JÖNKÖPING UNIVERSITY
*Jönköping International
Business School*

Female leaders' perceptions of the barriers and facilitating factors of their career in gender-equal Nordic countries

Master Thesis in Business Administration

Abstract

Background – This paper examined the literature on the concept of the glass ceiling in the management field, with an emphasis on Finnish and Swedish female leaders' perceptions of the barriers and facilitating factors of their career.

Purpose – The purpose of this thesis was to explore the factors that affect the career development of women in the context of Nordic countries, namely in Finland and Sweden. Furthermore, this thesis tried to understand the welfare state paradox better and how the women in Finland and Sweden perceive it. Lastly, the purpose of this study was to find out if there are any differences between the perceptions of these countries due to the societal and cultural differences.

Method – Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 female leaders from different companies in Finland and in Sweden. The grounded analysis was used in the qualitative analysis of the coding.

Conclusion – The research resulted that there are several barriers and facilitating factors that have affected the career of female leaders. Finnish and Swedish women highlighted their own individual factors such as motivation, self-esteem and courage as the major facilitating factor, and thereof lack of them a barrier. Based on this research, women's perception of Nordic welfare policies is that they are beneficial to career development, providing an opportunity to focus on work more. Contrary to the expectations, there were relatively few differences in perceptions between Finnish and Swedish female leaders identified in this study. However, it seems that in Sweden the responsibilities about family are shared more equally and the overall social atmosphere is more encouraging for women's career success.

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1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the topic by providing the background to the following theoretical framework and analysis of this study. Followed by background, the purpose of this study will be clarified. Finally, the research problem and question, as well as sub-questions, will be discussed.

1.1 Background

In recent years the low proportion of women in executive management and board positions have gained a lot of attention and given rise to public discussion in the Nordic countries as well as worldwide (e.g. Eurostat 2018; Mandel, 2012; Sanandaji, 2016). Statistics show that the higher up in the corporate hierarchy, the lower the female representation (Eurostat 2018; Oakley, 2000). Although progress has been made in many employment areas, women remain significantly underrepresented in positions of power (Bendl & Schmidt, 2010; Boone, Veller, Nikolaeva, Keith, Kefgen & Houran, 2013; Ćorić, 2018; Chanland & Murphy, 2018; Eagly, 2008; Furst & Reeves, 2008; Fernandez-Mateo & Fernandez, 2016; Schuh et al., 2014; Van Vianen & Fischer, 2002).

The "glass ceiling" metaphor has been used both in public and in scientific discussion since the mid-1980s to explain the female's underrepresentation in managerial positions. The metaphor describes the invisible barrier of prejudice and discrimination – an invisible "glass roof" that women face as they approach the top of the corporate hierarchy (Eagly & Karau, 2002: Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). Women advance to the top of middle management but are unable to pass through this barrier. This barrier is a combination of many factors such as gender role stereotypes, social norms, masculine corporate management, family-work conflicts and recruiters' priorities. Another term suggested for these barriers is the labyrinth, indicating the complicated, debilitating challenges that women must navigate on their way to management roles (Eagly, 2008).

There are several factors which help women to break the glass ceiling and help them to advance in their career. According to studies, these so-called 'career-boosting' factors have a positive effect on helping women to climb up the corporate ladders (Knorr, 2005).

For instance, stimulating assignments or responsibilities assigned by supervisors or a new job opportunity can have a facilitating effect on women's career direction (Knorr, 2005; O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005). Moreover, women's personalities, attitudes, desires and beliefs are important as well as factors such as personal relationships; spouse, friends and parents play a big role (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005). In later phases, women define their success in terms of personal fulfillment and happiness. Additionally, women's age has been recognized as an important factor as it is associated with work experience (Tharenou, Latimer & Conroy, 1994). Furthermore, professional relationships such as managers, role models and mentors have a positive impact on women's career and life choices (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005), for instance in the form of mentoring and networking.

Hence a large variety of factors have been identified in the literature which can facilitate or impede female leadership. These studies rely on a variety of theories, like social role theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), and are conducted in several countries. More recently, this phenomenon has been investigated in the context of gender-equal countries. Scholars have recognized that gender-equal countries are in fact hindering women's career progress (Mac Giolla & Kajonius, 2018; Mandel, 2012; Mcclelland & Holland, 2015; Stoet & Geary, 2018). Several countries have been studied, like Belgium, France, Hungary, Spain and Italy (Mandel & Semyonov, 2006). More recently, the Nordic countries have received specific attention with the Nordic Gender Equality Paradox (Sanandaji, 2016). This paradox discusses that Nordic countries have few women amongst top-managers as well as amongst business owners. Even though women in Nordic countries have succeeded in the public sector, proceeded in politics, they are still underrepresented in the private sector. These affecting factors transpire a bigger societal barrier hindering women specifically in gender-equal countries (Sanandaji, 2016). According to Sanandaji (2016), the public-sector monopolies, tax policies, and welfare and family policies, besides with ineffective gender quotas, together creates the glass ceiling in Nordic countries. Similarly, Mandel and Semyonov (2006) discovered women's employment opportunities in welfare states and figured that welfare states facilitate women's access into the labor force but not into powerful and desirable positions. Therefore, the same welfare state activities that promote one dimension of gender equality appear to hinder another dimension. In academic literature, this

phenomenon is called a 'welfare state paradox' (Ellingsæter, 2013; Mandel, 2012; Mandel & Semyonov, 2006; Mun & Jung, 2018).

1.2 Purpose

The studies about the barriers and facilitating factors have been conducted in many different settings, while recent findings from gender-equal welfare countries seem to be generalized (Mandel, 2012; Mandel & Semyonov, 2006; Mun & Jung, 2018). However, different countries have different characteristics in terms of culture and politics which can influence the career development of women. Hence a cross-cultural study is warranted in order to understand which conditions influence career development in different welfare states. Nordic countries are considered to be the leading countries in welfare and gender equality. Thus, this thesis seeks to explore the factors that affect the career development of women in the context of Nordic countries, namely in Finland and Sweden. In addition, this thesis tries to understand the welfare state paradox better and how the women in Finland and Sweden perceive it. Lastly, the purpose of this study is to find out if there are any differences between the perceptions of these countries due to the societal and cultural differences.

There are two reasons why to focus on the Nordic countries. First, they are widely known for gender-equality and policies facilitating gender-equality. Secondly, they are often generalized but there are differences between the countries which should not be ignored in understanding the welfare state paradox because they might influence women's career development. According to the Gender Equality Index (EIGE, 2015), Sweden scores 82.6 and Finland 73.0 – resulting in almost 10 percent difference. This index measures progress in gender equality across the EU by looking into gender gaps and different levels of achievement relevant to policy areas. There are several reasons behind this difference, for example, the history between these two countries are contrary, and it has created a different starting point for women in labor. Finland has made its way through wars whereas Sweden has survived independently without taking part in wars. Moreover, Finland and Sweden have differences within parental leave and the cost of early childhood education and care (SAK, 2017). The implication is that women may experience the family-work conflict differently between these countries and in fact, the family-work

conflict has been seen one of the fundamental factors that hinder women in working life (e.g., Eagly, 2008; Furst & Reeves, 2008).

The findings from this study can provide researchers with a better understanding of the perceptions of the glass ceiling barriers and facilitating factors in the Nordic countries. The findings may also be helpful for the gender-equal countries for more effective career advancement of women.

1.3 Problem discussion

The insights identified based on the existing literature suggest that there is a variety of factors arising from the individual level to organizational and societal that impact the glass ceiling and females' opportunities to achieve management positions. However, less is known about how impactful these factors in gender-equal welfare states are and how it has helped in shaping the career trajectory of women who survive above the glass ceiling. Also, less well known are the strategies successful female leaders use to navigate these challenges. When looking into the origin of the researches in the current literature, most of them are conducted in countries like the United Kingdom (e.g. Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008; Abele & Spurk, 2011) and the USA (e.g. Anderson et al., 2002; Combs et al., 2007; Eagly, 2008; Duguid et al., 2015). Despite the fundamental researches done before, across the past decades, only minor research has gone into (or at least surfaced in academic journals) the relationship of the lack of females in leadership positions and the potential connection of the gender-equal welfare state policies in the Nordic countries.

This thesis will be based on this current literature and will seek to uncover the perceptions of the female leaders in Sweden and Finland. Whether similar factors that have been mentioned in the literature has affected their journey to leadership positions and their perceptions about whether gender equal welfare systems have a positive or negative impact on their career progress.

Hence, the research question that is not yet answered is the following:

- What kind of barriers and facilitating factors female leaders perceive in gender-equal welfare states when reaching the top of their career?

In order to understand where these factors are arising and finally to compare these findings between Finland and Sweden, sub-questions are created:

- Are there differences in perceptions between Finnish and Swedish female leaders?
- How Finnish and Swedish female leaders perceive the effect of the welfare state in their career advancement?
- Do Finnish and Swedish female leaders believe that men and women have similar opportunities to advance in a leadership position in the Nordic countries?

1.4 Definition of key terms

Career

"The individually perceived sequence of attitudes and behaviors associated with work-related experiences and activities over the span of the person's life" (Hall, 2002, p. 7).

Career development

Career development can be defined as an on-going series of stages characterized by unique concerns, themes and tasks (Greenhaus et al., as cited in O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005).

Glass ceiling

An invisible barrier of prejudice and discrimination – an invisible "glass roof" that women face as they approach the top of the corporate hierarchy (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).

Welfare-state paradox / The Nordic Gender Equality Paradox

In the welfare states, the public-sector monopolies, tax policies, and welfare and family policies, besides with ineffective gender quotas facilitate women's access into the labor force but not into powerful and desirable positions and thus creates a paradox (Mandel & Semyonov, 2006; Sanandaji, 2016).

Gender Equality

Equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys (EIGE, 2019).

Nordic countries

Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Finland (The Global Gender Gap Report, 2018).

2. Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the theoretical background to the topic of female leaders' perceptions of the barriers and facilitating factors of their career in gender-equal Nordic countries. The theoretical background has been divided into the main themes arising from the existing academic literature.

The reasons behind the women's underrepresentation are complicated as at the same time women can have the opportunities to achieve these positions but also there seems to be a variety of barriers slowing them down. The current literature has recognized several barriers and facilitating factors that affect women's career progress. The main barriers and facilitating factors affecting women's career development arising from the existing academic literature have been illustrated in Figure 1. The factors that are overlapping in both colors are factors that have been identified to have both hindering and facilitating effect on women's career advancement. Additionally, recent literature in this research area proposes that the generous welfare policies (Mun & Jung, 2018; Pettit & Hook, 2009; Sanandaji, 2016); namely called as "welfare state paradox" affect women's career development (Mandel & Semyonov, 2006). Women in social democratic countries with highly-developed welfare states have achieved a higher overall level of gender equality in wages and labor market participation. However, women are still underrepresented in management positions (Mandel & Semyonov, 2006).

In the following chapters, the main factors affecting women's career development will be explored more in detailed. Finally, the discussion will be turned towards more specific research done in the gender-equal countries.
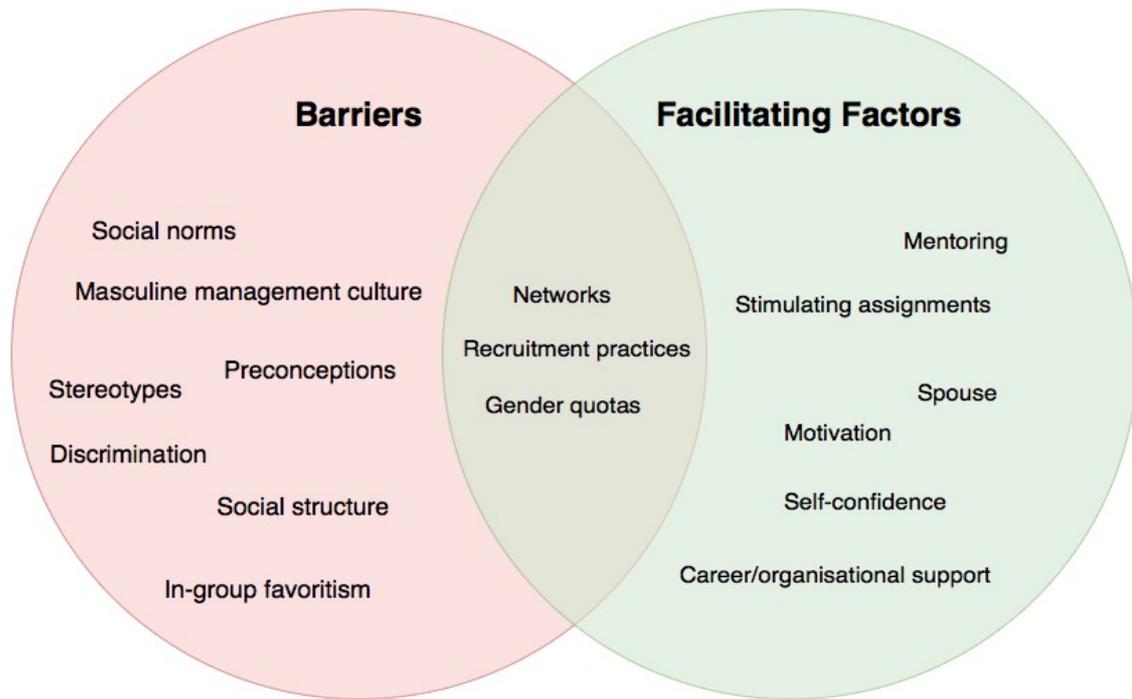
Figure 1. The main barriers and facilitating factors affecting women's careers arising from the existing literature

2.1 Perception and stereotyping

Literature defines career as follows: "the individually perceived sequence of attitudes and behaviors associated with work-related experiences and activities over the span of the person's life" (Hall, 2002, p. 7). Career development can be defined as an on-going series of stages characterized by unique concerns, themes and tasks (Greenhaus et al., as cited in O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005). However, it should be noted that women's career differs from such traditional models of career development for example because of family responsibilities (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987, as cited in O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005), and according to the literature, there are several other facilitating factors and barriers that separate women from male colleagues. One good example is that there is still stereotypes and negative prejudice that prevail towards female leaders and hinders career development. A common perception is that men are more likely to be seen in leadership roles, while women are viewed as the supportive followers (Cooper Jackson, 2001; Eagly & Karaua, 2002; Van Vianen and Fischer, 2002). Research by Schein and colleagues (as cited in Sools et al., 2007) stated that people usually see managers with characteristics typical for men as a better leader. In fact, according to literature, there is often mentioned the mentality of "Think Manager, think Male" (Sools et al., 2007;

Schein, 2001; Van Vianen and Fischer, 2002). Furthermore, this hinders self-perception and evaluation of a woman's potential to be a leader, as well as anticipatory socialization. In contrary, Ellemers (2014) argues that females that are succeeding are not willing to help other women to succeed. This "Queen Bee" syndrome has been often recognized in the literature stating that women tend not to help other women and prevents women leaders from acting as role models for other women (Derks, Ellemers, Van Laar & De Groot, 2011; Ellemers, 2014, Ellemers, et al., 2004).

When this mismatch between seeing women as followers and men as leaders are discovered more closely, it often emerges from people's perceptions of men and women's characteristics (Heilman, 2001). Biddle (as cited in Schuh et al., 2014) has noted that gender roles are defined as socially shared beliefs about the attributes of men and women. Attributes such as supportive, empathic and gentle (Schuh et al., 2014) or kind, helpful, sympathetic and concerned about children and family (Heilman, 2001) are more strongly associated to women. Attributes such as assertive, competitive, controlling and dominant (Schuh et al., 2014) or aggressive, forceful, independent and decisive (Heilman, 2001) are more strongly associated with men. Although women with attributes associated to women have proceeded in leadership positions, still people's expectations about successful leadership behavior are strongly associated with attributes such as competitive, assertive and decisive, which are all traditionally related to men's characteristics (Schuh et al., 2014). Moreover, according to the social identity theory (Tajfel &Turner, 1986), people tend to choose groups based on their social identity and thus might be avoiding male-dominated leadership roles. Furthermore, Eagly, Karau, Miner, & Johnson (1994) have claimed, women who proceed to a leadership position are more prone to role conflict than their male colleagues. Heilman (2001) argue that female leaders tend to be judged as more hostile with characteristics such as devious, selfish and bitter than their male counterparts.

Within these findings, it can be stated, as Eagly & Karau (2002) has noted through social role theory, that the female gender role and the leadership role are (in most contexts) inconsistent. Women are not seen as "proper" leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002) or suitable for promotion to top leadership positions (Van Engen & Vinkenburg, as cited in Sools et al., 2007) when they obey female gender role prescriptions. Consequently, achieving

leadership is more difficult for women than men. This is because of the common perception that women have less leadership ability and the preference that women do not indicate this ability, rather engage in supportive behavior (Eagly & Karaua, 2002). Factors that reinforce this opposite to the leader role is certain feminine personal characteristics. Feminine dress, grooming and pregnancy might make women seem unqualified for leadership (Eagly & Karaua, 2002). In fact, the impact of feminine clothing was tested by Forsythe, Drake and Cox (as cited in Eagly & Karau, 2002) and they found out that femininity of dress decreased the favorability of the hiring recommendation. In contrary, those women who were dressed more masculine (albeit with a skirt) were evaluated more negatively than applicants who were dressed moderately masculine. The speculation drawn from this is that for women the clothing is not universally accepted whereas for men it is obvious how to dress and give a convincing impression of leader. To sum up, physical attractiveness, feminine clothing, and token status illustrate variables that may disadvantage women position in the professional field (Eagly & Karau, 2002). At the same time, stereotypical beliefs of women's features seem to be limiting access to higher management positions (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008).

2.2 Personality and self-esteem

On the other side of this tension are the women who have overcome perceptions and stereotypes. According to O'Neil & Bilimoria (2005), women who see themselves in charge of their career and fearlessly are taking steps to ensure their career progress, are more likely to rise above the stereotypes. Similar findings have also made by other authors (e.g. Glass and Cook 2015; Guillaume & Pochic, 2009). Furthermore, women who are achievement-oriented and motivated to progress and know what they want, are determined to succeed. In the literature, women who have achieved the high management position are the ones who are not afraid to take risks and have learned to express clearly what they want despite the opinions of others (Johns, 2013). Overall the females who have managed to succeed in their career have had a strong motivation to do so. In contrast, Schuh and colleagues (2014) explored the relationship between gender, the motivation for power and leadership role occupancy. It resulted in that woman tend to have a weaker power motivation and thus, occupied fewer leadership positions. Even though this might be true, it seems that the females who occupy the roles are even more motivated than their male peers (Ragins, 1998).

Furthermore, good self-image and self-esteem are crucial to achieving management positions and to develop talent (Robinson, Fetters, Riester, & Bracco, 2009). As mentioned by Northouse (2015) leadership positions are often occupied with people who are creative and talented. When women are growing up, studies show that girls who are known to be talented, their self-esteem decreases especially during their youth in the time of puberty. The main reason for this is that the surrounding expectations for how traditionally women should be and behave might be in conflicting how the girls see themselves. The traditional female characteristics are dissonant to the fact at the same time, they are expected to perform well and succeed (Combs & Luthans, 2007; Hyvärinen, 2016, as cited in Määttä & Uusiautti, 2017). Women who grow in an environment which allows them to be as they are enhances the possibilities for them to grow as confident adults. Otherwise, these contradictory presumptions could lead to girls to hide their potential talents (Duguid & Thomas-Hunt, 2015; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008).

In addition, low self-esteem has been explained in some contexts by Impostor Syndrome. This diagnosis has been recognized in the late 1970s by clinical psychologist Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes (1978) and it was found to be very common among high-achieving women. Impostor Syndrome can be explained as a pop-psychological diagnosis – an internal sense of self, feelings of failing and faking (Simmons, 2016). Since on there has been further research on the field and the studies tell that the effects are undeniably negative (Churchill, 2018). In fact, the low presence of women in STEM fields has been employed to explain by Impostor Syndrome. However, Clance and Imes (1978) have been clarified that women who show the impostor phenomenon do not fall into any one diagnostic category. Most often the diagnostic is related to anxiety, lack of self-confidence, depression and frustration related to an inability to meet self-imposed standards of achievement. The characteristics of this phenomenon have been explained by Clance and Imes (1978, p.242) "Thus, unlike men, who tend to own success as attributable to a quality inherent in themselves, women are more likely either to project the cause of success outward to an external cause (luck) or to a temporary internal quality (effort) that they do not equate with inherent ability."

