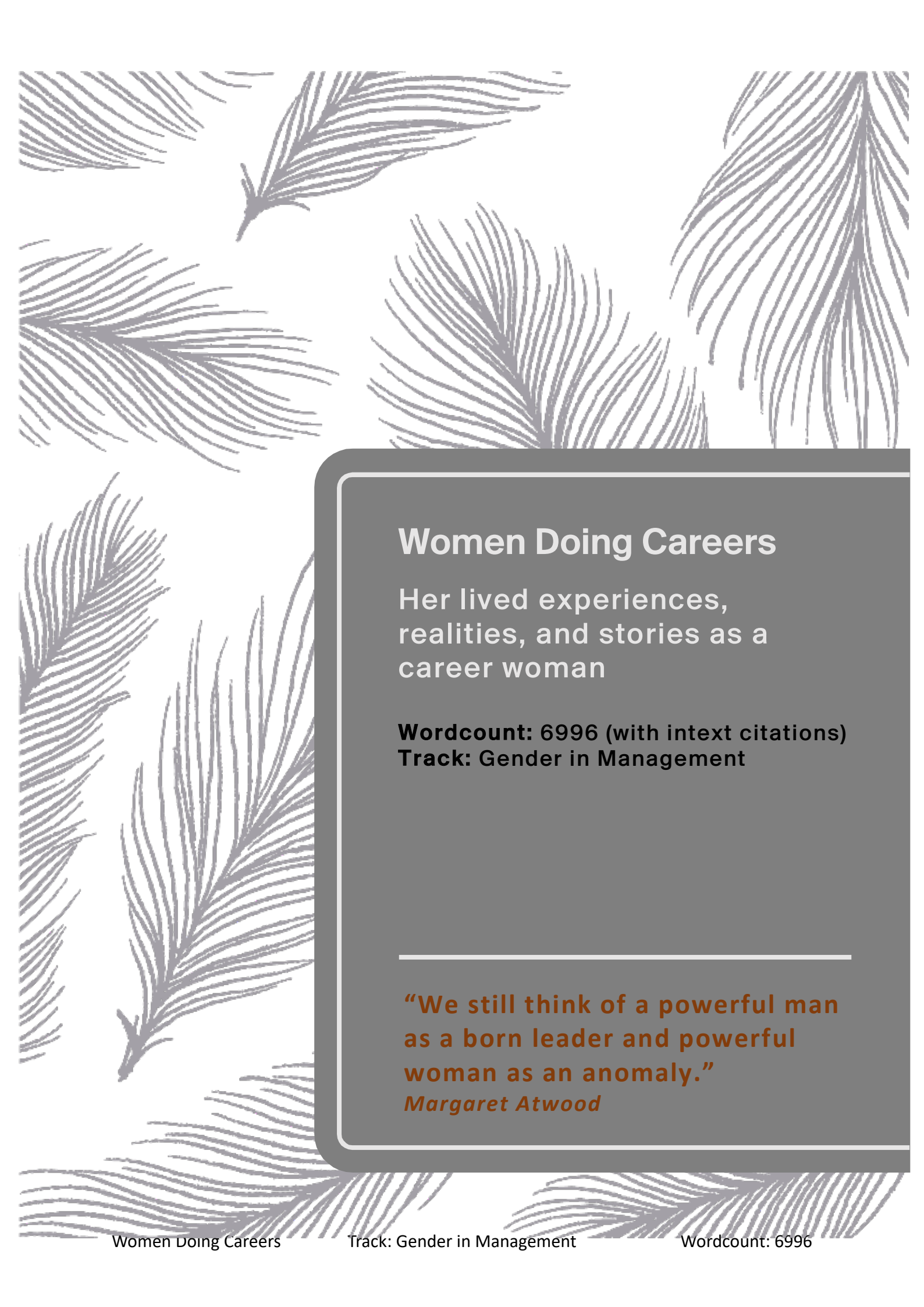




Women Doing Careers

Her lived experiences,
realities, and stories as a
career woman

Wordcount: 6996 (with intext citations)
Track: Gender in Management

**“We still think of a powerful man
as a born leader and powerful
woman as an anomaly.”**

Margaret Atwood

Abstract:

This paper conceptualizes the past research in the emerging field leadership and gender and career with a focus on women's careers, specifically the gender influences on women's career paths, advancement, and success to the top of the organizational echelons. Departing from the tenacious gender imbalance in leadership positions, this paper teases out the intricacies of conflicts, tensions, dilemmas, and barriers/biases in the contemporary organizations that still hinders career advancement for many women. Reviewing the past scholarship through a gender lens, the literature is critiqued through a deeper analysis that center's women's lived experiences, realities, and stories in doing their careers in contemporary times and unmask the gendered contradictions.

