



SCHOOL OF  
ECONOMICS AND  
MANAGEMENT

# Turning Points Among Female Managers in Icelandic Technology: A Narrative Study

by

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# Abstract

*This study explores how female managers in Icelandic technology companies describe their career journeys and the turning points that shaped their progression into senior management. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted and analysed using the Gioia methodology.*

*The findings show that none of these women planned their way into leadership. Instead their careers were shaped by unexpected opportunities, invitations from others and circumstances that forced a move they would not have made on their own. The analysis identifies five distinct turning point types, institutional recognition, prospective, unchosen, internal and retroactive, that extend existing frameworks in the career literature.*

*The study also finds that gender did not operate primarily through overt discrimination but through subtler dynamics, including conformity from within, the unequal distribution of visibility and opportunity and gender becoming visible when participants crossed outside Iceland into international environments.*

*The findings contribute to the turning points literature and to understanding of how gender operates in contexts that are formally committed to equality but where subtler dynamics persist.*

**Key words:** turning points, career development, female managers, gender dynamics, Iceland, technology sector

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Background

Career progression is no longer widely understood as a straightforward, linear climb. Instead, it is seen more as a dynamic process shaped by key turning points, moments of transition, decision and opportunity that redirect an individual's path over time. Earlier research in career theory emphasised structured organisational pathways but more recent research highlights the growing importance of individual agency and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances instead of careers being shaped solely by institutional structures (Hall, 2004; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). This study takes a narrative and interpretive perspective, treating career accounts not as objective reports of what happened but as stories that individuals actively construct and make meaningful over time. Supported by the Gioia methodology (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013) the analysis treats participants as knowledgeable agents whose accounts are examined not simply for what they report but for what they reveal about how these women have made sense of their careers. Exploring how people narrate and interpret these moments provides insights into how leadership careers are actually built in practice. This perspective is particularly relevant when studying female managers in contexts like Iceland, where formal gender equality is well established yet structural dynamics continue to influence who reaches leadership positions and how.

Iceland is often recognised as a global leader in gender equality, with high levels of female labour market participation and strong policy support for women in the workforce. Despite this, research shows that full equality in leadership representation and labour market outcomes has not yet been achieved (Ólafsdóttir, 2018; World Economic Forum, 2025). Women remain underrepresented in technical roles within the technology sector and the pathways into leadership continue to be shaped by gender dynamics that are often subtle and embedded in everyday organisational practices. This study initially expected to find clearer evidence of gender discrimination in the Icelandic technology sector. What it found was more nuanced and in some ways more interesting. Gender operates not primarily through overt discrimination but through subtler and more contextual dynamics that the participants themselves often did not name as discrimination even while describing experiences the literature would recognise as gendered.

While career development has been widely studied at a structural level, there is still limited qualitative insight into how women in senior management positions describe their own career journeys and the specific moments that shaped them. Existing research has largely focused either on structural barriers such as the glass ceiling, subtle discrimination and role congruity or on aggregate patterns of representation and outcomes. Less attention has been paid to the lived experience of transition itself, the specific moments in which careers change direction, how those moments were recognised and navigated and how gender shapes the conditions under which they occur.

This study addresses that gap by focusing on career journeys from the inside, through the narratives of women who have reached senior management positions in the Icelandic technology sector. Its purpose is to explore how these women describe the turning points that shaped their progression into senior management and how gender operated as a background condition in those careers. It aims to contribute to both the turning points literature and the gender and leadership literature, by identifying structural types that existing typologies do not fully cover and by showing how gender dynamics operate in a context that is formally committed to equality but where subtler dynamics persist.

## 1.2. Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to explore how female managers in Icelandic technology companies describe their career journeys, with a particular focus on the turning points that shaped their progression into senior management roles. More specifically, the study examines how individuals narrate key moments of transition, decision and opportunity, what these moments reveal about how leadership careers are built over time and how gender dynamics shaped the conditions under which these careers developed. By focusing on personal narratives and lived experience, the study seeks to contribute qualitative insights into how turning points function in career development and how gender influences who is recognised, supported and able to act on opportunities when they arise.

The research question guiding this study is: “How do female managers in senior positions in the technology sector describe their career journeys and key turning points leading to senior management positions?”



### 1.3. Delimitations

This study focuses on female managers in Icelandic technology companies, drawing on a small number of qualitative interviews with individuals in senior or leadership roles. The findings are not intended to be generalisable but rather to provide in-depth insight into a specific context and group. The study does not aim to measure the extent of gender inequality in the sector but to explore how gender shapes individual career narratives and the turning points within them. The turning point structures identified are offered as an extension of existing typologies rather than a replacement for them. They are the structures that emerged from this particular dataset and context, not a claim to exhaustiveness.

### 1.4. Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into five main chapters.

Following the introduction, Chapter 2 presents the literature review, covering key perspectives on career theory and how careers are understood, turning points as a lens for examining career change, narrative and interpretive approaches to career research and gender dynamics including role congruity, subtle discrimination and the Icelandic context.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology, including the research approach, design, the Icelandic technology sector as the research setting, data collection and data analysis supported by the Gioia methodology, as well as considerations of validity, reliability and limitations.

Chapter 4 presents the findings and analysis, structured around the Gioia framework. It explores how participants narrate turning points across five structurally distinct forms and how gender operated as a background condition that shaped the landscape in which these careers unfolded rather than as an overt or consistently named force.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings in conversation with the existing literature, examining what the five turning point types contribute to career theory and what the gender findings mean in relation to existing research.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by summarising the main contributions, discussing theoretical and practical implications and suggesting directions for future research.

## 2. Literature Review

This chapter reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on career development, turning points, narrative identity and gender in leadership. It begins by examining career theory, tracing the development of the field from early models to more recent perspectives on how careers actually develop. It then explores turning points as a way of understanding career change, before considering narrative and interpretive approaches that examine how individuals personally make sense of their career experiences. The third section reviews the literature on gender and leadership, focusing on what research tells us about the opportunities and challenges women encounter on their path to senior roles. The chapter concludes by identifying the gap in the existing literature that the authors aim to address.

These areas of research are quite closely connected. Career theory provides the broader framework for understanding careers, turning points offer a lens for examining career change, narrative theory explains how individuals interpret and construct meaning from their experiences and gender highlights the structural conditions within which careers unfold.

### 2.1. Career as a Phenomenon

The word “career” carries two quite different meanings that the research literature has progressively pulled apart. In everyday usage a career often refers to a profession or occupational trajectory, for example a person has a career in medicine or engineering. In the social scientific tradition, a career refers to something more fundamental, the sequence of work-related experiences and transitions that constitute a working life over time, understood from the perspective of the person living it (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). This second meaning is the one this thesis builds on.

Thinking about careers has shifted considerably over time. Earlier frameworks imagined career progression as a relatively linear and institutionally structured process, a path that organisations provided and employees moved along in a predictable sequence (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). The boundaryless career, introduced by Arthur and Rousseau (1996) challenged this model by arguing that careers were increasingly crossing organisational and occupational boundaries rather than progressing within them. Careers were becoming less the property of organisations and more the property of individuals, shaped by personal agency,

developed experience and the capacity to build portable competencies across different contexts. Briscoe and Hall (2006) developed validated scales to measure both protean and boundaryless career orientations and found that protean orientations were associated with greater career adaptability and subjective career success. Their research also suggested that these orientations do not automatically translate into equivalent objective outcomes such as salary or seniority, pointing to the structural conditions that shape whether individual agency can be effectively exercised.

Hall's (2004) concept of the protean career develops this further. The protean career is self-directed and values-driven, requiring individuals to define success in personal rather than organisational terms and to achieve what Hall calls psychological success through their own meaning-making. Central to this is adaptability, the capacity to respond to changing circumstances, to reorient oneself and to navigate transitions that are not of one's own making. Savickas (2005) translates this into the concept of career adaptability, a psychosocial resource comprising four dimensions, concern about the future, curiosity about possibilities, confidence in one's own abilities and commitment to one's choices. These qualities enable individuals to navigate the unexpected moments that characterise contemporary careers.

Another important concept in career theory is Schein's (1996) idea of career anchors, the values, motives and perceived competencies that individuals are unwilling to give up even when career decisions become difficult. Career anchors represent the internal compass that gives direction to career choices, the self concept around which professional identity organises itself. Schein identifies eight distinct anchors including technical and functional competence, general managerial competence, autonomy and independence, security and stability, entrepreneurial creativity and dedication to a cause. An anchor is not simply a preference but a constraint, it shapes which opportunities a person will pursue, which they will decline and what they are prepared to sacrifice. Career anchors are particularly relevant for understanding career transitions because they illuminate what individuals are protecting and pursuing when facing significant decisions. They help explain how individuals navigate career choices and respond to unexpected moments of transition, shaping which opportunities are pursued and which are declined.

Careers can therefore be understood as ongoing projects of self-construction rather than predetermined paths to be followed. Research in career theory has shown that careers unfold as sequences of experiences shaped by individual agency and broader organisational and social

context (Hall, 2004). They are built not only through deliberate choices but through responses to unexpected opportunities, relationships with key individuals and the capacity to make meaning from moments of transition. It is this dynamic and interpretive understanding of career development that informs narrative approaches to career research.

## 2.2. Turning Points in Career Development

Within the career literature, turning points have become an important way of understanding how career trajectories change over time. Turning points refer to experiences or events that significantly redirect an individual's career trajectory, such as a promotion, a change of role or organisation, an encounter with a key person, a period of difficulty or a deliberate personal decision. Research has distinguished between turning points that are structurally driven by organisational change, those that are forced by external circumstances and those that are self initiated by the individual (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). This framework is a useful starting point but it captures only the external conditions of turning points and not the range of structures they can take.

The transition into a leadership role is one of the most significant turning points in a managerial career and it is rarely a straightforward or fully planned process. Research has shown the importance of sponsorship in career advancement, where a senior individual actively advocates for and promotes someone within the organisation, going beyond the guidance and support that mentoring alone provides (Ibarra, Carter and Silva, 2010). While mentors primarily advise and support, sponsors use their networks, power and influence to actively advocate for their protégé and create concrete opportunities for advancement. Research suggests that women are more likely to receive mentoring than sponsorship, which may partly explain why gaps in advancement into senior roles persist (Ibarra, Carter and Silva, 2010). This asymmetry matters not only practically but also analytically. Sponsorship functions as a relational turning point, a moment in which someone else's intervention significantly changes the conditions under which a career can develop.