Another attribute that has been characterized as a barrier in women's career is modesty. The research on the topic is relatively little, and some of the conclusions have been made based on social psychology research. Budworth and Mann (2010) have been one of the first ones to examine the relationship between modesty and access to leadership and they reviewed the literature according to modesty and self-promotion. Based on the literature, the overall message was that behaviors that are successful for males in the workplace are not successful for females. Whereas men consistently self-promote their success, women under-represent their accomplishment to others. For example, Daubman and Sigall (as cited in Budworth & Mann, 2010) argue that women have been socialized to believe that they will experience more positive outcomes when they are seen by others as non-competitive, and they downplay their accomplishments in the presence of others to avoid being judged unfeminine. Conversely, Gould and Slone (as cited in Budworth & Mann, 2010) claim that men self-promote their success, in order to present a successful self-image to others.

In sum, how women perceive themselves plays a crucial role in their career development and may explain women's relative absence in higher management positions. The identity of leadership begins with a good self-image and without it, the opportunities to grow through new tasks and real achievements withers away. In order one reaching the top, an aspiring leader acquires the courage to differentiate oneself from the others (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013).

2.3 Corporate climate and recruitment practices

Organizations itself can have several factors hindering females career development. One of these factors often mentioned in the literature is the masculine organizational management culture (Cassell et al., as cited in Van Vianen and Fischer, 2002). The core takeaway from the reviewed literature is that organizations are often supported by norms and beliefs that are adhered to by men than by women. Therefore, masculine cultures contain hidden assumptions, inexplicit norms and structure practices that promote styles of communication, approaches to conflict, types of leadership, structure values, definitions of success and successful management, that are stereotypically masculine (e.g. Boone et al., 2013; Glass & Cook, 2015; Guillaume & Pochic, 2009; Hoobler et al., 2009; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008; Sools, Van Engen & Baerveldt, 2007; Van Vianen

and Fischer, 2002). Oftentimes, organizations which are male-dominated (e.g. Boone et al., 2013; Glass & Cook, 2015; Guillaume & Pochic, 2009), women are less prone to see themselves as leaders or seek leadership roles (Kulik, 2000). At the same time, the lack of strong female role models strengthens the perception of women as followers. According to the literature, it is difficult to develop a mental model of women as leaders when the environment has just a few women in key executive positions (Kulik, 2000).

More closely, organizations can hinder women's careers also with their promotions and recruitment practices. Guerrero claims (as cited in Schwanke, 2013) that women are encouraged to work in departments where developmental opportunities are limited or where they do not translate into executive advancement. Similarly, Guillaume and Pochic (2009) argue that females are more likely to accept horizontal mobility compared to their male peers. In order to get promoted, women need extra credentials like rare experience, better education or mentoring from male senior managers (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009). Further, Kumra & Vinnicombe (2008) investigate the linkage between women opportunities to top management and the male-dominated management in the organizations. It resulted that the people who are promoted to higher positions are the ones who resemble the ones already in those positions, which most of the cases are men. The women in the study experienced a lack of gender acceptance to be a key barrier to attaining senior positions within the firm (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008).

Furthermore, recruiting firms are suggested to be key actors keeping women out of top management jobs (Fernandez-Mateo & Fernandez, 2016). Even though this might be true, at the same time, hiring firms are facing a dilemma. They are required to offer more female candidates, but the description of the wanted person of the client organizations is limited by stereotypes. Often businesses are looking for a person to occupy the management position who is rational, decisive and ambitious – characteristics of masculine leaders (Van Vianen & Fischer, 2002). Similarly, Johns (2013) argues that recruitment and outreach barriers are significant obstacles for women in reaching senior levels of management. As companies most often promote people to the management positions inside the company, organizations have limited options of people as they are not actively recruiting and adding more women into their ranks. Those women who do overcome the recruitment barrier, they are often obstructed by what the commission

called corporate climate barriers, such as differing gender communication styles, behaviors, and ways of socializing (Johns, 2013).

In order for companies to limit these organizational barriers, creating a supportive environment to contribute to women's retention and development is one way to do so (Catalyst, 1998). Similarly, if the companies want to stay competitive according to Schmidt and Duenas (2002), they should concentrate to develop their work environment issues and focus on incorporate development practices that operate well for male and female workers. This kind of development would lead to a form of policies and regulations to make the work environment more worker-friendly. Furthermore, support from top management is important when implementing these changes (Morrison, White, and van Velsor, 1987; Catalyst, 1990). A supportive environment provides women with friendly workplace policies, but commitment from top management is crucial in implementing such policies.

Morrison et al. (1987) recognized already more than 30 years ago that organizations which have existing support systems facilitate women's development. Assessment structure such as tracking achievements, monitor pay, promotion opportunities, inclusion in decision-making, respect, and credibility (Morrison et al., 1987). However, even though nowadays a lot of organizations have settings for such systems, they are still some ways failing to measure performance and promotion of women, identify assumptions, and assess employees' needs, career goals, and potential discrimination factors (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008). Finally, such systems also know to improve job satisfaction (Culpan & Wright, 2002). These findings are in the line with the person-organization research which shows that a match between people's preferences and supplies offered by the job and the organizational environment is important for job satisfaction, commitment and well-being (Van Vianen, 2000).

The disadvantages women face in career advancement arise from a combination of firm-based and societally based factors (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008). Furthermore, society, economic reasons and choices of occupations can reflect women's choices of jobs over a career (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989). The conclusion drawn from this is that women do not have equal opportunities than men as there is ongoing double-bind situation impacting

women's advancement. Oakley (2000, p. 324) explains "a double-bind is a behavioral norm that creates a situation where a person cannot win no matter what she does." Double-bind is particularly troublesome for women due to challenges regarding women's clothing, behavior and gender roles that are impacting women's career, as already discussed in this paper (Oakley 2000). Additionally, organizations that promote the corporates culture of gender equality, are more likely to have an increasing number of women in leadership positions (Bajdo and Dickson, 2001; Knorr 2005).

2.4 Mentoring, career support and networks

Different conditions are identified to overcome barriers in the workplace, among which are mentoring, career support and extended networks. However, research shows that there are barriers linked to these conditions. In fact, one of the most prominent women's workplace barriers is a lack of mentoring (Boone et al., 2013; Chanland & Murphy, 2018; Furst & Reeves, 2008; Hoobler et al., 2009; Linehan and Walsh, 2001). It has been investigated that female leaders and other minorities receive fewer mentoring than their male counterparts (Linehan and Walsh, 2001; Mcdonald & Westphal, 2013). Although gender might not impact the effectiveness of mentoring, in-group favoritism, where white male mostly mentor other white male, and few female leaders do impact women's chances of getting mentoring (McDonald and Westphal, 2013; Linehand and Walsh, 2001). Anyhow, it has been stated that the mentor's gender does not impact on the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship (Linehan and Walsh, 2001). According to the academic literature, mentoring is seen to be helpful for women when advancing in a career (Linehan and Walsh, 2001; Mcdonald & Westphal, 2013; O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005; Tharenou, 2001). Women can gain from strong and supportive mentoring relationships and connections with powerful networks (Eagly, 2008; Linehan & Walsh, 2001). O'Neil and Bilimoria (2005) suggest that organizations should understand, recognize and support women's career. They suggest that managers are the best supporters, as they can encourage women's development by making sure that they have access to relevant opportunities. Moreover, women should have in the idealistic achievement phase of their careers (ages 24-35) access to assignments that will stimulate and challenge them. Overall, women should receive on-going coaching and mentoring through all phases of their career (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005).

Moreover, the limited access to networks is an existing problem within women's career advancement (Eagly, 2008; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008). Glass and Cook (2015) states in their study that female leaders experience a lack of access to important social and professional networks as well as a lack of acknowledgment of their role and responsibilities and explicit challenges to their authority. Several research participants mentioned the importance of outdoor sport like golf as a fundamental part of these networks as women usually were not invited to golf-related events. According to the study, this exclusion did not only concern workplace networking but also the opportunities to connect with the customers. Additionally, Boone and colleagues (2013) recognized the same pattern in their studies that women are experiencing social exclusion. Several respondents felt like they are being ostracized from informal networks of communication because of the male in-group favoritism. However, some companies have eliminated some of these kinds of 'traditional male rituals' by no longer organizing golf tournaments or fishing expeditions (Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).

In addition, it has stated that because of work-family balancing, women face challenges when socializing with colleagues and building professional networks. In fact, women have very little time for networking because of family responsibilities (Eagly, 2008). This can be seen as one of the factors of the glass ceiling, as networking plays a key role when proceeding in a career. Networking can be identified as one of the ways to gather insider information and workplace support as well as enhance in a career proactively (Eagly, 2008; Glass & Cook, 2015; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008). Although networking is identified as a proactive career-enhancing strategy, women may feel discomfort when building professional networks (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008). According to Buss (as cited in Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008) women are not necessarily naturally conditioned to take personal credits for their achievement or to compete intra-sexually for economic resources. This is in line with Nelson statement (as cited in Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008), such note as 'women cooperate, and men compete' is a clear and powerful message which women learn to accept from an early stage.

Whereas the majority of the findings emphasize the relevance of mentoring, networks and career encouragement (Eagly, 2008; Glass & Cook, 2015; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008; Linehan and Walsh, 2001; Mcdonald & Westphal, 2013; O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005;

Tharenou, 2001) some studies find the contrary. For example, some evidence is found for sex bias in mentoring, where the mentor could be credited from the success with being the "brains" behind the performance whereas the woman may be the loser despite her success (Heilman, 2001). More generally, Metz (2003) argue that none of the interpersonal variables such as mentor support, career encouragement and internal networks is related to women's managerial advancement. Yet the study was conducted in Australian banks only and therefore it cannot be examined in all fields. According to the discovered literature, mentoring, career support and both formal and informal networks might be helpful for women when advancing in a career.

2.5 Family and spouse

The discovered literature suggests that social norms are a related general explanation for the underrepresentation of women in management positions (Ćorić, 2018; Glass & Cook, 2015; Hoobler et al., 2009). Social norms tend to ascribe childcare and eldercare roles to women and because of this, care responsibilities are likely to limit women's ability to enter and remain in the paid workforce. Such responsibilities reduce their chances of promotion or possibilities to work in the evenings and on the weekends (Ćorić, 2018). Also, the average age of women to start a family is 25 to 35, which is at the same time when an intense working involvement is required (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009). Eagly (as cited in Hoobler et al., 2009) explains these social norms by social role theory that prescribes gender-typical roles ascribed to men and women shape both expectations about the appropriate behavior and the beliefs men and women have about their own talents and skills. Social role theory suggests that women are unassociated with management effectiveness whereas associated with nurturing, communal social roles (Hoobler et al., 2009). Lewis (2010) assert that caregiving roles are seen in organizations discontinuous with leadership roles. Such caregiving stereotypes ascribed to women may cause suffering to women's career (Hoobler et al., 2009). For example, a married man with children may signal stability, whereas a married woman with children may signal divided loyalties and limited resources. The implication is that married women with children are known to advance more slowly in the managerial ranks (Tharenou, 2001). Also, women may face the prejudice of high family-work conflict easier than men in the same situation (Eagly, 2008; Furst & Reeves, 2008; Guillaume & Pochic 2009; Hoobler et al., 2009; Van Vianen & Fischer, 2002). These assumptions are problematic as in fact,

according to Friedman & Greenhaus (as cited in Hoobler et al., 2009), women who are highly focused on their career are less likely to marry and less likely to have children.

The arrival of a child means that nothing stays the same. Family responsibilities, household tasks and career opportunities might change due to a child (Anderson, Binder, & Krause, 2002). Indeed, parental leave and length of it have been recognized to create an imbalance in the labor market especially influencing women's career advancement. It has been found that women's lower career success is due to more interruptions and more discontinuity in career development. This can be explained by women's higher involvement in childcare responsibilities (Abele & Spurk, 2011). In fact, Parasuraman (as cited in Hoobler et al., 2009) state that women spend more time each day on family responsibilities than do men. Furthermore, Aisenbrey, Evertsson & Grunow (2009) studied the length of mothers' time out of paid work after childbirth and the short-term career consequences for mothers. The study was conducted in Sweden, Germany and in the United States. They found out that in the United States mother's careers suffer the most if they leave the labor market at all after giving birth. Meanwhile, in Germany, the study showed that returning early back to work is not necessarily associated with improved career opportunities, whereas in Sweden women's career prospects are better if they return to paid work sooner rather than later (Aisenbrey et al., 2009). Despite the length of parental leave, it has been discovered that maternity leave and family responsibilities have an impact on women's human capital (Schwanke, 2013). Human capital consists of skills, knowledge and workforce of an individual (Spender & Burton-Jones, 2011). Human capital can also be explained by education, work experience and time out of the labor force (Anderson et al., 2002). Family responsibilities reduce women's human capital, as the career is interrupted due to childcare and other family-related responsibilities which are usually more women's responsibilities (Schwanke, 2013). The "pure" child effects appear in women's career caused by the reduction of work hours and gaps in labor force attachment (Anderson et al., 2002). Therefore, providing women with incentives to return to work sooner rather than later, human capital depreciation can be reduced (Aisenbrey et al., 2009).

Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer and King (2002) argue in their study that women with children are constantly torn between managerial and personal roles, feeling guilty and stressed.

However, the literature suggests that the stress is not necessarily a result of too many demands, rather of their perception of the impacts of outside work on their role as mothers (Rosenbaum and Cohen, as cited in Välimäki et al., 2009). Hence, the role of the spouse is important as it has been found that women who receive support from their husbands are less likely to feel that their role in the family is threatened by their career (Välimäki et al. 2009). In fact, Välimäki, Lämsä and Hiillos (2009) have found out that the spouse of the female manager has a significant effect on a career. Thus, the spouse's role for the woman's career can be various, and the spouse can be for example determining, supporting, flexible, instrumental or counterproductive. Nevertheless, a flexible husband with a broad-minded view of gender roles may enable women better to manage their career and integrate their work and family lives successfully (Välimäki et al., 2009). Finally, as O'Neil and Bilimoria (2005) have stated, women need better integration between work life and non-work life.

2.6 Welfare state policies

As this study will be conducted in welfare states; Finland and Sweden, it is important to look into the barriers and facilitating factors researched in welfare states before. Even though gender-equality has for many years been perceived as the way to stimulate female career development, research shows that there are still large differences between women and men in managerial occupations in gender-equal welfare states (Mandel & Semonoyov, 2006). According to Mandel & Semonoyov (2006), in the welfare states, gender equality is well enforced, and the development of family policies and the extension of public services enhance women's opportunities to start a career. However, these activities, while facilitating women's entrance into the labor market, do not facilitate their entry into the highest management positions. It could be that the efforts of welfare states to facilitate and protect women's work may result in creating barriers for career progress and thus create the glass ceiling (Mandel & Semonoyov, 2006).

Women tend to work in public sector jobs as kindergartens, schools and nursing and in these jobs, women do not earn as much as they would earn in the private sector (Tanhua, 2018). This causes a high level of gender segregation and the gender pay gap in the welfare states. "Gender segregation is commonly defined as the unequal distribution of women and men across the occupational structure, including occupations, workplaces,

industries and sectors" (Ellingsæter, 2013, p. 501). As well as social norms, gender segregation affects earnings, career mobility, and it reinforces cultural gender stereotypes in society and creates a less flexible labor market (Ellingsæter, 2013; Tanhua, 2018). Women are encouraged to take time off work and use generous family policies, and this may hinder women's career achievement as well as preserve women's dominant roles as mothers and wives (Mandel, 2012; Mandel & Semyonov, 2006). Consequently, 'the welfare state paradox' has arisen from these actions (Ellingsæter, 2013; Mandel, 2012; Mandel & Semyonov, 2006; Mun & Jung, 2018). The conclusion drawn from this is that welfare state policies have an impact on women's career advancement (Ellingsæter, 2013; Mandel, 2010; Mandel & Semyonov, 2006; Mun & Jung, 2018; Sanandaji, 2016).

More recently, literature has been focusing on gender equality in Nordic countries including publications written by Nima Sanandaji. Sanandaji (2018) claims that Nordic public-sector monopolies, tax policies, and welfare and family policies, along with ineffective gender quotas, combine to create the Nordic glass ceiling. His claims are based on facts that women are underrepresented in managerial positions in the private sector, despite Nordics policies support (Eurostat, 2018; Finnish Chamber of Commerce, 2018; Sanandaji, 2018). He argues that the Nordic countries should be admired for their egalitarian values and their long history of women succeeding in politics but however, the policies in these countries (Norway, Finland, Iceland, Denmark and Sweden) effectively prevent women from reaching the top (Sanandaji, 2016). The author calls this "The Nordic Gender Equality Paradox" (Sanandaji, 2016). Another action that has gained a lot of attention in Nordic countries is gender quotas. Policymakers in Europe have taken a step further for diminishing the underrepresentation of women in management positions by adopting gender quotas for corporate boards of directors (Matsa & Miller, 2013). However, there is no clear conclusion about whether gender quotas are useful or not. Boone and colleagues (2012) believe that gender quotas are not the solution as it does not address the underlying issue of a lack of leadership development for executive-minded individuals.

Taken together these factors in the welfare states and the researched a large variety of barriers and facilitating factors that are identified, it clearly shows that there are several factors affecting the career advancement of women. The studies about the barriers and

facilitating factors have been conducted in many different settings, while recent research on gender-equal welfare countries suggests that these countries are homogeneous (Mandel, 2012; Mandel & Semyonov, 2006; Mun & Jung, 2018). However, different countries have different characteristics in terms of culture and politics which can influence the career development of women. Hence a cross-cultural study is warranted in order to understand which conditions influence career development in different welfare states. The chosen countries to explore more closely are Finland and Sweden.

3. Methodological framework

The following chapter provides an overview of how this study was conducted. The methods and techniques of this study have been decided based on the philosophical assumptions that are explained further in the first section of this chapter. Moreover, this chapter describes transparently why the qualitative approach was selected and how the data collection has been done. Finally, data analysis, research quality and ethical considerations have been discussed.

3.1 Research philosophy

Philosophical assumptions are held by all researchers, although those assumptions are rather tacit than explicit positions. However, being aware of these philosophical assumptions is important as it can both increase the quality of research and contribute to the creativity of the researcher. The methods and techniques of this research have been decided based on the assumptions about the methodology, epistemology and ontology that are less visible and lie behind the scenes (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

The ontological starting point in this research is relativism, as the research support ideology about many 'truths" and that facts depend on the viewpoint of the observer. This ontology is in line with this study, as the aim is not to test a hypothesis, rather understand female leader's personal perceptions and therefore it is crucial to be aware of the multiple truths. Followed by ontology, the epistemology explains the ways of enquiring into the physical and social worlds. This study has a social constructionist approach, as the focus is on what people, individually and collectively, are thinking and feeling. The task is to not gather facts and measure the frequency of patterns of social behavior, rather appreciate the different experiences that people have. This supports the research purpose of this study, as the aim is to understand the different perceptions that Finnish and Swedish female leaders have about the barriers and facilitating factors of their career (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015).

3.2 Research approach

The strategy that is followed in this qualitative study is the abductive research strategy, developed by a few social scientists and elaborated by Blaikie (as cited in Ong, 2012). Ong (2012, p. 422) explains "The aim of the abductive research strategy is the construction of theories that are grounded in everyday activities, in the language and meaning of social actors." Dubois and Gadde (2002) clarify that the abductive approach is to be seen something more than just a mixture of deductive and inductive approaches. Especially if the researcher's objective is to discover new things, other variables and other relationships, an abductive approach is fruitful (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). Following the abductive approach, attention will be given to the meanings and interpretations, as well as to the motives and intentions, which people use in their daily lives. In this research, the abductive approach has been used as although some barriers and facilitating factors in women's career advancement in gender-equal Nordic countries have been known, the field has not been thoroughly researched and therefore, unknown barriers and facilitating factors were expected. Finally, the aim is not to create a theory, rather complement or question the existing theory on female leadership.

