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**Women in Leading Positions in the Fashion Industry:**

**Comparative Study**

Czechia & Sweden

*Bachelor Thesis*

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Supervisor: Ing. Petr Pavlík, Ph.D.

Hereby I declare that I developed this work independently. All used sources and literature were properly cited. This work has not been used to obtain another or the same degree.

In Prague 2nd May 2024

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Signature

I would like to thank my supervisor Ing. Petr Pavlík, Ph.D., for valuable feedback and patience. I would also like to thank my family, close friends, and my partner for their unwavering support.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Women's experience in leadership has many layers, from conquering gender stereotypes to managing a high demand career with family-life. It is not rare to read statistics about women being underrepresented in top management in most industries. In this context, it is even more interesting to look closer at a female-centric product industry. How does women's leadership experience look in fashion, beauty, and design? Does the predominantly female customer target group of these industries reflect in the leadership?

This is examined in two specific countries Czechia and Sweden in the form of a comparative study. The respondents are women between 30 to 49 years old in mid-senior to senior management positions. Specifically in the fashion, beauty and consumer product design industries.

My motivation for researching this topic is my interest in the real-life experiences of women in leadership, which I was missing from the usual industry statistics about women's underrepresentation in management.

Especially in the last two to three decades, there was more focus on women's experience in leadership in academia. The current state of research focuses a lot on the barriers that women face if they want to reach leadership positions, but a much smaller body of work is focusing on facilitators of female leadership. Bowles (2012) in her research argues that the extensive literature coverage on gendered leadership and barriers faced by women wanting to reach leadership is strengthening the barrier itself. That is also the reason why I wanted to focus on women's experiences in leadership, rather than looking for barriers as a default.

In a report by Catalyst (2006), called *Different Cultures, Similar Perceptions: Stereotyping of Western European Business Leaders*, they try to understand if and how female leaders' experiences were different in multiple European countries. Catalyst asked women across all four clusters of participants (Nordic, Germanic, Latin, Anglo) about what was stopping them the most from reaching the top positions in business leadership - "women leaders across Europe cited gender stereotypes - with great regularity" (2006, p. 3).

Some authors encourage women to not try fitting into a mold created by the patriarchy but to find their own ways for going into careers and leadership. What Lyness & Grotto (2018) point out is the fact that a lot of women are trying to mold their work life to these male-centric time demands and failing to realize that they are based on a gender-biased structure. This, in

turn, can harm women's careers much more than men's because there are still more time and flexibility demands on women due to childbirth and often primary parent roles even in a couple.

When we move to the facilitators of women's leadership rather than barriers, there is more and more research being done for example on networking. There is a further need to understand how networking exactly works and helps in women's careers. O'Neil and others set out to better understand specifically women's network groups in their qualitative research called *Do Women's Networks Help Advance Women's Careers? Differences in Perceptions of Female Workers and Top Leadership* (O'Neil et al., 2011). They tried to evaluate if the women's only networking groups are as valuable as some literature suggests.

I hope that by focusing on a comparative study between two specific countries like Czechia and Sweden, I will contribute with very specific local data. It is quite problematic to find and translate locally conducted research in Europe, since many of our countries have their own distinct languages other than English. That is also the reason why I decided to write this work in English.

This thesis aims to answer the research question - What is the experience of women in mid-senior to senior leadership positions in the fashion, beauty, and design industry, and does the experience differ between Czechia and Sweden? And the method of the research is semi-structured interviews, which is the best format to examine real life experiences.

The structure of this thesis starts with the Theoretical Part / Literature Review to provide context for the topic of women in leadership. Following with the Methodology section and lastly with the Analysis, which is the biggest and most focal part of this thesis.

## 2. THEORETICAL PART / LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review, I will provide the theoretical context for the topic of women's position in the workforce and leadership. I shall specifically look at the situation in the fashion industry in the two countries Czechia and Sweden, which are the focus of this research.

I have divided the Literature review into four parts. In the first, I will outline the current position of women in the workforce and business leadership. I shall discuss different studies that show that leadership qualities might be expected to be different when it comes to women and men as leaders. I briefly describe the position of women specifically in the fashion industry. At the end of the first part, I touch on how the academic literature tends to focus on the barriers to women's leadership rather than on its facilitators.

This critique influences the following structure - the second and third parts of the *Literature review*. The second part sums up the many barriers women face on their way to the top positions in business, including many studies that have enriched this topic in academia over the last three decades. The third part is on the contrary focusing on facilitators of women's leadership, summing up research focusing on actionable steps and strategies that women and organizations can use to facilitate female leadership.

The fourth part is focused on the legislation connected to gender equality in the workforce, specifically in the European Union (EU), Czechia, and Sweden. EU monitoring of different gender equality metrics in this area is also discussed in this part.

I intended to focus as much as possible on research papers and studies concluded in the European context. While I was reviewing the extensive academic work on the topics of female leadership and gender equality in the workforce, I quickly realized that the majority of the sources are from the United States of America (USA), and the European research and sources on this topic are more scarce. I will be using some sources from the USA when appropriate for creating the full context or if an exceptionally good model or theory comes from these sources. Otherwise, I will be referring to as many European sources as possible, since it is more relevant for the comparative study between Czechia<sup>1</sup> and Sweden.

I would like to acknowledge the limitations of my literature review work, as I believe it is important to be aware of them. My review was mainly done in the English language, which could contribute to omitting some relevant sources, especially from the European context written in

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout my work I will be referring to the Czech republic as Czechia. This name was officially introduced by the Czech government in 2016 as the new preferred shorter name for the Czech republic in English and it became used more commonly in the English language ever since.



different languages. When it comes to the Czech and Swedish legislation, some of the local strategies and legislations were sourced in the native Czech or Swedish language and then translated by me (as is always mentioned in the footnote for affected sources). Since I am not a professional interpreter I could have unknowingly modified some meanings from the original language.

## **2.1. Current Position of Women in the Workforce and Business Leadership**

In this section, I will outline the current position of women in the workforce and business leadership. Afterward, I briefly describe the position of women specifically in the fashion industry, and at the end of the first part, I touch on how the academic literature tends to focus on the barriers to women's leadership rather than on its facilitators<sup>2</sup>.

### **2.1.1. Women in the Workforce**

In 2022 the world population estimation reached almost 8 billion, out of that approximately half were female and half male. The total labor force accounted for approximately 3.55 billion of which almost 40% were women. In the EU countries collectively, the population was over 447 million in 2022, with the labor force accounting for more than 219 million of which more than 46% were women (*World Bank Open Data*, n.d.). These data show that women hold a significant share of the workforce, even more so in the EU.

Looking more in detail at the women's workforce share of the different EU members over the last three decades, we can see the biggest development in Cyprus, Spain, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, and Malta. In these countries, the estimated share of women in the workforce rose from about 30% to 35% in the 1990s to about 40% to 45% in the 2020s. In comparison, the countries that had above 46% of women participating in the workforce already in the 1990s were Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia. Only the last three countries had a negative development over the last three decades landing on 1% to 4% lower participation of women in the workforce. The highlight is Lithuania and Latvia as the only 2 countries in the EU that reached a 50% share of women in the workforce for multiple years.

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<sup>2</sup> See section 2.2.7. *Research to Practice Gap* of this *Literature Review*.

In this context, we can observe the development in Czechia and Sweden and one clear similarity between these two countries. Although the women's participation share is different, it is mostly consistent over the last three decades. Czechia has around 44%, and Sweden has around 47% of women participating in the workforce over the last 30 years. This number is moving a maximum of 0.5% up or down over the years, but staying mostly consistent. This means that the share of women's participation in the workforce is very consistent in Czechia and Sweden based on the *World Bank Open Data* estimates (n.d.).

However, looking only at the percentage of women participating in the workforce in a given country is not necessarily directly linked with an indication of women's inequality or equality. It is good to mention that just because there is a high share of women in the workforce, it does not automatically mean the country has a more gender-equal workforce. In fact, the opposite might be true. Still, it is an important metric when analyzing the position of women in the workforce. Especially as an indication of the share of women expected to be across all occupations and levels of seniority.

#### **2.1.1.1. Work Segregation and Pay Gap**

Segregating women and men into specific fields or jobs, and certain levels within the organizational hierarchy is what sociologist Barbara Reskin refers to as sex segregation (1998; as cited in Kimmel, 2011). This is one of the main gender inequalities in the workforce and it is "so pervasive that it appears to be the natural order of things, the simple expression of women's and men's natural predispositions... Job segregation by sex is the single largest cause of the pay gap between the sexes" (Kimmel, 2011, p. 260).

Kimmel (2011) further demonstrates how this dynamic plays out in reality in multiple ways. But one example strikes in particular and illustrates how sex segregation in a specific field is closely tied to wage differences and the value of work between women and men. Before the twentieth century, clerical work was considered a men's job and was fairly valued and paid. But by the middle of the twentieth century, the gender composition of clerical work had shifted and became mostly female-dominated. This resulted in both the value and prestige of the work and the wages going down. Around a similar time, women started to work as keypunch operators, who were the forerunners of computer programmers, exactly because the work was similar to the clerical one. But once computer programming was labeled as intellectually demanding work, it became more attractive and prestigious to men who as a result raised their wages again. This example is so powerful exactly because as of today, computer programming is still a male-dominated industry with incredibly high wages, but no rational reason for women to not

hold the same jobs. Despite that, it is still rare to meet a woman in computer programming, especially in the top positions.

In other cases there can be similar jobs across industries, requiring similar qualifications and yet they can have different position names and quite different financial compensation and status. More often than not, the more prestigious and better-paid jobs are occupied by men. Because, “income inequality often remains invisible precisely because of sex segregation—what appears to us simply as paying people doing different jobs is actually a way of paying different genders differently for doing roughly the same jobs with the same skill levels” (Kimmel, 2011, p. 265).

### **2.1.2. Women in Leadership**

As mentioned above, the EU workforce is split between approximately 54% men and 46% women<sup>3</sup>. Unfortunately, there isn't equal representation across leadership levels; as one rises in management ranks, the number of women decreases.

Furthermore, leadership is also not foreign to horizontal segregation. When we look closer, for example at the domains that the women in middle management are leading, it is mainly in human resources or marketing. The parts of the business that are stereotypically viewed as more female fields. There are fewer women in areas like heads of finance, business development, or operations, stereotypically male-dominated fields. This is an issue not only because of representation in middle management, but also because historically many top managers come exactly from the areas of finance, business development, or operations.

But why is it that women are not equally represented in leadership in the 21st century in what people would consider modern developed countries? One of the arguments is that there is a long-term snowball effect after the previous centuries when traditionally women were not working in big numbers and were not allowed to be economically independent until the First World War when it became more necessary for women to get into the factories. The “fairly recent” big wave entrance of women into the workforce was not that long ago.

However, the other argument is that since that time, there have been multiple generations of women in the workforce and that we should have enough women to reach the high ranks by now. There should also be a robust pipeline of women across all areas of business heading for leadership positions. That is if we mainly look at the workforce participation split between women and men. But the opposite is true, and women are extremely underrepresented in top leadership not only in business.

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<sup>3</sup> Data for 2022 (*World Bank Open Data*, n.d.)

Many articles have been written and research done in academia on this exact topic of why women are not equally represented in leadership. Many of them state multiple barriers that women are facing, compared to men, and that are not allowing them to reach higher positions. I will cover these more in detail in the later chapter 2.2. *Barriers*.

### **2.1.3. Women in the Fashion Industry**

Although the fashion industry's target customers are mainly women, and women are the majority of workers in physical retail and middle management, there is a strikingly small percentage of women in top management positions, and on the board of directors. Here the decisions, and as a result, losses and gains are mainly driven by men.

There is a similar pattern in other industries as well, but in the fashion industry, an industry so predominantly focused on women, it is even more unbelievable that the decisions are coming from men and not women. The fashion industry is a profitable one, illustrating that the decisions from the top executives are regarding no small sums.

