Revealing the Ceiling

A critical exploration of the barriers to female career advancement
and how organizations can help overcome these by gender equality work

Abstract

Women are underrepresented in organizations at large, especially at the top. Despite an increase in research about, and motives for studying, gender in organizations, there is a lack of qualitative studies about how organizations can do gender equality work (GEW) to overcome the barriers to female career advancement. The metaphor of the glass ceiling which entails invisibility is often used to describe these barriers, although previous literature suggests several explanations. Thus, this study aims to explore the cumbersome path to management for women by exploring how managers frame both challenges and ways to counter these within organizations. By conducting semi-structured interviews with 12 managers working within different industries in Sweden, and by applying critical discourse analysis, the empirical findings emphasize the importance of framing and points at the paradox of using the glass ceiling to describe already identified barriers. Moreover, it is argued that barriers are not always the appropriate framing, as some require support rather than removal. Some challenges, such as balancing work and family, are identified as constructed and maintained mainly by society. The findings imply that organizations need to create accountability even for these challenges – those that first may seem out of reach. The findings further indicate that stereotypes and bias are less of a challenge than the literature suggests; rather, the main challenge is informal networks created by a long history of male dominance. These networks affect access to knowledge, social capital, and chance of promotion. Further, the findings about GEW suggest that succession planning and different types of networking can mitigate the aforementioned challenge. Moreover, for GEW to be fruitful, it needs to be integrated into the business core, should not be viewed as a project, and requires proper leadership commitment.

Key words: gender in organizations, glass ceiling, barriers to female career advancement, gender equality work, critical discourse analysis

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Key concepts

Gender	"The effect of social definitions and internalizations and reproductions of the meaning of being a man or a woman" (Alvesson and Billing, 2009, p. 22).
Gender binarism	Although several forces such as the transgender activist movement have challenged gender binarism (Hyde et al., 2019), most of the research on gender in organizations applies a dualistic definition of gender. Thus, to narrow the scope, this study pertains to the gender binary where only men and women are taken into account (ibid).
Gender equality	"Gender equality means that women and men and girls and boys enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities and protections." (UNICEF, 2018). In this context, gender equality is the state where opportunities for career advancement are not affected by the gender.
Gender equality work	Different initiatives, processes, behaviors and efforts carried out by organizations in order to promote gender equality and increase the share of women in management.
Glass ceiling	Metaphor for the invisible and systemic barriers to female career advancement, widely used in research to describe women's slow progress to career advancement (Metz and Kulik, 2014, p.178).
Discourse	The word discourse carries several ideas about how language is structured in different patterns which will affect our acting in different social domains (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2000, p.7).

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1. INTRODUCTION

"It seemed to me there was an invisible barrier to advancement that people didn't recognize," – it is 1978 and Marilyn Loden, a mid-level manager, gives a speech at the Women's Exposition in New York (The Washington Post, 2018). By then, she did not know that this invisible barrier, coined by her as *the glass ceiling,* would be a popular metaphor for why women do not reach top positions to the same extent as men. By then, she did not know that Google would provide 8,310.000 results on "glass ceiling metaphor" three decades later.

The Global Gender Gap Report measures gender gaps on four dimensions: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment (The World Economic Forum, 2020). The second largest gap is within economic participation and opportunity, which measures participation in the labor force and wages (ibid). This dimension has a 42.2% gender gap globally in 2020, and at the current pace of development it will take nearly 257 years to close this gap (ibid, pp.5-6). Additionally, while 55% of women participate in the global labor force compared to 78% of men, this gap widens at more senior positions – only 18.2% of global firms are led by a woman (ibid, p.11).

In 2019, the proportion of women in senior management reached the highest number ever: 29% (Catalyst, 2020). Despite this increase, women are underrepresented in functions regarded as critical for reaching CEO and board-level positions. While 40% of human resources directors were women in 2020; the number of female chief marketing officers and chief information officers were only 17% and 16%, respectively (ibid). In 2018, there were fewer women than men named James among chief executives of Fortune 500 companies (New York Times, 2018). Sweden is often viewed as progressive in this matter (Allbright, 2020) and while it ranks 4th in the Global Gender Gap Report, it only ranks 16th when it comes to economic participation and opportunity (The World Economic Forum, 2020, p.323). Further, the lowest score within this dimension is on the percentage of legislators, senior officials and managers, where Sweden ranks 35th with a 38.6% share of women (ibid).

Generally, there are two motives for studying gender: recognizing injustice and wanting to counteract it and/or opposing the ineffective use of human resources as a result of the gendered order (Alvesson and Billing, 2009, pp.1-2). Numerous studies point at the economic benefits of gender equality, both in socioeconomical measures and at organizational levels (e.g. Maceria 2017; Chang and Milkman, 2020). For example, improving gender equality would increase GDP per capita from 6.1% to 9.6% and lead to an additional 10.5 million jobs by 2050 (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019). Due to these motives the interest in gender research has increased, especially in relation to managerial and organizational theory as well as in organizational practice (Alvesson and Billing, 2009, pp.1-2).

30 years after the metaphor was coined, Marilyn Loden expressed a fear that the concept of the glass ceiling would outlive her (The Washington Post, 2018). However, even though it is still referred to, the concept of the glass ceiling may not have to outlast Loden. Some even consider the metaphor to be "more wrong than right" (Eagly and Carli, 2007). The glass ceiling, being

an analogy of invisible barriers to female career advancement, is no longer unexplainable. Over the years, scholars have studied this topic; a large body of research includes explanations that points at several factors for women being underrepresented, in organizations at large and especially at the top (e.g. Eagly and Carli, 2007; Alvesson and Billing, 2009; Streets and Major, 2014).

The motives for studying gender in organizations have in common that they aim to identify reasons for inequality in order to ultimately create change. Despite this, there is a gap in this body of literature where few scholars have explored barriers to female career advancement and ways for organizations to help overcome these. Moreover, while research unravels existing challenges regarding gender equality, it is important to understand how people within the actual context frame these in order to pinpoint possible solutions. How do managers frame the barriers to female career advancement, and how do they frame possible ways of overcoming these?

1.1. PROBLEM AREA AND RESEARCH GAP

Due to increased focus on this matter, gender equality work (GEW) and gendered workplace initiatives are raised both externally and internally. The increased awareness of gender issues has led to an amplified media coverage and professionals use media to influence organizations (Wahl and Höök, 2007). Different theories exist concerning the gender inequality that prevails in society and several scholars have explored the barriers to female career advancement (e.g. Alvesson and Billing, 2009, pp.143-144). However, little research has been conducted on how to overcome these barriers. A Scopus search on "gender equality work" gives 46 results, moreover, nearly 30% are published in 2019 and 2020 (appendix 1). This highlights the newly increased interest in GEW, but the scarcity of existing literature covering it. Furthermore, most of the literature exploring women's barriers to advancement have focused on the role of the women in overcoming these barriers (Castaño et al., 2019); e.g. by finding career strategies for women to break the glass ceiling (Ragins et al., 1998). Additionally, most of the studies on gender and organizations have been conducted in the US and there is a lack of qualitative studies (Alvesson and Billing, 2009, pp.161-162). In sum, research on women in management has mainly looked at the barriers for women to advance in their careers and there is a lack of qualitative studies on how organizations can break these barriers.

1.2. PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTION

The overriding purpose of this study is to explore why women do not reach top positions to the same extent as men do, and how organizations can increase women's chance of doing so. It is important to see how managers perceive and frame gender equality issues within their organizations in order to draw conclusions on how to possibly make it more equal. As Eagly and Carli (2007) put it:

> If one has misdiagnosed a problem, then one is unlikely to prescribe an effective cure. This is the situation regarding the scarcity of women in top leadership. Because people with the best of intentions have misread the symptoms, the solutions that managers are investing in are not making enough of a difference.

Due to this study having a qualitative approach employing discourse analysis, the purpose can be more accurately narrowed to explore how managers *frame* gender equality challenges and solutions. What is measured gets done; what is diagnosed gets treated. Arguably, it is more difficult to identify ways to increase women in management if the cause behind their absence is not identified and framed in the correct manner. Thus, the research question can be formulated as follows:

> How do managers frame gender equality challenges and barriers to female career advancement, and how do they frame ways to overcome these challenges and barriers?

1.3. EXPECTED CONTRIBUTION

This thesis aims to add to the theory on gender in organizations. More specifically, it intends to narrow the research gap on the interrelation between barriers to female career advancement and how GEW executed by organizations can help overcome these. This is pursued by exploring how people within the context frame both barriers and GEW. Thus, this thesis also aims to contribute by giving practitioners insights on the studied field and how to work with these issues in order to ultimately increase the share of women in management.

1.4. DELIMITATIONS

Some demarcations were made to narrow the scope. First, one opportunity would be to look at a certain industry, e.g. by doing a case study, but in order to gather data with the aim to identify broad discourses on the subject, the study is conducted across several industries. Since the study intends to uncover possible ways for overcoming barriers to female career advancement it is relevant to explore if these barriers differ between industries. Second, most of the interviewees work at large global organizations but all of them work in Sweden, thus the study is limited to the Swedish market. Sweden has a global reputation of being progressive when it comes to gender equality, something that can be seen as a "paradox" as progress, in fact, is slowing down (BBC, 2019). Third, the study focuses on GEW and implications from an organizational perspective, not on what individuals can do themselves. Fourth, the study is limited to private-sector organizations. Fifth, the thesis applies a discourse analysis methodology. Hence, it is limited to the framing of barriers to female career advancement, and how to overcome them.

2. THEORY

2.1. GENDER IN ORGANIZATIONS

As society evolves, increasing awareness of inequality, and as more people see the benefit of utilizing resources and competences more effectively, there is an increasing interest in researching gender in organizations. Joshi et al. (2015) reviewed gender research in the Academic Management Journal (AMJ) over five decades to highlight themes salient in empirical research on gender in management. During the 70s, research themes were social stereotypes and gender roles in the workplace. The 80s focused on identifying and understanding barriers, e.g. evaluation and promotion. The volume of gender research experienced a decline in the 90s whilst continuing to focus on identifying even more barriers by broader theoretical perspectives such as social identity theory. In this era, there was also emphasis on how the representation of women at higher levels shapes the power and identity of women in lower positions. Between 2000 and 2015, there was a continued interest in the themes aforementioned, as well as some other trends such as how pregnancy and motherhood affect work-related outcomes (ibid). There are 17 articles containing "gender" or "sex" in the title or abstract published at AMJ between 2015 and 2020 (appendix 2). The main themes identified are closing a gender/wage gap, and leadership.

2.2. BARRIERS

Alvesson and Billing (2009, p.144) claim that the explanations for the lack of women in management can be distinguished between those pointing at differences between men and women, e.g. psychological traits and career choices, and those emphasizing more structural explanations. The categorization of explanations as either individual or structural has been applied here as well, although not in the exact same way as Alvesson and Billing (ibid).
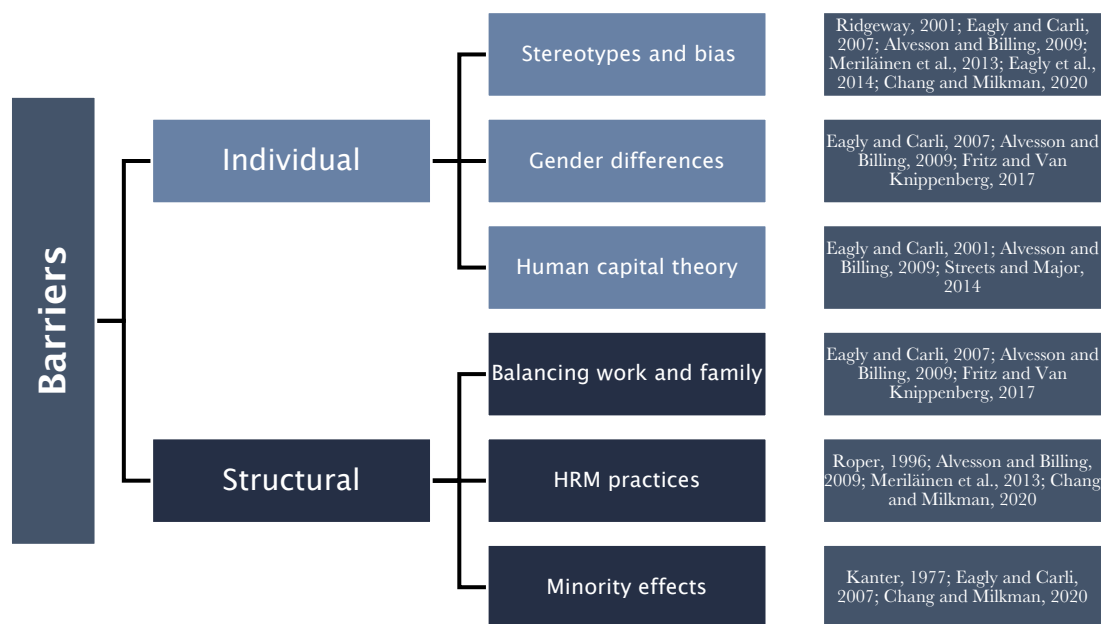
Figure 1: Barriers to female career advancement

2.2.1. Stereotypes and bias

As shown in the gender research review by Joshi et al. (2015), gender-stereotypical beliefs spilling over into workplaces was seen as a major source of gender inequality in the 70s. The ideal leader has typically been constructed in masculine terms, although some scholars consider this view as old-fashioned and less strong today (Alvesson and Billing, 2009, pp.145-146). Still, many researchers claim that gender stereotypes and bias play a central role in hindering women from becoming leaders.

Eagly et al. (2014, p.159) state that "the incongruity between the group stereotype about women and the requirements of leader roles is the major source of the prejudice against women leaders" and Meriläinen et al. (2013) conclude that the managerial body inherently is masculine. The most prominent view on gender stereotypical leadership is the trait perspective; women are prescribed communal traits, such as warm and caring, and men are prescribed agentic traits such as assertive and independent (e.g. Eagly et al., 2014; Streets and Major, 2014). This view lies behind Eagly et al.'s (2014) incongruity argument; the "ideal" leader is typically associated with more agentic behavior. The bias against women creates obstacles for equal wages, fair evaluations, and chances for promotion, and women are generally perceived as having lower social status (Ridgeway, 2001; Eagly and Carli, 2007). Stereotypes are mental shortcuts helping us to make decisions and are thus not inherently bad. However, as stereotypes sometimes are inaccurate, they can affect choices that perpetuate inequality and make people favor men over women (Chang and Milkman, 2020). Gender bias can also affect how we give credit; men are often given more credit in group performances, even when women take more responsibility, or the performance does not differ (ibid).

2.2.2. Gender differences

Alvesson and Billing (2009, pp.144-145) state that the research on differences between men and women has shown mixed results but that apart from some authors suggesting that women differ from men, there are no or only minor proved differences on the whole. On the other hand, Eagly and Carli (2007) ask if a distinct female leadership style exists and conclude that "there seems to be a popular consensus that it does". An important remark here is that women and men having different leadership styles is not equivalent to them having different aspirations, values, and personality traits as well as job-related skills and behaviors. Alvesson and Billing (2009, pp.144-145) state that most research agrees on women and men being similar when it comes to aspects such as aspirations, traits and skills. What Eagly and Carli (2007) discuss is the conception that women often struggle to foster an effective leadership style that conforms to both qualities broadly preferred in women and qualities perceived as necessary for leaders to succeed.

