



**LUND UNIVERSITY**  
School of Economics and Management

# **Challenges experienced by female executive managers with children**

**A study of work-life balance, glass ceiling and gender gap within management in Sweden**

By

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# Abstract

Academic research has tried to explain the challenges women in executive positions face in connection to work-life balance, glass ceiling and the gender gap in management. However, these previous studies have been made mainly quantitatively. Therefore, this study aims to go beyond the numbers by using a qualitative research approach. This thesis has collected in-depth data through interviews with women who have children and an executive position in Sweden.

This study describes the challenges that executive women face in their career. Challenges, such as women feeling pressured to prove themselves, being perceived negatively or being criticised, were exposed. Moreover, informal networks, stereotyping and the glass ceiling were brought up by interviewees as potential impediments. Further, this study shows that it is hard for female managers to find work-life balance. It has revealed the importance of setting personal priorities, both at work and in life in general. The study also presents the importance of support to enable executive managers to advance in their career and find a work-life balance.

Keywords: Leadership, Management, Gender Gap, Glass Ceiling, Work-Life Balance, Executive Women, Networks, Diversity, Sweden

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# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1 Background	5
1.2 Problem Area	6
1.3 Purpose and Research Questions	7
<b>2. Theory</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1 Leadership and Management	9
2.2 Gender Gap in Management	10
2.3 Glass Ceiling	12
2.4 Work-Life Balance	13
2.5 Illustrative Model	16
<b>3. Methodology</b>	<b>17</b>
3.1 Research Approach	17
3.2 Data Collection	17
3.2.1 Characteristics of the Interviewees	19
3.3 Data Analysis	20
3.4 Reliability, Validity and Generalisability	21
<b>4. Empirical Findings and Analysis</b>	<b>23</b>
4.1 Leadership and Management	23
4.1.1 Female and Male Leadership	23
4.1.2 Characteristics of an Executive Manager	25
4.1.3 Collaboration	26
4.2 Gender Gap in Management	26
4.2.1 Expectations, Norms and Stereotypes	26
4.2.2 Gender Diversity	28
4.2.3 Criticism	29
4.3 Glass Ceiling	29
4.3.1 Perception of the Glass Ceiling	29
4.3.2 Experience of the Glass Ceiling	33
4.4 Work-Life Balance	34
4.4.1 Finding Balance	34
4.4.2 Support	36

4.5 Additional Interesting Findings	39
4.5.1 Self-Employment	39
4.5.2 Suggestions from Executive Managers	40
4.5.3 Questions that Men Never Get	40
<b>5. Discussion</b>	<b>42</b>
5.1 Research Question 1: How do female executive managers with children perceive their work-life balance?	42
5.1.1 Finding Balance	42
5.1.2 Asking for Support	43
5.2 Research Question 2: What are the challenges experienced by female executive managers in their career?	44
5.2.1 Leadership and Management	44
5.2.2 Taking Risks	45
5.2.3 Stereotyping	46
5.2.4 Glass Ceiling	46
5.2.5 Networks	47
5.2.6 Criticism	47
5.3 Additional outcomes	47
5.3.1 Suggestions from Executive Managers	47
5.3.2 Questions Men Never Get	48
<b>6. Conclusion</b>	<b>49</b>
6.1 Key Findings and Conclusions	49
6.2 Contributions and Implications	50
6.3 Limitations of the Study	50
6.4 Future Research	51
<b>References</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Interview Questions</b>	<b>58</b>

# 1. Introduction

*Firstly, this chapter introduces the reader to the background of this thesis, including a description of the context for female executive managers in today's society. Secondly, it states the problem area, with main focus on Sweden. Lastly, the purpose and research questions are presented.*

## 1.1 Background

Historically, gender equality has been a challenge in society. The unequal treatment of men and women originates from the past, where men were seen as the heart of society. Men were portrayed as more dominant, masculine and powerful than women (Coates, 2016). Also, within leadership and management, men have dominated the scene for a long time by possessing the majority of higher management positions (Lundeteg, 2018). Since 2009, the time amount for recruiting and interviewing managers has nearly doubled. In addition to managerial skills, recruiters nowadays focus on how managers fit into the organisation's culture (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003). Moreover, a lot of emphases is put into creating heterogeneous organisations that value diversity within the organisation on all levels, to foster both growth, innovation as well as high performance (Hewlett, Marshall & Sherbin 2013; Johns, 2013).

Regardless of the growing trend for diversity within organisations, women are still a minority in leadership positions within the corporate sector in the European Union (EU) (Jourová, 2016). With an average of only 23,3% representation of women on the boards of the largest publicly listed companies in the EU, gender balance has not yet been achieved (Jourová, 2016). However, a significant increase has been seen in the trend for women entering into leadership positions in the EU (Jourová, 2016). To support dual-earning families and participation of women on the labour market, the European Commission (2018) has adopted a policy-package. This policy-package aims to improve the EU legislation in the contexts of flexible work arrangement and parental leave (European Commission, 2018). One of the biggest challenges for families in

the twenty-first century is to find a balance between work and life (Walker, Wang & Redmond, 2008). Moreover, due to rising economic pressures and increased cost of living, families often need two wage earners. Not only is balancing career responsibilities causing stress but also creating conflicts for both men and women. Even though both genders are experiencing inter-role struggle, it is more frequently a challenge for women to find a work-life balance (Walker, Wang & Redmond, 2008).

Women have impediments that men usually do not have in their careers, such as sexist bosses, networks favouring men or job positions that do not consider the family (Helgesen & Goldsmith, 2018). Moreover, Helgesen and Goldsmith (2018), note that even though women over the past 30 years have made some improvements in almost all sectors, organisational structures are still not favouring women's talents and capabilities. The amount of female managers has increased in recent years (Deal & Stevenson, 1998). Despite the increase in (lower) managerial ranks, women occupy only a low number of board member positions. One way to describe it is the glass ceiling effect, a wall or barrier stopping women from achieving executive positions (Deal & Stevenson, 1998). Nowadays, there is a growing trend in Swedish companies and organisations towards having a gender balance. Having said that, gender balance has not been achieved yet. This illustrates that the glass ceiling has been cracked, yet perhaps not entirely broken (Källqvist & Äremann, 2017).

## 1.2 Problem Area

Even though Sweden is ranked as the third most gender equal country in the world, Sweden is not gender equal when considering higher management positions (World Economic Forum, 2018). When it comes to legislators, senior officials and managers, Sweden only hold the 31st place (World Economic Forum, 2018). These deviating rankings indicate that Sweden is much further behind concerning managerial and leadership gender equality. Furthermore, the gender inequality shows in AllBright's report from 2018, where only 1 out of 10 Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) in Sweden listed companies are women. This report reveals the absence of

women in leading positions in Sweden listed companies, leading to an unbalanced situation with a lack of diversity.

According to AllBright's report (2018), women face a lot of challenges, e.g. being a minority when entering into executive positions. Moreover, they also have the challenge of keeping a good work-life balance (Johns, 2013). Mothers tend to feel responsible for a larger share of family obligations (Hardoy, Schøne & Østbakken, 2017). Therefore, work-life balance has to be considered as one of the main impediments for women with successful careers and higher management positions (Johns, 2013).

### 1.3 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to present how female managers at executive level perceive work-life balance, the glass ceiling effect and gender gap within management. Therefore, a qualitative approach was chosen to collect insights, emotions and feelings from executive women. Thus, the study aims to present the perceptions of executive women with children who have made it to a career in top management.

By using previous research as a foundation, which has been mainly statistical, this thesis aims to go beyond the numbers and reach to a more personal level with the perceptions of the respondents. Thus, the findings aim to narrow the existing research gap. Similar efforts have not managed to present in-depth qualitative data. This study aims to contribute to filling this gap. Moreover, this research aims to provide companies with more in-depth knowledge of the female executive managers in their organisation, e.g. companies that value diversity as one of their core values. Furthermore, this study can offer information for young professional females and students in the development of their career, in the context of career opportunities and work-life balance.



The thesis aims to answer the following research questions to fulfill the purpose presented above:

- 1. How do female executive managers with children perceive their work-life balance?*
- 2. What are the challenges experienced by female executive managers in their career?*

## 2. Theory

*Chapter 2 aims to present a selection of the most relevant and applicable theories and concepts in connection to this thesis and its research questions. This chapter includes descriptions of the four main topics, i.e. Leadership and Management, Gender Gap in Management, Glass Ceiling and Work-Life Balance. Furthermore, the theory chapter includes an illustrative model of the theory that has been developed by the thesis authors.*

### 2.1 Leadership and Management

Mintzberg (2009) claims that it is difficult to separate management and leadership in practice. For the sake of this study, the authors have chosen to not separate leadership and management in accordance with Mintzberg (2009). Instead, the researchers of this study consider these concepts to be equivalent. Mintzberg (2009) also notes that one wants to be managed by people who also can lead and be led by people who can manage as well. Furthermore, as explained by Darr (2011), “Successful managers integrate these various roles and are likely to engage in them without making a clear distinction” (p. 8). Thus, Darr (2010) indicates that successful managers do not separate leadership from management. Moreover, according to Mintzberg (2009) managers have coped with different types of problems through times, yet the key features and aspects of human behaviour stay relatively persistent and stable, and so does management in itself. As management is neither a science or a practice, it does not change as much over time, as for example, medical practice does (Mintzberg, 2009). According to Lämsä (2010), management in Sweden is functional-centered rather than person-centered. The leaders in Sweden see themselves as one of the team members and not as a stand-alone ruler. As Sweden is a fairly gender equal country, Swedes are relatively indifferent to the gender of their direct manager. Furthermore, Swedish leaders are considered to value the soft principles of leadership (Lämsä, 2010).