This research has started with the focus on barriers and facilitating factors that impact women's career advancement in Finland and in Sweden. The discovered literature suggests that barriers are arising from individual factors, such as personality, motivation and education, and from organizational factors, such as gender role stereotypes, masculine management structure, promotions and recruitment. In fact, first, the literature review was structured with a framework of Ragins and Sundstrom's (1989) four level of analyzes: individual, interpersonal, organizational and societal. The framework was used to guide the literature review and also the interview guide followed the framework by dividing the interview questions to these themes. Based on the literature review the first interviews were conducted. However, by following the abductive research strategy, new insights to this research have been identified and therefore the structure of the literature review, as well as an interview guide, has changed. After the first interviews, the framework that was used to guide the literature review was excluded. The four levels of analyzes were still inspiring the authors, but it was not sufficient for this study. Instead of having the framework, the literature review was structured with the most common themes

appearing from the discovered literature. Likewise, the main barriers and facilitating factors for women's career advancement have been identified from the existing literature.

After starting the process of interviews, few facilitating factors have been captured that did not appear in the discovered literature. Those factors include for example the impact of age of the female leader and the impact of a spouse in females' career advancement. Total 2 interviews out of 12 were conducted preliminarily aiming to become part of the social actors by regular involvement with them. After conducting the first exploratory interview, besides the literature review, the interview guide was restructured. This concept has been tested with one interview and finally, it was possible to reform the theoretical framework to support the aims of this study. Despite the changes in the interview guide, the themes have been related to female leadership and therefore all data collected from both preliminary and primary interviews are valuable.

The process of abductive approach has been continuing throughout the whole research. A frequent reflection back and forth between the interviews and the literature has been done. The factors that have been identified based on the interviews and not noticed when discovering the existing literature have been included in the rest of the interviews. In addition, these factors were included in the literature review. Alternative factors could not have been identified until the analysis of the data. During the process of coding, codes such as 'luck' and 'modesty' were created. These codes were first without categories, as they were not related to any of the concepts in the literature review and therefore difficult to categorize. When the analysis process continued, the authors realized that the code 'luck', more closely, the sense of feeling lucky, could have been linked to impostor syndrome. The existing literature of the research of impostor syndrome in female leadership has been explored and the main points have been included in the literature review. Similarly, the relatively little existing literature related to modesty was examined and few relevant points were included in the literature review.

Finally, when the data analysis process reached the phase of analyzing the differences in the perceptions between Finnish and Swedish female leaders, the perspective was changed. At the beginning of the research, the aim was to use Hofstede's as well as GLOBE's dimensions when analyzing the data and understanding the country

differences. However, later, the authors agreed that both Hofstede's dimensions and GLOBE's dimensions were not relevant in this study. Although the Hofstede's dimensions influence career development indirectly, and some relevant differences in dimensions were identified between the selected countries, they are not directly related to women's career development. The dimensions shape the setting but do not have a direct prominent effect that was expected female leaders to refer to. Hofstede's studies are relatively old and when studying female leadership in the 2000s in two countries that have similar characteristics, the benefit from Hofstede's studies is irrelevant to this study. In the end, different perceptions between Finnish and Swedish female leaders were identified based on the answers by comparing the results. In order to capture the different features, Excel spreadsheet was applied when analyzing the data. The data was analyzed together with the secondary data.

3.3 Methodological choice

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of female leaders and to gain insights about the barriers and facilitating factors in the Nordic countries. Additionally, the purpose is to understand how Finnish and Swedish female leaders perceive the effect of the welfare state policies in their career advancement and finally to compare the findings between Finland and Sweden. As the topic is mostly subjective and the female leaders' perceptions need to be explored, this thesis is conducted as a qualitative study. The decision is based on the aim which is to get an in-depth understanding and to catch and utilize non-numeric data such as verbal descriptions, whereas the quantitative design only considers numeric data such as figures (Cooper & Schindler, 2014). Additionally, the research and studies of the glass ceiling and the factors affecting females career development have been mostly scrutinized by quantitative methods in the previous literature (e.g. Hoobler, Wayne & Lemmon, 2009; Schuh, Hernandez Bark, Van Quaquebeke, Hossiep, Frieg & Dick, 2014).

The qualitative research method allows to interpret objects more freely within their natural context and therefore interpret the topic in conditions of the importance what human interaction brings to it (Cooper & Schindler, 2014). By observing individual female leaders in their natural environment, the aim is to explore and find, more honest and transparent perceptions about the barriers and facilitating factors. The interest is in

personal experiences which cannot be captured easily in a quantitative study. Furthermore, in a qualitative study, the information and underlying aspects that get transferred via the language can be also taken into consideration and therefore the qualitative research design is more applicable to this research than the quantitative one (Cooper & Schindler, 2014). In order to achieve this, throughout the interview's authors have tried to create an environment of trust to secure enough information exchange between the research participants and the authors.

Furthermore, when dealing with sensitive information participants may not be willing to answer questions truthfully, as the questions might intrude their privacy or potentially embarrass them. Therefore, a qualitative approach could be regarded as suitable for these kinds of issues, since qualitative research approach allows the researchers to get closer to the participants and get access to sensitive information (Easterby-Smith, et. al., 2015). The authors believe with this method they can get an in-depth understanding of the perceptions and answer the research questions. In addition, the decision to conduct qualitative research is partly based on circumstances that authors can easily adapt themselves to the research. The topic of female leaders' advancement is involving the authors' position as future female leaders and therefore it is facile to engage with the field, which is essential for qualitative research. However, throughout the research process, it has been aimed to be aware of how the various elements of the authors' identities have possibly become significant and therefore reflexivity has been aimed to incorporate into the research practices. It is impossible to remain outside the research, but the possible effects of the authors' perspective have been continuously observed and negotiated (Easterby-Smith, et. al., 2015). After all, the possible effects were minor, as both authors are still at the beginning of their career and freshly graduating from the university. Also, neither of the authors has children, and therefore, the familiarity of maternity leave or parental leave policies from their own experience is zero. Hence the effects of the authors' perspective on research are negligible.

3.4 Data collection

The data collection of this thesis has been done by qualitative interviews. The qualitative interviewing has been selected as a method for this study as it reinforces the underlying aim of this empirical research. King (as cited in Easterby-Smith, et. al., 2015, p. 391)

explains that the main aim of qualitative interviewing is to gain an understanding from the respondent's perspective, which includes not only what their viewpoint is but also why they hold this particular viewpoint. Besides primary data, secondary data have been collected mainly focusing on differences between Finland and Sweden.

Sampling

Participants for data collection was selected from Finland and Sweden. The decision to focus only on Finland and Sweden is based on the authors' experiences living in both countries and based on the knowledge about societal and cultural differences between Finland and Sweden. Moreover, the generalized perspective of gender equality across the Nordic countries desired to be questioned. Also, Finland and Sweden were selected because of convenience, as the authors were based in both countries during the data collection. In total, the number of interviews was 12, an equal number in both countries. The interviews were conducted together by both authors and in this way, it was possible to the other author to observe and make notes while the other author was in charge of interviewing. In the end, the observer asked all the questions that have been arisen from the ongoing discussion. Only one interview was conducted only by one author but in order to make sure that both authors are aware of what has been discussed, the interview was transcribed by the absent author.

Sampling was done by applying a convenience sampling strategy as well as snowball sampling strategy. The sampling started with the LinkedIn post while both authors posted an announcement to their profile to let their network to know that interviewees are needed (Appendix 1). The announcement was posted both in Finnish and in Swedish in order to meet all the potential interviewees. In Sweden, access to participants was limited due to the lack of authors' network. Therefore, besides LinkedIn announcement, authors used Google to find female managers in Sweden and contacted them straight via email. Furthermore, authors contacted female networks such as PWN Stockholm, 17 Nätverket and WCN (Women's Career Network) which yielded more interviewees from Sweden. In order to meet the needed number of interviewees, the snowball sampling strategy has been applied in Sweden.

Besides gender, the criteria of interviewees consist of the country based, as the effect of societal factors were looked more closely and therefore it was crucial that the participants were native or lived in the country for a long time. The aim was to interview native Finnish and Swedish female leaders, but one of the preliminary interviewees was originally from another country but has lived in Sweden for more than 8 years. The rest 11 of the participants were native Finnish or Swedish. Furthermore, as the purpose was to investigate women who are at the top of their career, the target was primarily women at director level. However, this was not strictly determined in the first LinkedIn announcement in order to reach as much as attention as well as contacts from potential interviewees. Moreover, the authors did not see the necessity to define the field of working of the participants and therefore the aim was to interview women from various fields. By interviewing female leaders from different backgrounds with different level of education and work experience, the impacts of the society were captured more comprehensively. Yet the industries were all related to business administration and participants were working in the private sector. In total, 10 women from the director level were interviewed and the rest 2 of the participants included in this research were middle managers due to the challenging accessibility to reach managers from the director level. The average age of the interviewees was 47 years. Basic information of all the interviewees is illustrated in Table 1.

Participant	The field of working	Position	Education level	Age	Approximate experience of managerial position (years)	Children (Yes/No)	Country
1	Recruitment	CEO	No academic education	36	10	Yes	Sweden
2	Banking	Head of Bank X	Master's Degree	54	23	Yes	Sweden
3	Transpor-tation	Head of Project Management	Bachelor's degree	39	8	Yes	Sweden
4	IT	Managing Director	Bachelor's degree	49	13	Yes	Sweden

5	IT	Product Marketing Manager	Master's degree	53	15	Yes	Sweden
6	Banking	Vice President /Strategic Partner Digital Banking	Master's Degree	54	20	Yes	Finland
7	Insurance	Insurance Service Director	Master's Degree	59	12	Yes	Finland
8	Retail	Project Manager	Bachelor's degree	28	3	No	Finland
9	Media	Deputy CEO	Bachelor's Degree	42	8	Yes	Sweden
10	Retail	Department Store Director	Master's Degree	34	4	No	Finland
11	Banking	First Vice President	Master's Degree	60	30	Yes	Finland
12	Charity	Marketing Director	No academic education	59	30	Yes	Finland

Table 1. Basic information of the interview participants

Interview structure

8 out of 12 interviewees was met face-to-face and the rest of the interviews was conducted on Skype. Especially in Sweden, it was challenging to find participants based in Jönköping and therefore in some cases, a Skype interview was a more convenient alternative for all sides. Most of the face-to-face interviewees were met at their workplace and the interview was held in the conference room. When meeting at the workplace was not possible, the interviewee was met at a public coffee place. Despite different meeting places, all the interviews were confidential and relaxed coffee table discussions giving a comprehensive view of the interviewee's perceptions. Similarly, confidentiality was guaranteed when some of the interviews were held on Skype. Authors acknowledged that the interviews held in the public coffee places might have an impact on the discussion as there might be people passing by the table or someone sitting nearby. However, the interviews were held at the time when the coffee places were not busy, and the place was

chosen by considering these difficulties. The approximate length of an interview was 50 minutes.

The interviews have been conducted as semi-structured interviews aiming to give a higher degree of confidentiality and allowing interviewees to be more personal in nature that the non-verbal clues can be captured (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). The interview guide followed the themes of the literature review (Appendix 2). This ensured that all the topics have been covered and the sub-question of this study has been answered. However, the interview guide gave only a direction to the interviews and it was not followed strictly. Only the most important questions were ensured to be asked and the order of the guide was not necessarily followed. The interviews were rather discussions and probing were all the time used letting the interviewee feel that the authors listened to her. For example, the authors used to say during the interviews "That is interesting, can you tell more about that" or "How did you feel in that situation?" etc. Secondary questions arising from the discussion have been also allowed. The interviews in Sweden were conducted in English and in Finland, the language that was used in the interviews was Finnish. Finnish was used as an interview language as it was the native language for all parties and allowed the situation to become a rather natural discussion than rigid interview excluding important insights. In Sweden, the interviews were conducted in English as it was a natural way to communicate due to the lack of common native language. This resulted in some difficulties among some Swedish interviewees to express themselves thoroughly and therefore the authors were helping by providing words in order for interviewees to finish their sentences. Despite the lack of common native language in Sweden, the interview questions were rather open questions, and the discussion was simple enough that the interviewees were able to tell about their perceptions. Lastly, all the interviews have been ethically considered and recorded with the permission of the interviewee. These ethical considerations are discussed later in the methodological framework.

All the 12 interviews have been recorded and transcribed. As the interviews in Finland were conducted in Finnish, but the language of this thesis is English, translating all the data into English was necessary in order to analyze the data equally with the data collected from Sweden. The interviews conducted in Finland were translated into English while transcribing the interviews. The transcribing process was time-consuming, but the authors

experienced that it facilitates data analysis. Finally, both authors verified that all the transcriptions match with the recordings and the translations give a true impression of the interviews.

Secondary data

As a complement, and to gain a more comprehensive picture of the differences between the selected countries, secondary data was collected from previous researches, news and articles to strengthen the analysis. This way the authors could get a better understanding and provide insight into the research problem. Acknowledging multiple sources of data provided a good foundation for the construct validity criterion to be upheld. The data from the secondary sources have been presented in the empirical findings and considered together with the primary data when analyzing the differences.

3.5 Data analysis

In order to get an in-depth acquaintance with the data collected through the audio recordings of the semi-structured interviews, the audio files were first transcribed, and the transcriptions were then repeatedly read and scrutinized in association with the written notes that accompanied the original interviews. The data have been analyzed by following the methods of grounded analysis without the use of software tools. Grounded analysis fits well to this constructionist research as it tends to be holistic and open to new discoveries by deriving theory from data. Also, the meaning of data fragments in the specific context was aimed to understand and as a grounded analysis requires, researchers have been engaged with the cultural and historical dimension of the data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015).

The analysis started with the familiarization and reflection of the data. The authors read through all the transcriptions and highlighted important parts and this way created the first open codes for the analysis. After this, the open codes were added to Excel spreadsheet and connections emerging between comparable traits appearing in different interviewees' answers were discovered. The codes emerged from the interviews were added to different columns taking into consideration whether the code was from an interview conducted in Finland or Sweden. After this, the data was divided into different categories by using different colors, which were then followed by the next step, called

axial coding where the authors search for relationships between the categories of data based on their dimensions and properties. This work, through which provisional classifications were repeatedly being revised and refined, allowed to organize the data corpus into well-defined final analysis state. The final stage of coding is selective coding which refers to the emergence of the core themes of the empirical data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The core themes that emerged from the collected data were personal attributes, supportive relationships, (un)conscious biases and societal influence. The grounded analysis procedure is illustrated in the appendix (see Appendix 3 and 4). For example, personal attributes represent categories like motivation, confidence, bad conscious, modesty, insecurity and age. These categories have been identified based on the codes gathered from the primary data.

Finally, the analysis of the differences in perceptions between Finnish and Swedish female leaders was completed after the process of coding and categorizing. The fact that the codes were organized in separate columns between the interviews facilitated the process when analyzing the differences between Finland and Sweden. It was facile to see from which interview the codes were arising, whether from Finland or Sweden. Moreover, the writing process of the empirical findings clarified the process of identifying the differences. Capturing citations from the interviews facilitated the authors to move in the right direction to the conclusion of the different perceptions between the two countries. More closely the differences between the perceptions were analyzed by taking into consideration different themes, for example, age, and by applying Excel spreadsheet, the colored answers on this particular theme were demonstrated on one sheet in order to compare the answers. In the end, the results were analyzed with the reflection on secondary data.

3.6 Research quality

To be able to ensure the overall quality of the research work, the authors have followed the four quality criteria for qualitative research suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

To establish the credibility of the research, making sure that the findings describe accordingly the actual data that were collected, a useful tool was provided by peer

debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The authors received feedback from the supervisor which helped to question the methods in use, detecting biases and exploring the full implications of the different steps of the inquiry. In addition to this, the inquiry was also subjected to authors own constant checking: the data gathered in the research and their interpretations were shared and discussed between the authors to make sure that the research results gave an adequate description of the female manager's perceptions. If there were any misunderstandings, authors contacted the interviewee for additional questions (Lincoln & Guba,1985).

As transferability is meant to measure to what extent the outcome of specific qualitative research work may be reproduced (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Therefore, a detailed description of the research strategy was provided, together with a full account of data collection and analysis processes, to allow other researchers to judge about the possible use of the results of this work to explore their own inquiry fields. Furthermore, background information from the studied female leaders was provided.

To avoid possible threats to the dependability of the research and grant full consistency between the research findings and the data collected, the detailed explanation of each step of this research has been provided. Starting from the creation of research design, followed by the reasons to use the chosen methodology and the data collection process. The overall dependability of the research was furthermore enhanced by the constant peer examination granted by the supervisor, whose assistance helped to consider research data and findings with the necessary objective poise throughout the different steps of the research.

The confirmability quality criterion, implying that research findings should be neutral and avoid being shaped by the researchers' personal bias. In order to avoid this, written notes were read through at the end of every interview and the authors constantly self-reflect about involuntary shortcomings and limitations for example by incorporating reflexivity into the research practices. Moreover, the confirmability of saturation was ensured. Towards the end of the interviews, the interviewees were repeating similar answers than mentioned before. According to Bowen (2008), data saturation is reached when the data has reached the point of diminishing returns. After the last interviews, nothing new was being added and therefore the data saturation was reached in this study.

3.7 Ethical considerations

As the data collection in this research included interviews with people, there is a potential to abuse the research by taking advantage of these participants. If the participants feel they are being mistreated or misrepresented, the consequence could lead to participants not wanting to participate in further studies (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Therefore, mishandling of the research could result in unethical research which could affect the quality of the research and cause serious damage to the researchers. During the research design, concerns about the participants' rights that need to be respected have been taken into consideration (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015).

The research has been designed so that the participants' right, safety and privacy are protected. The highest level of objectivity in discussions and analyzes was maintained throughout the research. Also, the anonymity has been guaranteed for the participants during all the phases of the process (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). For example, when meeting the interviewee in a public place, it was guaranteed that during the interview the name of the interviewee or the company was not mentioned. The participation for the interviews was voluntary and the participants were fully informed about the context. The interviews were held under the participants' conditions, respecting the interviewees' wishes about the meeting place and time.

Moreover, the research and its communication in relation to the research have been done with honesty and transparency. To assure the confidentiality in this study, the participants of the interviews were informed about the audio-recording and the purpose of the interview by sending an email a day before the interview. It has been highlighted that only the authors will have access to the data and the data is only used for the purpose of this thesis. The recordings were stored on the cloud service of the university, and no names of interviewees were mentioned during the recording or in the name of the file. Moreover, when dismantling the data, the names of the interviewees and the companies were excluded from the transcriptions this way the anonymity of the participants was ensured.

4. Empirical findings

This chapter provides a presentation of the empirical findings from 12 in-depth interviews and the collected secondary data. Together with the chosen literature review, it serves as a foundation for the analysis and discussion of the thesis. In order to answer the research question: What kind of barriers and facilitating factors female leaders perceive in gender-equal welfare states when reaching the top of their career, grounded analysis was used as a method for analyzing the data. Four themes emerged from the data analysis: personal attributes, supportive relationships, (un)conscious biases and societal influence (see Appendix 3). The resulted in barriers and facilitating factors are divided by these themes and discussed separately between Finland and Sweden. Additional quotes to strengthen the findings can be found in Appendix 5.

4.1 Findings from Finland

4.1.1 Personal attributes

The interviews with Finnish female leaders resulted that personal attributes are important when advancing in a career. It came evident, that all the interviewed Finnish women have an internal motivation to success Also, the interviews resulted that it is crucial to be brave, curious and confident and to accept challenges that are offered. For example, accepting the challenges like participant 6 and 11 did. Both jumped outside of their comfort zone and that resulted in success in the long run.

> *"I had the courage to jump off from a stable job and take a challenge. This happened 20 years ago when we established bank X to here in Finland. Risk taking. You shouldn't be afraid of challenges. That teaches you the most." (Participant 11, FIN)*

> *"Maybe that I got right away on the right track, that IT company, that I went there even though I knew nothing under my thirties, but I went there to show my ideas. And of course, that I am curious, and I am brave enough to go to the biggest boss to show my idea." (Participant 6, FIN)*

When asking the Finnish women about challenges they have faced during their career most of the women did not seem to have experienced any major struggles. Direct questions related to insecurity or modesty were not asked. However, participant 11 and 10 noted that sometimes they had felt insecure which they experienced being a challenge.