Beyond individual relationships, broader contextual factors shape the conditions under which career turning points occur, including the culture of the organisation and the norms of the sector (Gunz and Peiperl, 2007). Blom and Alvesson's (2014) concept of Leadership on Demand is relevant here. They argue that the transition into a managerial role is not always initiated by

the individual who ends up in the role. Rather it is often initiated by those around a person who define when and how they want to be led and who in effect invite someone into a position through their expectations and behaviour. This follower-centered perspective challenges the assumption that reaching a managerial position is primarily the result of individual ambition and instead highlights the relational and situational conditions under which such transitions occur. It also suggests that not having a clear career plan does not necessarily mean a career is just down to chance. Instead, it may reflect a process where others see leadership potential and help bring it out before the person themselves fully recognises it.

Research has also identified a range of personal qualities and resources that shape how individuals recognise and respond to career turning points. Resilience, the ability to keep going through difficulty and reframe setbacks, has been identified as a core resource particularly in non-linear career paths. Bimrose and Hearne (2012) found through qualitative interviews with adults who had experienced significant career disruption that resilience was not primarily a fixed trait but a relational resource built through supportive relationships and the opportunity to reframe setbacks. Their research also found that women were more likely than men to have developed resilience through necessity, having navigated more difficult structural conditions without equivalent relational support.

Edmondson and Harvey (2018) add a further dimension specific to the technology sector. Managers who must span significant knowledge boundaries between technical and managerial worlds face a particular form of transition challenge. They argue that effective cross-boundary work requires a form of leadership focused on learning instead of knowing and on building shared understanding rather than relying on individual expertise. This cross-boundary challenge is particularly relevant in sectors where individuals may transition into leadership roles without deep technical expertise in the field they are managing.

## 2.3. Turning Points as Narrative Construction

Turning points are important for researchers because they are not simply objective events. They are also shaped by how individuals interpret and make sense of them. Narrative and biographical approaches to career research have shown that individuals actively make meaning from their experiences, selecting and framing certain moments as significant when looking back on their careers (Savickas, 2005; Bujold, 2004). A turning point in this sense is not only about what

happened but also about how the experience is understood and remembered. This interpretive quality is not a limitation of the data but one of its most interesting features.

McAdams's (2001) theory of narrative identity is central here. He argues that individuals construct their lives as evolving stories of the self, selectively highlighting certain experiences to create coherence and meaning. The stories we tell about our careers are not neutral reports of what happened but interpretations that reflect who we understand ourselves to be and who we are becoming. A turning point in this framework is not simply a moment when something changed externally but a moment that has been incorporated into the life narrative as the place where the story changed direction. This retrospective quality means that what a turning point is and what it means depends fundamentally on the vantage point from which it is narrated.

Savickas (2005) develops a related but distinct argument through the concept of career construction. He argues that individuals do not simply respond to career events but actively give them meaning by building a narrative of their professional selves from accumulated experiences. The career is not discovered but constructed, assembled from the meanings individuals attach to their own career path. This perspective implies that the temporal direction of meaning-making is not always backward-looking. Sometimes individuals make sense of an experience in the moment of decision, before the outcome is known. Sometimes a single event does not reorganize where a career is going but the meaning of everything that came before.

McAdams and Savickas both point to a research approach that is interpretive rather than structural. The aim is not to list or catalogue what turning points occurred but to understand how individuals narrate and make sense of the moments they designate as significant and what those accounts reveal about how careers are built over time. This is the epistemological orientation of narrative career research. What narrative research accesses is not a direct record of events but how individuals have interpreted and made sense of them.

This interpretive framework is not merely a methodological background. It shapes how narrative career research organises its analysis, attending not only to what turning points occurred but to how they are narrated and what temporal structures those narratives reveal.

## 2.4. Gender and Career Development

The conditions under which turning points arise, who gets noticed, who receives sponsorship and who feels equipped to act on an opportunity are all shaped by gender dynamics. Understanding

how gender operates in organisational life is therefore essential to understanding how the career journeys of female managers develop over time.

The tension described in role congruity theory arises from a fundamental mismatch: women are expected to be warm and communal, while leadership is culturally associated with assertiveness and authority (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Women in leadership therefore navigate a persistent double bind, pulled between what is expected of them as women and what is expected of them as leaders. Expressing anger or seeking power tends to be seen as positive in men but problematic in women (Bolman and Deal, 2017). This double bind shapes not only how others perceive women in leadership but how women perceive themselves, contributing to a sense of not quite fitting a role that was not originally designed with them in mind. Gender stereotypes also affect perceptions of competence and suitability, with both men and women tending to associate managerial characteristics more strongly with men (Bolman and Deal, 2017).

As overt discrimination has become less socially acceptable, it is increasingly replaced by subtle discrimination and micro-inequities, small and repeated everyday interactions that can conceal unequal treatment even when they appear neutral (Van Laer and Janssens, 2011). Jones et al. (2017) conceptualise subtle discrimination as a continuous process embedded in everyday interactions in which small and often ambiguous disadvantages accumulate over time, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that perpetuates inequality. Moss-Racusin et al. (2012) demonstrate that subtle gender bias operates even in ostensibly objective processes, where male candidates are considered more hireable than equally qualified female candidates. Pikulina and Ferreira (2024) show how even small biases in promotion processes can accumulate over time and significantly affect career outcomes.

These dynamics often lead to a state where women are formally part of the organisation but remain culturally marginalised through peripheral inclusion, formally present but excluded from the informal centre through which influence, information and opportunity flow (Rennstam and Sullivan, 2017). The glass ceiling describes the invisible barriers that prevent women from advancing despite having the necessary qualifications and experience (Jackson and Parry, 2011; Bolman and Deal, 2017), while the glass cliff describes the related finding that when women are promoted to senior roles they are more likely than men to be placed in high-risk positions where success is already more difficult to achieve (Bolman and Deal, 2017). Both concepts are relevant

here not as explanations of individual experiences but as structural conditions that shape the landscape in which leadership careers develop.

These dynamics do not disappear in contexts that are formally related to equality. As Ólafsdóttir (2018) argues, Iceland consistently ranks highly on measures of gender equality yet disparities in leadership representation remain. Research also suggests that formal equality interventions do not automatically translate into changes in how women experience their work in practice, pointing to a gap between structural equality and lived equality that remains underexplored in the literature. More broadly, existing research has paid limited attention to how these dynamics operate together in the lived experiences of women who have reached senior management in formally equal contexts. In particular, little is known about how the turning points in their careers are structured, narrated and shaped by gender.

## 2.5. Synthesis

This chapter has reviewed the theoretical and empirical literature relevant to this research. The career literature provides the foundation for understanding how careers develop over time. Career anchors (Schein, 1996) illuminate what individuals are protecting and pursuing across the turning points in their careers. The protean career (Hall, 2004), career adaptability (Savickas, 2005) and empirical work on protean and boundaryless career orientations (Briscoe and Hall, 2006) help explain how individuals navigate non-linear careers and why personal values and adaptability shape career outcomes differently across individuals.

The turning points literature provides the primary framework guiding the analysis. Hodkinson and Sparkes's (1997) classification of structurally driven, externally forced and self-initiated turning points offers a useful starting point that this research extends. Empirical research has shown that resilience in navigating turning points is not a fixed trait but a relational resource built through experience and supportive conditions and that women are more likely to have developed it through necessity (Bimrose and Hearne, 2012). The narrative and interpretive tradition, particularly McAdams (2001) and Savickas (2005), establishes that turning points are not objective events but interpretive constructions, put together in hindsight and sometimes reinterpreted from the perspective of the present.

The gender literature provides the essential second framework. Role congruity theory



(Eagly and Karau, 2002), subtle discrimination (Van Laer and Janssens, 2011; Jones et al., 2017; Moss-Racusin et al., 2012), peripheral inclusion (Rennstam and Sullivan, 2017) and the concepts of the glass ceiling and glass cliff (Jackson and Parry, 2011; Bolman and Deal, 2017) together show how the conditions under which turning points occur are shaped by gender dynamics that can persist even in contexts that appear formally equal. Iceland and its technology sector provide the specific setting, a society internationally recognised for gender equality yet one where the gap between formal equality and lived experience remains visible, particularly at the level of senior leadership.

The literature reviewed above provides the conceptual foundation for this study. Career theory establishes how careers develop over time through individual agency and relational conditions. The turning points literature provides the primary framework for analysis, while narrative and interpretive theory establishes that turning points are not objective events but interpretive constructions assembled in hindsight. These frameworks do not operate independently. Gender shapes who is positioned to recognise and act on a turning point, narrative shapes how that moment is understood and remembered and the career context shapes which turning points become possible in the first place. This integrated foundation guides the examination of eight career narratives in Chapter 4.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Research Approach

This study takes a qualitative research approach to explore how female managers in the Icelandic technology sector describe their career journeys and the turning points that shaped their progression into senior management. It also examines the role gender played in shaping the conditions under which these careers developed. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with women currently working in senior or leadership roles. A qualitative approach was most appropriate here because the research question is concerned with how people interpret and narrate their own experiences, not with measuring variables or testing hypotheses (Bryman, 2016; Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2022; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The study takes a narrative and interpretive perspective. Instead of looking at structural factors from the outside, the focus is on how participants themselves make sense of their careers, what moments they pick out as important or significant, who they describe as having mattered and how they talk about gender. This sits within a broader qualitative tradition that treats meaning as something constructed through language and story rather than a fixed property of events (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2022). It reflects the assumption that careers are not simply sequences of events but stories that individuals actively construct as they look back on and interpret their experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

### 3.2. Research Design

The study uses an exploratory research design built around semi-structured interviews (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2022; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). This was considered the right fit for a study aiming to generate qualitative insight into an area that has not been heavily researched, rather than testing an existing theory or producing findings that can be generalised across populations (Bryman, 2016; Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they give participants room to reflect and introduce things that matter to them, while still covering the core areas, career progression, turning points and gender. The structure keeps the conversations comparable across participants

without shutting down the kind of open storytelling that narrative research depends on (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2022). In practice the interviews were conversational, with follow-up questions used to explore whatever came up rather than to direct participants too strongly in any specific direction.

### 3.3. Research setting

This study is based in Iceland, specifically within the technology sector. Iceland is a relevant setting for research on female managers and career turning points for several connected reasons.

Iceland consistently ranks first on the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2025) and has closed more than 90% of its overall gender gap. High levels of female labour market participation, parental leave policies and institutional commitments to gender equality are often highlighted as features of Iceland's position as a formally equal society.

At the same time, Iceland has not achieved full equality in practice. As Ólafsdóttir (2018) argues, differences in pay, seniority and how women are distributed across sectors still exist in ways that overall equality rankings do not fully show. Women are still underrepresented at the most senior levels of Icelandic organisations and tend to cluster in particular fields of work. Formal equality and lived equality are therefore not the same. Beyond this, The World Economic Forum (2025) highlights a persistent pattern, where women attain high levels of education yet continue to face barriers to senior leadership positions, particularly in technology and other STEM-related industries.