Burke and Collins (2001) state that there is a difference between female and male leadership styles. Furthermore, Gardiner and Tiggemann (1999) argue that the behaviour of women in male-dominated corporations is more analogous to men in those industries. Women incline to lead with interpersonal style, yet in male-dominated companies, this tendency decreases. When comparing male- and female-dominated industries, one can see that women in fields with a majority of men are much more task-oriented than in industries where women are the majority (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999). In addition, Helgesen & Goldsmith (2018) report that women generally describe success in another way than men. In addition to position and money, women value highly the life at work, great co-workers and clients. Moreover, they want their impact to make a positive change in the world. In case the company is not capable of offering expected qualities or conditions, women are often likely to leave jobs (Helgesen & Goldsmith, 2018).

## 2.2 Gender Gap in Management

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the gender gap is defined as “a difference between the way men and women are treated in society, or between what men and women do and achieve.” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Further, the World Economic Forum (2018) states that there are benefits of decreasing the gender gap. According to the World Economic Forum (2018), it is especially important to enable women to have leading positions within the workforce and thus, be part of decision-making. European Commission (2018) states in their report that having gender diversity in the workplace will create economic prosperity and development.

Haveman and Beresford (2012) report that there has been a considerable increase of women entering into management positions over the last 50 years. However, this increase is mostly for lower and middle- management positions, whereas very few women enter into top-management, this is referred to as the “vertical gender gap” (Haveman & Beresford, 2012, p. 114). Furthermore, Haveman and Beresford (2012) present how the human capital theory explains the vertical gender gap through three factors: education, kind of jobs and accumulated work experience. Further, they argue that the vertical gender gap connects to gender norms and roles

in management. However, the authors of this thesis are critical towards whether there are only these three factors.

Several other impediments have been highlighted for women within management. For example, Johns (2013) argues that women are impeded in countries that provide minimal institutional support for working families, e.g. the legal requirement on time with paid parental leave. Johns (2013) notes that societies with low institutional support make it hard for women to find work-life balance. Furthermore, lacking flexibility at work creates another obstacle for women who are the primary caregivers. According to Johns (2013), this can cause women to “off-ramp” and in some cases, leave their career, which limits and inhibits women from being offered new promotions or career opportunities. Moreover, she added that women do not get into the informal networks which are acting as crucial pipelines for promotion. They tend to lack sponsors or mentors who can promote them and their skills to the higher levels of the organisation, which result in falling behind compared to their male counterparts when climbing the organisational ladder. Additionally, Johns (2013) states that the gender wage gap is still persistent, potentially due to that wage practices are being discriminatory. Gender differences and stereotyping is making the road to success difficult for women. Confidence and ambition have also been identified as factors that prevent women from entering into higher positions, suggesting that women often lack self-confidence, have lower career ambitions and take more cautious career choices (Johns, 2013).

When it comes to leadership and management positions, women tend to be stereotyped. According to Goffee and Jones (2000), this is because women are a minority in management positions, and minorities tend to become subjected to stereotyping inevitably. Furthermore, Goffee and Jones (2000) argue that stereotyping limits women to explore and show their own personal and unique differences, when being categorised collectively as "helper" or "nurturer". Furthermore, Carter and Silva (2010) found that a more significant percentage of women compared to men in their first job leave because of what is called a "difficult manager". This suggests that women get treated adversely by their first bosses compared to men (Carter & Silva,

2010). Moreover, this article also brings up a provocative quotation "Does this reflect the presumption that men are more qualified and ready, but women have to prove themselves first?" (Carter & Silva, 2010, p. 4) and highlight the importance of further investigation and research within this topic.

Helgesen and Goldsmith (2018) highlight that not only male leaders are unconsciously biased towards female leaders but women can also be very critical to one another. To promote the inclusion of women some positions are sometimes reserved only for women, so-called gender quotas (Faniko et al. 2017). Furthermore, according to Faniko et al. (2017), these reserved positions have been opposed by both men and women, especially by those who have higher education. Faniko et al. (2017) also state that women who are working at higher levels in male-dominated companies are now and then denying gender discrimination. Moreover, Faniko et al. (2017) explain that some women are against gender quotas because they think that affirmative actions may harm its beneficiaries by boosting the idea that women cannot succeed on their own or promote the stereotyping of women. Women who have invested in their career success tend to be more critical towards junior female colleagues. Both female and male managers evaluate their masculinity as higher than that of same-gender junior colleagues. Furthermore, Faniko et al. (2017) state that women with similar career experiences tend to distance themselves from others in their group to, for example, improve individual opportunities. Furthermore, women resist and dispute gender quotas to support their view, where they are not suffering from stereotyping or unequal opportunities and to send the message that their status is fair and valid (Faniko et al. 2017).

## 2.3 Glass Ceiling

A glass ceiling, transparent and see-through, yet it is limiting women to reach higher management positions. The concept was introduced back in the 1980s and has been used as an analogy for the invisible, yet, present barriers that hinder women from reaching executive positions in their career (Johns, 2013). Furthermore, Johns (2013) argues that the glass ceiling is a result of the gender gap in management. Several of the factors that have built up the barriers

have been identified, such as structural, recruitment-related and governmental factors (Johns, 2013). Within the structural barriers, one includes policies for work-life balance and flexibility within the workplace, which are one of the key-issues (Johns, 2013). Furthermore, Ezzedeen, Budworth and Baker (2015) have made a qualitative study regarding how pre-career women (university graduates) perceive their possibilities of reaching executive positions. In their study, work-life balance was also brought up as a key-factor when talking about the glass ceiling (Ezzedeen, Budworth & Baker, 2015).

According to Albrecht, Björklund and Vroman (2003), who analysed the wage distribution in Sweden, men's wages are much higher than women's wages. This was especially evident at the top of the wage distribution. Moreover, it was interpreted as a glass ceiling effect that had been detected as a phenomenon during the 1990s in Sweden. Albrecht, Björklund and Vroman (2003) also investigated data from the United States of America and could not discover similar patterns. An update and extension to the research deducted in 2003 were done in 2015 by Albrecht, Thoursie and Vroman (2015). This time they investigated how the parental leave is affecting the glass ceiling in Sweden. Comparing the data from 1998 and 2008, the authors noticed that the wage gap distribution and glass ceiling had been persistent over this time. Moreover, Albrecht, Thoursie and Vroman (2015) investigated the log wage gap around having the first child. The wage difference was apparent even before the birth of the first child and it increased after birth. The log wage gap of mothers who take their parental leave and the mothers in the upper sector of the wage distribution are different. That is caused by different career expectations, ambitions, preferences and skills (Albrecht, Thoursie & Vroman, 2015).

## 2.4 Work-Life Balance

The term work-life balance is widely used in research and literature. However, the term has been defined as somewhat elusive and is used to express a range of different situations and phenomena. Even though several definitions can be found in literature, Kalliath and Brough (2008) argue that the core meaning of the term work-life balance lies in the perceptions of individuals and what they consider as a good balance. Kalliath and Brough (2008) state the

following definition: "Work–life balance is the individual perception that work and non-work activities are compatible and promote growth in accordance with an individual's current life priorities" (Kalliath & Brough, 2008, p. 326).