Keywords: Women's careers, leadership and gender, career path, advancement and success, gender inequality

Introduction:

On December 8, 2023, Professor Claudia Goldin won the Nobel Prize in economic sciences “for advancing our understanding of women’s labor market outcomes” demonstrating the gender differences in earnings (Goldin, 2024). This prize achievement is remarkable in many ways. First, it re-ignites the commitment to gender equality work in organizations, both in research and practice; and second, it signifies the state of precarity for women in the labor market, including the barriers and biases endured. Goldin’s research (2023) in gender pay inequity is one element displaying the gender differences in the labor market. Another critical measure of gender inequality is the present underrepresentation of women in leadership positions (Schein, 2007), creating a higher level ‘gender gap’ in terms of “formal power and authority, high status, and high incomes” (Billing and Alvesson, 2014, pp. 201). Although women in mid-managerial positions have high visibility, data suggests that advancement to leadership roles is “slow and uneven” across the globe (Schein, 2007, pp. 7). For example, the recent data of women in executive management across some robust economies shows that United States has 31% female representation, Sweden has 27% female representation, United Kingdom has 27% representation, France has 25% female representation, Germany has 18% female representation and Poland has 17% female representation (Allbright, 2023). While recent management research grounded in business cases suggests that companies with the greatest gender diversity in management teams were 25% more likely to have above-average profitability compared to companies with least gender diversity (Huang et al., 2019). Yet, female representation remains a minority in upper echelons of the organizations (Madsen, 2018). A social reality for women in the workplace that warrants further attention.

One may certainly raise the enquiry and probe why in the modern Western world does gender inequality at work persist now that women exceed men in higher education, have close parity in labor-market participation, and are highly represented in middle-management (Gillard and Okonjo-Iweala, 2020, pp. 19-27). These questions advance the investigation as to why women are not reaching the top echelons of the organizations. Historically, the dearth of women in higher ranks has been explained in leadership research primarily by gender prejudice, sex discrimination, structural challenges, systemic bias, and cultural discrimination (Netchaeva et al, 2022; Carli and Eagly, 2001, Burke, 2018). Whereas rationales and causes of gender imbalance at workplace in past career literature on gender have included explorations into other emerging topics like: work-life balance/conflict (Mayrhofer et al., 2008; Ballout, 2008), congruity/incongruity between the leader role and gender role (Eagly and Karau, 2002; koburtay et al, 2018); the persistent of gender-based barriers and biases at workplace (Oakley, 2000; Elsesser and Lever, 2011; Powell et al., 2002; Schein, 1993, 2007), women’s career choices (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; Frkal and Criscione-Naylor, 2021; Moe and Shandy, 2009; Ryan et al., 2007; Boardbridge, 2010; Anderson et al., 2010), the gender difference in executive career path (Lyness and Thompson, 2000; Gersick and Kram, 2002; White, 1995; Judge et al., 1995), the gender difference in interpreting career success (Jung and Takeuchi, 2015; Orser and Leck, 2010; Kirchmeyer, 2002; White, 1995; Herrbach and Mignonac, 2012), and more recently, the questioning and critiquing of the meritocracy concept (Sealy, 2010; Castilla and Bernard, 2010). All these explanations are presented as negative outcomes that work against women’s career paths and choices that hinder advancement, especially to leadership positions (Burke, 2014; Carli and Eagly, 2001).

The past scholarship is thus both emergent and fragmented, illuminating complex and singular findings. Though each piece of past knowledge allows for a rich in-depth insight.

Nonetheless, due to the narrow-focus of each research inquiry (e.g. only work-life balance investigation in Italian organizations) it can be difficult to holistically ascertain the general career experiences and success determinants for women (Chenevert and Tremblay, 2002; 922; Kirchmeyer, 2002, pp. 6). Nevertheless, the strong persistence of the ‘glass-ceiling’ that hinders women’s career advancement still exists (Powell, 2018, pp. 251; Carli and Eagly, 2001). With such inconclusive and complex evidence, it is worth further problematizing assumptions and past findings to consider why so few women reach senior positions.

Hence, I propose that we need to understand senior women’s career trajectories and life choices more holistically and in-depth to grasp the reality of women’s minority status in leadership positions. Therefore, in this review, the aim is to bring forth and integrate the ongoing debates in both leadership and gender scholarship as well as women’s career literature to uncover the gender differences resulting in workplace gender inequities. In doing so, it will enhance a deeper and all-inclusive understanding of women’s career path, career choices and causes for gender inequality in top positions. Simultaneously, it will help to demonstrate that the subject of women’s lived career experiences and success warrants further attention in both research and practice (Mah et al., 2023); and that despite modern liberal values, the pursuit for gender equality in workplace cannot be taken for granted. Accordingly, this paper will “review, critique and synthesize the literature” (Torraco, 2016, pp. 63) from a gendered lens by illuminating the relationships, weaving together themes and concepts that are intertwined and interlinked. Hence, the inclusion of literature is filtered based on ‘gender’ as the common factor. Henceforth, the overall purpose of this paper is to shed brighter lights to the problematization of women’s lived career experiences, barriers to advancement and success from the past scholarship, and to highlight the persistent leadership-gender imbalance in organizations.

