.2.3.1.3 Gender as defence**

Two members blame gender bias instead of taking personal responsibility for career disappointments.

*“I have always worked in very male-dominated environments. Getting a promotion in those environments is difficult, because when you look around and realize that there is only room for one woman and that the one seat is already taken, then there is not much you can do but wait.” – Memb\_4*

#### **4.2.3.2 WLDP specific**

This category includes two codes related to the specific behaviours of being a WLDP member.

##### **4.2.3.2.1 High potential**

All eight women agree that being part of a WLDP means that their behaviour was in line with what the organization defines as a high potential. Thus, it implies that they deserve a leadership role.

*“I was not surprised that I was nominated because I was part of the company’s talent planning. So I never really asked why it was my turn. In hindsight, that would have been very useful to know.” – Memb\_1*

##### **4.2.3.2.2 Navigation**

Four women mentioned that being part of a WLDP helped them to better navigate their future leadership by sharing experiences and strategies with peer women.

*“Listening to and discussing with so many interesting and successful women was very valuable to me and have had an impact on my own leadership.” – Memb\_5*

*“The WLDP put me in contact with senior role models that inspired me with their stories and helped me enhance my leadership skills and ability to handle difficult situations.” – Memb\_7*

#### **4.2.4 WLDP impact on career development**

Categories included in this theme are: “Leadership development”, “Understanding gender dynamics”, and “Support”.

##### **4.2.4.1 Leadership development**

This category includes five codes related to the leadership development resulting from participation in a WLDP.

###### **4.2.4.1.1 Personal development**

Three members say that they experienced improvements in e.g. confidence, sense of agency, skill development, self-awareness, and motivation to lead as a result from partaking in the WLDP.

*“The WLDP that I attended had much focus on personal development and how to get a balanced life and energy from the workplace etcetera.” – Memb\_2*

*“No, I did not develop as a leader per se. It was rather a confirmation that I have what it takes and that I am doing the right things in my role as a leader.” – Memb\_1*

###### **4.2.4.1.2 Career advancement**

Two women confirm that the WLDP participation facilitated their transition to more senior leadership roles.

*“I kind of knew that the nomination meant that the company wanted to get me prepared for a promotion to managing director. All the women who had been nominated before got a promotion.” – Memb\_6*

*“At that time I thought that participating in a WLDP would improve my chances to career advancement. However, since I was so critic toward the program and not afraid to show it, I probably ended up on the bottom of the promotion list.” – Memb\_4*

#### 4.2.4.1.3 Leadership identity

Only one member mentioned that the WLDP helped her search for, develop, and advance the values and purposes that she stands for as a leader.

*“None of the programs I’ve attended presuppose that women do not have visions, values, a view of life, and a leadership style. Absolutely not! It is ridiculous to think that women would have less of that than men.” – Memb\_1*

#### 4.2.4.1.4 Tools and strategies

Two members agree that the WLDP provided them with concrete tools for taking effective action towards reaching leadership positions and/or improve in their current role.

*“I do not think that I became a better leader because of the female aspect of the program. However, the WLDP gave me new ideas, strategies, and insights about leadership that I have practiced and embedded into my daily work.” – Memb\_3*

*“The purpose of nominating me was not that I should receive new leadership tools and strategies. Rather, my company wanted me to feel special and kind of show that they value me.” – Memb\_6*

#### 4.2.4.1.5 Knowledge integration

Only one woman mentions that WLDP participation has helped her build actual expertise, power, and credibility (she participated in a program that was especially focused on preparing women for a CFO position).

*“This cannot be taught in WLDPs. Expertise, power, and credibility is something one learns through getting more responsibility and experience from actual work. Therefore, it is important to be curious and try new things all the time.” – Memb\_4*

#### 4.2.4.2 Understanding gender dynamics

This category includes three codes related to the understanding of gender dynamics resulting from participation in a WLDP.

##### 4.2.4.2.1 Handle gender bias

Two members say that WLDPs helped them gain greater awareness about how gender biases take shape. However, they did not receive concrete strategies for how to counter them.

*“I gained a better understanding of the effects of gender biases in organizations but we never specifically discussed how to handle them. I learned that it is tougher to be a woman and that women need to work harder to prove themselves.” – Memb\_5*

*“We did not talk about gender biases at all. The focus of the program was solely business and pure leadership development where gender had nothing to do with it except for the fact that there were only women participating.” – Memb\_6*

#### **4.2.4.2.2 Critical reflection**

Six women cite that the WLDP offered them an opportunity to reflect on their own situation as leaders.

*“It was helpful to get out of my daily environment with lots of stress and to-dos. The WLDP gave me much time to focus on myself and reflect. I got a whole new perspective on how hard I push myself every day to be successful and live up to expectations.” – Memb\_1*

#### **4.2.4.2.3 Challenge defence mechanisms**

Three women say that the WLDP participation resulted in that they constructed grounded assessments of the cultural, organizational, and individual factors shaping who they are and wish to become as leaders.

*“It was an extremely good forum to discuss the gender-specific difficulties we have experienced during our careers. Also, it was interesting to get new insights into challenges that I have never thought about but which someone else in the group had faced.” – Memb\_4*

#### **4.2.4.3 Support**

This category includes two codes related to the support for members resulting from participation in a WLDP.

##### **4.2.4.3.1 Expand network**

All eight members mention that WLDPs lead to support in terms of providing opportunities to build a network of inspiring women.

