THE PRICE OF SUCCESS

Women in corporate leadership bargaining with neoliberal patriarchy

By

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, **Rita Hallgató**, candidate for the MA degree in Gender Studies declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to understand how women in senior corporate leadership navigate the gendered challenges that derive from hegemonic masculinity and neoliberal patriarchy, and how they remain successful despite the obstacles they face. My study interrogates to what extent my interviewees bargain with neoliberal patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988), what strategies they employ and what circumstances force them to reproduce this patriarchy. My interviews with 13 women leaders reveal patterns in their strategies that I present through two main findings. First, they leave no doubt that they belong and deserve to be there equally to men, and second, they rise above the gendered challenges in pursuit of personal and career objectives, that are equivalent to their understanding of success. All of this necessitates a substantial amount of effort, encompassing both emotional and body work, which can lead to exhaustion and burn-out. This creates an augmented level of difficulty in comparison to men and thereby preserves gender inequality. I conclude, that individual agency is closely associated with bargaining, and the more agentic my interviewees are the better they can succeed. However, navigating the inherently patriarchal workplace is demanding, that sometimes results in actions that reinforce the domination of hegemonic masculinity.

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INTRODUCTION

> "There have been many, many years in my life where I was following the expectation of others, colouring my hair, putting makeup on, wearing jeans, always groomed and looking always perfect, and it was a second job! It was draining! And it did impact. Just as simple as that, if you spend one hour each day on these things, unlike men, you have lost one hour and you multiply the number of days, number of years and it is a huge sacrifice which women are doing." (Amelia)

Amelia along with the other women I interviewed represent the select minority who have reached senior leadership within the corporate sphere. Their senior positions might imply a resolution to inequality, but the reality is contrasting. Amelia's example illustrate that her success is a result of hard work, dedication and sacrifice, that often goes invisible – a high price she is compelled to pay if she wants to have the same chances as her men colleagues. As statistics show, women are still underrepresented in the labour force including corporate leadership and the contrast of inequality is significant. Approximately 31% of the senior roles were held by women globally in 2021 versus their labour participation rate of 61.4% in 2022 (GrantThornton, 2021, p.2; Gomis et al, ILOSTAT, 2023). Notwithstanding the fact that nine out of ten companies have at least one woman in their senior leadership team, only 26% of all CEOs and managing directors are women (GrantThornton, 2021, p.2).

To succeed in corporate leadership, regardless how one conceptualizes success, women have to navigate neoliberal corporate patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity that requires more time, effort and persistence from them relative to their men colleagues.

My research addresses the following question: how do women "bargain with patriarchy" (Kandiyoti, 1988) in global corporate leadership and what kind of strategies do they apply in order to succeed? To better understand the tactics and strategies they employ, I investigate to what extent the women I interviewed question or re-affirm patriarchy and the implicit

masculine norms within the organisation. How do they manage, adopt or adapt to the "ideal work norm" (Williams, 2000) and what do they attempt to change within the organization?

Individual agency can be conceptualized as a process to exercise choice (Kabeer, 1999, p.437) and it is the ability to decide and set goals, have a sense of control over this ability and goals, and act on these goals (Donald et al., 2020, p.201). Bargaining, negotiation and resistance are forms of agency (Kabeer, 1999, p.438). While the possibility to rebel against a system while remaining within it is meagre, the more agentic my interviewees are the better results they can achieve through bargaining as it gives them higher confidence in their abilities and possibilities. Studies also demonstrated, that women leaders with higher agency are more likely to succeed (Rudman et al., 2012, p.174). Agency enables the women I interviewed to take a stronger bargaining position, shape the system and its effect on them, and extend the borders of the patriarchal bargain. By making the space less restricted, the concessions and compromises become gradually smaller, allowing for bigger changes and levelling the playing field for other women and underrepresented groups. However, the effect of their agency has limits. My interviewees' actions are not guaranteed to result in a favourable impact on themselves or on other women and underrepresented groups. When the objective of their actions shift towards self-serving motivations, it carries the risk of disregarding the common good and it reinforces patriarchy.

My study aims to contribute to the scholarly discourse that investigates the reasons and consequences of women's inequality in the workplace by providing new perspectives on how women in corporate leadership manage their careers and succeed within the masculine power structures of the neoliberal corporate world. My research has two main findings. First, the women I interviewed apply strategies to leave no doubt that they belong and deserve to be there equally to men. Second, my interviewees strive to rise above the gendered challenges by aiming for personal and career objectives, that are equivalent to their understanding of success. To

achieve success within a masculine and patriarchal neoliberal environment, I argue that my interviewees have to work harder than their men counterparts as they manage their career within the expectations of neoliberal professionalism and the "ideal worker norm" (Williams, 2000). I argue that my interviewees thereby "bargain with patriarchy" (Kandiyoti, 1988) as they work harder and make compromises in order to succeed. Bargaining is closely associated with individual agency, and the more agentic my interviewees become the better they can succeed. However, the hard work and effort that goes into this bargain and strengthening their agency can lead to exhaustion and burn-out, which creates situations where my interviewees would reproduce, albeit inadvertently, the neoliberal patriarchy and the masculine ideal worker norm (Williams, 2000). At the end of my study I conclude, that agency is a key factor to success for women both in bargaining with neoliberal patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988) and in building their careers, albeit there is an unused opportunity for women's advocacy of other women and underrepresented groups.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite numerical growth in their presence in corporate leadership, women's labour force participation still lags behind men's: 61.4% vs. 90.6% in 2022 (Gomis et al, ILOSTAT, 2023). Women's progression into leadership positions only grew by 3 percentage points between 2000 and 2019, from 25.3% to 28.3% (Gammarano, ILOSTAT, 2020), but during the pandemic it started to decrease again in many countries (Karkee-Sodergren, ILOSTAT, 2021).

Corporations are gendered and contrary to the common belief, organizations are not neutral but masculine, disadvantaging women and ignoring their needs (Acker, 1990). Irrespective of their position in the corporate organization, women "continue to lag behind men in terms of pay and authority" (Williams et al, 2012, p.1). Organizations mirror the socio-cultural norms in that they are inherently patriarchal, advantaging those who do not participate in social-reproductive labour and who thereby can be fully dedicated to the needs of monetarized capitalism.

I argue that as neoliberalism imposes market values on everything related to people (Lather, 2020, p.768), the corporate world expects its employees to adopt neoliberal values. Corporate governance and neoliberal approaches to how work is organized have been widely studied and criticized by scholars (Rose, 1992; Boltanski-Chiapello, 2005; Ong, 2007; Clarke, 2014; Crowley-Hodson, 2014). Anglo-American corporations are built on the neoliberal logic. Modern neoliberal corporations have lean structures with less hierarchical levels and instead projects based work, that is built on flexibility and networking within a matrix system (Boltanski-Chiapello, 2005, p.165). Employees must accept the authority of a management that oversees employee compliance (Vallas-Schor, 2020, p.283). As companies embraced neoliberal principles, shareholder value and maximizing profits have become the main driver of corporate governance and thus the main focus for employees, overshadowing the values and

purpose these companies were built on (Clarke, 2014, p.44; Crowley-Hodson, 2014, p.94). This led to corporations believing they are "the most important institution in society" (Nwoke et al., 2018, p.1367), that enables and empowers them to dictate how they expect their employees to behave and work, which is incorporated in their company culture.

Company cultures have been investigated by many scholars (Dellheim, 1987; Koberg-Chusmir, 1987; Steiber-Alange, 2016, Maldonado et al., 2018). They are “systems of shared beliefs, cognitions, and values that produce norms of behavior” and can positively or negatively influence a company’s success (Maldonado et al., 2018, p.747). Employees of Anglo-American corporations adopt and embody neoliberal values such as entrepreneurial mindset (Crowley-Hodson, 2014, p.92-93), networking as a career management strategy (Mickey, 2022), and “self-realization, self-presentation, self-direction, self-management” (Rose, 1992, p.14) that are embedded in the company culture. High-performance and self-discipline become “part of their DNA” (Crowley-Hodson, 2014, p.93), forming employees’ professional identities that become a “style of life” (Rose, 1992, p.14). Employees are expected to adopt a work ethic that originates in the ideas of the puritan, Protestant work ethic, which regards work as a calling (Weeks, 2011, p.38-39) and gives hard work and long working hours a “moral justification” (Weeks, 2011, p44). A strong company culture is foundational for a corporation to be successful (Maldonado et al, 2018, p.747), that drives employers to be very selective of who they employ. Beyond being available to work full time and travel frequently without childcare responsibilities (Williams, 2000), the ideal employee also adopts and demonstrates neoliberal values, and fits into the company culture by embodying a self-disciplined, high-performing ”winner-take-all” mentality (Crowley-Hodson, 2014, p.103).

Neoliberalism is not equally beneficial to everyone in the organization or society and its norms can be disadvantageous for workers (Crowley-Hodson, 2014, p.103). Employees’ rights have become limited as the institutional stability disappeared in many countries. This has given

corporations more power and opportunity to exploit their employees by establishing precarity as a nature of work (Kalleberg-Vallas, 2017, p.2-3), and allowing those in a privileged position to benefit more, widening inequality further both between employees in the organization and between employees and society (Kalleberg-Vallas, 2017, p.23). Within the organization, the redistribution of power led to employees losing ground (Crowley-Hodson, 2014, p.103), which further deepened inequality. The neoliberal logic has had a greater impact outside the organization. Neoliberalism contributed to the proliferation of precarious work arrangements such as outsourcing, temporary contracts and part-time work (Crowley-Hodson, 2014, p.92-93). It led to the digital revolution that conceived the gig economy that accelerated precarity further. The pressure of competitiveness and being "always on" led to a work-life imbalance and "time-poverty" (Fraser, 2016, p.99; Hochschild, 1997), resulting in the care-crisis, a "crisis of social reproduction" (Fraser, 2016).

The neoliberal corporate governance affects women employees disproportionately. The logic of the corporate structure is deeply engrained and influenced by hegemonic masculinity. Women in corporate positions have to work harder than men as they fulfil expectations of the corporate culture influenced by neoliberal principles as well as patriarchy, creating a hybrid challenge of navigating within neoliberal patriarchy. Performing according to work expectations is not gendered, yet it is easier for men as they do not face gender stereotypes and biases such as the "double bind", that makes the space women can navigate within narrow. The "double bind" exists, because men are seen as the prototypical leaders (Catalyst, 2007, p.9), forcing women to work harder to prove their ability to leadership. Women are subjected to additional scrutiny, extreme perceptions, higher competency standards and disapproval (Catalyst, 2007). If women behave congruent to their gender, they are perceived too soft therefore not fit for leadership, but if they behave incongruent to their gender by showing authority and agency, they are perceived to be aggressive, "acting like men" and not "lady-

like" (Catalyst, 2007, p.13; Rudman et al., 2012, p.175-176). As a result of not being considered as a 'default' leader, women have to prove their competence before being able to become a leader, that also leads to women having to work harder than men (Catalyst, 2007, p.16). Backlash is therefore evident if women decide to act with agency and incongruent to their gender, as it questions the status-quo therefore not acceptable from women. If women question it, they might face a number of risks such as missing promotion opportunities or being dismissed. Therefore, they cannot rebel against the system while remaining within it. By choosing to stay within corporate, they accept the neoliberal logic. To mitigate the challenges inherent to the system, and to succeed in this environment, women strive to be better neoliberal individuals by becoming high performing employees, by adapting to the ideal worker norm and by negotiating with neoliberal patriarchy.

The paid labour market is built on and organized around the "ideal worker". The term "ideal worker" describes the person who works full time, is fully mobile to relocate or travel frequently and does not have child caring responsibilities (Williams, 2000). The ideal worker norm forces women to 'self-select' into lower level and lower paid jobs, reviving domesticity in a contemporary interpretation (Williams, 2000, p.14, 20). According to Williams, this is a form of discrimination to deepen inequality. The real reason behind domesticity that led to the creation of the "ideal worker norm" is capitalism, that allows employers to expect full commitment, and patriarchy, that grants it as men's (husbands') right to act and work accordingly (Williams, 2000, p.19-20; Hartmann, 1979, p.11).