Literature Review:

The literature review below will be formed by some key themes and concepts impacting/influencing women’s career trajectories. These are important because scholars suggest that they either hinder, sustain, or advance women’s careers in dynamic ways. Mostly, empirical research has focused on hindering factors, where gender barriers, biases and discrimination are the causes of workplace gender inequality. The key themes and concepts will therefore be woven together to enhance an understanding of the complexity and the diversity of women’s lived experiences. The structure of the paper is thus as follows. First, I’ll provide an understanding into gender inequality in the workplace, mainly critiqued by scholars who identify as feminist and that allows us to view the ‘social reality’ through women’s eyes and voices (Acker, 1990, 2012). The feminist voices in the literature will provide context to comprehend and cognize a reality from women’s standpoint, a reality that is critiqued to be limited in management and leadership field (Kirchmeyer, 2002). These voices will argue that the traditional perspective on upward career trajectories is gender-mute (Kirchmeyer, 2002; Perez, 2019; Acker, 1990, 2012). This view will further unpack the notion of career success in career literature – that is the foundation for the contested ‘choice discourse’ (Broadridge, 2010; Rottenberg, 2018) debating whether women’s choice of ‘opting out’ (Mainiero et al., 2005) (from senior roles) is a preference. Thereafter, I’ll examine some vital debates in scholarship about women’s ‘career paths’, women’s ‘career advancement’ women’s ‘career choices’ and the limited factors that researchers identify as advancing women’s careers. Subsequently, an examination of gender influence on female leaders and leadership will be examined that uncovers the careers of female leaders. The gender and leadership strand of literature will further bring out the problematization of women’s underrepresentation in leadership positions

and provide insights to career trajectories of senior female leaders who shattered the glass ceiling.

Understanding Gender and Workplace Inequality – Context

The foundational work of sociologist Joan Acker (1990), theorizing “gendered organizations”, explains gender inequalities through a feminist lens. Acker’s (1990) work has unveiled another perspective of organizations as being embedded with politics, power, and prejudice; thereby deconstructing the mainstream management research where organizations are imagined as rational, fair, and logical. Acker’s body of knowledge has therefore been prudent in expanding our understanding of the effects gender brings into the organizations, politicizing the modern processes of talent management, meritocracy, and human resource management. As explained by Acker (2012):

“The gendered substructure is created in the organizing processes in which inequalities are built into job design, wage determination, distribution of decision-making and supervisory power, the physical design of the workplace, and rules, both explicit and implicit, for behavior at work.” (2012: 215).

Undoubtedly, Acker’s (1990) original conceptualization of “gendered organizations” has challenged organizational theory and our conventions of fairness and equality in the organizational context; and further compelled us to be reflective and think beyond taken-for-granted gender-neutral assumptions that arguably bend and shape organizational logic, processes, and structure. This school of thought has thereby fueled feminist scholars to re-examine women’s career trajectories in organizations that are argued to occur on an ‘unfair playing field’ and are masked behind generic human capital discourses and practices (Acker, 1994, 2006; Mavin, 2001; Rottenberg, 2018).

More significantly, Acker’s (1990) theorizing has shaped and exposed the concept of the “ideal worker”, one that is heavily cited in research and one that indisputably favors the “prototypical man” (Guenther et al., 2018, pp. 12). This idealism is defined by the ability to work long-hours, available 24/7, willing to travel at short notice with minimal non-work responsibilities (Guenther et al., 2018). These are also argued as the essential traits of the male-career model that allows a competitive advantage for the men to succeed (Mavin, 2001). Similar to the concept of ‘ideal worker’, Goldin’s (2021) work describes this labor as ‘greedy work’ where the individual is engaged in double work (putting in endless hours) has an inflexible schedule, is travel-ready – and provided this fruit of labor, enjoys the economic amnesties of career advancement. Goldin (2021) thus argues that this enjoyment yields from a system that favors ‘greedy work’ but further fuels the gender gap, perpetuating the disparities between women and men ‘doing career’. Interestingly, the few studies enquiring into the careers of ‘high performing women’ have found similar traits of these women performing as an ‘ideal worker’ (Derks et al., 2016), who arguably managed to conform to the organizational expectations. An interesting stream of research from this perspective have labelled such female leaders as ‘Queen Bees’, mostly implying a negative connotation abiding as an ideal worker (Derks et al., 2016).

Additionally, other implicit gender biases causing workplace inequality have also been demonstrated in recent times. Some of these are described as the role of “benevolent sexism” (Hideg and Shen, 2019) and the “lack of career support” in attaining “strategic projects” (Keinert-Kisin, 2016) that further disadvantages women’s career advancement to senior roles.

What remains a dark reality is that the research concludes repeatedly that “women who have what it takes still suffer disadvantage by their gender alone” (Keinert-Kisin, 2016, pp.8); significantly politicizing the organizational context. It is also noteworthy to mention that the majority of visibility of women in senior level management, is mostly found in soft roles, such as HR, marketing, and legal – all of which are “less likely to lead to the CEO position” (Madsen, 2018, pp. 17).

However, one clear implication of past findings is the consensus that gender gap in leadership positions cannot be solely resolved without resolving the gender gap at home (Northouse, 2016; Cook and Glass, 2014; Glass and Cook, 2016; Goethals and Hoyt, 2017; Guenther, 2018; Kaufman and Bernhard, 2016). This of course puts the attention on who can be/become an ‘ideal worker’ in the organizations. It is therefore prudent that the career-care equation (Rottenberg, 2018) is complemented in leadership and career research as a critical factor, or women will remain conspicuous by their absence in the senior ranks of organizations. This however cannot be achieved without understanding the lived experiences of women’s career (and care) trajectories that can unmask their choices, recognize the barriers and biases faced, highlight their tactics/strategies for advancement, bring forth their navigation of organizational processes plus the challenges and enablers of ‘advancing a career’. In this sense, I argue that gender becomes a constitutive element in understanding women’s careers.