*“I am so grateful for the network that I got from the program. It made me realize how much I have missed having a network of women throughout my whole career. We have helped each other out many times during the years. If you ask me, giving women more opportunities to network will have a much stronger impact on equality than WLDPs will ever have.” – Memb\_6*

*“For once be in the same room as and spend time with other successful, self-secure women that do not let anyone put them down, made it easy for us to become friends and we still are today!” – Memb\_3*

##### **4.2.4.3.2 Identify mentors**

Three members confirm that the WLDP encouraged them to identify potential mentors and helped them develop strategies for building those relationships outside of the program.

*“Before participating, I was excited about getting a mentor which was promised to each member. However, the mentors were exclusively older men that certainly had no interest in young women. They did it because they had to. I believe the idea was that these men would support us and give us smart career advice from a male perspective which, when I think about it today, is just so wrong.” – Memb\_8*

## 5. ANALYSIS

*This chapter presents an analysis of the empirical findings. The chapter starts with section 5.1, which analyses the empirical results related to the organizational perspective, and is followed by section 5.2, which includes an analysis of the empirical results from the member perspective. Furthermore, the analyses within each section are further divided according to the more narrowly defined research questions mentioned in the introductory part of the thesis. The combination of these analyses will lead up to the final chapter of the thesis where the main research question then will be answered.*

### 5.1 Organizational perspective

The following sections present the analysis of the empirical findings from the organizational perspective.

#### 5.1.1 What are the underlying assumptions that motivate WLDP investment?

This question aims to create a deeper understanding of the underlying organizational assumptions about female leaders. While theory motivates the need for WLDPs as a result of women's distinctive leadership needs, which mixed-sex programs fail to meet (Ely, et al., 2011; Hopkins et al., 2008; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003), we find it important to investigate if this assumption corresponds with reality. Hence, answering this question enables us to understand if the fundamental reason behind WLDP investment is to address these specific developmental and instructional needs of women, as suggested in theory (Anderson et al., 2008; Debebe, 2011; Hopkins et al., 2008; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003). What we discovered is that the answer to the question is ambiguous. None of the researched organizations outspokenly confirmed that they assume that women e.g., acquire knowledge differently or have less leadership capacity. However, in accordance with theory they do confirm that there are significant differences between men and women regarding leadership. For example, because most cultures have an idea of leadership that is synonymous to maleness (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ridgeway & Correll, 2000), the organizational context is more complicated for females striving for leadership. In line with theory, organizations do seem to believe that women face a reality where they have to negotiate and sometimes even renounce themselves to overcome gender-specific disadvantages and unfair treatment (Ely & Padavic, 2007; Bowles et al., 2010; Ely & Rhode, 2010; Ely et al., 2011; Sandberg, 2013; McKinsey & Company/Lean In 2015).

Ely et al. (2011) theorize that male-dominated organizational structures create a culture which communicates that women are ill-suited for leadership roles. Empirical findings confirm that organizations are worried about the fact that when women are less integrated into dominant coalitions, it reduces their likelihood of advancement to higher positions (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003; Ely et al., 2011; Tessens et al., 2011). Thus, organizations assume that women differ from men on at least one important aspect, which affects their leadership development – they are not very skilled at building strong networks consisting of other female leaders. At the same time, organizations know that women become better leaders when they have the opportunity to build relationships and share experiences with other women. In line with these findings, Debebe (2011) conclude that female-only programs are motivated because they provide members

with the opportunity to interact with peers who are uniquely fit to give necessary support, validation, and social comparison in order to figure out who they are as leaders. Hence, organizations that use WLDPs motivate their investment based on the assumptions that (i) networks are important for women to navigate through and succeed in their professional life and (ii) females in top management positions often are the only woman in their group, resulting in limited networking opportunities. Therefore, female-only programs are considered the obvious and most efficient solution to facilitate such relationship-building. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that this does not indicate that organizational assumptions about women are in line with arguments put forward by e.g., Ely and Meyerson (2000), claiming that the problem is located in women and that they need to be fixed. Rather, companies believe that unfair gender dynamics in combination with the male norm is what put women at a disadvantage when claiming a leader role.

In line with empirical findings indicating that organizations do not believe that the developmental or instructional needs of women differ from those of men, we have discovered that most organizations use the same teaching method and include the exact same content in their WLDPs as in their mixed-sex programs. One might argue that this points toward what research refers to as “institutionalizing bias”, which could possibly lead to counterproductive talent management systems that might disrupt opportunities for women’s advancement, especially within male-dominated structures (Bauer & Baltes, 2002). While organizations do not believe in women’s different ways of learning, which contradict the argument put forward by Sinclair (1995; 1997), the majority seems to acknowledge the fact that women face different development needs in preparation for leadership in organizations (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003) and that men and women are trained to be skilled at different things. Hence, while empirical findings show that organizations do not centre their WLDPs around gender, they do believe that the female-only setting is beneficial because it better facilitates some of the specific needs of women that are mentioned throughout this thesis.