Despite the "ideal worker norm" being an 'old' concept, it is still relevant and instead of becoming obsolete, it has been very flexible and adaptive to changes over the past two decades. Analyzing the gendered differences in corporate leadership roles, Gray et al. argues that the "ideal worker" is still a significant element of the "gendered organization" (Acker, 1990) and it is still characterized as a "rational, strong leader, committed to work and unencumbered by

family or other responsibilities" (Gray et al., 2019, p. 663), and women are considered as the opposite of this. Through the analysis of Williams et al we know that the organizational logic, that produces the gendered organization, have transformed, but remained gendered (Williams et al, 2012). Modern neoliberal careers now require employees to self-promote themselves, which may be more challenging to women, and job features can have negative consequences for women and other minorities (Williams et al, 2012, p.16-17, 10).

Ridgeway et al elevate the "ideal worker" image and argue that non-white non-male employees have to face more obstacles and expectations, and this is mostly invisible to those closer to the norm (Ridgeway et al, 2022). Through their research with architects, we can see these obstacles through the lens of the six most apparent biases that appear in the workplace. First, the prove-it-again bias puts women in a situation where they have to prove themselves more than others do, Black and other underrepresented women must do so even more than White women (Ridgeway et al, 2022, p.640). Second, the tightrope bias forces women to balance being their true selves and behaving according to the expectations of men and the ideal worker norm (Ridgeway et al, 2022, p.641-642). Third, women and other underrepresented groups have to combat a fit bias because they are different from the ideal worker, thus the pressure to fit into the workplace culture is higher for them, and it is even higher for Black women ((Ridgeway et al, 2022, p.642-643). Fourth is the exclusion bias; women of all races face challenges from not being included in workplace networks, thereby missing out on information (Ridgeway et al, 2022, p.643-644). The fifth obstacle is the gendered bias of emotional work. Emotional labour is invisible and often performed by women, and results in reproducing the gender order in the workplace hierarchy (Pierce, 1996; Ridgeway et al, 2022, p.644-645). The sixth is being interrupted at meetings, where women experience more hardship (Ridgeway et al, 2022, p.644-645).

Holgersson and Romani argues that the ideal worker is not just a man, but it is also associated with behaviours that are perceived as masculine. The preference for such behaviour is embedded in our society and cultural norms in which corporations operate (Holgersson-Romani, 2020).

Gender stereotypes, biases, and prejudices have long been written about in gender publications. The behavioural perspective of how women in leadership positions deal with hegemonic masculinity and the neoliberal patriarchy of organizations is frequently researched in psychology as well. Many of these researchers focus on why and how these stereotypes and biases work, and why it is more difficult for women in leadership roles than for men (Correll, 2017; Diekman-Eagly, 2000; Rudman et al., 2012; Vinkenburg et al., 2011). My study provides a focus on those individuals who are impacted by asking whether they deliberately get by or rebel against such expectations in order to challenge or change them.

I argue that workplace stereotypes, prejudices and biases are products of the implicit masculinity of the "ideal worker norm" and the neoliberal norms of professionalism, and women are viewed through these filters. Beside economic interests, social relations at the workplace are built on societal and cultural norms, that are fueled by these beliefs, stereotypes, prejudices and biases about how one should do gender "well". Inequality at the organizational level is hardly comprehendible on a systemic basis by senior management, because it is not so readily visible and is unlikely to be communicated through lines of report. Instead it is often linked with individual level situations that further legitimize and maintain the gendered nature of inequality (Wynn, 2020, p.127).

Women's success in their career is influenced by descriptive and prescriptive gender stereotypes and beliefs about how they behave and about how they should behave (Vinkenburg et al., 2011, p.10-11). This is particularly the case when women are seen to have fewer leadership skills and when their agency disrupts the gender status-quo regarding how they

should behave. For example in the United States men are seen as more "agentic and instrumental" whilst women are seen as "less competent, nicer and more communal" (Ridgeway-Correll, 2004, p.513). Research shows that behaviours which challenge the gender status-quo are condemned (Rudman et al., 2012, p.177). Women have to jump through hurdles to be accepted as leaders (Rudman et al., 2012, p.165) and once in leadership, they are subjected to a "double-bind", a stereotype that leaves women with limited and disadvantageous options (Catalyst, 2007) and in predicaments, where they have to find and negotiate their way in a "labyrinth" (Eagly-Carli, 2007, p.27). These "status beliefs" lead to biases about competency of women and people of colour, that lead to higher expectations (Ridgeway et al., 2022, p.630), and that in turn affect how women view their abilities which are the basis of their career decisions (Correll, 2017, p.728). Intersectional studies show that Black women are subject to even harsher expectations (Correll, 2017, p.729), so it is important to always apply an intersectional analysis to workplace inequality studies, as prejudices and stereotypes against Asian, Latinx, Black and other women of race or ethnicity versus White women can be and are often different, depending on the context (Ridgeway et al., 2022).

Research demonstrates that stereotypes link leadership to masculinity (Garcia-Retamero and Lopez-Zafra, 2006, p.59; Correll, 2017, p.728). Not surprisingly, men and women in higher level positions are perceived to have more masculine characteristics than at lower levels (Fagenson, 1990, p.204), so masculinity is not just linked to one's gender or sex, but also to their perceived power in the hierarchy (Fagenson, 1990, p.209), which suggests that women in senior positions are viewed to fit in with the ideal worker norm more. Beyond perceived power, Pearce shows in her research that masculinity is embedded in job characteristics, such as type of work, job title and even allocated space within the office (Pierce, 1996, p.30-37).

In order to contextualize the strategies that my interviewees apply, it is also important to look at how those who are caregivers manage work-life balance and childcare responsibilities. Arlie

Hochschild's argued in her book, Time Bind (1997), that in workplaces current at the time of publication, boundaries between work and private life had become blurry and employees spent more and more time at work (Hochschild, 1997). I propose that this is still the case today. The presence of children impacts women's labour market participation rate (Gomis et al, ILOSTAT, 2023) and today we see more and more women leaving the labour force, but the reasons why this happens has become more complex in the past two decades. Some research shows that women (particularly in the STEM sector) may lose commitment towards their profession amidst challenges to juggle work and family life (Singh et al., 2018, p.903) while others conclude that "family-related constraints" are never the reason for women exiting traditionally masculine jobs (Hunt, 2016, p.221). According to Metz, only 1 in 10 women in her research opted-out due to family obligations or preferences, whilst most women decided to leave and not return due to the combination of family and work life challenges (Metz, 2011, p.302). Long working hours, overly political working culture, irrelevant expectations and lack of flexibility offered by the employer can lead to frustration, and frustration along with changes in their life circumstances make women leave the workforce (Neck, 2015). Stone called this phenomenon "opting out" in her book, where she investigated why highly educated women with successful jobs and careers chose to leave the workforce entirely (Stone, 2007). Stone argues, that these women opt out due to family constraints and duties. Compared to that, most of my interviewees' decision so far was to change the company for a better one.

The dilemma that my interviewees face is thus opting out, staying and juggling multiple responsibilities or changing to a job that comes with more flexibility. It can be argued that my interviewees have already sacrificed a lot and have found ways to balance their work and private life. Thus for them the goalposts have shifted and they now try to optimize the experience of fellow women colleagues and team members. But the dilemma of staying, changing, or opting out affects those who are not caregivers too. The examples of my

interviewees support the findings of Metz and Neck. Several of them experienced explicit masculine norms or discrimination along with bad leadership at some point in their career. That led to them becoming frustrated and ultimately to them resigning. My research focuses on the strategies of those women who stay despite the challenges they face.

I argue that beyond adapting to the ideal worker norm (Williams, 2000), my interviewees have to "bargain with patriarchy" in order to navigate the corporate leadership (Kandiyoti, 1988). Kandiyoti argued that women apply different strategies to find the opportunities that will help them make the most of their situation within patriarchal constraints, that she called "bargaining with patriarchy" (Kandiyoti, 1988). In her study she zoomed in on women in agricultural development (sub-Saharan Africa) and in the family household (North Africa, West Asia, India and China). She argued, that the patriarchal bargain influences how women become gendered subjects and what strategies they apply to endure their oppression, to "maximize security and optimize life options" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p.274). In her example, women in sub-Saharan African countries protect and maximize the autonomy they built for themselves using resistance and refusal strategies (Kandiyoti, 1988, p.276). The women I interviewed strategize for similar reasons when bargaining with patriarchy, albeit the expectations towards them are driven by both neoliberal corporate values and society. In my study I show how the women I interviewed move beyond bargaining with patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988) in their micro environment, and challenge its existence one step at a time with an attempt to correct the failures of the system around themselves.

Kandiyoti argued that the patriarchal bargain is the blueprint of a society which impacts how women perceive their gender identity and that then influence societal gender beliefs and norms (Kandiyoti, 1988, p.275). I agree with Kandiyoti in that the opportunities of my interviewees are confined by gender beliefs and norms at a certain time and in a certain place. However, Kandiyoti did not explore the dynamic of these boundaries and if these borders can

continuously extend, then their space for bargaining will be bigger and less restricted. I argue and will demonstrate through examples, that the women I interviewed have higher negotiation power now, thanks to the agency they have built over the years. They consciously use their power to continuously shape the system and its effect on them. This means the concessions in patriarchal bargains can gradually become smaller, allowing women to attain bigger changes in the organization and levelling the playing field for other women and underrepresented groups too. However, the impact of these changes may be limited predominantly to upper-management level only, as they lack the transformative capacity to materially alter the fundamentally exploitative landscape of neoliberal corporate capitalism. Instead, they tend to perpetuate and reinforce its prevailing structure, exacerbating the existing disadvantages faced by women in less privileged circumstances and further deepening their disadvantage.

Kandiyoti's concept has been adopted by several researchers since its publication, who provide new perspectives and examples of the different forms of patriarchy and masculinity women have to deal and cope with. Kamphoff showed how women college-level coaches in the US deal with structural disadvantages, negative stereotypes and heteronormativity, due to the inherent masculinity of the sector, many choosing to leave at the end (Kamphoff, 2010). Women entrepreneurs in Malaysia also have to bargain with patriarchal norms in order to keep their businesses running (Selamat-Endut, 2020).

Bargaining with patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988) requires agency, but for women in corporate leadership acting with agency means not "doing gender" (West-Zimmerman, 1987; Connell, 2010) by conforming to stereotypes. Perceptions of doing gender well are built on fixed stereotypes and the ideal worker norm, allowing men to behave without having to be worried about the consequences (Martin, 2003, p.356), be it backlash, or perception of lack of fit (Rudman et al., 2012). Scholars show that when women act with agency, they risk backlash (Rudman et al., 2012, p.175-176), but they do not reflect on what agency means and how it is

enacted. Mavin and Grandy challenge our understanding of gender as an accomplishment (West-Zimmerman, 1987; Connell, 2010) and argue that gender can't be undone but it can be re-done, and we all act both feminine and masculine. Yet in the workplace we are all expected to do gender well – behave and perform according to the binary (Mavin-Grandy, 2012). This article is a signpost, a reminder to think outside of the binary, and brings up an underlying question as well: can women leaders disrupt the gender binary in the workplace and behave / act both feminine and masculine? Whether this is good news or bad news, the future will tell, that according to some researcher, stereotypes about women are dynamic, which means they change over time and can eliminate the disadvantages of its members (Diekman-Eagly, 2000).

Beyond stereotypes, prejudices and biases, women face other obstacles like the 'glass ceiling' and the 'glass escalator'. Researchers focused on the "glass ceiling" as early as from 1986, when Hymowitz and Schellhardt first wrote about this imaginable ceiling as to why women can't access top level jobs (Hymnowitz-Schellhardt, 1986). Cotter et al. (2001) showed us the effects of the glass ceiling mostly focusing on gender pay gaps in top hierarchy positions. The "glass escalator", a new term introduced by Williams (2013), shows the other side of the glass ceiling of how men have more leverage in traditionally female oriented positions. Sinha and Sinha point out that the problem goes beyond corporations in the Global North (Sinha-Sinha, 2011). Whilst it is important to understand what is at stake for women in corporate leadership positions, I will not consider the concepts of 'glass ceiling' or 'glass escalator' beyond this literature review, because my interviewees measure success in different ways. Breaking the glass ceiling is just one form of success and it is not the focus of my research.