Gender influences on career path, advancement, and success

The Merriam-Webster dictionary (2022) currently defines career as a “profession for which one trains, and which is undertaken as a permanent calling – in a field for or pursuit of consecutive progressive achievement especially in public professional or business life.” From a scholarly lens, the term *career* stems from the Latin *carraria* that in colloquial language means “a carriage-road or road” that has come to mean “a person’s course or progress through life” (Gunz and Heslin, 2005, pp. 106). Nevertheless, the nature of work and career has significantly changed over time and subsequently the meaning of career has as well in the post-industrial societies (Dries, 2011, pp. 365). However, what’s perceived as a “normal, successful career” in organizations is still defined by one that involves “continuous service and steady, regular promotions to higher level in a corporate hierarchy” (Dries, 2011, pp. 378). Arguably, this is a career model that is favorably tilted for the male advantage (Rottenberg, 2018). In this sense, ‘career advancement’ is understood as a linear path, climbing upwards, with objective criterion for promotion and success (Madsen, 2018, p. 255). Complementing advancement, ‘career success’ signifies how an organization “defines and rewards success” (Sealy, 2010, pp. 184) that also most commonly involves a steady and continuous path of upward mobility (Heslin, 2005). Consequently, career success in the organizational context symbolizes a static nature, as a one-way uphill street, where primarily the ‘fitted’ candidates, such as ideal workers (Acker, 1990) stand a chance of success. Hence, examining career paths, advancement, and success in research from a gender lens brings out many complexities and center’s the multifaceted enquiry into women’s career trajectories and choices.

As explicitly contested, women’s careers advance quite differently compared to men and that women make different choices (O’Neil and Bilimoria, 2005; Michaelides et al., 2023); though the factors for the ‘career choices’ that affect advancement remain inconclusive in research (Leberman and Hurst, 2018, pp. 255; White, 1995, pp. 5). Accordingly, career aspirations could thereby be understood differently and subjectively (Leberman and Hurst, 2018; White, 1995)). As previously illustrated, the normative concept of career has traditionally been considered as a “meaningful progression” in a “relatively routine manner” within an

organization that has systematic and hierarchal structure (White, 1995, pp. 5). Yet, in extant literature the research enquiry through a gender-lens strongly advocates that women's careers, in most cases, are non-linear and interrupted (Mavin, 2001; Oakely, 2000; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; O'Neil et al., 2008; Hirschi and Valero, 2017; Grand and Tahlin, 2017; Kirchmeyer, 2002). This means, women's career paths encounter more career breaks and hurdles compared to their male counterpart, in terms of maternity leave, career shocks (such as job loss), career plateau (due to lack of promotion/advancement/progression) (Mavin, 2001; Oakely, 2000; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; O'Neil et al., 2008; Hirschi and Valero, 2017; Grand and Tahlin, 2017; Kirchmeyer, 2002). Consequently, it is possible that career advancement and success from a women's perspective may entail multiple meanings that go beyond the traditional concept of career success dominating generic career research. To quickly demonstrate, the study by Sturges (1999) found that women managers' conceptualization of career success differed from conventional notions, and success was perceived to be a choice of more "balanced life", in which career played only one part of the success story (Sturges, 1999, pp. 249). The author however further problematizes women's subjective notion of career success as being borne against the "traditional model of organizational success, based on hierarchical positions and with level of pay not readily available to them" and therefore may "choose to refocus their ideas of what success is" (Sturges, 1999, pp. 250). Similarly, the study of alternative explanation for the 'opt-revolution' unpacked the notion of choice (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). In this study the authors concluded that 'choice' was weighted against the traditional career model which was incompatible with how women operate in both work and non-work realms (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005) and therefore made different choices.

Furthermore, a review from 1990 to 2008 of women's careers in the 21st century highlighted career patterns and paradoxes that are inconsistent with the "male-defined constructions of work and career success" which still dominate both research and practice (O'Neil et al., 2008, pp. 727). O'Neil and authors (2008) highlighted four patterns that more holistically capture the career trajectories of women at work that are embedded in "women's larger-life context" (pp. 727). The findings of these patterns described that both families and careers take centrality in women's lives and that in the organizational context, both human and social capital are crucial for career development (O'Neil et al., 2008, pp. 731-33).

The authors further analyzed that these patterns are juxtaposed to the realities of organizational life and identified the paradoxes that misalign and are disconnected with women's career patterns (O'Neil et al., 2008). To elaborate, the organizational workings are perceived to demand a separation between private and public, where families are implied as a liability to women's career development (O'Neil et al., 2008 pp. 730-1). Similar findings have also been found in other research, where married women are regarded as less productive due to the possibility of career interruptions (i.e. as mothers) (Kim, 2004, pp. 600). Another paradox recognized in this extensive review was the organizational reward system that continuously appreciate upward mobile career model (O'Neil et al., 2008, pp. 732) that has been, as stated earlier, criticized to favor the default male-career model (Mavin, 2001). Moreover, the author highlighted how the accumulation of women's human and social capital "has not defeated the glass ceiling" (O'Neil et al., 2008, pp. 733) possibly questioning the gendered nature of meritocracy (Acker, 1990; Sealy, 2010). Whereas, it has as well been argued in leadership literature that both human and social capital are critical and value-added for women's upward mobility (Laud and Johnson, 2012; Bridges et al., 2021). More worrying, a recent study of women leaders on gender bias in leadership revealed that women are criticized on "facets of women's identity in an overt or subtle ways, such as race, age, parental status, attractiveness, and physical ability (Diehl et al., 2023). The authors, similar to review by O'Neil et al. (2008),

argued that these criticisms serve as barriers for women's advancement to leadership and that despite accomplishments, women are "never quite right" for promotion (Diehl et al., 2023).