### 3.4. Data Collection

Eight women in senior or leadership roles in the Icelandic technology sector took part in the study. Participants were identified through purposive sampling using a gatekeeper contact (Moser and Korstjens, 2017). A member of the committee of Félag Kvenna í Atvinnulífinu (FKA), a professional organisation for women in business in Iceland, suggested nine potential participants, of whom eight agreed to take part. Invitations were sent via email outlining the purpose of the study.

All participants hold senior or executive roles across a range of Icelandic technology companies. Pseudonyms are used throughout and identifying details have been removed or generalised. Given the small size of the Icelandic technology sector, information about specific roles and organisations has been kept deliberately vague in order to protect anonymity and ensure confidentiality.

**Table 1. Overview of Participants**

| <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Role</b>                   | <b>Company description</b>   |
|------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Sigríður         | Managing Director             | Icelandic technology company |
| Rannveig         | Founder and Managing Director | Icelandic technology company |
| Þórunn           | Operations Manager            | Icelandic technology company |
| Birna            | Chief Executive Officer       | Icelandic technology company |
| Katrín           | Managing Director             | Icelandic technology company |
| Lilja            | Head of Software Development  | Icelandic technology company |
| Margrét          | Managing Director             | Icelandic technology company |
| Vigdís           | Founder and Managing Director | Icelandic technology company |

*Note. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants and company descriptions have been generalised to protect the anonymity of participants.*

The interview guide was developed in Icelandic and covered five areas: career background, turning points, organisational environment, decision-making and problem-solving approaches and experiences of gender. It has been translated into English and is included in Appendix A. All interviews were conducted in Icelandic so participants could express themselves naturally and in full. They were audio recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim in Icelandic and then translated into English for analysis. Excerpts are presented in both languages to preserve meaning and nuance across languages.

### 3.5. Data Analysis

The study used Gioia-inspired coding procedures within a broader interpretive narrative approach, designed to bring structure and precision to qualitative analysis while staying grounded in participants' own accounts (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013). The approach treats participants as knowledgeable agents who can articulate and describe their experience clearly. In the early stages, the priority was to stay close to participants' language, before moving toward more abstract interpretation. This fits the study's overall interpretive orientation, where what participants say is understood as a constructed narrative rather than a factual report (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Although the Gioia methodology is most commonly used to build grounded models of organisational processes, this study adapts it to a narrative purpose. Rather than mapping stable structures, the coding process here follows fluid, retrospective accounts, the kind of meaning-making that only becomes visible when people look back on their careers and construct them into coherent stories. The result is an approach that keeps the analytical precision of the Gioia framework while remaining sensitive to the interpretive and narrative quality of the data.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim in Icelandic and translated into English before analysis began. The analysis followed the three-level coding structure of the Gioia methodology, first-order concepts grounded in participants' language second-order themes developed by the researchers and aggregate dimensions connecting the findings to broader theoretical frameworks (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013). Both researchers coded independently throughout and then compared and discussed their interpretations.

In the first stage, both researchers went through the transcripts line by line, using labels that stayed close to how participants actually talked. The coding process was guided by two questions: what is this person describing and what language are they using to describe it? Codes were generated inductively from the data rather than imposed from existing frameworks. Across the eight transcripts, approximately sixty first-order codes were generated in total. Accounts of roles arriving unexpectedly were coded as things like "role arrived not sought" or "coincidence that I ended up here." Self-doubt at leadership transitions became "self-doubt at transition" or "had to prove myself." References to key people became "mentor as turning point" or "someone who saw something in me." Patterns were identified through repetition, when the same type of experience or the same kind of language appeared across multiple accounts, this was treated as

significant. A coding log was kept throughout and codes were refined through discussion between the two researchers. The data structure figure in Appendix B presents the first-order concepts that most directly informed the second-order themes and aggregate dimensions and therefore represents a selection from the full set of codes rather than an exhaustive list.

In the second stage, the researchers moved from participants' language into their own interpretive language. Related codes were grouped into broader themes. Persistence and overcoming difficulty went under resilience. Codes about unexpected opportunities formed the theme of an unplanned career. Self-doubt, imposter feelings and needing to prove oneself were grouped under imposter syndrome and self-confidence. This movement between first and second order was iterative, so the researchers kept returning to raw data to check that the emerging themes still reflected what participants had actually said (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013; Braun and Clarke, 2006).

In the third stage, the second-order themes were examined for the broader patterns they formed across the dataset and elevated to aggregate dimensions, the most abstract level of the Gioia framework. These connect the grounded themes to existing theoretical constructs and place the findings in conversation with the literature (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013). Two aggregate dimensions came out of this process: career development through turning points and gender as structural and narrative context. The data structure is presented in Appendix B.

Although the analysis was inductive it was also shaped by theory. Career theory and gender frameworks guided where attention was paid, while remaining open to themes that emerged from participants' accounts, which reflects what Braun and Clarke (2006) describe as the distinction between deductive and inductive approaches.

### 3.6. Validity and Reliability

Several strategies were used to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2022). Both researchers coded independently and discussed interpretations, which helped keep the analysis consistent and reduced the risk of one perspective dominating. A coding log documented decisions throughout. Patterns were compared across interviews and direct quotations are included so readers can assess the interpretations for themselves (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

In relation to transcription and presentation of data, no changes were made to

participants' wording. The only exception was the removal of personal names and place names that would be easily identifiable in the small Icelandic context, in order to protect participant anonymity. Spoken language was carefully reviewed to account for non standard grammar, including cases where inflection or sentence structure was not grammatically correct. This process helped support consistency across the Icelandic and English versions without altering meaning. This bilingual approach was especially important for close readings of specific Icelandic terms used in the analysis.

It is worth being clear that qualitative findings like these are not meant to be statistically generalisable. The aim is not to make claims about all female managers in the Icelandic technology sector but to offer detailed, context-specific insight that may help shed light on dynamics relevant in comparable settings (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2022; Bryman, 2016).

### 3.7. Limitations

Several limitations are worth naming, though each reflects a deliberate methodological trade-off rather than a straightforward weakness.

The sample is small, eight participants. This is appropriate and in fact typical for qualitative work focused on depth but it does limit generalisability (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2022). All participants were recruited through FKA. This gave access to a clearly defined group of women in senior technology roles, which was exactly what the study needed. The trade-off is that the sample may lean towards women who are already engaged with professional networks and thinking about gender, which may mean some dynamics are more visible than they would be in a broader sample.

The interviews were conducted in Icelandic. This was a deliberate choice that produced richer, more natural accounts. The trade-off is that something is inevitably lost in translation even when it is done carefully, which we were mindful of throughout the process.

Finally, the retrospective nature of the interviews means that participants' accounts are shaped by where they are now, what they choose to include, emphasise or frame as significant reflects their current perspective, not a neutral record of events. This is not a flaw but is actually central to what the study is about, how people make sense of their careers over time (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis was guided throughout by the Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) turning point framework, which distinguishes between structurally driven, externally forced and

self-initiated turning points. This gave a useful starting point but quickly showed its limits, the same moment could belong to all three categories at once depending on how it was told. A burnout, a phone call and a decision made under pressure could all be a part of a single turning point, its meaning depending not on the event but on the story built around it. That observation shaped the whole approach, rather than classifying turning points, the analysis asked what the way they were narrated reveals about how these careers were constructed.

Artificial intelligence tools were used during the writing process of this thesis. Claude (Anthropic) was used throughout the writing process to assist with language editing, structural feedback, identifying inconsistencies in argumentation and improving clarity of expression across all chapters as the thesis was written in a language other than the authors' first language. ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used for similar language editing purposes. Neither tool was used to generate analysis, interpret data, produce academic arguments or conduct any part of the research process. All analytical work, interpretations, empirical findings and theoretical arguments are the authors' own. All AI-generated suggestions were reviewed, revised and approved by the authors before inclusion. Examples of prompts are shown in Appendix C.



## 4. Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents the findings from eight semi-structured interviews with female managers in Icelandic technology companies, structured around the two aggregate dimensions that emerged from the analysis. The first concerns the structure and logic of turning points, how these women construct, narrate and navigate the decisive moments in their careers. The second concerns gender as a background condition, how gender shaped the landscape in which these careers unfolded, operating not primarily through overt discrimination but through subtler structural and internalised dynamics. The turning point sections are presented first, followed by the gender sections.

### 4.1. What a Turning Point Looks Like

Across these interviews, turning points are rarely recognised as such at the time they happen. They are constructed retrospectively in the telling, assembled into moments of significance once the speaker can see how they redirected the trajectory of the story. This retrospective quality is not a limitation of the data but reflects the fundamental nature of biographical narrative. Building on McAdams (2001), individuals construct their lives as evolving stories of the self, selectively highlighting certain experiences in order to create coherence and meaning. What we access in these interviews, therefore, is not a direct account of what happened but how these women have interpreted and made sense of what happened and that construction is precisely what the following sections examine.

The sections that follow present five structurally distinct types of turning point that emerged from the data. Each type is grounded primarily in the account where it appears most clearly but is traced across multiple accounts in the dataset. The analysis attends not only to what turning points occurred but to their structure, their logic and what they reveal about how these careers were built.

### 4.2. The Turning Point as Institutional Recognition

One of the turning point structures that emerges from this dataset has no clear name in the existing literature. It is not a moment of decision, not a response to external pressure and not an

invitation from a colleague or mentor. It is a turning point in which the career moves not because of anything the individual did but because of what they built, a form of institutional recognition so complete that the person and their work become inseparable. The turning point is not chosen. It arrives because expertise has become irreplaceable.

This structure appears across the dataset in different registers. Katrín describes being observed and then invited by a board that had watched her work from a distance. Sigríður describes never having applied for any of the roles she has held. Rannveig describes being approached by a company at precisely the moment she was considering leaving her current position. The unplanned career that runs as a consistent pattern across all eight interviews finds one of its clearest structural explanations here, when expertise becomes irreplaceable or when reputation precedes the individual into a new context, the career acquires its own momentum without requiring the individual to steer it.

The clearest account of this structure is Lilja's. She was, on more than one occasion, transferred from one organisation to another because the organisation wanted the software system she had spent years building and she was inseparable from it.

Icelandic: “Ég var búin að vera að þróa þessi kerfi frá upphafi og ég flutti kerfið yfir til tölvudeildar hinnar stofnunarinnar þar sem ég vann við þróun þess.”

English: “I had been developing these systems from the very beginning and I transferred the system over to the computer department of the other institution where I worked on its development.”

This happened not once but twice. When one company bought the loan system she had built at her original workplace, she went with it. When a larger institution absorbed that company in the aftermath of the financial crisis, she went with it again. She described this with a particular phrase “ég flýt með kerfinu” I float with the system. The verb matters. Floating is not active steering nor straightforward passivity. Instead, it describes a kind of movement created by the value of what she had built. She moved because what she had built was substantial enough to carry her. This is the defining feature of the institutional recognition turning point, agency is present but not in the form of deliberate pursuit.