Interesting is that the reason for organizational adoption of the “add-women-and-stir” approach (Martin & Meyerson, 1998), has nothing to do with a denial of gendered influence on leadership development. While theories from this perspective are based on the assumption that the WLDP design must take into account how unfair gender dynamics negatively affect a woman and make it difficult for her to claim leader roles (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000), our findings show that organizations assume that leadership development with a gender lens will be perceived as outdated, provocative, and irrelevant for the modern WLDP member. Evidently, the majority of organizations in our research instead develop frameworks based on assumptions that different personality types create individual conditions for leadership, which are dissociated with gender. With that said, we think it is important to highlight the one organization that contradicts and criticises WLDPs, which separate personality and gender, especially when research proves a strong correlation between the two (Hyde, 2005). In this WLDP, gender matters a great deal for women’s personality as well as their leadership identity. This also explains e.g., the double-bind that women face and

WLDPs must therefore help women understand how this affects their leadership negatively (Catalyst, 2007; Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ibarra et al., 2013).

Consequently, the assumptions made about women and their leadership differ between organizations and steer their WLDP design strategy in different directions.

### **5.1.2 What are the main organizational benefits of investing in WLDPs?**

While theory from this perspective presents WLDPs as a means for organizations to attract, develop, retain, and promote high-achieving women in the organization (Hewlett & Rashid, 2011; Ely et al., 2011), our empirical findings reveal that the main benefits from WLDPs come from only one aspect of talent management, which is the retention of current female leaders rather than the promotion of them. The implication is that organizations are well-aware of that the nomination of high-potential women will most likely result in that women feel special and valued, which positively affects their engagement and commitment to the organization. Since it is more complicated for women to fit into organizational cultures where male leadership behaviours are the norm (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ridgeway & Correll, 2000), WLDP nomination is a strategy utilized by organizations to motivate female talents and show appreciation. But to a large extent, WLDPs are also about a desire to behave morally right (Mikkola, 2005; World Bank, 2012) and organizations believe that WLDPs signal commitment to gender diversity both to the rest of the company and to society at large. Hence, our research indicates that WLDP investment is a way for organizations to handle external demands on diversified leadership and improved gender equality. To summarize, our research contradicts current theory (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003; Debebe, 2011; Ely et al., 2011) by showing that WLDP nomination is not primarily about promoting or preparing females to more senior leadership roles. Rather, WLDPs seem to be an efficient way to increase engagement of a few women that currently hold leadership positions.

Ely et al. (2011) points to a vital aspect of successful WLDPs, namely to add to normative leadership development strategies how women's path to leadership is affected by gender, neither making women feel victimized nor blamed, and simultaneously cultivate in them a sense of agency. However, since the organizations we have studied (i) do not purposely encourage gender-discussions in their program and (ii) nominate women who already have a sense of agency and high leadership position, this vital aspect becomes irrelevant for members to discuss and is therefore not included in the WLDP. What we discover in our research is that even though gender is not a focus element in WLDPs, spending time on leadership discussions with other successful women will have a rather small, but positive impact on females in the lower echelons of the organization. This is the result of the fact that when successful women get time to reflect and interact with similar others, they become aware of their responsibility to help less successful women overcome the barriers they might face. Therefore, one could argue that empirical results point toward the conclusion that organizations themselves think that WLDPs only have a small effect on the



culture and work environment, because they “force” female leaders to surface and challenge gendered assumptions shaping how people think, feel, and act (Debebe et al., 2016). Hence, organizations seem to believe that letting a few, but powerful women, partake in a WLDP will lead to some improvements in the work environment as a whole, thanks to network support, reduced stereotype biases, and greater access to organizational resources (Ely, 1995; Bilimoria, 1995; Kanter, 1977; McKinsey & Company/Lean In 2015). However, we discover ambiguity in the empirical findings regarding WLDPs’ impact on culture as organizations also say that such initiatives are far from enough to drive structural change e.g., recruitment processes, advancement mechanisms, and work policies – factors that significantly affect women’s opportunities to reach senior leadership (Debebe et al., 2016; Ely et al., 2011).

## **5.2 Member perspective**

The following sections present the analysis of the empirical findings from the member perspective.

### **5.2.1 What is the overall perception of partaking in a WLDP?**

While the member perspective theorizes that women’s leadership development cannot be viewed in isolation from how gender dynamics complicate the process of obtaining a leader identity (Hogue & Lord, 2007; Ely et al., 2011; Ibarra et al., 2013), our findings show that successful female leaders disregard gender as factor shaping their leadership achievements. This has important implications for how members perceive WLDPs, since it contradicts the essence of WLDPs, which is to facilitate the understanding of how gender biases shape women’s leadership (Hopkins et al., 2008; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003; Ely et al., 2011). Instead, empirical findings indicate that WLDPs that presuppose a mismatch between how women are seen and the qualities that typically are associated with leaders (Ely et al., 2011; Hopkins et al., 2008; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003) are perceived as less positive and attractive than WLDPs with a pure leadership development and skills focus. Consequently, there is little empirical evidence confirming that women identify their leadership strengths by navigating the challenges of contradictory expectations between being a woman and having a leadership role (Sugiyama et al., 2016) or feel pressures to fix themselves to better fit a new leadership identity (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). In our research women cite authenticity as a main factor for successful leadership transitions. Additionally, we believe that this might limit members’ willingness for discussions about how their gender shape their leadership (Debebe et al., 2016).