Gender bias remains evident in both past (Oakely, 2000) and recent research (Diehl et al., 2023; Diehl and Dzubinski, 2018), effecting career path, advancement, and success. Taken together, the research evidence indicates that gender does play an influencing role on women doing career. Therefore, it is imperative that analysis of women's careers' are investigated through a gender lens that can offer alternative insights that holistically captures women's realities. Nevertheless, if we accept that career advancement should be assessed solely on principles of meritocracy, as "an objective assessment of an employee's career movement", (Carmeli et al., 2007, pp. 192) then this introspection herein on how women's career advance points to a gendered understanding of advancement processes in contemporary times (Kumra, 2014, pp. 269). Hence, the next section will critically analyze the gender influences on women's career advancement and unmask some of the tensions and conflicts that act as obstacles.

Gender influences on career advancement: tensions and conflicts

Research on women's career advancement and career patterns indicates that women are faced with complex and interwoven choices that constrain women's career trajectories (Powell and Mainiero, 1992; O'Neil et al., 2008; O'Neil and Bilimoria, 2005; Rua et al., 2021; Foort-Diepeveen et al., 2021; Broadbridge, 2010, Kumra, 2014). The main debate underpinning this complexity of choices and constraints is the work-life balance/conflict that affects women more than men (Broadbridge, 2010). The choice discourse herein is implied as a conflicted push (forced) or pull (free will/agency) factor of women's careers, thus creating a tension in women's career choices that permeates their narratives (Broadbridge, 2010). One such choice under debate is the notion of work-life balance and whether this balance is rather a work-life conflict, shaping women's careers.

Emerging research seeks to understand how the work-life balance (eg. Giguere et al., 2022; Costantini et al., 2021) and work-life conflict (Ballout, 2008; Mayrhofer et al., 2008) impacts career advancement and how they are related to career success from a gender perspective. The underlying assumption of this strand of research is based on the women's "relational-orientation" in choosing family over career and thus giving more value to the subjective measure of success, such as job satisfaction and work-life balance (Mainiero and Sullivan 2005; Mavin, 2001). As a result, women's career development is found to be constructed uniquely and differently from men. Meaning, women's careers are described as "zig-zags", whereas men's careers have a ladder-like structure (Gersick and Kram, 2002, pp. 31). These 'zig-zags' can be interpreted as career breaks, career interruptions, career choices (active and/or passive), which are important life decisions that entail family obligations and/or (unpaid) care-work (O'Neil et al., 2008; Richardson, 1996; Madsen, 2018). In this sense, the relational-oriented career decisions women make are considered to be of family and life choices, which take center stage in women's decision-making processes (Frkal and Criscione-Naylor, 2021, pp. 3); however, they are shown to act as an obstruction to career advancement. Albeit, these 'choices' could as well be thought of as an anomaly from the traditional career-model that celebrates the ladder-like careers over the zigzags career pattern in contemporary organizations; despite flexible working attitudes and policies (Perrigino et al., 2018). Some authors therefore empirically question the extent of "free choice" women have in making career-care life decisions and whether this "choice equates to preference" or tension in making conscious trade-offs (Broadridge, 2010, pp. 244).

A consequence of these tensions has a direct impact on women's careers that, at times, is misunderstood when it is inferred that women have low work-centrality and low motivation to work (O'Neil et al., 2008). Hence, this misconception has shown to adversely affect women's career advancement (O'Neil et al., 2008; Mayrhofer et al., 2008). As an example, the phenomenon of motherhood-penalty (a career break) provides strong evidence of the challenges women face in the workplace after returning from maternity leave (Mayrhofer et al., 2008). These career breaks are argued to convert into a competitive disadvantage (Mavin, 2001), given the nature of the normative male-centric career advancement model that disfavors interruptions (White, 1995; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). An interesting analysis by BBC on female leadership (June 8, 2022) alluded to the need for women to "secure senior jobs in the first decade of their careers", otherwise it will prove challenging to climb the corporate ladder (Bishop, 2022). This suggests that "timing" is critical in "aiming for leadership roles", ideally before embarking on the parenthood journey to avoid the "motherhood penalty" (Bishop, 2022). Notwithstanding, it is often during the first decade post-graduation that women think about having a family; thus creating a time-conundrum between the choice of career or family (Metz and Kulik, 2014, pp. 179; Goldin, 2021), positioning these (e.g. career and family) as 'strange bedfellows'. Thus, the strange bedfellows, require career women and the mother, as coming together with some friction, despite the challenge of realistically negotiating a 'balance' (Rottenberg, 2018). The onus to ensure this 'balance' nevertheless lies on the individual women. Consequently, the embracing of 'individualization and self-responsibilization' of care work in the neo-liberal discourse thereby "serves to obscure the gendered socio-cultural and power dynamics that profoundly disadvantage mothers" (Brien et al., 2023). From this prism, Rottenberg (2018) critique of 'the rise of neoliberal feminism' challenging the 'balance' discourse is taking strong roots by anti-neo-liberal feminists. In this analysis of gender (in)equality, particularly the career-care equation, where the onus of creating a "felicitous balance between public and private aspect of self" is placed solely on the individual women, is entrenched in neoliberal rationality in which the individual is self-responsible for his/her career (Rottenberg, 2018, pp. 13-15). This line of *raison d'être* is also found in popular feminist manifestos, such as *Lean In* (Sandberg, 2013), that encourages women to negotiate a 'happy' balance, fight our 'internal battles' and not opt-out – but rather 'lean in' (Sandberg, 2013). Critical feminists have of course counter-argued that such "empowerment manifestos" of 'leaning in' neglect structural barriers, gender bias and even intersectionality's of race and class that impacts majority of women (Rottenberg, 2018, pp. 81). Nonetheless, the research on motherhood penalty and work-life balance/conflict repeatedly confirms the struggle of choices and barriers women face in their career paths taking the majority of the care and domestic duties, stalling women's equitable career advancements (Kmec, 2011; Metz and Kulik, 2014; Brien et al., 2023). It is thus imperative to apply an equity perspective to women's career that can help promote rather than impede advancement.