2.2.3. Human capital theory

Another explanation to why women do not climb the corporate ladder as easily as their male counterparts is related to human capital. Some research suggests that the lack of women in management can be derived from a shortage of females with appropriate education and background (Alvesson and Billing, 2009, p.145). Eagly and Carli (2001) label this explanation as a pipeline problem, however, while the pipeline explanation remains popular among male

CEOs (Ragins et al., 1998), it has been disproved in large. Streets and Major (2014, pp. 292-295) add another layer to human capital theory, stating that role models largely affect people's career attitudes from a young age since they impact people's self-efficacy. This can thus partly explain why some interests, educations and career choices are more associated with men.

2.2.4. Balancing work and family

Women have historically taken out more parental leave. Despite improvements, the median length of paid leave in Europe and Central Asia is 421 days of maternity leave, while only ten days of paternity leave (World bank, 2020, p.8). Besides governmental regulations that may lead companies in directions favoring men over women, there are other aspects to this barrier. Women interrupt their careers more often than men, are less mobile, and take more days off which results in less flexibility and fewer years of experience; ultimately leading to a lower chance of promotion (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Alvesson and Billing, 2009, p.149). The prioritization between family and career can also be argued to lower women's leadership aspiration as they need to take this into greater account than their male counterparts (Fritz and Van Knippenberg, 2017). Another implication of women this aspect is the decreased social capital; as more women prioritize family, they get little time for social networking (Alvesson and Billing, 2009, p.149). To socially network and build professional networks that emerge from "non-essential" parts of work is indeed quite essential (Eagly and Carli, 2007), something that many women miss due to having to prioritize family over work.

2.2.5. Human resource management practices

Research on explanations to barriers for female career advancement also include human resource management (HRM) practices, such as recruitment and assessment processes (Alvesson and Billing, 2009, pp.146-147). Chang and Milkman (2020) describe how gender bias can affect how people redefine merit and exemplify this by a study where the participants evaluated applicants for a leading position. The participants shifted criteria depending on the gender, favoring men, and did not realize this but rather thought they were objective since they used reconstructed definitions of merit to justify their decisions (ibid). Thus, recruitment practices are important to consider when evaluating gender equality in organizations as they often lead to disfavoring women. Meriläinen et al. (2013) explored executive search practices as executive search consultants possess power in elite labor recruitment by determining who classifies as talented and suited for high-level positions. The authors found that executive search practices reproduce understandings of the ideal executive body – an ideal that is male (ibid). Another layer to HRM practices is "homosocial desire" (Roper, 1996, pp.212-213), describing men's networks and how managers chose successors similar to themselves. It aims to capture how male affinity becomes a structural mechanism, forming and maintaining "exclusionary circles" (ibid, p.225). Although this concept goes beyond HRM practices, it can affect how managers are selected.

2.2.6. Minority effects

Kanter (1977) states that a critical mass, about 30%, is necessary for an underrepresented social group to have equal opportunities to the dominating group. When women are in a clear minority, their identities as women are more salient and thus more prone for others'

stereotypical bias (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Thus, the existing sex ratio within companies may pose challenges for women to feel recognized and comfortable. Another related issue is tokenism, or when companies treat equality as a formal checklist rather than a real issue and opportunity. Sometimes groups recruit one woman – a "token" – to avoid being accused of disregarding gender equality (Chang and Milkman, 2020). However, when diversity is treated as an item on a checklist both the woman and the group suffer (ibid). There is a risk that the woman is viewed as not having earned her spot in the group, leading to strained relationships and group dynamics. This, in turn, can affect the job performance of the woman which creates reinforcing cycles preventing the woman to perform to her fullest capability (ibid).

2.3. GENDER EQUALITY WORK

An important remark regarding GEW is the distinction between normative and positive research. In this study, normative research can be described as research pointing at how organizations ought to work with gender equality, while positive research can be described as research about what has been made or even proved to be effective to promote female leadership. Additionally, there are two ways to look at the existing literature regarding GEW – in relation to the challenges it is trying to counter, or what type of organizational process the work relates to. Garvin (1998) presents a framework consisting of three major organizational processes: work processes, behavioral processes, and change processes. Garvin (ibid) also adds managerial processes to his framework. Behavioral processes are individual or interpersonal, and can be divided into three categories: decision-making, communication, and organizational learning. Behavioral and managerial processes have strong links to parts of the literature on GEW and have been applied in those matters. The rest of the literature, focusing more on formal processes and less about behavior, is simply defined as organizational processes.
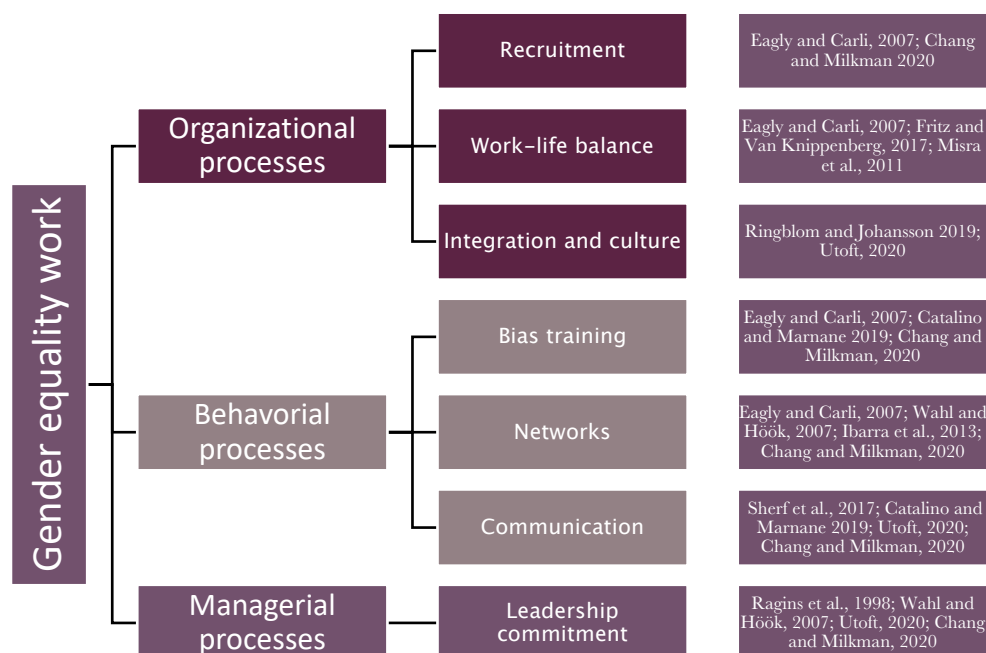
Figure 2: Gender equality work

2.3.1. Recruitment

Since recruitment processes can be affected by stereotypes and the tendency of people to recruit equals, increasing the objectivity in these processes can decrease gender bias that often leads to favoring men over women. When evaluations are more objective, prejudice in both hiring and promotion can be combated (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Blind decision-making is one way to increase objectivity; by making the gender invisible during recruitment, the risk of gender bias affecting the decision is eliminated (Chang and Milkman, 2020). However, this may not be feasible when recruiting to management positions as they seldomly use open job advertisements and screenings where blind decision-making is applicable, but rather use search executives, referrals and internal hiring. Eagly and Carli (2007) state that an internal process should be transparent and communicated at the company as research shows that it can increase the number of women in managerial roles. Another way to increase objectivity when disregard of gender is not feasible is to evaluate candidates simultaneously along the same dimensions and to ensure that the evaluation criteria is explicit without room for bias (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Chang and Milkman, 2020). Another aspect regarding recruitment processes is tokenism, which is harmful both for women and organizations at large (Chang and Milkman, 2020). Eagly and Carli (2007) state that companies should avoid having any team with solely one female member and ensure a critical mass of women in executive positions to "head off the problems" with tokenism.

2.3.2. Work-life balance

As stressed before, one challenge for women to advance in their careers is managing the balance between work and family. Work-life initiatives is one way to tackle this problem. In addition to generally creating better chances for women to advance in their career, work-life initiatives have also been shown to increase women's leadership aspiration, which in turn increases the chance of them advancing (Fritz and Van Knippenberg, 2017). Eagly and Carli (2007) give practical suggestions for how to work with this topic. Companies can change the long-hours norm by emphasizing objective measures of productivity instead of hours spent at work. By stressing productivity over work hours, women with family demands but productive work habits are more likely to be given appropriate rewards. They also suggest for organizations to establish family-friendly HR practices, such as flextime and on-site childcare, to facilitate for women during the most demanding family years. Moreover, they emphasize encouraging male participation in these practices and benefits, to avoid a much larger share of women taking part of them, which could harm their careers (ibid).

Smithson and Stokoe (2005) explored the usage of de-gendered terms in relation to work-life initiatives. They found that using gender-neutral language such as "family-friendly benefits" do not change the common assumption that family issues are strongly linked to women (ibid). Linking this to Eagly and Carli's (2007) suggestion to encourage men to take part of family-friendly practices could imply that communication of this should not be gender-neutral, but rather emphasize the gendered issue. Misra et al. (2011) tested the relationship between work-family policies and employment outcomes (hours and wages). They found that work-facilitating policies (e.g. childcare) have positive effects on employment outcomes for mothers, while work-

reducing policies (e.g. parental leave) have positive effects only if parental leave is of moderate length (ibid).

2.3.3. Integration and culture

Ringblom and Johansson (2020) explored inequality regimes in male-dominated industries in the Nordics, and within this study they used material from four gender equality projects. The projects all had the aim to gain knowledge on how gender inequality is created, maintained and challenged. Two of these projects address the importance of working systematically and integrated with gender equality. The first project's main implication was the need to explore the relationship between strategies for gender equality and an organization's core activities. The second project revealed a lack of a systematic approach when working with gender equality. These two findings thus point at the need of working systematically with GEW as well as integrating the work with the core business of the organizations (ibid). Further, Utoft (2020) explored GEW from a cultural perspective and found that anchoring GEW in a company's cultural heritage can legitimize gender equality efforts. However, transparent communication and leadership commitment is a prerequisite for this to be valuable (ibid).

2.3.4. Bias training

Gender bias and stereotypes about women, men and leadership are seen as a challenge for achieving gender equality. Gender bias should be recognized within organizations by raising awareness; this can be done both implicitly and through more formal processes. One more implicit way is a practice Chang and Milkman (2020) call "substituting", to challenge your gut reaction when making decisions about promotion where the people in charge simply asks themselves whether they would make the same decision if a man was being judged. This practice puts much emphasis and trust in individual abilities; however, the idea of substituting may be used in more structured bias training. Further, when conducting formal bias training, it is important that the learnings are enhanced, and not underscored, by the sayings and work of the managers in the company (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Gender bias can also be reduced by educating people about the benefits, such as improved financial performance, gender equality has for the company as a whole (Chang and Milkman, 2020). Lastly, many organizations inadvertently have a narrow set of leadership traits, often associated with stereotypical male traits; Catalino and Marnane (2019) suggest that companies should broaden their leadership model to counteract this.

2.3.5. Networking

Ibarra et al. (2013) present three actions to support women's access to leadership positions and one of these is to create safe spaces, e.g. by mentorship, networks or leadership development programs. In these safe spaces women can work on their identity and develop themselves as potential leaders by interpreting messages from feedback and discuss gender bias (ibid). Eagly and Carli (2007) discuss networking as an important measure to increase women's social capital in order to improve chances of promotion. Moreover, they emphasize the importance of connecting with people with greater legitimacy – people that are often male (ibid).

Ibarra et al. (2013) and Eagly and Carli (2007) thus discuss networking both as formal and informal (e.g. networks vs. socializing) and on group and individual level (e.g. networks vs. mentorship). Wahl and Höök (2007) conducted a study where they explored changes in GEW between early 1990 and early 2000. One of the four identified trends was a shift in working with organizational projects such as networks to working with individuals, such as counselling and supporting women with coaching (ibid). However, it was stressed that despite the shift towards more individualized work, a structural understanding of women's positions still needs to be considered (ibid). Chang and Milkman (2020) introduce the strategy of "individuating" as means to reduce the risk of bias. They state that by learning more about an individual, the tendency to rely on stereotypes is less likely to occur (ibid). Thus, it can be argued that socializing and networking, regardless of formal or informal, will increase the proximity to people and thereby make everyone involved less prone to stereotyping.

2.3.6. Communication

As aforementioned, Utoft (2020) claims that transparent communication about gender equality activities are required for them to be fruitful. Further, according to Sherf et al. (2017) men do not participate to the same extent as women in gender parity initiatives due to lack of psychological standing, that men do not feel it is their place to address gender issues. Sherf et al.'s (2017) study pointed at the lack of psychological standing as the reason behind men's low participation in initiatives aimed at increasing gender equality. To achieve more effective initiatives, companies should thus frame these in a manner that provides psychological standing to men in ways that will encourage them and consequently increase participation and contribution (ibid). Catalino and Marnane (2019) also address the involvement of men by stating that it is important that companies should not only sponsor leadership development programs, but actively encourage women to speak about their insights from these isolated efforts.

2.3.7. Leadership commitment

Utoft (2020) concludes that an important factor when doing GEW is the leadership commitment. This top-down approach to GEW is something also mentioned by Chang and Milkman (2020) who state that in order to facilitate equal acceptance of women and men, senior leaders should publicly articulate new social norms. In Chang and Milkman's (2020) paper, they mention that Google noticed that men more often nominate themselves for promotions and to combat this, a senior leader provided research on how women often fail to advocate for themselves. This effort, in fact, led to more self-nominations by women when it was time for promotion (ibid).

In Wahl and Höök's (2007) study on changes in working with gender equality, another identified trend was increased awareness of gender equality issues. This increased awareness has shed light on another trend, a discrepancy between the talk and action from senior management. Despite the heightened awareness of gender equality issues and the increased support where management groups state that they want to increase the proportion of women in senior management, management groups continued to recruit men to these positions (ibid). This points at the fact that senior commitment, and communicating this commitment, is not enough; it is highly important that senior management "walk the talk". Moreover, Ragins et al. (1998) state

that while leadership commitment is important, it is not sufficient; for change to occur, leaders must also have a crystalized understanding of the barriers that exist.

2.4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

While there exist frameworks for barriers to female career advancement and GEW separately, no framework addressing these jointly could be identified. Moreover, frameworks for barriers do not highlight senior levels specifically (Streets and Major, 2014); and frameworks for GEW do not apply to organizations (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Graversen, 2020). Thus, this study will be based on a synthesis of the literature review as well as the theoretical foundation of discourse analysis. These will act as the underlying framework and permeate the research question, methodology and analysis.

2.4.1. Synthesis of literature review

The literature on the barriers that women encounter along the path to management as well as the literature on GEW aiming to overcome these barriers is fragmented. Furthermore, the literature on barriers does not quite address solutions, and vice versa. Thus, the literature is made sense of by both labeling and categorizing the existing literature on barriers and GEW respectively as well as synthesizing these two. This is illustrated below where the GEW on the y-axis all address different challenges (x-axis).

Barriers / Gender equality work	Stereotypes and bias	Gender differences	Human capital theory	Balancing work and family	HRM Practices	Minority effects
Recruitment	■				■	■
Work–life balance				■		
Integration and culture	■	■	■	■	■	■
Bias training	■	■			■	
Networks	■	■	■	■		
Communication	■			■		
Leadership commitment					■	

Figure 3: Synthesis of literature review

The main implication for this synthesis as baseline for the study is that both barriers and GEW will be looked at, separately and jointly. How do people in management frame these separately and in relation to each other?