From one angle this could be read as passive career progression where things happened to her rather than being chosen. But this reading misses something important. The reason she was transferred with the system was precisely because she was irreplaceable. Her knowledge was so deep, so embedded in the product she had built, that the organisations acquiring that product understood they could not have one without the other. The passivity of floating is, on closer examination, a form of professional authority so complete that it made her mobile in a way most employees are not.

This type of turning point also reveals a particular nuance, it can carry a person forward without building the internal confidence that deliberate pursuit develops along the way. The turning point that is most significant in Lilja's narrative is not the transfers themselves but the moment when the career that had always come to her suddenly required something different from her. When the first leadership role arrived in 2017, having spent seventeen years as a programmer and then a senior technical contributor, she was offered a team leadership role managing a group of programmers at a company where some of the group members had been at the company longer than she had.

Icelandic: “Ég upplifði hálfgerð blekkingar heilkenni þarna. Þannig að ráðið sem ég myndi gefa ungum konum, er að konur hafa tilhneigingu til að líta gagnrýnið á eigin hæfni þegar þær lesa starfsauglýsingar. Þær skoða hæfniskröfurnar og finnast þær vera óhæfar í starfið ef ein þeirra er ekki uppfyllt, jafnvel þó þær uppfylli allt annað. Karlmenn, hins vegar, sjá aðallega það sem þeir uppfylla og láta vaða og sækja um um þrátt fyrir allt sem vatnar upp á. Ungar konur eiga ekki að láta neitt stoppa sig því við getum yfirleitt mun meira en það sem við höldum, þó maður upplifi mótlæti þá á maður bara að halda áfram og sýna þeim að þeir hafi rangt fyrir sér. Leyfið engum að stoppa ykkur.”

English: “I experienced something of an imposter syndrome there. The advice I would give to young women is that women tend to look critically at their own abilities when reading job advertisements. They go through the requirements and feel they are unqualified for the position if just one of them is not met, even though they may fulfil everything else. Men, on the other hand, mainly focus on what they do meet and just go for it, applying regardless of everything they fall

short on. Young women should not let anything stop them, because we can usually do far more than we give ourselves credit for. Even if you encounter setbacks, you just have to keep going and prove them wrong. Don't let anyone stop you.”

The qualifier "hálfger" meaning “something of an”, is not simply modesty. It is a hedge against overclaiming, a refusal to fully inhabit even the language of self-doubt. She does not claim the full label. She hedges it, as if uncertain whether her self-doubt was substantial enough to merit the term or whether she was entitled to invoke it at all. The hedging runs across the dataset. These women consistently qualify their own experiences of difficulty and uncertainty, naming them partially and then pulling back. The pattern is worth noting not as an individual trait but as a shared dynamic. The professional self of these women present was not always the one they started with. It was constructed carefully over time through gained experience.

What she then describes is the specific challenge of having her authority questioned by people who had been her peers and who now had to accept her as their manager. She did not respond with confrontation or a dramatic assertion of authority. She held her ground quietly:

Icelandic: “Ég varð yfirmaður forritara sem höfðu mun lengri starfsreynslu en ég hjá fyrirtækinu. Það skapaði svona togstreitu, því sumir þeirra töldu það ósanngjarnt að ég skyldi vera að segja þeim fyrir verkum. Ég hélt áfram og ég hélt mínu striki og hlustaði ekki á þetta. Ég náði þannig að snúa þessu við og með tímanum snar breyttist þetta viðhorf. En svo þegar ég fór í næstu stöðu sem er staðan sem ég er í núna þá upplifði ég þetta alls ekki, enda komin ný inn og komin með reynsluna.”

English: “I became the manager of programmers who had far more experience than me at the company. It created tension, as some of them felt it was unfair that I should be telling them what to do. I persevered, held my ground and did not listen to that. I managed to turn things around and over time that attitude changed completely. But then when I moved to my next position, which is the position I am in now, I did not experience this at all, as I was coming in fresh with the experience already behind me.”

This is the turning point within the turning point. The career that had always arrived without being pursued suddenly required active defence. The first leadership role demanded something the preceding career had not. The sustained assertion of authority in the face of resistance. She navigated it through persistence rather than through any dramatic confrontation or strategic intervention. She simply held her line until the environment adjusted. What emerges here is not only persistence but a specific form of professional resilience. Lilja did not respond to resistance through confrontation or withdrawal but through sustained consistency over time. Her authority was not established through a dramatic assertion of leadership but through continuing to perform the role despite uncertainty and scepticism around her. Resilience in this account therefore appears not as recovery from crisis but as the capacity to remain steady long enough for legitimacy to consolidate around her. And then having done it once, she found she didn't need to do it again. The second leadership role carried none of the same friction because she arrived in it already carrying the authority that the first role had cost her so much to establish.

The sequence of difficulty, persistence resolution and transfer of earned credibility is a turning point structure that the career theory literature does not fully capture. It is not a moment. It is a process, extended over time, in which something is won through sustained effort and then carried forward. Savickas (2005) describes that careers are constructed through the meanings individuals give to their experiences. In Lilja's case, this is reflected in how credibility is built over time, not granted automatically but developed through navigating scepticism and demonstrating competence.

Lilja's account reveals a turning point structure in which agency is present but not in the form of deliberate pursuit. It is the agency of someone whose expertise has become so essential that institutions move around it. This is not passivity. It is a specific form of professional authority that carries a career forward without requiring the individual to steer and it is the structure this dataset makes visible.

What this type reveals about turning points more broadly is that they do not always announce themselves as choices. Sometimes they arrive as the natural consequence of work done well over a long period, recognised not by the individual but by the institutions that have watched it accumulate.

### 4.3. The Prospective Turning Point

Most turning points in this dataset share a common narrative structure, an opportunity arrived from the outside, the participant recognised it and she said yes. What varies is the relationship to self-doubt at the moment of decision. In most accounts self-doubt is present but managed, suppressed, worked through or gradually overcome. What makes one account in this dataset structurally different is that self-doubt was not suppressed or overcome at all. It was used. The inadequacy became the engine of the decision rather than an obstacle to it. This also reflects a broader pattern across the dataset in which resilience appeared not simply as endurance after difficulty but as a willingness to move toward uncertainty despite self-doubt. Several participants described approaching opportunities through action rather than certainty, solving problems and adapting as situations unfolded rather than waiting until they felt fully prepared. In Vigdís's account, this takes a particularly clear form. Rather than suppressing doubt or waiting for confidence, she converted perceived inadequacy into motivation for action. This is what this study identifies as the prospective turning point, meaning-making that happens in the moment of decision itself, before the outcome is known, not retrospective reframing after the fact but a forward-facing deployment of doubt as motivation.

McAdams (2001) and Savickas (2005) describe career construction as a primarily retrospective process, individuals make meaning from their experiences after the fact, assembling turning points in the telling. The prospective turning point is structurally different. The meaning is made forward-facing, in the moment of decision, before there is any outcome to reflect on.

This mechanism appears across the dataset in different forms. Rannveig described deciding to found her company not by resolving her doubts but by making a deliberate decision to override them. "I made a very conscious decision. I was not going to let my own thoughts stop me." Birna described grabbing every opportunity even when she did not fully know what she was doing. In each case the turning point was seized not despite the inadequacy but through a specific internal decision about how to relate to it.

The clearest account is Vigdís's. The context is a meeting at a startup company she was working for in the mid-2000s. A project had come in implementing their vehicle management system for a client abroad and the question was who would go.

Icelandic: “Við sátum á fundi þar sem verið var að ræða tækifæri sem væri að koma upp við að innleiða stjórnunarkerfi ökutækja í öðru landi. Það var verið að ákveða hver ætti að fara út til þess að sinna verkefninu en ég hugsaði með mér að mér þætti ég ekki nógu góð í ensku. Útaf því ákvað ég einmitt að taka tækifærinu til þess að æfa mig í samskiptum á ensku.”

English: “We were sitting in a meeting where an upcoming opportunity was being discussed to implement a vehicle management system abroad. It was being decided who should go abroad to carry out the project but I thought to myself that my English wasn’t good enough. Because of that, I decided to take the opportunity to practice my English communication skills.”

The fear of not being good enough at English was not a reason to decline. It became the reason to accept. This inversion is the defining feature of the prospective turning point, the perceived deficit is converted into the argument for going rather than the argument for staying. She then describes what she actually encountered when she arrived:

Icelandic: “Mætti algjörlega þessu viðhorfi að ég væri bara einhver stelpa frá Íslandi. Hvað veit hún eiginlega?”

English: “I was completely met with the attitude that I was just some girl from Iceland. What does she even know?”

The word “stelpa” or girl, is an interesting comment. She was not a young woman new to the field. She was an experienced system implementer with deep knowledge of the product. But she was perceived as a foreign girl and this perception preceded any demonstration of competence. She had to establish credibility that a male colleague in the same position would likely have been granted automatically (Moss Racusin et al., 2012). This is one of the few moments in the dataset where gender becomes explicitly visible as a shaping force in a specific professional situation, examined further in the gender sections below.

Icelandic: “Þetta hefði örugglega verið öðruvísi, hefði ég bara verið karlmaður á mínum aldri. Það hefði hentað aðstæðunum betur.”

English: “It would probably have been different if I had just been a man my age. It would have suited the situation better.”

She went on those trips multiple times and she proved herself. The project was then implemented. A turning point she entered through fear and left having become someone larger than she had been before. The turning point did not reveal who she was. It produced who she became.

Vigdís describes a relationship to self-doubt that appears in different forms across the dataset but never quite as explicitly as here. Rannveig had to consciously override her inner critics to found a company. Lilja qualified her imposter syndrome as half-genuine before allowing herself to name it. Birna wore suits at international meetings, dressing like the men around her, before her father called out what she was doing. In each case self-doubt was present at the moment of the turning point. What varies is how it was handled.

This account contributes a turning point structure that neither Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) nor the career narrative literature fully captures. The self-doubt did not disappear. It was converted. That conversion, happening in the moment of decision rather than in retrospect is a structural feature of turning points that this dataset makes visible.

#### 4.4. The Unchosen Turning Point

Not all turning points are seized. A third type that comes from this dataset is one in which the turning point is imposed rather than chosen. The unchosen turning point is a decisive moment that arrives not because the individual pursued it but because the circumstances made it inevitable and that is recognised as significant only in retrospect, from a position of distance that the original moment did not allow.

This type reveals the limits of agency-centered models of career development. Hall’s (2004) protean career assumes a self that directs its own path through deliberate choices and self-directed values. The unchosen turning point describes a self, directed by its circumstances, one that only later could narrate those circumstances as the turning points that made her who she is.