Furthermore, though some recent empirical findings reinforce the gender-structure in larger society – even by demonstrating that though men do take some part in the domestic affairs, women continue to be the main caretaker for both care-and-household duties (Galinsky, et al., 2008; Belkin, 2008; Craig, 2006; Pailhe and Solaz, 2006). This thus entails a greater career penalty for women. As a direct consequence, research both inside and outside the contested 'choice discourse', argues that women are opting-out of the organizational careers due to the double-burden of paid-and-unpaid labor; generating a substantial erosion of human-resource capital (Fitzsimmons and Callan, 2016). Although the 'choice' scholars make an apparently valid argument that by making a 'choice' (Anderson et al., 2010) women are exercising their agency to make different life choices, a closer inspection reveals that the

underlying causes are associated with the lack of advancement, working twice as hard, the inflexibility after becoming a parent, which altogether act as the influencing dynamics for making the self-decision to leave, hence opt-out (Anderson et al., 2010). Interestingly, similar evidence of ‘opting-out’ also emerge in feminine-like occupations (Collard, 2001; Addi-Raccah and Ayalon, 2002) potentially calling to question the workings of structures and systems of the organizations as ‘gendered organizations’ (Acker, 1990). While more research is required in this particular topic seeking to understand the work-care potential challenges, there is however some research evidence indicating an “incompatibility” of work-life balance policies/idea with the “senior management post” (Drew and Murtagh, 2005); which may partially explain the pipeline leakage and the underrepresentation of women in senior posts. Despite changing family attitudes towards sharing care responsibilities in the neo-liberal era and modern culture, these seems to remain largely idiosyncratic. Research shows that women are not only expected to be taking care of domestic responsibilities due to their gender role (Metz and Kulik, 2014), but they also spend more time on these tasks resulting in a double/second shift for women (Foort-Diepeveen et al., 2021, pp. 472). Hence, the work-life balance turned work-life conflict has pushed many women to make an either/or choice, ‘a cost-benefit calculus’ (Rottenberg, 2018); resulting in many women stalling their careers (Broadbridge, 2010), leaving the workforce, or working part-time (Foort-Diepeveen et al., 2021, pp. 472). Henceforth, the critical inquiry into women’s choices and especially the “opt-out debate” (Frkal and Criscione-Naylor, 2021) have therefore questioned whether these choices are “genuine” (Foort-Diepeveen et al., 2021, p. 472; Broadbridge, 2010, pp. 256). In view of this, these authors argue rather than women choosing to opt-out, they are being ‘pushed-out’ due to the prevailing structures and cultures that reinforce gender bias and neglects to understand the realities of mothers and/or dual-income families of the 21st century (Ryan et al., 2007; Moe and Shandy, 2009). Albeit this remains a contested issue and more research is required to tease out this phenomenon. Research however confirms that women’s careers are different from men and therefore the gender-lens is imperative. It is no surprise that scholars have therefore described women’s careers with metaphors such as “cross-currents in a river” (Powell and Mainiero, 1992), ‘labyrinths’ (Carli and Eagly, 2015) and “off-ramps and on-ramps” (Hewlett, 2007), illuminating the non-linear nature and the complex career paths of women imbued with tension and conflicts that influence advancement.

Nevertheless, while we have ample research understanding the definitional, structural and normative barriers and tensions faced by women in their career journey to the top, we have however little insights into the sources of women’s career advancement and success. Nonetheless, there are recent research initiatives to fill this gap (Ber et al., 2021). As Birdges et al. (2021, pp. 372) emphasize that “despite pervasive barriers, some women do prosper”; although more research is required to understand what the success factors are (Ber et al., 2021). Next, I’ll tease out the few factors advancing women’s careers, though they further unmask the peculiarities of women doing careers.

Factors advancing women’s careers – a critical analysis

From a theoretical perspective, there are many career tactics proposed in the career literature on advancing one’s career objectively (i.e. vertically). These are however positioned as gender-neutral that serve as a strategic tool for career planning, failing to take the gender factors into account (Mavin, 2001). While the traditional view of career advancement may be informed by a meritocratic measure (i.e. human capital), the reality may be experienced differently, especially for women (Sealy, 2010; Perez, 2019). Hence it is worth exploring critically, how women’s career’s advance and succeed in organizations through a gender lens

to bring out an understanding of *both* the enabling and impeding factors in women's career paths – unmasking the challenges within advancement and success.