Consequently, these women have low interest in content that is built on the assumption that they need to become more open and less defensive toward gender biases (Ely et al., 2006; Kolb & Blake-Beard, 2009; Davies et al., 2005). This finding is in line with theory stating that high-achieving women deny the existence of gender bias (Clayton & Crosby, 1992; Valian, 1998). WLDPs that leave out gender-related content and instead focus on women’s individual leadership needs as well as provide time for reflection, inspiration, and skills-development are perceived as valuable. While research suggests that this perception is related to women’s tendency to show fear for the appearance of femininity i.e., being perceived as un-leader-like (Bass,

1997; Spreitzer & Quinn, 1996), our findings emphasize that such reluctance toward gender-focused discussions has to do with irrelevance: members do not believe that acknowledging gender is what has helped or will help them succeed.

Therefore, WLDPs that aim to deconstruct members' hard-fought leader identities are perceived as both offending and upsetting. Nevertheless, empirical findings confirm that WLDP members value the opportunity to interact with other female leaders as such support, validation, and social exchange among women can truly spark leadership development (Debebe, 2011). Identification with other women during the program increases members' willingness to talk openly (Ely et al., 2006; Kolb & Blake-Beard, 2009; Davies et al., 2005) about every day and business issues. This rare opportunity to meet other successful women is often inspiring and widens members' perspectives. In line with theory, empirical findings show that WLDPs can facilitate the member in the process of gaining a deeper understanding of how their personal and professional experiences have shaped them (Ely et al., 2011). Furthermore, research from both perspectives reveals examples of WLDP participation that have resulted in that members realize that if they as women want to reach senior leadership positions, they have no future within the company, which leads them to the decision to leave and find something better. Thus, an organization that cannot ensure an environment where women will thrive and tries to compensate by offering them to participate in a WLDP, will have difficulties keeping its female employees.

Another important finding is that negative feelings of disrespect can arise from WLDP nomination. Such feelings often arise because women are distinguished from the rest of the organization in combination with a belief that mixed-sex programs have a stronger impact on women's leadership opportunities. We also discovered that negative feelings often arise simultaneously as positive feelings of pride and honour from being identified as a talent. This contradiction can only be resolved when the member clearly understands their personal gain from partaking in a WLDP. On a positive note, both nomination and participation have clear effects on members' motivation, engagement, and acceptance of increasing performance demands (Björkman et al., 2013).

### **5.2.2 What are the main benefits of partaking in a WLDP for the member?**

Theory suggests that an essential benefit of WLDP participation is that the member learns how to become an effective leader when they understand how gender shapes leadership (Ely & Meyerson, 2010; Ely & Padavic, 2007). By now, our research has made it clear that WLDPs with an explicit focus on gender are rare in reality. Furthermore, while empirical findings from the organizational perspective show that nominators expect WLDPs to result in that members are provided with tools and strategies for taking effective action towards reaching leadership positions (Ely et al., 2011), members themselves say that WLDP participation rather confirmed what they already knew or at the most sharpened some of their existing leadership skills. In line with theory (Ruderman & Ohlott, 2005), the latter process is facilitated

when the members gain new perspectives on leadership and business challenges as well as when they are provided with time to reflect critically upon themselves and their organizational situations. For example, some women cite that they became humbler or more calm after the WLDP. However, in opposite to research by DeRue and Ashford (2010b), the women that we interviewed do not believe that leadership is something one will learn in a classroom.

Answering this research question makes us realize that it is important to emphasize that women who are given the opportunity to participate in WLDPs have come a long way in their careers at the point of nomination. Thus, they have already developed expertise, power, credibility, and self-confidence into their leadership identity. Consequently, these women are not responsive to shape new leader identities that better fit organizational circumstances, as suggested in theory (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Ely & Padavic, 2007). Instead, empirical findings clearly show that successful women are not open to change that requires a fundamental identity shift (Hogue & Lord, 2007; Ely et al., 2011; Ibarra et al., 2013). However, it would be healthy and important for these women to actually evaluate themselves and their leadership to give room for improvements. Given the situation at hand, it might be worth questioning if these are the right types of women to nominate for WLDPs if the goal is to strive for gender equality.

Additionally, we noticed that the younger female members are more open to the existence of gender biases, to receive feedback, to take on new perspectives, and consequently to adapt their leadership styles as they gain awareness and new insights. These women appreciate being appointed a mentor and are more inclined to learn from senior women about leadership. In summary, younger members seem to be more positive toward WLDPs and the benefits of such programs. Furthermore, empirical results show that more experienced women that receive a WLDP nomination have difficulties understanding the true value of partaking in a WLDP, especially from a leadership development perspective as the program often includes elements they already know much about. Opposite to what the organizations believe, members are sceptical and sometimes negative towards the use of WLDPs as a strategy to improve gender equality. Overall, from a career point of view, it is much more attractive and beneficial to be nominated for a mixed-sex program where women get confirmation that they have the same value and get the same chances as men in the organization.

On a positive note, our empirical findings show, in agreement with theory (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003; Ibarra et al., 2010; Ely et al., 2011), that members unanimously perceive one extremely valuable benefit of WLDPs compared to mixed-sex programs, namely the network. At the same time, our research unfortunately confirms that no matter how much one wants to deny the existence of gender biases, exclusion from vital networks and the inability to hear other women reflect on their leadership development are among the main factors preventing women to reach higher in their careers. Even though most of the researched women seem to agree that the motivation behind organizational investment in WLDPs is

questionable, they are thankful to be provided with the rare opportunity to network and build new relationships, which according to them is one of the most beneficial aspect of WLDP participation. Another interesting finding is that members, as a result of partaking in the WLDP, realized how important it is to act as role models and encourage other women to become more confident and to claim their right to leadership. This might seem obvious but when caught up in one's career and personal success, it is easy to forget the impact one has on others.