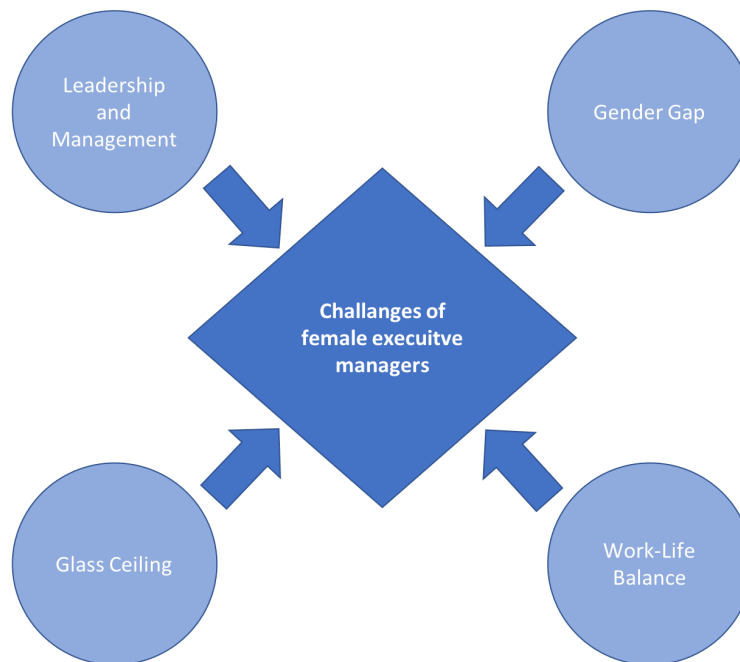
Richert-Kazmierska and Stankiewicz (2016) explain the work-life balance concept as capturing the social roles of us humans. They problematise it as the perception of balance between working and doing the rest of the human activities. Furthermore, Richert-Kazmierska and Stankiewicz (2016) argue that there are three different levels, i.e. individual, organisational and societal, that are related to maintaining a work-life balance. On the individual level, issues relate to the ability of combining work with other life dimensions, e.g. family, household, interest, social activities and health. Work-life balance can generate psychological well-being, enable higher self-esteem and create a feeling of harmony. Sustaining a work-life balance will inevitably make one feel healthier, happier and more creative according to Richert-Kazmierska and Stankiewicz (2016). However, Richert-Kazmierska and Stankiewicz (2016) also argue that finding an equilibrium, meaning the right spot, where one has a good balance, is not easy and that this is not the same for everyone. On the organisational level, management systems and personnel policy can be used to enable the employees to have a balance. Richert-Kazmierska and Stankiewicz (2016) state that there are several common ways for managers to enable employees to have a work-life balance, such as offering flexible work arrangements and leaves or allowance from work obligations when employees have a need for family responsibilities. However, when it comes to managers themselves, they often tend to work long hours (Dex, 2003). Regardless of this, several sources (e.g. Richert-Kazmierska & Stankiewicz, 2016; Dex, 2003) highlight flexible work arrangements and times as useful approaches for increasing the work-life balance of employees. On the society level, there are legal regulations that have been introduced by the state, so-called pro-family policies (Richert-Kazmierska & Stankiewicz, 2016). Furthermore, Richert-Kazmierska and Stankiewicz (2016) have identified three main determinants that shape the individuals' work-life balance, i.e. the economic aspect, the working conditions and the family situation. Concerning these three factors, Richert-Kazmierska and Stankiewicz (2016) have identified women as a risk group for work-life balance disruption. Moreover, they found that younger people who are in the

early stages of their career and have parental responsibilities are more likely to have disturbances in their work-life balance than older individuals. The group of individuals who were older than 55 years was the most satisfied with their work-life balance among all ages tested by Richert-Kazmierska and Stankiewicz (2016).

Previous research, e.g. Kalysh, Kulik and Perera (2016), has aimed to explore the relationship between work-life practices and the number of women in management positions quantitatively. Their research suggests a positive relationship between increased gender diversity in management roles together with improved work-life practices. They extract two key factors, one being the "unforgiving decade" (Kalysh, Kulik & Perera, 2016, p. 512), and the other company culture. By the "unforgiving decade" Kalysh, Kulik and Perera (2016, p. 512), refer to the ages 25 - 35 which are the primary childbearing years, which are concurrent to the years in which most career advancements are made. Secondly, the broad company culture also influences the work-life practices of a company according to Kalysh, Kulik and Perera (2016). They argue that changing the culture tend to take a long time and that it also requires organisational change (Kalysh, Kulik & Perera, 2016).



## 2.5 Illustrative Model



**Figure 1.** Illustrative model of the theory.

The illustrative model in Figure 1 demonstrates how the four theoretical dimensions connect to the challenges perceived by female executive managers. The arrows illustrate the influence coming from all four theory sections. The researchers of this study investigated similar studies and previous literature concerning the challenges of female executive managers in connection to their career. These four concepts, i.e. Leadership and Management, Gender Gap, Glass Ceiling and Work-Life Balance, were identified as the most frequently mentioned topics in previous research (e.g. Burke & Collins, 2001; Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999; Haveman & Beresford, 2012; Johns, 2013; Albrecht, Thoursie & Vroman, 2015; Kalysh, Kulik & Perera, 2016) regarding women in management. Considering the time limit of the thesis, the researchers decided to focus on the topics that were repeatedly mentioned. These concepts are presented separately in the theory section above, yet they are somewhat interconnected and even overlapping. Therefore they cannot and shall not be entirely separated from one another.

## 3. Methodology

*This chapter presents the chosen research approach, data collection and data analysis. Under data collection, the authors have included a section regarding the characteristics of the interviewees. The chapter ends with a discussion regarding the reliability, validity and generalisability of the selected method.*

### 3.1 Research Approach

Methods in similar research papers, (e.g. Pylkkänen & Smith, 2004; Kalysh, Kulik & Perera, 2016; Faniko et al. 2017) have used quantitative analysis and approaches in this field. These studies present patterns, factors and statistics about what the challenges are in the context of the glass ceiling, gender gap and work-life balance. However, very few of these studies go beyond the numbers, to the personal level of the women in executive positions. This study aimed to get a deeper and more personal understanding by including feelings, attitudes and thoughts. To go beyond the numbers a qualitative research approach was chosen. The qualitative approach allows the researchers to gather perceptions and experiences that can capture the complexity of the research questions better than a quantitative approach (Choy, 2014).

The authors chose to focus on Sweden since Lund University is located in Sweden. Therefore, it was possible to use connections to get in contact with participants from companies for the interviews. Ideally, the authors would have liked the study to include more than one country, yet considering the short time limit, the researchers decided to limit the study to only Sweden.

### 3.2 Data Collection

The study is built on interviews with women who have children and executive positions in Sweden. To gather thoughts and perceptions about work-life balance, glass ceiling and gender gap, seven interviews were conducted. The authors initially wanted to limit the respondents into only CEOs. Since it was hard to get connections to only CEOs, the researchers decided to expand

the scope. By including several executive positions, i.e. Chief Executive Officer, Chief Financial Officer (CFO) and Head of Platform Development, a sufficient level of respondents was ensured. Furthermore, the authors experienced difficulties in getting time for interviews because the participants had a full schedule. To get in contact with relevant respondents, the authors used their connections. However, the participants had no previous relation to the authors. The study is based on seven interviews with a time range from 40-60 minutes for each interview. Moreover, the length of the interviews allowed the authors to gain in-depth data. Through the interviews, qualitative data was collected in the form of experiences, perceptions and personal descriptions. Since participants were not located in the same city, the meetings were planned to be carried out via Skype. However, due to difficulties with Skype, three of the interviews were carried out via phone instead. One of the phone interviews was carried out simultaneously as the respondent was partly doing other things. This might have influenced the respondent's answers as her focus might have been disturbed. Moreover, one of the participants, who was located in Lund, asked for the opportunity to do a face to face interview. The topics investigated in this study can be considered very personal and the purpose was to gather insights, emotions and perceptions, rather than instant and up-front answers, that might lack reflection and awareness. To give the participants time and opportunity to reflect on the questions and topics, they were sent some days in advance via email.

In order to not disturb the interviews and to be able to listen carefully, the research authors decided to tape the interviews. Moreover, taping was essential to assure that information did not get lost before the analysis. Before the meetings, interviewees were asked for the consent of recording the conversations under the condition of staying anonymous in the study. However, one has to be aware of the biases that can occur when being recorded (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Sekaran and Bougie (2016) state that even though interviewees agree on being recorded, knowing that they are being recorded might bias their answers anyway. However, the respondents of this study are experienced in presenting both themselves and their companies. Therefore, the authors argue that the respondents are not likely to be biased by the recording.

The interview questions (see Appendix 1) have been developed with respect to the presented theory in Chapter 2, the purpose of the study and the research questions. The authors have divided the interview questions into themes, i.e. gender gap, glass ceiling and work-life balance. When deciding on interview questions, the aim was to create questions that were easy to understand and without the assumptions of the interviewers. Sekaran and Bougie (2016) note that it is crucial to use unbiased questions to avoid biased responses. Moreover, loaded questions can influence the received answers from the respondents. Therefore, the thesis authors avoided using certain tones, wordings and stayed neutral during the interviews. Furthermore, the questions were open-ended, allowing the participants to fully express their perceptions and thoughts, without restraints or limits (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Therefore, a semi-structured design was used for interviewing, which gave the opportunity not to put too narrow borders and leave room for expanding the topic and the discussion. The interview questions were set, yet, the semi-structured approach allowed the researchers to ask additional questions for gaining more in-depth insights. It also allowed for capturing and adding to what has been brought up already (Newcomer, Hatry & Wholey, 2015).