Workplace support in the form of internal sponsors can also contribute to the success of women and other underrepresented groups. Global corporate organizations are inherently patriarchal, meaning White male controlled, and corporate cultures are masculine dominant and biased toward hegemonic masculine behaviours, due to the fact that most of the concept of these

enterprises have been built by men for men. In such environments it is even more important for women to have sponsors that champion them, and that they advocate not only for themselves, but for other underrepresented groups too. Stainback et al. investigates whether women in leadership positions redo or undo the gendered organization (Stainback et al., 2016), and they argue that women leaders operate as "agents of change" (Stainback et al., 2016, p.127). Previous studies contradict this argument, stating that women leaders are "cogs in the machine" and that they tend to foster men's career opportunities through ways of exclusion and by reaffirming men's position in power (Maume, 2011, p.296).

As women navigate the corporate space their success depends on their networks, mentors and role models (Linehan, 2001, p.828), and how well they are able to strategize their career (Mickey, 2022, p.29). Yet networking benefits men but limits the career opportunities of women, resulting in women often being still excluded from events due to family responsibilities or not feeling comfortable attending (Mickey, 2022, p.29-30). Strong same-gender relationship ties might help women to overcome prescriptive gender stereotypes and the double bind, but they first have to cross boundaries to be able to utilize them (Ibarra, 1997, p.99-100). As I will show in my research, agency is a fundamental aspect of women's success in senior leadership. They are often mentors and role models themselves, therefore it is a necessary responsibility to advocate for other women and underrepresented groups in the organization. Women in corporate leadership can have a crucial role in making their workplace more diverse and equal if they take on the role of advocates and sponsors, but to achieve that they have to be willing to disrupt and challenge the status quo of neoliberal patriarchy, that they worked hard to fit into (Bilimoria, 2006, p.58).

I contribute to this literature by illustrating how my interviewees overcome the systemic challenges and obstacles of the gendered organization (Acker, 1990). I argue that they bargain with neoliberal patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988) as they make compromises and work harder than

their counterparts in exchange for success in the context of their understanding. My study adds to Kandiyoti's concept of "bargaining with patriarchy (1988) by illustrating how with agency my interviewees are able to extend the borders of the bargain to enable women to attain bigger changes in the organization and levelling the playing field for other women and underrepresented groups too.

METHODS

This study is based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 13 women who hold or have held senior leadership positions in a corporation. I interviewed women to gather information about their experiences as leaders, shaped by the neoliberal corporate culture. By analysing the interviews I present the gendered challenges and obstacles they face, and the strategies they apply to overcome these while being successful in their roles and in their career.

I followed Kamphoff's researcher position as my approach to this study, and conducted my feminist research for women and not on women. It was imperative that my research considers the systemic challenges women face with the goal to improve the experiences of women in corporate leadership (Kamphoff, 2013, p.361).

Interviewees were selected from my extensive LinkedIn network and through recommendations from my closer network of former associates and friends. The criterion was to have been worked in a director or higher level position for at least three years in a corporation, irrespective of industry, type of work, or location. My background in corporate leadership allowed me to have these conversations, as they either already knew and trusted me, or my contacts who recommended me vouched for me as a reliable person who comes from the same world and therefore understands the importance of privacy. I have a deeper understanding of the corporate world because I have worked in it for 17 years, in a leadership role at a director and partner level for six years. This puts me in an insider position because I understand the structural logic and processes of such organizations, and to some extent the challenges they face, but at the same time I am also an outsider as I do not work for the same company they do and often my background is from a different industry and/or a different country (Rooke, 2009, p.154-155). Conclusively, it is hard for me to take a critical stance

because I have been in their shoes thereby I am somewhat biased and more understanding toward their experiences.

At the time of the interviews, eight of my interviewees were in a director or senior director position, three were in a vice president position, and two in a chief level position. Job titles are not consistent between the different industries and companies; it is possible that the level of responsibilities of a senior director in one company is similar to a vice president's in another. To finesse these differences in job labelling, throughout my study I refer to my interviewees as senior leaders. I targeted these seniority levels because the expectations and challenges in these roles are somewhat similar. They all report to a more senior employee in the organization or to the CEO directly. They have a team which they oversee. They are subject to performance evaluations and are accountable for a specific area and geography within the company. They are decision makers, yet they operate and have authority within certain limits, either geographically or functionally, or both. Each of my interviewees have worked at more than one company, and they have on average 11 years of leadership experience, albeit at different levels throughout their career. They have worked on an average nine years before becoming leaders. While the neoliberal logic of the corporate world is built on the same principles, every company has a unique company culture that differentially impacts the daily routines of its employees, defining the expected behaviour, work methodologies, work styles, and approaches to work. Some of the variations in what these women report are due to the variations in corporate culture in which they operate.

My interviewees come from eight different countries spanning over five continents, but not all of them live and work in the country that they are from. Seven of them identify as White, five of them as Asian, and one of them as Latin. The somewhat lack of racial diversity is due to two distinct reasons, the lack of diversity of my network and the lack of diversity within senior management in the corporate world. 12 of my interviewees identify as cisgender women and

one of them identifies as a transgender woman. Six of my interviewees have children, two of them have more than one child, and seven of my interviewees have no children. I use pseudonyms for all my interviewees to protect their identity, by applying names commonly used in many countries.

The interviews lasted on an average of ninety minutes, some shorter, others longer, and most of them were split into two to accommodate the schedules of my interviewees. All interviews were conducted in English via video call from Vienna, Austria, between February and May 2023. I audio recorded and then transcribed all interviews to ensure accuracy and to allow myself to be fully able to focus on the interviewee (Weiss, 1994, p.54).

I asked my interviewees about how they perceived masculinity in their workplace, the privileges and disadvantages they faced, the compromises and sacrifices they felt they had to make, and how they handled and responded to these challenges throughout their career. I followed the same interview guide through all 13 interviews, and in some instances I asked additional questions to gain a better comprehension. The women I interviewed gladly shared their experiences with me, some more freely than others. Our shared backgrounds presumably facilitated my interviewees' comfort in talking to me, but it may have caused some to be more cautious and reserved in sharing their experiences in fear of judgement or negative perception. At the end of the interview some of my interviewees shared that remembering some of the negative examples made them angry in hindsight, either because they felt they should have left and changed jobs earlier, or because they thought they had moved past those experiences emotionally.

In my analysis I identified common themes connected with my interviewees' experiences. I then analysed my interviews through the lens of different gender stereotypes and prejudices, and through the concepts of "bargaining with patriarchy" (Kandiyoti, 1988), the "ideal worker norm" (Williams, 2000), and their consequent adaptations. As a result of patterns of similar

experiences shared by my interviewees, and through contextualizing the neoliberal corporate world and hegemonic masculinity, I form two key arguments that I present in my study drawing on the quotes from my interviewees.

This study has limitations. First, as a person with corporate background, my interpretations of what my interviewees told me may be influenced by my experience and journey to leadership. Perhaps a lifetime academic would draw somewhat different conclusions from the interviews. Second, the interviews were conducted through video calls only and I did not have the opportunity to observe the women I interviewed in their day-to-day work. Third, the systematic analysis of intersectionality was challenging and is therefore limited in my study. A broader empirical study with more participants would allow a more coherent intersectional analysis. However, I do not see this as a significant criticism of my research because the experience of my interviewees comes from within global corporations that are built on the neoliberal logic that makes them similar in their structure and governance and it therefore establishes a strong foundation for analysis.

ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to show how women in senior corporate leadership positions navigate the workplace that is built on the principles of neoliberalism and hegemonic masculinity. My initial hypothesis is that they apply strategies and tactics to succeed. My study examines how they adapt to the expectations of neoliberal professionalism that stems from the ideal worker norm, what they attempt to change and how these lead to a stronger agency. My research argues that the women I interviewed bargain with neoliberal patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988), by making compromises and working harder than their men counterparts in return of achieving success. To better understand the strategies they employ, I investigate how these women deal with the implicit masculine norms within the organisation beyond the expectations of having to be professional, how they navigate their career and how they become more agentic.

In my analysis, I first examine the interpretations of masculinity and patriarchy, and I describe how my interviewees see and experience masculinity at work. After that I briefly analyse what success means to them. I then present my two main findings. First, to successfully navigate the neoliberal corporate leadership world and become more agentic, the women I interviewed leave no room for doubt, that they belong and deserve to be there. I present three strategies that my interviewees apply: the 'bullet-proof' meeting preparation strategy, the conscious use of masculine attributes in their behaviour, and how and why they adapt to the ideal worker norm (Williams, 2000) in their communication style and appearance. Second, my interviewees rise above the gendered challenges as they strive for personal and career goals, such as a successful career or a balanced work and private life. To achieve this, they make the following four compromises and adjustments: they endure discrimination and microaggressions and learn to let it go, they are willing to lose their ideas, and they adjust their personal lives. At the end of the analytical chapter I examine how workplace sponsorship has contributed to some of my

interviewees' success, any why it is a weak solution to the problem of inequality leaving my interviewees exposed to further gender stereotypes.

Interpreting masculinity and success

In order to contextualize the experience of my interviewees in the corporate workplace, it is important that I first consider the meaning of the terms 'masculinity', 'toxic masculinity', 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'patriarchy'.

Masculinity has been researched and defined by many scholars. Whitehead and Barrett's interpretation of masculinity has been foundational, and it is the closest definition to what my interviewees referred to throughout the interviews: "behaviors, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organizational locations, which are commonly associated with men and thus culturally defined as not feminine" (Whitehead & Barrett, 2001, p.15-16).

Some of my interviewees used the wording 'toxic masculinity' but I refrain from using this term throughout my study. Scholars question whether masculinity is inherently toxic (de Boise, 2019, p.150) while others argue that masculinity is a "vague concept" where men are positioned as victims of their gender category (Waling, 2019, p.371). The term 'toxic masculinity' has been used parallel with 'hegemonic masculinity' in publications, and by not using the term I follow de Boise, who argues that 'toxic masculinity' is a "decontextualised, ahistorical label" while it individualises social issues and ignores the broader context (de Boise, 2019, p.149).

Therefore in my study I adopt the term hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Connell-Messerschmidt, 2005), that is based on the "plurality of masculinities and the hierarchy of masculinities" (Connell-Messerschmidt, 2005, p.846). The plural usage of the term refers to the multiplicity of the different social-relational performativity of these attributes in certain

social settings (Connell-Messerschmidt, 2005, p.836). In my study however I use the singular word ‘masculinity’ instead of ‘masculinities’ to emphasize that I refer to structural domination and not of individuals, although often represented by individuals. The concept of hegemonic masculinity that I refer to throughout my study includes the following four elements: first, a comprehensive understanding of gender hierarchy that acknowledges the existence and the dynamics of agency and power, second, the acknowledgement of local, regional and global differences, third, the dynamics of the embodied masculinity and its social context, and fourth, masculinity is not unified and it can and it does change over time (Connell-Messerschmidt, 2005, pp.848,849,851,852).

Simultaneously to ‘hegemonic masculinity’ I also use the term ‘patriarchy’ in my study. When I write ‘patriarchy’, I employ the interpretation of bell hooks: “patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating” (hooks, 2004, p.1). The corporate organization and environment that my interviewees work in can be interpreted as this system. Domination in the workplace stems from the embedded structural inequality of the gendered organization (Acker, 1990) that allows gendered and racial hierarchy.

The ideal worker norm is therefore unavoidable in most corporate workplaces because organisations are gendered (Acker, 1990) and they are built on implicit masculine norms (Williams, 2000, p.213). The 13 women I interviewed all feel that they work in masculine environments, irrespective of what industry or country they work in. My interviewees bring up various examples of how they experience or see hegemonic masculinity in their workplace, which is in line with research arguing that masculinities are not fixed identities but results of dynamic attributes (Waling, 2019, p.366). Some examples provided by the interviewees: they feel the nature of the industry they work in is masculine, the gender ratio and lack of diversity across management is male dominant, the very direct and sometimes aggressive communication style, the inconsiderate expectations towards mothers, misogyny, the

masculine topics of 'water-cooler' conversations and the way they are expected to socialize and build relationships.