## 6. CONCLUSION

*This chapter summarizes the findings from the previous analysis, enabling us to answer the research question in a short and concise manner. Section 6.1 starts by addressing the research question and pinpoints the main conclusions from the study. Section 6.2 presents the theoretical contribution to the literary field of WLDPs as well as the practical implications for organizations, followed by section 6.3, which discusses the limitations of the study. The chapter ends with section 6.4, giving suggestions for further research.*

### 6.1 Addressing the research question

In this thesis the WLDP phenomenon is researched and analysed from the organizational and the member perspectives. With such an approach we found both similarities and discrepancies between the two perspectives that has led us to a point where we can finally answer the main research question and thus add to the rather limited explanations for organizational investment in WLDPs.

#### ***Why do organizations invest in Women Leadership Development Programs?***

Previous literature can be summarized to assume that women have not been socialized to compete successfully in the world of and therefore need to learn certain skills that come naturally to men. Furthermore, the literature considers WLDPs to have a direct and positive effect on women's transition into leadership positions. In this thesis, we close the identified research gap by finding out that, contrary to what theory suggests, organizational investment in WLDPs is not primarily about becoming more successful in recruiting and developing female talent in a way that improves the gender balance and ultimately increases business performance.

Instead, we found that the main organizational goal of WLDP investment is to support already successful female leaders by providing them with the opportunity to meet and interact with peer women. In line with findings from the member's perspective, where the "boys' club" is often mentioned as something that women are excluded from but desire to be part of, the network aspect of WLDPs is thus beneficial for both the organizations and the members. WLDPs can therefore be important as we move into the future where women can concentrate less on being accepted into the "boys' club" and instead create their own "women's club". As companies are well-aware of the difficult situation that women in leadership positions face, even though women themselves do not want to admit this fact, offering them to participate in a WLDP is an attempt to improve their circumstances and to develop them in their current position. In doing so, organizations also show that they do care about their female colleagues and make them feel valued, which in itself is important and leads to increased commitment to the organization.

Hence, the majority of organizations that we have researched do not believe in WLDPs as a means to increase the amount of women in senior leadership positions, although there is evidence that WLDPs have

an indirect positive effect on female promotion through e.g. helping members gain awareness of the organizational situation other women face and how they can act as role models for these women. Finally, we find that one important reason for companies to invest in WLDPs is that they internally and externally signal commitment to gender issues and show that they are interested in reaching gender balance. This also allows organizations to avoid acknowledging and finding a solution to the real problem, namely the organizational culture, something which would require a lot more effort from an organizational perspective. However, organizations do believe that WLDPs can contribute to a cultural change but it is not enough to serve as a stand-alone solution.

## **6.2 Theoretical and practical contribution**

This research contributes theoretically by explaining the reasons that motivate organizational investment in WLDPs, even though such initiatives do not fulfil their initial purpose. The thesis has also found that WLDP members have different opinions regarding the programs. While some women are negative towards the use of WLDPs as these distinguish between gender and signal that there is something wrong with women, others react positively because they feel that their organizations believe in them. This has practical implications for organizations as they need to carefully consider if WLDPs are a preferable alternative under their own individual circumstances, and if they choose to invest, they must ensure that the program members really get something out of their participation and have a positive experience, regardless of what it might be. If women do not feel that a female-only program is more beneficial than one with both gender present, it is better to let women and men participate in the same leadership development program. On a practical note, companies should also consider alternatives to WLDPs to address the gender issue and find solutions that more efficiently give women the same circumstances as men in the organization.

## **6.3 Limitations**

This thesis has some limitations that are worth considering. First, the interview sample consisted of a rather homogenous group of women, which might not correctly reflect a reality that includes many different personality types. This may have resulted in that the empirical findings and the subsequent analysis are biased. Second, the themes and categories within the theoretical framework are neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive, which means that some elements might have been neglected in the study. These elements could possibly have been important to include in order to better reflect the true motivations for organizational investment in WLDPs. Third, the study is limited to Sweden and as there may be national differences in opinions and thoughts regarding the use, perceptions, and outcomes of WLDPs, this could have affected the empirical findings and the analysis in several ways. It could also limit the transferability of the study as discussed in section 3.7.2.

#### **6.4 Further research**

As mentioned in the methodology chapter, we did include millennials as a third perspective in our study and went through with several interviews. Discussions with fellow female students at the Stockholm School of Economics went in rather unexpected directions and common for all of them was that they were quite critical towards the use of WLDPs to increase the number of women in senior leadership positions and to address the gender issue. Our impression is that women about to enter their professional career think that it is not enough for companies to invest in WLDPs to be perceived as authentic and truly interested in making a difference regarding gender balance. These females want to see actual results and numbers on how WLDPs impact the ratio of women in senior leadership positions – something that WLDPs currently cannot provide. Therefore, we think it would be of interest for other researchers to investigate more closely what future WLDP participants think of such initiatives to improve gender equality in order to determine whether it will be beneficial for organizations to continue investing in those programs.