> *"I would say there have been many different kinds of challenges. I think it's been about my own insecurities and when I was working in the bank, I knew I could do more but there are no opportunities from the organizational side like budget and etc. which hinders you to get the full potential from yourself and from the work. Also, how do you share your time between work and your family." (Participant 11, FIN)*

> *"If they would have put me in this position (current position as a manager) back then, of course, I would have been insecure but for everything, you grow during the journey if you start from a suitable position. In all positions I have been, there has been the pain and thoughts like "I cannot do this, am I good enough, can I take all the people's emotions into consideration" and it has been not dependant on age." (Participant 10, FIN)*

The questions regarding children and time spent home brought up the level of motivation of the interviewed Finnish managers. It came evident that the time at home was not stimulating enough and they wanted to return to work as soon as possible. In addition, some of the Finnish interviewees mentioned, like participant 6 did, that when they are at work, they are at work and not think about what is happening at home meanwhile, and vice versa.

> *"I just wanted to go to work earlier because I knew I can put my kids to daycare and I just wanted to start working." (Participant 7, FIN)*

> *"I just felt like I want to go that my work is really important to me. And because I knew everything was handled at home." (Participant 12, FIN)*
> *"So, when I am at home, I am at home and when I am at work, I am at work and then I focus completely on that 100%." (Participant 6, FIN)*

Although these women have been extremely motivated and worked hard and made the decision to not stay long at home with children, some of them have still felt guilty about it. Among the Finnish interviewed women, 4 out of 6 have children, and participants 6 and 11 have shown some regrets when it comes to the time when the kids were little.

> *"When I think about that now, I think that maybe it would have been a good idea to slow down a bit, because I was traveling a lot, also abroad and of course, it impacts on my relationship negatively. So, I traveled a lot, I was a week away and sometimes two and children were little, so it was really tough for my husband." (Participant 6, FIN)*

> *"I think financially at that time because mortgage due dates were upcoming shortly. At that time there was no such system as now. But I think if I should regret something in life, it would be that I didn't stay longer home." (Participant 11, FIN)*

Lastly, the impact of age on women's career progress has been discovered and several impacts of age have been brought up during the interviews in Finland. There was no agreeing conclusion about the impact of age, and many different perspectives prevailed in the interviews. For example, participant 7 believed that age brings authority whereas participant 11 believed that if you want to change your career you must do it before you are 50. The common opinion was that age does not matter too much, rather how you do your job.

> *"I think when you gain life experience, you start to understand people better and how it affects their behavior. I think I have a wider perspective on things now compared when I was younger. For example, when there are goals and rules from the company, I learn to understand that things happen and not everything always goes as planned. Also, I feel like I gained more authority as sometimes my employees come to me and say that for example, customers did not believe something could I confirm it." (Participant 7, FIN)*

> *"But I don't believe that my age has been a problem if we think about credibility."* (Participant 10, FIN)

> *"I think if you want to change your employer or career you must do it before you are 50 otherwise there are a lot fewer opportunities."* (Participant 11, FIN)

4.1.2 Supportive relationships

It came evident based on all the interviews that without certain supportive relationships the career advancement would have been more challenging, even impossible. Several different supporters were mentioned, and what is obvious, is that the women who are married mentioned their spouse to be one of the most important supporters during their career. Besides spouse, the support from family and parents have been mentioned, as participant 7 experienced that the courage and support to proceed in a career have always come from home. Supportive and encouraging parents that do not put pressure on their daughters' life have been mentioned to play an important role when advancing in a career.

> *"I would say our relationship is equal and we both do things and that has been the starting point."* (Participant 6, FIN)

> *"It has always been in our family that we are encouraged to study and succeed in life. And then of course, my friends and some of my female colleagues inside this company."* (Participant 7, FIN)

Besides the crucial support from the spouse and family, other supportive relationships consist of relationships arising from networks, such as mentors and role models. The importance of networks has been highlighted in all the interviews in Finland. It is obvious that it is important to get to know people and create a network that consists of people from different companies and directions, not only people from your own field, like participant 10 noted. What has been underlined, however, is that the network should be built by doing your job well, as then getting to know people is easier. After all, only the participant 12 had experience about mentoring as she had a communication psychologist mentoring her.

"I have always done all that I do well. And also, that I have got to know people in the company and not only the ones that are in the same "bubble" but also outside." (Participant 10, FIN)

"I feel like the other department directors were mentoring me and helping to succeed in the role. And also, the other colleague who is running the other department with me he is still helping and encouraging me. Also, the organization is providing training. "(Participant 7, FIN)

"I had an amazing communication psychologist whom I used to work, and she was mentoring me after leaving the work she was couching me. Also, my colleague was a mentor to me while working with him." (Participant 12, FIN)

All the professional advancement happens inside of the organization and regardless of how well the life outside of work has been organized the final step will be done at work. Therefore, the support gotten from the organization, more closely from the manager, came evident when interviewing Finnish women who have been advancing in their career. For participant 10, the biggest step happened in the early stage of her career when she got into a trainee program organized by the company she still works. She believed that without this program she would not have proceeded in her career so smoothly. Further, it has been highlighted that supportive and encouraging managers play an extremely important role. For example, participants 7 and 8 believed that those managers that have believed in them and challenged them to take further steps in their career has supported and facilitated their professional advancement.

"I got into trainee program which is meant to be university students so through that I have advanced in my career." (Participant 10, FIN)

"When I was working in the bank as a summer employee, already than my supervisor (man) encourage me and help me to get my first job after graduation. Also, when I worked in the courthouse, the managers of mine were men and they were always encouraging me to progress and gave me

the impression that I actually do my work well. And also, when I worked in the bank as a permanent employee, I felt like my manager trusted me and gave me more responsibilities. And specifically, in this company when I moved to the insurance department my manager encouraged me and help me to move forward in my career." (Participant 7, FIN)

"...that's the biggest benefit I have had, the trust I have gotten. For example, if I say that I am not sure what should I do, the answer is yes you know, just go for it. That has been a really big thing to my growth." (Participant 8, FIN)

4.1.3 (Un)conscious biases

The interviews resulted that there are various unconscious as well as conscious biases that have affected the interviewed Finnish female leader's career progress. Stereotyping arises one of the main hindering topics from the interviews in Finland. For example. women are perceived by others as caring figures, which affect how others see them as a leader. Also, there are certain expectations of how women should behave. Like participant 7 reflected that people changed temporarily the way, they saw her after coming back from the maternity leave.

"I feel like coming back from maternity leave for a moment it felt like people just saw me a mother of 2 children, not a respectful lawyer." (Participant 7, FIN)

Also discriminating attitudes mainly from male colleagues such as women experience that they are addressed as a "girl" or that people automatically assume leaders to be male. Especially participant 7 experienced this kind of behavior from the male colleagues when she started her career, and many of them did not take her seriously and rather saw her as a "little girl" than a respected lawyer. Participant 6 highlighted that she has been discriminated in a hiring process because of being a too powerful person and the male manager had experienced her as a threat.

"Then I actually got a permanent position there, I think the bank world was something different that I was actually shocked. Like now I had to think that I am a "GIRL". For some people, it was OK but for some older men and some my age women, it was a bit difficult to see me as a lawyer as I was so young and a woman. It was hard for them to perceive me. And for example, I had some difficult task, I don't think they didn't think that my answers would be wrong but rather, that they would have to ask help from a "little girl" like me." (Participant 7, FIN)

"Yes, I asked (feedback), and they say that I am too executive to that position but how I understood that feedback is that I was too powerful, and that manager did not want to have this kind of powerful person to that position. So I was too dominative as a person to his team." (Participant 6, FIN)

"So, I am a red type (DiSC profile) as a person so that has been discovered quite aggressive and like decisive, so it has been perceived like aggressive and not fitting to a woman." (Participant 6, FIN)

Many of the participants agree that men are more direct and more confident compared to women and that the behavior towards women comes from old habits. Preconceptions about the roles of woman and man seem to be rooted in the attitudes of people overall. Participant 6, for example, noted that woman tend to be satisfied to lower level jobs more easily and that woman needs to prove themselves more to break the preconceptions. Participant 11 highlighted that a lot of the preconceptions about the roles of men and women have changed in Finland but that there are still some old attitudes below the surface.

"And if I think about the women and men I know, I would say that women will be satisfied much easier like "Well okay I will stay here dealing with these papers", so women do not require anything else to themselves, or anything more challenging or interesting assignments. So, it depends a lot about yourself. And also, how you express yourself. So maybe there is this

kind of traps to women, that there are these stereotypes that are inside of men's heads, like categorizing women. So maybe it requires that you prove the men wrong, and be brave enough to be powerful." (Participant 6, FIN)

"Yes, I think so, it has changed a lot. But there are still some old attitudes below the surface." (Participant 11, FIN)

However, many of the participants also noted that even though there is a lot of preconceptions, the key to the success of women is more about their personality and not about being a woman or a man. When interviewing the women, a lot of them seemed to have a hard time distinguishing whether the differences have been because of the gender or just purely because of the person.

"I could generalize that yes (male and female leaders' differences), but maybe it still depends more on personality." (Participant 10, FIN)

"I have never felt that I could not go into a situation because I am a woman, usually it has been an advantage. If you are the only woman in that group, you get much more attention." (Participant 6, FIN)

Some of the participants also reported experiences about in-group favoritism. For example, some of the interviewed women have faced a situation that man has chosen a man in a recruiting situation or that men have networks that exclude women or that they don't fit in as a female manager. Participant 6 noted that females have to be much better in order to survive in the corporate world and that men don't actively see women as potential candidates compared to male peers. Participants 6 also revealed to experience discrimination in the recruitment process. Participant 8 noted as in Finland all the industries are quite small, easily men tend to create their own networks trough sports for example.

"No, and I can say straight away no. Women have to be much better, unfortunately. Also, the in-group favoritism impact that, men prefer men, and they do not even see that they could choose a woman. So, they do not

actively see women as potential candidates. So, women have to do a lot of work that they would be seen as potential candidates." (Participant 6, FIN)

"In Finland, all the industries are quite small, and easily men create their own networks within sports and through that, they meet other people in a really relaxed environment, and they have the chance to get to know people and create their networks. I think women do not have similar things, and also when men are supporting each other, women are more like enemies for each other and they see other as a threat and I still got one." (Participant 8, FIN)

Interestingly, when interviewing the women what was the motivation to become a leader and how did they manage to do it, some of the women mentioned that they have been lucky to get the position where they are today.

"I don't think so, because from a very early age I progressed fast to management positions. I haven't had time to think about I've been just pushing forward, with clear goals and tasks. I think I've been really lucky." (Participant 12, FIN)

"Women can study but still I think it's so much about the people whom you meet and face in working life and also how much luck you have." (Participant 7, FIN)

4.1.4 Societal influence

A lot of the discussion also led to more specific societal factors that females have experienced to help or slow them down through their career. Many of the women stated that stereotypes and assumptions coming from the social culture or norms in Finland has affected them. Participant 8 noted that it is very expectational that other people would be happy about one's success. She thinks that in Finland the success is still something that should not be generally highlighted. Similarly, participant 10 highlighted for example if you are an entrepreneur, people tend to judge you more hostile if you are successful. According to her, the Finnish society is not encouraging.

"No. I think it is very expectational if there are people that you can approach and go to say that "I am so proud of myself and I succeeded, I was so good at this" and the answer would be "Yay, you go!" It is more like saying nothing and then talking behind the back and wondering how she managed like this. So, I think in Finland the success is still something that will take something away from another." (Participant 8, FIN)

"The one who is happy, it should be hidden. So, you should be quiet and say, "Yes I'm ok", even though you would be the best one in your field." (Participant 8, FIN)

"Similar when it comes to entrepreneurship, it is almost like criminality if you are successful with your own work. Also, the society, it is not that encouraging among working, for example, if you are in your thirties and you are not sure what to do in your life, you can still live a normal life just being at home and spending time with your friends." (Participant 10, FIN)

"I think the Finnish government has a well-organized social system. But I feel like in Finland the atmosphere is a bit like that the proper mom stays home for 2 years compared to Sweden where they are supported to get back to work earlier and the opportunity to work part-time is offered." (Participant 7, SWE)

Additionally, according to some of the participants, they have experienced that there are certain social norms or expectations for women. Therefore, they have faced moralization and preconceptions about their choices. Participant 7 noted that she has experienced moralization from coming back from maternity leave early and would like to change that. Also, women should be more encouraged to get back to work and that doing part-time work would be more accepted and supported in Finland. In addition, participant 8 highlighted that there are certain preconceptions that women are the caretakers also within society.

"Maybe the moralization of females getting back early to work is something I would like to change. The bad conscious of mothers, they should not feel bad or bad mother because they go pursue their career." (Participant 7, FIN)

"But it is still like women should take care and to be a good mother and the home should be clean and everything, women have more pressure to be the hostess when friends visit and so." (Participant 8, FIN)

In turn, the participants highlighted that the overall atmosphere prevailing in society has an impact.

"On the one hand, people are encouraged to be successful, but on the other hand, nobody could succeed." (Participant 10, FIN)

All the participants in Finland experienced the welfare state system beneficial for their career development. The interviewed women did not feel like the long maternity leaves would encourage them to stay longer home, rather giving the opportunity to combine family and work more effectively. The welfare system has supported the women offering free education, long parental leaves, home care aid and other financial support. Participant 12 noted that she does not see any problems with the system, maybe it is the people who do not get how good it is. Participant 8 agreed that the financial support for her studies offered by the government has been beneficial for her career.

"And also, in Finland, things are really well. We have the opportunity for a good life; our political situation is good which creates good opportunities for women as well. I feel like Finnish people don't get it sometimes. I don't see any negative in this model." (Participant 12, FIN)

"Study leave, that is my thought to benefit from that at some point, all the money that we receive to be supported our studies. So those money supports play an important role if you have a situation in your life that you want to

study more or if you want to change your career or so, it is possible because of the financial support." (Participant 8, FIN)

In addition, when asking about the equal opportunities to advance in the highest management positions, none of the females answered it to be equal. According to the responses, it is easier for men to progress to these positions than for women.

"No, they don't have. I think women have to work more in order to proceed into the same position and also family impacts." (Participant 8, Finland)

"No, and I can say straight away no. Women must be much better, unfortunately. Also, the in-group favoritism impact that, men prefer men, and they do not even see that they could choose woman" (Participant 6, FIN)

4.2 Findings from Sweden

4.2.1   Personal attributes

The interviewed Swedish women described their personal traits and reflected their personality with their career advancement. Based on the interviews with Swedish women, it is obvious that personal attributes play an important role when advancing in a career. It came evident that almost all the Swedish women who have advanced in their career have been goal oriented and they have been wanted to be part of decisions. In addition, participant 3 believed that women can have as a good career than men with necessary steps. She mentioned that in order to proceed it is necessary to be ambitious and show what you want.

"I am very goal oriented, focusing on the results and opportunities. I ask feedback in order to develop as a leader." (Participant 4, SWE)

"I wanted to be part of making decisions, that's my motivation." (Participant 5, SWE)

"I think females can have as a good career as men if you take the necessary steps. Meaning that you be proactive showing what you want in your career. So be ambitious, ask propositions, say that you want to be in this role, so you got to ask. Pick your boss, negotiate your salary, move positions every 2-3 years. Move away from the setbacks, they are deniable, but you just have to face them and be resilient to get through them." (Participant 3, SWE)

Conversely, participants 2 and 9 did not have leadership positions as a goal. Participant 2 rejected the question when asked if she knew already when studying economics that one day, she will be a leader.

"No! I just pick a lot of different education and I just got that where I got in, so it was not a strategic choice, it was just something that felt fun." (Participant 2, SWE)

"I don't know if it has been the goal in such to be in a leadership position. It's actually really interesting specifically as I'm working in such role now. Now there is more focus of mine to develop my leadership skills. I don't know if I had a goal to be a leader or go to the position but it's kind of naturally progressed as I got more and more responsibilities and experience as I was supported and trained and it kind of more and less happened that way." (Participant 9, SWE)

These above-mentioned personal attributes are crucial, as some of the interviewed Swedish women felt that modesty and insecurity might hinder women's career progress. For example, participant 3 mentioned that women settle with the given tasks easier than men. In addition, participant 4 gives an example when it was difficult to believe in herself.

"A lot of females are just happy with their given role/salary and they don't ask more. As compared to men who will break the boundaries more and break the rules. For example, if a man and a woman are reaching out for a new position the man will ask 15% more of the salary. If HR would say that

we can only do 5-10% and woman tends to want to follow the rules so she will accept this. Where the man is like nope, I want 15% and will insist on this salary." (Participant 3, SWE)

"And then they asked me if I could be interim Managing Director and I was very surprised because I have never really... well I did consider that position for myself actually. And then I accepted it. And then I told them actually that well I can do this as an interim solution, but I think you need to try to find someone, you need to start the recruitment process to find the real Managing Director. And they were like what do you mean by real Managing Director? (Laugh). Well, you know someone with the experience to handle this company. And then the chairman was like we think that you have the experience and I was very surprised, and I was like I don't think so. And then he said that I want you to considered at least and I did and after two weeks I called him and said I want to be part of the recruitment process and I think the reason why I did not accept the position first was that I was scared because I really did not know what was expected from me and how my colleagues would react and all the challenges coming from the customers." (Participant 4, SWE)

However, despite insecurities and modesty, all the interviewed Swedish women were highly motivated to work, and the time at home proves that. The Swedish women felt that time at home with children was not stimulating. In fact, the time spent in the maternity leave was relatively shorter than the offered time by the system. Besides motivation, also the pressure to go back to work and secure the position appeared in the interviews with Swedish women. For example, participant 3 wanted to secure her position.

"I wanted to go back to work as soon as possible because I felt like really, not stimulated like I must do something." (Participant 1, SWE)

"I think, that I choose not to stay home. I was not very happy just staying at home." (Participant 4, SWE)

"No there was no problem. It was about me because I wanted to go to work earlier. I enjoy being at work." (Participant 9, SWE)

"I wanted to secure my positions and I feel like if you stay away too long you kind of get forgotten so by coming back earlier, I can secure the position." (Participant 3, SWE)

In addition, some of the interviewed Swedish women have felt some bad conscious at the time children were little. For example, participant 2 felt that she was always in the wrong place. Instead of feeling guilty, participant 4 was more like a realist, as she realized that it is not possible to do everything.

"Of course, I have suffered about bad conscious because you feel that you are in the wrong place." (Participant 2, SWE)

"..so it was fine when she (baby) was with her daddy. So, it was like no problem for me to be at work. But if he (husband) could not have been able to stay with her (baby) and I would have had to take her to daycare, I would have felt guiltier. He was fantastic staying at home with her. I think it worked out very well." (Participant 1, SWE)

"I think you can't do everything; you can't be the perfect mother and making a career like this. It does not work." (Participant 4, SWE)

At some point in the interviews, Swedish women were asked how the age has impacted their career. Various experiences have been brought up. For example, participant 3 felt that age brings confidence and respect from others. Participant 2 experienced being young as an advantage, as then you have the "freedom" to choose how to be. Also, the negative impacts of being young have been brought up, as people's minor respect towards you and "little girl" syndrome, as participants 1 and 2 have experienced.

"And definitely now when being a bit older you have a lot more respect. Also, when you had some challenges in your career, I feel like I'm more

confident and stronger and I made it through and I'm a director anyways, so I made it. So, I feel like this experience gives you confidence."
(Participant 3, SWE)

"I can also say something about being young and female leader, it is what I said before, you have the freedom because you don't fit in the role, you don't look like the other bosses you are not male, you are younger than the others, then you have the freedom to speak your mind, you are not that threatful. But in my age when I speak my mind, that is stronger that is more threatful and that I can see." (Participant 2, SWE)

"Yeah, I can, but it was a little bit more difficult before, like 10 years ago, but I think that can be about myself too because today I'm more confident, and yeah, if they think I'm a little girl and then they can go and.... Yeah, I have no problem with that today but before I was thinking that "Aaw I'm just a girl." (Participant 1, SWE)

"When you are younger it can be "a little girl" syndrome." (Participant 2, SWE)

4.2.2 Supportive relationships

The interviewed Swedish highlighted the importance of their husband when it comes to their career development. It came evident, that all the Swedish women who were married truly believed that without their husband raising children and advancing in a career would have been different. All of the married female leaders highlighted that the support they have gotten from their spouse has been crucial. Also, equality has been mentioned several times as an important value in the relationship. Participant 2 thought that it is not possible to be a manager and take full responsibility for the family.