### 3.2.1 Characteristics of the Interviewees

The interviewed managers were from different industries, i.e. consultancy business, recruitment, media, information technology, innovation, finance and insurance. The participants shared common characteristics, such as having children, an executive position and working in Sweden. Moreover, the authors consider the interviewed women to have a successful career as they have a lot of experience, led projects or people, experienced growth through conquering challenges and achieved high job positions, i.e. CEO, CFO and Head of Platform Development. Selected characteristics of the interviewees are presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Selected characteristics of the interviewees.

	No. 1	No. 2	No. 3	No. 4	No. 5	No. 6	No. 7
<b>Number of Children</b>	3	2	1	3	2	2	2
<b>Age (years)</b>	50-55	45-50	40-45	45-50	55-60	60-65	45-50
<b>Role</b>	CFO	CEO	Head of Platform Development	CEO	CEO	CEO	CEO
<b>Size of company <sup>1</sup></b>	Large	Medium	Small	Small	Large	Small	Small

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were later listened through, transcribed and saved as separate word-processed documents. Moreover, transcribing interviews ensured no data was lost. The authors of this thesis were not only interested in presenting what the participants said but also how they said it (Saunders, Thornhill & Lewis, 2007). All transcripts were later analysed deductively with respect to the research questions. To facilitate the analysis of the interviews, the questions were categorised in advance. Then, the classified data from the different interviews were integrated for examination and analysis (Saunders, Thornhill & Lewis, 2007). Following Sekaran and Bougie (2016) firstly, the data was reduced by coding and categorising; this process was iterative and made several times. Secondly, the condensed data was displayed according to themes, categories and codings. To ensure the anonymity of the respondents, they were given a random number between 1-7, as presented in Table 1. Initially, the large amount of data was rather hard to structure comprehensively for the authors. Nevertheless, by organising the condensed data using different documents, it was easier to get an overview and visualise patterns

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<sup>1</sup> Size of company refers to the number of employees in the company with the following categories: Small = below 49, Medium = 50-249 and Large = above 250

with colours. Trends, such as frequently mentioned topics and themes, were displayed in these documents. The common issues from the analysis gave rise to sub-headings under the four main categories, i.e. Leadership and Management, Gender Gap in Management, Glass Ceiling and Work-Life Balance, in Chapter 4. Moreover, these sub-themes are visualised in Table 2. Data that was not in line with the theoretical framework was still considered valuable and used in the research paper. In the third step, the structured data was highlighted for drawing and verifying conclusions. Moreover, the connections between patterns and theoretical framework were drawn and are presented in Chapter 5.

**Table 2.** Illustration of the common topics (sub-headings) under the four main categories.

<b>Main Categories</b>	<b>Sub-headings</b>
Leadership and Management	Female and Male Leadership Characteristics of an Executive Manager Collaboration
Gender Gap in Management	Expectations, Norms and Stereotypes Gender Diversity Criticism
Glass Ceiling	Perception of the Glass Ceiling Experience of the Glass Ceiling
Work-Life Balance	Finding Balance Support

### 3.4 Reliability, Validity and Generalisability

To secure validity, the authors presented common themes but also included deviating samples as described by Sekaran and Bougie (2016). From the seven in-depth interviews, it was possible to notice patterns and draw conclusions. Moreover, regarding generalisability, the number of interviews was relatively modest. However, the interviewees share common characteristics, i.e. having an executive position, children and working in Sweden. Therefore the findings should be considered generalisable within contexts with similar characteristics. Based on previous research,

the researchers suggest that many executive mothers have similar experiences in relation to these research topics and therefore, the study should be considered valid for them as well.

The interviewees were not selected entirely random as they were provided by contacts from the network of the authors. However, the participants had no previous connections to the researchers, providing the same initial conditions for everyone. This should minimise the effect of biases when contacting or approaching interviewees, resulting in more valid data to be collected.

The interviews were performed in English, even though the participants' mother tongue was Swedish. This was decided because the first language of one of the researchers was not Swedish. Another reason was to avoid translating interviews. Moreover, translations inevitably cause assumptions and misinterpretation of interviewees and to some extent, even cause errors in the collected data (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). By removing this obstacle, the collected data can be considered more valid. However, one can argue that it would have been easier for the participants to express themselves and their perceptions more in depth in their native language (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Nevertheless, the authors argue that this could be considered as a minor limitation due to the high level of proficiency in English of the executive women. Furthermore, many of the respondents had previous work-experiences in professional business English. All interviewees had also accepted to do the interviews in English.

## 4. Empirical Findings and Analysis

*Chapter 4 aims to present the empirical findings of this study together with the analysis. The illustrative model displays the four main themes in Chapter 2 (see Figure 1). Under these four main themes, there are sub-headings which rose from the interviews and further analysis. Furthermore, the last section presents additional interesting findings.*

### 4.1 Leadership and Management

#### 4.1.1 Female and Male Leadership

During the interviews, when participants were asked to describe their thoughts on leadership, different advantages and disadvantages of being a female leader were brought up. Respondents considered themselves to be more trained to listen to people than men and saw this as an advantage. Moreover, interviewee number one (No. 1) expressed that she believes *“it could be, being a mother I think, that you have learned to understand how people react and behave”*. Besides, she thought male leaders could be good at understanding people, yet *“[...] I think it is somehow easier for a female leader to get the loyalty of coworkers than males”* (No. 1).

*“I think we have benefits, and the benefits are that we are more communicative, and we have better communication skills. In general, I think that is our main tool to become powerful.”* (No. 7)

Participants had experienced that when they were honest, enthusiastic or spoke up, men interpreted them differently than they intended to and had thought. Manager No. 3 *“felt that I got stabbed being bitchy [...] and I think that is something that I have had to navigate in”*. Moreover, participant No. 2 brought up an example of a situation where another female leader was described as tough and harsh and that people *“[...] would not have used those words at all if she was male”*.



Interviewees believed some qualities are more common for male leaders. Furthermore, they thought men as leaders lack an understanding of how important it is as a manager and as a leader to be personal. Female leaders see male leaders as they have something to prove to others. Men *“[...] have it in their DNA to sort of to be like “tuppar”, cocks, in front of each other, and that is a part of what they do when they grow up and to show who is the boss sort of”* (No. 3).

*“A lot of men, they still want to have the final word and be the smartest one in the room, each and every meeting earn their position.”* (No. 2)

Interviewees noted that men also have qualities that female leaders lack. When it comes to male leaders, they are *“[...] much better at separating the person and the cause”* (No. 5). Moreover, they have strengths such as to *“[...] go into like a military mode and just keep doing what they're doing for hours and hours. And I think that's a strength that you need in some ways”* (No. 7).

Participant No. 3 thought female and male leaders can sometimes use different methods to make decisions. She was *“[...] challenged to work in the management team, because they are all men, and they have a sort of informal structure. When the decisions are made, they are actually made outside the meeting, because people have prepared each other, like lobbying before. So the decision is actually made before coming to the room”* (No. 3). Moreover, she had realised *“if you have women in the group, [...] they would go in and have a discussion and make a decision in the meeting”* (No. 3).

However, various interviewees expressed that they do not see the difference between male and female leadership. They noted that leadership and management are based on an individual level, meaning that there are no specific differences between the genders.

*“I think it's up to personality so much. I've met male and female leaders that are so different, not depending on gender.”* (No. 1)

*“I don't think that it is different if you have a woman as a boss or a man as a boss.”*

(No. 5)

*“I don't think it is a question of male or female. I think it is a question of values and believing in yourself.”* (No. 4)

#### 4.1.2 Characteristics of an Executive Manager

There are some characteristics of an executive manager that have been identified by the interviewees. Past experience gives managers a better understanding of how to act in different situations. Moreover, knowing how to operate as a leader and knowing the way “[...] of reacting, you can manage people so much better” (No. 4). On the other hand, respondent No. 3 thought “[...] when you are in a high executive position, it is very easy to lay back and think that you've finished learning”.

Respondents thought that executive managers need to respect and trust their employees. Furthermore, “as a good leader, you should be a really good listener, [...] really interested in people and love seeing people grow” (No. 2).

*“I think that we need managers who have great trust in their employees and believe that people can do anything.”* (No. 4)

In addition to being self-aware and trusting their workers, interviewees set importance on the quality of knowing the market, company's finances, and customers. High positioned leaders should have a greater sense of what is the purpose of the company and why particular decisions are made. As making choices is part of a high manager's everyday work, they need to “[...] take risks and be able to make decisions” (No. 2). Moreover, the reasons behind the decisions and guidance for further actions need to be communicated clearly to the employees.