2.4.2. Discourse analysis

Language is becoming an increasingly important phenomenon within social and organizational research; some scholars even consider it to be the most important phenomenon (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). This heightened focus on language has naturally increased the amount of research taking interest in discourses. Many people treat the concept of discourse as generally

known – which is not the case (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2000, p.7; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). Thereby, it is important to clarify the approach of discourse used in this study and what theoretical assumptions it rests on. While some people may consider discourse analysis solely as a methodology, it is also a theoretical concept often used within the social constructionist view. Thus, this thesis rests on the theoretical foundation of discourse analysis. Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) distinguish between two approaches to discourse: the study of social talk (studying text in certain social contexts) and the study of social reality (studying reality as discursively formed and maintained). This thesis applies more to the second approach, where social reality, i.e. gender equality within organizations, is studied. As I conform to a social constructionist and discourse analysis view, social reality needs to be studied as discursively formed and maintained. Discourse thus is viewed as a means for identifying and uncovering how social reality is produced; and by understanding the discourses that are part of shaping and maintaining inequality within organization, possible ways of change may be unraveled. My approach to discourse is based on Phillips and Hardy's (2002) view on discourse and social reality:

> In other words, social reality is produced and made real through discourses, and social interactions cannot be fully understood without reference to the discourses that give them meaning. As discourse analysts, then, our task is to explore the relationship between discourse and reality.

Discourse analysis that is concerned with how power and inequality is formed and maintained through discourse is generally referred to as critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Harding, 2015). It is critical as its task is to uncover how discursive practices are part of sustaining unequal power relations within the social world; the purpose of CDA is to contribute to social change by making these relations more equal (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2000). One of the founding scholars of CDA is Norman Fairclough (Cruichshank, 2012). He believed that conversation analysis had an overly simplistic understanding of the relationship between text and society (ibid). This led to the forming of CDA; an approach that provides a way to study the relationships between text, discursive practice and social practice (ibid). Phillips and Hardy's (2002) approach to discourse is based on Fairclough's (1992, p.73) three-dimensional view where texts are connected to discourses that locate them in a social context, referring to the actors, relationships and practices that characterize the situation under study.
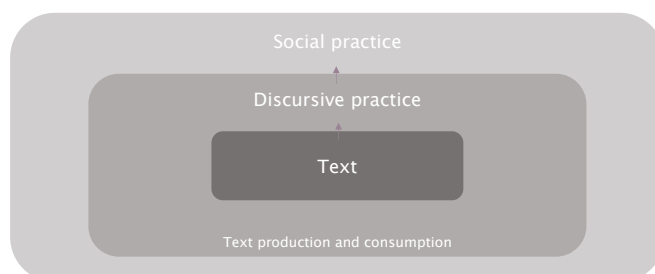
Figure 4: Fairclough's three-dimensional view

2.4.3. Emerging research questions

The overriding purpose of this thesis can be narrowed down to a research question interested in exploring how managers frame gender equality challenges and barriers to female career advancement, as well as ways to overcome these challenges and barriers. However, after synthesizing the literature on barriers and GEW, as well as applying a theoretical approach of discourse analysis, some emerging research questions can be added to the study:

- ♦ How do managers frame barriers to female career advancement?
- ♦ Do they frame challenges as individual or structural?
- ♦ How do the barriers differ and/or coincide among different industries?
- ♦ How do managers frame the connection between barriers and ways to overcome these?
- ♦ How is GEW framed by managers and what can be drawn from the discursive context to the social reality?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. RESEARCH STANCE

Alvesson and Billing (2009, pp.21-22) conclude that gender is central to understand all social relations, institutions and processes, and that gender relations are not naturally given but socially constructed. This thesis aims to explore and uncover how the path to management unfolds for women and the epistemology of this study conforms to social constructionism. Social constructionism is widely based on the idea that social reality is not an objective reality separate from individuals; instead, reality is viewed as socially constructed by individuals through interactions and interpretations (Cunliffe, 2008). However, social constructionism includes a range of work as there are different approaches to the level of subjectivity (ibid). On the one end are researchers focusing on different social contexts and how social reality is interpersonally constructed in these; on the other end are researchers who focus on social construction from a macro-level viewpoint, concerned with how power-infused practices objectify in social structures which privilege some over others (ibid). This thesis stands somewhere in between these externalities, as the social context of organizations is focal, in which, however, social practices that privilege men over women are objectified. Further, the study is concerned with how organizations ought to be and aims to ultimately suggest how this could be achieved, why it is of more radical than regulatory nature (Bell and Thorpe, 2013). Research within the radical humanist paradigm, which is aligned with the research stance of this study, strives to both understand and change the conditions of work (Hearn and Parkin, 1983).

There is a common belief among interpretivists that it is not possible to create nomothetic knowledge, i.e. knowledge with a high degree of generalizability, regarding something as complex as human activity, as management knowledge is more situationally specific and formed through interactions and interpretations (Bell and Thorpe, 2013). Despite this, the majority of the research on women in management either is positivistic or popularly oriented text written for practitioners (Alvesson and Billing, 2009, pp.161-162). Thus, in spite of the arguable better methodological fit, the field of gender in management lacks studies with a qualitative approach.

3.2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The goal of the study is not, as with studies conforming to positivism, to create law-like knowledge by rejecting or confirming hypotheses (Bell and Thorpe, 2013); rather, it is about exploring possible ways to change the socially constructed inequalities, as seen by the people involved in the context. Moreover, as Alvesson and Billing (2009, p.10) elaborate on, studying gender relations is methodologically difficult as many issues are hidden and complex. Complex issues are difficult to grasp through standardized questions and as complex issues lack clear and simple meanings, the responses to survey questions are unreliable and likely to deviate from the meanings intended by the researcher (ibid).

Taking the aspects above into account – the majority of studies within the field being quantitative, the difficulty in capturing social construction by quantitative methods, and due to the applied research stance – a qualitative study was viewed as the most appropriate option and thus chosen as the methodology for this study. Further, the research process was iterative where

theory and empirical findings were "successively reinterpreted in the light of each other" (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009, p.4); hence, this thesis took an abductive approach.

The methodology of discourse analysis has the potential to reveal "processes of social construction that constitute social and organizational life" (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). While other qualitative approaches assume a social world and aim to understand the meaning of it for those affected, discourse analysis seeks how the socially constructed ideas which constitute this social world were created in the first place and how they are maintained (ibid). Since this thesis aims to explore and reveal processes of social construction as well as to identify means of going against status quo, discourse analysis is seen as an appropriate methodology. The goal of the analysis applied to this study is to uncover both how gender inequality is produced and maintained within organizations as well as how a more equal workplace is, and can be, created by doing GEW. While a traditional qualitative approach would have been to try to understand how the social world is and how it affects those in it, this study goes beyond solely understanding how professionals are affected by gender (in)equality within organizations. Instead, it aims to identify how the social world is produced in the first place and how to change what is taken for granted.

Ontology Interpretivism	Epistemology Social constructionism	Methodology Qualitative; discourse analysis	Method Semi-structured interviews; CDA
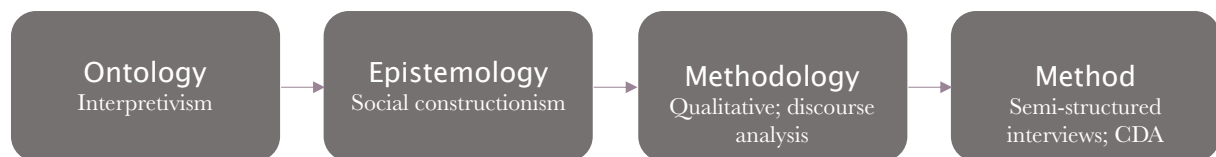
Figure 5: Research paradigm

3.3. DATA COLLECTION

3.3.1. Interview sample

Within the interpretivist paradigm, management is understood through the viewpoint of the people directly involved in it (Bell & Thorpe, 2013). Thus, the interview sample are people that somehow have been involved in GEW within their organizations. The interview participants were found through internet searches on Swedish companies and gender equality and recruited via email. All of the participants were contacted directly through their email as they had been identified as suitable prior to contacting them; they either had taken part in news interviews or had a title (e.g. Head of HR) that was perceived as aligned with the criteria of being familiar with the subject. All of the participants had leadership positions, although of varying kind, ranging from middle manager to CEO and board member. Further, gender was not a sampling criterion as the research inquiries aimed to understand the topic from the viewpoint of managers working with GEW. However, a majority of the final sample identified as women. As this thesis aims to explore the research question across different industries, participants from diverse industries were recruited. A total of 12 interview participants from ten different industries were recruited (appendix 3). This was considered a satisfactory sample since no new themes could be identified after the tenth interview, indicating a saturation, and due to the type of analysis. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009, p. 233) claim that within discourse analysis it is "not the size of

a sample that is interesting, but the close study of nuances in possibly quite a small number of accounts."

3.3.2. Interview design

The interview guide was thoroughly elaborated before the first interview, where some questions that potentially could be perceived as leading in a certain direction were changed. The structure of the interview guide was also carefully considered, having broad questions in the beginning and more narrow questions towards the end of the interview. The interview guide was semi-structured covering key topics with allowance for probes and follow-up questions, as a key requirement in qualitative interviewing is flexibility (King et al., 2019). The questions were generally kept very open as the interviews aimed to identify key constructs; the most open questions were in the beginning so the interviewees could speak open and freely about the topics without being led in a certain direction. Three types of probes were used during the interviews in order to gain more in-depth answers: elaboration (e.g. "Why?"), clarification (e.g. "By that, do you mean female leaders or women in general?") and completion (e.g. "What was the result of this?") (King et al., 2019).

The first part of the interview guide included basic descriptive questions such as title and tenure. The questions were divided into five parts: 1) problems/challenges within the industry; 2) problems/challenges within the company; 3) addressing the issues within the company i.e. GEW; 4) leadership; and 5) concluding questions. Challenges at industry level were included as one aim was to identify if challenges differ or coincide across industries. These questions were asked early in the interview to create rapport without having the interviewees talk about challenges at their companies since that is more personally related to them. The full interview guide is presented in appendix 4.

3.3.3. Interview setting

With regards to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were held remotely. In the first contact with the participants, they were informed that the interview could be conducted through phone, zoom, teams or other virtual services of their preference. An advantage with remote interviewing is the flexibility and low-cost aspect; it is a convenient interview setting both for the interviewer and the interviewee. Moreover, remote interviewing is also suitable when doing research about more sensitive topics, as it increases the sense of anonymity and may thus make interviewees more willing to share personal stories, than if interviews would have been conducted face-to-face (King et al., 2019, p.116). All interviews were conducted at places where the interviewer and interviewees were the only ones in their respective room, with no disturbing elements such as noises or other people nearby. The duration of the interviews ranged between 26 and 64 minutes, with an average of 46 minutes.

3.3.4. Interview transcription

To ensure confidentiality as well as to get familiar with the data, transcription was not outsourced. Despite the time-consuming aspect, all interviews were transcribed verbatim, i.e. transcribed for every word used originally, since studies focusing on language require more detailed transcriptions (King et al., 2019). 11 out of 12 interviews were held in Swedish to avoid

miscommunication and ensure comfortability, as this was the mother tongue of both the interviewer and the interviewee. However, this poses a risk that some translations are inaccurate. Nonetheless, the interview extracts included in the findings were listened to several times to make sure that translations were as accurate as possible.

King et al. (2019, pp.196-200) address three quality considerations when it comes to transcribing: recording quality, missing context and "tidying up" transcribed talk. These were accounted for during the interviews as well as the transcription process by asking interviewees to repeat themselves when internet was lagging, by typing down non-verbal and paralinguistic aspects such as voice intonation and laughter to the greatest possible extent, and by not correcting mispronunciations or incorrect use of grammar.

3.4. DATA ANALYSIS
3.4.1. Data analysis method
The research purpose of this study was pursued methodologically through interviews and CDA. As this thesis adopts the three-dimensional view on discourse (Fairclough, 1992, p.73) this acted as a theoretical foundation throughout the data analysis.

Social practice
ANALYSIS OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Discursive practice
INTEPRETATION OF INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

Text
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS
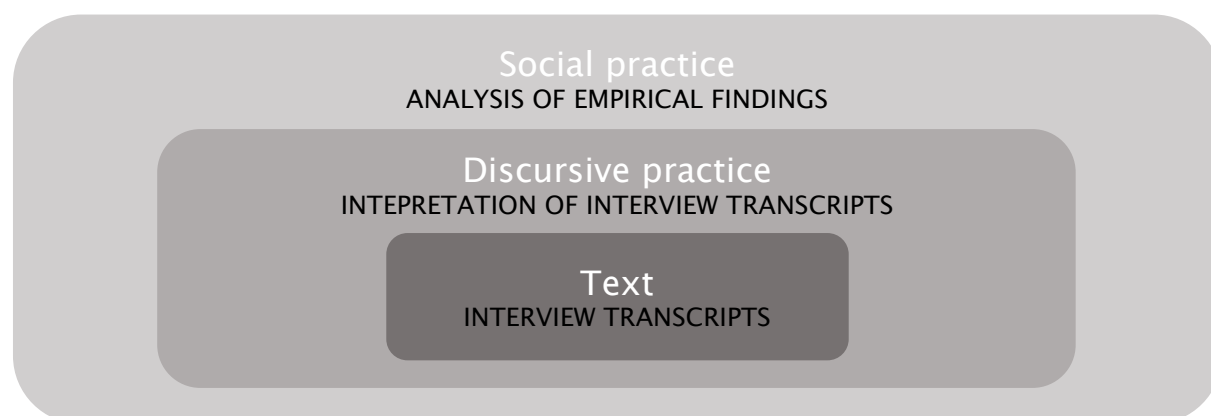
Figure 6: Adaption of Fairclough's three-dimensional view

There are not many frameworks for conducting discourse analysis: "It is easier to trace the theoretical underpinnings of discourse analysis than to identify and describe the formal processes of actually carrying out such research" (Muncie, 2006, p.75). However, Harding (2015) presents a four step-guide to discourse analysis on interview data, which was used as guideline for the data analysis process.

Read transcripts → Identify themes in data → Identify the language used to construct each theme → Identify commonalities in the use of language in relation to the construction of each theme
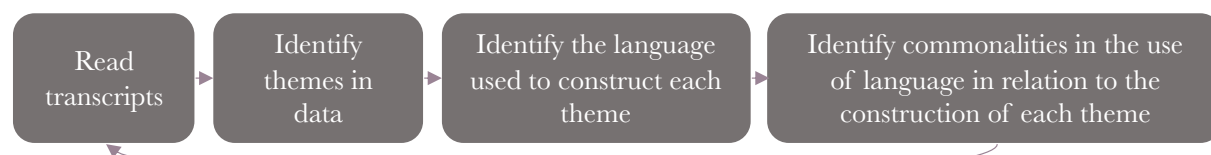
Figure 7: Data analysis process

3.4.2. Data analysis process

Harding's (2015) framework acted as a methodological guideline for the analysis of the text and discursive practices in the empirical data. However, the analysis was done in a more iterative manner than the guide suggests. When all interviews were conducted and carefully transcribed, they were printed to provide a better overview during the analysis. After all transcriptions had been read through and analyzed individually, they were read through again to compare and identify similar or disparate accounts. Then, the transcripts were read through separately again in order to identify language that construct each identified theme. Lastly, the language constructing the themes in all transcripts were identified alongside each other to identify commonalities. Within the research process of CDA, the text should be analyzed from written form and researchers should continuously itemize the objects within the text (Flick, 2014). This "itemization" was done by the coding of themes within the interview transcriptions. See appendices for full coding.