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## APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW GUIDE (ORGANIZATIONS)

This interview is conducted as part of a master's thesis about women leadership development programs (WLDPs) written by two students at the Stockholm School of Economics. Your answers to the below questions will provide us with valuable information and highly contribute to the outcome of the thesis. Everything that is said during the interview as well as your and your company's identity will be kept confidential.

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### **Background questions**

Name:

Age:

Company:

Position:

Association to WLDP:

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### **A. Underlying assumptions**

1. Do you see any differences between male and female leaders? What are the differences?
2. What is the company philosophy regarding the development of female leaders?
3. Is it common for women in your organization to adopt masculine attributes with the aim of being perceived by others as more leader-like?
4. What do you think are the barriers to female career advancement?
5. How does the WLDP help women overcome these?
6. Why does the company that you work for invest in WLDPs?
7. If investing in an external program, why did you choose the one that you did?
8. What are the differences between a leadership program solely for women and one that includes both gender?

### **B. WLDP content and design**

9. Can you please describe as detailed as possible the design and content of the WLDP?
10. What are the most important elements to include in the WLDP to make it valuable for the participants?
11. What criteria do you consider when deciding whom to nominate for the program?

### **C. Benefits and outcomes**

12. What are the intended outcomes of WLDP participation?
13. In what ways can WLDPs foster in members a sustained capacity for leadership?
14. Besides developing better female leaders, what are the benefits for your organization to invest in WLDPs?
15. What are the negative consequences of declining a request from an employee that want to participate in the program?
16. Why are WLDPs an efficient way of increasing the number of women in senior leadership positions?

## APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW GUIDE (MEMBERS)

This interview is conducted as part of a master's thesis about women leadership development programs (WLDPs) written by two students at the Stockholm School of Economics. Your answers to the below questions will provide us with valuable information and highly contribute to the outcome of the thesis. Everything that is said during the interview as well as your and your company's identity will be kept confidential.

### **Julia Martins**

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### **Background questions**

Name:

Age:

Company:

Position:

Year of participation in the WLDP:

Recent positions/Company:

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### **A. Introductory questions**

1. What qualities do you think are important in order to become a leader?
2. What characterizes you as a leader?
3. What worries did you face before taking on a leadership role?
4. Have you perceived any differences between female and male leaders?

### **B. Before WLDP participation**

5. Why did you want to participate in the program?
6. Why did you want to become a leader?
7. How did you feel when you were nominated for the program?
8. What expectations did you have on the outcomes before participating in the program?

### **C. During WLDP participation**

9. How would you describe your WLDP experience?
10. Tell us about the program:
  - i) What topics were covered during the program?
  - ii) For how many months did the program proceed?
  - iii) Can you please describe the other participants?
  - iv) Were there any male lecturers, administrators etcetera?? Do you think this was beneficial?
11. Did the WLDP allow you to discuss your personal experiences (e.g. challenges) of being a woman?
12. How did it feel to share your story?

13. How did the program help you gain a better understanding of the effects of gender biases in your organization, how these may affect your development as leaders, and what you can do to counter them?
14. What do you think was the best/most inspiring part of the program?

**D. After WLDP participation**

15. In what way could the program have been designed differently to better fit your needs and expectations?
16. What were the most important outcome of participating in the WLDP?
17. What have you learned as a result of partaking in the program?
18. In what ways have your participation in the WLDP helped you reach a leadership position?
19. What were the negative effects of participating in the program?
20. If you felt any worries about taking on a leadership role, in what ways did the WLDP help you handle these?
21. In what ways have the organizational expectations on you changed after your participation in the program?

**E. Concluding questions**

22. What are your thoughts on using WLDPs as a way of increasing the number of women in senior leadership positions?
23. Based on your experience, what better alternatives to WLDPs could there be in order to increase the number of women in senior leadership positions?

## APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW SAMPLE

| Interviewee Code | Industry              | Date of Interview | Length     | Interview Type |
|------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|------------|----------------|
| Memb_1           | Telecom               | 31 March 2017     | 60 minutes | In person      |
| Memb_2           | Management Consulting | 3 April 2017      | 55 minutes | In person      |
| Memb_3           | Management Consulting | 4 April 2017      | 60 minutes | In person      |
| Memb_4           | Banking               | 19 April 2017     | 40 minutes | In person      |
| Memb_5           | Management Consulting | 21 April 2017     | 55 minutes | In person      |
| Memb_6           | Management Consulting | 25 April 2017     | 70 minutes | In person      |
| Memb_7           | Management Consulting | 26 April 2017     | 45 minutes | In person      |
| Memb_8           | Pension Consulting    | 26 April 2017     | 40 minutes | In person      |
| Org_1            | Telecom               | 5 April 2017      | 55 minutes | Telephone      |
| Org_2            | Leadership Consulting | 10 April 2017     | 60 minutes | In person      |
| Org_3            | Banking               | 11 April 2017     | 50 minutes | In person      |
| Org_4            | Leadership Consulting | 24 April 2017     | 75 minutes | In person      |
| Org_5            | Manufacturing         | 24 April 2017     | 70 minutes | In person      |