The physicality is obvious, by just looking around in the office. Natalie, for example, who has been in management for a decade, is the only woman in her senior leadership team. Those in a numerically more gender-balanced environment likely work in areas that are traditionally occupied by women. This masculinity is augmented further by the sameness of the dominance as described by Emily, who has been in senior management for over a decade:

> "They all go to one of about 15 universities. They are white, male. They all wear navy blue gilets. They all go skiing in winter and depending on what their summers look like in terms of where they sit on that ladder of financial capability, they either play golf or they go shooting". (Emily)

What Emily points out is not a unique experience, and it is just one example of why many of my interviewees feel that they cannot or were not always able to bring their true selves to work. If they did, they would risk reduction in the opportunities available to them. As research shows, women face a dilemma to be seen as competent but also regarded as likeable. If they want to be seen as competent, they risk backlash, but if they want to be likeable, they might be judged incompetent (Correll, 2017, p.730-731). The masculine environment is visible not just in physicality, but as Ingrid, who is a director and is a mother of two, puts it "also the attitudes that they bring to the table, they are quite aggressive". Ada works as a director in a corporation, her example attests to it:

> "People get talked over. It happens on a seniority level for sure. A vice president and a director can be talking, and a vice president will just interrupt and talk over them. I notice it disproportionately against women". (Ada)

As a result of that, Ada feels she works in a misogynist environment, which negatively impacts not only the women but the entire organization.

Amelia had a successful career in corporate leadership for over a decade:

> "I have experienced so many times that women were expected to dress up in a particular way, hairstyle, what they wear, how they talk, how they work, how they look. It's annoying sometimes and it's really upsetting, but when it comes to men, there's no such expectation". (Amelia)

Amelia's experience is not unique as she recalls the different hegemonic gender stereotypes and double standards she had to face throughout her career. These examples prompt a question: what does it take for these women to be successful? It takes resilience, confidence, and agency.

The women I interviewed have moved beyond accepting patriarchy as a rigid norm and through different strategies they are not only able to operate within masculine environments, but they challenge how it operates and applies to them as well. As a result, they have developed a strong sense of agency throughout their career and they are confident to act with it.

The criteria of success among my interviewees varies among them, but irrespective of how they interpret the criteria of success, it is a key driving factor for them. Most women started out in their career with goals for big salaries and titles, but as they climbed the ladder and achieved successes, the goalpost have shifted to purpose, making a difference, building things, making an impact, having a good work-life balance, doing something they enjoy and are happy while doing it. Building a successful career as a woman requires sacrifices and compromises, that often lead to frustrations that result in exiting. Most of the women I interviewed had changed companies at least once because of getting frustrated with their situation, some including time off in between two jobs. Among the reasons were toxic culture, double standards, being used and controlled by men, not being supported and borderline harassment with inappropriate jokes and comments. Despite these experiences and because of a strong sense of agency and determination, they did not opt out (Stone, 2007) and continued to successfully build their career.

In the next section I analyse the strategies of the women I interviewed to argue that they leave no room for doubt that they belong and deserve to be there, using the following three examples: the 'bullet-proof' meeting preparation strategy, the conscious use of masculine attributes in their behaviour, and how and why they adapt to the ideal worker norm (Williams, 2000).

Leave no doubt

I argue that my interviewees' aim is to leave no room for doubt that they belong and deserve to be there equally to men. As a result of men being seen as default leaders (Catalyst, 2007, p.9-12), women have to work harder than men to prove that they belong to leadership just as men do. However, scholars suggest that if a woman manages to get into a leadership position, it is possible that she will be more competent than her men counterparts, due to the hardship and higher benchmarks she was subjected to (Eagly-Karau, 2002, p.587). To be successful in a neoliberal corporation, women also have to adjust to norms that favour men more than women. I identify and analyse three examples that form a congruent pattern to corroborate my argument. First the strategy that I call the 'bullet-proof' meeting preparation, second, the conscious use of masculine attributes in their behaviour, and third, how they adapt to the ideal worker norm (Williams, 2000) by adjusting their communication style and their appearance. The examples I present illustrate that women have to work harder and more if they want to achieve their goals due to the systemic disadvantage they have compared to men. Harder and more does not only mean longer hours, but as I demonstrate in my findings, emotional work as well that scholars refer to as the "third shift" (Pierce, 1996).

First, almost all the women I interviewed prepare extensively to meetings with peers or senior stakeholders. The amplitude of this preparation varies but I noticed the goal to be similar: to be proverbially bullet-proof in order to maintain their professional identity as a leader. Meetings

are organized with different purposes, and at such senior level these women often find themselves to be the only woman in the room. The stakes are high not only for achieving their objective which often represents the work of their teams, but also for their own career too. As Savannah, who has been in leadership for almost ten years and is a mother of one, describes:

> "you need to bring confidence to them that you are both of sound judgement but also a level, that can get the right outcomes, and I think a lot of how you show up in these meetings is what people take away, because they only get to see a window of your performance and whether it's right or wrong in those meetings, they get to judge the way that you show up". (Savannah)

Savannah knows that she cannot afford to go unprepared, and it is an extensive process that sometimes starts weeks before the meeting, where her leadership will be put under a magnifying glass. Whilst preparation to a meeting is not gendered as it is a common workplace requirement, scholars argued, that unconscious gender biases are more likely to affect people in ambiguous decision making processes like meetings and in men dominated environments (Correll, 2017, p.733). Therefore Savannah is a priori disadvantaged as she might face gendered implicit biases while she is presenting and she has to mentally prepare for emotional work as well.

Preparation to a high stakes meeting varies. All the women I interviewed, at some point in their career experienced being ignored, overtalked or shouted down, and even sent out and were told they did not belong to that meeting. The experience of these situations made them believe that their expertise or leadership were questioned on the basis of gender stereotypes, often intersecting with their age and race as well. As a result of these experiences they prepare for all possible scenarios that go beyond being the expert of the presented topic, to prove that they are not there by mistake but deserve to be there. Isabelle, who has been in leadership for a decade, spends a lot of time talking to the different departments to get all the background data possible, Ada goes through all the possibilities that might come up during her presentation, and

Ingrid has a sounding board of people to practice before the meeting. They want to know the agenda and the purpose of the meeting. Emily describes it: "Never walk into a room without having an objective in your mind as to what you want". The women I interviewed meticulously prepare for important meetings. The reasons might be different, but I argue that this is both a form of emotional work (Ridgeway et al, 2022, p.644-645; Pierce, 1996) and patriarchal bargain where "women strategize within a set of concrete constraints" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p.275) in order to increase their chances of success. We can see this through Isabelle's example, how she learnt to act with agency and became more confident over the years:

> "when the tone of the voice starts to get elevated, I used to panic or lock myself. So that's why when that becomes the context of a meeting, I kind of shut down or used to shut down. So … it doesn't matter if somebody's discussing, this is the way that people talk sometimes, and if it turns aggressive, I have the ability to tell them, listen, I feel like you are maybe taking another level that doesn't need to be that". (Isabelle)

Isabelle realized early on in her career, that she needed to change something if she wanted to bring the best out of herself in those meetings. She was not used to handling such overt masculinity and the way she initially reacted could have had an impact on how her leadership skills were perceived by her colleagues, that could have impacted her broader career. She worked with an external coach to get better at handling such situation and was able to grow her confidence:

> "in the company I used to work for, was a bit more aggressive and at that point I didn't have the seniority or maturity to push back". (Isabelle)

Boosting her confidence was Isabelle's way to strengthen her agency that would help her be more successful not just in meetings but in navigating the neoliberal patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti, 1988) and building her career too. As part of the bargain, she accepted that emotional work was part of her job in return of strengthening her career opportunities.

The playing field has not been even for Isabelle, nor for the other women I interviewed, particularly in meeting with senior leadership or stakeholders. Confidence in their own abilities are often shattered during the early years of their career, and the expectations to perform as the ideal worker make this even more difficult for them. Research shows, that gender beliefs create bias that impacts how one sees their own competence irrespective of their abilities (Ridgeway-Correll, 2004, p.526). Both Savannah and Grace, who have been a leader for over 15 years, attribute their ability to deal with masculinity to their upbringing, which now helps them be more successful in the corporate environment. Being exposed to expectations whether through competitive sports or international education made both of them resilient and more confident about their abilities, that they successfully apply in their corporate leadership roles too.

Natalie has adopted a methodical approach to preparing for important meetings, but she also learnt that thorough preparations are not always sufficient. Coming to those meetings she saw something that her men colleagues did more effectively:

> "I think women are good at relationship building but they don't leverage from the relationships. … But men are very crafty to make or develop allies to their proposals and they drive it to work it favourably for themselves. I think that's something women don't do." (Natalie)

Natalie meticulously prepares to a meeting and makes sure she covers all grounds to leave no doubt about her abilities, but she learnt over the years that she also needs to maintain a good relationship with her colleagues and then use those relationships similar in lobbying, to ensure they will support her during the meeting. Natalie's observation is shared by Savannah too, who learnt from her line manager that the meeting is the dressing on the top and all the work happens beforehand so there are no disagreements afterwards. This was a crucial moment for her as she realised that she needed to operate differently to be more effective, and that changed the way how she thought about what her role was in these decision making moments.

Preparing to meetings to be proverbially bullet-proof is not a natural choice for these women. Due to the expectations of neoliberal corporate values, these women have to prove that they are able to work and collaborate in transversal teams and they possess high-performer mindset. This is gender inequality as they must perform at their best as failure would further strengthen gender stereotypes and prejudices against them, which their men counterparts do not face. They have to mentally prepare for and do extra emotional work before and during meetings that means more hours of work that their men colleagues do not have to do, and they have to operate according to norms that suit men more. By doing this, they conform to the corporate standards of the ideal leader, albeit unconsciously. Due to the 'double-bind' stereotype, my interviewees are seen "different" and "atypical" from the perceived image of the ideal leader (Catalyst, 2007, p.9-10), thus to be accepted as leaders and become successful, they adapt to this ideal leader norm risking backlash (Rudman et al., 2012). As a result, the process of navigating high-stakes meetings becomes a bargaining with neoliberal patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988), as my interviewees adapt to the expectations in order to progress towards their goals. The more conscious they become about it, the more they are able to question the status quo and extend its borders. However this extensive work can result in 'frustration' and 'burn-out', which makes the bargain disadvantageous, which ultimately might lead to women give up and either "opt-out" (Stone, 2007) or stay but reaffirm the existing neoliberal patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity by complying.

The second common example I identify to argue, that the women I interviewed leave no room for doubt that they belong and deserve to be there, is how my interviewees consciously use hegemonic masculine attributes in their behaviour. Workplace leadership behaviour is under a lot of scrutiny and women in such positions have to be successful surrounded by masculine dominance and simultaneously defy gender stereotypes that are both derived from traditional

gender roles in the society and from linking leadership with masculinity. The latter is often internalized by women more than by men, which leads to an increased level of biases against women (Garcia-Retamero-López-Zafra, 2006, P.59). Masculine perceived behaviours such as "dominance, authority and ambition" are still considered as imperative elements of leadership despite scholars showing, that good leadership is transformational (Cundiff, 2022) and has the ability to motivate, persuade, empower, partner and engage (Eagly-Carli, 2007, p.48). Stereotypical perceptions about leadership create a "double-bind" for women (Catalyst, 2007, p.10, Rudman et al., 2012), that results in women having to balance a fine line between being agentic and being liked.

Emotional work as the "third shift" has been shown as an imperative element of work, particularly for women (Pierce, 1996; Hochshild, 1997; Ridgeway et al, 2022, p.644-645; Goodall-Cook, 2022). In her work with lawyers Pierce showed, that litigators – irrespective of their gender – consciously use masculine style emotional labour (for example dominance or intimidation) to achieve their goals, and women are often hired in administrative or support roles, reproducing the gender hierarchy at the workplace (Pierce, 1996).