3.5. RESEARCH QUALITY

3.5.1. Rigor

A common critique against discourse analysis is that it is not falsifiable, i.e. "you find what you are looking for". This was accounted for by having open questions to not lead interview participants in certain directions. There is a risk when conducting interviews that the interviewees give biased answers due to misunderstanding the question or due to the desire of being portrayed in a favorable way (Silverman, 2013). However, when conducting discourse analysis, interviewees telling the truth is subordinated to interviewees expressing themselves in ways they find meaningful (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2002). Thus, the common risks with traditional qualitative approaches do not always apply to discourse analysis approaches and the qualitative rigor of this study should be looked upon more from the latter approach.

There are scarce specific criteria defining qualitative rigor within discourse analysis and CDA but Mullet (2018) presents two quality criteria that are agreed upon in most CDA approaches: completeness and accessibility. Completeness has to do with the data and findings, that the empirical findings are complete as no new data would reveal new findings; whereas accessibility has to do with the final product being readable to the social groups that are studied (ibid). These two aspects were considered in different ways during the whole research process, by assuring a satisfactory number of interview participants, methodological transparency, and language used in this thesis. The quantitative research community often criticizes qualitative methods for being less stringent and thus less valid (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2000, p.122). Again, transparency is one way to ensure validity in qualitative research in general and in discourse analysis in particular (ibid, p. 123). A limitation with discourse analysis as method is the lack of explicit and precise ways of carrying it out (Flick, 2014, p.450). This was taken into account by researching explicit ways to do so, as well as making the data analysis method for this thesis transparent.

A common belief about discourse analysis is that it is not possible to draw conclusions beyond the discursive context, however, this is not always the case. Nevertheless, it is important to

consider when accounts should be treated as accounts within their textual context, and to which extent they can be used to draw conclusions outside the discursive context (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009, p. 235). The three-dimensional approach to discourse by Fairclough (1992, p.73) implies that the interview data can be interpreted on three levels: 1) text, where fine-grain text is looked at; 2) discursive practice, where the researcher make interpretations of the text; and 3) social practice, where the aim is to draw conclusions outside of the interview context, thus more "out there", e.g. behaviors, social patterns, and structures (Fairclough, 1992; Alvesson and Sköldberg, pp. 235-236). Taking this into account, and the fact that the aim of CDA is to uncover and establish the relationship between language and social practices (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2000, p.76), discourse analysis is, in fact, able to provide insights about the external reality beyond the interview context.

3.5.2. Reflexivity

Within qualitative research, and especially within social constructionism and CDA, reflexivity is a key concept that needs to be considered and addressed. I have thought about my role as researcher throughout the whole research process, continuously challenging myself as well as discussing with others. CDA is not politically neutral as the sole purpose is to aim for social change and alienation of those less privileged; neither is the researcher's position neutral (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2000, p. 70). Moreover, as I, the researcher, am a woman about to enter the organizational world possibly aspiring to reach leadership positions, my role is even more conflicted as I could be seen as part of this less privileged social group. This is something that has been acknowledged during the research process. For example, I have asked other people, e.g. fellow researchers, to read through parts and to challenge my interpretations and beliefs. Asking for second opinions from people identifying with another gender than female was also important, as the study concerns gender. Further, the fact that I do feel belongingness with the less privileged group in this context is made transparent. By making the researcher's position transparent, the readers can themselves make interpretations based on a transparent standpoint:

> Overall, the theoretical consistency requires that in a concrete discourse analysis you consider and seek to account for how you stand in relation to the discourses you examine and what consequences your own contribution to the discursive production of our world can have (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2000, p. 29).

Winther Jørgensen and Phillips (2000, p. 111) state that one form of reflexivity within discourse analysis is the considering of the power relationship between the researcher and the research subjects. One layer to the power relationship is that, as aforementioned, I am a woman studying the lack of women in management. This could lead to a certain dynamic during the interviews. When talking to participants that also are women, they could feel more prone to open up as we identify with the same gender. On the other hand, when talking to male participants, they could be affected by me being a woman and consider this when answering. As already mentioned, the honest truth is not the aim of the interviews, nevertheless, this is something that could have had an impact on their framing.

Additionally, I thought carefully about my own discursive practice, that is, how my usage of language, could be interpreted during the interviews. Thus, the framing of questions depended on the participants' answers. One example is the question "how do you think the company is doing in terms of gender equality?", where the next question was framed different dependent on their answers. If the interview participant was very positive, not indicating any issues, I framed the second question in a way making it possible for them to say that there are not any problems, e.g. by asking "do you see any challenges?". If I would have asked "*what* challenges do you see?" instead, I am taking for granted in my questions that the person being interviewed "should" see challenges.

3.5.3. Ethics

During the research process, ethical considerations were also taken into account. All interviewees were given enough information prior to the interviews in order to give informed consent, no incentives were used to recruit participants and confidentiality was maintained during the whole process (King et al., 2019). A GDPR-compliant document about data was sent to participants before interviews were held, thus, all interviewees gave written consent. All interviewees were asked again in the beginning of interviews to give verbal consent to be recorded; all interviewees agreed to audio recording. All audio files were kept on local storage and deleted at the end of the study. Since transcriptions were printed before analysis, there was a risk of them being accessed by other people. Before saving the final transcribed version, all data that could be used to identify either the company or the interviewee was deleted. Thus, there was no risk for other people, even when looking at the final transcription, to be able to identify company name or interview participant.

4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Below, the findings from the qualitative study are presented. The interview participants are presented with randomized pseudonyms.

Transcription symbols used in extracts

.	Full stop: a completing intonation
,	Comma: a continuing intonation
—	Em dash connecting words: a cut off in speak
–	En dash: an intentional cut off for emphasis
. . .	Ellipsis: a noticeable silent pause
[. . .]	Ellipsis within brackets: omission of text
text	Italic: emphasized delivery
!	Exclamation mark: raised voice
?	Question mark: indicates a question
[text]	Text within brackets: non-linguistic events such as laughter

Figure 8: Transcription symbols

4.1. CHALLENGES: INDUSTRY LEVEL

Six key themes were identified as explanatory discourses to gender inequality within the interview participants' respective industry. These themes can further be looked upon from three levels of analysis: micro (individual), meso (company), or macro (society).
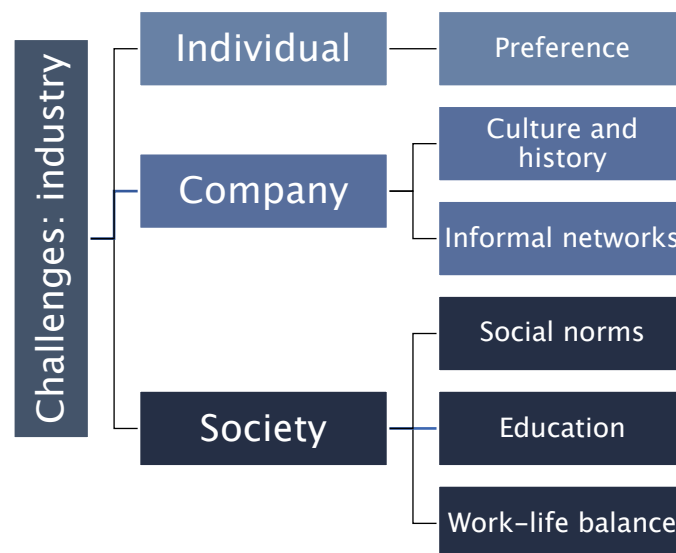
Figure 9: Challenges at industry level

4.1.1. Preference

Some participants voiced more individual explanations to why women do not reach top positions in their respective industry:

28

> I think that it's much the women themselves, and the norms that are in society, women are those who automatically take responsibility for greater responsibility for the family. [. . .] I think that there aren't many, they're not ready to give up the family situation and being as available for the children as one wants. [Camille, automotive]

In this extract, Camille claims that it is the women themselves, but subsequently mentions social norms. The word "automatically" is of interest here; something being automatic indicates that it is not by conscious choice. Thus, it can be interpreted that when Camille talks about the women themselves making a choice, this choice is made automatically as the social norms call for that. Still, she points out that "they", referring to women, are not ready to give up the family situation. This was salient in several interviews, that individual preference – especially in relation to prioritizing family – is intertwined with social norms. However, preference was not framed in ways that would imply it to be more prevalent in one industry over another.

4.1.2. Culture and history

This theme highlights how corporate cultures within different industries can hinder or help gender equality. Diana works at a company in the life science industry and claimed that "it's nothing unusual with a female CEO in our industry, absolutely not." When asked why, she said the following:

> In some traditional industries it's male-dominated [. . .], if you think about the construction industry, there clearly are more male leaders, the financial industry as well. So, it's probably also, unfortunately, the culture that remains. I can imagine that life science is a bit more at the forefront, what to say, not liberal, but slightly more open.

Diana thus makes an account where, in contrast to the industry she works in, other industries' cultures are framed as the issue. Frida, who works within mining, also framed history and culture as a challenge: "But the challenge is, of course, cultural and historical, and that it's been a very male-dominated industry". The question after this statement was if, and why, there are fewer female leaders than male leaders within the industry, and Frida said:

> I believe, as said, that there's been an incredibly male-dominated industry during such a long time, [. . .] If one looks back historically also, very, *very*, many men that are very loyal and dedicated the company, that's been around very very long and climbed all the way up to leading positions.

This extract sheds light on how many men are *loyal* since they have been part of the industry for a long period of time. According to Frida, this has made them climb up to the leading positions.

4.1.3. Informal networks

Hanna works in retail, and this statement was made about her company:

> Well, what can we be, 90% women maybe as employed, and in the senior management team they're probably like 90% men [laughs], so within retail in general there are many women, but not so much within senior positions.

Although Hanna speaks about her company, this extract highlights that even in an industry like retail when women are in majority, men are holding the top positions. When I asked her why she think it looks like this, she said the following:

> I myself know what it looks like in recruitment processes, it's much easier to recruit someone who's, well someone who you feel similar to, who you can relate to, and there it becomes this vicious circle when men are recruiting men [. . .] So really, I don't think there are any obstacles at all except that you're not allowed in, that's the problem.

The expression that you are not *allowed* in symbolizes a barrier. Behind this barrier is the informal network where there is a tendency to recruit people that are similar to you. Relating this to the previous theme where the discourse male dominance was salient – as men hold a majority of leading positions, "men are recruiting men". Several participants made similar accounts. However, these accounts did not vary between industries and will be elaborated on in company challenges instead.

4.1.4. Social norms

Two participants, both working in tech-savvy industries, brought up more macro-level explanations to why gender equality prevails within their industry. They made similar accounts, talking about gendered social expectations. Camille talked about why interest in tech may vary upon gender:

> More women interested in tech is needed, so we have a bigger pool to choose from.
>
> I: Why do you think it is like that, that there aren't more people with that interest?
>
> I think that it, like, comes down to norms… expectations and norms that we give to the children when our children, when they're little [. . .], well, it's a tough nut to crack. You can do a lot in school, but it's also the parents, what they're interested in, we can't force people [laughs lightly] to—or women, children, girls, to be interested, it's somehow to do it in school, show that it's not that *difficult*, do it in some easy-going way.

Even though Camille herself mentions that less women are interested in tech, the succeeding question to her is constructed with the category "people", i.e. gender neutral. Camille is gender neutral when she talks about forcing an interest but corrects herself saying "women, children, girls". It is a linguistic sequence demonstrating her stream of thought, which ends with girls. She is thus partly explaining the lack of females within tech industries by the social norms that women are exposed to at a young age.

4.1.5. Education

In contrast to Camille's account on women's interest in tech, Alice said that her industry (IT consulting) is moving forward because she thinks that "more girls want to study technological education and can imagine that type of job".

Johanna, working in the automotive- and transport industry like Camille, was asked if she sees any obstacles for women aspiring to become leaders within the industry. She said that "the level of education is very low" within her industry where "recruitment usually takes place internally" and "then, if you only have men working, and promotion takes place according to the proved pattern the best salesman becomes the manager [. . .]. Then it's men." She is thus stating that one reason behind men holding leadership positions is because education is low and recruitment is based on performance within the company, which often consists of men.

4.1.6. Work–life balance

This theme was mainly brought up when the participants explicitly were asked about obstacles for women to become leaders, not when general challenges with gender equality were discussed.

> I think it's different depending on what type of company it is, I mean, earlier I worked within—for one of the large auditing firms, and at such a large company I think the problem is that you lose all clients when you go for parental leave, because you can't keep them, and then there are more women that, well, are gone longer, and then they lose all clients, and it takes much longer to become a partner, for example. [Hanna]

Hanna is mentioning parental leave as an explanation to obstacles for women to reach more senior roles; she refers to losing customers while you are absent from work since women "are gone longer".

This was the only account within all interviews that positioned parental leave in relation to the type of firm or industry you work in. Only Hanna spoke about children and work-life balance in a way that shed light on it from an industry perspective. Instead, this theme will be elaborated on in the company challenges section below.

4.2. CHALLENGES: COMPANY LEVEL

Themes identified when the participants' respective company was the focal point of discussion can also be divided into individual, company or societal levels of explanation.
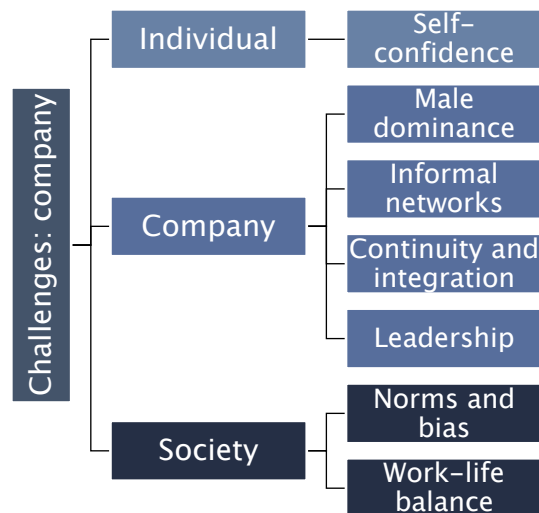
Figure 10: Challenges at company level

4.2.1. Self-confidence

Two participants spoke about women's self-confidence as a possible explanation to why there are fewer female leaders. This is highlighted by Linda's account below:

> We lose far too many women who have the potential to, uh, get managerial positions. It's a bit, it's a b—you also need women who believe in themselves, and who're credited enough to have the confidence to advance into the leadership positions, uhm, and this of course lies both with these women, but perhaps mainly with the rest of the business. [Linda]

Further, Klara said that if a woman says no to a leadership position it does not mean she is not interested, but that it might be "needed to ask the same question five times". Both Klara and Linda pointed at the risk of losing women that have potential but lacks confidence. Moreover, they both highlighted the woman's responsibility in believing in herself, but also the need of other people helping them; that women are "credited enough" or "ask[ed] the same question five times".

4.2.2. Male dominance

That men are dominating positions of power is one of the ground pillars of this study. However, male dominance is also identified as an underlying factor and can thus be seen as a challenge in itself. This is highlighted by this account:

> If I think about our organization it's also much about, now there are many men at the top, and they have a strong network. [. . .] But also, to support women to enter those networks where there are many men, to get access to the networks that are male-dominated as well. [Camille]

Camille claims that "there are many men at the top" in her organization. Thus, one explanatory factor to the lack of women in management is that men are dominating at senior levels. This is an important aspect to emphasize as several participants framed that one challenge for women simply is that they are in minority. As George puts it:

I think that as a minority you always have to work in headwinds and always have to prove yourself extra hard. And it'll always be an albatross around one's neck. Women are a minority, and this will hit them negatively, *unfortunately*, and that's unfair, but I believe by acknowledging that this is the case, we can also access it.