It is precisely women, millions of them working in the fashion industry supply chain. In factories across Bangladesh, Turkey, Indonesia, and many more they are feeling the exploitative nature of this business the most. However, it is not wise to point a finger at women and claim that if only they could be more represented in the top leadership all problems would go away.

But it is interesting that in the last few decades, mostly from the early 2000s newly established brands with women in charge, e.g. Stella McCartney, or men with what could be marked as a more feminine style of leadership, e.g. Veja, are focusing on being more sustainable and counter the exploitative side of the fashion industry. These brands are finding both consumer success and decent profit while putting a lot of thought into maintaining “feminine” leadership. It probably would not be so outrageous to suggest that if more fashion brands had a more feminine leadership style in charge, we could see some positive changes in the fashion industry, both for the business itself and the consumer.

### **2.1.4. Focusing on Barriers Instead of Facilitators of Women’s Leadership**

During the collection of information for this literature review, there was extensive coverage of the barriers that women face if they want to reach leadership positions, but a much smaller body of work was focused on facilitators of female leadership. Bowles (2012) in her research argues that the extensive literature coverage on gendered leadership and barriers

faced by women wanting to reach leadership is strengthening the barrier itself. She claims<sup>4</sup> that “Scholars of gender and leadership have a strong theoretical grasp on why women typically do not attain top leadership positions, but only a weak command of why some women do” (Bowles, 2012, p. 5). And she is not alone, multiple following authors recognized that this is a trend happening in the field.

In *Women and Leadership in the United States*, the authors summed up what they think is happening as follows: “review found that literature narrowly focuses on barriers and offers limited insights about how to facilitate female leader empowerment while simultaneously addressing systemic, entrenched organizational barriers” (Lyness & Grotto, 2018, p. 227). Opinions like these are trying to push academic research for more applicable results and strategies.

However, this is not to say that research should focus only on the female leaders who “made it” in the most prestigious positions. After all, this trend already happened around the years 2007 - 2015 when: Leslie Bennetts wrote her book *The Feminine Mistake* (2007), Sheryl Sandberg became COO (Chief Operating Officer) at Facebook and later became the first woman on their board of directors and published her book *Lean In* (2015), Marissa Mayer was appointed CEO at Yahoo! and a member of their board of directors, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie wrote her famous book *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014), Anne-Marie Slaughter published the viral *Atlantic* article *Why Women Still Can't Have It All* and expanded it in her later book *Unfinished Business: Women, Men, Work, Family* (2015) after leaving her prestigious job at the U.S. State Department.

Maybe it is a natural development in the research field of women’s leadership, that after such focus on the top 1% of most successful executives in the world, the focus is turning towards more relatable management levels. Of course, it would be amazing to see more women in countries’ administrations and C-level<sup>5</sup> positions in the world's biggest companies. But to create a pipeline of women from which these new top leaders can grow, there must first be more support for women in all other management levels across companies and countries. That is possibly one of the reasons for the increase in academic literature for a bigger focus on facilitators of women's leadership. Ideally, while not dismissing the many barriers women face in their professional careers.

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<sup>4</sup> This particular critique of Bowles may seem too bold. However, for the context of her critical statement, I want to mention that the rest of Bowles’ research paper did not appear to be overly critical for the sake of being bold.

<sup>5</sup> Or “chief executive”, refers to the highest strategic role within a company. The most common are CEO (Chief Executive Officer), COO (Chief Operating Officer), CFO (Chief Financial Officer), and others.

## 2.2. Barriers to Women's Leadership

This second part of the Literature review sums up the many barriers women face on their way to the top positions in business leadership, including many studies that have enriched this topic in academia over the last three decades.

### 2.2.1. Gender Stereotypes

*"The lack of equal treatment of men and women often focuses attention on stereotyping and discrimination as explanatory factors." (Billing & Alvesson, 1989, p. 66)*

In a report by Catalyst called *Different Cultures, Similar Perceptions: Stereotyping of Western European Business Leaders* they try to understand if and how female leaders' experiences were different in multiple European countries. Catalyst asked women across all four clusters of participants (Nordic, Germanic, Latin, Anglo) about what was stopping them the most from reaching the top positions in business leadership - "women leaders across Europe cited gender stereotypes - with great regularity" (2006, p. 3). Other studies concluded similarly gender stereotyping is one of the main barriers to women's advancement in business leadership (Bowles, 2012; Greguletz et al., 2018; Lyness & Grotto, 2018; Singh et al., 2023).

The Catalyst (2006) study found that the perceived defining leadership qualities differ for men and women. Based on their findings, all respondents thought women outperform men in supporting others, and "care-taking" was identified as the perceived defining quality of women's leadership. When it came to men's leadership qualities, although the responders agreed on "taking charge" as the most important, they diverged in two different directions afterward. Men thought men leaders outperformed women in problem-solving, but women thought men leaders outperformed women in influencing superiors.

Gender stereotyping is mentioned in academic research as one of the main barriers to women's career advancement, for example in this study across 20 European countries, where senior women in large corporations also pointed to gender stereotyping as the main leadership barrier (Catalyst, 2006). And the 2007 book *The Double-bind Dilemma for Women in Leadership: Damned If You Do, Doomed If You Don't*, describes the invisible barrier to women's advancement, and points out stereotyping as one of the key contributors to the gender gap in corporate leadership (Catalyst, 2007).

Similarly the Catalyst 2006 report *Different Cultures, Similar Perceptions: Stereotyping of Western European Business Leaders* also pointed to gender stereotypes regularly as a main

barrier to the most senior positions in business. Here the findings were interesting as they concluded that based on their study the managers misrepresented both women's and men's leadership exactly because of stereotypical views. They also noticed that "Ironically, stereotypic perceptions were more pervasive in countries with higher levels of gender equality" (Catalyst, 2007, p. 4). However, the strongest stereotypical perceptions in this Catalyst study were identified as "care-taking" being assigned as female defining leadership quality, and "taking charge" as male defining leadership quality (Catalyst, 2006).

A different perspective on gender stereotypes in business and leadership was offered in a recent study called *Women Leadership and Emotions: Knowledge Structure and Future Research Opportunities*. Here Singh and others point out the newly found appreciation of women's leadership. During the Covid-19 pandemic, women's more communal-focused leadership style came out as a strength. They suggest that "studies on women leaders in corporations and businesses focusing on women leaders and emotions may contribute to 1) breaking stereotype around women being emotional, 2) nurturing and developing elements of emotions in men for an inclusive workplace" (Singh et al., 2023, p. 878).

### **2.2.2. Gender Bias**

One way gender bias is reflected in a corporate environment is the organizational structure and amount of time required for one's work. The majority of the work time demands were created and structured by men based on their lifestyle and needs. Especially at the top management positions a lot of those with families would have a stay-at-home wife taking care of the kids and household. What Lyness & Grotto (2018) point out is the fact that a lot of women are trying to mold their work life to these male-centric time demands and failing to realize that they are based on a gender-biased structure. This, in turn, can harm women's careers much more than men's because there are still more time and flexibility demands on women due to childbirth and often primary parent roles even in a couple. Other authors like Kimmel (2011), are also mentioning gender bias as one of the main barriers preventing highly qualified women from getting into higher positions in management.

One study, in particular, is diving into the topic of gender bias in the corporate world. Providing a lot of actionable steps on how to manage gender bias from the individual perspective. *How to Manage Gender Bias from Within: Women in Leadership* is an interview-based study, and although it was conducted in Canada, the context and direction are very applicable to the European corporate world. Roberts & Brown (2019) focus on women in Canada on corporate boards and how they are dealing with gender bias. The outcome of the

study focuses on guiding women on how to be more effective in managing gender bias in their leadership roles. Although in general there is a tendency to put too much action for change on women's shoulders instead of forcing organizational and structural changes, keeping this in mind, it is beneficial for a well-rounded argument to look at all perspectives.

### **2.2.3. Glasslike Metaphors - Glass Ceiling, Glass Wall, Glass Cliff Theory**

Over the last decades, while more focus has landed on the topic of women in leadership and the barriers to getting there, many metaphorical terms were created to label them. When reading different academic and popular literature, it resembles a lot of kingdoms made of glass that women live in. One of the most notorious terms is "glass ceiling". Kimmel puts the explanations of what the popular term means into a good context when he says:

Women thus face a double bind in their efforts to achieve workplace equality. On the one hand, traditional gender ideologies prevent them from entering those occupations that pay well; they are pushed into less-paying sectors of the economy. On the other hand, when they enter those well-paying fields, they are prevented from moving up. This is what is known as the "glass ceiling". (Kimmel, 2011, p. 270)

He expands on this topic by elaborating on why the so-called glass ceiling occurs. Stating insufficient equal corporate policies when evaluating employees' performance; leaning into traditional gender stereotypes; and men pushing for preserving the all-male environment for comfort and familiarity reasons (Kimmel, 2011).

The "glass cliff theory" is another metaphor for explaining a specifically female experience from the top leadership environment. After noticing this situation again and again authors in academic literature have started to point out that women are much more likely than men promoted to top management positions, especially the CEO position, during times of distress in the industry or when the organization is in a risky situation for other reasons. Thus making it even harder for women to succeed in top leadership, even after they get there (Lyness & Grotto, 2018).

In another report by Catalyst (2000) called *Breaking the Barriers: Women in Senior Management in the U.K.* surveyed more than 1100 women in corporations in the UK the term "glass wall" appears. It refers to an obstacle that prevents women from gaining the range of experiences needed to be considered for top leadership jobs. Based on this study 1 in 5 CEOs



thought that the lack of extensive line or general management experience presented a barrier to the advancement in their company.

#### **2.2.4. Mentoring and Networking**

Having good mentors and sponsors, and a robust professional network is vital and oftentimes necessary to get to the highest levels of leadership. For example, Lyness & Grotto (2018) suggest that it is exactly what could help to close the gender gap in leadership and that professional development programs, networking, and mentoring are important. However, at the same time, they say that although the evidence suggests this, “we have a limited understanding of how facilitators of female leader empowerment operate at various organizational levels, have influence in different directions (top-down and bottom-up), and contend with societal and organizational barriers.” (Lyness & Grotto, 2018, p. 252)

There is a further need to understand how networking exactly works and helps in women’s careers. O’Neil and others set out to better understand specifically women’s network groups in their qualitative research called *Do Women’s Networks Help Advance Women’s Careers? Differences in Perceptions of Female Workers and Top Leadership* (O’Neil et al., 2011). They tried to evaluate if the women’s only networking groups are as valuable as some literature suggests. Through interviews with members of the internal women’s network and the same company’s leadership, they concluded that the leadership did not recognize the value of the internal women’s network (O’Neil et al., 2011). These findings suggest that the people in charge do not see the same value in internal women’s networking groups as the group members do. That could be due to an unconscious bias, as they might not perceive the same importance to them, compared to the predominantly men’s network groups.

There is one study on the topic of women in business and networking that stands out. *Why Women Build Less Effective Networks Than Men: The Role of Structural Exclusion and Personal Hesitation* study done by Greguletz et al. (2018) based on 37 interviews with top-level leadership women in Germany sheds a lot of light on the potential reasons for women’s ineffective networking compared to men’s.

Why do women build less effective networks than men? Our analysis points to the existence of structural exclusion resulting from work-family conflict and homophily. With regard to personal hesitation, we identified two elements that were associated with under-benefiting from networking: moral considerations in social interactions and gendered modesty. (Greguletz et al., 2018, p. 1)

### 2.2.5. Research to Practice Gap

As mentioned previously there is more than a subtle research-to-practice gap suggested in the women in leadership topic in academia (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018; Lyness & Grotto, 2018). This is also the main focus of Kossek and Buzzanell's (2018) work called *Women's Career Equality and Leadership in Organizations: Creating an Evidence-based Positive Change*. They “address the persistent research-to-practice gap in developing and implementing practical solutions for a positive change to advance women's career equality” (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018, p. 813). They argue that much of the gender equality research is not primarily focused on “evidence-based solutions” but has a tendency to describe a reporting of the many barriers women are facing in the workforce. And they are calling for “scholars to derive research-to-practice implementations that can be translated to different contexts and under certain conditions. While most published research highlights barriers and obstacles for gender-equitable workplaces, the vast majority of studies are not very useful for fostering a meaningful employment change” (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018, p. 817).