*“One thing you have to have is like a helicopter view. You have to be able to go up and say OK where is this leading us and what's happening on the market.”* (No. 7)

*“You want to have someone who sees you, someone that is clear, taking decisions, can communicate, putting your interest and goals, can express what is expected of you.”* (No. 5)

*“[...] understand the economy in a company in order to make a career. That is important.”* (No. 6)

### 4.1.3 Collaboration

As managers are working with teams that consist of different people from both genders, they should collaborate and involve everyone. An executive manager should understand the value of the company and why it exists. Further, he or she should be able to *“[...] get the employees on all levels actually to come together in that same why”* (No. 3).

*“You have to package that direction that you saw that you have to do and to make people in your team understand.”* (No. 7)

*“As soon as we change the norms, we have to involve gender. We need to make sure that the men are involved in this change as well.”* (No. 4)

## 4.2 Gender Gap in Management

### 4.2.1 Expectations, Norms and Stereotypes

Some men are still not trusting that women are competent enough for doing specific jobs. Interviewees explained how they *“think that females have to always prove that they are better”* (No. 6) and that they have felt underestimated during their career. However, respondents argued that this could be in their favor as they explain that they *“think that it's an advantage when*

*someone is underestimated*” (No. 5). Some respondents have also felt insecure about what they can achieve in their career, whereas others have not felt insecure.

*“My entire life has been insecure in the sense that, as to can I do this, can I do that. Sort of when you look at other people, whether it is men or other women, leaders or not leaders, you see them from the outside and what they project. Yourself, you know yourself from the inside, and you know yourself with all your insecurities.”* (No. 3)

Respondents explained how the problem might be structural, and that women tend to be attributed with negative words that males usually do not get associated with. Additionally, respondents mentioned how they were not seen with all their characteristics, but categorised instead just as women. Furthermore, the interviewees thought that the origin might be in how one raises children from an early age, with different norms and expectations on boys and girls. Respondents expressed it to be an obstacle when they were perceived differently than men.

*“It is not seldom that I have heard that I am perceived as aggressive. But if you are a man and straight forward [...] I have almost never heard any man saying that another man is aggressive. Then they say he is straight forward. He knows what he wants, and he is a good guy. [...] that I think is an obstacle.”* (No. 5)

*“I think that there is a structural problem. I mean, the number of CEOs with female gender are much lower than male, so it speaks its own language [...] the structure is not working for women. [...] employees maybe talk about a female leader with a different language, with different words.”* (No. 2)

Additionally, respondents expressed how they have been seen as helpful, kind and positive. These qualities have sometimes been in their way when making a career as they were *“not really seen as the serious leader type”* (No. 7). Furthermore, the respondent explained how she had been *“[...] accused of having accepted to become manly”* (No. 7). Respondent No. 3 told how

wearing high heels has been an advantage for her to get noticed and heard. Furthermore, stereotyping of women of colour was brought up by the respondents to be present in their industry.

*“They don’t think I can take the hard decisions [...] You are not as nice as you look. I think that’s the best compliment I’ve ever had.”* (No. 7)

*“The fact that I wear high heels at work. That contributes to me making noise when I move around, so I am noticed. People hear it when I come, and I think the fact that I am a woman takes a role in that, which is a good role actually rather than a bad one.”* (No. 3)

Respondents stressed the importance of having people around them who realise their potential and have the possibility of promoting them for higher positions. Further, they emphasised it to be an advantage to be a woman in order to get access to networks and senior people. They explicitly stated the importance of being supported by their networks in the organisation to be able to climb the organisational ladder.

#### 4.2.2 Gender Diversity

It is essential to understand the human element of organisations. Even though women and men are perceived differently, respondents emphasised that all individuals are equal. Furthermore, interviewees argued that organisations need a mixture of women and men. Moreover, respondents thought one *“have to be careful not to forget about the men. Because they are needed too”* (No. 7) and explained the importance of having gender diversity within networks.

*“When we start to realise that our companies are built up with people, and try to actually act human and respect them as humans. I think then we will get a totally different culture, that is much more creative.”* (No. 2)

*“I think in a way we are equal. [...] You shouldn’t have either 100 percent female organisation. You should not have a 100 percent male organisation. You need a mixture.”* (No. 6)

### 4.2.3 Criticism

Being criticised by other women for not taking enough time from work to be with their children was brought up by the interviewees. They explained how other women could be *“a bit patronising like oh poor you, it must be hard not having time for your kids.”* (No. 4), and that both men and women have made negative comments about making use of support, e.g. au pairs. Furthermore, the respondents explained that women tend to have difficulty supporting each other. Moreover, women often have negative opinions about other women.

*“I heard some very bad comments from other males and females [...] you have the au pairs, you have all the support. You’ll notice that when they grow up, you’ll see all the bad side of this.”* (No. 6)

*“But to be quite honest, women also have a lot of opinions about other women and they are not always nice.”* (No. 5)

## 4.3 Glass Ceiling

### 4.3.1 Perception of the Glass Ceiling

Respondents perceived it to be more difficult for themselves, as women, to reach an executive position than for men. They explained how they *“must have worked harder to an executive position than men, to prove that we actually can do it”* (No. 1). Furthermore, they explained how they have felt that they needed to prove themselves by delivering better at work than their male counterparts. However, some respondents did not think there

is a glass ceiling at all. Interviewees also highlighted that it differs between companies, and explained how it could depend on the industry, the culture or the size of the organisation. Moreover, respondents argued that the glass ceiling is less evident in industries where there are as many women as men or a majority of women. However, other respondents argued that in some cases, the glass ceiling is not that evident in male-dominated industries. One respondent expressed that being a woman can be an advantage in a male-dominated industry.

*“Of course I have worked hard, I don’t know if I have worked harder than male, I think so because as a mother we are more into the family than men in career are, that’s my take on it.”* (No. 1)

*“I think that I have not much experience from it because I have been in smaller organisations. I think it is more obvious in larger organisations. I have been in an industry where there are as many, or more female people.”* (No. 4)

*“[...] another very wise woman that I talk to continually said that she has not felt the glass ceiling, but that she has been in a glass elevator. With that, she meant that she got an advantage for being a woman. And I think that I can see that in some industries, especially in tech-industry where there is mostly men.”* (No. 3)

Respondents explained how age could influence the opportunities for entering into executive positions. Interviewee No. 5 expressed how she had *“[...] to deliver, and perhaps to do that a little bit better than the men to actually be seen, and the older you get, the harder it actually gets. Because you know the glass ceiling.”* (No. 5). Whereas, interviewee No. 7 explained her perception to be the opposite, that it gets easier when you are older. Interviewees also perceived the glass ceiling to be connected to networks that consist of a majority of men.

*“When you have gray hair, then you have something to say. I don’t know, but it was worse when I was young, I hated that. When you were young and pushed into the corner.”* (No. 7)

*“So you can say it’s not a glass roof, it’s more a glass bowl [...]. You need to be in that bubble and that context. [...] I call it more the man’s bubble. We have difficult to break into that bubble.”* (No. 6)

### ***Networks***

The interviewees highlighted that executive positions are not advertised in the same ways as other positions within a company. To be able to apply, or get a top executive position, the importance of networks has been brought up by the respondents. The respondents explained how they had been offered executive positions through their networks.

*“If you look at all the advertising, and there are few advertisements on top positions [...] since there is no advertising, you need to have the network to identify it.”* (No. 6)

*“I was called up [...] the recruiter asked whether or not I was interested to join in that process.”* (No. 2)

*“I was headhunted for my next position during maternity leave actually.”* (No. 3)

Some of the respondents argued that they consider it harder for women to enter these crucial networks, whereas other respondents explained that it could be a challenge both for men and women. They explained how it depends more on the individuals’ interest in networking and staying in the right circles. One respondent described how she decided to every week have “at



*least two lunches with people, not that they should give me an offer, but to give me references”* (No. 6). Moreover, this enabled her to socialise and stay in touch with her network. Furthermore, respondents expressed how the times are changing and that it is necessary to have mixed networks with both women and men.

*“[...] you need to know people. And that keeps the old structures of knowing the right people. They were men, for a very long time. So I think it’s a natural thing, but I think it’s a really bad thing. I think it’s better now.”* (No. 7)

### ***Culture and Behaviour***

Respondents brought up how the company culture and the behaviour within the company have influenced their perceptions of the glass ceiling. Some argued that the glass is now thinner, but that some cultures within certain companies are still in favour of men. Interviewees explained how it can be hard to climb the hierarchy within male-dominated companies. Further, respondents explained how they have felt that they needed to adapt to the culture and the behaviours of the male-dominated companies, to be regarded as competent.

*“That behaviour is a behaviour that is rewarded in a hierarchy in companies. When someone says, and sound like they know, then they are regarded as competent.”* (No. 3)

*“So the opportunities are there, but I still think there’s a cultural thing and I think it’ll change.”* (No. 7)

Respondents expressed that they think norms on a society level can play an important role when it comes to the behaviour of men and women in work. Interviewee No. 5 also explained that *“there have been situations where colleagues or bosses or customers have been approaching me as a woman”*, meaning flirting. She expressed that she has had difficulties in handling these situations without affecting the work relations. Furthermore, male leadership styles have been mentioned as being awarded for promotions.