Several participants describe founding companies or accepting roles not because they were ready but because the circumstances required it. Þórunn describes leaving the financial



sector not as a positive pursuit of a new direction but as a departure from an environment that had stopped feeling right. The career theory literature tends to understand entrepreneurial decisions as expressions of individual agency and self-direction (Hall, 2004). What these accounts suggest is a different mechanism, not a leap forward but an exit from what had stopped working. The company was not the goal. It was the conclusion reached when existing arrangements no longer held.

The fullest account of the unchosen turning point is Vigdís's. She had been working as head of IT at a company undergoing significant restructuring. She describes flagging repeatedly that she needed more support, more resources and more people in the department. The support never came. She describes the accumulating pressure:

Icelandic: "Var bara að hugsa um það að það er nú kannski ótrúlega góð lausn ef eitthvað myndi þvinga mig til þess að hætta, af því ég hef það ekki í mér að hætta sjálf."

English: "Maybe it would be an incredibly good solution if something were to force me to quit, because I did not have it in me to quit by myself."

This passage describes a specific feature of the unchosen turning point, the exit cannot be self initiated. The sense of a professional obligation had closed off the internal route that individual agencies would normally provide. She could not make herself leave. The turning point had to come from outside because she could no longer bring herself to leave.

In this case, a specific work situation eventually made continuation impossible, leading to her exit. A difficult meeting ended with her walking out and not returning. She went into a severe burnout. The turning point was not chosen. It was imposed on her by the situation she could no longer sustain.

What follows reveals a further dimension of the unchosen turning point. While she was still recovering, she received a call from a company asking whether she would consider joining them. She returned to work earlier than she felt ready, this was not a return driven by opportunity or readiness but by external conditions that required it.

Still, looking back this was also the beginning of the sequence that led to founding her own company. Two years later, dissatisfied with feeling undervalued, "mér fannst eg bara ekki

metin" meaning "I just felt undervalued", she and her husband founded their own company. She describes this decision in the following terms:

Icelandic: "Nú er ég orðin bara þreytt á að láta aðra græða á því hvað ég er klár."

English: "Now I am just tired of letting others profit from how capable I am."

This sentence is the pivot of the unchosen turning point as it is the language of exhaustion with an arrangement that has stopped working. The founding was a withdrawal from a condition that had become intolerable rather than a pursuit of an independently formed goal. At the same time, the account demonstrates how resilience in these careers often emerged through necessity rather than optimism. Vigdís does not describe overcoming exhaustion through confidence or strategic clarity but through continued movement under difficult circumstances. The ability to keep solving practical problems despite exhaustion and uncertainty appears throughout the dataset as an important condition of career progression.

The founding refusal pattern appears in a related form in Rannveig's account. Her decision to found her own company is described in terms of a conscious decision to stop being held back rather than in terms of entrepreneurial vision. Both accounts reframe what the career literature treats as entrepreneurial agency. In these narratives the company was not the dream. It was the boundary drawn when existing arrangements were no longer sustainable.

None of the moments that shaped this particular career, the period of exhaustion, the phone call during recovery, the slow dissatisfaction that preceded the founding decision, felt in the moment like the beginning of something new. They felt like the continuation or the end of something already in progress. It was only in retrospect that the sequence assembled itself into a coherent career narrative. This is what McAdams (2001) makes visible, the mechanism through which an unchosen and painful sequence becomes a coherent and even generative career narrative. Events acquire meaning not when they occur but when they are incorporated into a story a person tells about who they have become.

## 4.5. The Internal Turning Point

The turning points in the previous sections all have something in common, they were triggered by something in the world outside the individual. A system was acquired. A project needed

someone to go abroad. A period of exhaustion forced an exit. The fourth type of turning point does not follow this pattern. It is an internal turning point, a decisive moment that had no external trigger at all, no offer, no door opening, no mentor intervening. The turning point was a change in how the individual related to her own internal experience and that change made everything that followed possible. This turning point type is not included in the Hodgkinson and Sparkes (1997) typology. Their definition of turning points as experiences or events assumes something happening in the external world. The internal turning point reveals that the decisive event can happen entirely within the person, leaving no external trace yet still redirecting everything that follows. It can only be accessed through narrative research, by attending not to what externally occurred but to how individuals describe their relationship to their own experience at the moment of decision.

The internal dimension is present across multiple accounts in this dataset. Vigdís converted her perceived inadequacy into motivation at the moment of decision. An internal reframing that preceded the external action of taking the project. Birna decided to stop performing masculinity after her father called out what she was doing, a shift that manifested as a change in clothes but was in substance a change in how she understood her own right to lead within the environment she had entered. Lilja held her ground quietly rather than engaging with the scepticism around her. An internal decision to maintain her sense of her own authority. In each case something shifted internally before anything changed externally.

In Rannveig's account the internal turning point appears in its purest and most consciously articulated form. The context is the third of three visits she made to the same person at intervals of approximately ten years, each visit coinciding with a major life crisis. At the third visit what she received was not a prediction but a reframe of how she related to her own inner critics.

Icelandic: “Þú þarft bara að útiloka þessar raddir í hausnum á þér sem segja eitthvað annað en að þú getir þetta. Útiloka! Þessar raddir sem segja manni að maður geti ekki eitthvað eða kunni ekki eitthvað það eru bara fyllibyttur í hausnum á manni sem segja það og hver hlustar á fyllibyttur?”

English: “You just need to block out these voices in your head that say something different than you can do it. Block them out! These voices that tell you that you

cannot do something or do not know something, they are just drunks in your head saying that and who listens to drunks?”

The image of inner critics as drunks is distinctive precisely because of its irreverence. It does not take the voices seriously. It does not engage with their content and does not ask whether they might be right nor does it weigh their arguments. It simply delegitimises them as a category. The point is not the image itself but what the image makes possible. A decision that does not require the self-doubt to be resolved, only disqualified as a relevant voice.

Rannveig then reflects on the asymmetry this image exposed:

Icelandic: “Við erum algjörlega okkar hörðustu gagnrýnendur og getum verið mjög hörð við okkur sjálf. Í staðinn fyrir að vera uppbyggileg. Til dæmis ef þú kæmir kannski til mín og myndir segja að þú sért að pæla í stofna fyrirtæki og ert með þessa hugmynd, svo lengi sem ég myndi heyra að þú hefur ástríðu fyrir henni þá myndi ég allan daginn segja bara láttu vaða.”

English: “We are our own hardest critics and can be very brutal with ourselves. Instead of being constructive. For example if you came to me and said you were thinking of starting a company and had an idea, as long as I heard that you had the passion for it I would always just say go for it.”

She would encourage someone else without hesitation. She would not do the same for herself. This asymmetry between how these women assess others and how they assess themselves runs across the dataset. It is not unique to Rannveig. It is a pattern in how these careers were navigated. A standard applied to the self that would be considered unreasonably harsh if applied to anyone else. Once she saw the asymmetry clearly, once it had been named she was able to make a decision:

Icelandic: “Ég tók mjög meðvitaða ákvörðun þarna. Ég ætlaði ekki að láta mínar eigin hugsanir stoppa mig af.”

English: “I made a very conscious decision. I was not going to let my own thoughts stop me.”

This sentence is the turning point. Not just the founding of the company which came later. Not just the decision to leave her job which also came later. The turning point was this internal moment, the decision to change her relationship to her own self-doubt as a matter of deliberate policy.

What also emerges from Rannveig's account and from the gender sections that follow is that the inner critics she describes are not generic doubts. They are specifically about whether she is enough, whether she will be taken seriously and whether she has the right to claim visibility. These are not the doubts of someone who has failed. They are the doubts of someone who has succeeded at every stage of her career but has not been able to fully see or claim that success. This gap between achievement and self-perception is consistent with what Clance and Imes (1978) describe as the imposter phenomenon and with the role congruity dynamics that Eagly and Karau (2002) identify. The internal turning point in this light has a gender dimension. The internal voices that need to be overridden are shaped by structural conditions, not only by individual psychology.

The internal turning point matters both as a typological addition to the literature and as a methodological argument for interpretive research. A study that cataloged external career events would miss it entirely. It is only visible through attending to what individuals say about how they related to their own experience at the moment of decision. This is what the narrative approach makes visible. The turning point that happened inside, that left no trace in the external record but redirected everything that followed.

## 4.6. The Retroactive Turning Point

This fifth type of turning point breaks the assumption shared by the previous four types, that turning points change what happens next. The earlier turning points redirect the future. This one does not. Instead, the retroactive turning point changes how the past is understood. It does not change the future. It is a moment that reorganises not where the career goes from here but what everything that has already happened means. The career itself does not change. The story told about it does.

This type appears twice in the dataset, in Þórunn's and Margrét's accounts. This repetition matters. When a pattern appears in two independent accounts, it is not just a personal story, it is a feature of the data. In both cases an adult diagnosis of ADHD did not change what

these women were capable of. It changed how they understood what they had always been able to do, making those abilities visible to them for the first time.

Pórunn describes a combination of serious personal difficulties in her teenage years, experiences she received no help or recognition for, that left her entering adult working life with what she describes as a completely broken sense of self-worth.

Icelandic: “Þessi samblanda af mjög lágu sjálfsmati og miklum erfiðleikum sem ég fékk enga aðstoð með. Það var aldrei neinn sem spurði mig hvernig mér liði eða hvernig ég hefði það þannig mér fannst erfitt að átta mig á því hvort það sem ég væri að ganga í gegnum væri eðlilegt.”

English: “This combination of very low self-esteem and great difficulties that I received no help with. No one ever asked me how I was doing so I found it hard to figure out whether what I was going through was normal. “

She moved through the aftermath largely alone, carrying a self-image so damaged that she entered adult working life without any sense of what she was capable of. At every workplace she entered, the same thing happened. She immediately began looking for what could be improved. Always the same impulse, always the same orientation toward improvement.

Icelandic: “Ég var alltaf að þæla hvernig við gætum breytt og bætt hlutina.”

English: “I was always thinking about how we could change and improve things.”

She did not know at the time where this came from. She only knew that she could not help it. The diagnosis of ADHD and OCD at thirty did not change what she was capable of. Suddenly the pattern made sense. The hyperfocus, the attention to detail, the restlessness with anything that was not working as well as it could, these were not random personality traits. They were the recognisable profile of a mind that had been working that way all along without a name for it.

Icelandic: “Greiningin hefur hjálpað mér að skilja hvernig hausinn minn virkar. Ég hef tekið eftir miklum breytingum í vinnunni og sjálfstraustinu mínu, um leið

og þú hefur meiri trú á því að þú vitir eitthvað og á sjálfa þig þá ferðu að tala og bera þig þannig.”