A good example of this is debated by Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre (2008) who “found that highly committed and competent scholars involved in large-scale gender equality programs often emphasize reflection to a greater extent than practical action.” (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2008, p. 814; as cited in Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018). This study further adds to this perception of the research-to-practice gap.

In an effort to live up to their critique, Kossek and Buzzanell (2018) provide some examples of research studies done in the spirit of “evidence-based solutions”. For example:

Van Esch et al. (2018) provide a list of HR best practices to create a positive process and environment for the selection and success of women leaders in senior positions. Ladge et al. (2018) offer a concise table with listings of actions to support new mothers. These actions are organized according to practices designed to generate internally based organizational support, externally based organizational support, and managerial support. (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018, p. 818)

Their work is motivating more scholars to pay closer attention to creating research with applicable insights in the field of gender equality in the workforce and leadership.

## 2.3. Facilitators of Women's Leadership

The third part of the *Literature review* focuses on the facilitators of women's leadership. Exactly because of the reasons mentioned in the previous paragraphs above, this part outlines research that has focused on more applicable insights or strategies. Recognizing what actionable steps can future women leaders and organizations use to facilitate female leadership.

The academic literature on the topic of women in business leadership that would mainly focus on the facilitators of women's success rather than on the barriers is scarce. Most works will devote maybe a small section to this topic within a larger study of the barriers to women's success. However, there is some research primarily focused on the steps and strategies women used, to get to the top business leadership.

The observation from conducting this literature review is that the younger the academic work in the leadership and gender field, the more likely it is to focus on the women's leadership facilitators rather than barriers. Works dated to the 1990s would mostly mention this need rarely (Billing & Alvesson, 1989), in the early 2000s there might be a paragraph or a small section mentioned here and there in different papers (Catalyst, 2006; xxx), and from around the 2010s, there is more academic work pointing to this issue and gap in research<sup>6</sup>.

### 2.3.1. Building Professional Network

One suggested facilitator of women's leadership is effective networking and seeking mentors and sponsors<sup>7</sup>. However, networking can encompass barriers as well as mentioned in the namesake chapter above. But if done strategically and with the pitfalls in mind, a good network of professionals can be the thing that helps women move up the ladder. "According to the experiences [of] women in leadership, one of the most important things women can do is network. [...] Research shows that women tend to spend significantly less time networking than men do. The same trend applies to seeking mentors" (Elias, 2018, p. 176).

Elias's (2018) article *Lessons Learned from Women in Leadership Positions* is also rich in applicable advice given after each chapter. For example, after the chapter focused on

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<sup>6</sup> As mentioned in 2.2.7. *Research to Practice Gap* section works that are pointing out more clearly to this issue are (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2008; Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018; Lyness & Grotto, 2018)

<sup>7</sup> In general mentors are people who can guide or advise someone's career and share their own knowledge in the industry. Sponsors are people who can also act as mentors, but more importantly they will advocate on behalf of the person with senior leadership internally or within the industry. In business people usually say "mentors talk with you and sponsors talk about you". Hence sponsors are oftentimes more fundamental for someone's career growth.

creating a network they advised not only to maintain online professional contacts. But also make sure to have an in-person professional network of women and men.

The less obvious advantage of a good network is that it helps when breaking out of stereotypes. That is true, especially in an environment where the woman wants to climb to a higher position. A strongly built network can give her the credibility for next promotion (Bowles, 2012).

### **2.3.2. Acquiring the Right Skills and Experiences**

Having the right skills and experiences that align with the demands of the top positions is also important. "...There is evidence in the broader management literature that much of the critical development of managers' skills takes place through developmental job assignments, which are more often given to men than to women" (Lyness & Grotto, 2018, p. 236). And if developmental jobs are as crucial for promotions as the literature suggests, women have to find a way to secure them.

Greguletz and others (2018) have gathered information from their study participants, suggesting that to secure these jobs, women have to be very clear and vocal about their interests. To clearly state that they are interested in more difficult developmental roles and projects, and higher positions. This way women have a better chance at suppressing the gender stereotypes of managers assuming they do not want to take on a more demanding role due to having existing or potential kids.

Another option for professional women to expand their networks and mentoring opportunities is leadership development programs focused on women. These programs should help them to get the necessary skill set, mentorship, and sponsorship opportunities with the goal of being able to move up in the management ranks. *Taking Gender Into Account: Theory and Design for Women's Leadership Development Programs* is a theoretical study set to provide actionable steps on how to design women's leadership development programs so they are more effective (Ely et al., 2011).

### **2.3.3. Ways to Legitimize Claiming Leadership**

Hannah R. Bowles (2012), a senior lecturer at Harvard Kennedy School, conducted research from data collected with the help of her colleagues called *Claiming Authority: How Women Explain Their Ascent to Top Business Leadership Positions*. By analyzing 50 interviews of female top executives from corporations and high-growth ventures her research "suggest(s)

two alternative accounts of how women legitimize their claims to top leadership positions: navigating and pioneering”. The result of this research is a proposal of a process model for women on how to legitimize their claim to top positions (Bowles, 2012, p. 2).

In the “navigating” group women used following well-predefined career paths to legitimize their progress and keep advocating for themselves to their bosses and internal people of power to eventually reach a top leadership position. On the other hand, in the “pioneering” group women verbalized a new strategy and gained a following which facilitated their progress in leadership. One of the findings was that when a woman in leadership was not successful with either navigating or pioneering strategy, they tended to reevaluate and often pivot from one to the other. It was also found that one woman with a long career in leadership could fluctuate between navigating and pioneering strategies depending on the place, timing and need in her career (Bowles, 2012).

#### **2.3.4. Different Work-Life Balance**

Some literature suggests that one way to facilitate women’s leadership is to adopt a different thinking about the so-called work-life balance. Cheung & Halpern (2010) suggest it might be beneficial, for not only women, to think about their work life and family life in terms of “work + family”. Instead of pursuing the glorified perfect work-life balance of the Western culture. They included a model of how women could develop as leaders in a way that acknowledges the importance of maintaining family involvement in their work, *Women at the top: Powerful leaders define success as work + family in a culture of gender*. For example, some successful leaders from their study “created links between family and work, although they kept their role identities distinct.” (Cheung & Halpern, 2010, p. 185). This could look like bringing the kids to business trips, or reading work material while kids did their school reading at the kitchen table. This should not only help the mothers to feel less guilt for not spending more time with them but also help the kids understand what the mother is doing when she is away.

Another crucial point from this particular study is supporting the idea of letting go of unachievable standards and leaning into outsourcing at home, the same way one would do at the office:

Instead of being superwomen who hold themselves to the highest standards for all of the role-related tasks of being wives and mothers, they adopt different internal and external strategies to redefine their roles. They learn to let go and outsource household tasks just as they would outsource work in a busy office. They recognize that they do not have to do it all by themselves.

They alter their internal conceptions of the demands of their work and family roles and define these roles in ways that are meaningful and helpful to them. (Cheung & Halpern, 2010, p. 185)

Women are often under more gender-stereotypical pressure to be the “perfect parent”. It can be extremely helpful to facilitate women’s careers if they proactively let go of perfection at home and outsource household tasks to spend time with their kids instead.

Many research papers cite easy childcare accessibility and making the workplace more “family-friendly”, as one of the main facilitators of women’s career advancement. A clear facilitator of women’s success is for men to get more involved in influencing workplace and country policies. As Kimmel concluded, society likes to mark the demand for career facilitators while juggling a family as “women’s issues”. However, available child care at the workplace, time flexibility, and parental leave availability are not only women’s issues but parent’s issues. And he continues to say “... to the extent that men identify as parents, men ought to want these reforms as well. Politically, women probably cannot get the kinds of reforms they need without men’s support; personally, men cannot have the lives they say they want without supporting these reforms.” (2011, p. 286). And here Kimmel refers to the men’s sentiment of wanting to spend more time with their families and be more involved fathers than they traditionally were.

Indeed we can see the shift from labeling these demands from “women’s issues” to “parent’s issues”. Today when most households in the Western world are expected to be dual income and as the generation of Millennials women started to have families, they realize how unequal the division of labor at home still is. Even if many men want to be more involved fathers. And because having children has been connected to a much lower chance of becoming a CEO for women but not for men (Hurley & Choudhary, 2016; as cited in Lyness & Grotto, 2018), women must use any advantage to help their success in leadership that they can.

### **2.3.5. Organizational Cultures, Structures, and Processes**

Even with a good network and appropriate skills, which can be controlled on an individual level, there still needs to be a lot of positive change in the organizational structures and cultures. The following authors are suggesting, through their research, what changes could organizations make to better facilitate women’s leadership and reap its benefits.

Franczak & Margolis (2022) are amongst others suggesting that organizations adjust what qualifications they demand as necessary from candidates to fill open top management positions. For example, requesting only candidates who are now CEOs to fill an open CEO position will jeopardize women. Considering there are significantly fewer females than males

being CEOs today. Companies can rather focus on transitional skills, than on hard requirements that can be biased towards men. Another area of suggestion is that “organizations should make sure that definitions of competence are aligned with task requirements rather than stereotypical or masculine definitions of competence” (Franczak & Margolis, 2022, p. 6). Again the focus should be on the actual skills and results rather than the cultural and stereotypical labels.

Another important aspect of organizational culture is in the form of what leadership values are celebrated and rewarded. Walker & Aritz (2015) state “authoritarian management practices, respect for hierarchical structures, and adherence to chain-of-command” (Walker & Aritz, 2015, p. 457), as characteristics of a more masculine and competitive organizational culture. And focus on collaboration, including others, keeping a more flat organizational structure, and building strong professional relationships, as a more feminine and supportive organizational culture.

Based on Lynnes and Grotto’s (2018) work there is a clear indication and “evidence suggests that organizational processes at various levels may help close the gender gap in leadership, such as developmental programs, networks, and mentoring relationships” (Lyness & Grotto, 2018, p. 252). However, as stated in the previous chapter about barriers, we have a somewhat limited understanding of how exactly these different facilitators of women’s leadership work. However, there is a clear indication that the companies that provide these organizational processes are more encouraging towards female leaders.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

In the *Theoretical Part / Literature Review* I have covered the theory about the current position of women in the workforce, leadership, and the fashion industry; the many barriers to women's leadership; the facilitators of women's leadership; and the tools countries and the EU have to ensure gender equality in the workforce. In this part, I will explain the research strategy and design, how I sourced and collected the data for my research, and what method I will be using to analyze them. I will also pay attention to the ethics and limitations of the research methods.

The main goal of my research is to answer the research question: What is the experience of women in mid-senior to senior leadership positions in the fashion, beauty, and design industry, and does the experience differ between Czechia and Sweden?

#### **3.1. Research Approach and Method**

For the research itself, I have chosen a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research uses inductive research methods and provides a more in-depth description of the case (Hendl, 2005). This is ideal for my research since I want to follow from specific observations to general conclusions. And then compare the conclusions between the two chosen countries, Czechia and Sweden.

The best method to answer the research question is a qualitative semi-structured interview because at the center of my research is authentic women's experience. This method gives enough space for women's stories while keeping a consistent structure across all interviews to be able to collect and analyze usable data. This is in line with the feminist perspective/research, as per Reinharz (1992), who puts women as individuals and people at the center of the research. Also, an interview as a qualitative research method is ideal for understanding the experiences of people (Hendl, 2005), which is exactly in line with answering the research question. During the interview, my communication partners can formulate their thoughts in their own words. They do not have to try to fit them in the prepared formulations as is the case in surveys.