4.2.3. Informal networks

Johanna said that the leading positions in her company has a clear male overrepresentation, when asked why she thinks it looks like this, she said:

> I mean, it's never that someone is like 'no, oh my god, we can't have a woman on that position, that won't work', you don't hear that anymore, but on the contrary, that the question doesn't appear at all, but rather, we're recruiting someone, 'well I know some guys that we can ask', and already there it's—the women are overlooked, without even noticing.

It can be interpreted that there is not a conscious resistance to recruiting women to senior positions. Rather, this account points at the question being neglected, "the question doesn't appear at all", and the tendency when recruiting to rely on an informal network, "I know some guys".

Recruitment was a salient theme in all interviews. However, the process was not the focal point; more adequately, the people involved in the recruitment process were emphasized. Many participants brought up that "equals recruit equals" [Maria], and because leadership positions are male-dominated, "men, to a greater extent, recruit other men" [Ben]. Since many senior roles are not appointed through open recruitment but rather by social networks, this becomes an important aspect. Linda said that many heavier positions in her company are partner positions, and that "it's a very formal procedure" where "there's a culture where men highlight men". Hanna said the following:

> If you think of the CEO and CFO positions, then the board is often part of recruiting and deciding, the board has no clue about who works operatively within the company, except on the top positions, and then there are like five old men in the board and like 'oh, now the CEO is leaving, I have a great CEO in mind, he works at this and this company, yeah we have to pick him', and then one chooses from what's within one's own network.

Frida talked about how the mining industry has a long history of male dominance. This can create and influence informal networks, which is demonstrated in the following extract where Frida talks about their leader forums:

> And then it gets so evident when you're wandering around and networking, that basically all of our presidents, senior executives, are *men*. Uhm, and they can refer back to the copper prices in 1972 [laughs], they've been in the industry for a long time, and they know each other very well, and then thin—that creates a culture, I think.

This extract reveals that social networks do not only affect concrete processes such as recruitment, highlighted in Hanna's account; they are also part of providing social capital and knowledge which can create a bond among people. George also touched upon knowledge, claiming that a challenge is to prepare women for senior roles. When asked what obstacles he sees to do so, he stated this:

> Uh, just in *our* case I probably see the greatest obstacle as. . . exposure to strategic discussion, I would say. Uh, and then again, you tend to surround yourself with people who are equal to yourself, at senior levels there are fewer roles and thus fewer people and it's a small group that's continuously sitting and discussing the same type of issues.

4.2.4. Continuity and integration

This theme includes accounts that framed ways of working with gender equality as a challenge. Ben said the following:

> I think we've done the mistake of like trying to 'projectify' the work. Since gender equality work is very difficult to make part of the core product, it becomes something extra, that a part of the organization needs to do, and then it's very satisfying to make it a project, so you get it done some time. [. . .] The problem, I think, is that once you've done things, they don't integrate by themselves into processes, or into people's behaviors, or into people's cultures.

Ben stresses the mistake of making GEW to a project; to not integrate GEW into the processes, behaviors and cultures. Thus, one challenge is the lack of continuity and integration of GEW. Klara works at a company that has reached equal gender division at senior levels. She was asked if she despite this success sees any challenges, and said the following:

> Uh. . . yes, absolutely, well but that's how it is, there are always challenges of course, and you're never done with this work, but it's about managing to keep up with, uh, that work. [. . .] The challenge is to be able to hold on to this and not lose these girls now.

This ties in with Ben's reasoning about making GEW a project; even though you have reached satisfactory numbers, there is the challenge of *keeping up* and *holding on* to GEW; to ensure a continuity.

4.2.5. Leadership

The theme leadership was identified in several accounts, with different aspects to leadership. Mainly, participants spoke about the leadership commitment – and lack thereof.

Eva explained that all employees may not understand the value of gender equality, and associated this with a leadership mindset:

> You know, for me, it's sometimes so simple, so gender equality is so good for *business health, business result, work environment.* . . You know? So, for me, so simple, but why aren't we embracing that in lower levels? And I think that we need to explain much more the *why*.

> And it's about leadership, and it's about our leaders really embracing this mindset, this culture.

Several participants made accounts similar to Eva's above, pointing explicitly at the importance of leadership commitment. In addition to this, Johanna said that "the question doesn't appear at all" and that "women are overlooked, without noticing." This can also be interpreted as a lack of leadership commitment, as it demonstrates the view on gender equality at Johanna's company from a leadership perspective.

4.2.6. Norms and bias

Some participants framed typical masculine traits to be more attractive (e.g. Alice), however, this was never brought up by themselves when asked about challenges and obstacles. Thus, it is not identified as a prominent challenge. Even though some participants noted that there is a common prejudice that female leaders are "softer" [Linda] or "caring" [Camille], they did not see these prejudices nor realities at their companies.

Rather, they emphasized that they have had male leaders who conform more to stereotypical female traits, "I've had men who've cared more than female managers. So, I can neither see it from my own experience nor that it's discussed" [Camille], and female leaders who conform to stereotypical male traits, "I would probably say that we have many female leaders who are what you would typically call male leaders if you then talk about more like straightforward maybe, or blunt and such" [Hanna].

Overall, gender bias was brought up as something that is inevitable and merely needs to be made aware of. One account demonstrating this is presented below:

> I still believe that, that—I never think we'll get rid of all biases, from people, because they'll always be there. [. . .] But being aware of that you're biased, so that you as an individual can integrate it when you're making your decisions or form your groups or whatever it may be, is what's important. [George]

4.2.7. Work–life balance

The theme of balancing your career with your family life was salient in all interviews, both when speaking about industry challenges and company challenges. As aforementioned, it was not more prevalent in a specific industry. Rather, the participants framed this as a general reason behind the lack of women in management:

> It's more difficult for men than women to give birth, which means that women generally take on that – and that women in that context become absent from the labor market generally for a longer period of time than men, and it's also generally at the same time that one may begin to gain some traction in one's career. [Ben]

> I think, maybe, that our generation is a bit better on, well, equal parental leave and such, but otherwise it's been an obstacle [. . .], when you get back you're a less meaningful person than you were when you left [laughs]. While men are like this 'but oh my, I took

a month there in the beginning, then I've worked every other week', and then it's like, yes of course that works—it works splendidly to make a career then. [Hanna]

In these two accounts, no connection to the companies are being made. Rather, both Ben and Hanna are putting gender as the focal point; Ben by stating that women give birth, and Hanna by implying that men take less parental leave and keeps on working, still making a career.

Johanna answered the following, when asked about why there are fewer female leaders in her company:

> So, I notice that what I think of the, mostly, it's more like these structural things like, [sighs], working hours, uhm, the possibility to combine with family life, uhm [. . .] Then it feels like. . . aah! I don't know. I have a hard time seeing any company-specific obstacles, uh, but then it's more—well, actually, working hours probably are company specific [laughs], you have to say that.

Johanna uses a lot of hedges here, where words like "uhm" or "like" are used to moderate the statement and could imply low conformance with what is being said (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2000, pp.87-88). However, in this case, the usage of hedges could be interpreted as uncertainty more than low agreement. Johanna thinks as she speaks which is evident by her saying "aah! I don't know" and "well, actually" – she is discussing with herself. Interpretively, she initially believed that the work-life balance is a structural barrier; something the company cannot be hold accountable for. Nonetheless, when mentioning working hours, she changes her thought by recognizing that this is something that the company, in fact, can impact.

Since the participants made accounts by answering open questions, me as an interviewer very seldomly suggested possible challenges. One example, though, when this occurred is with Diana:

> I: Can you see *any* challenges for women wanting to become leaders? For example, parental leave or norms regarding how a leader should be or act?
>
> No! I actually think that's pretty blurred out here, I have to say. And we have both men and women on parental leave. And we do a lot with the flexibility of how—and work-life balance, it's well widespread. Now, however, all work from home, but otherwise there were also good opportunities for that, with flextime and so on. So, no, I don't think that's been an obstacle.

As opposed to Johanna's account, Diana juxtapositions parental leave with the company and how her company provides "good opportunities" for flexibility and work-life balance. Thus, in contrast to the other accounts on this theme, when speaking positively about prioritization between career and family, the company's actions are mentioned.

4.3. GENDER EQUALITY WORK

To make sense of whether the GEW had been executed on or merely was framed as how things ought to be, a distinction between normative and positive GEW was made during the analysis of the interviews. Appendix 7 displays the coding of normative/positive accounts. However, the empirical findings about GEW are structured according to figure 11 below.
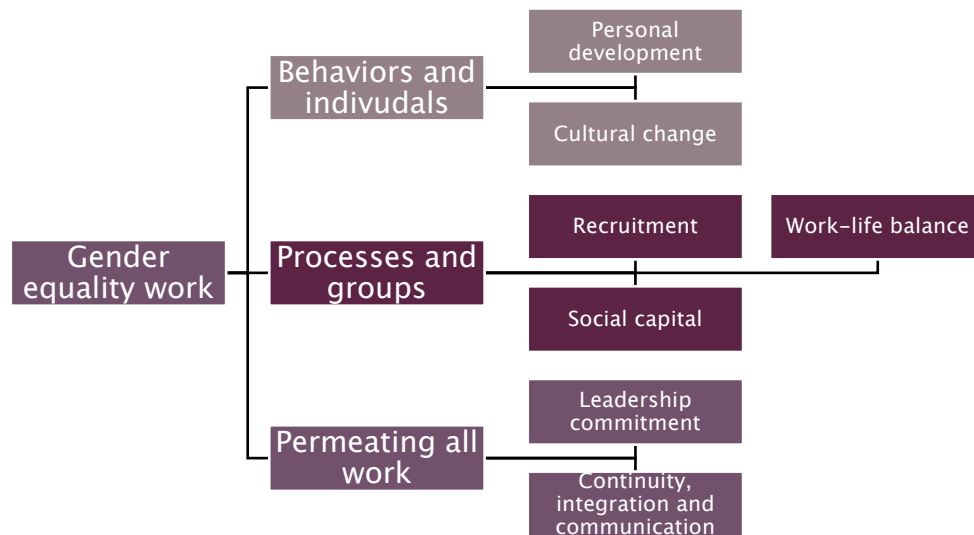
Figure 11: Gender equality work themes

4.3.1. Personal development

This overriding theme consists of GEW aiming to develop individuals to ultimately improve gender equality. There are three subthemes here: bias training, leadership development programs, and increasing confidence. They all target different challenges, as will become evident.

Camille spoke about one initiative aimed at diversity and inclusive leadership:

> During this training they get to work with their preconceptions and become aware, it's never possible to erase preconceptions, but you can at least become aware of them and try to question yourself.

This is thus a program specifically aimed at developing more diverse and inclusive leaders, partly by having bias training. When Camille was asked if they have seen any results, she said the following:

> It's good that it's been made mandatory for all – that wasn't the case from the beginning. [. . .] And then, only this existing as a natural part makes people reminded in recruitment situations to think about this, with diversity. I'd say that it's been a normalization that it's important to think about this.

George said that they have "a variety of initiatives aimed at increasing understanding", e.g. "for biases", and Klara said that they have "gender educations, at all managerial levels".

George spoke about another initiative they have carried out, a "career accelerator program" to "accelerate the diversification of more senior roles in terms of gender" where the people participating are equipped with tools to help them advance in their career. When George later was asked whether any initiatives have shown good results, he said of the career accelerator program:

> It's one of the initiatives that we've pushed the longest when it comes to making people grow, and *actively* making them grow. Education is *good,* process is *good,* but what actually gives result here and now, are these types of initiatives and here we've seen great results [. . .], at least, what is it, 85% have made a continued career.

Camille mentioned an initiative they carry out because they have identified that many women "'settle' with being first line managers". This initiative is targeted at women who "may falter, who [they] see a potential in." In this program, Camille's company provides tools for expanding the business perspective, and how to "lead and communicate and influence others with self-confidence." Thus, this is a leadership development program aimed at both increasing the knowledge and self-confidence with women who her company sees potential in.

4.3.2. Cultural change

Cultural change is an overriding theme of two subthemes: culture and values and challenge the norm. The latter is intertwined with challenges like bias, but as GEW it is much about changing the culture. Frida was asked what she thinks is critical to make her company more equal and said to challenge the norms "about what a managerial role should look like". When she was asked how one does that she answered this:

> We try to ask questions, when you get into these roles, we ask, an obvious question is 'how do you work to get the balance between work and private life?' and then we very often hear like 'well I work out'. And I feel, I'm starting to get allergic to the fact that we always say, 'I work out', 'that's my way of getting breathing space' [laughs]. But that does not change the norm, because there's something that's not right when we like put training in relation to how the work role is structured. [. . .] Cause today we are creating a managerial role that is not for everybody.

Frida gives strong ("very often", "always say") examples of how the norm is manifested in her company. When asked about balancing work and private life, managers focus on their private life – not on the work role itself.

Two participants spoke about the company culture being an important aspect; how everything is based on values and that the "culture that's created in the company is based on behaviors and abilities, leadership abilities" [Klara], and "it's not always the numbers" [Maria]. Changing culture takes time, Klara said: "this type of work, when you're about to do this transformation that we've done in four years, it's also about changing behaviors, and attitudes and values, as well." Maria said that they are doing gap analyses on values, where employees get to describe perceived values within the company and what values they wish to see more of.

4.3.3. Recruitment

Johanna said that recruitment is "the area where [they] have done most". When asked *how*, she said: "when working with recruitment companies, uhm, if it's been for higher positions, in the management group and so, we've been very clear about wanting to see female candidates mainly." Linda made a similar statement, saying that there has been "a very clear focus that you *really* want to bring in female senior people, when recruiting seniors."

Many participants put much emphasis on succession planning, even though some did not frame it as that explicitly. Diana said that their diversity group has worked with "getting managers to understand how important it is with diversity, especially when recruiting. To get a good breadth, then there's a greater chance that there'll be a spread—good diversity in the end." Thus, there is less emphasis on the final decision in recruitment, but rather to work proactively to achieve diversity in the recruitment base.

Both George and Klara framed succession planning as important. The extract below demonstrates how George's company works with it:

> I think that you should set objectives on how do we make sure that the supply in our pipeline is as diversified as possible, because that will drive a better outcome of the final recruitment. It also stems a bit from. . . that we always should hire the best one for the job, that we shouldn't hire someone based on who they are or what demographic group they belong to, but it also demands that we have a, a larger breadth in the talent pool [. . .] and we know that it takes longer time to, for example, recruit a woman to senior technical roles, so if we haven't started that process even if don't have a vacant position we'll never hire a woman to that role, because we'll not have the time to wait then when that role is opened up, so this proactivity one should remember, or I know that it is incredibly important for us to solve.

Another theme related to recruitment is tokenism; some participants mentioned the risk of undermining women. As seen in George's account above, he is talking about avoiding hiring someone based on "what demographic group they belong to". This is something that Ben also touched upon by stating that it is "extremely important that people who have positions of power [. . .] actually are good at their job. So that you don't place leaders in order to get good statistics." He continued by raising the risk of undermining where "lower expectations" are created if someone is not qualified. Maria also mentioned the risk of undermining women:

> I think that there are much more to do but I much believe in this to, don't really separate the women, it's not that we're going to have a—this with victim mentality I think is a very dangerous way to take, like, to somehow weaken, a group.

Although this is an account related to neither recruitment nor tokenism, it conveys another layer to this finding. Several participants are bringing up the aspect where they frame a risk of victimizing or undermining women when working with gender equality.

4.3.4. Social capital

Another salient theme was to help build social capital by different initiatives. It relates to personal development, as some of the initiatives mentioned by participants aim to personally develop employees as well. However, the accounts below reveal that the main purpose by these initiatives are to help shore social capital to individuals in order to increase the chances of them climbing the corporate ladder.