"..maybe it would be different without my husband." (Participant 1, SWE)

"It was important that my husband was willing to take the full responsibility, together of course but in an equal way. It is not possible to

be a manager and to take full responsibility for the family." (Participant 2, SWE)

"So, I work full time and also my husband works full time we basically combine everything 50/50 all the responsibilities at home." (Participant 3, SWE)

"First, of course, my husband has taken a lot of responsibility for the family during this time. I took more responsibility at the beginning when our children were young, but he has taken a lot later on. Perhaps, especially in the first years when everything was new to me and that worked well with his job. I think that both can't do a great career at the same time or when you have to buy a lot of services like cleaning etc." (Participant 4, SWE)

Through the interviews with Swedish female leaders, it came evident that networks are important when advancing in a career. Moreover, certain role models, such as managers or colleagues have also been mentioned, but what has an actual impact on career advancement, is the existence of a mentor. What can be said, is that all the Swedish female leaders who have had a mentor at some point in their career believed that the mentor has helped them when advancing in their career. Participant 2 has had both female and male mentor, and she has been a mentor herself too. When she was asked if she thinks those mentors have improved her career development, she highlighted that a mentor that fits the personality matters more than a strategically chosen mentor. Based on the interviews, there is no clear conclusion about whether the help of a mentor is significant or not, as some of the interviewed women believed as participant 5 did, that personal coach has better insights regarding the career than a mentor.

"I got a mentor which was the general manager (male) and he gave me one of the best advice in my career." (Participant 3, SWE)

"I think it's good for your education at least, I didn't choose mentors that were strategically good for me. I chose mentors that were good for me as a person, and I should say I have made those choices the whole time in my

career, I haven't had the hurry to be someone, or to be something, that's not important to me, to me it is important to develop, and you can develop that way or that way , it doesn't matter to me, so I have chosen good leaders, good persons that can give me as a person development." (Participant 2, SWE)

"Yes I have and that time the mentor recruited me actually, but I usually work with personal coaches cause actually having a mentor, there is always a kind of trade of having a mentor, because you kind of want that to promote you that's why I usually prefer to have a personal coach that can help to work with my issues without having any external mentions, like tell others later on so for me I prefer personal coach they are usually really good with psychology and help you and improve you as a person. Because improve you as a person and understand your reactions you actually become a better leader as well." (Participant 5, SWE)

Both participant 1 and 9 believed that getting jobs through the networks has been helpful. Also, the benefit from networks can be something related to personal development. The participant 3 has a good example as she is part of the professional women network and through that, she has gathered for example some support and tips to salary negotiations.

"I think it has been very important, I think if you have good relations, both private and business, then it's a huge benefit. And if you are a person that people like, they will give you some job or opportunities because I have never gotten a job without relations." (Participant 1, SWE)
"Through my friends and contacts getting jobs through that has been helpful." (Participant 9, SWE)

"As you found us, I am the president of the professional women network and now co-president as I'm in the maternity leave. And that's an international female network. 10-15 years ago, established in Stockholm. It has definitely been beneficial because we have different speakers in our events and then you get value out of the event. These events are almost like

training in your personal life as then you can bring back professionally.
Also, you get access to the network so you can share experiences. For me,
it's important how I want to impact others is to give them a tool, advice,
guidance and how to manage your career. It also helps in salary
negotiations to share tips with others." (Participant 3, SWE)

Also, the support gotten from the managers has been brought up during the interviews with the Swedish female leaders. Participant 1 experienced her manager like a mentor, and she believed that the encouragement gotten from him has been crucial in her career advancement.

"Yes, I think he was like my mentor or something, he was one of the owners
in the other company, and he helped me so much in the daily life, he had
confidence in me. I think I'm not the person asking for more responsibility
and I'm not like hungry on that way I'm not like "give it to me" I'm more
like "I don't know if I can do it" but he was always like "you can do it!" I
think it's the person why I'm here today." (Participant 1, SWE)

"First, that I had a manager who actually believed me and challenged me
to take this position where I am." (Participant 4, SWE)

4.2.3   (Un)conscious biases

Some of the females in Sweden noted that there are attitudes from other people and also their own that have affected their career progress. For example, participant 2 noted that there is a stereotype of women that they take care and participant 3 agrees that you need to show the interest having a career after having children, otherwise people will see you as a mother, not professional.

"..as a woman to take care of people, male leaders don't have that
assumption, they don't need to take care of the people they work with."
(Participant 2, SWE)

> *"After having child, you definitely have to show that you are still interested in having a career. I think if you do that people will just forget you have children, if you don't, you will be seen as a mother and it does affect females more than the male." (Participant 3, SWE)*

Some of the females also experienced that they have been perceived negatively if they have for example strongly expressed their opinions. For example, participant 2 noted that it is okay to say that man is a strong leader but for a woman is not so positive. Furthermore, participant 1 noted that it is not that nice when women make more money than men.

> *"I am strong but not in a positive way, but male that is saying the same is strong leader, that's positive but women shouldn't be that." (Participant 2, SWE)*

> *"It's not so nice when women make more money than men." (Participant 1, SWE)*

Interestingly, only one participant in Sweden clearly had experienced ingroup favoritism. Only participant 1 said that it is common for men especially when you are hiring someone, you look at someone who reminds you about yourself.

> *"When you are hiring someone, you look someone that reminds you about yourself." (Participant 1, SWE)*

> *"Also, there is this thing that men tend to help other men. Another man at the top will then give 15% to another man." (Participant 1, SWE)*

In addition, some of the females experienced discrimination that they were treated in a different way that male colleagues, like participant 2 noted that especially older men tend to treat you differently because that is how they treat their wives and daughters. Participant 5 noted that she has seen male leaders using all the dominant techniques to get their will and this way tries to diminish her roles as being a woman. Furthermore, participant 3 revealed that her old boss was not paying accordingly to a woman.

> *"I think they treat me same way sometimes is more like...usually it's older men and how they treat their wife or their daughters that way."* (Participant 2, SWE)

> *"I can see male leaders using all the dominant techniques you can find out there. At my level they listened high up, so they definitely tried to diminish me and my role as being a woman."* (Participant 5, SWE)

> *"(old male boss) has a reputation that he will bring the woman into the team, but he would never pay them, and this is also what I have seen elsewhere. And I also later found out he was offering the same amount to a male manager in a lower position than me."* (Participant 3, SWE)

Also, the own attitudes against the women's career revealed an interesting fact. Most of the women experienced that they have had the luck to be where they are today or that it has been a coincidence to get the positions they are today.

> *"It was actually a little bit of a coincidence that I became a managing director."* (Participant 4, SWE)

> *"I have the luck to be seen quite early."* (Participant 2, SWE)

In addition, the participants in Sweden thought that women are more insecure and men more ruthless and risk takers. However, a lot of women could not make a clear differentiation between personality and gender.

> *"Because I think women can or men have less tendency to be insecure. Now I am really generalizing. I think I communicate better with males because I communicate more direct and I think men are more direct."* (Participant 9, SWE)

"Male leaders are more ruthless more risk takers, I appreciate this risk-taking as they are faster making decisions and take risks. Females tend to be more conservative and they need to understand the situation more deeply before making the decision so that is also good in a different situation." (Participant 3, SWE)

4.2.4 Societal influence

When discussing more specifically about the societal influence or societal norms in Sweden, many of the women seem to have similar thoughts about it. In Sweden, the participant 1, for example, noted that you should not show off too much because it is not considered societally accepted.

"I shouldn't be too much show off because they won't like it." (Participant 1, SWE)

"It's not that nice to make money here in Sweden, you don't want to be like show off because you don't drive with expensive cars because it's not that nice." (Participant 1, SWE)

"I still remember when I was applying for jobs in my thirties, we did not have kids at that time, it didn't matter what I said, in 75 % of the cases I was losing the job to a man. Because of the expectations, it's really hard to break those barriers and in Sweden, I think today it's 80-90 % of the parental leave is taken by the mother." (Participant 5, SWE)

However, despite modest culture, most of the women felt like they have been encouraged to succeed and take chances. Overall it seems that the atmosphere in Sweden is positive about females to progress in their country. Participant 1 noted that as a woman in Sweden you have all the opportunities to be a businesswoman. Participant 3 noted that in Sweden when a couple starts a family, people do not assume that it is only the female's responsibility to stay home. Similarly, participant 4 agrees that there are no expectations for women to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the family.

"I think that as a woman you have all opportunities to be a businesswoman. We have a fair country....and if you really want to do it. Yeah. In Sweden you have opportunities." (Participant 1, SWE)

"I love it like when a couple starts a family here in Sweden it is not just assumed that the female would be gone a year." (Participant 3, SWE)

"In Sweden actually, there is no expectation for women to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the family and stay home." (Participant 4, SWE)

When asking about the welfare system overall and how do the women perceive it; most of the women think it is a great system and has helped them a lot to focus on their career. Participant 9, for example, notes that in Sweden the is a major focus on the work-life balance and that the parental system is great. Participant 9 appreciated the time off Swedish systems gives females to have kids. However, participant 5 noted an interesting opinion as she has been working abroad. Compared to other countries like Spain and Netherland where women don't have as generous systems as in Sweden, women tend to go back to work earlier. In addition, she noted that staying longer on maternity leave might have a negative impact on their career.

"I think Sweden has a lot more focus on work-life balance and the whole thing with parental leave is just amazing." (Participant 9, SWE)

"The fact that Sweden gives you the opportunity to take time off, it's really valuable. Specifically, for females to take a break take care of the kids and get back." (Participant 3, SWE)

"I have been in working in Europe as well, Spain, Netherlands and so far, in those countries they usually go for 3 months (maternity leave) so they have much less of that when women will be gone because they won't. They either leave the position, or they are home for 3-4 months. So, I have been having my own theory about that, this fantastic opportunity to parental

leave in Nordic countries can have a negative impact on female careers as they can safely stay home longer." (Participant 5, SWE)

Despite the good atmosphere in Sweden, when asking about the advancement opportunities overall to highest positions the answers were rather contrasting on their earlier responses. All the interviewed women in Sweden noted that it is still easier for men to get those positions that it is for women. However, the interviewed women could not give clear reasoning for their beliefs. Participant 4 believed it is mostly because women are too insecure.

"No, I don't think so. Because in general women are not as confident as they should be. So, when opportunities reveal themselves, I don't think they see themselves in the position as the man do. Men are more like - okay I can't do this or this, but it does not matter as I'm so good otherwise." (Participant 4, SWE)

4.3 Findings from the secondary data

In order to get a more comprehensive picture of the differences in perceptions between the selected countries, secondary data was collected from previous researches, theses and articles to strengthen the analysis.

Nordic countries are often generalized across the world like Finland and Sweden to be similar because of similar statistics (EIGE, 2015). These countries are geographically close, the culture and customs have similar features, and moving from one country to the other is easy. However, there are differences between the countries, that can have an impact on the various aspect of life including female leadership. For example, Finland has faced many wars while Sweden has survived independently without taking part in wars. When Finland started to build their country again the leadership models learned from the wartime followed to business life (Kauhanen, 2015). Hence, wars have created a different starting point for women in labor. Furthermore, the recent study shows that Finnish and Swedish women have a different position at work. Sweden occupies the second position on the index, while Finland's rank is 9 (PWC, 2019). This study is an average of various measures that reflects female economic empowerment including the

earning, female unemployment rate, the ability of women to access employment opportunities and job security. This signals that females in Finland are in a weaker position against the work market in Finland than the Swedish women in Sweden.

Another important difference between these two countries is the length and reimbursement of parental leave. The length of parental leave is often considered to be the most important indicator of whether the welfare state is family friendly. Generally, these family-friendly policies are established to reduce gender inequality, but as it has been brought up, it appears at times to increase gender inequality (Mandel & Semyonov, 2006). Parental leave in Sweden is 480 working days, and 420 of these days are paid at a rate of 80 % up to limitations (The Global Gender Gap Report, 2018). Parental leave can be taken up until a child turns 8 years old (Sweden, 2019). This parental leave combines maternity and paternity leave and days can be shared equally between the parents. If the parents do so, there is a tax relief that is paid to parents who share their paid parental leave equally. It aims to increase gender equality between the parents but also on the labor market (Europal, 2009). In Finland, the system varies, as the maternity leave is 105 days and paternity leave is only 54 days. After the compensative leaves, parents can choose who stays home and the additional parental leave is 158 days with fixed allowance covered by the Finnish government (Kela, 2019).

As the parental leave can be shared equally in Sweden it is possible for women to return work sooner. In Finland, the maternity leave is relatively longer than the paternity leave, and therefore the main responsibility is given to the mother. According to Kambur & Pärnänen (2017), it is more common in Sweden for mothers to return to work earlier after giving birth than in Finland. Thus, Finnish mothers' work attendance rate is lower compared to Swedish mothers at the early age of the child. Another conclusion is that there is a distinct difference in working among mothers and fathers between the countries. Finnish mothers go less to work than Swedish mothers and correspondingly, Finnish fathers are more at work than Swedish fathers when children are little. The third point is that in Sweden, both mothers and fathers work more part-time than in Finland. Particularly, Swedish fathers appear to have more time for their family when children are little (Kambur & Pärnänen, 2017). This is in line with research done by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health Centre, where Swedish fathers take more responsibility

for the childcare than Finnish fathers (Talouselämä, 2018). Thus, it seems that in Sweden it is easier to combine work and family as the responsibility of the child is more equally shared between the parents. The implication drawn from this is that these differences can have an impact on women's career development opportunities between Finland and Sweden.

There are also some distinct cultural differences in working life, for example, Finnish people values directness which is unusual in Sweden. Finns are more straightforward and are not afraid to voice their opinions, whereas Swedes are more averse to conflicts. (Finland relocation, 2016). Thus, it might affect the women to be more prone to raise their opinions as in Sweden which could hinder their career. On the other hand, according to the survey made by Finnish Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences students (Nisula, 2016), Finnish culture is more hierarchical, and people are more closed and antisocial as compared to Sweden where the people tend to be more social and open. Therefore, in Sweden, it might be easier to build connections and networks with people and help women to succeed in their career. Also, Swedish people are said to be more risk takers and self-confident than the Finns, which could also mean that Swedish women have the courage to seek leadership positions more often than Finnish women.

5. Analysis

Together with the empirical findings and the chosen literature, this chapter provides an analysis of the empirical observations that have been done. The analysis is divided into three sub-chapters in a line with the research questions of the study. First, barriers and facilitating factors have been analyzed with the reflection on the literature review. Lastly, the differences between Finland and Sweden have been analyzed in contrast to secondary data.

5.1 Barriers

When comparing the results from the empirical research with the theory on the subject, it came evident that females in Finland and Sweden are experiencing similar barriers as came across in the literature. The core takeaway from the interviews resulted that women in both countries have experienced in some measure challenges or barriers for their career development. Similarly, as mentioned in the literature, these women have experienced insecurities, preconceptions and stereotypes. Furthermore, the social norms and modesty in the culture in the Nordic countries have been challenging them. In contrast to the reviewed literature, the participants did not experience welfare state policies to hinder their success.

Personal attributes

The participants noted to experience sometimes insecurity and bad conscious. Specifically, they felt bad conscious about concentrating to work and not for their children. This is in the line with Ruderman et al. (2002) who stated that women who have children are constantly torn between managerial and personal roles, feeling guilty and stressed. Similarly, the participants had faced preconceptions from their workplace after coming back from the maternity leave that their colleagues see them now as mothers, not respectful leaders or employees. This might be due to the social norms which tend to ascribe care responsibilities such as childcare and eldercare roles to women (Ćorić, 2018). Also, as mentioned in the theoretical framework, this female care-taking role appears to influence managers perceptions of female employees. Women who have children, might not be perceived as well performing than their male colleagues or an as good fit to the

organization, as they cannot invest all their time towards work (Hoobler et al., 2009). The participants also revealed that they have experienced insecurities about their skills and competencies to succeed in a management position. However, all the interviewed women were able to concreate these obstacles by their persistence and motivation. Also, a lot of the females seemed to be modest about their achievements, which was research by Budworth and Mann (2010) that women tend under-represent their accomplishment to others, whereas men consistently self-promote their success. In addition, according to the women, the age has some minor hindering effects. In Sweden, one of the participants revealed to been treated as "little girl" when she was younger. One of the Finnish women said that when getting older, people don't see them as competent for a new innovative project, as the companies are looking for new fresh ideas and they might be too old for that. O'Neil & Bilimoria (2005) studied the career phases of women and they argue that personally when women are older, they tend to focus on a stable career rather than looking for new challenges.

Supportive relationships

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, women may face the prejudice of high family-work conflict easier than men in the same situation (Eagly, 2008; Furst & Reeves, 2008; Guillaume & Pochic 2009; Hoobler et al., 2009; Van Vianen & Fischer, 2002). According to Friedman & Greenhaus (as cited in Hoobler et al., 2009) women who are highly focused on their career are less likely to marry and less likely to have children. When interviewing the female participants, ten out of twelve women had children. Thus, in Finland and Sweden, it seems not to be a problem to have a family and to be successful at the same time. When asking about how the females arrange their work and family time – did they experience any conflicts, none of the participants recalled having major issues. Overall it seemed that in Finland and Sweden companies support women having children and as parental leaves can be divided between the parents, there seems not to be major prejudice against women.

Moreover, according to the literature, the limited access to networks is an existing problem within women's career advancement (Eagly, 2008). Glass and Cook (2015) and Boone, et al. (2013) state in their study that female leaders experience a lack of access to important social and professional networks. When the participants were asked if they have

ever felt exclusion – namely in-group favoritism, some of the women answered that they have. The lack of inclusion was more strongly emphasized in Finland. Especially in Finland some of the participants answered experiencing social exclusion as in Finland, the industries are quite small, so it is easy for men to tend to create their own networks trough sports for example.

(Un)conscious biases

As stated in the empirical findings, (un)conscious biases have an impact on female's success. Some of the interviewed females have experienced stereotyping. For example, the customers and colleagues questioning their profession or addressed as a "girl." Few of the participants also experienced commenting about how they should dress at work and how not to. Similarly, Forsythe, Drake and Cox (as cited in Eagly & Karau, 2002) noted that females experiences biases about their clothing more often than men. Additionally, in the theoretical framework, it was discussed that a common perception is that men are more likely to be seen in leadership roles, while women are viewed as supportive followers (Cooper Jackson, 2001; Van Vianen and Fischer, 2002). The findings in this research, however, resulted that only a few of the women recognized that there is such a difference between male and female. According to them, it is mostly about personality not about gender. Furthermore, the participants did not experience the masculine management culture being a problem in their countries. This is in contrast with the findings in the earlier research which strongly emphasizes the masculine management culture being one of the major barriers (e.g. Boone et al., 2013; Glass & Cook, 2015; Guillaume & Pochic, 2009; Hoobler et al., 2009; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008; Sools, Van Engen & Baerveldt, 2007; Van Vianen and Fischer, 2002). The reason behind this can be the fact that Finland and Sweden are gender-equal and thus, it is not generally accepted to have such culture in the organizations. Also, the "Think Manager, Think Male" (Sools et al., 2007; Schein, 2001; Van Vianen and Fischer, 2002) that was discussed in the theoretical framework does not seem to apply in the Nordic countries. This might be since Finland and Sweden, both have had female leaders in high positions (for example Finland had a female president) and therefore, this kind of stereotypes might not be as common.