## **3.2. Data Source and Data Collection Method**

### **3.2.1. Sample Selection**

The sample of participants was chosen with multiple criteria in mind. First of all, it was important for the participating women to have enough experience in the business. Besides that, the condition was for them to have a current job position as a head of department or higher, to be able to provide well-informed opinions about the senior management environment. The last condition was for the segment of business they currently work in - in this research the focus is on the fashion/beauty/design industry. The respondents are women between 30 to 49 years old in mid-senior to senior management positions.

I contacted the participants either through my contacts in the fashion/beauty industry, through people I have previously worked with, or via mutual connections on LinkedIn. After the initial reach out, we would usually exchange several rounds of messages about the research goals, before scheduling the interview via video call. Since I, as the researcher, work in the fashion industry, I could feel a deeper connection forming with the participants than just research subjects<sup>8</sup>. This seems to be in line with how Reinharz describes feminist research: "This blurring of the distinction between formal and personal relations, [...], is a characteristic of much, though not all, feminist research." (Reinharz, 1992, p. 236).

### **3.2.2. Interviews Questions/Questionnaire**

Since the goal of my research is to find out about women's experience in senior management, I tried to avoid specific questions. I aimed to try to make the participants guide me through their experience and pay attention to anything outside of my questions they would mention. I wanted to give as much autonomy as possible to the participants. The reason for this is to create enough space for them to tell their story as authentically as possible, ideally without me guiding them too much into specific topics. By this, I hoped to avoid suggesting answers for them.

The construction of the questionnaire purposely started with more general questions about how they got into the industry, or what they like and do not like about their job. The potentially harder questions came later, after the respondent felt comfortable to talk more. The original Czech language questionnaire and the English language questionnaire can be found in the Appendix.

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<sup>8</sup> Also, there is another risk. I have an understanding of the industry, so it is possible I might forget to ask certain follow up questions in the interviews. Because to me it might be clear, but if such information would be omitted for the reason, I would not be able to analyze it.

### **3.2.3. Interview Process**

I have planned the interview session via video call, to ensure as consistent an interview environment as possible for all participants. I could have met with some of the participants in person, but not all. If I had done so, it might have altered the responses and overall tone of the interview between the in-person and video interviews. That is why I gave priority to the video call format for all interviews, to keep the conditions and environment as similar as possible for the sake of the research. The sound quality in all interviews was good, and there was no noise. The respondents were always sitting alone in an enclosed meeting room at work or at home.

To set a similar mood across all interviews, I have dedicated the first 5 min to more casual conversation - off the record. I would start by introducing myself<sup>9</sup> and the topic of the research once again<sup>10</sup>. Also, I would remind them that at any moment during the interview, if they feel uncomfortable answering a question and want to pass, or want to say something off the record, I will follow their request - no questions asked. Lastly, I would ask them if they had any unanswered questions about the process of the interview before we start.

### **3.2.4. Ethics of Research**

To ensure ethical research, I was as clear as possible about the use of the data respondents provided. I have in advance informed via email or LinkedIn message that the participation will be fully anonymous. When we started to call, I would explicitly ask them on record again if they feel comfortable with the conditions of the interview and if they agree to start the interview. Most respondents were completely comfortable, just two of them had follow up questions about the anonymization of the data. After my explanation, they seemed to be pleased with the answer and agreed to do the interview.

## **3.3. Method of Data Analyses**

For working with the data from the interviews the main task is to analyze and interpret them inductively, from noticing specific situations to generalizing into conclusions. The goal is to comprehend how people understand what is happening in a given situation, and how they

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<sup>9</sup> Or reminding the participants of myself, for those whom I have met through work in the past.

<sup>10</sup> Every participant would receive all information about the purpose of the interviews and my thesis research beforehand.

explain it to themselves (Hendl, 2005). I was looking firstly, for any themes corresponding with this thesis's *Literature review* theory, and secondly for any new, unmentioned cases.

For the analysis itself I have used a thematic analysis, which is a common method for analyzing qualitative data, such as interview transcripts. The thematic analysis method has predefined steps which I followed in the proper order - familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the final analysis (Caulfield, 2019).

### **3.4. Limitations of Research**

It is important to mention the limitations in research, for example, the type of relationship I established with the participants before the interview, and then my reactions and ways of asking the interview questions might have been skewed by my worldviews and beliefs. However, this can be said about any research method.

Secondly, due to the bachelor thesis scale and size, the sample consisted only of women. Of course, it would be even more beneficial to conduct similar research with a bigger sample of participants consisting of both women and men. To get a more well-rounded perspective on the external factors of women's barriers and facilitators. However, every student works within some time constraints.

And lastly, there is my own conscious or unconscious bias as a human socialized in our culture. All of this might have played a role during my work on this research whether I have realized it or not. One such particular example happened when I was first communicating with the potential Czech participants. I noticed that in the Czech language, I was subconsciously more careful about what words from the gender equality topic I would use compared to when I communicated with the participants from Sweden in English. This might be probably because I partially grew up here, and I carry a subconscious belief that the topic of gender and feminism is polarized and uncomfortable to talk about for some people. As soon as I realized this, I was careful about using similar words in both languages and not avoiding certain words in the Czech language.

As with all research, there are also some limitations and this one is no exception. I as the researcher myself could be considered as a limitation, because I myself work in the fashion industry. That could mean that I might have omitted some information that is a "common knowledge" for me, and not ask further about it in the interviews. This limitation is a strength at the same time, since my profile and network allowed me to sample the respondents for this

research. In future research, two students could collaborate on a similar research project. One with the profile and contacts in the industry, who could facilitate the interviews with respondents. The other student, with no ties to the industry, could conduct the interviews and analysis.

Also, the sample included only women, due to the bachelor thesis scale and size. Of course, it would be beneficial to conduct similar research with a bigger sample of participants consisting of both women and men. To get a more well-rounded perspective on the external factors of women's barriers and facilitators.

## 4. ANALYSIS

In this section, I will analyze the data obtained from 8 semi-structured interviews with women in mid-senior to senior leadership positions in fashion, beauty and design. I have chosen 4 Czech and 4 Swedish respondents, because this is a comparative study

The analysis is split into 5 main sections based on the 5 main areas from the interview questionnaire. The main sections have 14 different sub-topics that come partially from the follow-up questions in the interviews or from topics mentioned by the respondents themselves that were central to answering the research question - What is the experience of women in mid-senior to senior leadership positions in the fashion, beauty, and design industry, and does the experience differ between Czechia and Sweden?

To ensure anonymity each respondent is marked by an abbreviation R+number (e.g. R1 for Respondent 1) and with a country code CZ for respondents from Czechia (e.g. R1 CZ) or SE for respondents from Sweden.

In the case of the respondents' interviews from Czechia, the interviews were conducted in the Czech language and translated to English by the author.

### 4.1. The Industry and Market Specifics

To best understand the respondents' experiences, it was important at the beginning to get a picture of how they got into the industry. Mainly what do they like about **their job**, and what would they like to change if possible? This was the first question in the interview and all participants looked quite relaxed and excited to talk about all the different topics.

Multiple respondents mentioned the fashion/beauty/consumer design **industry** and **market** they work in and how they shape their career opportunities and experiences in leadership. And if these conditions somehow fundamentally differ between Czechia and Sweden. These topics were part of the first question, which was focused on the broad context of respondents' current jobs.

#### 4.1.1. The Fashion and Beauty Industry Pros and Cons

What the respondents did not like about the industry they work in was mainly the unsustainability of the fashion industry and the communication around it (R1 CZ, R2 SE, R5 SE,

R6 SE). They were mainly concerned with waste, overproduction, and pollution that the fashion industry creates. For example, one respondent said on this topic:

*“I think there's obviously a lot of awareness now when it comes to overproduction and sustainability questions, [...] And I really believe that using data in a meaningful way to reduce the amount of products that we produce is the solution, plus working with the suppliers to support them into renewable energy and to reduce basically our CO2 footprint as an industry is super important. So I think that's one of the challenges. And I think also how do we basically excite the customers without changing the trends so often and kind of create a sort of more sustainable shopping habits.” (R2 SE)*

Also, the effects on the economy, for example, some companies producing overly cheap products while the cost is subsidized by the first-line workers was of concern to another respondent (R1 CZ). And hypocrisy in fashion marketing pretending to be sustainable (greenwashing) when it comes to communicating to the customer:

*“[...] in the fashion industry, the issue of course is everyone trying to present themselves as sustainable when in fact fashion or consumerism itself isn't that sustainable. So I think that what I would like to change, and this is something that is very, very difficult to change, is how that is actually communicated with customers [...].” (R5 SE)*

One respondent pointed out how women's bodies are portrayed in fashion and the possible negative effects on women's body image this has:

*“[...] there's still a lot to be done in like how we look at bodies and women, like how we portray them and so on, which is, of course, also a big challenge and a lot to be done still.” (R6 SE)*

On the other hand, there were multiple positives about working in the industries. In the fashion industry, the answers span from simply *“I enjoy fashion” (R1 CZ)*, to other topics like it never being boring but more ever-changing which brings opportunities to develop (R1 CZ). Respondents working in the beauty and consumer design products mainly mentioned working with beautiful products that people like as a main highlight.

It is worth mentioning that only respondents working in the fashion industry (for both CZ and SE) mentioned unsustainability or overconsumption as something they would like to change

if they could. The ones working in the beauty or consumer design products industries did not explicitly mention it. However, both of these industries face similar challenges when it comes to more sustainable production and shopping habits.

#### **4.1.2. Specifications of the Czech and Swedish Market**

The specific market in which a person builds up their career largely affects the opportunities and norms for their career development. That is why it was important to hear from the respondents if they have any opinions on the specifications of the Czech and Swedish workforce market. This was not a specific question, as I did not want to suggest this direction. Respondents were coming to these inputs on their own while talking about what they like and do not like about the particular industry they work in.

One respondent thought that Czechia was a good place to learn and try things in the industry, but has a low ceiling/limits in terms of how far an individual can progress professionally (R1 CZ). She thought it was because there are not many big companies with high-level position opportunities:

*“I think it's really purely because if you manage Alza's [local equivalent to Amazon] marketing or sales at 30, you won't have many opportunities to move up here from Alza. For the smart people, and it doesn't matter if they are women or men, I think there is no room for growth here.”*  
(R1 CZ)

Another topic that came out was the glorification of the jobs in the capital city of Czechia, but then the reality became grimmer based on one respondent (R8 CZ). She thought mainly social policies of companies only worked in theory but not in practice:

*“I would say that it is very Czech, that the companies present themselves, that they support parents and that there are flexible working hours, home office options and I don't know what else, but everything, or everything, mostly it is only on paper in theoretically, and in practice I have never experienced that it would work.”* (R8 CZ)

Adding, she mostly worked in corporations that are international and have universal social policies, but it did not have a big effect on the local company culture.

When it comes to statements said specifically about Sweden, it was mainly about the “typical” Swedish company culture that is an indirect and kind of leadership style but less

focused on performance. This can be sometimes challenging in terms of delivering business results (R2 SE). But then another respondent highlighted that she thinks they struggle with diversity in leadership. Although they want to be international and open-minded, people in top leadership all look the same (R3 SE).

Lastly, many respondents mentioned the good work-life balance in Sweden, though one respondent said that it is not necessarily as good as it usually is portrayed:

*“I think work-life balance is much better in Sweden than it is in Turkey for sure. I worked at, you know, for sure. I worked from 8.30 to 8.30 regularly when I was in Turkey and that was my normal. ....But it's also not, I think in the startup space, not as people set out to be, you know, in Sweden, oh, we'll turn off at 4:30. That's not true. I've worked nights, I work weekends, and it's not because you're being forced to, but you have to finish the work. There is no other option, right? So, yeah, it's better in terms of work-life balance, I would say, but not perfect.” (R5 SE)*

The Czech respondents thought that the higher-level job opportunities in the Czech market are very limited (e.g. R1 CZ), and that is why some people struggle to build up long-term high-level careers.

In comparison, one respondent (R8 CZ) criticized how some companies in her experience only market social policies to their employees, but in reality, has not seen them applied. However, there will be a lot of instances later in the analysis from both Czech and predominantly Swedish respondents talking about generous social company policies facilitating their work-family balance.