The women I interviewed consciously use hegemonic masculine attributes in their behaviour in certain situations to increase the chances of achieving the desired result. It is important to recognize that behaving masculine in general is not right or wrong, it is not better or worse, but it is often accompanied with dominance and therefore its hegemonic status cannot be ignored. The masculinity that I refer to in this section are attributes that dominate the corporate workplace numerically and structurally as the ideal worker norm, that the women I interviewed have to adapt to. Most of my interviewees do this when they interact with peers or senior stakeholders. Grace interacts with a lot of senior external clients regularly:

> "I think when I behave more masculine, it would probably be when I'm speaking to C-suites as well as Board, because in a sense it projects credibility, especially when the

> board is very male dominated. Then I dial up the masculinity because you gotta be able to hold your ground, have a constructive, kind of sparring conversation sometimes". (Grace)

Grace does this to showcase her leadership abilities and future potential, that she is able to drive her agenda and achieve her goals. She knows that in a male dominated environment she is more likely to get the desired result if she uses attributes that her audience is more familiar and comfortable with. She bargains with patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988) by changing her behaviour in order to get what she wants.

Natalie applies a more masculine approach in moments of crisis:

> "When you need to take control of something which is going into a crisis, you may sound like a male, you sound less like a female, but if that behaviour is what is needed in that situation, so be it. Just be careful not to use filthy language". (Natalie)

Natalie interprets masculinity as a behaviour and not an identity, which she uses when she deems that the situation requires it. Managing situations of crisis like that is a frequent element of leadership trainings in the corporate world, but by doing so Natalie is put in a difficult position. Taking the lead in a crisis situation shows her agency and leadership, but if she does that, she risks backlash because she discredits the system of the gender status-quo (Rudman et al., 2012, p.166). This creates a 'double-bind' situation for Natalie. She has to carefully balance her behaviour to demonstrate masculine traits that will enable her to achieve her goal, but at the same time not act too masculine as that would create more backlash (such as labelled as 'queen bee' or too tough and not likeable) than benefit.

Many of my interviewees confirmed, that it is now easier for women than it was 15-20 years ago. Still, due to gender prejudices, it takes longer for women to strengthen their agency than it does for men, and in the context of bargaining with patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988), this means

my interviewees constantly have to do more emotional work and negotiate with the expectations of fitting in to a norm that inherently suits men more, and therefore they are disadvantaged from the moment they enter the workplace.

The examples provided by the interviewees illustrate the inherent nature of gendered organizational dynamics, which are predicated upon a binary understanding of gender, prescribing specific behavioural norms for individuals to adhere to. However, my findings indicate that my interviewees frequently deviate from these expected norms, choosing to enact behaviours that diverge from the prescribed gendered expectations.

As Mavin & Grandy also concludes, "the gender binary cannot be ignored" when analysing women in leadership, and the examples of my interviewees corroborate their findings, that women are able to simultaneously do gender well and do gender differently (Mavin-Grandy, 2012, p.223). But potential backlash is a risk they have to mitigate here too. When women go against the status-quo in behaving different than 'they are supposed to', they can be labelled (Mavin-Grandy, 2012, p.223-224). Emily found herself being labelled as "Queen Bee" (Mavin-Grandy, 2012, p.224) before:

> "I openly had people call me bitch. Bitch is a very gender specific insult. I used to be quite flippant about it when I was younger, so I'd say things like *I'd prefer if you called me such and such a insult*, like deflect it, because particularly if you're in front of your own team too, you don't want to be aggressive. Now I would just call it out" (Emily)

She first tried to minimize the impact that stereotyping had on her, and reacted according to the stereotypical rules congruent to her gender, but as she later became more agentic, she felt more confident to act differently. Common to women in senior management, Emily was labelled because she did not fulfil her colleagues' expectation of her gender (Mavin-Grandy, 2012, p.224). As shown by research, women are evaluated based on how well they do gender and if they go against the gender binary simultaneously acting both feminine and masculine, it

can have a negative impact on their career (Mavin-Grandy, 2012, p.224-225, Rudman et al, 2012). But by learning how to react to such insults, Emily not only strengthened her agency, but proved that she deserved to be there.

Along with Emily, many of my interviewees choose to do gender differently and take more risks in the hopes of more gain, including personal development, increased self-confidence as well as the ability to level the playing field for other, often younger underrepresented groups. By consciously behaving more masculine, my interviewees demonstrate two things. First, that they can manage the high pressure environment and expectations of the "ideal worker norm" (Williams, 2000) imposed upon them, therefore their gender is not an obstacle for them to succeed. Second, that the bargain goes beyond the gender binary and the less strict they are in following the gender binary expectations, the more successful they can be if they can battle the backlash they receive.

Third, the women I interviewed adapt to the "ideal worker norm" (Williams, 2000) by adjusting their communication style and appearance. The neoliberal expectation of professionalism requires employees to communicate and dress in a certain style. Workplace communication is inherently structured by hierarchy, defining expectations of interactions among individuals. Finding the right communication style is imperative for women to convey their message. Studies show that men tend to talk twice as long as women in a conversation, and if women decide to counterbalance the perceived repression and talk more, they are subject to stereotypes (Sheridan, 2007, p.321). When women talk incongruent to their gender, the double-bind emerges (Sheridan, 2007, p.332). Appearance is a pivotal aspect of the professional image of corporate employees, it connects professional identity with status and individuality, signifying creativity and commitment, and difference from collared workers (Weeks, 2011, p.73-75).

Scholars consider aesthetics a form of labour, in which workers turn appearance into a capability that becomes a strategy to project professionalism and expertise (Warhurst-Nickson, 2020, p.44). The women I interviewed exert communication and appearance as an unconscious strategy to demonstrate, that they are on a par with their fellow leaders and they belong there too.

First I present how my interviewees change their communication style, including tone of voice, the use of words and email communication. The women I interviewed attribute certain communication styles to women or men, and consciously change their own style when the situation requires it. Isabelle used a communication coach because she was criticised for not being assertive enough. To keep the attention of her audience and to ensure that she will be listened to, she developed a technique of having maximum three points to avoid being ignored for talking too long. She unconsciously aligned her communication style to a prescriptive hegemonic gender stereotype, a belief of how women should behave (Vinkenburg et al., 2011, p10). Ingrid also structures her words into three points that build up to her intended message:

> "I often call it the wisdom of words. I often don't have the right words for the situation, and I'm mindful of that, so I know that. It's something I'm learning and I think at my current company, they're the cleverest people I've ever met. Not just from an education perspective, but diversity of thought, et cetera. And the people here are very good at articulating words… So I do spend a lot of time thinking about how I will structure my words". She continues: "I know some of my male leaders are much more structured than some of my female leaders or my female colleagues have been. So I might change my style and I might change the way I bring my agenda points to the table". (Ingrid)

Both Isabelle and Ingrid developed a communication tactic that help them to be more impactful in their job and adapt to the different styles of their colleagues. Research shows, that it is wise for women to fulfil prescriptive gender stereotypes to avoid repercussion that would question their leadership (Vinkenburg et al., 2011, p.19). Should Isabelle and Ingrid decide to not conform to such stereotypes, the phenomenon called the 'double-bind' would emerge. They

would risk backlash that could impact their career and the possibilities ahead, and it could lead to prejudices against their leadership abilities too (Rudman et.al., 2012; Catalyst, 2007). When Emily did not fulfil prescriptive gender stereotypes and started to call out inappropriate comments, it generated a new stereotype against her:

> "When I first started doing it, they think you're calling out the behaviour because you're weak. *Ohh, you can't handle it… You know Emily, you might just need some help because you can't handle it.* No, actually this is me being quite strong and telling you I don't have to tolerate it". (Emily)

Emily faced backlash when she decided to act with agency, but doing so gave her added strength and confidence to continue to do it. Should Emily been in a more junior position exhibiting a comparable level of agency, it is uncertain what the potential outcomes have ensued. Her example suggests, that the level of backlash is in reverse proportion with agency but in direct proportion with juniority. Had she acted agentic earlier in her career, she would have likely faced bigger prejudice and backlash.

The workplace has a very distinct communication style often referred to as professional, but rarely concluded as masculine. If the ideal worker is a white man (Ridgeway et al., 2022, p.628), the normalized communication style is also of a white man's, that generates stereotypes. Iris, who has been in a leadership position for five years, experienced it in her very first leadership position at her previous employer when the CEO, who was a man, stereotyped one of the women dominated team several times: "they're just whining about this and we have to focus on work" … "I don't want to hear this complaining all the time". These instances made Iris adapt to the expectations, unless she wanted to be stereotyped as a "whining person too". What Iris experienced was a descriptive hegemonic gender stereotype, a belief of how women behave (Vinkenburg et al., 2011, p.10). Had she acted agentic, she would have likely met with resistance and hostility too (Ridgeway-Correll, 2004, p.525).

Iris's example is less common nowadays. Many of my interviewees acknowledged that the workplace environment has changed since they started out, and a lot has improved. Grace has had a stellar career so far, most of which she spent in a men dominated industry. She attributes her success partially to her patriarchal upbringing. She was constantly compared to the boys in the family as a child, which gave her a strong character and a mindset of proving them wrong.

> "If I have a direct point to deliver, I tend to be able to deliver in a constructive, diplomatic, politically correct manner, but the point gets through. So it's kind of like a passive aggressive technique as well in a sense, and that kind of worked." (Grace)

Grace's example proves how she adapted to a more masculine style to be more effective, particularly in an international environment where there are also cultural differences in communication. She finds it more challenging to adapt to the different cultures so the work that goes into her diplomatic style includes doing a homework to be able to mirror their communication preferences. The international, culturally diverse environment thus adds to the gendered challenges, but Grace adapts to them to show her leadership and to prove that she belongs there.

Finally, there are also subtle, but important adjustments that my interviewees apply. Gabby is a young mother and has been in management for almost a decade. She intentionally uses a different style when messaging men to avoid perceptions such as she is not serious or business oriented, and she mirrors men more than women. To project confidence she implemented a small change:

> "not saying *I think* for things that are based in fact. For me it is taking away some of the qualifiers when speaking with senior leadership instead of saying *I just wanted to check*, or *I think that maybe*, I would just state what it is." (Gabby)

She also lowers her tone of voice when talking to men. These small changes work well for Gabby even when she is less sure about her point, particularly with senior management who are mostly men. Adapting to the ideal norm helps her become more effective, which indirectly contributes to her success. Research indicates, that the communication style applied by both women and men can be misunderstood. Consequently, if women adopt a more masculine communication style, they can project confidence albeit accompanied by the risk of "double-bind' again (Sheridan, 2007, p.332; Baxter, 2012, p.102). To maximize her opportunity to success, Ingrid pays attention to even smaller details:

> "when I read emails from men versus women, they sign them off differently. And I don't know if that's because, is there a weaker word to end a conversation, is a "best regards" a weaker response? And I don't actually see many men "best regards" at the end of an e-mail, they just sign their name. So again, it's that adjective. It's like sometimes a woman might put best wishes, best regards, kind regards, all of those kind of things could be quite a soft word, so I do think about what the tone of the e-mail is versus how I end the sentence, and I'm pretty sure when I read emails from men they just sign whatever their names are, and they don't actually think about that, but I do." (Ingrid)

Through Gabby's and Ingrid's examples we can see that the "ideal worker norm" (Williams, 2000) is embedded in the workplace communication at different levels. The corporate workplace has certain expectations to everyone. One might argue, that the only expectation is to be professional and that is genderless, but for the women I interviewed this expectation is very much gendered, as it is built on the ideal worker who is a cisgender, heterosexual, married, white man (Williams, 2000; Gray et al., 2019; Holgersson-Romani, 2020; Ridgeway et al, 2022). Effective communication takes effort, hours of training and emotional work for the women I interviewed. To be successful they adapt their communication style when it suits them or when the circumstances require it. They carefully avoid being labelled as ineffective or not capable to be a leader, thus they are very conscious about what they say to whom, and how they say it.