Furthermore, the interviews revealed that some of the women have experienced being a woman rather beneficial for their career progress. Especially in male-dominated organizations, men felt that they could differentiate themselves and use their feminine traits as an advantage. This is in contrast to Kumra & Vinnicombe's (2008) study where they argued that especially in male-dominated organizations women are often excluded from the opportunities when reaching top management positions. Yet, some of the participants told that they have hesitated to apply for management positions as they thought they don't have the right skills or competencies. This provides evidence supporting the arguments made by Kulik (2000) who noted that women are less prone to see themselves as leaders or seek leadership roles. Schuh et al. (2014) distinguished people's expectations about successful leadership behavior which are strongly associated with attributes such as competitive, assertive and decisive, that are all traditionally related to men's characteristics. The participants seem to have in common similar characteristics, especially they all seem to be competitive. However, some of the participants answered to experience negative attitudes towards them if they express their opinions too strongly especially from the male colleagues. They were sometimes experienced as threatening. Heilman (2001) argue that female leaders tend to be judged as more hostile with characteristics such as devious, selfish and bitter than their male counterparts which are in line with the findings of this research.

Societal influence

Interestingly, when interviewing about the effects of welfare state policies, most of the females experienced that it did not have a negative impact on their career development. According to the interviewed women, they rather experienced welfare and family policies have supported them in their career. Thus, the societal structure in Finland and Sweden was not seen as a barrier for participants career progress.

However, when asking about the opportunities for women to achieve high management positions, none of the female's respondent it to be as easy for women as it is for men. Both in Finland and Sweden answered that even though the countries have good opportunities for women it is still hard to progress to the highest management positions. This seems to be in contrast with the fact that in an individual level the women felt that they have been able to advance in their career quite easily. But in some way, they still seem to

acknowledge that there is the glass ceiling for women in both countries. Additionally, it was interesting to notice that a lot of the females agreed that both in Finland and Sweden it is not socially accepted to highlight one's success and that they were experiencing some negativity about being so successful. This can be related to the modest culture of the Nordic countries and the social systems which underlines the equality of the people (Sanandaji, 2016).

5.2 Facilitating factors

The empirical findings showed that there are several factors that can have a facilitating effect on women's career advancement and these factors prevail both in Finland and in Sweden. However, there is no clear conclusion on how women should make progress in order to reach the top managerial position. Also, many of the interviewed women could not say if some certain difference was because of the gender or because of the personality. But what is obvious, is that personal attributes, supportive relationships and welfare state policies play an important role in women's career development.

Personal attributes

According to the empirical findings, the main factors that facilitate women when advancing in a career are personal attributes. It came evident that being brave and curious, as well as having the right attitude and taking risks, facilitate the process towards managerial positions. Especially being brave in the matter of accepting the offered challenges and getting the right assignments have been highlighted to be facilitating factor when advancing in a career. Also, when asking about the motivation, it came evident that all the interviewed women are extremely motivated towards their career, and they have always been consciously moving forward. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, Schuh et al. (2013) claimed that women have lower motivation for power. Conversely, according to this research, it seems that the interviewed women are motivated for power.

Personal attributes have been a topic of many discussions and many studies have agreed with the interviewees in this matter. For example, Robinson et al. (2009) found out that a good self-image and self-esteem are crucial to achieving management positions and to develop talent. O'Neil & Bilimoria (2005) have also discovered this in their study, and they found out that stimulating assignments can have a facilitating effect on women's

career direction. In order to get the stimulating assignments, however, it requires that the manager have trust in the employees, and this has been brought up frequently during the interviews. This empirical data supports the findings in the theory as O'Neil and Bilimoria (2005) suggest that managers are the best supporters, as they can encourage women's development by making sure that they have access to relevant opportunities. Indeed, Knorr (2005) have also found out organizational support to be one of the factors that contribute to women's career development.

In addition, based on the interviewed women and their answers, age does not have a huge impact on women's career. Some ideas appeared during the interviews how the age might impact, but in general, the interviewees thought that the environment and the performance impact more. Interestingly, however, most of the interviewees agreed that age brings positive aspects into the career. For example, the interviewees explained that they feel more confident when they get older, as working experience brings authority and confidentiality in the work. As mentioned in the analysis of barriers, the negative perspective for the age issue is that some of the interviewees argued that they have fewer opportunities when they get older. One of the interviewees mentioned that if you want to get a promotion, it should be gotten before you are 50 years old. However, the women in both countries thought that age does not have a substantial impact when advancing in a career, it is rather about the personality or own efforts. This is in line with the study conducted by Metz (2003) in Australia, as the results indicated that women's advancement is principally linked to some individual factors such as training and years of work experience.

Supportive relationships
Furthermore, while reflecting the empirical data with the existing literature, it is clear that certain supportive relationships have an impact too. When the interviewed women were asked about their networks, it came evident that all of them thought that networks are important in career advancement. Networking and supportive people were mentioned even though the question was not straight related to networks. This has been also discovered through academic literature. For example, Eagly (2008), Glass and Cook (2015) as well as Kumra and Vinnikombe (2008) have identified networking to be one of the ways to gather insider information and enhance in a career proactively. In contrast to

the theoretical framework, the interviewed women do not feel that their access to the networks would have been limited because of family responsibilities. This is interesting, as, for example, Eagly (2008) has discovered women to have very little time for networking because of family responsibilities. Similarly, Glass and Cook (2015) have stated that female leaders experience a lack of access to important social and professional networks. The limitation regarding the access of networks can be related to the in-group favoritism, which has been analyzed in the chapter of barriers.

Likewise, mentoring has been discussed during the interviews and negative experiences about interacting with mentors have not been brought up. Conversely, all the interviewed women who have had a mentor at some point during their career thought that the mentor they have had was helpful when it comes to the right direction in their career. This empirical data corresponds to the academic literature. Several studies carried out for example by Linehan and Walsh (2001), Mcdonald and Westphal (2013), O'Neil & Bilimoria (2005) and Tharenou (2001) agree to mentor to be helpful for women when advancing in a career. Also, according to the empirical findings, the gender of the mentor did not have an impact, as the interviewed women have had both female and male mentors. Similarly, Linehan and Walsh (2001) have studied that mentor's gender does not impact on the effectiveness of the mentoring. In contrast to the above-mentioned studies and to the empirical data, Metz (2003) argue that interpersonal factors, such as mentor support, are important but do not explain advancement.

Besides all the organizational support the interviewed women have gotten, it is evident the support women get outside of work life has also an impact on the career. All of the interviewed women who were married mentioned their husband when asked how they have reached the top of their career. The married women were unanimous regarding the fact that their spouses have supported them during their career. They highlighted that their relationship is equal, and the household tasks and family responsibilities have been divided equally. This has been also studied previously, and in fact, the importance of the spouse in women's careers has been identified in the academic literature. As it came evident in the literature review, Välimäki et al. (2009) found out that the spouse of the female manager has a significant effect on a career, and those women who receive support from their husbands are less likely to feel that their role in the family is threatened by

their career. Indeed, the support received from the husband has been crucial during the career of the interviewed women. All of the interviewed women who have children have spent relatively little time home with children especially when considering the possibilities for maternity leave in welfare states. The fact that the interviewed women returned to work relatively soon, has a clear link with the academic findings of women's career development. As mentioned already in this paper, Aisenbrey et al. (2009) have found out that in Sweden, women's career prospects are better if they return to paid work sooner rather than later. A similar academic study from Finland did not found.

(Un)conscious biases

In the analysis, the factors that are under (un)conscious biases are rather hindering. However, interestingly, according to the empirical data, the interviewed women brought up several times that they have been lucky as they have managed to get to the current position. Similarly, some of them have mentioned that they have been lucky as they have never applied for a job, rather they have been found by head hunter. In addition, some of the interviewed women felt that getting the job has been a coincidence. The conclusion drawn from this is that the interviewed women explained their success by saying they have been lucky rather than describing their talent or skills that might have helped them with the progress. The sense of "feeling lucky" came evident in interviews conducted both in Finland and in Sweden. This phenomenon can be related to low self-esteem or to impostor syndrome which effects on women's achievement have been studied since the 1970s. In fact, Clance and Imes (1978) have identified imposter syndrome as a female problem, as women tend to attribute their successes to temporary causes, such as luck or effort. Conversely, men are more likely to attribute their successes to the internal, stable factor of ability.

Societal influence

According to the interviewed women, they experienced that welfare and family policies, as well as tax policies, have helped them to advance in their career. Especially the support received during the parental leaves but also the system for students including financial support and guarantee for the loan have been mentioned. Especially in Finland, the financial support received from the government have been highlighted. These findings are in contrast with Sanandaji's (2018) claims that welfare states are intentionally holding

women back. The participants in this study repeatedly answered that the generous support from parental leaves to home care aid and excellent daycare systems has helped them to concentrate on work rather than to the family responsibilities. This way they also have had the opportunity to progress in their career. When asking about is the system is too generous, none of the participants agreed. The interviewed women did not experience the welfare system to be too tempting and going back to work was obvious. One of the interviewed women noted that in Nordic countries females have the choice to work or to stay home as it has been possible by the government and the systems. Women do not have to stay at home and the welfare state policies support their possibilities.

5.3 Differences between the perceptions in Finland and Sweden

Several barriers and facilitating factors in women's career development have been identified based on the interviews conducted in Finland and Sweden. As illustrated in the results, the interviews resulted in similar answers in both countries. The reason for that might be that traditional roles of men and women are very similar across Finland and Sweden which influences that findings are similar in some measures. However, in the analysis phases, some differences between the countries were identified.

The interviewed Swedish women signaled that the atmosphere in Sweden would be more encouraging when it comes to female leadership. Overall the interviewed Swedish women had a positive attitude and they believed that all the women have similar opportunities. These findings are in line with the secondary data and existing expectations about the Swedish culture. In both countries, however, the women believed that the reason why they have reached their current position was because of luck or coincidence. There were no differences in answers whether the women in Finland or Sweden would have mentioned 'the sense of feeling lucky' more frequently. Additionally, the answers about the impact of age slightly varied between Finland and Sweden. In Sweden the answers were mostly positive, believing that age brings positive things into life, whereas in Finland, the interviewed women thought more that age does not matter when advancing in a career. In the end, based on these answers, age can thus be facilitating factor as well as hindering. However, huge differences in how the age impacts cannot be determined between Finland and Sweden.

In Sweden, evidently, the role of the spouse was highlighted, especially when asking about being a mother and a manager. Also, the interviewed women in Sweden were at home with children relatively shorter than it would be possible in Sweden. The generous parental leave of 480 days (Sweden, 2019) was barely taken up. All of the Swedish women who have children returned back to work before than necessary. It came evident that time at home was not stimulating enough. In addition to that, spouses of few interviewed Swedish women also stayed at home at the time when the children were little and the mother in the family wanted to go back to work. This in line with the secondary data which states that in Sweden fathers spend more time with their children when they are little (Talouselämä, 2018). The explanation for that might be the tax relief, as the parents in Sweden benefit if the parental leave is shared equally (Europal, 2009). Indeed, equality as a value was highlighted several times during the interviews in Sweden.

In both countries, the interviewed women believed that welfare state policies have rather improving effect in their career. In contrast to Sweden, in Finland, the financial support received from the government have been highlighted several times during the interviews. The interviewed Finnish women could not identify any negative effects of the welfare state policies, as financial support such as compensated parental leave and home care aid has been crucial. In addition, in most of the cases, the maternity leave of 105 days and paternity leave of 54 days were taken up and the women returned back to work after the compensated leaves. Usually, in Finland, after the compensated leave, the children were taken to the daycare and not mother neither father stayed home with children.

Interestingly, Swedish women accounted to have a mentor which has helped them to get a better understanding of their strengths and guidance in their career. When asking about mentors in Finland, only one participant told that she has had a mentor at some point of her career. There is no clear explanation for this difference, however, the interviews revealed that it seems to be more common in Sweden to be part of mentoring programs and people are encouraged to get a mentor. In Finland maybe the overall attitude is that people should survive on their own and maybe people do not know where to look for help or even acknowledge that there is the option for mentoring available. In addition, as mentioned earlier in Finland, the participants reported experiencing in-group favoritism more than in Sweden. The in-group favoritism was not as highlighted as much as in the

previously researched literature, but Finnish women seem to experience it in some measure. The reason for this difference could be that Finnish culture might be a bit more traditional still than the Swedish. As revealed in the secondary data, women have a different position in the working life in Finland compared to Sweden (PWC, 2019). This study is an average of various measures that reflects female economic empowerment including the earning, female unemployment rate, the ability of women to access employment opportunities and job security. Thus, the results of this study also signal the fact that Finnish women might still be relatively weaker position in the labor market compared to neighbor Swedish counterparts.

Taken together, the collected data from Finland and Sweden suggest that the barriers can be diminished, and the glass ceiling can be shattered. Even if the interviewed women in both countries felt unanimous that women and men do not have equal opportunities to advance in their career, the women did not perceive the barriers as invincible in their career. The general opinion based on the interviews is that the glass ceiling does exist, but the interviewed women felt that they were able to break it or avoid it. Additionally, the research participants in both countries were able to mention several factors that have a facilitating effect on their career development. All of the women agreed that networks and mentor might be helpful when identifying own strengths and recourses, or when applying for a job. The difference between Finnish and Swedish female leaders is here that only one of the Finnish women have had a mentor at some point in their career, whereas several Swedish women have had a mentor. In addition, the organizational support and the support and trust received from the manager has been highlighted to be one of the biggest facilitators. These facilitating factors are in line with the previous research on the field. Lastly, the women felt that their spouses and family have played a big role in their career development but also, the support gotten from the government have been mentioned especially during the discussion about being a mother and a manager. The interviewed women perceived the welfare state policies supportive and only minor negative details were able to be recognized.

6. Conclusion

After having thoroughly investigated the empirical results and analyzed the data with the reflection of the theoretical framework, it is now possible to answer the research questions and fulfill the purpose of this study. In the following chapter, the conclusion in accordance with the research questions of this study is given.

The goal of this thesis was to explore the perceptions of female leaders in the Nordic welfare states about the barriers and facilitating factors that have affected their career. In addition, the purpose was to understand how Finnish and Swedish female leaders perceive the effects of the welfare state policies in their career advancement and finally to compare the findings between Finland and Sweden. For that purpose, twelve females' leaders, six from both countries were interviewed. The findings of these interviews allowed to get valuable insights about which kind of barriers and facilitating factors females face in Nordic countries, how have they overcome their challenges and how has the welfare system supported their success. Additionally, some slight differences between Finland and Sweden were able to recognize. The qualitative research method was used which allowed to interpret objects more freely within their natural context and get a more in-depth understanding. Moreover, the grounded analysis method was chosen to analyze the data as it fits well to this constructionist approach and is open to new discoveries. The theory was built from categories that are 'grounded' in the data and by doing this it was possible to understand more about rather the new phenomena about the hindering effects of gender-equal Nordic countries for women.

What kind of barriers and facilitating factors female leaders perceive in gender-equal Nordic countries when reaching the top of their career?

According to the results, there are several barriers and facilitating factors that have affected the career of female leaders. Interestingly, some of the barriers mentioned in the theoretical framework did not apply for the interviewed women. For example, in contrast to the literature, the welfare policies were perceived as a facilitating factor. Also, even females mentioned hindering factors, they did not experience that these have affected their career too much. Furthermore, the interviewed women in both countries experience

the topic challenging in the matter of giving "the right" answers. The challenges in answers were related to gender aspect as the women could not provide clear answers in certain questions. The females could not say for sure if the challenges they have faced during their career has happened because they are women or because they are a particular person. The implication of this research is that personal attributes play a bigger role than gender and thus are the main factor affecting women career development in the Nordic Countries. The main barriers and facilitating factors identified based on the interviews have been illustrated in Figure 2.
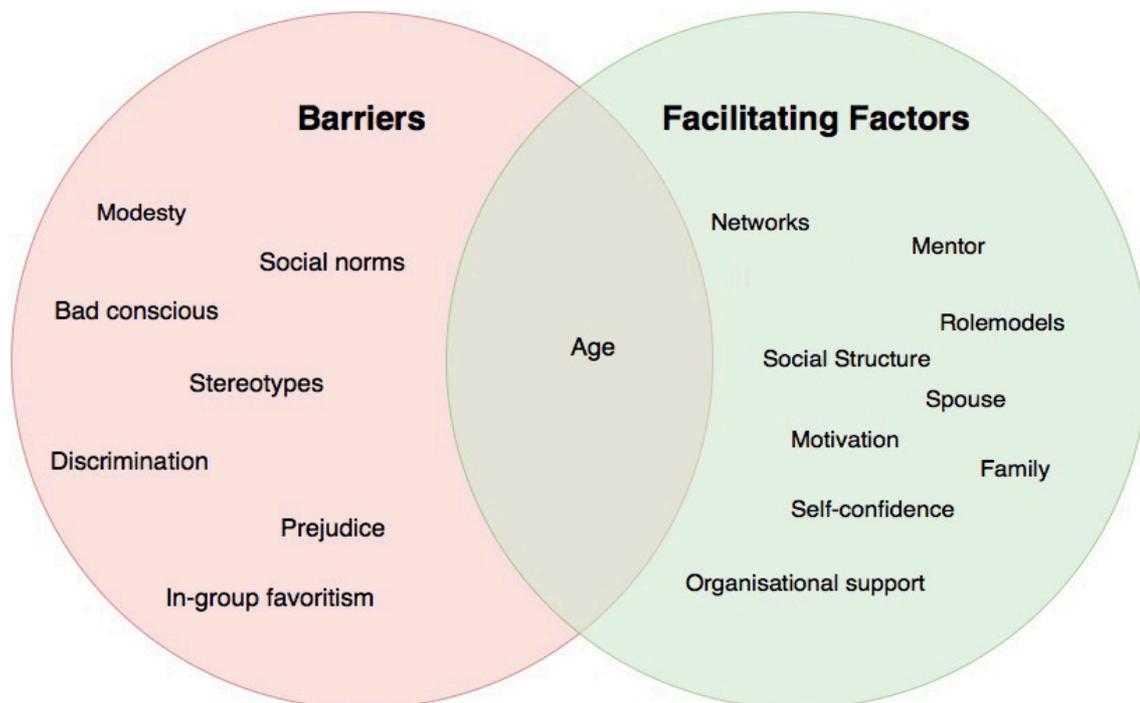

Figure 2. The main barriers and facilitating factors affecting women's careers identified based on the empirical data of this study

Are there differences in perceptions between Finnish and Swedish female leaders?
Contrary to the expectations, there were relatively few differences in perceptions between Finnish and Swedish female leaders identified in this study. When interviewing the women, similarities in the answers could be recognized. Overall in Sweden, it seemed that the equally shared parental leave has a positive impact on the women career as it is socially accepted that the father can stay at home as well. The role of spouse seemed to be crucial in Sweden, whereas in Finland the governmental financial support was underlined more often. In both countries, it is common that success should not be

highlighted, however it seemed that in Sweden the atmosphere of taking risks and women to progress in their career is more encouraged. In addition, Finnish women seemed to experience in-group favoritism more than Swedish women.

How Finnish and Swedish female leaders perceive the effect of the welfare state in their career advancement?

Interviews resulted that the women experienced that welfare and family policies, as well as tax policies, have helped them to advance in their career. Especially the support received during the parental leaves but also the system for students including financial support and guarantee for the loan have been mentioned. These findings are in contrast with Sanandaji's (2016) claims that welfare states are intentionally holding women back. The participants in this study repeatedly answered that the generous support from parental leaves to home care aid and excellent daycare systems has helped them to concentrate on work rather than to the family responsibilities. This way they also have had the opportunity to progress in their career.

Do Finnish and Swedish female leaders believe that men and women have similar opportunities to advance into the highest leadership positions in the Nordic countries?

According to the responses of the interviewed women, their perception is despite their success, women do not have the same opportunities. Both in Finland and Sweden, all of the interviewed women believed that getting a leadership position is not as easy for women than for men.

7. Discussion

The following final chapter provides a discussion for this study. The result of this study might be valuable for organizations in gender-equal countries and therefore implications of this study will be presented. Also, the limitations of this study and suggestions for future research will be presented.

This study focused on investigating women's perceptions of barriers and facilitating factors that they faced when reaching leadership positions in Nordic welfare states, Finland and Sweden. By using grounded analysis, responses were clustered into different categories and, the barriers and facilitating factors that the interviewed women perceived were identified. Moreover, the effect of welfare states policies and gender equalities hindering effect was questioned. In addition, as already illustrated in analysis, a comparison between Finland and Sweden were performed to measure whether there are differences in the perceptions of the female leaders between the countries. To the authors best knowledge, such comparison has never done, and it is important to acknowledge that there are differences within the countries. This study strengthens the assumption that Finland and Sweden are similar, but at the same time, it proves that there are differences, that affect the perceptions of the females.