## 4.2. The Journey to the Current Position

Next, in the biggest section of the analysis, we will closely look at the participants' **backgrounds** and experiences with leadership. We will look at how they got into their **current leadership positions**, how they acquired the **necessary skills and qualifications**, what **motivates** them to be in leadership, and if they had any **hesitations** with agreeing to senior positions.

In this thematically biggest section, all respondents were candid with their experiences, especially around the question about possible hesitations to accept a high level position.



### 4.2.1. Professional Background

Multiple respondents had a different background from their studies or first jobs that helped them to stand out and/or use it as an advantage to eventually acquire more senior positions all the way to the current one.

For one, a tech background was helpful once marketing got more technical in terms of tools. She could also do marketing for more tech companies and understand the product, which turned out to be a big advantage (R1 CZ).

Another originally studied politics/humanities, and was very interested in different cultures and traveling. Her open mind in terms of job locations and work traveling turned out to be advantageous in terms of opportunities. Due to her curiosity, she tried many areas of business - buying, production, merchandising, physical retail, online, and back to assortment optimization - which helped her create a unique valuable profile:

*“pivoting along the way allowed me to actually have unusual and broad scope with what I do, basically.” (R2 SE)*

She attributes getting her current role as global head of department to her varied background and working for multiple global companies:

*“And I think then you get rewarded for that. [...] I think the advantage of that is also the breadth of the experience. It's so broad and so unusual that I can actually do quite a lot of things. [...] I can switch quite swiftly through different topics, like from operational, financials, to marketing, to product development and all that.” (R2 SE)*

One respondent studied business and was very interested in that environment. She also previously worked in sales, and she connects it with getting her first managerial position:

*“And I guess I got it because I had then been in sales before.” (R3 SE)*

Another respondent who also studied economics says it helped her understand data much better and being able to do her job on another level:

*“I think that studying economics has helped me a lot. I don't think that I would have the same perception of data if I hadn't studied economics. .... we were taught the biases people have in*

*decision-making so or you know we were taught statistical significance so you know I'm not basing my decisions on a small sample size. So that has helped me.” (R5 SE)*

All of the Swedish respondents had a different background compared to their current role. In their cases it facilitated promotions and added a bonus to their skills which provided a higher competence. In the Czech sample only one respondent (R1 CZ) stated a different background to her current job, and also labeled it as an advantage. The other 3 worked in essentially the same line of work from the beginning of their careers.

#### **4.2.2. Experience and Competence**

The following are experiences and competences which respondents believe helped them to their current positions in leadership. Here it was a little bit harder for the respondents to keep on track with the question, but I would always try to steer them back to the topic with follow up questions.

One respondent working in the fashion industry says that most people are very aesthetics oriented and she thinks she has an advantage because she is very analytical:

*“Yeah, I think the ability, because normally when you work for fashion, you have to have like a more creative and kind of understanding of certain like aesthetics and stuff to just make sure that you have this kind of instinct for the aesthetics. But normally that doesn't come with analytical skills. And I've always been super comfortable with numbers, with analytics and I can combine the creative side of the business with more of a business-driven approach basically.” (R2 SE)*

Multiple respondents stayed at the same company for many years (R4 CZ, R3 SE, R6 SE). One of them has experience with climbing the corporate ladder at the same company all the way to her current director position. She thinks her promotions were due to to time and experience, that she felt like she progressed only once she acquired knowledge she could pass on others:

*“Either a person has the experience or gains some knowledge and then they say they are an asset to others or not.” (R4 CZ)*

One respondent was very conscious about the quality of her knowledge. After some experiences she feels like there is value about honing in on the quality of her expertise. She feels like sometimes people move too fast and don't digest the level they are at in depth, but just on the surface:

*"Yeah, exactly. I think that you know careers are long already, maybe it's it's good to take some time and not not try to make things even faster than they are, you know I think it's good to take a step back and really digest your level and learn from other other leaders as well because when you advance so quickly you haven't seen so many different other leaders." (R5 SE)*

Competence as a facilitator for future promotions came up quite a lot. For example Respondent 6 thinks her main competence based on previous experiences is good team work and delivering results. She feels like leading team came natural to her, but what she struggled with as first time manager was fear of people not liking her:

*"So I think that like being scared of people not liking me was the biggest challenge actually." (R6 SE)*

Feeling competent was the reason for Respondent 8 to always continue working in media (the direction she took thanks to her first job) because it was important to her that she could bring her experiences to the table (R8 CZ).

Analytical skills were highlighted on multiple occasions as one of respondents main competence (e.g. R2 SE). In their experiences with job promotions there was a focus on acquiring deep knowledge in a specific area before progressing higher (R4 CZ, R5 SE). This notion was quite common in both Czech and Swedish groups.

### **4.2.3. Accepting Senior Roles - Confidence and Hesitation**

Although all the respondents are at least in mid-senior to senior management positions, some of them are even now dealing with lack of confidence or imposter syndrome. When asked about how she was progressing in her career and if she ever questioned taking the next step, one respondent said that she sometimes wonders:

*“Am I good enough to do this? There's always a part of me that says, what if I fail? But I think it's more of a female thing, when I talk to my male colleagues, they don't really have the same, they think that they're just great and they will do great.” (R2 SE)*

Similarly, another very senior respondent said that when she was offered a big promotion, she questioned her bosses if they were sure about it (R3 SE).

One example of a slightly different confidence story comes at the beginning of Respondent 5 career, when she said she did not even consider she could be promoted:

*“I didn't even consider myself on par with managers or senior managers. To me that was something that would happen you know in the very very very far future, maybe. .... “ (R5 SE)*

But then she explains that once she started to work at another company and she saw how much value she was bringing compared to her peers, she started to realize she also deserved to reach more senior roles (R5 SE).

Another respondent says she always hesitates when facing a new role, asking herself why her and if she could mess it up. She always evaluates all the risks before going for it. But then she adds that she is not afraid of personal responsibility because she has the confidence that she has all the available skills (R8 CZ).

There was a common thread in which about half of the respondents questioned themselves if they were good enough when they faced new promotion opportunities. The other half did not question their capabilities when promotions came. This split did not occur along Czech and Swedish lines, suggesting it is more a personal trait than a cultural norm.

#### **4.2.4. Career Development**

What motivates these individuals to say yes to more senior leadership positions? And was their path to their current position intentional or by chance? These questions are the focus of this part of the analysis.

One said about her current position that she already knew she wanted to lead a team. She knew the role of head of department would be a challenge since she would lead the original team that built the brand. She knew there would be challenges getting higher positions, but she was not discouraged. When discussing whether it was her goal to be in leadership positions::

*“I want it to be fun, no matter what the environment is. [...] And at the same time, exactly as one*

*always learns something or collects something, then the next natural step is to try it either one step higher or in another country and so on.” (R1 CZ)*

Another respondent was clear about always being driven and ambitious. She thinks that her promotions are due to what her subordinates notice, and her intelligence, rather than her pushing her way up forcefully. Her career pivots were done very intentionally:

*“Yeah, it was very intentional on my side. [...], I like to grow and kind of challenge myself. I tend to not like when things get repetitive and I feel like, okay, I sort of got that. I maybe not mastered that, but at least I know what I'm doing and it gets repetitive, then I tend to pivot and try to do something else. And it's not a conscious choice when it comes to career, it's more driven by my own needs to develop personally. (R2 SE)*

She moved cities and countries in order to access new opportunities and believes you need to put yourself in discomfort to grow. She adds that there is a small part of herself asking if she can do it, but she thinks that is mainly imposter syndrome. In terms of motivation, she says:

*“I like to work. And I get to be visionary, like I know where we're going and try to guide people there.” (R3 SE)*

She feels like the majority of her promotions were organic, but she was very intentional when she set her eyes on her first managerial position within the company. She directly expressed the ambition to her bosses and thinks that she got the role without previous team management experience because they saw her as a natural leader and she had already varied experience delivering strong results in both sales and buying. But she explains that it was very challenging to manage people for the first time:

*“And I had had like no preparation whatsoever to deal with this. And I think very classic like junior manager, I thought that my job was to have answers for everything, fix everything. So it was a really, really tough year.” (R3 SE)*

After asking if she thought about giving up, she responded:

*“I'm super stubborn. I'm like grit. I don't give up.” (R3 SE)*

When she got her last biggest promotion, she was very humbled. Though she thought it will be very tough, she could not say no because it was a huge opportunity.

Respondent 4 is motivated by the fact that her field is very creative and constantly evolving, and that she works with beautiful products. When asked whether her path to leadership was intentional, she said that most people are not as ambitious to set their minds on a specific high position, but that such development is more organic in time. She explains:

*It's also because [our company] is actually good in that it provides opportunities, that one can relatively move up if they want. .... And when one simply has ambitions or interest in moving up, then there's always that possibility. (R4 CZ)*

She believes she stayed at one company for so long because she was able to move to new positions every 2-3 years. She never tired of the company due to her many opportunities in the business. When she was offered her last role to lead a big team she took it as a positive challenge:

*"I thought it was good, that I would learn something new again. Probably the only thing I hesitated about logically was whether I could handle it, whether I could manage such a large team and how time-consuming it would be" (R4 CZ)*

The next respondent ended up in the fashion industry by chance, because she first worked for other consumer products ecommerce which also included fashion, and then she continued more in that direction. Multiple of her promotions were due to her bosses' needs to fill roles, and because the leadership saw potential in her to take over:

*"[...] and then after that in the manager position my manager left and I had to basically take on the role that he had because I was the only one who had worked with all the channels before. .... And after a year of doing it unofficially, then I got promoted, but I didn't ask for it. And then to the VP position as well, that happened because I was made responsible for an additional team that I didn't even have in mind. So I think I just stumbled into it." (R5 SE)*

Her bosses saw her competence and potential and trusted her to be able to manage the next level.

Respondent 6 works at the same long term company by chance, when she applied to their trainee program along with her peers. After 10 years she feels like she could stay in this one company her whole life, because of the many opportunities and the ever changing fashion industry. When offered her current role, she was surprised that such a senior offer came so early, but she decided to refuse because of pregnancy. When offered a second time, she was ready to take it on. When asked about her bosses' willingness to promote her to leadership positions, she says:

*"I think it's a lot in my personality, but then I think I have developed a lot as well during my like 10 years now at [her company]. I think I've always been a very positive person and really enjoy teamwork. So that's a bit like who I am. And I've always been competitive and want to get excited and then I want to deliver kind of. So I think that's also connected to who I am."* (R6 SE)

Lastly, Respondent 8 believes her first job directed the course of her career. She questions every new new role, and goes in with big humility:

*"big responsibility, or there can be like a big risk for me, [...] So I always go into it with great humility."* (R8 CZ)

She then proceeds to say that she found early on that people are not as high level professionally as she would expect.

Many of the participants do realize the specifics of the challenge before accepting job promotion, but do not get paralyzed by it (R1 CZ). Innate ambition was a common thread with some (R2 SE), while others did not set their mind on specific positions but rather it happened after time organically (R4 CZ). In hard situations, it was their unwillingness to give up which made them persevere (R3 SE).

It is worth pointing out that the career development of the 8 respondents could be categorized to being specifically within one company where they worked for longer periods and built a robust rapport (R4 CZ, R3 SE, R6 SE) or they had jobs in multiple companies and hence had to rely more heavily on their skills and competences for their next job promotions (R1 CZ, R7 CZ, R8 CZ, R2 SE, R5 SE).

#### 4.2.5. Continued Learning

Acquiring the necessary skills and qualifications for their leadership positions, rarely happened only through their working experiences. Almost all respondents (all except R6 SE) said they engaged in continued learning or training along their careers.