As mentioned in the section about personal development, the company that Camille works at has an initiative aimed at women who are faltering but have the potential to become top executives. When I asked Camille about the results of this program, she said the following:

> What we've heard so far from this group is, yes, they are *so* happy for this program. And what we hear is mainly this network – to get a strong female network where they support each other.

Thus, even though the program's main objective was to gain a broader business perspective, the network part is what the participants seem to have been most content about. Frida talked about a mentorship program where only women participate as mentees and are matched with the "most senior managers" within the company. Similar to Camille's account, Frida emphasized the network part of this program but added that "it has been requested in the program that 'we would like to network with the other women in the program.'"

However, not everyone is framing female networking as positive:

> I believe that we're too stuck in old tracks, there are still female networks and mentors for women [. . .] it's probably good too, I shouldn't say that something should *not* be done [. . .] but I'd really welcome a 2.0 version of this. [Maria]

Despite ensuring that she does not think it is inherently bad, Maria is by her discursive practice making the notion that female networks and mentors for women are part of "old tracks" and that an updated version would be welcome. Another point to these opposed narratives regarding female-only initiatives is the career accelerator program brought up by George. He said that before launching the program, it was intended for females only. However, it was "met with rather negative reactions", where the women that was exposed to it said they did not want an easy way to senior roles and that it would not do them nor the company any good. George's company then changed the program to include all genders, albeit with diversity in mind, and this was a success. Nevertheless, it can be said that networking is something that is done, regardless if it is targeted to females only or not.

George identified the lack of access to strategic discussion as a main challenge for increasing women in management. To address this, they have initiated a sponsor program where the management group has a sponsee from a minority group, "mainly women in this case". He is also differentiating between mentoring and sponsoring:

> Mentoring is more about listening and coaching and challenging. Sponsoring is more about actively contributing in their development, so it can for example be 'now I'm going to this exciting meeting – it would be great for my sponsee to join and learn what we talk about and how we encounter certain issues.'

He is emphasizing active contribution, and to get insight into the type of decision-making that needs to be regarded at more senior levels. Not only does this provide deeper understanding; by joining these discussions, these people also socialize with more senior people.

4.3.5. Work–life balance

Although work-life balance was a prominent theme when the participants spoke about challenges, few participants provided examples by themselves on how their companies work to counter this challenge.

The participants' framing of this challenge reveal that this barrier is something that the company is not seen accountable for. Statements like "they're not ready to give up the family situation" [Camille] and "structural things like [. . .] the possibility to combine with family life" [Johanna] were made. Thus, participants mainly pointed at individuals or society as root cause behind this problem; not the companies' practices, nor behaviors related to management.

This interpretation manifests further in the accounts about work-life balance and GEW; this was not brought up by participants when they were asked about how they work to counteract the previously addressed challenges. Instead, me as an interviewer explicitly asked if they have done anything to mitigate the challenges of employees trying to balance work and private life.

Maria made an account on how to possibly counteract the fact that women are missing career opportunities due to prioritizing family, which relates to a previous discussion about expectations for a leader role:

> I think it's a combination of that certain structures maybe we would feel good to, to look at and maybe change. And at the same time, it's still the case that, cert—certain roles in a company *are* very demanding, I don't think you can avoid that based on how we generally have organized the entire business world.

Maria's framing of structures here refers to how a leadership role is constructed. Some other participants also framed the solution to achieving work-life balance as changing the conception of senior roles, although Maria is negotiating with herself whether this is feasible.

Two participants said that their companies have launched payment benefits, where employees receive full payment the first six months of their parental leave. Linda said the following:

> And the reason why we have exactly six months is because we want to encourage women after six months to maybe come back to work earlier, and then that men at our workplace to a greater extent aims at being at home these six months.

In some interviews flexible working time was brought up as means for balancing work and private life. Several people also discussed that they already have made learnings from the COVID-19 pandemic. Klara said, "we've probably made a leap 5 to 10 years into the future only by having the possibility to work, uh, the largest part of time at home", and Frida made this account:

> The steps we've needed to take now, based on Corona – that we've been required to think new and challenge ourselves very, very quickly. And we've been able to see results and make it work. And I think that's exactly how we need to work, with these questions as well.

The account above highlights an aspect that several participants shed light on, that learnings from the pandemic, and the actions taken as a consequence of the pandemic, can provide insights on how to change ways of working in order to benefit all employees.

4.3.6. Leadership commitment

Leadership commitment is identified as a theme being intertwined with many other themes, as it is not an isolated effort within organizations, but rather a prerequisite for other work to be effective. As Klara framed it when asked about how they will continue to ensure gender equality: "everything starts with the leadership".

In the accounts below, Frida and Eva are expressing the importance of leadership commitment and how they are trying to ensure this commitment among their leaders:

> It's important that we have, well, 'walk the talk', our managers and leaders should really act and do as we say. It must be seen and felt. And then diversity is one such thing that we pursue very powerfully at a strategic level. [Frida]

> We're having conversations when we're promoting people, trying to understand if we're talking about the best candidate, or if we're talking about that this is a male candidate. [. . .] Because really, it depends on the leaders' abilities. And, leaders' culture also. And we have strong values in our company, but still. You know, leaders, they're the ones making things happen. [Eva]

Thus, leadership commitment relates to act in accordance with what is being communicated, as well as recruitment and promotion. Alice said the following: "It's the usual, like, talk, that may not be that concrete. But now I think it's starting to concretize more and more." When she was asked how, she said that her company had set targets for a "certain percentage of women in the organization". Goal setting was brought up by several participants. Klara's company set "very aggressive targets", and she stressed the "commitment in the management group".

4.3.7. Continuity, integration, and communication

The theme of continuity was identified in the interview with Ben, as he said that they had "done the mistake of like trying to 'projectify' the work." This theme was visible in many interviews; several participants talked about integrating diversity in the strategy. Klara put much emphasis

on *holding on to* the objectives that are set. She was asked why she thinks it is important to stick to the targets, and she said that this sort of transformation do not occur "during one or two years", and that is "so important that the organization recognizes the red thread."

Alice was asked if she had an example of an initiative that has given results and said, "this gamification I think was much talked about", a project where they integrated "gamification in recruitment processes to reward women." When asked why there was much talk about gamification, she said:

> It's something that you want to continue with. And also show how you can do things with technology. We're a tech-company, so we're trying to find a connection to that, kind of.

This is thus a successful example of how a company has made an initiative regarding gender equality by connecting and integrating it into the business core. When Maria was asked what she thinks is critical for succeeding with gender equality, she made the following account:

> To address the question of what we mean and for what reason it's desirable, the *purpose*, that dialogue I think would, we would feel good to have more often. And a context of, the business critical, that when we're doing strategy and business planning, so that's where it comes in, so that you tie it together, so that it doesn't become a separate, part. [. . .] Uhm, if you look at the area of sustainability, that there still are sustainability managers, I think, that role will disappear in the long run, because sustainability is integrated into every single business process. It would be exciting if this also could be even more integrated, and one can say that that should already be the case, because this question has been around for so long, but I'm not so sure that maybe the purpose, like, why, *why* is this a good idea, I don't really know if it's deep enough landed in each and everyone.

This account points at continuity, "that dialogue I think would, we would feel good to have more often", integration, "so that it doesn't become a separate, part", and explaining why gender equality is important, "*why* is this a good idea". The last aspect is the last identified theme: communication.

To explain the purpose of doing GEW is rendered central by several participants. The framing of the importance of communicating both the purpose and benefits of GEW was very similar among participants. The extract below highlights this topic:

> So, we need to try to explain to them, the *why* is so important with gender equality, *why* so important. After that, what's in it for them? [. . .] And create this desire – *yes*, I would like to promote that because it's really good. It's good for business, it's good for us, it's good for our work environment. [Eva]

Thus, communication is also framed as an important aspect to GEW. That the work is communicated, but mainly that there is a clear communication about *why* the work is done.

5. ANALYSIS

While the previous chapter presents findings from their discursive world; this analysis goes beyond the discursive context, aiming to expand the discursive practices to social practices (Fairclough, 1992) and "implications for possible ways-of-being" (Willig, 2003, p.409).

5.1. BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

Altogether, the theory presents six themes of barriers and the findings 13. While the literature does not distinguish between industry- or company-specific barriers, the findings do. However, the empirical findings for industry- and company challenges strongly relate to each other, illustrated in figure 12 below. While continuity and integration and leadership only were identified as a challenge at the participants' companies; education was only identified as a possible explanation to inequality with regards to their industries. All other themes were framed as challenges both at industry- and company levels.
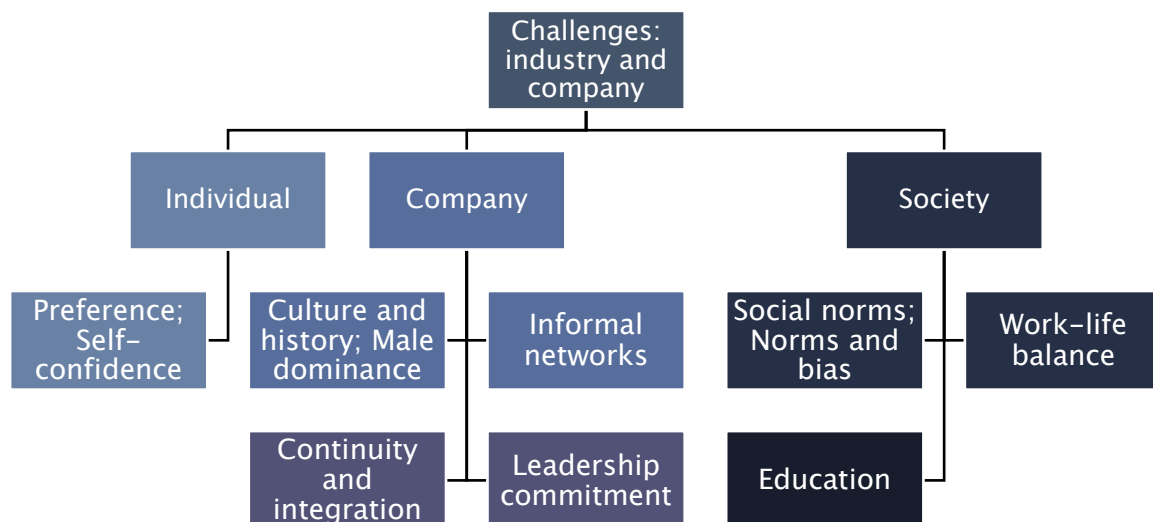
Figure 12: Challenges industry and company

Most of the challenges framed by managers are captured within previous literature (figure 13). An elaboration of the connection between theory and findings is presented below.
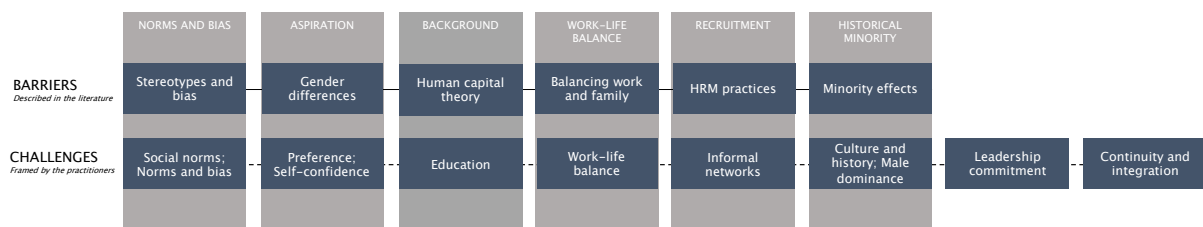
Figure 13: Barriers (literature) and challenges (findings)

5.1.1. Stereotypes and bias

The literature on gender bias as barrier to female career advancement is somewhat inconsistent, however, most of the literature agrees on stereotypes playing a central role in gendered

leadership (e.g. Ridgeway, 2001; Meriläinen et al., 2013; Chang and Milkman, 2020). The empirical findings are not completely aligned with previous literature, as the participants did not frame stereotypes as a main challenge at their industries nor companies. Rather, bias can be a possible explanation to another challenge – a pipeline problem. Some participants framed that social norms regarding interest and career choices affect the share of women and men applying for certain educations. Further, this was mainly the case for traditional male-oriented industries, such as tech-savvy industries. Some participants brought up bias as a general challenge within their companies, however, they framed gender bias as an inevitable human factor, "they will always be there" [George] and that a key aspect is to make employees more aware of their bias. This is aligned with Chang and Milkman's (2020) view on stereotypes; they are not inherently bad, but it can at some points affect decision-making in an unfavorable way and should therefore be made aware of. Lastly, some participants mentioned trait expectations on women versus men, where a shared framing was that women are prescribed "softer" image, and men more assertive. This is aligned with previous literature on communal and agentic traits. However, this was not framed by managers as a key challenge; the participants that brought this up framed an opposition to it, stating that they have leaders of both kinds.

5.1.2. Gender differences

While stereotypes and bias often do not correspond to reality, research on this topic emphasize actual differences between genders as explanatory factor for gender inequality. Previous research suggests that women and men mostly are similar when it comes to personality traits and aspirations (Alvesson and Billing, 2009). Nevertheless, research also suggests that women sometimes struggle more than men to foster an effective leadership style (Eagly and Carli, 2007). The latter, effectiveness of leadership, was not framed as a challenge; rather, it was opposed by participants stating that they have had great female and male leaders who do not conform to the gender-typical ascribed leadership (e.g. Camille and Linda). One finding that somewhat contradicts research by Alvesson and Billing (2009) is aspiration. Klara said that a woman might need to be asked "the same question five times", thus indicating that women are less prone to say yes to leadership positions. Self-confidence was framed as one cause for this. Thus, one could argue that self-confidence at workplaces differ between men and women, which could affect leadership aspiration. This is aligned with Fritz and Van Knippenberg's (2017) finding that women sometimes have lower leadership aspirations.

5.1.3. Human capital theory

Eagly and Carli (2001) state that the explanation "pipeline problem", i.e. fewer women in relevant education for managerial positions, has been disproved at large. Contrasting this, some participants within male-dominated industries (e.g. tech and automotive) framed education as an explanation to why there is a lack of female leaders. However, this aspect was brought up when the industries at large were discussed, framing education as a long-term explanation to why some industries are more male-dominated. This is in line with Streets and Major (2014) who emphasize the impact of role models when we are young, and that the lack of interest in technology among young girls partly can be explained by this. Thus, empirical findings are consistent with previous research, where the main implication is that education and background

has been a historical factor behind gender inequality but should not pose a barrier for females at companies today.

5.1.4. Balancing work and family

The empirical findings on work-life balance are consistent with previous research. In addition to self-confidence, participants explained other reasons behind women being less prone to accepting leadership offers. They framed the underlying cause as expectations on a leadership role, and that women are not ready to give up family life. This is in line with Fritz and Knippenberg (2017) who state that the prioritization between family and career is taken into account more often by women, which can lower women's leadership aspiration. Many participants stated that women are more absent from work during their parental leave, which can pose a challenge for them to advance in their career. This is supported by previous research suggesting that women's interruption of their career leads to a lower chance of promotion (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Alvesson and Billing, 2009). Further, some participants also framed decreased social capital as result of being absent as a challenge, which also aligns with research (Eagly and Carli, 2007). All previous research on this topic is evident in the participants' framings. However, few participants framed this specific challenge as something that their companies are accountable for, rather, they stressed societal and individual reasons.