English: “The diagnosis helped me understand how my mind works. I noticed big changes in my work and my self-confidence. As soon as you have more belief in the fact that you know something and in yourself, you start speaking and carrying yourself accordingly.”

The diagnosis did not give her new skills. It changed how she carried herself. What shifted was not competence but the visible expression of competence. The self-presentation that follows from believing you know what you are doing. Before the diagnosis she had the capability without self-belief. After it she had both. This is the mechanism of the retroactive turning point. It does not add anything new. It makes what was already there legible.

Margrét describes the same mechanism. She reflects that she never imagined she could end up where she is today and connects this directly to never having known whether she was doing well.

Icelandic: “Ég vissi aldrei hvort að væri að standa mig vel.”

English: “I never knew if I was doing a good job.”

She did not lack competence. She lacked the ability to perceive her own competence. The diagnosis reorganised the meaning of everything that had already happened. Years of professional success that had felt uncertain and provisional were retroactively confirmed as real.

The diagnosis in both cases is not just a medical event. It is a narrative event, a moment that reorganises everything that came before it into a different and more legible story. It is a turning point that turns not the career but the meaning of the career.

There is also a gender dimension to this pattern that deserves naming. Both Þórunn and Margrét were diagnosed with ADHD in adulthood. Research suggests that ADHD is constantly underdiagnosed in women and girls partly because its presentation differs from the predominantly male profiles used in diagnostic criteria and partly because women are more likely to develop compensatory strategies that mask the underlying condition (Williamson and Johnston, 2015). The years these women spent not knowing how their mind worked are not

simply a personal history. They are a gendered history. A path to understanding themselves as capable was longer and harder than it needed to be, shaped by the same structural condition that shaped everything else in these career narratives.

What the retroactive turning point contributes to the literature is a temporal structure that existing typologies do not include. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) assume that turning points are forward-moving. Before the turning point the career was going one way and after it another. The retroactive turning point breaks this assumption. It reorganises not the direction of the career but the meaning of the career as a whole. Þórunn did not become a different person at thirty. She became someone who understood the person she had always been. And that understanding, of finally having a frame for a lifetime of experience, is itself the most significant turning point in a career full of them.

#### 4.7. Gender Conformity as a Response to Environment

We entered this study expecting to find more direct gender discrimination. What the gender sections reveal instead is something subtler and in some ways more interesting dynamics. These included gender conformity produced by organisational environments rather than imposed through direct discrimination, gender operating visibly internationally but invisibly domestically, gendered patterns in the allocation of visibility and opportunity and the unexpected finding that tech was experienced as more hospitable than finance.

A pattern that runs across the gender sections of this dataset, gender conformity from within. Not discrimination done to these women but something they enacted themselves in response to their environments, below the level of conscious decision-making and without anyone in the organisation explicitly requiring it. Birna's account is the clearest instance in the dataset but the pattern also appears in Vigdís's experience of being perceived differently abroad, in Katrín's invisible labour at international meetings and in Sigríður's observation about self-promotion. In each case, the gender dynamic was not imposed from the outside but produced from within, in response to structural conditions the individuals could read but could not easily name.

Birna describes stepping into her first senior management role in a group of middle-aged white men. She does not describe feeling excluded or unwelcome. She describes something more



subtle and in some ways more revealing, she had started, without quite realising it, to dress and present herself like the men around her.

Icelandic: “Ég var að stíga upp í hópi fólks sem var eldri og með meiri starfsreynslu en ég. Það var sérstaklega erfitt því að ég var að stíga upp sem stjórnandi í hópi sem voru all miðaldra hvítir karlmenn. Það var tekin mynd af stjórnenda hópnum eftir einhvern tíma. Ég sýndi þabba myndina þá sagði hann við mig: af hverju ertu klædd eins og lítill karlmaður, þú ert alltaf í kjól, hvað er þetta?”

English: “I was stepping up into a group of older and more experienced people. It was especially hard because I was stepping up as a manager in a group of all middle-aged white men. A photo was taken of the management group after some time. I showed my father the photo and he said: "Why are you dressed like a little man, you always wear dresses, what is this?"

What is significant here is that no one told her to dress differently. No one in the organisation said that she needed to look more like them. The conformity happened on its own, below the level of conscious decision-making, as a response to the environment she had entered. She read the visual language of authority in that room and began to reproduce it. The suit was not a choice she made. It was something the environment produced in her. Her father's intervention is the turning point. What he said was important and sat with her.

Icelandic: “Hann sagði: þú varst sett í þessa stöðu af því að þú ert öðruvísi og ert þú. Þú skalt ekki vera að reyna að spila eitthvað hlutverk hér.”

English: “He said: they put you in this position because you are different and you are you. You should not be trying to play some role.”

The logic her father is articulating is that her difference as a woman with a different style and a different way of leading was not a liability to be concealed but the very thing that had been recognised and valued. Her attempt to minimise that difference was therefore not self-protective but self-defeating. She was erasing the thing that had earned her the role.

Icelandic: “Mér fannst þetta óþægilegt fyrst en fattaði svo að hann hafði rétt fyrir sér. Það var svo mikill léttir að geta bara hætt að vera í þessu hlutverki, af því að minn stjórnunarstíll er allt öðruvísi heldur en hjá þessum körlum.”

English: “I found it uncomfortable at first but then realised he was right. It was such a relief to just stop being in that role, because my management style is completely different from those men.”

The word “léttir” meaning relief, carries more weight than the translation alone suggests. You feel relief when you stop doing something that was costing you effort you had not fully acknowledged. The fact that the relief was so pronounced suggests that the performance of masculinity had been exhausting in ways she had not consciously registered until the moment she stopped. She had been carrying a weight she had not known she was carrying.

The conformity still happened. It happened because the environment had already communicated, through who was in the room, through what authority looked like there, through what had historically been rewarded, what the prototype for leadership was. She read that environment accurately and her body responded to what she read. The internalisation is therefore not separate from structural gender dynamics. It is produced by them. When organisations consistently associate authority with masculine presentation, women do not need to be told to conform. The message has already been absorbed long before any individual decision is made. What Birna's account reveals is not a personal failure of confidence but the mechanism through which structural conditions get inside individuals and shape behaviour from within. The suit was her own choice. But the conditions that made that choice feel necessary were not

Icelandic: “Ég er alltaf klædd eins og litaspjald og bara sættið ykkur við það.”

English: “I am always dressed like a colour chart and just deal with it.”

This is not a casual self-description. It is a daily enactment of the turning point. Every morning when she chooses the colour over the suit she is choosing not to perform the role. The turning point that happened fifteen years ago is still happening in the clothes she puts on in the morning. What began as an act of conformity recognised and challenged became the foundation of an authentic leadership style. As she herself puts it:

Icelandic: “Ég er samkvæm sjálfri mér og ekki að leika eitthvað leikrit.”

English: “I am true to myself and not putting on some kind of show.”

#### 4.8. Gender, Visibility and Opportunity

The most structurally revealing gender observation in the entire dataset does not come from an account of personal discrimination. It comes from Sigríður reflecting on a pattern she has observed across her career, the way opportunities are distributed not through deliberate exclusion but through the quiet workings of behavioral norms that nobody names and everybody follows.

Icelandic: “Strákarnir komast oft lengra því þeir einfaldlega stíga fram. Stelpur eru miklu meira svona nei, ég er bara mjög dugleg, klár og samviskusöm og það hlýtur einhver að taka eftir því en svo tekur bara enginn eftir því.”

English: “The guys often get further simply because they put themselves forward. Girls are much more like no, I’m just smart and hard-working and someone is bound to notice but then nobody does.”

This is an observation about a structural pattern, one that Sigríður has watched operate across organisations and over time. The men put themselves forward and the women wait to be noticed. The outcome accumulates across thousands of small decisions about who gets which project, who gets visibility and who gets the stretch assignment that leads to the next opportunity. It is a systematic difference in career trajectories that no single person chose and no single incident produced.

Sigríður is not describing an injustice she experienced. She is describing something she has come to understand as simply how things work, a pattern so embedded in everyday texture of professional life that it barely registers as a pattern at all but its consequences are anything but ordinary. If men are consistently getting the interesting projects because they put themselves forward over the course of a career. The interesting projects, visibility, the skills, the relationships and the opportunities they generate accumulate disproportionately on one side.

This connects directly to the unplanned career pattern that runs across all eight interviews. Almost none of the participants describe having actively pursued their leadership roles. They describe being noticed, being invited and being offered. The unplanned career which appears across all eight interviews as a consistent narrative pattern may not be simply a matter of personality or cultural modesty. It may be at least in part a reflection of the structural condition Sigríður is describing. If the default mode for women in these environments is to wait to be noticed rather than to put themselves forward then the career that results from that mode will inevitably look unplanned because the opportunities arrived from outside rather than being engineered from within.

But here the analysis must hold two things in tension. Because the same women who describe waiting to be noticed also describe when the moment came seizing opportunities with real boldness. Vigdís threw herself into the project abroad because she was afraid of it. Rannveig made a conscious decision to override her own inner critics and found a company. Birna has always grabbed every opportunity even when she did not fully know what she was doing. The waiting and the seizing coexist. These women did not simply wait passively. They waited in a particular way where they were alert, ready and when the moment arrived decisive.

What Sigríður's observation points to is the space between those moments. It is the day-to-day environment where men accumulate visibility through self-promotion, while women accumulate competence through conscientious work. Both are building something but only one is immediately visible to those deciding who gets the next opportunity. The competence and conscientiousness are real but as Sigríður puts it with a touch of frustration, they operate in a register that nobody notices.

## 4.9. Gender in Finance Versus Tech

Among the most revealing patterns in this dataset is one that only becomes visible through direct comparison. Several participants in this study have worked in both the financial sector and the technology sector and can therefore speak not from theory but from lived experience of the difference. Their accounts complicate a simple assumption this study entered the field with, that technology as a historically male-dominated sector would be the harder environment for women. The clearest of these accounts comes from Þórunn who spent several years in banking before moving into tech. Her observation is unambiguous:

Icelandic: “Tilfinningin mín af því að vera kona á vinnustaðnum er mun jákvæðari í tæknigeiranum heldur en fjármálageiranum.”

English: “My experience of what it is like to be a woman in the workplace is much more positive in the tech sector than in the financial sector.”

We had anticipated that the technology sector, historically male-dominated and associated with a particular cultural image of who belongs, would be the harder environment for women. What we found instead was that the participants who had direct comparison experience consistently described tech as more open, more fair in practice and less restricted by the formal and informal hierarchies that structured gender in finance. The sector we expected to be more difficult turned out at the level of daily experience to be a more hospitable one.