For example, one respondent who leads a marketing and PR project for the local community thinks leadership programmes and extra training were beneficial for her career. Per her experience, training and upskilling programmes are especially good in corporations, because they manage it well:

*“it's more like a workshop, where you work a lot with assertiveness, with some kind of approach to situations and so on, to communication. So, I think it's more like asserting self-confidence or that you shouldn't have some kind of imposter syndrome, or something like that workshop-like.”*  
(R1 CZ)

Another respondent studied for an MBA while working because she wanted to better understand the financial parts of business. She felt like she needed more knowledge even after university and she continually educates herself:

*“[...] and now actually I'm going to go through the course which helps to train women who are sitting on boards of the companies to create more diversity in the boardrooms. I feel like even though I have some experience, I'm always like, okay, I don't know enough about this, I might go and learn. Or when I worked for those big companies, I always participated in executive leadership programs. And I was always like, there's always this 1 thing doing the work, but it's always, especially when it comes to leadership, there's so much happening.”* (R2 SE)

She strongly believes all her extra training and activities helped her in her career.

Another respondent (R3 SE) also has taken advantage of internal educational possibilities. She did internal senior leadership programs with other global leaders as well as other similar programmes.

Another respondent believes she learns something new every day. She regularly reaches out to their external partners for explanation if there is a new trend or technology she does not understand. She realizes that new trends and technologies constantly come up and that one needs to stay up to date:



*“Yeah, within [her company], we have training sessions and we have plenty of options to choose from courses, as online training. Plus, internationally, there are training sessions, where, if you come up with something new, or some new tool, or something like that, it's addressed. [...] [her company] places a lot of emphasis on this, so within that, it really develops its employees a lot.”* (R4 CZ)

Respondent 5 began studying for an MBA, but left the program because she believed she wasn't senior enough. After years of experience now she thinks it would be valuable for her future career to do an MBA:

*“I think that there are a lot of different moving parts in organizations and I have a good view of marketing but I also want to learn more in an academic setting in theory how things should work because I feel also that you know depending on which company you work at your experience and your learnings are so different on how things should go. And I've worked in startups my whole career. So it's not very objective in the sense of how things should actually be going. And I kind of want to reality check.”* (R5 SE)

She feels like she could benefit from a training program but did not yet find a good opportunity. Instead she self studies using sources such as books, newsletters, chat groups, and Youtube

Contrary to the other respondents' experiences, respondent 8 feels like none of her academic courses brought her value. Nothing went deep enough for her level of experience (R8 CZ).

Continued learning and knowledge expansion was present in almost all respondents' careers. Some studied for MBAs while others attended executive training provided by their companies or externally. At least half attends industry events and is part of mentoring activities in some programs.

#### **4.2.6. Meaningful Work**

When asked about what they like about their work and what motivates them, meaningful work and adding value were among the respondents' most common answers. Respondent 1 wants her work to be meaningful and to work with brands she enjoys. She wants to enjoy her job because she realizes how much time people spend working during their life. She also likes that she brings value to the company and team because of her experiences. Making a difference was the center of her motivation:

*“I like that I can make a difference. I feel that I'm making a difference. It's very tangible.” (R3 SE)*

She is very driven by making a difference, both for the customer and for the people she works with. When she was part of restructuring the department, she focused on making the most out of the organization above her personal ambitions, even if it potentially meant losing a senior title..

This respondent (R5 SE) really enjoys her job, and takes the onboarding and making a good first impression at a new role quite seriously:

*“Once someone sees you as a high performer, it's much harder to see you as a low performer later than vice versa.” (R5 SE)*

She has a mindset of putting the organization first in her decisions asking herself “how does this help the company?” She thinks caring for the greater good was always in her personality and that it translates to good work.

The fact that fashion impacts so many customers is important for Respondent 6:

*“[...] fashion impacts so many people even if it's a small company like it's a big part of everybody's everyday life and I'm like even if you don't love fashion you wear clothes every day. So it has a big impact on people.” (R6 SE)*

On another note she like she didn't have to change who she is at work, and that her natural personality thrives at the company environment. She gives that as a main reason why she is very happy and not working somewhere else. She feels like her company helped her develop positively as a person.

Respondent 8 also considers impacting people's lives as a reason why she feels her work is meaningful:

*“Actually, it's not just about beauty, let's say, people who don't suffer from any problem, but it's also about people who are not completely healthy and it actually affects their lives, let's say, healthy skin or whatever, so we actually work there as well..... So it's like, it's not just about the appearance, but it also has some deeper meaning.” (R8 CZ)*

Making a difference and having impact were the most common motivators for the respondents to keep going in the leadership positions. This often means prioritizing the greater good and the organizational goals instead of their personal agenda. Many of them also simply stated that they like to work and they like their jobs.

#### **4.2.7. Work-life Balance**

When respondents were asked about any hesitations to take a more demanding position, work-life balance often came up. This subject arose not only in this part of the interview, but also came up when they were talking about progressing to higher positions. Many discussed the importance of a company culture that values simultaneously having careers and family life balance.

For example Respondent 1 was looking intentionally for a new position because of a long commute which was more challenging because of her dog responsibility and some healthcare issues (R1 CZ).

When Respondent 2 was offered her next role in another city, she told the company she does not want to move her family again as she had already relocated a few years prior. The company was accommodating and found a flexible solution for her to commute for a few days a week instead (R2 SE).

This woman who has 2 kids described a priority shift that occurred during her career. At the beginning of her career, she prioritized, but after having a family her top priority shifted to her kids and husband. When her kids were younger they had help with pickups, but she says those years were very tough. Later yet another work-life balance adjustment had to happen. After being injured around 40, she decided to get really strong physically, and started to work out:

*“[...] one of the most important things that I've learned is [...] that I decided to get really strong. So I started working out a lot. [...] So I go maybe 4 or 5 times a week to the gym. I stay really, really strong. [...] If you're going to be a leader, I think on this high level, you need to think about health and how you take care of yourself if you're going to be able to perform on that level. So that's something that has also, I think, that I've realized, I guess, with age and to prioritize that time. And I think also with the work-life balance, maybe just come to the realization that you can't do everything. I try to plan maybe months ahead and if I know that I will have a really intense work period” (R3 SE)*

Another respondent pointed out that work-life balance is much better in Sweden than in Southeastern Europe where she previously worked. But she highlights that the Swedish way of working does not apply 100% to the startup scene, and that she would often work long hours just to get the work done, but still think it is comparably better but not perfect:

*“But it's also not, I think in the startup space, not as people set out to be, you know, in Sweden, oh, we'll wrap up at 4:30. That's not true. I've worked nights, I work weekends, and it's not because you're being forced to, but you have to finish the work. There is no other option, right? So, yeah, it's better in terms of work-life balance, I would say, but not perfect.” (R5 SE)*

Sometimes it happens that personal and work life important moments collide and one needs to choose their priorities, like this respondent:

*“[...] few years ago [...] I got offered like the same level of position, but then I had just found out like 6 days before that I was pregnant. So I told my manager [...], because it didn't feel good to take on like a new position, both for myself and also for the team, like just doing it for a couple of months. And then it's not so good for the team to like change managers more than we already do...”(R6 SE)*

Luckily the promotion came a couple of years later, and she says she was ready then knowing management already saw her as a candidate for senior leadership.

Respondent 8 explained that she does not buy into working overtime as it takes from your private life and she thinks it is a sign of bad organizational skills. She had quite a strict distinction between career as a tool to provide her living, and personal life as being the area that gives her happiness and satisfaction (R8 CZ).

Most respondents thought about work-life balance in at least some capacity. From realizing that good jobs can facilitate their lives in a specific way, to consciously slowing down temporarily to be able to take care of another aspect of their lives before getting the next promotion.

#### **4.2.8. Family**

Five out of the respondents have kids, and here they respond to the question about how they combine work and family life. The respondents with kids (R4 CZ, R7 CZ, R2 SE, R3 SE, R6 SE) were very candid about the reality of having a high level career and kids at the same time.

When one respondent commutes to another city for work a few days a week, her husband takes up the care for their one child. On the days she is at home she tries to take up more load. Although her husband works as well, he has more flexibility thanks to having his own business:

*“None of us has family here and my husband has his own business [...] It's quite demanding but he managed to make it work.” (R2 SE)*

Because they do not have any extra help, she and her husband juggle household and raising their kid on their own.

Respondent 3 has two kids and has an agreement with her husband that while their kids still live at home (both in age brackets 10-14) one of them will not work 100%. First she was more available at home and now when she got offered her last position, her husband left his job and started to work on his own company from home so he takes on the majority of the household tasks. She said she thinks otherwise she would not be able to accept this demanding role:

*“[...] when I got offered this role, my husband basically said that he was ready to leave his job and he could work on his own for a while. So that was, I mean, otherwise I couldn't have said yes. So that sort of collided. So that's what made it work. .... So my husband has been like driving his own business and working from home, so he takes the majority of the everyday cooking stuff.” (R3 SE)*

Another respondent with two kids was also considering how time consuming her latest role will be. She and her husband have a calendar system through which they coordinate and she thinks it would not be possible to do her job without her husband being hands on at home. She also thinks additional support network around the nuclear family is important and has her parents and a nanny to help with the kids:

*“I'll say it quite frankly, I think it wouldn't be possible for me to do the job I do if I didn't have a husband who also has a managerial position, but if he didn't help at home, if it weren't possible. [...] Both of us have to participate, and without the other partner, it wouldn't work. If a person doesn't have those people around them who will help and whom they can rely on, it definitely wouldn't work. [...] Yeah, like the people around, exactly, who help, like with those kids, if I didn't*

*have them, or if I were somewhere, I don't know, maybe abroad, or didn't have my parents there, didn't have any friends, neighbors, people you always know you can turn to, so I think it would be much harder.” (R4 CZ)*

The next and last woman with two kids emphasized the importance of her company allowing people to have both family/private life and worklife. She says they have a lot of women who in their thirties having kids and she thinks the company adapted to that quite well. They have help with their two kids from their own parents who are retired and a babysitter for pick ups. She decided with her husband early on that they will split evenly:

*“And then like if it's a day when a child is sick, we do half day each. You can have the most important meetings in that day when it's supposed to be.” (R6 SE)*

They both work many evenings, so they can prioritize kids pick ups to spend more time with them in the week.

The next respondent does not have kids on her own, but did have a lot of thoughts about family-life balance regardless. She feels strongly about companies having to adjust to people having kids, although she does not have them herself. She does not like how it is often presented that women have to give up a career to devote themselves to family:

*“So to have a situation or something like that, how a woman has to give up in quotes a career to devote herself to a family is complete nonsense to me. Like any employer, they should realize that there will always be women in that company.” (R8 CZ)*

She continues to say that she cannot imagine having kids in the capital with the set up she has now, saying that working as she does now is unsustainable. She thinks that times have changed and men are as tired from work as women, so there is no reason for the women to pick up the majority of the household and childcare, they should do it both.

The family arrangement differed between the participants with kids, but not in terms Czech vs Swedish. Instead it actually depended on how many kids they have. The ones with one kid (R7 CZ, R2 SE) were also those who did not live in the same area as their parents, meaning they did not have regular help from the grandparents. Also, they currently did not have any regular extra help, but one of the respondents (R7 CZ) said they used to have a nanny when her child was a baby.

The other group of respondents who have 2 kids (R4 CZ, R3 SE, R6 SE), had a more robust support system around them, with grandparents living near and helping out extra with child care. They all said that they could not do their high level jobs without two things - supportive hands of their husbands and extra help.

### 4.3. The People Affecting Ones Career

The previous section gave us an understanding of the background of the participants and their experiences with getting into leadership from a competence and skills point of view. Additionally we took a deeper look into how they juggle careers with personal life. Next we will examine what helped them get to those senior positions from the perspective of **networking**, **mentoring** and **sponsorship**.

#### 4.3.1. Networking

All respondents agreed that networking is important, but each has a different way how they actively practice, or not, building up their professional network. For example Respondent 1 believes that 60% of good business is networking. Although she doesn't feel exceptionally social after work, she makes sure to attend at least some events, because she considers networking very important. Her professional network helped her to some of the positions (R1 CZ).