5.1.5. Human resource management practices

The literature on HRM practices as barrier strongly relates to stereotypes and bias (Alvesson and Billing, 2009; Chang and Milkman, 2020). That decision-making can be affected by long-held stereotypes was brought up by a few participants. However, the most salient themes were how people in positions of power rely on informal networks when recruiting, as well as the tendency to recruit people like those recruiting. That people in general tend to recruit persons similar to themselves creates a vicious circle where men recruit men, as most senior levels are dominated by men. Although this is aligned with Roper (1996), who claims that homosocial desire makes men recruit similar successors, the literature on HRM practices overall fails to capture the significance of this issue. It could be the case that research does not make enough difference on hierarchy regarding this matter. Recruitment practices differ depending on level of the position; arguably, so do the challenges regarding these practices. The empirical findings show that informal networks and homosocial desire pose central challenges for women to be promoted.

5.1.6. Minority effects

Kanter (1977) states that a critical mass is needed for any underrepresented group to have equal opportunities as the dominating group. The findings are aligned with previous research; several participants made accounts where the discourse *minority* was used to point at challenges that simply can be derived from being underrepresented. The risks of tokenism described by Chang and Milkman (2020) were also salient in some interviews. Several participants said that when recruiting, it is important not to recruit just for someone's demographic belonging, as it poses a risk of undermining women. However, this is not identified as a *barrier* for women aspiring to become leaders. Rather, it is a challenge; it needs to be taken into account to not achieve opposite effects of those intended.

5.1.7. Additional comments

The literature fails to capture two challenges framed by people in management: leadership and continuity and integration (figure 13). While these are emphasized within the literature on GEW, they are not described as barriers. It can be argued that the very framing of barriers as *barriers* could be one reason for that. The lack of proper commitment from leaders may be difficult to identify as a barrier for female career advancement; leadership commitment needs to be addressed and amplified, rather than removed. Similar reasoning applies to continuity and integration; it is the lack thereof that is the challenge. Kotter (1995) describes why change and transformation efforts fail, emphasizing two common pitfalls: to declare victory too soon and to not anchor the change into the company culture. This would be the case of not integrating GEW into the strategy but rather to solely make isolated projects, "so you get it done some time" [Ben].

5.2. GENDER EQUALITY WORK
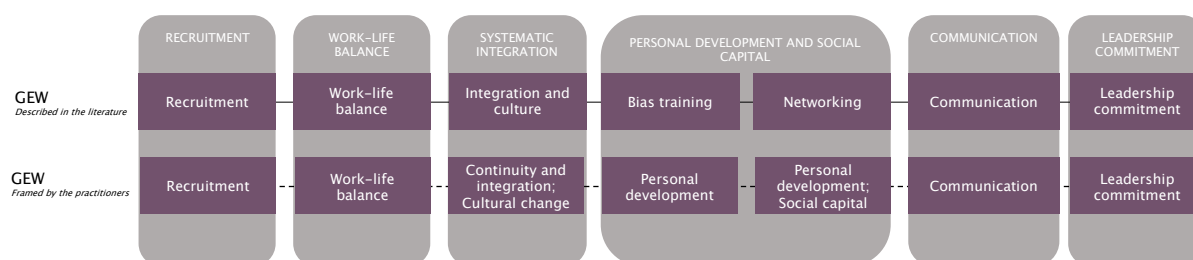
Figure 14: Gender equality work (literature and findings)

The literature on GEW resonates better with the empirical findings than the barriers do. However, some aspects are overlooked when digging deeper. This is expanded below.

5.2.1. Recruitment

The literature suggests that by increasing objectivity in recruitment processes, people will be less likely to rely on stereotypes (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Chang and Milkman, 2020). Rather than using processes to increase objectivity, several participants said that they work with this issue by reminding leaders and recruiters of gender bias and by stressing the importance of diversity when recruiting. Thus, this relies on individuals considering gender equality without established support, which aligns with the concept of "substituting" (Chang and Milkman, 2020) where people are encouraged to challenge the gut reaction when recruiting to avoid gender bias. However, as discussed in HRM practices, recruitment for a senior position is different than general recruitment practices, which could explain why the literature does not seize this. The main finding regarding recruitment is succession planning as an "important tool" [George] to improve gender equality. Several participants emphasized that ensuring diversity in the talent pool increases the chance of reaching diversity in the end, which is not captured in the literature.

5.2.2. Work-life balance

Empirical findings are not completely in line with previous research. While the literature suggests several ways to mitigate the challenges that comes with parental leave (e.g. Eagly and Carli, 2007), very few of the participant framed initiatives or actions aimed at this. Two participants mentioned that they have initiated full payment during six months of parental leave. This relates to Misra et al.'s (2011) study that shows that work-reducing policies have positive effects on women's employment outcomes when the parental leave is of moderate length. As previously discussed, many participants framed work-life balance as a challenge that can be derived from society and the individuals themselves. This may be the explanation to why there is a lack of accounts on how to work with this matter at the participants' respective company, and why these findings do not align with previous literature.

5.2.3. Integration and culture

Although the literature on this subject is scarce, the empirical findings are in line with previous research. Ringblom and Johansson's (2020) study emphasizes the importance of integrating gender equality into the core business as well as having a systematic approach to GEW. Several participants stated how critical it is to integrate GEW into the strategy and overall business, to not make it a "separate part" [Maria]. Alice mentioned an initiative that successfully connected GEW to the core business; a tech company integrating gamification in the recruitment process to reward women. Further, participants also emphasized to work continuously with GEW, that the organization "recognizes the read thread" [Klara], which is intertwined with the finding of cultural change. While Utoft (2020) address the importance of anchoring GEW in the company's culture, the findings rather stress cultural change in itself as means to promote gender equality.

5.2.4. Bias training

Both the literature and (some of) the participants highlight bias training as means to reduce bias and increase gender equality. However, both the research and the findings are normative to their nature – they do not say anything about how effective bias training, in fact, is. Rather, this is just mentioned by participants as an initiative that has been made to make people aware of biases and thus rely less on these, e.g. when recruiting or making decisions.

5.2.5. Networking

In contrast to Wahl and Höök's (2007) finding that there was a shift from gender equality projects such as networks to more individual work such as coaching, several participants said that their companies work with different types of projects. Wahl and Höök's (ibid) study was conducted between early 1990 and early 2000, hence, this is not a clear contradiction. Some participants stressed the positive effects that network projects have had within their companies; both for women to network with other women in a safe setting, which is in line with Ibarra et al.'s (2013) position, and for women to socialize with people having greater legitimacy, which is in line with Eagly and Carli (2007). Overall, both the literature and the empirical findings reveal the importance of both formal and informal networks to gain knowledge, shore up social capital and consequently increase chances of promotion. This can be done in several ways depending

on the identified challenge, e.g. by sponsorship if the aim is to increase access to strategic discussion.

5.2.6. Communication
The empirical findings are partly in line with previous literature. Sherf et al. (2017) and Cataline and Marmane (2019) emphasize the importance of mobilizing the whole workforce and involve men when doing GEW; some participants stressed a risk of doing isolated efforts for women. No one touched upon psychological standing, that men perceive that it is not their place to address gender issues. However, one out of two male participants said "I will start this answer by humbly disclaiming that there are people that are experts on this subject" [Ben] when he was asked what kind of GEW he thinks works best. This can be interpreted as a lack of psychological standing within this discursive context, pointing at some relevance of Sherf et al.'s (2017) study. The main disparity between literature and findings is the communication of the purpose and benefits of doing GEW. Whereas the literature somewhat fails to take this into account, several participants emphasized the importance of explaining "the *why*" [Eva].

5.2.7. Leadership commitment
The empirical findings are in line with previous research, emphasizing leadership commitment (and communication thereof) as critical to increase gender equality (Utoft, 2020; Chang and Milkman, 2020). Several participants made accounts on this as well. For example, Klara stated that a key determinator for their success has been to ensure committed leaders. Additionally, some participants mentioned that whilst top management expresses that they want to increase the share of women in management, there is a lack of concrete actions. This aligns with Wahl and Höök (2007) who found that despite an increasing awareness of gender equality issues, some companies fail to walk the talk.

5.3. A REVISED FRAMEWORK
As presented in chapter 2, the theoretical assumptions of discourse analysis as well as a synthesis of the literature review acted as baseline for this study. However, as discussed and accentuated above, the literature fails to address some challenges as well as ways to tackle these. Moreover, it is doubtful that "barrier" always is the right framing to explain the lack of women in management. More accurately, they are challenges. It can be discussed whether this framing actually matters, but the empirical findings implicate that it does. Lack of leadership commitment is one example demonstrating this; when the participants said that lack of leadership commitment may hinder women to become managers, they did not answer to what obstacles there are. Instead, this aspect was mentioned mostly when asked what is critical to achieve gender equality. This phenomenon can be extended beyond its discursive context. Depending on the question the participants were asked, they overlooked challenges that was expressed later, when the question was formulated in another way. Similarly, if you ask what barriers exist within your company, you may overlook critical aspects.

Thus, it is important for organizations to acknowledge that several challenges exist, identify what applies to their context and then take measures to counter these. As highlighted in figure

15, different GEW answer to several and diverse challenges. That is why framing of challenges must exist within organizations before doing GEW. The figure summarizes the barriers described in literature that resonate with the challenges framed by practitioners, as well as the GEW highlighted in literature and interviews.
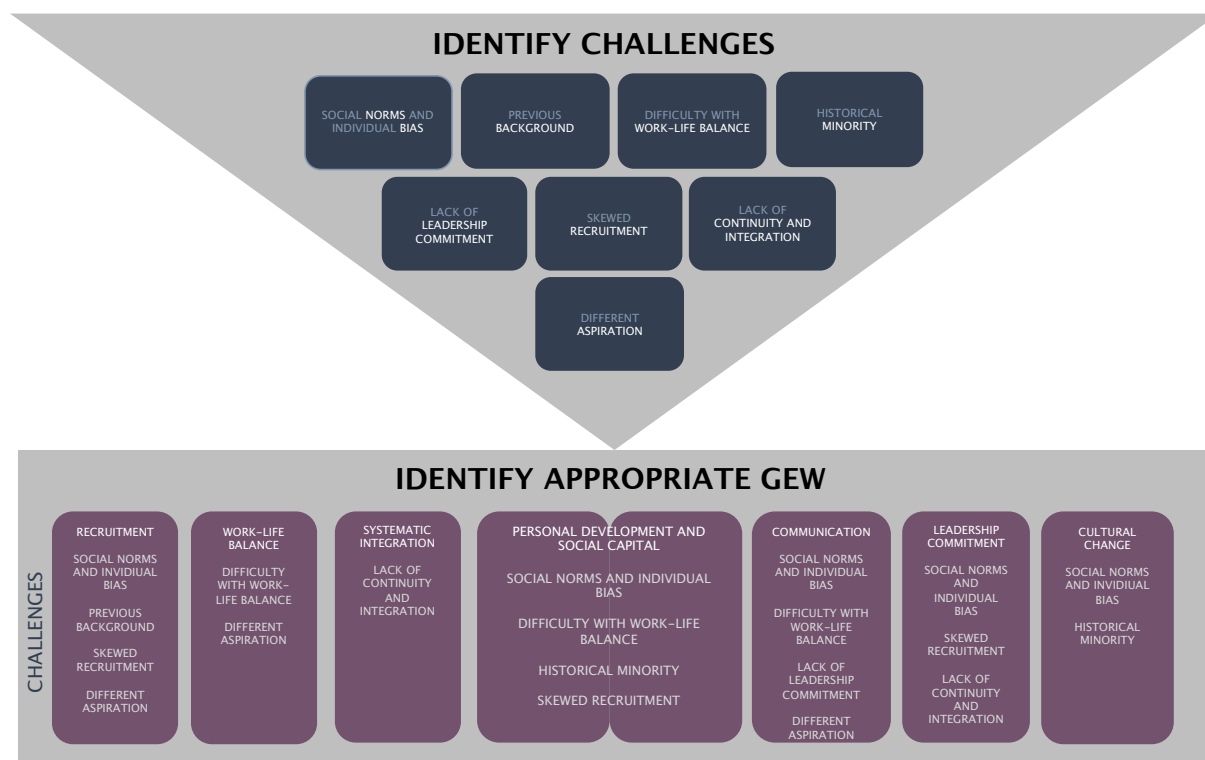
Figure 15: Challenges and gender equality work (literature and findings)

6. CONCLUSIONS

6.1. ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH QUESTION

When formulating the research question at the beginning of this project, I aimed to gain a broad and holistic understanding of how people within management frame gender issues within their companies. I wanted to uncover the challenges for women to advance in their careers and, especially, how to possibly tackle these challenges:

> How do managers frame gender equality challenges and barriers to female career advancement, and how do they frame ways to overcome these challenges and barriers?

Further, I was interested in how people within the specific context frame both challenges and solutions as the ontological and epistemological standpoint was that their discursive practice could reveal patterns of how social reality is created and maintained. After a review of the literature, additional research questions emerged. These inquiries were formulated to, in addition to the broad understanding, gain deeper knowledge about this complex subject. Thus, the question of how managers frame gender equality challenges and barriers to female career advancement, and how they frame ways to overcome these challenges and barriers, will be answered by addressing the additional research questions:

- ♦ How do managers frame barriers to female career advancement? (6.2)
- ♦ Do they frame challenges as individual or structural? (6.3)
- ♦ How do the barriers differ and/or coincide among different industries? (6.3)
- ♦ How do managers frame the connection between barriers and ways to overcome these? (6.3)
- ♦ How is GEW framed by managers and what can be drawn from the discursive context to the social reality? (6.4)

6.2. THE PARADOX OF THE GLASS CEILING

The findings indicate that barriers such as stereotypes and bias and traditional HRM practices are less hindering than the literature suggests. Instead, the main challenge is the informal networks often consisting of men due to the long history of male dominance, as these provide access to knowledge, strong social capital and consequently increase chances of promotion. However, there are more, intertwined, challenges, such as the company culture, lack of leadership commitment and balancing work and family. Further, the empirical findings reveal that women's path to management does not designate like a glass ceiling, nor as evident barriers that needs to be crossed. Rather, the road to female career advancement is like an obstacle course in darkness. This analogy points at the need to shed light on the issue, to remove the veil of darkness and identify the obstacles for women pursuing leadership. It also uncovers that the obstacles can take different forms. When doing an obstacle course, your physical condition and motivation will impact your performance. External factors such as weather conditions and terrain will have an impact, as well as the obstacles in the specific course. The challenges encountered by women in in organizations are similar; individual self-confidence and preference will affect the career path, so will external factors like social norms. The obstacles

are the core in this parable, and organizations can remove some of them, while helping to overcome others.

6.3. CREATING ACCOUNTABILITY

Another conclusion relates to the question if people in management frame challenges as individual or structural, and industry- or company-specific. Not only is it important to frame the cumbersome path for women in organizations; it is also important to acknowledge where the challenges can be derived from. The challenge of balancing work and family manifests this. Both theory and findings reveal that this issue is anchored in external factors outside the companies' control; social norms about caregiving as well as governmental regulations have historically made, and still make, women more absent from work than their male counterparts. If we turn back to the analogy of the obstacle course, balancing family and work would be weather conditions. Organizations cannot change governmental regulations or affect long-held prejudices; they cannot turn rain to sun. However, they can support. They can facilitate for their employees to balance work and family, e.g. by changing the leadership expectations, providing better flexibility, or launching payment benefits. But only by acknowledging that organizations possess the power of facilitating will this become feasible. The empirical findings also show that barriers and challenges for female to advance in their career do not differ much across different industries, although some themes were more salient in traditional male-dominated industries, such as previous background. However, this aligns with the reasoning about accountability. Some of the participants that spoke about education emphasized that it is not an excuse that the talent pool of women historically has been smaller. Instead, they recognized this issue and started working strategically to mitigate it by doing proactive work with succession planning to ensure a diverse recruitment base. Hence, another important factor to increase the share of female leaders is to make your organization accountable for issues that, at first, may seem out of your reach. Thus, managers frame the challenges for women to advance in their careers both as individual, structural, and company-related; the challenges are similar across industries although some are more prominent in male-dominated industries; and one way to counter challenges despite them being individual or structural is to create accountability.