## APPENDIX 4: ANALYSIS OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS (ORG.)

| Theme  | Category                    | Code                               | Description   | Org_1 | Org_2 | Org_3 | Org_4 | Org_5 |
|--|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| WLDP design strategy                                     | Organizational context      | Maleness                           | Idea that leadership equates to maleness and is expressed through masculine behaviours such as assertiveness, aggressiveness, and competitiveness           |       | X     | X     | X     | X     |
|  |                             | Leadership needs                   | Idea that women have distinctive leadership needs compared to men, which the organization has to meet when designing WLDPs                                  | X     |       | X     | X     |       |
|  |                             | Learning style                     | Idea that women acquire and transform knowledge differently than men  |       |       |       |       |       |
|  |                             | Gender barriers                    | Idea that gender dynamics make it difficult for a woman to claim a leader role and/or reduce her chances of being recruited for higher status positions     | X     |       | X     | X     | X     |
|  |                             | Cultural expectations              | Idea that when men enact masculine behaviours, their actions are congruent with cultural expectations and seen as legitimate                                | X     |       |       | X     | X     |
|  | Learning elements & content | Feminine leadership                | Idea that stereotypically feminine leadership strategies, e.g. cooperation and collaboration, are important to the organization                             | X     | X     | X     | X     | X     |
|  |                             | Transformative learning            | WLDPs should allow women to expand their perspectives through critical reflection upon the assumptions, values, and habits that steer their action          |       | X     | X     | X     |       |
|  |                             | Feedback                           | WLDPs should include the activity of collecting, delivering, and processing feedback to build self-knowledge  |       | X     | X     | X     | X     |
|  |                             | Networking opportunities           | WLDPs should help women expand the depth and range of developmental relationships and highlight the benefits of networking                                  | X     | X     | X     | X     | X     |
|  |                             | Leader identity                    | WLDPs should provide knowledge and expertise to develop as a leader and internalize confidence needed for leadership success                                | X     | X     | X     | X     | X     |
|  | Approaches                  | Framework                          | WLDPs should build on a framework that is gender-distinctive and provides gender-sensitive instructional strategies   |       | X     |       | X     |       |
|  |                             | Experience sharing                 | WLDPs should provide opportunities to interact with peers who are uniquely fit to give support, validation, and social comparison                           | X     | X     | X     | X     | X     |
|  |                             | Teaching method                    | WLDPs should adopt gender-sensitive teaching methods that honour women's individual modes of learning   |       |       |       |       |       |
|  |                             | Gender composition                 | WLDPs should be composed in a way that enhances safety and does not disrupt the process of discovering the gendered aspects of their leadership experiences | X     | X     | X     | X     | X     |
|  |                             | Add women and stir                 | When organizations deliver the same programs to women as they do to men   |       |       |       | X     |       |
| Goals and outcomes of organizational investment in WLDPs | Direct                      | Fix the women                      | When organizations locate the problem in women, because they have not been socialized to compete successfully in the world of men                           |       |       |       | X     | X     |
|  |                             | Talent management                  | The objective is to attract, develop, retain, and advance high-achieving women in the organization  | X     | X     | X     |       | X     |
|  |                             | Cultural change                    | The objective is to change the organizational culture to erase assumptions and norms that perpetuate gender inequality                                      | X     |       |       | X     | X     |
|  |                             | Structural change                  | The objective is to change e.g. recruitment processes, advancement mechanisms, job titles, and work policies that perpetuate gender inequality              | X     |       |       |       |       |
|  |                             | Female promotion                   | The objective is to promote women in order to achieve greater diversity through gender balance  |       | X     |       | X     |       |
|  | Indirect                    | Business performance               | The objective is to improve financial results by embracing diverse leadership   |       | X     | X     | X     |       |
|  |                             | Create awareness                   | The objective is to create awareness throughout the whole organization by identifying unfair gender dynamics  |       | X     | X     | X     |       |
|  |                             | Improved work environment          | Result in greater representation of women, which creates benefits e.g. network, support, reduced stereotype biases, and greater access to resources         |       | X     | X     |       | X     |
|  |                             | Dealing with external demands      | Result in an improved ability for the organization to handle external demands on leadership diversity and gender equality                                   |       | X     | X     | X     |       |
|  |                             | Recognition of stereotypical roles | Result in that females better understand gender stereotype biases and avoid overcompensation by enacting hyper-masculine demeanour                          | X     | X     | X     | X     | X     |
|  |                             | Help other women succeed           | Result in that participants can act as role models and support other women in the organization  | X     | X     | X     | X     |       |
|  |                             | Work attitudes                     | Result in positive effects, e.g. increased engagement and commitment to the organization  | X     | X     | X     | X     |       |