Þórunn’s account complicates the picture in an interesting way. She does not simply say that finance was worse and tech is better. She describes a specific mechanism through which gender equality policy in finance created its own form of uncertainty

Icelandic: “Það er algjörlega eitt af lykil mælikvörðum, þau eru með einhvern kynjastuðul, þannig maður veit stundum ekki hvort að öllum finnist í alvöru konurnar vera nógu hæfar að þau vilja ráða þær eða hvort að þau séu að passa sig að rugla ekki stuðlunum.”

English: “It is one of the key metrics, they have some kind of gender ratio so you sometimes don’t know whether people genuinely think the women are qualified enough and want to hire them or whether they are just being careful not to mess up the ratio.”

The “jafnlaunavottun” or the equal pay certification that Icelandic financial institutions adopted, is a structural intervention designed to address gender inequality. But Þórunn’s experience of it is one of ambiguity rather than reassurance. When a formal gender metric is in place the signal that recognition sends becomes harder to read. Is she being valued because she is good or because she is useful for the numbers? The policy intended to reduce uncertainty about gender bias may in practice introduce a different kind of uncertainty, one that sits not in the organisation but inside the woman being hired.

Katrín adds a further dimension. She spent almost two decades in financial software and describes her day-to-day experience within Iceland as largely unmarked by gender. But her account of the international dimension tells a different story. At a board meeting abroad with her European employer she encountered something qualitatively different from anything she had experienced in the Icelandic tech environment.

Icelandic: “Að þurfa að vega og meta og plana dálítið bara hvaða rödd ég ætla að hafa á þessum fundi, hver eru viðfangsefnin? Vera dálítið mikið skipulagðari kannski heldur en karlar þurftu að vera. Ég fann að ég þurfti að hugsa: okei, ég ætla að taka á þessum málum svona og setja þetta fram á þennan máta því ég tel að þeir hlusti betur á það.”

English: “I had to think things through and plan which voice am I gonna have at this meeting, what are the issues, be a little more prepared perhaps than the men had to be. I found that I had to think: Ok, I'm going to address these matters in this way and I am going to present them in this manner because I think they will listen to that.”

What Katrín is describing is a form of invisible labour, the additional cognitive and strategic work required to be heard in a room where the default assumption of authority was not extended to her. The men around the table did not have to plan their voice. She did and she frames this not as discrimination but as a reading of the room, a tactical adaptation to a specific environment. This is precisely what makes it significant, that labour and disadvantage is real but it is so thoroughly normalised and so fully integrated into how she approached those meetings that it does not register in her accounts as unfair. It registers as a skill she developed.

These accounts paint a picture of gender operating differently across sectors across national contexts and across formal and informal registers. Within Icelandic tech at the level of daily work gender was largely quiet. Across borders within finance and formal equality frameworks it became louder, more visible and more demanding. The technology sector in Iceland is not free of gender dynamics. But it appears at least for the women in this study to have been a more navigable environment than the alternatives they knew. That was not what we expected to find and the fact that it surprised us is itself worth naming because it suggests that

the assumption of tech as uniquely hostile to women may itself need revision at least in the Icelandic context and at least at the level of management.

Vigdís's and Katrín's experience abroad point to the same underlying dynamic. Gender in the Icelandic tech sector was not absent, it was contextual. Within Iceland, these women worked in environments shaped by reputation, relationships and a relatively informal culture, where gender operated quietly in the background. The moment they crossed a border that changed. Vigdís encountered immediate skepticism abroad that she attributed directly to being a woman at her age. Katrín had to plan her voice and anticipate how to frame her contributions in ways that her male colleagues at the board table did not. In both cases they were entering rooms where nobody knew them, where their track record carried no weight and where the only visible information about them was who they appeared to be. Stripped of the relational context that had supported them at home, gender became the primary lens through which they were perceived. This finding matters because it suggests that the relative absence of gender discrimination these women describe in their Icelandic careers is not simply a feature of the Icelandic tech sector in general. It is at least partly a feature of the specific relational environments they built over time within Iceland. Gender did not disappear when they left. It became visible for the first time.

This chapter has examined eight career narratives organised around two aggregate dimensions. The turning point sections identified five structurally distinct types that extend the Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) typology in directions it does not currently accommodate. The gender sections revealed dynamics that operated more subtly and situationally than expected, shaped less by overt discrimination than by conformity, visibility and the conditions under which opportunity is distributed. These findings are discussed further in Chapter 5.

## 5. Discussion

This chapter puts the findings in conversation with the existing literature, organised around the two dimensions that structured the analysis in Chapter 4. The first concerns the structure and logic of turning points and what the five types identified in this study add to existing career theory. The second concerns gender as a background condition and what the gender findings mean in relation to what the literature would have predicted. The chapter closes with a reflection on what both dimensions together suggest about how careers like these are actually built over time.

### 5.1. Turning Points

The central finding is straightforward. None of these women planned their way to senior management. Their paths were shaped by a series of turning points, opportunities that arrived unexpectedly, invitations from people who had noticed them and circumstances that forced a move they would not have made on their own. This is consistent with Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) and all three of their turning point types were visible in the data, often in combination. It also fits with Blom and Alvesson's (2014) concept of Leadership on Demand, leadership was frequently activated by others who saw something in these women before the women fully saw it in themselves.

The analysis identified five turning point structures that extend the existing typology in directions it does not currently accommodate. The first, the institutional recognition turning point, visible in Lilja's account, is a career that moves not through choices the individual makes but through the value of what she has built. When her expertise became inseparable from the systems she had created, institutions moved around her. This is neither passivity nor straightforwardly goal-directed ambition but a form of professional momentum grounded in embedded expertise and institutional recognition. Savickas (2005) describes careers as constructed through the meanings individuals give to their experiences. In Lilja's case credibility was not granted automatically but developed through navigating scepticism over time and once established it transferred forward into the next role.

The second type, the prospective turning point, is visible in Vigdís's decision to take the project abroad. McAdams (2001) and Savickas (2005) describe career construction as primarily



retrospective. The prospective turning point is structurally different, meaning is made forward-facing at the threshold of decision before there is any outcome to reflect on. Rather than suppressing self-doubt or waiting for confidence, Vigdís converted perceived inadequacy into motivation for action. The self-doubt did not disappear, it was used.

The third type, the unchosen turning point, describes a decisive moment that was imposed rather than chosen and recognised as significant only in retrospect. This type reveals the limits of agency-centred models of career development. Hall's (2004) protean career assumes a self that directs its own path through deliberate choices. What the unchosen turning point describes is a self that is directed by circumstances rather than by its own choices. Vigdís could not make herself leave a role that had become unsustainable. The turning point had to come from outside. Several participants describe founding their companies in similar terms, suggesting a pattern across the dataset of companies emerging not from entrepreneurial vision but from the weight of conditions that no longer fit.

The fourth type, the internal turning point, is visible in Rannveig's decision to stop treating her inner critics as authoritative. This type is not included in the Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) typology at all. Their definition of turning points as experiences or events assumes something happening in the external world. What Rannveig's account reveals is that the decisive event can happen entirely within the person, leaving no external trace yet still redirecting everything that follows. It is only accessible through narrative research by attending to how individuals describe their relationship to their own experience at the moment of decision.

The fifth type, the retroactive turning point, breaks the assumption shared by the previous four, that turning points change what happens next. Þórunn's adult diagnosis of ADHD did not redirect her career. It reorganised the meaning of everything that had already happened. Years of professional success that had felt uncertain and provisional were retroactively confirmed as real. The career did not change direction but the story told about it did. This is a temporal structure that existing typologies do not include and that only narrative research can access.

Across all five types, three individual factors emerged consistently as shaping how participants navigated turning points. Resilience appeared not as a fixed personal trait but as an ongoing mode of navigating uncertainty, built through difficulty and developed through necessity rather than optimism. This is consistent with Bimrose and Hearne's (2012) finding that resilience is a relational resource and that women are more likely to have developed it through navigating

difficult structural conditions without equivalent support. Networks and key people played an equally important role, with sponsorship relationships frequently functioning as decisive turning points and their absence making the path significantly harder (Ibarra, Carter and Silva, 2010). Imposter syndrome shaped many of these journeys, with participants describing periods of significant self-doubt and a gradual process of constructing a more confident professional narrative over time (Clance and Imes, 1978).

## 5.2. Gender as Background Condition

The gender findings were among the most complicated and nuanced aspects of the data. We entered this study expecting to find stories of women navigating visible discrimination in a male-dominated sector. What we found was different. Almost none of the participants described direct personal gender discrimination in their Icelandic technology careers. This absence is not a gap in the data but part of the data itself.

Gender appeared more subtly through dynamics of visibility, legitimacy, authority and self-presentation that participants themselves often did not explicitly name as discrimination, even when those experiences aligned closely with existing gender theory. Role congruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002) predicts that women in leadership navigate a persistent double bind between what is expected of them as women and what is expected of them as leaders. What the accounts in this study suggest is that this dynamic does not always manifest as overt conflict. It can operate quietly, shaping how women present themselves and what they feel entitled to claim, without anyone naming it as gendered.

The clearest instance is Birna's account of the suit. No one told her to dress differently. The conformity happened below the level of conscious decision-making, as a response to the environment she had entered. This is consistent with what Van Laer and Janssens (2011) and Jones et al. (2017) describe as subtle discrimination, small and often ambiguous dynamics that accumulate over time and shape behaviour without anyone intending the outcome. When organisations consistently associate authority with masculine presentation, women do not need to be told to conform. The message has already been absorbed before any individual decision is made.

Sigríður's observation about self-promotion points to a related structural pattern. Men consistently get the more interesting projects simply because they put themselves forward while women wait to be noticed. This connects to Pikulina and Ferreira's (2024) finding that even small biases in how opportunities are allocated can accumulate significantly over the course of a career and helps explain why these careers looked unplanned. The opportunities arrived from outside rather than being engineered from within, at least in part because the conditions of these environments made waiting the default mode.

Gender also operated differently depending on context. Within Iceland, these women worked in environments shaped by reputation, relationships and a relatively informal culture, where gender operated quietly in the background. The moment they crossed a border that changed. Vigdís encountered immediate scepticism abroad that she attributed directly to being a woman at her age. Katrín had to plan her voice and anticipate how to frame her contributions in ways her male colleagues did not. Stripped of the relational context that had supported them at home, gender became the primary lens through which they were perceived. Gender did not disappear when they left Iceland. It became visible for the first time.

The unexpected finding that participants who had worked in both finance and technology described technology as the more hospitable environment adds a further layer. Þórunn's account of the equal pay certificate (*jafnlaunavottun*) complicates this even further. When a formal gender metric is in place, the signal that recognition sends becomes harder to read from the inside. Was she valued because she was good, or because she was useful for the numbers? The policy intended to reduce uncertainty about gender bias may in practice introduce a different kind of uncertainty, one that does not live in the organisation but inside the woman being hired. This aligns with Ólafsdóttir (2018), who argues that deeper organisational dynamics can persist even in highly equal contexts and suggests that the relationship between formal equality interventions and the subjective experience of the women they are designed to support is more complex than policy frameworks tend to assume.