Despite limited empirical knowledge, one strongly supported finding in the literature is the value of social and human capital for women's upward mobility (Laud and Johnson, 2010; Bridges et al., 2021). In a study of upward hierarchical advancement and career tactics, women reported that education added a positive contribution to their profile and created “a more level playing field in male-dominated organizations (Laud and Johnson, 2010, pp. 247). Similarly, studies have reported positive benefits for career advancement for women who have accumulated *both* social and human capital (social capital being a mix of bonding, bridging, networking relationships) (Gorska et al., 2021). Although historically and currently, women are excluded from social networks known as the “old boys club” (Oakley, 2000, pp. 328), there is an assumption and some empirical evidence that women choose not to take part in these networks, where the engagement is inferred as a ‘political behavior’ and does not align with women's perception of meritocracy, ways of working, values, or authenticity (Sealy, 2010). The boys club is however an exclusive group, where men in power have a material advantage in social capital that “allows them to benefit from exclusive ties” (Gorska et al., 2021, pp. 79); alas providing with an unfair competitive advantage – for example, where social capital is given more value over human capital in promotional decisions (Sealy, 2010). On the other hand, women are perceived as a threat to the male-dominated sub-culture of these networks and therefore efforts are made to keep them excluded (Oakley, 2000, pp. 329). Nevertheless, some research argues that women who manage to apply their human, social and cultural capital (i.e. use of appropriate language, behavior, norms) can gain ‘legitimacy’ and trust from leaders to advance their careers (Bridges et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2022). Few studies also advocate that “perceived competence” can override gender bias (Hu et al., 2022) and favor women's career success, though the onus is persistently put on women to prove herself and her merits (Sealy, 2010). Not to mention, the ambiguity with ‘perception’ based decisions in organizations as well deemed problematic (Phelan and Rudman, 2010). Nevertheless, proving capable beyond the meritocratic measures can also result in women facing a double-edge sword dilemma: at times women can succeed through perceived competency (i.e. Hu et al., 2022 study), yet conversely, at other times, they may receive a backlash trying to legitimize their authority (Vial et al., 2016, pp. 401).

Another debate in enabling factors for women's career advancement is centered around the ‘female advantage’ based on the contemporary transformational leadership style that organizations today are urged to practice (Grant, 1998; Helgesen, 1990; Rosener, 1995). Transformational leadership is imagined and performed as a style embedded with feminine characteristics (i.e. caring, supportive, collaborative); hence providing an advantage to female leaders who are imagined as ‘transformational’ (Helgesen, 1990). Some scholars have also advocated for organizations to “place greater emphasis on feminine characteristics” to be “successful in an increasingly diverse and competitive economic environment” (Powell et al., 2002, pp. 181). Supporting this viewpoint, a few recent yet niche studies have explored the benefits of having more female leaders and the advantage of female leadership from a variety of different factors (i.e. Devicienti et al., 2019; Hu et al., 2022; Koburtay et al., 2018). To briefly exemplify, the findings in the study by Devicienti et al. (2019) showed that female managers in Italy were “more prone to grant part-time arrangements to employees who requested them”, an organizational action of work-life balance policy that benefits employees (2019, pp. 923). The study further went to suggest that these altruistic actions may be profound by mitigating “the problem of underemployment...and contributes to the work-life balance of workers” (Devicienti et al., 2019, pp. 923) – thereby favoring the female workforce. While this study

addresses the need of flexibility for those with care duties, it only addresses a fraction of the challenges that women face in advancing their careers. Though part-time work and work-family policy initiatives are observed as positive organizational actions (Costantini et al., 2021), these tend to be negatively evaluated as career interruptions and breaks that goes against the standard career ladder to advance vertically (Metz and Kulik, 2014). From an organizational perspective, these actions act as ‘enabling factors’ for women’s career sustainability (Goni et al., 2020), though not always in favor of advancement. Hence, it is fundamental to differentiate such enabling factors as being sufficient versus being essential for women’s career advancement and success.

Women’s career journey to leadership: gender barriers and biases

The data on gender inequality in leadership positions globally is argued to be a strong indicator of gender barriers and biases still persistent in workplaces (Kumra, 2014; Madsen, 2018). As women are still a minority in senior roles, the examination of the leadership-gender imbalance is critical to gain a broader understanding of women’s careers, above and below the glass ceiling (Glass and Cook, 2016). To enhance our understanding of the realities of women’s careers, scholars have relied on metaphoric language of glass (i.e. glass ceiling). This figure of speech began with the infamous “glass ceiling” metaphor, coined in the 1980s by Marilyn Loden (Madsen, 2018, pp. 50). Simply, the ‘glass ceiling’ symbolized the invisible yet powerful upper limit by which women can climb to in the organizational hierarchy (Madsen, 2018). Alternatively put, it is a concrete but transparent rooftop forcefully hindering women’s career aspirations and advancement (Powell and Butterfield, 2015). The findings of glass ceiling research have been consistent in the last four decades and continue to plague women’s lived experiences in the workplace (Zaleznik, 1970; Wichert, 2011; Madsen 2011; Powell et al., 2015).