As mentioned already in this paper, the research and studies of the glass ceiling and the factors affecting females career development have been mostly scrutinized by quantitative methods in the previous literature (e.g. Hoobler, Wayne & Lemmon, 2009; Schuh, Hernandez Bark, Van Quaquebeke, Hossiep, Frieg & Dick, 2014). As this study was conducted as a qualitative study, it allowed capturing female leader's authentic feelings whereas in a quantitative study it would have been a risk to miss the stories and examples that the women shared during the interviews. For example, factors such as age and the sense of feeling lucky could not be revealed in quantitative research. Moreover, as the approach to this study was abductive, it allowed the authors to go back and forth between the literature and interviews, as well as in the analysis process consistently reflect the findings with the existing literature. Without an abductive approach, the insights about the sense of feeling lucky and the relation to the impostor syndrome could not have been

found. Therefore, in total, this research gave a more in-depth understanding of the perception of barriers and facilitating factors in women's careers that prevail in gender-equal countries.

In addition, the four themes that have been identified based on the empirical data can be reflected with the initial model that has been applied in this paper and later excluded. The framework of Ragins and Sundstrom's (1989) consist of four levels of analyzes: individual, interpersonal, organizational and societal. Even though this framework has similar characteristics than the themes of personal attributes, supportive relationships, (un)conscious biases and societal influence, it excludes, for example, the support from family and spouse, that have been identified in this research as playing the key role as supporters in women's' careers. Also, the framework of Ragins and Sundstrom's (1989) did not provide a consistent model to this study as it excludes the possibilities of identification of other factors.

Furthermore, the public discussion about the glass ceiling and the factors that affect women's career advancement is largely discussed in different contexts. There is no general opinion about how women should advance in order to break the glass ceiling or be able to avoid it. However, a lot of research has been made and several factors affecting women's career advancement has been identified. Also, this study has identified several factors that improve women's career development but also some factors that might hinder progress. Anyhow, the interviewed women in both countries believed that the glass ceiling is possible to break or avoid by making the right choices and accepting the offered challenges. The general opinion based on this study was that a lot is about personal attributes. They also thought that femininity can be an advantage at work, and this might be linked to having the right attitude: not being afraid, rather brave and curious. This might be easy for the interviewed women to say so, as they have already experienced career development. Also, the average age of the interviewees was 47 years, which indicates that certain confidence has gathered within the age. This is in line with the empirical data, as some of the interviewed women believed that age brings confidence and authority. Yet there was no agreeing conclusion regarding the age, as some of the interviewees believed that getting older is rather negative as the opportunities are limited.

Therefore, based on this research, age can be seen both as a barrier and as a facilitating factor in female career development.

Interestingly, in Finland and Sweden, the participants did not experience the masculine management culture being a problem in their countries. This is in contrast with the findings in the earlier research which strongly emphasizes the masculine management being one of the biggest barriers. Similarly, in-group favoritism was not a big issue as the existing literature suggests. This was seen especially in Sweden where the female leaders have barely faced any situations where men would prefer men, whereas in Finland these kinds of situations were faced more often. The speculation drawn from this is that in Sweden the gender equality is more advanced than in Finland.

The clear link between gender equality and the answers of Swedish female leaders is on welfare state policies. Even though women in both countries experienced the welfare state policies rather improving their career development than hindering, the interviews in Sweden resulted in a more positive attitude towards the policies. Also, in Finland, the governmental support was underlined, and all the Finnish women were similarly rather thankful to the government. Still, however, the Finnish women underlined the financial support more than did the Swedish females. The reason behind this result might be in the parental leave policies. As it has been explained in this paper, the parental leave policies between these two Nordic countries varies. The parental leave policies in Sweden are advanced and thus fosters gender equality better. This is something Finland should adapt to in order to share the family responsibilities more equally between the parents and increase gender equality in the labor market. Likewise, it would facilitate to break the social expectations towards women that prevail still in the society in Finland. For example, the "good mother" and "women take care" norms or that women go to the parental leave rather than men, should be diminished.

In sum, the barriers and facilitating factors seems to be having similar features in this study and in the previously conducted studies. However, females seem to have better opportunities to progress in their career in the Nordic countries as the interviewed women stated in this research that it is mostly about the personality. In addition, the claimed effect of the welfare state paradox was challenged and at least based on this study, such

hindering effect does not apply for the women who have succeeded and who has the motivation to become a leader.

7.1 Managerial and societal implications

The result of this study can be valuable for organizations and societies in gender-equal countries. The findings are possible to be implemented in organizations as well as for societies to take the insights under consideration. Based on this research, particularly the organizations should pay attention to women's career development. Although the interviewed women thought that a lot of actions can be made by women themselves but still, however, the organizations have power when it comes to women advancing until the managerial positions. Therefore, organizations or managers could improve women's career advancement by providing stimulating assignments that keep women motivated. Also, promotions and raises in salary could improve motivation. In addition, as stated in the existing literature as well as in the empirical data in this study, managers should support and provide training for the females in order for females to develop themselves. This is in line with mentoring, that has mostly only positive outcomes in women's careers. Organizations should consider a mentoring program for the employees and meanwhile, the access to the networks should be uncontrolled. Managers should be aware of the inside networks that are created only among certain people or only among men. Those kinds of networks that exclude women or other people should be diminished by the managers of the organization.

Gender-equal countries should pay attention to pay gaps. The salaries are still relatively smaller in the women-dominated fields such as kindergartens, school and nursing (Tanhua, 2018). This pay gaps should be balanced by considering making changes in salaries in the public sector. One of the interviewed women mentioned that: "..what you can see in Sweden today, is that as soon there are more women than men, in a position, the salaries go down" (Participant 5, SWE). This is something that should be paid attention to. Similarly, parental leave policies have something that could be improved. Although the interviewed women unanimously agreed that the parental leave systems both in Finland and Sweden are well structured, and huge changes should not necessarily be made, something based on the analysis can be still highlighted. The fact that in Sweden, the parental leave can be divided equally between the parents and benefit from

that is something that varies from Finland's parental leave policies. In Finland, the biggest responsibility of the children is still on women. Although the interviewed women were able to avoid the glass ceiling, there are numerous other women trying to balance between the family responsibilities and advancing in a career. If the parental leave policies would be equally built also in Finland, it can be assumed that the glass ceiling would be easier avoided.

7.2 Limitations and suggestions for future research

This paper has discovered barriers and facilitating factors that female leaders perceive in Nordic welfare states, more specifically in Finland and in Sweden. The purpose of the study was to identify differences in perceptions between Finnish and Swedish female leaders. However, for future research, it would be important to extend this and include a larger variety of studies. For example, by conducting qualitative interviews in all Nordic countries, the perceptions of female leaders could be compared comprehensively and by doing that, conclusions about women's perceptions in all Nordic countries could be done. Also, a larger sample could be applied.

Secondly, this paper has explored only women who have reached the top and therefore the perceptions of women who did not manage to reach the top is missing. Future research could conduct a qualitative study about women who would have wanted to become a leader, but for some reason did not pursue in their career. For instance, the interviewees could be former management students with all resources and human capital to become leaders, and the research could focus on reasons what inhibited those women's advancement. Moreover, interviewing men instead of women could give interesting insights about what kind of perceptions men have about the glass ceiling.

Thirdly, as this study has focused on female leaders from various industries, there is a need for future research to pay attention to this matter. According to Metz (2003), the process of women's advancement in management may differ across industries. Therefore, a similar study could be conducted focusing on specific industry and see how the perceptions of the barriers and facilitating factors change in comparison to this study.

Lastly, interesting findings of the impostor syndrome could be studied more comprehensively in the context of gender-equal countries. The direction for such a study could be whether the women recognize it as a barrier in their career. Even though some studies about the impostor syndrome linked to female career development exist, clear evidence whether it is reinforcing the glass ceiling could not be found.

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Appendix 1: LinkedIn announcement

Hello woman! Are you at the top of your career? So are we shortly. We kindly ask you to help us to collect valuable data for our Master thesis. We are looking for Finnish and Swedish women, who are working in different leadership positions for an interview in Finland and Sweden. We want to hear how you have achieved the top of your career and what has influenced this.

What: 30 minutes confidential and anonymous interview about your career
Where: At a place that works for you the best (your workplace, coffee place nearby, Skype)
When: In March 2019 at a time that works for you the best

Please like or share this post as all the potential interviewees see this!

Thank you for your attention,

Maija Uusilehto & Johanna Mattila
Master's Degree students at Jönköping University

#femaleleadership #glassceiling #nordicparadox #jönköpinguniversity

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

General questions
1. Please introduce yourself shortly?
2. Tell about your current position. Do you have subordinates? If yes, how many?
3. In total, how long have you been in a management position?
4. What is your education?
5. How old are you?

Perception and stereotyping
6. What has been your motivation to become a leader?
7. What kind of barriers or challenges you have faced to get where you are now?
8. In your opinion, what is a good leader?
9. What kind of leader you are?

Networks and Mentoring
10. Who or what have been the most important supporters of your career? How?
11. What kind of benefit you have had from your networks?
12. Have you ever had a mentor? If yes, how s/he helped you when pursuing a career?
13. How your manager has supported your career?

Corporate climate
14. Describe how you see a female and a male leader. Do you see any differences?
15. Tell us examples if you have faced any discrimination in the recruitment process or at work in general.
16. Have you ever felt like you could not raise your opinions as the male colleagues could see you as a threat or in a negative way?
17. How do you think your age matters when pursuing a career?
18. Do you think in Finland/Sweden women and men have equal advancement opportunities to the highest corporate positions? What effects this?
19. Do you think the atmosphere in Finland/Sweden is encouraging women to progress in their career?

The impact of the family and society
20. How have you combined your work and free time? (family, hobbies, friends)
21. How do you think Finnish/Swedish welfare state support your possibilities to advance in your career?
22. How the household tasks have been divided in your family (children, pets, cleaning)
23. Do you feel that the duties at home reduce your time to be effective at work or to advance in your career?

24. Do you use household services such as cleaning, childcare etc.? Why/why not? Would you use such services more if it would cause less cost?

25. *Additional questions if the interviewee has children:*
    - *How motherhood has affected your career?*
    - *What does it take to be a mother and a manager?*
    - *What kind of challenges you have faced at work at the time you were pregnant or when your children were little?*
    - *What do you think about the maternity leave system?*
    - *How do you think the system should be changed?*

To conclude
26. Can you sum up, what has impacted your career the most?
27. What has been the biggest drivers or factors that have helped you to reach the position you are now?

Appendix 3: Grounded analysis – Codes to categories

Personal attributes

Confidence
Believing in the future
I am my own supporter
It's all about your own attitude and risk taking
Being brave and getting the right assignments
Interest in management tasks
Using all the advantages of being a woman
Will to do the best
Being curious and confident

Motivation
Time at home not stimulating
Internal drive
Interested in management tasks
Will to making decisions / effecting things, solve problems
Self-development
Will to do the best and to develop
Focus on the most important things
Being independent

Bad conscious
Feeling guilty about not staying home with kids
You can't have a career like this and be perfect mother

Modesty
Being settled to given role and salary
Being unsure about your own competencies
Being afraid what other people think about you

Insecurity
Challenges related to insecurities
Being unsure about your own competencies
Doubts about own credibility
Feel like the position is threatened
Feel like have to prove yourself
Being unable to affect things

Age
Getting older and learning to work with people better
The older women get, the tougher it gets to become a leader
Getting older and more confident
Younger women have bigger freedom to choose how to be
When I was younger, I needed to show myself more
"Little girl" syndrome
Age does not matter
When you are older you have less opportunities
I have not noticed any ageism
Age does not matter, rather personality

Supportive relationships

Role models
Early models play a big role
My family member was my role model
My manager was my role model

Mentor
My mentor (male) gave me one of the best advices in my career
I have an amazing communication psychologist who was mentoring me
Personal coach has helped me

Spouse
My spouse has supported me
We are equal with my spouse
My spouse accepted my career choice
My spouse stayed home with children more

Family
My mother pushed me both education and savings
My parents always supported me
My family supported me
My family encouraged me

Networks
Good relationships
My networks helped me
I have gotten to known people in the company
I chose mentors that were good for me as a person
I was working in the same duties and they asked me to work in
I have a bound with women
Networks are really important
My friends supported me

Organizational support
The organization provides training
My manager believes in me
My manager gives me freedom
The biggest benefit is the trust I have gotten
My manager believed in me and challenged me
My company has been flexible
Having the right assignments
My manager trusted in me
The atmosphere in the company is really supportive
My manager encouraged me
My first job open opportunities for me

Propositional attitudes

Stereotyping
"Women take care"
Taken as a girl not a woman
People assume leaders to be man
Men are more direct
Behavior towards women is rooted from habits
Men are more confident

Preconceptions
It's all about personality
Leadership style depends on personality
Men are risk takers and women more conservative
"Women cannot be manager and mother"
"Young women cannot be managers"
Stereotypes of women are inside of men's heads
People review men and women differently
Men and women lead differently
It's not nice when women earn more
Females shouldn't be strong
Men have more courage to apply new positions

In-group favoritism
People recruit like themselves
Men often pick men
Men tend to help other men
Feeling that you don't fit in as a woman
Men create their own networks which exclude women
Men prefer men

Discrimination
As a woman you have to deliver more
Women are underestimated
My opinions are not always listened
Men are dominative

Women are expected to look certain way
Female leader I worked with consciously isolated me
Females shouldn't be strong
Man, without experience was chosen over woman with more than 10 years of experience

Luck
Feeling lucky because of opportunities
Feeling that getting job was coincidence
Headhunted

Societal factors

Social norms
Assumptions comes from the social culture
Highlighting your own success is not accepted
Women are expected to behave certain way
No expectations towards women

Welfare state policies
The welfare systems help me
The systems are not encouraging for women who wants to work
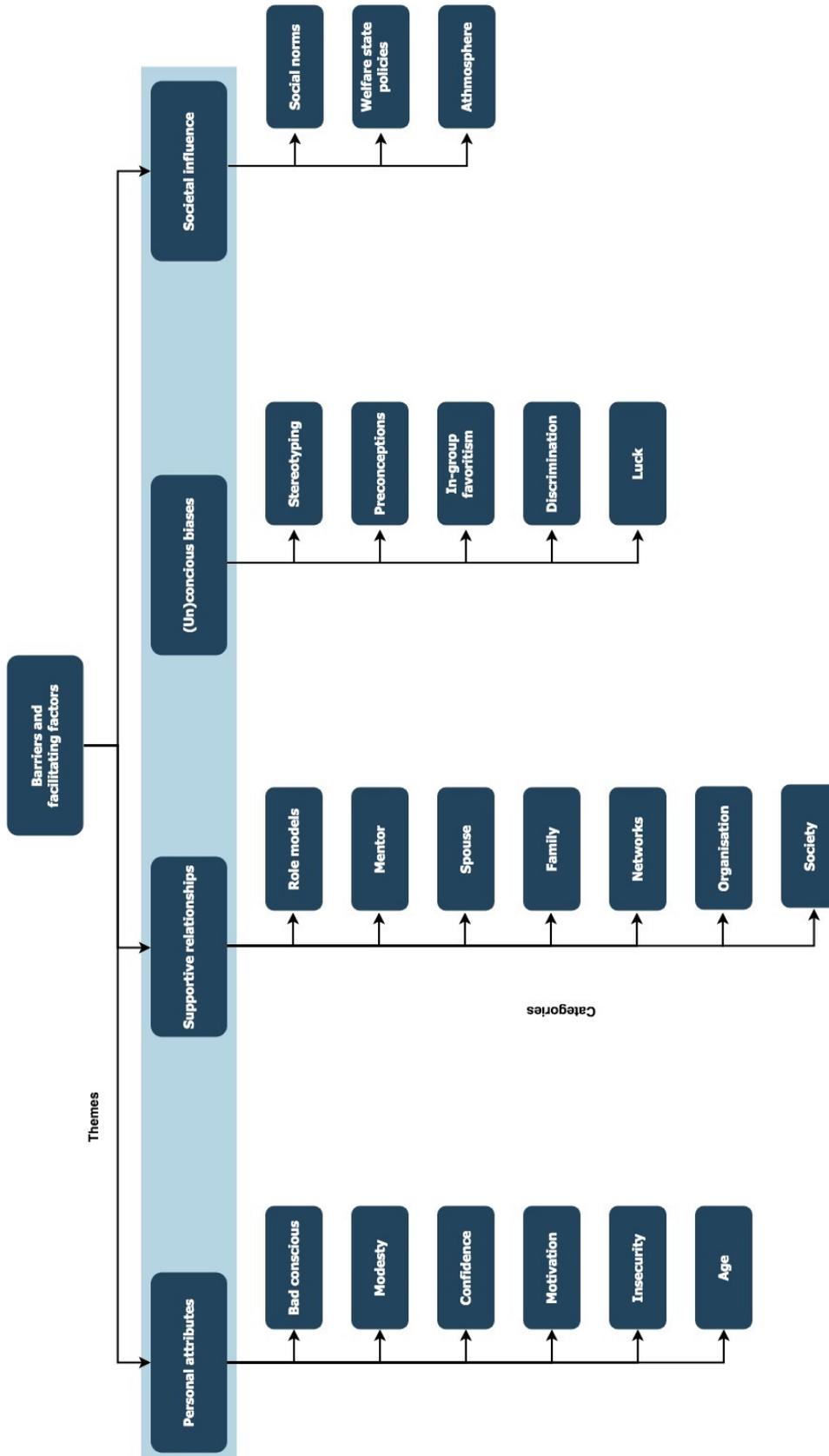The corporate hierarchy is flat

Atmosphere
Equal opportunities
Unequal opportunities
It is okay to work less
the atmosphere is encouraging
People focus on quality of life

Society
Society has supported me
Free education
Home care aid
Outside help

Appendix 4: Grounded analysis – Categories to themes

Appendix 5: Proof Quotes

Finland

Personal attributes
Confidence, Motivation

"My husband used to say that I always put my nose into things (laugh), so I'm extremely curious and I have always started to ask more and ask people to tell me more and through that gained the expertise to myself." (Participant 6, FIN)

"It is in my personality (women aren't risk takers how you have been), I have learned to be very independent." (Participant 6, FIN)

"..maybe I am not the housewife type, so I did not want to stay." (Participant 6, FIN)

"I think it is the internal drive that takes me forward." (Participant 6, FIN)

"Management tasks have always interested me." (Participant 7, FIN)

"Well, the daycare system is helpful. And that makes me a happy taxpayer." (Participant 7, FIN)

"I just wanted to go work earlier because I knew I can put my kids to daycare and I just wanted to start work." (Participant 7, FIN)

"(Motivation to become a leader) I can affect what I do, and I can make an impact on things what I do." (Participant 8, FIN)

"I want to have challenges and I want to try new things and learn new things and actually I have been asked in many positions, so I wasn't the one who was active and maybe it is about that other people see my energy and my decision-making skills." (Participant 10, FIN)

"I do not plan or aim to be CEO one day and I do not see myself as a failure if I do not aim that." (Participant 10, FIN)

"Everything is possible if you give your 100%." (Participant 11, FIN)

"So, I was just kind of thrown into the situation and then see how I managed. And from there slowly I build my own profession. I think it's good to have support but it's so much about your attitude and risk-taking, to be fearless." (Participant 11, FIN)

"I think I'm not afraid and I'm not afraid to fail." (Participant 12, FIN)

"You have to have the courage to do things that haven't done before and have the skills to sell them." (Participant 12, FIN)

Insecurity, bad conscious
"They said to me from work, that come back. Maybe if they would not say so powerfully that we need you." (Participant 6, FIN)

"I stress how I can deliver and be credible." (Participant 8, FIN)

"That I might be softer, not that strict when it comes that I have to say my opinion and it's something negative. So, I have noticed that it is difficult for me to say those things exactly how I think." (Participant 8, FIN)

"I think it's about that I don't want to hurt anyone or make anyone upset." (Participant 8, FIN)

"I have also had really difficult phases during my career, but they did not come outside, nothing like someone would not appreciate me, or someone would not support me, rather it comes inside of me like "I want to do something better" and how can I do my best." (Participant 10, FIN)