The turning point and gender findings point to something broader about how these careers were built. Careers emerged not primarily as individually engineered projects but as relational processes shaped through recognition, sponsorship, invitation and accumulated legitimacy over time. This sits in tension with the protean career model (Hall, 2004), which emphasises self-direction and individual agency as the primary drivers of career development.

What these accounts suggest instead is that agency and relational recognition are not separable. Careers are built through both, simultaneously and continuously. Sponsorship, institutional trust and relational legitimacy shaped who was invited into new roles and who gained access to high-visibility opportunities, consistent with Ibarra, Carter and Silva's (2010) argument that sponsorship creates concrete opportunities rather than simply providing guidance.

The conditions under which turning points arise, who is positioned to recognise and act on them and who receives the support needed to navigate them are all shaped by the same informal dynamics that structured gender in these careers. The women who were noticed, invited and sponsored were those who had built the kind of visibility and relational credibility that Sigríður describes men accumulating more easily through self-promotion. The careers that looked unplanned were in many cases careers that depended on others doing the noticing. That is not the same as chance. It is a specific and gendered form of career development that the existing literature has not fully named.

## 6. Conclusion

This chapter draws together the contributions of the study and considers their implications for theory, practice and future research.

### 6.1 Summary of Main Findings

This study explored how female managers in Icelandic technology companies describe their career journeys and the key turning points that shaped their progression into senior management. Eight qualitative interviews were analysed through the Gioia methodology. What emerged was not a tidy picture of planned advancement but something more interesting, careers shaped by unexpected moments, relational recognition and the gradual construction of a professional self over time.

Three findings stand out. None of these women planned their way to senior management. Five turning point structures emerged from the data that existing typologies do not fully capture and a third finding concerns gender. Gender operates not primarily through overt discrimination but through subtler dynamics of conformity, visibility and the informal patterns through which some people are noticed and others are not.

### 6.2. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several contributions to the existing literature on career development and gender in leadership. The most direct contribution is to the turning points literature. It extends the Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) typology by identifying five structural types it does not currently accommodate. Three are particularly significant. The internal turning point shows that the decisive moment in a career can happen entirely within the person, leaving no external trace yet redirecting everything that follows. The retroactive turning point shows that turning points do not always redirect the future, they can instead reorganise the meaning of everything that has already happened. The prospective turning point shows that meaning-making does not have to be retrospective, self-doubt can be converted into motivation at the threshold of decision, before any outcome is known. Together these types demonstrate that turning points are more varied in structure, direction and location than existing frameworks assume.

A second contribution is to gender literature. This study shows how gender can operate quietly even in contexts that are formally committed to equality. The Icelandic context matters here not because it eliminates gendered dynamics but because it changes how they are experienced and whether they are recognised. Gender became most visible when participants left Iceland and entered rooms where their reputation no longer went before them, suggesting that gendered dynamics sit not only in formal structures but in the specific relational environments people build over time.

Finally, the equal pay certificate (*jafnlaunavottun*) finding offers a contribution to debates about formal equality interventions. The study suggests that equality metrics can introduce their own form of uncertainty for the very people they are designed to support, a dimension that existing policy literature does not fully address.

### 6.3. Practical Implications

The findings of this study have several practical implications for organisations, women in senior roles and professional networks operating in the Icelandic technology sector and beyond.

For organisations, the findings suggest that talent identification and succession processes should be examined for the degree to which they depend on individuals actively putting themselves forward. Many of the most effective people in this dataset reached their positions not by seeking them out but by being noticed. Organisations that rely solely on self-nomination or visible ambition as signals of leadership potential may systematically overlook capable candidates, particularly women who may be less likely to put themselves forward for high-visibility opportunities (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). The allocation of stretch assignments and high-visibility work should be actively managed rather than left to emerge from informal patterns of behaviour.

The distinction between mentoring and sponsorship has direct practical relevance. Mentoring programmes are valuable but not sufficient on their own. Organisations should consider how to create conditions in which senior leaders actively advocate for and create opportunities for promising individuals, particularly women who are less likely to receive sponsorship than their male counterparts (Ibarra, Carter and Silva, 2010).

For women in the sector, the findings suggest the value of deliberate network-building earlier in the career. Several participants describe discovering the importance of networks

relatively late and reflecting that a stronger network earlier would have opened more doors. Professional organisations such as FKA provide important spaces for this kind of connection and the findings suggest their value extends beyond formal mentoring to the informal relationships and sponsorship opportunities that networks can generate.

For policymakers and organisations implementing equality frameworks, Þórunn's account of the equal pay certificate (*jafnlaunavottun*), raises an important question. Equality metrics, however well designed, can introduce their own form of doubt for the very people they are meant to support. When a formal gender metric is in place, the signal that recognition sends becomes harder to read from the inside. Policymakers might therefore consider how recognition is communicated beyond the metric itself, so that women who are intended to benefit from these policies can trust that it is genuine.

## 6.4. Future Research

This study opens several directions for future research. First, the sample is small and focused on a specific sector and context. Future research could extend the turning points framework to a larger and more diverse sample of female managers in Iceland or compare findings across different sectors to examine whether the patterns identified here are specific to the technology industry or more broadly applicable.

Second, this study focused exclusively on women who have reached senior management positions. Future research could examine the experiences of women who have not reached such positions, exploring whether and how the absence of key turning points, sponsorship relationships or network access contributes to different career outcomes.

Third, the generational dimension that emerged in the data suggests that the conditions under which women advance into senior positions in the Icelandic technology sector are changing. Future research could explore this shift more directly, examining whether younger women entering the sector today describe different turning points and different gender dynamics from those described by the participants in this study.

Fourth, the finding that these careers were largely unplanned and shaped by invitation raises broader questions about how leadership candidates are identified in technology organisations and whether gender shapes who gets noticed and who gets asked.

Fifth, the five turning point types identified here are offered as an extension of existing typologies rather than a replacement for them. Future research could test their applicability across different sectors, national contexts and career stages and examine more directly the conditions under which internal shifts precede or enable external turning points.

Sixth, the experiences of Þórunn and Margrét suggest that adult diagnosis of ADHD functions as a significant career turning point with a specifically gendered character. The mechanism identified here, that diagnosis reinterprets existing competence rather than adding new capability, warrants further investigation. Future research could examine how late diagnosis shapes professional self-perception among women in senior positions and how the structural underdiagnosis of ADHD in women intersects with career development more broadly (Williamson and Johnston, 2015).

This study set out to understand how female managers in Icelandic technology companies describe the turning points that shaped their careers. What it found was that none of them had a plan. Their careers were built through unexpected moments, through people who noticed them before they noticed themselves, through circumstances that forced a move they would not have chosen and through internal decisions that left no trace in the external record but changed everything that followed. Gender shaped the landscape quietly, rarely named but consistently present. These eight accounts tell a story not of dramatic breakthroughs but of persistence, adaptation and the gradual construction of a professional self over time.



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# Appendix A

## Interview Guide

### Opening

1. Information about current role and background

### Career

2. How did your career begin?
3. The development of your career and how you got to where you are today
4. Key turning points that influenced your career
  - "What led up to this moment?"
  - "Why do you think this became an opportunity for you?"
  - "Was this something you were working towards or did it happen unexpectedly?"
  - "Did this feel like a risk at the time?"
  - "What made you decide to take this step?"

### Environment

5. How would you describe the environment in your sector?
6. Do you feel there is a gender bias in your sector?

### Carving your own path

7. What do you think has helped you most in moving forward?
8. When opportunities have come up in your career, how have you approached them? Have you actively sought them out or have they tended to come to you?
9. Have you had any mentors?
10. How have you dealt with important decisions or challenges? Is there a particular way you approach problems when they arise?

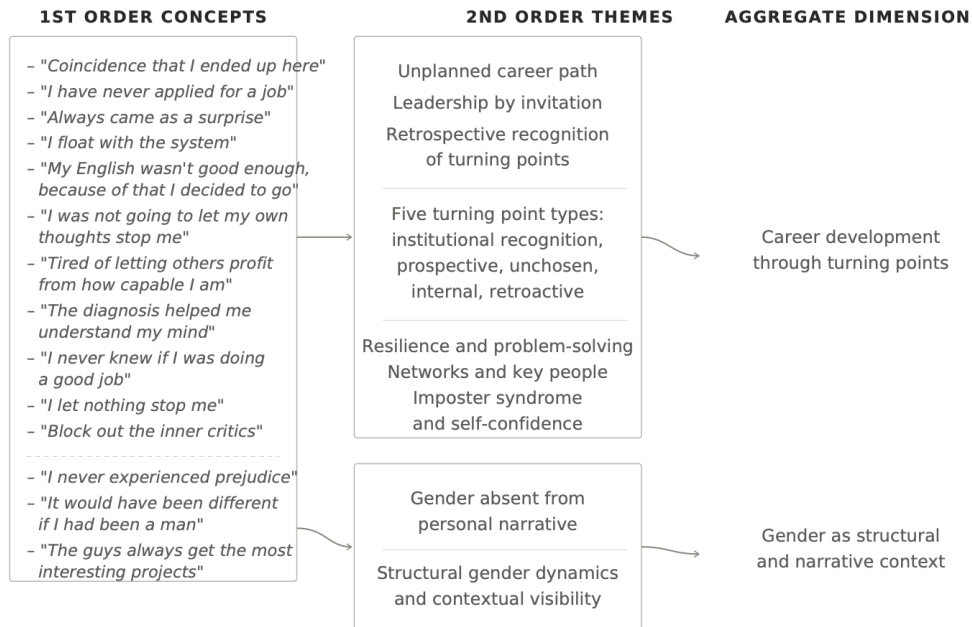
**Reflection**

11. Looking back, what has shaped your career the most?
12. What advice would you give to women aiming for a management position in your sector?

**Closing**

13. Is there anything important that we have not asked about?

# Appendix B



# Appendix C

Prompts used for AI tools.

"Does this sentence read clearly or is it too long?"

"Is this paragraph repetitive?"

"Does this section flow logically from the previous one after translating to english?"

"Is this phrasing too formal/informal for an academic thesis?"

"Does this conclusion answer the research question clearly?"

"Is this appropriate for a literature review or does it belong in the analysis"

"Are there any grammatical errors in this paragraph?"

"Here is the feedback we got, can you help us summarise and prioritise what needs to be fixed"

"Help us make a plan for revising the thesis based on this feedback and the time we have"

"Can you help me create a data structure table with a simple look, from our coding material for the appendix"