*“That’s the scary part where we have to see the norms that we have in society. Because I know that men can be much more eager to negotiate their salary for example, [...] I’ve had situations where, well, this woman is much more competent, she should have been much more tougher with me in this situation.”* (No. 4)

*“I think that there is a certain leadership style that is very manly [...] women have to be much more like men to get the positions when they want to raise in the hierarchy, or make career.”* (No. 3)

#### 4.3.2 Experience of the Glass Ceiling

The interviewed women expressed that they have not felt the glass ceiling themselves, even though some of them expressed that they have seen it for others. Furthermore, they revealed that it could be difficult to know whether *“the things that happened to me, if they happened to me because I am the person I am, or if it happened to me because I am a woman”* (No. 3). It was also mentioned by respondents that the implications in connection to the glass ceiling might have been too small for them to notice themselves, but that they have seen it happening to others.

*“I have never had an experience that I’m not chosen because I’m a woman.”* (No. 5)

*“I think, I have only experienced that it is OK to be a female leader.”* (No. 1)

Some of the interviewees, however, had experienced that they were not listened to and that their accomplishments were not seen. Additionally, respondents brought up that it is important as a woman not to wait until you are fully prepared, have had children and all. Respondent No. 1 expressed how *“[...] females are more waiting for an offer to step up”* and that one instead needs to take some risks.

*“[...] when I said I am ready for the next step, they just didn’t understand what I meant. And when they wrote my reference [...] I had to deal with leading in top management in*

*all countries [...] But the reference was nothing about that, it's like they didn't see it. They didn't see what I had, and that made me so disappointed.” (No. 7)*

*“I was never doing something right, while my colleague, who was a man, was doing the right thing. And you know, I felt you know, I can never continue here, because you know they are talking over my head.” (No. 6)*

## 4.4 Work-Life Balance

### 4.4.1 Finding Balance

#### ***Achieving Work-Life Balance***

Finding a work-life balance when achieving career goals and having children is considered to be hard. While having children and making a career, *“you can't do everything, you have to sacrifice something. Which does not mean you can't do anything, but you can't be the most social person and also have a very demanding job and having three kids”* (No. 1). Participants do not consider themselves as good examples of making a career and keeping a work-life balance at the same time. Furthermore, participants felt it was especially challenging to find a balance when their children were younger and they *“[...] have more balance today, but I work a lot today as well.”* (No. 5). Moreover, one of the participants expressed that she has had struggles trying to find a balance since her son has a light form of autism, that has made it more difficult for her. Participants found it hard to be a great parent, who is also visible for their children and be an excellent boss at the same time.

*“Because I would lie if I say that everything is balanced.” (No. 2)*

*“I am not a good example of a balance. I am a terrible example.” (No. 6)*

On the other hand, *“[...] some kind of balance has to be there, and I really have to be present when I am present. Not just with the body, I mean with my mind I have to be present.”* (No. 2).

Moreover, the balance is very individual and also associated with one's mindset and habits. In some cases, managers like to have a lot on their schedule and busy everyday life.

*"[...] balance, I think that comes from me. So whether it is ten hours per day, six hours a day, that does not matter it is the conditions of my emotions, conditions of where I am."*  
(No. 2)

*"I'm 80 percent balanced and 20 percent over-stressed. But I wouldn't really like to be 100 percent balanced."* (No. 7)

Since the participants love their job, they do not mind being somewhat unbalanced. Furthermore, for participant No. 4 *"[...] it is about not actually splitting up work and life, because work is part of my life, and I enjoy working"*. Having a successful career while being a parent at the same time, makes participants feel that *"[...] the balance sort of comes as a bonus"* (No. 4).

### ***Strategies for Finding Work-Life Balance***

Being a mother, a wife, a friend and someone's boss all require time and energy. For the interviewees, it is not always easy to find a balance between those roles. There were different methods and ways that were used by the interviewed managers to achieve more balance in their lives. If possible, participants tried to work from home to be closer to their children or moved to the same city where they worked, which made it possible to go back to work after they put the children to bed.

*"Then I had the time with the kids and the family, and it was my high interest to work and do what I did, so it was not a sacrifice for me to get back to work and finalise my things."*  
(No. 1)

Another way to balance work and life is to spend some quality time with friends, work out or to meditate. Interviewees No. 3 and No. 7 both enjoy physical activities for change, while

participant No. 2 claimed “[...] *the first thing I cancel is training, and that is of course not good. But, I do not take away friends and social events*”. Furthermore, planning life, having schedules and prioritising activities have helped the executive managers to keep life organised.

*[...] I try to run 3 times a week to keep head and shape.*” (No. 3)

As an executive manager, one has a busy schedule and it is hard to keep in contact with all friends and relatives. To stay in touch with close ones, respondent No. 2 thought “*with new technology, you can really manage your friendships and relations. You don’t even have to talk to each other. You can just send those messages*”.

Finding a balance does not always come without sacrifices. Moreover, sometimes busy managers “*[...] feel that I’ve given up some of my extra activities*” (No. 7). Participants believe it is crucial to decide what is most important and not feeling guilty about the choice. Furthermore, respondent No. 4 expressed “*[...] having to struggle with my own feelings that is the main part of it*”.

*“So you have to decide, you have to decide that it is important being with your children, or in my case being with my son.”* (No. 5)

*“I have been in situations all the time where I have felt like, no, I should have been with my kids, or no, I should have been at work.”* (No. 4)

#### 4.4.2 Support

Having support with taking care of the children and the household while making a career was necessary for the respondents. Different types of support were brought up, such as nannies, au pairs, relatives, spouses and friends. Furthermore, some expressed it to be hard to ask for help and to feel dependent on others. The need for support from people, other than their spouse, was

evident among the respondents who had a spouse that was doing career simultaneously as themselves.

*“My husband, [...] He was travelling a lot also from time to time, so we have been nanny-masters and good innovations to grandmothers and so on.”* (No. 4)

*“I was dependent on having people around me. My parents helped me a lot. [...] But every time I was travelling with my work, I needed help from friends and relatives to manage that. So the difficult part is actually to ask someone for help. You can’t manage everything by yourself, so you have to ask for help and that is difficult.”* (No. 5)

Participants referred back to the time when their children were small and noted it would have been useful to have some help from nannies or au pairs. But instead, they managed work-life together with her husbands.

*“We had to kind of sort it ourselves. We did not have an au pair or anything like that. Looking back, that could have been a good idea.”* (No. 1)

### ***Spouses***

In addition to getting help from relatives, friends, nannies and au pairs, partners have played a significant role in finding a work-life balance. Their husbands were not planning to make a career, or they wanted to stay home and take more care of their children. This enabled women to achieve their career goals. Furthermore, participant No. 2 expressed that her husband *“makes it possible for me to make a career because he is not so interested”*. Even though they love working, it was not always easy being away from their family, especially when something happened with their children.

*“I know one example where it was very hard. One of my daughters got hurt, she was training gymnastics and she broke her leg [...] You know my daughter had her father there, so she wasn’t on her own”* (No. 4)

### ***Travelling***

The interviewed women expressed how travelling due to work has influenced their work-life balance. One of the interviewed women expressed how she *“travelled a lot, which was quite tough at the time”* (No. 4). Another respondent explained how she had *“bad conscience all the time. When I’m travelling, I want to go home to my kids”* (No. 7). Furthermore, travelling has created a need for support from others such as a spouse, nannies, au pairs, family or friends.

*“[...] we have had au pairs, [...] Which made it possible for me and my husband to work. I think that has made it possible for me to make a career. Because when the kids were small, I had over 100 days travelling all around the world.”* (No. 6)

Additionally, travelling has also been mentioned by respondent No. 1 as a factor that is especially hard for families where both parents are doing a career and travelling.

*“[...] me and my husband are doing parallel careers, but you can say that in times when I had my job which required a lot of travelling he has had a job travelling, so I think it’s hard to combine if both are travelling a lot.”* (No. 1)

### ***Parental Leave***

Interviewees described different types of situations when having children and taking parental leave. For one of the interviewees, it was used for one and a half year, to stay home with her child that needed extra support. Another respondent stayed abroad during her maternity leave with her husband, who was working in another country. On the other hand, some respondents decided to use parental leave three to six months only. The spouses also made use of their parental leave.