## APPENDIX 5: ANALYSIS OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS (MEMBERS)

| Theme                              | Category                   | Code                        | Description   | Memb. 1 | Memb. 2 | Memb. 3 | Memb. 4 | Memb. 5 | Memb. 6 | Memb. 7 | Memb. 8 |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|---|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Members' experiences               | Women specific             | Gender identity negotiation | About pressures on women to "fit" themselves to fit into a leadership identity that matches organizational expectations                               | X       | X       |         |         |         | X       |         | X       |
|                                    |                            | Contradictory expectations  | About masculine leadership behaviours being the organizational norm that do not match with female's relational and collaborative leadership           |         | X       |         |         |         | X       |         |         |
|                                    |                            | Rejection of leadership     | About contradictory role expectations that result in rejection of women's leadership claims   |         | X       |         |         |         |         |         | X       |
|                                    |                            | Gender differences          | About gender differences influencing the way men and women process information, handle stress, relate to one another, experience leadership etc.      | X       | X       |         |         |         | X       | X       | X       |
|                                    | WILDP Specific             | Network challenges          | About exclusion from vital networks and lack of occasions in which women can listen to similar others reflect on their leadership development         | X       | X       |         |         |         | X       | X       | X       |
|                                    |                            | Expectations                | WILDP nomination results in expectations on members such as higher work effort, engagement etc.   | X       | X       | X       |         | X       | X       | X       | X       |
|                                    |                            | Gender composition          | WILDP gender composition matters because gendered pressures persist in mixed-sex settings and limit women to explore their leadership experiences     |         | X       |         |         | X       | X       | X       | X       |
|                                    |                            | Worry                       | Women may worry about being un-leader-like, overly masculine or feminine, and capacity to remain successful   |         | X       | X       |         | X       |         |         | X       |
|                                    | Before participation       | Vulnerability               | Women may feel more vulnerable to the risk of failure when the number of females at more senior levels is low   | X       | X       | X       |         | X       | X       |         |         |
|                                    |                            | Proud and honour            | Women may feel proud and honoured about being nominated to participate in a WILDP   | X       | X       | X       |         | X       | X       | X       | X       |
|                                    |                            | Disrespect                  | Women may feel disrespected as a result of being nominated to participate in a WILDP  | X       |         |         |         |         |         | X       |         |
|                                    |                            | Identification              | Participants identify with other women, which increases willingness to talk openly without fearing that others will misunderstand or judge them       | X       | X       | X       |         | X       | X       | X       |         |
| Member's feelings & attitudes      | During participation       | Resistance                  | Participants may feel threatened when discussing sensitive topics such as gender bias or when reflecting on one's personal leadership challenges      | X       | X       | X       |         | X       | X       |         | X       |
|                                    |                            | Understanding of self       | Participants are able to better understand how their personal and professional experiences have shaped their leadership persona                       | X       |         |         |         | X       | X       |         | X       |
|                                    |                            | Engagement                  | Being part of a WILDP increases the feeling of devotion and engagement  | X       | X       |         |         | X       | X       | X       | X       |
|                                    |                            | Reciprocity                 | Being part of a WILDP increases the inclination to give back to the organization by stepping out of one's comfort zone and becoming a better employee | X       | X       |         |         |         | X       |         | X       |
| Members' behaviours                | Women specific             | Sense of agency             | Being part of a WILDP increases the feeling of control of own situation and behaviour   |         |         | X       |         | X       |         | X       |         |
|                                    |                            | Masculine demeanour         | Women overcompensate for stereotypical role expectations by enacting extremely masculine behaviours   |         |         | X       |         |         |         | X       |         |
|                                    |                            | Collaborative strategies    | Women are more likely to seek social contact in stressful situations, respond quicker to feedback, prompt personal and group improvements etc.        | X       | X       | X       |         |         |         | X       | X       |
|                                    |                            | Denial                      | Women who have put much effort into ensuring that their gender will not hinder them in their career, might find it hard to admit gender biases        | X       | X       | X       |         |         | X       | X       |         |
|                                    | WILDP specific             | Gender as defence           | Women may blame gender bias instead of taking personal responsibility for obstacles that they have encountered throughout their careers               |         |         |         |         | X       | X       |         |         |
|                                    |                            | High potential              | Being part of a WILDP implies that the woman has leadership potential, which results in nomination  | X       | X       | X       |         | X       | X       | X       | X       |
|                                    |                            | Navigation                  | Being part of a WILDP helps members to better navigate their future leadership by sharing experiences and strategies with peer women                  |         | X       |         |         | X       |         |         |         |
|                                    |                            | Personal development        | WILDPs result in that women gain greater confidence, sense of agency, skill development, and self-awareness and thus become more motivated to lead    |         |         |         |         |         | X       |         | X       |
| WILDP impact on career development | Leadership development     | Career advancement          | WILDPs result in facilitation of participants' transitions to more senior leadership roles  |         |         | X       |         |         | X       |         |         |
|                                    |                            | Leadership identity         | WILDPs result in that female leaders develop and adopt identities that reflect and promote the values that they stand for                             | X       |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
|                                    |                            | Tools and strategies        | WILDPs result in that female leaders are provided with tools for taking effective action towards reaching leadership positions                        |         |         | X       |         |         |         |         | X       |
|                                    |                            | Knowledge integration       | WILDPs result in that women build expertise, power, and credibility   |         |         | X       |         |         |         |         |         |
|                                    | Understand gender dynamics | Handle gender bias          | WILDPs result in that participants learn how gender biases take shape and receive tools and strategies for how to tackle them                         |         | X       |         |         | X       |         |         |         |
|                                    |                            | Reflection                  | WILDPs result in that participants surface, examine, and challenge their own organizational situations  | X       | X       |         |         | X       | X       |         | X       |
|                                    |                            | Defence mechanisms          | WILDPs result in that participants construct grounded assessments of the cultural, organizational, and individual factors shaping them                | X       | X       |         |         | X       |         |         |         |
|                                    |                            | Expand network              | Support in terms of the WILDP providing an opportunity to more effectively build and maintain a network of inspiring women                            |         |         |         |         | X       |         |         |         |
|                                    | Support                    | Identify mentors            | Support in terms of encouraging women to identify mentors and help them develop and build those relationships outside of the program                  | X       | X       | X       |         | X       | X       | X       | X       |