The second pattern of adapting to the "ideal worker norm" (Williams, 2000) is appearance. The first thing Ingrid did when she joined her current employer was to buy a pair of sneakers, as everyone wore it there. Fitting to the norm starts from day one in the job, and women pay attention to their appearance beyond the company dress codes. While it is no longer suit and tie, the expectations have not disappeared but changed. At the onset of neoliberalism, beauty became equated with wealth, offering women the false promise of power and visibility (Wolf, 1991, p.30). Women have been told what and how to wear to look professional – they have to be "businesslike" and "feminine", and they cannot afford to differ from these standards (Wolf, 1991, p.42). The neoliberal value of self-discipline forces women to consider their appearance as a display of their success and competence, while men are not subjected to the same expectations (Wolf, 1991). My interviewees experience the same pressure to conform to these neoliberal corporate beauty ideals, albeit to a different degree depending on the industry they are employed in, yet the goal is the same: to look professional, capable and competent. Savannah uses appearance to show confidence that she is knowledgeable.

> "When I come into some of these meetings, I have to remind myself that people expect a certain standard and a certain quality, and they expect you to have a certain presence" … "I make sure I wear my lipstick. I do my hair nicely in the morning. I present on the outside how I want to feel, how I want people to see me as well. So you know, it's not just how do I make myself. A, you should know the topic you're talking about, and B, how do you present to people with confidence that you are knowledgeable, and appearance does help." (Savannah)

Paying extra attention to her appearance gives a feel of control to Savannah, with which she compensates for not automatically fitting in to the norm. However, compared to her men counterparts this means extra effort and more work for her, that signifies gender inequality. She must exert a certain self-discipline with her appearance and not deviate from the beauty standards to be recognized as committed and competent. Research shows that ambiguity in meetings heightens workplace biases (Correll, 2017, p.731). Savannah is therefore very conscious about her appearance because she cannot afford her abilities and leadership to be

questioned or doubted based on hegemonic gendered stereotypes or as a result of not meeting the expectations of professionalism.

As leaders, these women are bound to do "gender well", if they want to be accepted and considered as a successful leader, which means behave like a woman in a body that looks like a woman's (Mavin-Grandy, 2012, p.220). But to be successful leaders, they also have to "defeat gender stereotypes by presenting themselves as competent, confident and assertive" (Rudman et al., 2012, p.165). This creates a catch-22 situation which means they constantly have to balance between being feminine but not being too feminine or too masculine either (Rudman et al., 2012, p. 176). Many of them opt for wearing more neutral colours or stick to the same colour palette. As Natalie describes: "being in the senior leadership team, you dress modestly. You do not want to distract anybody".

Hegemonic gender stereotypes go beyond how one dresses, and research shows that people "automatically sex categorize" the person they interact with as male or female in a fraction of a moment, and in some countries racial categorization happens at the same time as well (Correll, 2017, p.727). First impression therefore matters and women in senior management cannot afford to risk starting off the wrong foot hence they pay a lot of attention to their outlook. As the result of the ahistorical prescriptive stereotype of doing gender well, expectations become internalized, especially when the stakes are high. Before important meetings with top level management Ada pays extra attention to how she presents herself:

> "I'll always wear my hair down. … I'll try and time my hair colour appointments … to make sure that has been done, so the colour is good and it's been professionally blow dried and straightened, because it holds for couple days looking much, much better". (Ada)

Ada, along with the other women, do not do this for the audience they are going to meet, they do this for themselves, to feel better and more confident, so they have that extra kick to achieve

their goals on that meeting. Part of this is conscious decision, but part of this is complying with workplace expectations that stem from the standards of professionalism. My interviewees decide to adapt to these standards in their appearance to boost their confidence that they belong there, and show that they are knowledgeable and self-conscious leaders. This however means they spend more time, more money and more effort which their men counterparts do not have to do.

Women of colour face more stereotypes and they have to overcome more obstacles in proving their competence (Ridgeway et al., 2022, p.628), including how they look. Ingrid is very open about how this impacts her:

> "I often straighten my hair for bigger meetings. … My hair's very, very curly. … I feel much more professional when it's straight and that's really sad, but I've started to intentionally not do as much cause you know, you need to take me for me, but actually I still do it. So if I've got a big meeting, I will straighten my hair." (Ingrid)

Ingrid's example shows, that racialized gender prejudice is an additional burden for her, and while she brings her true self to work more often nowadays, she still feels the pressure of having to fit into the norm.

When it comes to appearance, the women I interviewed use it as a tool in adapting to the norms of professionalism. They perform gender according to the expectations, and consciously balance femininity with modesty. To not stand out too much, they also mirror their audience on important meetings. I therefore argue, that the adaptation to norm is often unconscious because it has been long internalized within the setup of the organization, but the women I interviewed consciously decide to put up with certain prescriptive hegemonic gender stereotypes to prove that they belong and deserve to be there, and to maximize the possibility of their success.

Go for the bigger win

In this section I argue that my interviewees rise above the gendered challenges as they pursue personal and career objectives that align with their conceptualization of success. They bargain with neoliberal patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988) as they negotiate and make compromises ensuring that their core values remain intact. However, due to the inherent hegemonic masculinity of neoliberal corporations, my interviewees are often left with no choice but to 'let it go'. Gender inequality on a structural level means more obstacles and more work than what their men counterparts face. Whilst the neoliberal patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti, 1988) is one possible strategy to reduce these obstacles, the extent of these challenges can be so significant, for example mental exhaustion or 'burn-out', that they might not be able to continue to "maximize" and "optimize" their opportunities (Kandiyoti, 1988) and are forced to 'let it go'. 'Letting go' means several things. They might let go of their job and change company, they might let go of their dream and opt out (Stone, 2007), or they might choose to deal with it differently and stay. The latter is often not a conscious choice but a matter of circumstances and the strength of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy in that specific workplace. Either way, if they decide to 'let go', they unconsciously and unwillingly reaffirm the structure of the patriarchal male domination.

In this section I identify and analyse four examples that form patterns of strategies my interviewees apply to succeed. I first examine the discriminations they have to bear and how they respond to it. By learning to deal with discrimination, my interviewees become more agentic that they utilize as a strategy to succeed. Beyond discrimination, my interviewees have to handle frequent microaggressions, where they alternate between 'letting go' and 'pushing back', that I analyse as my second example. Third, in their pursuit of personal objectives and business success, the women I interviewed are willing to compromise and give up their ideas, forming a strategy I call 'planting the seeds'. Fourth, I examine the compromises and strategies

employed by my interviewees who are mothers as they adjust their personal lives and family responsibilities to enable their careers.

Building a successful career at any workplace is demanding, but in order to achieve what they dreamt of whilst maintaining a positive experience, the women I interviewed have had to learn and apply different strategies and responses to covert and overt discrimination. Learning from past experience itself is not gendered, but many of the challenges women face on their way to becoming successful leaders are, and it requires more work and more determination from these women. As Isabelle puts: "in general for humans the paths are not designed, but for women, I had to break a lot of walls".

Pursuing personal and career objectives means both personal and professional advancement. The strategies my interviewees apply go through transformations as they grow in their career. The level of bargain, such as quitting their job or avoiding conflict for the benefit of their career or well-being, was higher earlier in their career and gradually became less as they improved their self-confidence and became more senior. The necessity to bargain (Kandiyoti, 1988) did not disappear however. Along the way these bargains have become learnings that my interviewees turn into their advantage by making adjustments in how they anticipate, react to and handle challenges that used to require them to make compromises or sacrifices.

Many of my interviewees experienced some form of, often covert, discrimination at some point in their career. Workplace discrimination is rooted in stereotypical beliefs about gender and race (Ortiz-Roscigno, 2009, p.339). Women experience discrimination due to their lower status position either as a form of inequality or a differential treatment (Ortiz-Roscigno, 2009, p.338). The level of disadvantage women face depends on their race and class as well (Ortiz-Roscigno, 2009, p.340). The women I interviewed react to discrimination differently, however a common

thread emerges from their experiences. The ability to recognize and handle it more effectively enables them to strengthen their agency, and ultimately achieve a better bargaining position.

Gabby experienced harassment, which is a form of discrimination, earlier in her career: "at the time I kind of just blew it off and was like *haha* … I brushed it off and just went and continued doing my job" (Gabby). Gabby at that time did not know how to react to workplace harassment. The reasons can be different: she might have wanted to get out of that situation as quickly as possible, she may have not wanted to create a scene, or she may have felt embarrassed. Either way, she pretended it was a harmless joke. She revised the situation and minimized her experience by concluding that "nothing really happened", which is a common reaction of women to harassment (Kelly-Radford, 1990, p.42). When it happens in a fraction of a moment, as we see it in Gabby's example, finding the right way to react is even more difficult. It took time for Amelia too to find a way, that worked for her, to handle discrimination:

> "In the early days of my career, when I felt discriminated, I just left. … In one of my latest corporate experiences I was clearly discriminated … and the second or third time he threatened me I said to him clearly, the next time you do it, I'm going to submit a complaint against you. And I mentioned it to the CEO and the CEO gave him feedback. And then he stopped. Maybe because I was senior enough in the organization" (Amelia)

From Gabby's and Amelia's examples we can see that when they did not have the confidence, they weighed their options and decided to let it go. We know from research that racial minorities experience workplace discrimination at a higher rate than white people (Daniels-Thornton, 2019, p.328-329). Amelia felt marginalized in both discriminatory situations, and a common response to that is what scholars call "job stress", that has an impact on health, commitment, and as a consequence, consideration of leaving the job (Dhanani et al, 2018, p.149,159,161). The stress of the discrimination earlier in her career made Amelia to quit that job and create an unplanned change in her professional resumé for the sake of her own wellbeing. As Amelia and Gabby became more experienced, they felt more confident to push

back. Pushing back is a form of assertive resistance, a common bargaining strategy that my interviewees apply once they have built strong agency, therefore employer support is crucial. Many companies now have workplace discrimination and harassment policies to prevent it to happen, but due to its nature, discrimination can be covert and subtle, making it more difficult for employees to recognize and report.

Learning to let go appears in other situations too. It took long for Natalie to realize that discrimination happened to her. She considers herself a very high potential person and learner. According to her, what somebody took one hour to learn, she learnt in just 15 minutes. People who worked with her started to see her as a threat, which became a source of discrimination. She refers to it as the 'tall poppy syndrome'. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, 'tall poppy syndrome' refers to "the fact, that people do not like or often criticize other people who are successful". This made her think she was not good at her job and only realized later that she was treated differently because of discrimination. Natalie thinks of this as a learning experience, that she has turned to her advantage. She now anticipates and recognizes this behaviour and keeps focusing on her end goal.

As we see from Amelia's, Gabby's and Natalie's examples, workplace discrimination has made them to be more alert, and over time they have learnt to let certain things go in their pursuit of success. Letting go here is a coping mechanism not just with discrimination, but with the pressures of the "ideal worker norm" (Williams, 2000) too. As an assertive resistance, it is also a form of bargaining with neoliberal patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988) with added emotional labour (Pierce, 1996; Ridgeway et al, 2022, p.644-645) in order to improve their day-to-day experience at work, maintain a sense of composure and resilience, and focus on their career and work responsibilities. The bargaining here is less favourable on the short term, but the women I interviewed know that they have to let certain things go if they want to win on the long run. However, the result of this bargain is that they unconsciously reaffirm neoliberal

patriarchy. Isabelle is very open about it when she shares how she deals with hegemonic gender stereotyped requests:

> "I've maybe learned to not look at those things, just ignore them and just say I'll take notes, it's not gonna kill me, or I'll organize the thing, it's not gonna kill me, like not put a lot of attention into those things. So I know that … I put a blind eye to most things, just because I just want to operate and … I'm not going to change the world, but I just want to make sure that because it does affect me as a person, I think I'm sometimes a bit sensitive, I don't want to suffer from this thing, so I just do it. It doesn't take a lot of effort for me, I just do it and I just forget about it, I'm not gonna change the way they play, right? And if I really think I shouldn't do it or I don't want to do it, I push back". (Isabelle)

Isabelle has learnt, that pushing too hard can jeopardize her career goals as it might affect the relationships she had built. She decides to compromise and take the lower end of the bargain in this example. It is evident, that her bargain impacts both the possibility of her active resistance to the masculine status-quo and the form of her struggle with it (Kandiyoti, 1988, p.275,285). Her examples demonstrate, that she balances dealing with the gender rules that are imposed upon her by hegemonic masculinity and her desire to being agentic. She could have also decided not to take up with these nuisances, but she was not ready to let go of her career so she made a compromise that she deemed smaller and more acceptable for her.