Another respondent (R2 SE) did not explicitly say if it helped her to a role specifically, but is convinced it is important:

*"Yeah, again, not as much as I would like to, but actually I'm trying to. I've been to London recently to meet colleagues from the industry. Then in June, I'm going to a retail event in Barcelona called Shop Talk, where the biggest companies in the industry gather and then we have sessions. [...] But I think it's when I have opportunity, when I see that my calendar is a bit easier, then I tend to opt for that. I get a lot of energy from it." (R2 SE)*

On the other hand, this respondent actively used her internal network, especially when she was coming back from a leave and was figuring out what to do next. Otherwise she had mostly her manager/sponsor as a main facilitator of her promotions. She does not see her internal network as a strategically maintained contacts but more as a natural relationships after many years of working at different departments:

*“And also one of the things I love with my job is also recruiting new people, seeing other people grow in the business. I guess in that way that I have people that I've watched grow and then we keep in touch. .... it's more like, okay, I really like you and I stay in touch with you. I don't like ... network.” (R3 SE)*

In contrast, Respondent 3 maintains a robust professional network mainly from a standpoint of collaboration:

*“I use LinkedIn, I have relationships there. It's also about the fact that we cooperate a lot with external agencies and partners, so having that network is good because when something comes up with an agency or something doesn't work, it's good to know which person to approach. It's definitely more from that collaboration network standpoint, it's good to have it.” (R4 CZ)*

She did not give specific examples of her internal network leading to promotion.

Respondent 5 says that at the beginning of her career she heard that networking is important but did not take it seriously, outlining her development:

*“[...] you always hear that networking is so important. Networking is so important. I never took it seriously because networking for me meant, you know, being that annoying salesperson and going up to people, you know, meeting them and just being very fake. And that's what networking meant to me. But then I realized, as we've discussed, my current position is due to networking, even though I didn't network on purpose, we just worked together. ... And the longer that I work, the more that I realize that you know industries are very small and people know each other. .... but it's very important and so now I take it more seriously but I can't really like I'm not networking on in the hopes of networking I just try to leave everyone with the best impression that I can even if we're just going to work together for a month. I go to some industry events because it's nice to meet people and discuss ideas not for the sole purpose.” (R5 SE)*

Adding that she also likes to follow important ideas shapers from her industry on LinkedIn.

On the contrary, this woman realized after some time at the company that although she never thought about it as networking, she has a big internal network she naturally keeps in touch with because they worked together or met internally. She believes that though the culture



is very network based within their big company, her promotions were more due to her sponsor/manager (R6 SE).

The last Respondent 8 networks more by keeping people she liked from previous jobs as friends. Then she attends company and industry events, but sees it more as upskilling than networking. Her network was not a direct link to her current position, but she likes internal networking with colleagues from foreign branches, for exchanging knowledge and experiences (R8 CZ).

Most respondents agreed that networking is very important, and for some of them it even led to new external or internal job opportunities (R1 CZ, R3 SE). Three of them thought about networking as something forced or artificial (R8 CZ, R5 SE, R3 SE), but paradoxically got a new job opportunity thanks to their network (R3 SE). And one of them completely changed her mind (R5 SE) about networking after more years in the industry from something forced, to something necessary and natural.

The most specific type of networking is probably attending big industry events that some respondents described as a great way to network more naturally and keep up with the industry happenings at the same time (R1 CZ, R4 CZ, R2 SE, R5 SE). There was no significant difference between how respondents from Czechia and Sweden approached networking.

### **4.3.2. Mentoring and Sponsoring**

Good mentors can inspire one's career, and good sponsors can take it to a new level as seen per the respondents experiences. Although for some of them this had a large impact on their careers, for others it was not such a focal point in their career development. For example, Respondent 1 had more informal mentors during her jobs she took inspiration from. But when she wanted to seek a more formal mentorship program when more mentoring platforms started and she was interested, she found out she was much more experienced than the people and she could not learn anything new (R1 CZ).

In contrast to that experience, another respondent (R2 SE) had the opposite experience. She thinks it important to seek mentors because they are most likely already people before you who dealt with similar issues and it is important to exchange knowledge. She does not have one constant mentor, rather multiple ones she reaches out to if she has tougher periods and needs guidance. Additionally:

*“[...] this time within the company I managed to get like free mentorship within [her company] with a consultant that I could bounce things with and to guide me through...” (R2 SE)*

This respondents long term mentor acts as her sponsor, who brought her with her along her career, also gave her confidence by seeing potential in her:

*“It's more that I've had the same manager for a long time. And I think she has seen potential in me, which has made me then believe, oh, maybe I can do this.” (R3 SE)*

She also kept in touch with her first manager and took guidance from her when she herself became a first time people manager.

Another respondent has a similar experience. She contributes her promotions to sort of sponsors, her managers who saw her potential and moved her upwards:

*“So it was rather always about someone above me who said, well, it makes sense to move me forward.” (R4 CZ)*

She did not have a specific mentor, she once tried but it did not work out due to availability. But she was a mentor herself through an internal mentoring programme.

Next promotion that happened directly as a result of professional network and sponsorship happened for Respondent 5:

*“But my previous manager, [...] he had joined this company and he reached out to me on LinkedIn and asked me if I would be interested if there was such a position and we started talking and then it sounded interesting. So that's how it happened.” (R5 SE)*

Otherwise she had multiple memorable mentors, for example she marks one of her previous managers as very valuable in knowledge sharing and leadership style inspiration he provided.

Another woman said that although it was not explicitly stated that her long time manager is her mentor, she always felt like she acted as her internal sponsor for future promotions, and acted as a leadership style inspiration:

*“Ah, I mean, for one thing, like she's the one who like, she made me, she made me a manager the first time. [...] Of course, she has had a huge impact on my career... But also, I mean, a lot of inspiration. I mean, she's a fantastic leader. I've learned a lot from her.” (R6 SE)*

She thinks she had very good managers in general in the company.

Participant 8 took an opposite stance. She did not have specific mentors, and instead took inspiration from the leadership styles she saw along her career. She does not feel that someone like a mentor can really advise or direct how you should progress in your career (R8 CZ).

Sponsors can have a huge impact on one's career and some of the responders had exactly this experience (R4 CZ, R3 SE, R6 SE). It is important to point out that all of them are exactly those people who have a long tenure in big international companies (10-20 years). That said, they stayed exactly because they would progress every 2-3 years thanks to their internal sponsors who would vouch for them for the new roles, so they never felt like they needed to change a company. This was the case both in Czechia and Sweden.

## 4.4. Leadership

So far we focused a lot on the participants' experience from the individual perspective. Now we will see how the company culture values can either support or not support the participants' **leadership**.

### 4.4.1. Leadership Style

Most of the responders were quite frank about the leadership style in their company, but some did hesitate more around these questions. One even said she (CZ) cannot comment on that, but she can tell me about her leadership style, which was of course respected.

One respondent's experience with leadership styles:

*"I think very transparent. And it was certainly most of my work. Most of those businesses were super transparent, both inside and outside the company. That was relatively good honestly. But otherwise, I honestly have experience with classic business management."* (CZ P1)

She described her own leadership style as a hands-on manager that doesn't take credit for work done by individuals in her team, but shines through her team (R1 CZ).

Another respondent said the leadership has a family-like company culture, driven by values and kindness. He has a less aggressive leadership, but says people are sometimes too comfortable and you have to increase a sense of urgency at times (R2 SE). They unsuccessfully tried to incorporate US top management, but the more aggressive culture did not

fit with the company's Swedish leadership style. Their company culture is indirect and kind, but less performance driven. It is more focused on long term yearly good performance than on aggressive quarters (R2 SE).

Important that she likes what she does. Want to be valued for the experience she brings, and make a difference and contribute. Thinks her personal values align with company values:

*"And I think it's because, first of all, internally in this company, I think I'm very true to our values. I work very much, I think they coincide very much with my own private values. I don't come into work every day and become somebody else. I am myself, but I work ..."* (SE P3)

She got feedback of being a natural leader, but had to acquire manager experience and a clear compass on what's important. Most successful leaders at the company are aligned with the company's values. She wishes for more diversity and thinks it would be beneficial to have more non-Swedish natives in the room (R3 SE).

This participant thinks it's important as a leader to give space for people to perform and not micromanage. She believes in a very open company culture and that making mistakes is ok because that is how you learn. She believes coaching styles of leadership work better than directive styles, but that it also matters who is in the manager position. She believes some people can create non ideal environment, but she didn't encounter that much (R4 CZ).

Leaderships high ability to solve adversity is what Respondent 5 values at her current company:

*"Yes, high level of experience, but also the ability to adequately respond to different business challenges than they've seen before, which I think also comes with experience, but also the ability to solve adversity. Because you know, in the C-level there's always opposing thoughts and everyone has their convictions and people are very, you know, they have a reason for why they think they're right, right? It's not just because. So I think they're all very good at knowing when to push and when to pull back. So I think that's an important skill."*(R5 SE).

Describing her own leadership style, Respondent 6 says her main capability as leader is being results-driven and getting the team on board. She feels lucky to work at her job, because she thinks there are very few companies where parents can have this level of seniority and family at the same time. She is inspired by her mentor/sponsor's style of team leadership - strong team building, securing the right people at the right positions, and long term team

planning. Her company values being team-oriented rather than drive and salesmanship. She feels like she is learning a lot from internal leaders and peers, and sees it as a big benefit (R6 SE).

The last respondent was inspired by her first boss' leadership, her character, and approach to work and people (R8 CZ).

Many respondents mentioned transparency and not micromanaging as leadership styles they prefer in their answers. In Sweden there was a clear focus on a very value driven and more flat structure type of leadership in bigger corporate companies, but a bit more cut throat and performance driven in the start up space. This was actually quite similar in Czechia, with the difference being that multiple respondents mentioned it is a very hierarchical type of leadership they are used to in Czechia.

#### 4.4.2. Leadership and Gender

Lastly, we will examine how gender plays a role in leadership and what the participants thought about **equal gender representation** in the senior ranks of leadership. When asked whether it is common for women to have their level of position in the industry, some of the respondents appeared slightly uncomfortable talking about it before opening up to answer. On the other hand, some would immediately laugh saying something like “of course the very top does not look like the lower and middle management”, meaning there are no women at all at the very top.

Based on one respondent's answer, being a head of marketing is not completely common for women. She says it depends on the business, but that she mostly encounters men:

*“It's very hard to say. I think this is really hard to judge, but at the same time I certainly can't deny that men are more pushy in a lot of things, they are more assertive and so on, so they definitely don't get it for free.” (R1 CZ)*

Another thinks that across company leadership there is a high amount of women. But at the absolute top it is a male-dominated culture. However, all managers on her level (global head of) are female, which is attached to the fact that they have a female centric product at the core of the business (R2 SE).

Another respondent paints a similar picture, saying that the majority of leaders in assortment (female centric products) are women. In other parts of the management like IT, logistics and sales it looks a bit different. Still thinks her company is very good at having women

leaders (R3 SE).

Another comments on the different roles taken by men and women:

*“Most of the men are sales,... marketing, mostly women...” (R4 CZ)*

They have more women interested in positions at the company, since they have a female centric product at the core of the business. The company has a program to bring more men in on the levels of the company where it is dominated by women for more diversity (R4 CZ).

Another respondent discusses the high amount of women in digital marketing:

*“I think in Sweden, at least it is when I tried to you know, when I look at try to recruit people or look at similar CVs, I think that the ratio of women in digital marketing would probably be very high. And that's great.” (SE P5)*

Another respondent confirms the specific nature of the female centric products business. Assortment has a lot of women in leadership. But departments like expansion or sales are more varied. Would not say that there are lots of women in the higher management levels (R6 SE).

In general there are more women in leadership in marketing and HR, and more men in sales, logistics, finance, general management. Their company skewed because of the female focused product (beauty), there are many women in the top management. She continues:

*“And it is important [for women] to be there that women have many qualities over men and men have many qualities over women.” (R8 CZ)*

This respondent believes it is important to have both men and women in leadership because they each have different strong skills (R8 CZ).