*“I was home six months with the oldest, and with my girl, I only took four months off, and that is short in Sweden.”* (No. 2)

*“He also was prepared to stay home 50 percent of the time. So he took 7 or 8 months with each child. So I was working earlier than most women in Sweden, I think”* (No. 7)

## 4.5 Additional Interesting Findings

### 4.5.1 Self-Employment

The interviewed women explained that they during different parts of their career had started their own company as a consultant or entrepreneur. Various reasons for leaving their current jobs were mentioned, e.g. having unreachable goals, limited promotion opportunities, reorganisations and cuttings of staff. Interviewee No. 6 explained how she told her husband *“I left my job today because it is impossible to reach the goal”*, whereas others have felt mistreated by their bosses. Interviewee No. 7 explained that not being able to climb the hierarchy in a company once made her *“[...] jump out of the blue and become an entrepreneur”*. Furthermore, respondents also mentioned how having their own company have enabled them to meet a lot of people and widen their professional networks. Moreover, respondents emphasised that it was necessary to dare to take the risk of leaving without having a new offer from another company. However, the risky choice was somewhat dependent on the family economy.

*“So I started my own consulting company, I did consulting for three years. During that time I had very nice appointments I think, and met a lot of new people.”* (No. 1)

*“[...] we were going into cutting staff, and I just went into the office one day and said OK, I can leave [...] So I decided to leave there, and I went home, and I was very pregnant, with two small kids at home, but I still wanted to do something, so I started my own business as a consultant.”* (No. 4)



*“I told the CEO, I am leaving [...] But you have to dare, and I think that is one of the base, to have a family economy.”* (No. 6)

#### 4.5.2 Suggestions from Executive Managers

The interviewees have highlighted the importance of planning and preparing in their career, but also to take risks and to seize the opportunity when it comes to job offerings. Furthermore, they stressed that it is crucial to believe in oneself and get to know oneself. Moreover, expressing one’s own opinion has been brought up to be vital, and the respondents encourage women in general to *“lean in, to sit at the table, to take up space”* (No. 3). Furthermore, they stressed the importance of making use of the support that exists, e.g. family, spouse and au pairs. The women explained that *“you might need to step aside in your career for a couple of years or step down. And that’s not a bad thing to do. You will rock it after that.”* (No. 1), due to having children.

#### 4.5.3 Questions that Men Never Get

The respondents felt that times are changing and thus, it is becoming easier for young women in today’s generation to step up and lead. Further, the respondents argued that men nowadays are better at embracing insecurity compared to previous generations. Still, respondents felt that questions about work-life balance, and more specifically being a parent or taking care of the household are only asked from successful career women, and never to men with an equally successful career. The respondents expressed how these questions make them upset, and that they think questions about work-life balance should be asked to men as well.

*“I have got the question on how do you manage your work as a mother. [...] and I usually ask them: Would you ask my husband the same question? And I asked my husband, he never ever got that question.”* (No. 4)

*“That’s the question I think you should ask men. They never get that question and I’m angry with that question. Why do you ask? It is like, how do you feel to be a woman? I don’t know. How do you feel to be a man? I don’t know. It’s just like, why would it be a problem. That’s my answer. Why would that ever stop you.” (No. 7)*

## 5. Discussion

*In this chapter the analysis and findings are discussed in connection to theory. To facilitate for the reader, the two research questions have been selected as headlines. Furthermore, the additional interesting findings are discussed under the last section, called additional outcomes.*

### 5.1 Research Question 1: How do female executive managers with children perceive their work-life balance?

#### 5.1.1 Finding Balance

As presented in theory, Kalliath and Brought (2008) stated that work-life balance is individually based. Furthermore, they explained how work-life balance requires that one feel that non-work and work activities are compatible, and can be combined with the current life priorities of individuals. This study has shown that priorities have been tough for executive women and that they have had to make sacrifices. Finding work-life balance was especially hard during the younger years of their children. These years are called “The unforgiving decade” by Kalysh, Kulik and Perera (2016, p. 512), which generally coincide with the years where most advancements in career are made. Therefore, it is not surprising that this study also has identified those years to be the toughest years for having a work-life balance.

The respondents explained that they were not good examples of having work-life balance and successful career at the same time. Not being good at balance was described as feeling guilty for working a lot and not having enough time for their children. Still, the ambiguity lies in that the interviewed women love working and some consider this to be their balance. Participants had different opinions when it came to splitting up life and work. Some thought the balance comes when one does not separate these two, whereas others felt that it is necessary to split the work from the family and vice versa to find balance.

The findings of this study are mainly relating to issues on the individual level and how different life-roles, e.g. being a mother, a wife, a friend and someone's boss, influence the executive women's' work-life balance. These roles capture the dimensions highlighted by Richert-Kazmierska and Stankiewicz (2016), e.g. family, household, interest and social activities. Respondents expressed different strategies for how to achieve balance in their life's, such as working from home when possible. Moreover, several sources (e.g. Richert-Kazmierska & Stankiewicz, 2016; Dex, 2003) have expressed that flexible work arrangements play an important role in facilitating for individuals to maintain their work-life balance. Furthermore, respondents found balance through having quality time with friends, working out or meditating. Planning and organising the different life activities was made concerning individual priorities. Further, digitalisation was expressed to have made it more accessible, both to work more flexible but also to socialise and keep in touch with friends without being physically present. Moreover, having support from other sources, such as spouses, family and au pairs was brought up as crucial for the interviewed women in their lives.

### 5.1.2 Asking for Support

With the work-life balance related issues in mind, it was not a surprise that the executive women had to make use of different types of support such as friends, relatives, spouses, nannies and au pairs. Furthermore, the need for additional support was higher among the women who had a spouse who was focusing on his career as well. Moreover, when work required travelling, women expressed that the need for support was more significant and that they felt that they could not manage it by themselves. Thus, they had to ask for help and considered that to be difficult.

Making use of the parental leave that is provided in Sweden was done in various ways. Some women decided to take maternity leave for three to six months only whereas others stayed home over a year. It was mentioned that the spouses had worked part-time and taken their share of the parental leave as well. Having support from spouses helped the respondents to feel more at ease when being away from their children, and it was mentioned to enable them to become successful in their career.

In connection to theory, the responses support that it is essential to have institutional support in the form of parental leave, as explained by Johns (2013). Further, the findings suggest that the need for support is most evident among dual-earning families, especially those where both individuals are focused on their career. The findings, therefore, tie back to the importance of the EU legislation within parental leave and flexible work arrangements which were presented by the European Commission (2018).

## 5.2 Research Question 2: What are the challenges experienced by female executive managers in their career?

### 5.2.1 Leadership and Management

According to Mintzberg (2009), a good manager is someone who can lead and manage other people. Furthermore, participants of this study described a great manager as someone who has previous experience, which has given knowledge of how to be a good leader and how to manage people in different situations. Interviewees also believed, being a manager includes having an interest in people. Moreover, it requires being a good listener, respecting and trusting employees. Not only does previous experience provide skills to lead better, but it also makes a manager more competent in particular fields.

A study by Lämsä (2010) displayed management in Sweden as functional-centered. Further, Swedish leaders interpret themselves as part of the team. Thesis interviewees were interpreted by the authors to be relatively functional-centered managers as they highlighted the importance of knowing about the company's finances, purpose, market and customers. Even though Sweden is considered as a rather gender-equal country in research by Lämsä (2010), the participants described that male and female leaders are interpreted and seen differently. The authors of this thesis considered descriptions of disadvantages being a female manager by participants, as challenges in their career. The interviewees (No. 3; No. 4; No. 7) had been in challenging situations where they were interpreted manly or they were expected to be more like a man, in

order to make a career. As stated in the literature, the behaviour of women in male-dominated corporations might be analogous to men (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999). There were also thoughts about women working harder to get executive positions, wearing heels to get the noticeability and people using words to describe female leaders that would not be used to describe male managers. However, not all interviewees had experienced differences in treatment or saw specific characteristics for female or male leadership. These managers thought the ways of managing are more connected to the personality.

Women in general value profoundly the life at work, their clients and the possibility to make a change in the world. In case the environment or company is not meeting women's expectations as managers, they are more likely than men to quit their job (Helgesen & Goldsmith, 2018). The interviewees in this study described situations where they decided to leave their jobs because it was not possible for them to reach expected goals. Another challenge that interviewed managers faced was mistreatment by bosses, which made the women resign from work. Moreover, this could be connected to the theory by Carter and Silva (2010) about women quitting their jobs because of difficult managers.

### 5.2.2 Taking Risks

Johns (2013) argued that women tend to make more careful career choices and generally have lower career ambitions. This study suggests the opposite, especially for executive women. The interviewed women expressed the importance of taking risks and leaving unsatisfactory jobs without having new offers coming up. Furthermore, the study suggests that it is common for executive women to start their own companies within entrepreneurship and consulting. Additionally, being self-employed can also be risky from an economic point of view. However, the authors consider these risks to be more favourable. Not taking any chance, is a risk in itself, and the authors argue that cautious career choices do not favor career advancements for female managers. As mentioned by Johns (2013), a lack of confidence can limit women from entering into executive positions. Furthermore, it can limit women in taking the essential risks that they

need to take. The study has shown that some respondents felt insecure, but still, they managed to be opinionated and act decisively.