Two findings emerge from how my interviewees deal with discrimination. First, the structural inequality is so engrained and internalized, that it takes time and experience to recognize covert discrimination. Second, once they have learnt to recognize it, the way they deal it with depends on their agency and bargaining power, thereby they either 'push back' or 'let go'. However discrimination does not disappear entirely. Scholars suggest, that strong agency can be the cause of further discrimination on a different basis (Eagly-Karau, 2002, p.588). This suggests, that women in leadership positions have to cautiously exert agency to avoid backlash, thus the position they take when bargaining with neoliberal patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988) needs to be carefully assessed. This puts the women I interviewed in a difficult position while they choose

when to ‘push back’ and when to ‘let go’, as their decisions may result in opposite outcomes. ‘Pushing back’ may provoke individual consequences, whereas if they ‘let it go’ they overlook thus reaffirm the patriarchal status-quo to some extent in the interest of their own personal and career objectives, whether it is their mental health, work-life balance or career.

Second, similar to discrimination, microaggressions are unwelcome obstacles. When handling microaggressions my interviewees complement the strategy of ‘letting go’ and apply more ‘push back’, as it better enables them to focus on their overarching objectives. In this section I interrogate how my interviewees deal with microaggressions, such as condescending language, elevated tone of voice, shouting and yelling, when they compromise and how they bargain. Here we see similar transformations over time, the more senior and confident they get, the less they accept the insults and bargain with patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988). The bargain here is the fact, that my interviewees have to manage such behaviours in order to remain successful, that means on top of their day-to-day work they have to perform extensive emotional labour too (Pierce, 1996; Ridgeway et al, 2022, p.644-645), and do not have the means to change them.

We see two approaches, one when they respond to emotions by ‘pushing or clapping back’, and two, when they react with a completely opposite behaviour. High emotions mostly arise in meetings but verbal insults can happen at any time and space. The expectations to be professional and the efforts of the different inclusion and educational programs have minimized the presence of verbal insults, but they have not disappeared fully yet due to the culturally embedded stereotypes and prejudices.

Ada allows herself to be emotional in her response because she has built a strong agency over the years that makes her more confidence. As she calls it, she fights fire with fire:

> "I see chest beating in meetings and at times I have to get quite shirty and if I don't shout down, I'll be shouted down. … Most often I'll clap back if it happens to me, but not always. If I know my subject matter really really well, and I know 100% I'm right, I will clap back, but there's a high threshold to do that. If I'm doubtful at all, I might just go, you know what, I can do without this, I don't want the risk of looking like an idiot. … I'm more cautious" (Ada)

Ada has a low tolerance for insult but she still chooses wisely when and how to react. The expectations to behave professionally keep her hands tight, which means she has to be conscious about potential consequences should she decide to act in the heat of the moment. As previously explored, there are a number of reasons why she might hesitate to react: either to avoid backlash that could appear because she does not behave according to her gender status (Rudman et al., 2012, p.174; Catalyst, 2007), or to avoid resistance and hostility (Ridgeway-Correll, 2004, p.525). Irrespective of why she responds the way she does, her example illustrates the necessity to learn to deal with aggressiveness in the workplace, and in the context of personal and career objectives it often means making more compromises to remain perceived as professional and mature. Ada has reached a point in her career, where she can afford to decide when to 'let go' and when to 'push back', but her strategy is unconsciously driven by the gender stereotype of double-bind (Rudman et al., 2012; Catalyst, 2007). She feels she can allow herself to 'push-back' when her competence and leadership will likely not be questioned, but she is cautious about risking to be seen as too aggressive and not feminine enough. This requires a lot of emotional work from Ada, that puts her at a disadvantage compared to her men colleagues who do not have to worry and strategize about how to react and handle similar situations as they are not bound by stereotypes or gender biases as negatively as Ada is.

The other approach my interviewees have shared with me to respond to high emotions is by pausing, remaining calm and composed, and keeping the tone down.

Ingrid and Natalie have come a long way since they started out in the corporate world. They had to deal with condescending language and high emotions during meetings, and they have found that sometimes not reacting is more powerful than reacting:

> "You just need to remain composed, don't talk over people, even if they're talking over you and just almost like, keep a silence. And I'm learning that now, it's taken a while to learn that, but being silent is actually almost more powerful." (Ingrid)

> "I keep reminding myself to be more mindful about what happens in the meeting and how I am reacting to it. Can I modulate it and make it more pleasant? Can I make it more objective? Can I keep my tone the same way despite somebody yelling in the meeting? That's not easy. … Can you be exactly opposite? I don't think I have mastered that art. I'm still trying to do that, but I'm a lot better than a lot of people" (Natalie)

They both developed this technique to be able to keep their presence and focus on their ultimate goal. On the one hand, their reaction reflects the professionalism that is expected in the modern workplace, but on the other, they cannot afford to not comply with these expectations either. From the perspective of expected behaviour, they face a double standard compared to their men colleagues. If they behaved differently, they would likely trigger gender stereotypes that they are not fit for their role (Heilman, 2012, p.121), and could face disapproval and backlash, if they behaved in a way that is reserved for men (Heilman, 2012, p.123). Consistent to Heilman's findings, the consequences for Ingrid and Natalie are negative either way. They either risk prejudice and penalties, such as disapproval, or they bargain with patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988) by finding strategies that will enable them to stay professional and achieve their goals.

Iris is aware that reacting to similar situations by adjusting her response is a bargain:

> "usually when I have very heavy emotional reaction to something I try to dial it down and say OK, what are the facts? How can I make a case here? What can I use that is rational? As if heavy or not even heavy emotional response wouldn't be legitimate" (Iris)

Dealing with overt insults or microaggressions is still not easy for my interviewees. The double standards and stereotypes are engrained and subtle, making it more difficult to report or acknowledge. As a result of the expertise, confidence and agency they have built and strengthened over the years, they are more skillful to acknowledge and handle them imminently, and less intimidated by the possibility of backlash thereby they can afford to 'push back'. However, the expectations of professionalism constrain their range of options when it comes to effectively navigating and addressing microaggressions. When they 'push back', they cannot afford to be too emotional or too loud, as that would be incongruent to their gender resulting in a 'double bind' (Catalyst, 2007, p.9-10), and unacceptable by the terms of professionalism, as they are expected to "self-discipline" themselves (Crowley-Hodson, 2014, p.93). This places my interviewees in a very difficult position in choosing the right strategy. If they choose to 'push back', it will assist their overarching objectives and simultaneously challenge hegemonic masculinity and neoliberal patriarchy within their work environments. But if they 'let go', they unconsciously and perhaps unwillingly reinforce hegemonic masculinity and neoliberal patriarchy.

Third, hegemonic masculinity advantages men as they are seen as the default leader (Catalyst, 2007, p.9) forcing the women I interviewed to 'play by their rules' if they want to be accepted as competent to retain their job. Competency and ability is an important criterion in capitalist corporations, measured by business results. This puts my interviewees in a difficult position as they not only have to work hard to achieve their set business objectives, but they have to do it according to the norms and expectations of hegemonic masculinity and neoliberal patriarchy. This results in a difficult bargain (Kandiyoti, 1988) as it requires a strategy that potentially comes with more compromises than my interviewees would like to make, resulting in reaffirming inequality and neoliberal patriarchy.

This forces my interviewees into a catch-22 situation, as they either choose not to comply with the expectations and "opt out" (Stone, 2007), or they show that they are as competent leaders as their men counterparts by achieving the desired results. The women I interviewed worked very hard to get where they are today, thus they make a hard bargain here. They compromise and apply a strategy that I call 'planting the seeds' in order to achieve their objectives and business results. And while they are aware that by doing this they will not further equality but reproduce hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal dominance, some of them now try to challenge this ways of working and support women less senior to them to avoid having to apply the same strategy.

The overwhelming majority of the women I interviewed use this specific strategy, which, paradoxically, is based on a descriptive stereotype about men. Ada calls it "finding backdoors and ways to get things done". She explains "sometimes I feel like I have to go, you know what? If I make you say it, if I make you present it as an idea, then you'll be bought into it rather than listen to my idea". Natalie tailored it to what I call the 'half done pitch':

> "I see that men generally don't want to accept good ideas … So I don't pitch it as a final product. … I pitch it as though it is half made, and then I welcome their thoughts and that brings in buy-in. And then I go a second time, then I go a third time, trying to tell them that *this is how I'm developing it, your idea was good* and then I also tell them that, I pitched it to an X person and a Y person as well and they also appreciated this and they have added this idea into this. Now they want to be part of the gang who contributes to this idea." (Natalie)

Natalie's strategy is to slowly convince her colleagues and stakeholders to consider her idea by making them feel it is their idea too. Her experiences thought Natalie, that she could reach her desired result if she gave up wanting her ideas to be attributed to her name. She tested and validated her assumptions, and built a successful strategy, which resulted in being heard and her ideas being implemented or taken into consideration. When applying this strategy, Natalie bargains with neoliberal patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988), because she sacrifices not being

recognized for her ideas in order to drive greater accomplishments. She knows that the success of the business will be her success too.

Emily applies a similar but more direct approach during one-on-one conversations:

> "the number of times I've had to have one-on-one conversations with men so they can then go pretend like it's their idea is thousands, thousands and thousands. Just to get stuff done. I socialise little bits of information over time. Sometimes you're just better off letting them self-conclude and that is to my detriment. I will say that I have probably not gotten as far as I could have. … It's hard". (Emily)

By not bringing her ideas to a meeting without obtaining the support of her stakeholders, Emily sacrifices a lot of her time that she could spend on other important matters. This is often referred to as workplace politics, that some of my interviewees like Emily mentioned as something unnecessary that they do not like to deal with. In an ideal world Natalie and Emily would not have to strategize how to bring ideas where they would be listened to, but matters that are important to them would be treated with equal potential as those presented by their men colleagues.

Research shows that in men dominated areas such as leadership or management, people accept ideas or products more willingly if they come from higher status people, and a product is also considered as better if it is assumed to have been created by a man (Ridgeway-Correll, 2004, p.518). When women choose this strategy, they sacrifice their ideas to be associated with them to gain personal and career goals. Isabelle applies the same strategy with her line manager and stakeholders:

> "it's very annoying that most of the times it's like if I say something, they ignore me, but when their people tell them, they're like, *oh, did you know that?* And I'm like *you know, I told you this two weeks ago. You didn't listen to me*. So it has happened a lot. This is still something that bothers me. I always find myself looking for strategies to how to make sure that my ideas first are recognized as my ideas, and secondly that are remembered, because I know the business more than them sometimes because I'm more in the ground". (Isabelle)

This sacrifice not only leads to frustration, but risks how she is viewed at her next performance evaluation. Emily's and Isabelle's frustrations are not unfounded. Men are likely to be considered more competent than women even if their performance is the same, which leads to women having to work harder if they want to be judged equally (Ridgeway-Correll, 2004, p.519). Emily's and Isabelle's examples illustrate, that the compromise they have to make is significant, but a failure would not only impact them but their teams too, and this additional responsibility forces them to comply. However they express their frustrations and desire to change, as they feel this jeopardizes their equal position within the leadership. Emily thus decided to call it out on meetings:

> "something I started doing some time ago was if I was in a senior meeting and a woman, and I find this is an age issue as well, so a graduate or someone like that says something and then 15 minutes later, some senior guy would repeat it, I would say, *ohh yeah, that goes back to that guy's point or that girl's point, or that person's point*. But I would always try to attribute the idea to the individual who first came up with it, because otherwise everyone just thinks it's the white guys idea. So I think that that's something I've done to try and kind of help other people, cause when you do it for yourself, it looks selfish or when you do it for other people at least you know you're trying to change things slightly". (Emily)

Emily recognized this as a pattern and now tries to help other, often junior colleagues to get credit for their ideas. She learnt through experience that such credits are important to be able to succeed and build a solid career in corporate: "that credit is how you get promoted, paid more, given more opportunities", she says. Confidence in herself now enables Emily to be agentic more often, and to use that to advocate for other underrepresented colleagues as well.