Evidence of gender barriers and biases also exists above the glass ceiling. Despite shattering the glass ceiling, research on female leaders shows evidence of precarious appointment of women in C-suit and/or Board positions, as a tactic to utilize their feminine qualities and traits to “save the sinking boat” (Madsen, 2018, pp. 51). Research by Ryan and Haslam (2005) investigating such appointments describe this phenomenon as the ‘glass cliff’, symbolizing women’s rocky and risky nominations to top positions. While there is consistent evidence of the “think manager, think male” bias over time and space (Schein, 1993, 2007), the glass cliff appointments signify “think crisis, think female” (Ryan et al., 2011), as feminine traits are imagined as vastly desirable in “times of crises” (Madsen, 2018, pp. 51; Zenger and Folkman, 2020). However, various explanations are postulated to make sense of this glass-cliff phenomenon. Some of these are repeated explanations of “in-group favoritism” as well as protecting “male power elites” – both alluding to the idea that decision-makers may be favoring and saving their in-group male members (Madsen, 2018, pp. 51). Accordingly, male members “may be willing to appoint women to glass cliff positions as they make obvious scapegoats when things inevitably go wrong” (Madsen, 2018, pp. 51). On the contrary, women are believed to accept these appointments believing that they may not be afforded another such career advancement/success opportunity (Ryan and Haslam, 2007; Ryan et al. 2007). As such, research provides some convincing evidence that there exists barriers and biases, fueled by overt and covert gender bias and discrimination (Oakley 2000), both above and below the glass ceiling.

Another rationalization for the leadership-gender imbalance is explained by the social role theory known as the “gender (in)congruity theory” (Eagly and Karau, 2002). This

sociocultural theory broadly highlights the social division of labor by gender, the differences in social roles of males and females, their behaviors, attitudes and arguably, the segregated work roles in society. Accordingly, the theory brings forth a prejudice towards female leaders, which is a perceived incongruence between the female gender role and the leadership role (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Thus, following this theory, this belief of incongruency could potentially explain some of the deficits suffered by women in society, specifically the economic subordination and pressure to perform domestic duties (Grayling, 2019, pp. 468). These deficits are based on the gender and cultural interpretations of ‘prescriptive’ (beliefs about how women should act) and descriptive (beliefs about how women typically act) stereotypes (Powell et al., 2002; Elsesser and Lever, 2011; Smith et al., 2021). In brief, stereotypes are the “belief about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of certain group” (Hilton and von Hippel, 1996, pp. 240 as cited in Powell et al., 2002, pp. 177). Due to these stereotypes, previous studies in leadership research have thus found that a good manager is predominantly described by masculine characteristics that are mostly associated with male traits (e.g. being agentic, assertive, risk taker) (Powell et al., 2002, pp. 178). Consequently, female leaders are stereotyped as having “less potential” and evaluated as “less favorably” for leadership (Elsesser and Level, 2011, pp. 1556). This leadership stereotype has thereby observed as one of the significant elements hindering women’s advancement to leadership positions (Ragins, 1998; Ridgeway, 2001).

Women are thus persistently faced with a double bind, either being a female or being a leader, which from the data of the underrepresentation of women in upper echelons seems socially irreconcilable. In review, the journey of women in leadership roles is fraught with tenacious barriers, deeply ingrained biases, and systemic discrimination, hindering their full participation and representation in various spheres of influence.

Conclusion:

No country to date has achieved gender parity. Data strongly shows that women and men are not equally represented in society with regards to political and economic participation (Perez, 2019). Not even in the most gender-equal Nordic countries from where I am writing (Grand and Tahlin, 2017). While women have made tremendous progress since the 1970s marking their entry into the labor force, the existing discrepancies in workplace gender equality as described herein remains daunting. A plethora of issues and explanations for the challenges in women doing career were uncovered in this brief review. The research at the intersection of gender and leadership equally unveils many barriers and biases that women still endure, many due to the socio-cultural gender binary reductionism. The prevalence of gender stereotypes, unequal access to opportunities, and discriminatory practices underscore the need for sustained efforts to dismantle systemic barriers and foster inclusive environments. Though the extant literature in both leadership and career field can be best recapitulated as complex, fragmented, and multifaceted, with some inconclusive findings (Billing and Alvesson, 2014, pp. 206) – the preliminary truths still unmask women’s lived experiences, realities, and powerful stories in the contemporary workplace.

Going forward, there is however limited research seeking to understand the dynamics of career advancement and success of women who do succeed, and who may (or may not) have faced hurdles along her career journey. There is therefore a need for research to include disparate and more female voices, to shift the inquiry from the sources of gender inequality to the sources of equality by including women’s voices and lived experiences above the glass ceiling, while simultaneously being critical and cautious of past scholarships that indicates

strong forces of gender bias. Hence, the shift in discourse is not a means to disregard the barriers and biases that past research has demonstrated. Instead, it is a means to understand how women may have countered these gender boundaries in organizations argued to be designed by men for men (Kumra et al., 2014). Hence, the research inquiry should acknowledge these gender implications and thereby seek to understand and explore the sources of success factors and thus raise different questions, from different perspectives. It means to embrace a holistic framework by understanding what is not working but also asking what is working by centering the inquiry on women's voices and experiences in specific contexts and time. This pursuit is not only a wise business-imperative (i.e. talent retention, gender diversity) but also a moral imperative in which all members of society can have equal opportunities to advance, succeed and make genuine choices – on equal terms, despite their gender role. Only through concerted action and unwavering commitment, in both research and practice, can we realize the full potential of women's careers and pave the way for a more equitable and just organizations and society. Women doing careers does not only require continuous research and storytelling, but a renewed commitment to change and gender equality.

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