### 5.2.3 Stereotyping

This study has shown that executive women sometimes experience that they get perceived differently compared to men, e.g. when acting in a straightforward way, they were called aggressive. Stereotyping and gender differences have been suggested by Johns (2013) to be impeding women in their career. Furthermore, respondents explained that they had been categorised collectively. Being perceived differently compared to men was considered to be an obstacle for the respondents. Even positive attributions, such as being helpful, positive and kind, has been considered obstacles in their career, by not being seen as a serious leader who can make hard decisions. Being categorised collectively with certain groups or attributes have been expressed in limiting women from exploring their unique skills and characteristics by Goffee and Jones (2000). Further, this study has shown that even these successful women have felt that they needed to prove themselves throughout their career, and sometimes deliver even better than their male counterparts to be seen for their accomplishments. Referring back to Carter and Silva (2010), the findings of this thesis suggest that the presumption that men are competent enough, whereas women first have to prove themselves, exist and is common.

### 5.2.4 Glass Ceiling

As stated by Johns (2013), the concept of a glass ceiling, a see-through barrier, stopping women from achieving high positions was introduced in the 1980s. Structure as a factor causing the glass ceiling identified by Johns (2013) was mentioned by the thesis interviewees as well. Today, there are signs of the glass ceiling being cracked, yet it is not entirely broken (Walker, Wang & Redmond, 2008). Some participants of this thesis had experienced the need for proving that they are better than men in order to reach a high position. However, there were opposite opinions which could be due to the cracked glass ceiling. Interviewees expressed that challenges in connection to the glass ceiling could be inherent for particular companies or industries. Furthermore, there had been examples of the glass ceiling being an elevator, giving an advantage

for being a woman amongst men. The glass ceiling was also described as a glass bowl, man's bubble or man's network that females have a hard time entering.

### 5.2.5 Networks

The informal professional networks, that are of outermost importance for higher promotions and career advancements, were brought up as a challenge in this study. Some respondents expressed it to be easier to join the networks as a woman, whereas other respondents expressed that the networks are still exclusive for men only. The interviewees stressed the importance of being visible in the right circles for being offered higher job positions and that these are not advertised to the same extent as other positions. Further, the results of this study support Johns (2013) by stressing the importance of being part of the networks. However, the study suggests that even though these have been almost exclusively for men in the past, times are now changing and the networks are becoming more gender equal.

### 5.2.6 Criticism

Considering the theory and interview outcomes, the authors of this thesis detected criticism towards women leaders from other male and female leaders. Even though men have been portrayed to be critical towards women, this study has also highlighted the phenomenon of women being critical towards each other. In line with Helgesen and Goldsmith (2018), this study supports that it is common for executive women to be criticised by other women, partly men as well. The interviewees expressed that they have felt questioned for their priorities, especially within work-life balance. Furthermore, the study suggests that women have a hard time promoting each other, which might influence their possibilities within networking.

## 5.3 Additional outcomes

### 5.3.1 Suggestions from Executive Managers

Additionally, to the identified challenges that executive women face, this study has also presented different ways of overcoming these challenges. Respondents emphasised that it is crucial to have a strategy, to prepare and plan, both life and work activities. Further, being



self-aware and to know yourself was expressed as an essential ability in order to excel in a management career. This will inevitably also enable one to prioritise and align the activities to assure self-fulfillment. Furthermore, to express one's own opinions and lean in at the table was highlighted by the respondents to be encouraged to become successful in their career.

### 5.3.2 Questions Men Never Get

Interview participants were curious if the same questions were asked to male managers as well. They have received questions about how they manage work and being a parent, and think it is disturbing that their husbands never get the same questions. Moreover, asking this type of questions only from women makes them feel like there should be a problem. The researchers support their belief and agree with this feeling, that these type of questions are more frequently asked women than men. However, the underlying reason has not been investigated in this study. What can be said is that the historical roles and structures within families might remain unconsciously in the society as stereotyping.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Key Findings and Conclusions

This thesis aimed to gather and present perceptions related to work-life balance, the glass ceiling effect and gender gap within management. Executive women were interviewed about the challenges they have faced in their career and life. This enabled the study to go beyond the numbers of previous research.

Concerning the first research questions, the empirical findings have generated insights on how female executive managers perceive their work-life balance individually. Results revealed the importance of setting personal priorities, both at work and in life in general. Furthermore, the empirical findings conveyed that decision making was as an essential skill for successful managers. The study also presents the importance of support, e.g. spouse, family, friends and au pairs, to enable executive managers to advance in their career and find a work-life balance.

When exploring the second research question, the empirical data generated a broader scope of challenges than what was presented in the literature. Challenges included women feeling the pressure to prove themselves, being criticised and perceived differently compared to men. Furthermore, stereotyping, the informal professional networks and the glass ceiling was brought up as potential obstacles.

Overall, this study has identified the challenges executive women have faced in their career. The findings of this research have gone beyond the numbers presented in the literature of those challenges. Moreover, feelings, thoughts and attitudes about the four main categories leadership and management, work-life balance, glass ceiling and the gender gap in management were presented. Further, these topics were expanded by the interviewees and the study developed broader results.

## 6.2 Contributions and Implications

In connection with the background and the problem area presented in Chapter 1, this study has shed light on the problem from a more individual level. Furthermore, the interviewed women have to be considered successful cases that have overcome challenges and obstacles, proving that this can be done. This study identifies the perceived challenges, which can enable more targeted actions to be made for allowing more women into successful careers. Furthermore, the study implies that times are now changing and organisations are becoming more gender equal in management. Moreover, when it comes to leadership and management programmes and education, women are becoming increasingly interested. There has been an increase in the percentage of women who get enrolled in managerial programmes such as the MiM-programme at Lund University. Over the last three years, the percentage of women enrolled in the MiM-programme at Lund University has increased from 45% to above 60% (AMBA Self Audit Report 2019). This indicates that women are interested in leadership and management and see themselves as leaders in the future. Furthermore, this suggests that the future might become more gender diverse and gender equal.

## 6.3 Limitations of the Study

The qualitative approach resulted in subjective input, which might be difficult to generalise. However, the findings were very connected and brought up broad discussions on relevant topics providing an extensive, yet subjective scope of challenges perceived by executive women. Further, having more respondents might have provided an even more extensive view of the thesis questions.

One has to be aware that this thesis only captures the current perceptions of executive women in Sweden. The study cannot provide data on how the situation, context and attitudes of executive women might change in the future. This might be obvious to the reader, yet it is important to point out as a limitation of this study.

Another limitation might be that none of the women in this study had small children, i.e. younger than ten years old, living at home. Having small children at home might provide another perspective and perception regarding challenges, e.g. in connection to work-life balance. Still, the interviewed women have had small children at home while making a career. Furthermore, they expressed perceptions and experiences both in connection to their previous situation and their current. Attitudes and feelings regarding their situation in the past might have changed over time and could, therefore, have influenced their responses. However, this study aimed to present the perceptions and experiences of executive women and has collected substantial and relevant input for analysing the research questions in a proper manner.

## 6.4 Future Research

This study can be used as a base and serve to open up the qualitative research discussion within the topics connected to challenges faced by female executive managers. Further, the study could be complemented by further research within other countries. As Sweden is in the forefront of gender equality, it would be valuable also to use a similar qualitative research approach to investigate countries which are not as gender equal but still have better gender equality within management.

Referring back to the research limitations, to be more generalisable this topic could be further researched by including more participants. Moreover, it became evident concerning the additional findings and the literature, that mainly one side of the problem is presented within research, the female side. It would be interesting and valuable to also have men as respondents to interviews to get both sides and be able to compare. Therefore, the authors suggest further qualitative research with both men and women. Additionally, studies comparing executive managers who have children and those who do not have children could be done in the future.

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# Appendix 1: Interview Questions

## **Background**

Asking the interviewees to talk about their background.

*Additional questions if needed:*

- *Where are you from and what is your educational background?*
- *How large is your company?*
- *Career - how has your career path to the position that you currently have?*

## **Family-life balance**

Asking the interviewees to describe their family.

*Additional questions if needed:*

- *How many children do you have, and when did you have children?*
- *What role did you have when you had your children?*
- *What is the occupation of your spouse? (or “sambo”)*
- *Have you had support with taking care of the children/households?*
- *Career - what are the main challenges you have faced?*

## **Work-life balance**

- What is your perception of work-life balance within your own context?
- How is it to be a mother and have an executive management position?
- What is your strategy for balancing the family/household activities and the work activities?

## **Glass ceiling**

- Have you heard of it? What is your take on it or perception of it? What is your experience? (Including definition of the concept)
- How do you perceive opportunities for female and males in entering into executive positions? Have you ever experienced differences in treatments or opportunities for females/males?

## **Gender gap in management**

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a female executive manager?
- What characteristics do you think a CEO/CFO should have?
- Do you see any difference between female/male leadership? (What is your take on it?)

If no challenges have been mentioned, follow up question about what challenges they have faced.