Regardless of the respondents being from Czechia or Sweden, they all have a very similar experience with women's representation in the very top leadership. Because of the unique set up of their industries, due to having a female centric product at the core of the business, they experience a lot of women in the lower, mid, and even mid-senior management. But in the top positions like CEO or CMO, the leadership teams are mostly composed of men.

## 4.5. Extra: Gendered Opinions

During the interviews, there were some moments with answers especially charged with gender stereotypical answers. Here is a sample of such statements:

*“It's very hard to say. I think this is really hard to judge, but at the same time I certainly can't deny that men are more pushy in a lot of things, they are more assertive and so on, so they definitely don't get it for free.” (R1 CZ)*

*“Especially female, I think it's always like questioning, can I really do it? Am I good enough to do this? There's always a part of me that says, what if I fail? But I think it's more of a thing when I talk to my [male?] colleagues, they don't really have the same, they think that they're just great and they will do great.” (R2 SE)*

*“The man is just as tired from the job as the woman, so there is no reason for the woman to carry the burden of taking care of the family as such, of taking care of family emotionally, of course, women are better at it, but like me, I don't know, when it comes to cooking , clean up, tasks, pickup, delivery, this doctors, dentists, ordering.” (R8 CZ)*

*“And it is important [for women] to be there [in leadership] that women have many qualities over men and men have many qualities over women.” (R8 CZ)*

## 4.6. Summary of the Analysis

The respondents expressed multiple advantages about working in the industries. In the **fashion industry**, people enjoyed fashion, and liked that it **always changes and brings opportunities for development** (R1 CZ). The respondents working in the **beauty and consumer design products** mentioned working with **beautiful products that people like** as a main highlight.

It is worth mentioning that only respondents working in the **fashion industry (for both CZ and SE)** mentioned **unsustainability or overconsumption** as something they would like to see changed. Those working in beauty and consumer product design did not express these desires.

The Czech respondents thought that the higher-level job opportunities in the **Czech market are very limited** (e.g. R1 CZ), and that is why some people struggle to build up long-term high-level careers. None of the Swedish respondents mentioned not having enough opportunities in their market.

There appeared slight criticism of some of the companies in **Czechia** for having **social policies at work**, but only **on the outside**. On the other hand the respondents from **Sweden** had a very positive outlook on companies having **policies facilitating work-family balance**. However, both sides have exceptions.

**All Swedish** respondents had a **different background** compared to their current role. In their cases it facilitated promotions and added a bonus to their skills which provided a higher competence. In the Czech sample only one respondent (R1 CZ) stated a different background to her current job, and also labeled it as an advantage. The other **three Czech** respondents worked in **the same line of work** from the beginning of their careers.

**Analytical skills** were highlighted on multiple occasions as one of respondents' main advantages in competence (e.g. R2 SE). In their experiences with job promotions, there was a focus on **acquiring deep knowledge** in a specific area before progressing higher (R4 CZ, R5 SE). This notion was quite common in **both Czech and Swedish** groups.

There was a common thread in which about half of the respondents **questioned themselves** if they were good enough when they faced new promotion opportunities. The other half **did not question** their capabilities when promotions came. This split **did not occur along the Czech and Swedish axis**, suggesting it is more a personal trait than a cultural norm.

Many of the participants do realize the specifics of the challenges before accepting job promotion, but do not get paralyzed by it (R1 CZ). Innate **ambition** was a common thread with some (R2 SE, R7 CZ), and yet the exact opposite with others who did not set their mind on specific positions but rather it happened **over time organically** (R4 CZ). In hard situations the unwillingness to give up is what made them persevere (R3 SE).

The career development of the 8 respondents could be split to having **long tenure** in one company where they build a **robust rapport** (R4 CZ, R3 SE, R6 SE). Or they had jobs in **multiple companies** and thus had to rely more heavily on **skills and competences** for next job promotions (R1 CZ, R7 CZ, R8 CZ, R2 SE, R5 SE).

**Making a difference and having impact** were the most common **motivators** for the respondents. This often meant prioritizing the greater good and the organizational goals instead of personal agenda. Many of them also stated that they like to work and they like their jobs.



Most respondents thought about **work-life balance** at least in some capacity. From realizing good jobs can facilitate their lives in a specific way, to consciously slowing down temporarily to be able to take care of another aspect of their lives.

The family arrangement **differed between the participants with kids, but not on the Czech vs Swedish axis but instead depending on how many kids they have**. The ones with **one kid** (R7 CZ, R2 SE) were also those who did not live in the same area as their parents, meaning they **did not have regular help** from the grandparents. Also, they currently did not have any regular extra help, but one of the respondents (R7 CZ) said they used to have a nanny when her child was a baby.

Then the other group of respondents who have **two kids** (R4 CZ, R3 SE, R6 SE), had a more **robust support system** around them. With grandparents living near and helping out to extra child care. All of them said that they could not do their high level jobs without two things - supportive hands on husbands, and extra help.

Most respondents agreed that **networking is very important**, and for some of them it even led to new external or internal job opportunities (R1 CZ, R3 SE). Three of them thought about networking as something forced or artificial (R8 CZ, R5 SE, R3 SE), but paradoxically got a new job opportunity thanks to their network (R3 SE).

The most specific type of networking is **attending big industry events** that some respondents described as a great way to network more naturally (R1 CZ, R4 CZ, R2 SE, R5 SE). There was **no significant difference** between how respondents from Czechia and Sweden approached networking.

Sponsors can have a huge impact on one's career and some of the responders had exactly this experience (R4 CZ, R3 SE, R6 SE). It is important to point out that all of them are exactly those who have a long tenure in big international companies (10-20 years). They would progress every 2-4 years thanks to their **internal sponsors who would recommend them** for the new roles, so they never felt like they needed to change a company. This was the case **both in Czechia and Sweden**.

Many respondents mentioned **transparent and not micromanaging leadership styles** as a preference in their answers. This was **similar in Czechia**, with the difference that multiple respondents mentioned it is a very **hierarchical type of leadership** they are used to in **Czechia**. In **Sweden** there was a clear focus on a very **value driven and more flat type of leadership** in bigger corporate companies, but a bit more cut throat and performance driven in the start up space.

Respondents from **Czechia or Sweden**, have a very **similar experience with women's representation in the very top leadership**. Because of the unique set up of their industries, due to having a female centric product at the core of the business, they experience a lot of women in the lower, mid, and even mid-senior management. But once they look at the very top, like CEO or CMO positions, **the top leadership teams are mostly men**.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews with four respondents from Czechia, and four from Sweden told of real experiences of women in leadership, in the fashion, beauty, and consumer design industries. Through this process, four main differences between Czechia and Sweden have been found, answering to the research question - What is the experience of women in mid-senior to senior leadership positions in the fashion, beauty, and design industry, and does the experience differ between Czechia and Sweden?

The first significant difference is in the form of career opportunities in the Czech and Swedish job market. The Czech respondents thought that the higher-level job opportunities in the Czech market are very limited, and that is why some people struggle to build up long-term high-level careers. There was no mention of such complaints from the Swedish respondents.

Another difference in leadership experience comes down to complaints about Czechia for having social policies at work, but only superficially. On the other hand, the responders from Sweden had a very positive outlook on companies having policies facilitating work-family balance.

Third, all Swedish respondents originally had a different background compared to their current role. In their cases, it facilitated promotions and added a bonus to their skills which provided a higher competence. In the Czech sample, only one respondent had a different background from her current job and also acknowledged it as a big advantage in her career.

And lastly, there is a difference in the leadership style between the respondents from the two different countries. Multiple respondents mentioned that there is a very hierarchical type of leadership they are used to in Czechia. In Sweden there was a clear focus on a very value driven, and more flat structure type of leadership.

After the analysis these main themes of women's leadership experiences were recognized - The Industry and Market Specifics, The Journey to the Current Position, The People Affecting Ones Career, and Leadership. Under these themes fourteen different sub-topics appear. Out of these, only four revealed a significantly different experience between the respondents from Czechia and Sweden.

As with all research, there are limitations and this is no exception. I as the researcher myself could be considered as a limitation, because I work in the fashion industry. That could mean that I might have omitted some information that is a "common knowledge" for me, and not

asked about it further in the interviews. This limitation is a simultaneous strength, since my profile and network allowed me to sample the respondents for this research. In future research, two students could collaborate on similar research. One with the profile and contacts in the industry, who could facilitate the interviews with respondents. The other student, with no ties to the industry, could conduct the interviews and analysis.

Secondly, the sample included only women, due to the bachelor thesis scale and size. Of course, it would be beneficial to conduct similar research with a bigger sample of participants consisting of both women and men. To get a more well-rounded perspective on the external factors of women's barriers and facilitators.

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# Appendix

## Questionnaire in English

1. How did you get into the fashion/beauty/design industry?
  - a. Was it your dream or was it a matter of luck or accident?
  - b. What do you like about your job?
  - c. What don't you like? What would you change?
  
2. How did you get to your current position?
  - a. Was it your goal to get to a leadership position?
  - b. What steps did it take to get there?
  - c. How did you acquire the necessary skills and qualifications for your position?
  - d. What motivated you to say "yes" when offered the position?
  - e. Was there any hesitation connected to accepting the position?
    - i. What were the things you hesitated about? Was life-work balance an issue?
    - ii. How do you combine work and family life?
    - iii. Do you have someone to help you? Do you hire someone to help you with the household or child care?
  
3. What do you think were some things that helped you to get to a leadership position?
  - a. Was networking important in this respect? If yes, how do you network?
  - b. Did someone mentor you?
    - i. Is there a mentoring system in your company or is it an informal process?
  - c. Did someone sponsor you?
    - i. If yes, how did you find your sponsor?
  
4. Does your company promote a specific leadership/management style?
  - a. If yes, can you elaborate?
  
5. Is it common in your company that women rise to leadership positions?
  - a. Does your company support gender equality?
  - b. Does it provide any leadership programs? Does it provide mentoring programs?
  
6. Is there anything you would like to add that I did not address? Have any questions come to your mind during our discuss



## Questionnaire in Czech

1. Jak jste se dostala do módního/beauty/design průmyslu?
  - a. Byl to váš sen, nebo to bylo štěstí či náhody?
  - b. Co máte ráda na své práci?
  - c. Co se vám nelíbí? Co by jste změnila?
  
2. Jak jste se dostala na svou současnou pozici?
  - a. Bylo vaším cílem dostat se na vedoucí pozici?
  - b. Jaké kroky jste podnikla, aby jste se tam dostala?
  - c. Jak jste získala potřebné dovednosti a kvalifikaci pro vaši pozici?
  - d. Co vás motivovalo k tomu, abyste řekla „ano“, když vám nabídli novou pozici?
  - e. Váhala jste nad něčím, když jste přijímala novou pozici?
    - i. Nad čím jste váhala?
    - ii. Byla rovnováha mezi osobním životem a prací problémem?
    - iii. Jak kombinujete práci a rodinný život?
    - iv. Máte někoho, kdo vám pomáhá? Najímáte někoho, kdo vám pomáhá s domácností nebo péčí o děti?
  
3. Co si myslíte, že vám pomohlo dostat se na vedoucí pozici?
  - a. Byl networking v tomto ohledu důležitý? Pokud ano, jakým způsobem networkujete?
  - b. Měli jste mentora?
    - i. Existuje ve vaší firmě systém mentoringu nebo se jedná o neformální proces?
  - c. Měli jste sponzora?
    - i. Pokud ano, jak jste je našli?
  
4. Podporuje vaše společnost specifický styl vedení/řízení?
  - a. Pokud ano, můžete to upřesnit?
  
5. Je ve vaší firmě běžné, že se do vedoucích pozic dostávají ženy?
  - a. Podporuje vaše společnost rovnost pohlaví?
  - b. Poskytuje nějaké programy vedení? Poskytuje mentoringové programy?
  
6. Je něco, co byste chtěl dodat, co jsem nespomenula? Napadly vás během naší diskuse nějaké otázky?