6.4. GENDER EQUALITY WORK IS NOT A PROJECT

In addition to aforementioned insights about GEW, the business benefit of gender equality and ways to promote it needs to be addressed and explained at all levels within organizations. All employees, perhaps especially those in positions of power and decision-making, need to understand the purpose and benefit of GEW. As Klara uttered, "it's pure business, that's what it's about." As many interview participants framed, although in different ways, it is important to not make GEW into a project. In order for GEW to be effective, the work needs to both be continuous as well as integrated into the business core. This is aligned with previous literature suggesting that GEW needs to be integrated in the business, have a systematic approach and be mobilized across the whole workforce. Thus, GEW could be looked upon as a transformation rather than a project. As Kotter (1995) claim: "change sticks when it becomes 'the way we do things around here', when it seeps into the bloodstream of the corporate body."

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

7.1. IMPLICATIONS

7.1.1. Theoretical

The body of literature on barriers to female career advancement is plentiful and some scholars have looked at how to overcome these barriers. Despite an increasing and amplified focus on gender issues within media and at organizations, a gap within research was identified. Few studies exist that simultaneously explore barriers to female career advancement and ways to overcome these, as framed by practitioners.

This thesis contributes to existing theory on gender in organizations by stressing the importance of considering the framing of explanations behind the lack of women in management in order to be able to find accurate ways to increase this share. This study agrees with scholars such as Eagly and Carli (2007) who question the metaphor of the glass ceiling. Although powerful when first introduced, using the concept of the glass ceiling implies a risk where the glass ceiling will act as a paradox in itself. By framing the challenges for reaching gender equality as invisible, the means for change will also become imperceptible. Further, this thesis adds to theory on barriers to female career advancement by adding a holistic view across different industries. The main implications regarding industries are that the barriers for women pursuing management in general are very similar across different industries, although some challenges such as previous background are more evident in male-dominated industries. Additionally, barriers are framed as individual and structural in accordance with the current literature. This thesis also emphasizes informal networks as intertwined with other barriers as a major source of challenge, which is not sufficiently covered in current literature. Lastly, it adds new dimensions to both the literature on barriers and GEW, such as lack of leadership commitment, and cultural change.

7.1.2. Practical

The main implication for practitioners is to become aware of how gender equality issues prevail within their organizations; to make a thorough diagnosis in order to treat it correctly. The findings revealed that informal networks and the tendency to recruit equals is a major source for women's difficulty in reaching leadership positions. This can be mitigated in different ways, e.g. by providing access to senior networks and discussions, or emphasizing diversity in recruitment processes. Further, it is important that practitioners take accountability for those challenges that may seem as outside their control at first, such as how a pipeline problem can be mitigated by succession planning. Another implication is that for GEW to truly embed into the culture and behaviors it needs to be continuous and integrated into the core business, rather than merely isolated efforts.

7.2. LIMITATIONS

The thesis has several limitations of both theoretical and methodological nature. The study may have overlooked both challenges and ways to tackle these as neither the literature review nor the participant sample is complete. Further, although a large part of the companies is global, the geographical scope was limited to Sweden. Since Sweden has come quite far in comparison

with other countries regarding gender equality, there may be other challenges more prominent in other cultures which could generate different insights and conclusions. Moreover, while two people out of twelve interviewed were men, there was an overrepresentation of women which may have affected the analysis and conclusions. Lastly, the implications of the study are not able to point accurately at how effective the different ways of overcoming the barriers are since the thesis has identified discourses on gender equality challenges and GEW; it is therefore in the reader's position to interpret and transfer knowledge from this study.

7.3. FUTURE RESEARCH

In order to be able to draw stronger conclusions to ultimately create change, the challenges' vigor as well as the effectiveness of GEW need to be explored. There are two main aspects to conduct further studies: studies enabling greater generalizability and studies conducted more narrowly. As this study has shown, there is no magic formula for doing GEW, different challenges must be targeted by different initiatives. Thus, it would be valuable to conduct more narrow studies on specific challenges and how to tackle these. Further, studies that are able to measure the effectiveness of certain initiatives are proposed. Since this study did not differentiate between the participants' gender, it could also be interesting to conduct studies where gender is a sampling criterion to see if there are any differences. Lastly, women are only one demographic group exposed to patterns of inequality; further research about challenges regarding career advancement, e.g. for ethnic minorities or transgender people, also is much needed to ensure usage of all competences and combat injustice.

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9. APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Scopus search

Title + abstract + key words: "gender equality work"
Date of search: 4 Oct. 2020

Year	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	2009	2006	2005
Results (46)	5	8	3	5	3	4	3	4	2	4	2	1	1	1

Appendix 2: Academy of Management Journal search

Title/abstract: "gender" or "sex"
Date of search: 6 Nov. 2020

Publication year	Authors	Title
2020	Gupta V.K., Mortal S., Chakrabarty B., Guo X., Turban D.B.	CFO gender and financial statement irregularities
2020	Chua R., Jin M.	Across the great divides: Gender dynamics influence how intercultural conflict helps or hurts creative collaboration
2019	Brands R.A., Mehra A.	Gender, brokerage, and performance: A construal approach
2018	Kanze D., Huang L., Conley M.A., Tory Higgins E.	We ask men to win and women not to lose: Closing the gender gap in startup funding
2018	Dwivedi P., Joshi A., Misangyi V.F.	Gender-inclusive gatekeeping: How (mostly male) predecessors influence the success of female CEOs
2018	McClean E.J., Martin S.R., Emich K.J., Woodruff C.O.L.T.	The social consequences of voice: An examination of voice type and gender on status and subsequent leader emergence
2018	Akinola M., Martin A.E., Phillips K.W.	To delegate or not to delegate: Gender differences in affective associations and behavioral responses to delegation
2017	Leslie L.M., Flaherty C., Dahm P.C.	Why and when does the gender gap reverse? Diversity goals and the pay premium for high potential women
2017	Briscoe F., Joshi A.	Bringing the boss's politics in: Supervisor political ideology and the gender gap in earnings
2017	Abraham M.	Pay formalization revisited: Considering the effects of manager gender and discretion on closing the gender wage gap
2017	Schaumberg R.L., Flynn F.J.	Self-reliance: A gender perspective on its relationship to communality and leadership evaluations
2017	Lee M., Pitesa M., Pillutla M.M., Thau S.	Male immorality: An evolutionary account of sex differences in unethical negotiation behavior
2017	Han J., Shipilov A.V., Greve H.R.	Unequal bedfellows: Gender role-based deference in multiplex ties between Korean business groups
2016	Zhang Y., Qu H.	The impact of ceo succession with gender change on firm performance and successor early departure
2015	Cumming D., Leung T.Y., Rui O.	Gender diversity and securities fraud
2015	Joshi A., Son J., Roh H.	When can women close the gap? A meta-analytic test of sex differences in performance and rewards
2015	Lanaj K., Hollenbeck J.R.	Leadership over-emergence in self-managing teams: The role of gender and countervailing biases

Appendix 3: Interview sample

Alias	Industry	Title	Date	Length of interview	Interview form
Alice	IT consulting	Head of sustainability	2020-10-07	26 min	Phone
Ben	Advertising	CEO	2020-10-08	59 min	Zoom
Camille	Automotive	Learning program manager	2020-10-14	64 min	Skype
Diana	Pharmaceutical	HR manager and employer branding	2020-10-16	31 min	Zoom
Eva	Automotive	Director Diversity and Inclusion	2020-10-20	53 min	Teams
Frida	Mining	L&D specialist	2020-10-23	41 min	Zoom
George	Tech	HR business partner	2020-10-26	59 min	Zoom
Hanna	Retail	Financial manager	2020-10-27	33 min	Teams
Johanna	Automotive	Board member	2020-10-28	48 min	Zoom
Klara	Construction	Head of HR	2020-10-28	57 min	Teams
Linda	Professional services	Manager	2020-10-29	31 min	Zoom
Maria	Real estate	Head of people and culture	2020-10-03	51 min	Zoom

Appendix 4: Interview guide

Basic information
- Alias
- Position
- Tenure

Challenges: industry level
- How do you think this industry is doing in terms of gender equality?
  - Why/why not?
- What problems/challenges do you see regarding gender equality in companies?
- Why do you think there are fewer female leaders?
- What obstacles do you see for women aspiring to become leaders?

Challenges: company level
- How do you think the company is doing in terms of gender equality?
  - Why/why not?
- How do people talk about gender equality within the company?
- What problems/challenges do you see regarding gender equality in the company?
- What is the division between female and male leaders within the company?
  - Why do you think it looks like this?
- What obstacles do you see for women aspiring to become leaders within the company?
- Do you think men and women are equally evaluated?

Gender equality work
- Could you tell me about how you work with gender equality within the company?
- Have there been any specific initiatives made in order to promote gender equality and/or female career advancement?
  - What were the outcomes? Anything measurable, attitudes etc.?
  - How do people talk about the initiatives and/or the outcomes?
  - Is there anything you think that could have been made to make it more effective?
- How are employees informed about gender equality work?

Leadership
- Do you have a specific leadership profile within your company? E.g. core leadership principles
- Comparing female and male leaders within your company – do you see any differences?
  - Why/why not?
- How does your company promote leadership?

Concluding questions
- What do you see as important in order to make your company more equal in the future?
- In general, what kind of gender equality work do you think has the biggest influence?
- Is there anything that I have not asked that you would like to share?

Appendix 5: Coding of industry challenges

		Status											
Macro		0	Status										
Meso		1	Explanation										
Micro													

Theme	THEMES	1_ALICE	2_BEN	3_CAMILLE	4_DIANA	5_EVA	6_FRIDA	7_GEORGE	8_HANNA	9_JOHANNA	10_KLARA	11_LINDA	12_MARIA
Stakeholder	STAKEHOLDER PRESSURE	0											
Stakeholder	MIRRORING CUSTOMERS					0					0		
Painful process	PAINFUL PROCESS							0					0
Measurability	MEASURABILITY							0					
Male domination	FEELING OF EXLUSION	0											
Male domination	MALE NORM	0	0										
Male domination	MALE DOMINATION	0	0			0				0			
Individual perspective	PROVE THEMSELVES			0				0					
Good	GOOD IN COMPARISON TO OTHERS				0			0					0
Forward, but slow	FORWARD	0		0	0							0	
Forward, but slow	LONG WAY LEFT	0											
Forward, but slow	SLOW PROGRESS	0		0			0					0	
Size	SIZE										1		
Process problem	ADS				0								
Education	EDUCATION	1	1	1				1		1			1
Male dominance	REVERSED FUNNEL/RATIO AT TOP				1					1			
Societal norms	SOCIETAL NORMS			1					1				
Societal norms	ROLE MODELS			1					1				
Leadership norm	LEADER EXPECTATIONS/NORM						1						
Informal networks	MEN RECRUITING MEN		1			1				1		1	1
Informal networks	SOCIAL NETWORKS							1	1			1	1
The individual	WOMEN THEMSELVES			1									
The individual	ASPIRATION/DARE TO APPLY												1
Cultural problem	CULTURE		1		1	1	1				1	1	
Cultural problem	INDUSTRY HISTORY				1		1						
Cultural problem	CONSERVATIVE INDUSTRY						1						
Children and WLB	CHILDREN		1	1					1			1	
Children and WLB	WORKLIFE BALANCE		1	1			1					1	1

Appendix 6: Coding of company challenges

Macro		0	Status										
Meso		1	Explanation										
Micro													

Theme	THEMES	1_ALICE	2_BEN	3_CAMILLE	4_DIANA	5_EVA	6_FRIDA	7_GEORGE	8_HANNA	9_JOHANNA	10_KLARA	11_LINDA	12_MARIA
Self-confidence	SELF-CONFIDENCE						1				1	1	1
Male domination	RATIO AT TOP			1				1				1	1
Informal networks	SOCIAL NETWORKS			1				1	1				1
Informal networks	ACCESS TO MALE NETWORK			1									
Informal networks	MEN RECRUITING MEN					1		1			1		1
Informal networks	STRATEGIC DISCUSSION							1					
Culture	CULTURE			1								1	
Explaing why	LACK OF "WHY"	1				1				1			
Continuity and integration	CONTINUITY			1	1			1			1	1	
Leadership commitment	TOP COMMITMENT	1									1		
Leadership commitment	SIGNAL	1											1
Leadership commitment	LEADERSHIP MINDSET					1	1			1	1		
Bias	LEADER EXPECTATIONS	1						1				1	1
Bias	TRAIT BIAS	1											
Bias	BIAS								1				
Work-life balance	CHILDREN/WLB			1		1			1	1	1		
Individual perspective	PROVE THEMSELVES				0								
Male domination	MINORITY								0	0			
Progress	PROGRESS	0	0						0			0	
Talk not walk	LACK OF CONCRETE ACTIONS	0									0	0	
Talk not walk	OBJECTIVES/GOAL SETTING	0					0				0		
Explaing why	LOW AWARENESS									0			
Role models	ROLE MODELS							1			1		
Size	SIZE								0				
n/a	NO SPECIFIC BARRIERS/CHALLENGES				1								

Appendix 7: Coding of GEW

		0	Normative										
		1	Positive										

Theme	THEMES	1_ALICE	2_BEN	3_CAMILLE	4_DIANA	5_EVA	6_FRIDA	7_GEORGE	8_HANNA	9_JOHANNA	10_KLARA	11_LINDA	12_MARIA
Communication	EXPLAIN WHY					0	0			0		1	0
Communication	COMMUNICATION		0			0		1			1	0	
Concrete actions	MORE CONCRETE ACTIONS	0					1		1			0	
Concrete actions	EQUALITY GROUP			1				1	1			1	
Concrete actions	COMPENSATION SURVEY			1			1		1		1		
Continuity & integration	CONTINUITY AND INTEGRATION	1	1	1		1				0	0	1	1	0
Cultural change	EXPECTATIONS/CHALLENGE THE NORM		0	0				1			0	0	0
Cultural change	CULTURE AND VALUES				1	1	1				1	0	1
Involve more people	INVOLVE MORE PEOPLE			1						0	0		
Measurability	MEASURES/GOAL SETTING	1		1		1					1		
Personal development	BIAS TRAINING	1		1					1		1		
Personal development	LDP		1	1					1	1	1	1	0
Personal development	INCREASE ASPIRATION/CONFIDENCE										0	0	0
Recruitment	MINORITY/CRITICAL MASS		1	0				1	0	1	1		0
Recruitment	RECRUITMENT				0		1		1		1	1	0
Recruitment	UNDERMINING/TOKENISM		0						1				0
Recruitment	SUCCESSION PLANNING			1	1				1		1	1	1
Recruitment	PROCESS SUPPORT								1				
Social capital	ACCESS STRATEGIC DISCUSSION		1	1					1				
Social capital	FORMAL AND INFORMAL NETWORK	1	1			1	1	1		1		1	1
Social capital	MENTORSHIP				1			1					1
Social capital	SPONSORSHIP								1				
Top commitment	TOP COMMITMENT		0	0			1	1				1	
Top commitment	SIGNAL		0		0			1			1		
Work-life balance	WLB			1	0	1			1			1	1
Work-life balance	LEARNINGS FROM WFH				0			0			0	0	0