The strategy of 'planting the seeds' is rather a compliance and adaptation to the "ideal worker norm" (Williams, 2000) than a bargain with neoliberal patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988). The women I interviewed are compelled to make compromises and relinquish their ideas in order

to attain their business objectives. However, this process reinforces the dominance of the neoliberal patriarchy, and provides minimal scope for negotiation or alternative approaches. My interviewees recognize these dynamics and proactively endeavour to decrease the struggle for other women after them, that may result in less women opting out thus more challenging the patriarchal status quo.

Fourth, I examine how my interviewees who are mothers adjust their personal lives and family responsibilities to meet work expectations in the hope of advancing their careers or achieve success. Hochschild investigated in her foundational book why people work long hours, why they can afford that and what challenges they face (Hochschild, 1997). Since then, numerous scholars have studied the phenomenon of work-life balance and the effects of work expectations and personal and care responsibilities on each other (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kossek et al, 2001; Rothbard et al, 2005; Mickel-Dallimore, 2009; Kelly et al., 2010; Kossek-Lautsch, 2012).

The women I interviewed built their career adhering to the "ideal worker norm" (Williams, 2000), but the structural inequality is so deep, that the existence of such norm is not fully recognized, and women have no other options but to bargain with neoliberal patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988). The ideal worker is a "rational, strong leader, committed to work and unencumbered by family or other responsibilities" (Gray et al., 2019, p. 663), and to become a successful leader within such expectations require adjustments.

The most noticeable adjustment that my interviewees who have children apply is the shifting of childcare responsibilities in their personal lives. I argue that it should be the norm for a parent to have the opportunity to decide how they share childcare responsibilities with their partner, without having to consider external factors. But due to the systemic inequality of

neoliberal patriarchy it becomes a compromise as social reproduction is not considered as a productive (paid) work, therefore parents are forced to make adjustments (Fraser, 2016). Savannah feels the tension of structural inequality in her decision:

> "I think that most people who are two people working would say that the system is not built for two parents to work, it's just not in any kind of busy city where you don't have family around. So that was our decision, which has helped enable me to work as I need to work in the way that work expects whether you're a mother or not."

Both Savannah, Nadine and Ingrid have children under the age of ten and their husbands are the primary caregiver. Savannah recognized that she had to make a decision early on, but for Nadine, who has been in leadership for almost ten years, it was a gradual change:

> "my husband is the primary caregiver and as I've got more senior in my career, he's taken on much more of that. I think it started off with me doing everything and then it shifted with him doing everything" (Nadine)

Nadine often had to emphasize that she was committed and flexible. She was asked multiple times during interviews and job conversations what her husband did for a living. Before her husband became full time primary caregiver, Nadine often felt she had to share that her husband was very supportive of her career and she could travel for work just to reassure the interviewer. Nadine feels it is a double standard as the same question would never be asked from a man, as the ideal worker is not assumed to have childcare responsibilities.

For Ingrid, to perform according to the expectations meant that she had to make compromises:

> "I had to compromise in my life, I missed Nativity plays, I missed those kind of things. I didn't think it was appropriate to ask for it. After a while I started to do that, so I didn't compromise my family over it. … We worked out my situation with my husband and actually he stepped down from his job to look after children. I think if I'd been juggling a bit more, there would be so much more that I would have compromised at work for family. But now I'm in a great position where … I've got parents and children and I am very clear that I will prioritise those over work" (Ingrid)

Ingrid had to figure out how to prioritize her family and at the same time build her career, as she was facing conflicts between her personal and professional life. The intersection of personal and professional life is competitive, and can result in both negative (stress, low life and job satisfaction, higher turnover intentions) and positive consequences (enhancement, enrichment) for the individual (Mickel-Dallimore, 2009, p.630). Ingrid felt that the expectations of her career would have resulted in more sacrifices with her children, so she and her husband made a compromise that they felt was the most beneficial for their family and for themselves. While the adjustment helps Ingrid to be more present with her family, she still has to sacrifice much of her 'me' time in order to be successful on the other two fronts.

There have been many improvements in recognizing the need for flexibility in the workplace in the past decades as corporations started to introduce work-life balance and family friendly policies, but many of these initiatives have been criticised as well (Kelly et al., 2010; Berrey, 2014). Despite these efforts, the problem lies deep, and unless social reproduction gets acknowledged and financially rewarded the same as economic production, mothers in the workplace have no other option but to bargain with neoliberal patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988) by making compromises and adjustments in their family lives. While my interviewees' unequal position compared to their men counterparts is undeniable, it is important to acknowledge two important aspects. First, Nadine, Ingrid and Savannah are in very privileged positions, as they can afford to be the main earners in the household whilst their husbands step down and become the primary caregivers, and many women in and outside of the corporate sphere are constrained to be in a 'two-earner family' (Fraser, 2016, p.104). This often results in the woman stepping down in her career, therefore many women cannot afford to think about building a career even if they wanted to. Second, seven out of my 13 interviewees are not parents, and whilst my research is not representative, it underscores a significant aspect of the neoliberal corporate environment, namely that women without children tend to occupy a more advantageous

position when it comes to building a successful career as leaders, relative to women who have children (Ridgeway-Correll, 2004, p.526).

Regardless of the level of effort, my interviewees often need further support from the organization to be able to deal with workplace barriers and succeed. Due to the gendered nature of organizations, the covert expectations of the "ideal worker norm" (Williams, 2000), and the workplace gender stereotypes and discrimination (that are often intertwined with racial and class prejudices too >Ortiz-Roscigno, 2009, p.340<), the need for senior support in the forms of sponsorship or allyship were emphasized in many interviews.

Not being part of informal networks is a critical impediment to women's career prospects (Gray et al, 2019, p.664, Linehan, 2001, p.825), however half of my interviewees highlighted ill feelings and displeasure towards networking. Entering these networks is more difficult for women (Linehan, 2001, p.825-826). Many of my interviewees reported that the internal networks are often gendered and focus on masculine activities, which further marginalize them and their careers (Mickey, 2022, p.4). When done internally, it often involves after-work socializing which then champions and upholds the hegemonic masculine culture and excludes people who have care or other responsibilities.

Due to the nature of these networks and my interviewees displeasure in engaging in networking, some of them identified alternative ways to gain senior support in the forms of sponsorship or allyship. Nadine gained a sponsor the moment she joined her employer who helped her throughout her career, sometimes behind the scenes. She believes having a men sponsor has been critical in her career and she attributes part of her success to this. For Isabelle it is senior women allyship that helps her through the difficult moments in dealing with workplace stress and challenges caused by hegemonic masculinity.

Corporate policies and programs are now available to support underrepresented groups in feeling more included and be able to better advocate for themselves, such as discrimination and harassment policies (Dobbin et al, 2015, p.1029), employee affinity or business resource groups (Berrey, 2014, p.359, Dahunsi, 2017), mentoring programs, et cetera. Wynn however showed in her research, that executives still endorse views that support the gender status quo whilst simultaneously speaking in support of diversity programs (Wynn, 2020, p.126-127), making the company's diversity efforts a 'lip service', using Ada's words. Unfortunately there is still a long way to go despite the efforts of the different diversity programs, which, in certain situations can also become counterproductive (Berrey, 2014, p.365, Ibarra et al, 2010), leaving women and other underrepresented groups with one tried and tested strategy to achieve their goals: bargaining with neoliberal patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988).

CONCLUSION

In this study I investigated and analysed how women in senior corporate leadership deal with the gendered challenges and obstacles they face in the organization, and what kind of strategies do they apply to succeed in the context of how they interpret success. I examined the neoliberal logic of corporations and how it impacts the women I interviewed. I conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with women in corporate senior leadership, and from my findings I presented two main arguments, first, that the women I interviewed leave no room for doubt, that they belong and deserve to be there and second, that they rise above the gendered challenges as they strive for greater objectives. In my analysis I interrogated how my interviewees respond to stereotypes, discrimination, microaggressions, and how they manage the expectations of neoliberal corporate values and the ideal worker norm. I examined to what extent they bargain with neoliberal patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988) and if their strategies question or reaffirm patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity.

Trish is part of the senior management of a smaller enterprise and she describes the atmosphere at her current employer genderless, where she feels people are treated equally. For Trish genderless means all gender identities being equal and one not dominating the others. On the basis of Acker's finding that organizations are gendered (Acker, 1990), I argue that the ideal worker norm (Williams, 2000) is engraved in the organizations' culture, because it is embedded in a gendered society, therefore a true genderless organization is not possible yet. Genderless in a sense of being equal and equitable is desirable, but it can be intentionally misinterpreted to suit the needs of the majority, and become a 'lip-service' to be able to maintain the status-quo. An organization that promotes a 'neutral' company culture can be seen as genderless, but it is structurally rooted in the neoliberal logic that expects employees to adopt its norm of

professionalism and the "ideal worker norm" (Williams, 2000), that is based on a heterosexual, married white man.

Professionals are expected to manage and present themselves in ways that are deemed appropriate (Rose, 1992, p.14). The women I interviewed have to work harder than their men counterparts as they encounter a greater array of obstacles beyond the expectations of professionalism. They deal with the expectations of the "ideal worker norm" (Williams, 2000; Gray et al., 2019; Holgersson-Romani, 2020; Ridgeway et al, 2022) as they adapt their communication style and appearance. They work harder to adopt the image of an "ideal leader" who is by default a man (Catalyst, 2007, p.9) for example when they meticulously prepare for meetings or when they use masculine attributes in their behaviour. They face higher competency and gender standards that are rooted in gender stereotypes and biases often unbeknownst to them, for example the 'double bind' (Rudman et al, 2012; Catalyst, 2007). And they face difficult decisions regarding motherhood, whether they want to be parents and if so, willing to make adjustments to their family lives or sacrifice their career. My interviewees have to manage all these challenges while also accepting precarity as a nature of work that affects the neoliberal corporate sphere as well (Kalleberg-Vallas, 2017, p.2-3). In addition, it is important to acknowledge that the national and cultural background of my interviewees contribute to their experiences and abilities to strategize and build their career. These challenges leave my interviewees with one option: find a strategy that will enable them to succeed.

It was important for my study to represent the multiplicity of experiences and workplaces mediated by intersectional identities hence my goal was to include a diverse group of women. However, due to the small scale of the research an intersectional analysis was an obstacle. My interviewees lived experiences are somewhat unique and different from each other as they

come from and work in different countries and cultures, and applying an intersectional lens to such small scale did not reveal significant patterns of experiences and strategies.

In my analysis I argued that the strategy available to the women I interviewed is bargaining with neoliberal patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988). I demonstrated through examples that the more agentic my interviewees are the better bargaining position they have. It is evident from their experiences, that their individual agency, where results mean their own individual success, is closely associated with bargaining.

However the effect of their agency has limitations. My interviewees' actions are not guaranteed to result in a positive impact for other women and underrepresented groups and a strong agency bears the risk of backlash for themselves too. When the goal becomes self-serving, it carries the risk of ignoring the public good and it reinforces patriarchy. The road to success is not yet paved and my interviewees admittedly have not found an all-encompassing solution for women's inequality. However, a strong pattern has arisen from the interviews as a possible step to move in the direction of progress: women's advocacy for other women and underrepresented groups.

Scholars interrogated the reasons of "female misogyny" and why women in corporations are often not supportive of each other (Mavin-Grandy, 2012, p.225). They found, that in order to be successful leaders, women break away from the gender binary and behave gender incongruent, thereby become a "threat to the self of other women" (Mavin-Grandy, 2012, p.226). The women I interviewed had differing experiences working with women colleagues and managers throughout their career, that resulted in both positive and negative opinions about working with women in general. During the interviews I did not sense jealousy toward their women colleagues or the sense of "threat to the self" (Mavin-Grandy, 2012, p.226) from my interviewees. However as I demonstrated throughout my study, gender stereotypes are not only

engrained in the neoliberal organizational logic, but internalized on an individual level too, that distort how women view and support each other irrespective of where they are in the organization. As my interviewees became more confident and agentic, they have started to support other, often junior women colleagues in and outside of their organization, but these efforts are often clouded by their personal experiences. A future study should investigate successful strategies and examples of women's advocacy toward other women, enriching not only academic understanding of the subject, but also supporting and increasing women's equality in the workplace and perhaps on a wider level too, in society, transforming the systemic logic of patriarchy step by step.

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