"Yeah I think there have been some. If you really see that something is going to some direction and then you feel like yeah this is wrong but basically there is nothing I can do, then I haven't even raised my opinion. It's because I felt like I couldn't affect them or change it." (Participant 11 FIN)

Age

"(age) maybe the environment where you are working impacts more and if they give you responsibility and do things. During this 20-year career, I've seen a situation, for example in the beginning in this IT company they gave me responsibility and when I presented 3 slides of PowerPoint and after that, they asked if I want to lead that. And then I breathe deeply and said yes (laugh). I did have no idea how can I do it, but then I just thought I'm brave enough I can do this." (Participant 6, FIN)

"But I think maybe step by step I have learned to give space and see a different kind of people and see their strengths and weaknesses and maybe when you get older you learn to deal with people more." (Participant 6, FIN)

"I think I have a wider perspective about thing now than compared when I was younger." (Participant 7, FIN)

"Also, I feel like I gained more authority." (Participant 7, FIN)

"In both companies, I have been working the age has not been the focus, more the results." (Participant 8, FIN)

"I don't know. I am still so young. I haven't seen if ageism exists." (Participant 10, FIN)

"But I don't believe that my age has been a problem if we think about the credibility." (Participant 10, FIN)

"I think if you want to change your employer or career you have to do before 50 otherwise there is lot less opportunities." (Participant 11, FIN)

"I think it effects when you are really young, but I think it's more how you do your work and how talented you are. So, when people get to know you than the age does not matter anymore." (Participant 11, FIN)

"I remember when I was younger and CEO and people when they asked my age I tried not to answer because I didn't want people to think my age. I was proud of my achievement, but I think there was some kind of underneath fear that people think I'm too young to do this and that's why I didn't tell my age in order to people to see me in the right light see me as a CEO. I Think when coming older I am more relaxed. You know you have a lot of experience and work history." (Participant 12, FIN)

Supportive relationships
Husband, family, other support

"It requires that your husband accept that career and also it requires a lot of skills to be well organized." (Participant 6, FIN)

"For our family, it was really good that we got this home care aid." (Participant 6, FIN)

"I got a manager who believed in me." (Participant 7, FIN)

"But I was lucky that my boss still saw the potential in me." (Participant 7, FIN)

"But it was never that I was forced to be anything that I wanted my family was always encouraging me to be whatever and if I also wanted to be a lawyer it was just fine. My parents always considered us as equal, so it was never questioned when I then wanted to be a lawyer that why I would want to study something so "manly." (Participant 7, FIN)

"My supervisor (man) encourage me and help me to get my first job after graduation." (Participant 7, FIN)

"I felt like my managers trusted me and gave me more responsibilities." (Participant 7, FIN)

"My husband has always supported me and never questioned." (Participant 7, FIN)

"Yes, quite equally, maybe I was taking bit more responsibility from the kids." (Participant 7, FIN)

"Family (parents and also my husband), colleagues and some of my supervisors." (Participant 7, FIN)

"My fiancé, and also my networks." (Participant 8, FIN)

"I can ask help and opinion how I should do certain things in my life or about salaries." (Participant 8, FIN)

"My manager gives me so much freedom and sometimes it feels more like a pair then manager." (Participant 8, FIN)

"(Who or what has supported you the most during your career?) My father." (Participant 10, FIN)

"(Has your manager supported you) Always. Very much. They have all supported me and I have also learned a lot from them, and they have always helped me." (Participant 10, FIN)

"I think it's from my family and also my good managers." (Participant 11, FIN)

"Yes, for sure, otherwise there has to be someone else like grandparents or so who would help." (Participant 11, FIN)

"Really equally between my husband." (Participant 11, FIN)

"I've been with my husband over 40 years we had 3 children and we only lived in few places. I think it has created a stable bottom to go so strong at my working life." (Participant 12, FIN)

"I think it's because my family with my husband has always been super equal, so I have never fight about who cleans who cooks and so on, It's the one who has time." (Participant 12, FIN)

Networks, mentor, role model
"Actually, they called me from here, so I was working with my colleague's wife, and they had a need here and they called me and invite in an interview. I was really suspicious in the beginning because I did not know anything about this field. But then I thought that if they believe in me, then I have to believe in me too." (Participant 8, FIN)

"Yes, the network impacted that I faced this position." (Participant 8, FIN)

"Well, to this position I ended up that I was already working in the same duties in that other department store where they asked me to work in." (Participant 10, FIN)

"I think already in an early age of girls it should be taught to them that these leadership positions are also for women. And something that you should reach." (Participant 11, FIN)

"I never applied for a job. I have always been headhunted." (Participant 12, FIN)

"If you do good, people will know you and your skills and yes, the networks are really important so that's how you get the jobs." (Participant 12, FIN)

"I have amazing communication psychologist whom I used to work, and she was mentoring me after leaving the work she was couching me." (Participant 12, FIN)

Un(conscious) biases
Stereotypes
"Thinking about that I cannot categorize based only on gender. Maybe it's more like a good leader and a bad leader." (Participant 6, FIN)

"But in the best scenario a good female leader can be people oriented, and like smiling and a person that people like and easy to work with. Maybe a good male leader is a good manager and a good leader to his employees, and this kind of alpha male, straightforward." (Participant 6, FIN)

"I think he thought I was an assistant or something." (Participant 7, FIN)

"Maybe this is also a stereotype, but I would say that men have more courage to apply and I also recognize this from myself like "I'm not sure if I can do this." What I have learned once is that if somebody trusts you so much that is ready to promote you, trust yourself too." (Participant 10, FIN)

"I would say, the female leaders I've been working have been straightforward and trustful. They have kept all the promises that have been made so I've have seen them in a really good light. I have not always been so sure with the men what kinds of games they are playing; it hasn't always been so easy to read them." (Participant 11, FIN)

Discrimination
"That might be surprising, but the most negative experience I have with a female manager, who consciously isolated me that I could not do anything." (Participant 6, FIN)

"Yes, I have. I don't know if it has been the reason that I am a woman. I have also one experience about recruitment that there was me and then one person that I knew well, and I knew he did not a day of experience about being a manager and he was 10 years younger than me. And I have more than 10 years of experience about being a manager. But I was not chosen to that position." (Participant 6, FIN)

"It was "ridiculous" that females at the branch, the tellers had a certain uniform (suit) provided by the bank how they needed to dress. Specifically, this uniform was meant for women. And I knew that the men lawyers in the bank were not using any bank uniform but their own suits. And then a manager in a high position inside the company came to me and asked why is it that you are using your own clothes and not the official uniform?" (Participant 7, FIN)

"No never, I think I have been always perceived well." (Participant 7, FIN)

"I would say that women have to prove themselves more and like make a point, and I have noticed that in my own leadership style too." (Participant 8, FIN)

"But I think it is still weird, that when a woman spends time with the family, it is a bad thing, but when a man spends some time with the family, it is a good thing." (Participant 8, FIN)

"(Have you ever faced this old-boy network or so?) YES, I have. And like this kind of global organization you really see country differences and discrimination from the different countries." (Participant 10, FIN)

"I have always got the same salary with men, but I also have given to men better salaries...I feel like women still have to do

more to get the position than men."
(Participant 12, FIN)

Luck
"But these opportunities have come to me."
(Participant 11, FIN)

"They actually came to me and asked if I wanted to. I think mostly I got all these positions that I've been headhunted, or someone has asked me." (Participant 11, FIN)

"I am really lucky; I have always got to do work that I really like." (Participant 12, FIN)

Societal influence
Society
"But I feel like it should be more courage from the maternity leave system that women would be more supported and encouraged to get back to work. And if I would need to work part-time it wouldn't look bad." (Participant 7, FIN)

"Mostly about studies. It is not true that everyone would have the same opportunities, even though it is free, but we all come from different backgrounds." (Participant 10, FIN)

"In Finland, we do not have that high hierarchy, which is good." (Participant 10, FIN)

"I would love to say yes, but in practice it's not, I think it's because of women's own fault (same opportunities)." (Participant 11, FIN)

"I think daycare has been a really good thing and give time to concentrate on work." (Participant 11, FIN)

"But I think our society should take care of the ones who want to work and put a lot of effort to them." (Participant 11, FIN)

Sweden

Personal attributes
Confidence, Motivation
"Sometimes it's too much work, but then you have to take a deep breath and focus. It's not so easy but you have to always remind yourself of combining everything." (Participant 1, SWE)

"Of course, it was scary, but you have to feel like I can do this." (Participant 1, SWE)

"I want to do it in the way I want to do it, so I thought I can do this by myself." (Participant 1, SWE)

"I have always had a sense for like I see it like this, but I want to have it like this." (Participant 1, SWE)

"It's like I want to make stuff, I want to make stuff happen and I can see that people are listening to me and they think I have good ideas." (Participant 1, SWE)

"I want to solve problems." (Participant 1, SWE)

"I have always had a sense for like I see it like this, but I want to have it like this." (Participant 1, SWE)

"I calculated the risks." (Participant 1, SWE)

"You have to focus on the stuff you do like what is most important." (Participant 1, SWE)

"So, you have to remind yourself all the time what is important in your life." (Participant 1, SWE)

"I think it's easy, but I didn't want to do it because I wanted to work." (Participant 1, SWE)

"Boring at home." (Participant 1, SWE)

"I wanted to go back to work as soon as possible because I felt like really, not stimulated like I have to do something." (Participant 1, SWE)

"A good leader for me is someone that has strength in showing where we are going, to do the vision about it and also to get everyone to engage in that vision that you want to follow." (Participant 2, SWE)

"I like to say what I think, I like to decide and to make a difference." (Participant 2, SWE)

"I could take your position. And you know it." (Participant 2, SWE)

"I have taken a lot of steps to negotiate, I have proved if you ask more it can work." (Participant 3, SWE)

"I feel like you need to experience these set back as it makes you more resilience stronger." (Participant 3, SWE)

"I used all the traits of being a female to my advantages to communicating and connecting, and that is why I think I was able to move up quickly." (Participant 3, SWE)

"I turn out fine even though growing up without a father figure. And that automatically set the stage I will never depend on a man. This is number 1. I can't even bear the thought of being financially depended to anyone." (Participant 3, SWE)

"I was really interested in making money being financially independent." (Participant 3, SWE)

"I think flexibility is really important" (being a mother and working). (Participant 3, SWE)

"You should be more interested in developing other people than developing yourself." (Participant 4, SWE)

"Well starting with of course I have always been really independent. I kind of decided that I would never want to be depended on a man." (Participant 4, SWE)

"First we as woman need to be bigger risk takers and challenge ourselves." (Participant 4, SWE)

"And then of course I've been working hard and delivering results and I think I have developed as a person and a leader. "(Participant 4, SWE)

"But I think to give good advice to women is not to question yourself too much, accept the challenges, you can do them!" (Participant 4, SWE)

"I wanted to be part and have an impact on things." (Participant 5, SWE)

"I would say is that I've always had confidence but today I'm much humbler." (Participant 5, SWE)

"The biggest driver is definitely the need; I would say it's my will." (Participant 5, SWE)

"It is not necessarily the will to manage people, and to have a title, for me it is crucial to have an impact and be part of signing the direction of my work with." (Participant 5, SWE)

"I think it's been myself, because I've been moving also to different countries, so a lot of new starts. Professionally there is no-one and also in the personal level there has not been one person, like friends but no mentor and such." (Participant 9, SWE)

Insecurity, bad conscious

"I'm more like "I don't know if I can do it." (Participant 1, SWE)

"Daycare and he was working I think I would have felt more guilty." (Participant 1, SWE)

"A lot of females are just happy to their given role/salary and they don't ask. As compared to the men who will break the boundaries more and break the rules." (Participant 3, SWE)

"I think the reason why I did not accept the position first was that I was scared because I really did not know what was expected from me and how my colleagues would react and all the challenges coming from the customers." (Participant 4, SWE)

"So, then I decided I'm going to do this and of course I had to do a lot of work in the beginning I was insecure." (Participant 4, SWE)

"Of course, I was afraid to fail." (Participant 4, SWE)

"I thought maybe someone would do a better job than I did." (Participant 4, SWE)

"But I guess, when I started, I never been a risk taker." (Participant 4, SWE)

"But I think when you are new in a position you want to be good at everything and it is hard to ask for feedback and you are young and you want to prove yourself but I learn a lot but in a hard way." (Participant 4, SWE)

Age

"It was a little bit more difficult before, today I feel more confident." (Participant 1, SWE)

"You have big freedom to choose how to be (young)." (Participant 2, SWE)

"When you are young, and I looked very young and female, it's a bigger issue." (Participant 2, SWE)

"You are younger than the others, then you have the freedom to speak your mind, you are not that threatful." (Participant 2, SWE)

"I don't feel like people perceive me differently now and when I was younger as a manager." (Participant 3, SWE)

"My company was really good at trying to promote women, but on the other hand, if you are young it's fine but the older women get the tougher it gets to become a leader, which I found really really weird." (Participant 5, SWE)

"But I would say younger women especially in tech, you can actually earn bonus points or brand value if you have female leaders, then it's easier." (Participant 5, SWE)

"I think the more junior I was. I guess my reactions to that has to make bit more noise to make a point." (Participant 9, SWE)

"Of course, when you worked 2 years instead of 10 years people respect you more." (Participant 9, SWE)

Supportive relationships
Husband, family, other support

"My previous boss gave me a lot of responsibility." (Participant 1, SWE)

"I think if I haven't' had my husband, he took a lot of responsibility being home." (Participant 1, SWE)

"We have like an equal relationship, so he stayed home for 8 months after I went to start my business." (Participant 1, SWE)

"A big step when I got my first job as a manager, and I think that was the greatest one because before that I didn't have experience about leadership." (Participant 2, SWE)

"I have always got very good support." (Participant 2, SWE)

"It was important that my husband was willing to take the full responsibility together of course but in an equal way, it is not possible to be a manager and to take the responsibility for the family." (Participant 2, SWE)

"I think the most important was in the beginning to be seen and to be given those possibilities." (Participant 2, SWE)

"Boss that doesn't fit, they never will support you and you will be unhappy." (Participant 3, SWE)

"But we constantly support each other and to do hobbies." (Participant 3, SWE)

"No, we share the tasks with my husband. If he would do his part I would be in trouble." (Participant 3, SWE)

"My husband has taken a lot of responsibility for the family during this time." (Participant 4, SWE)

"I think that both can't do a great career at the same time or then you have to buy a lot of services like cleaning etc." (Participant 4, SWE)

"The right assignments and right people around you, I think that is what has helped me." (Participant 5, SWE)

"Oh, he has been crucial. He actually resigns the really good job, because I wanted to have a job in Spain when our kids were really small, and he came with me, so he has been crucial, definitely." (Participant 5, SWE)

"Yes, there were no issues, my company is really supportive." (Participant 9, SWE)

Networks, mentor, role model
"Maybe it's because women know that you have worked very hard to get where you are." (Participant 1, SWE)

"Maybe with women you like to feel, they are like sisters." (Participant 1, SWE)

"Networks are really important." (Participant 1, SWE)

"I chose mentors that were good for me as a person." (Participant 2, SWE)

"My mother was really pushing both education and savings." (Participant 3, SWE)

"Our first big sister was a 30-year-old accountant and we met every Saturday morning, to do an activity together like arts and craft and so on. She was university educated she was professional; she was single she was independent." (Participant 3, SWE)

"So, I think early role models play a big factor." (Participant 3, SWE)

"Because my father was working in business and people around him it felt more something like I could understand or secure to do." (Participant 4, SWE)

"I have a huge network." (Participant 5, SWE)

"Of course, it's people, it's people around you who trusted in you and wanted to

promote you and been confident in your abilities.” (Participant 5, SWE)

Un(conscious) biases
Stereotypes
“Like “it's girly” “she wants to do like this, that's typical girls” stuff like that.” (Participant 1, SWE)

“They want to be nice, but I don't take it like that, because they don't tell that to the guy next to me, they don't comment his hair.” (Participant 1, SWE)

“I should be caring, and a male leader don't have to be too caring. I think that's more like social... hmm.. That we have with us, that we supposed to be like in some ways.” (Participant 2, SWE)

“As a woman, you have to still, unfortunately, deliver more. You have to be a bit better, still.” (Participant 2, SWE)

“I think people are not aware that they review men and women differently.” (Participant 2, SWE)

“I feel like people like to report to female leader better because they are more caring, they bring the softer skills.” (Participant 3, SWE)

“Who gets to the world to recruit, they are in their 35 to 45 and they recruit people like themselves.” (Participant 5, SWE)

Discrimination
“You feel that you don't fit in.” (Participant 1, SWE)

“When I'm talking not so many persons listen always.” (Participant 1, SWE)

“This happens quite a lot that man can do what they want but if the same would happen with a female the woman should maybe

prove their selves more.” (Participant 3, SWE)

“I never got any question about how you are going to deal with your family from my managers but from my own organization.” (Participant 4, SWE)

“At my level, they listened high up, so they definitely tried to diminish me and my role as being a woman.” (Participant 5, SWE)

“Usually those who get the highest role, someone has been listening to them, and helping them to get that role.” (Participant 5, SWE)

“I wouldn't really say so; I been really fortuned to work in the companies where I have never felt different treatment because I am a woman.” (Participant 9, SWE)

Luck
“It was actually a little bit of a coincidence that I became a managing director.” (Participant 4, SWE)

“The reason that I became a leader was that not that I must be a leader but there was my leader left and they asked me if I wanted to become a leader and I accepted the challenge.” (Participant 2, SWE)

“Story of my career, I have been really really lucky because I moved into XX, so I was working with Sweden's largest cell phone operator and they were later merged with Finland's biggest operator.” (Participant 5, SWE)

“It was (position) offered to me but also discussed with me.” (Participant 9, SWE)

Societal influence
Society
“You get money just be home so that's fantastic.” (Participant 1, SWE)

"Assumption comes from the social culture." (Participant 2, SWE)

"Swedish welfare support important? Definitely. Because we wouldn't have a possibility to manage our family otherwise." (Participant 2, SWE)

"When you have to pay for cleaning and then you can have it back in taxes the way how it is now, that is very good because to have help with cleaning, or even that you can today do groceries on the Internet." (Participant 2, SWE)

"But I know that I can take the parental leave later on until they are 7/8 years old." (Participant 3, SWE)

" I forgot to mention one thing about the Swedish welfare system. As a result of the low cost of excellent day-care (dagis and förskola) in Sweden, women can stay employed." (Participant 3, SWE)

"Swedish citizens care more about the overall good of everyone and are very considerate. The corporate hierarchy is flat and everyone's opinion counts. Also due to high taxes, it does not really pay to climb the corporate ladder, so it pushes ambition down." (Participant 3, SWE)

"It is also about the quality of life. Swedes understand that time is more important than chasing money and material possessions." (Participant 3, SWE)

"I feel that they feel insecure about how to behave what should I talk about with her, what would be her interest (laugh) so it's a structure in the society that you feel more comfortable talking to your own gender. And they feel like they must well perhaps, men are insecure how to behave around women. We are always in the minority." (Participant 4, SWE)

"I guess, you can deduct cleaning service from your taxes is a good thing. And we have a lot of good working opportunities in Sweden. And also, I guess, daycare in Sweden is very developed and it does not cost a fortune." (Participant 4, SWE)

"I have a another director (man) reporting to me and he was in parental leave for half a year and I was I a severe shock when I announced this because I would need to do his job but I also understood that okay this is where the society is going." (Participant 4, SWE)

"This fantastic opportunity to parental leave in Nordic countries can have a negative impact on female careers." (Participant 5, SWE)

"What you can see in Sweden today, is that as soon as you have more women than men, in a position, the salaries go down." (Participant 5, SWE)

"Yes, I do think so and there is a lot of focus on it. Specifically, the younger generation and it gets better and better for each generation" (atmosphere in Sweden). (Participant 9, SWE)

"I don't know if it's supporting me on my career, but it is definitely supporting me having a baby. I think the Swedish state is allowing me to make a good connection with my child. Also, because it's not with the cost of the company so there is no pressure for me from their side for me to come back." (Participant 9, SWE)

"Also, the fact that Sweden is so good in many ways. The employment market the work-life balance is so good. Easier to work less hours." (Participant 9, SWE)