

Understanding the intersection of women's commitments and career advancement in their corporate leadership

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ABSTRACT - Women's leadership in both the corporate and public sectors is still disproportionately small, which might be due to the barriers to combining work and family. This research investigates how women can develop the skills they need to succeed as they climb the leadership ladder. First, to identify the factors that encourage women to become leaders at the beginning of their careers, and second, to balance the commitment of women in leadership positions with their personal lives. The present study used an abductive approach by analysing data from semi-structured interviews with eight women leaders from the corporate sector. The findings highlight the need for women to have specific skills and competencies to take on more prominent roles in the workplace, particularly through their continued development and networking with other women leaders in terms of mentorship, sponsorship, and advice. The themes are communication skills, networking, going the extra mile, critical thinking and grit. Women balance their commitment and professional ambition for career growth by protecting their me-time, prioritizing, working on realistic goals, and having a support system. They do perceive that balancing both commitment and career advancement is unrealistic. This study will add to the existing knowledge and improve the competencies of women in leadership in the public sector.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The proportion of women holding senior positions in organizations has remained relatively constant in the current corporate climate (Appelbaum et al, 2013). According to Fritz and Knippenberg (2017), men and women are unfairly represented in leadership roles in today's enterprises and organizations. In 2020, women held only 29% of senior management positions. This number serves as an unsettling indicator of the gender disparity that persists in top management roles across the world. It emphasizes how important it is that more women should be given the chance to take on leadership positions. It is a call to action for organizations to make sure that women are given equal chances and to encourage an atmosphere that supports their advancement into leadership positions (Lindner, 2023).

Accordingly, women need specific skills and abilities to take on more prominent roles in the workplace. The need for ongoing development, networking, mentoring, sponsorship, and collaboration with other women leaders for mentorship is essential for leadership (Medicine et al., 2020). Change is slow, and women are still struggling to catch up with men in all areas. Women remain disproportionately underrepresented in leadership positions, and women are challenged to address the gender inequality that affects entry-level professionals and those in their first five years of full-time employment. There will be great opportunities (Lean In, 2021) compared to previous generations. Leaders are recognized through their leadership style, authority or power, personality, and position. These female graduates are mostly employed in entry-level positions in mid-level organizations and management fields. Surprisingly, very few reach the top of the corporate pyramid or achieve leadership positions.

Women who want to become leaders should examine various issues, including gender and their leadership goals. Women have the same leadership goals as men, according to research. According to Eagly and Carli (2007), women's leadership style often emphasizes collaboration, inclusiveness, and transformative leadership, bringing distinctive characteristics to organizational leadership. Many barriers prohibit women from moving into leadership roles, which act as barriers to women's leadership ambitions. The term "glass ceiling" refers to the invisible barriers that hinder women's progress. Discrimination, gender bias, and prejudice continue to prevent women from rising to leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Scholars of intersectionality and leadership emphasize the need to examine intersectionality and recognize that women's experiences differ depending on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. Furthermore, organizational culture and policies are organizational contexts that influence women's leadership aspirations. Female leadership is linked to collaborative culture and family-friendly policies (Kossek et al., 2017).

An inclusive workplace includes flexible work options and mentoring programs. Next, networking and mentoring have been highlighted as important components in women's leadership development. Mentoring has a positive impact on career advancement, skill development, and confidence building for women who aspire to leadership positions. (Ely & Meyerson, 2010). The media portrayal and visibility of women leaders in various sectors shape society's attitudes. Positive role models and visibility can help break down gender stereotypes and inspire women to take on leadership roles (Hunt & Carter, 2015). Cross-cultural studies shed light on the diverse leadership experiences of women around the world. Cultural norms, societal expectations, and political settings affect women's leadership aspirations differently across regions (Dorfman et al., 2019).

Research shows that men are generally considered more capable of leading than women, despite having the same qualifications. There is also a lack of role models. Women find it difficult to see themselves as leaders if they don't have strong role models to whom they can turn for advice and inspiration. Only 8% of the 500 CEOs in his study were women (Semeshkin, 2023). Despite the decline in the number of women in leadership roles in both public and commercial organizations, as well as male-dominated industries, this is the case. This study will look at how women can develop the necessary abilities to thrive as leaders today. This research aims to better understand why there are so few women in leadership positions and to create measures to attract more women to leadership positions.

Additionally, a research gap is that gender equality involves increasing the number of women leaders in proportion to their male counterparts in personal, public, and political settings. Through a series of interviews, the study examines how women view the issues under study while revealing new details about how women can be empowered as they move up the leadership ladder. Work-life balance is an important problem that has to be addressed for working women. As more women enter the workforce, they face problems balancing professional and personal duties. A good work-life balance is critical for their overall well-being and long-term success. In recent years, there has been considerable growth in the number of women working in numerous industries. While this is encouraging, it has also emphasized the importance of addressing the work-life balance issues that working women confront (Berman et al., 2019). The research questions are (1) What are the drivers for women to become leaders in the early stages of their careers? (2) How do women balance their commitments and professional ambitions for career advancement?

This study will be conducted through semi-structured interviews where women at the highest levels of leadership and management will be asked to describe the phenomenon in leadership. Women's leadership and work-life balance are themes explored in this study. The study subjects are Malaysian female company owners with more than ten years of management experience working in major organizations. This study contributes to the understanding of how Malaysian women can achieve leadership positions while improving work-life balance. This research will identify and analyze successful examples of women leaders who have created a balance between their work and home life. This success story may be an example and a guideline for other female executives. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Malaysian women can become leaders while maintaining work-life balance. Next, create positive change, promote gender equality, and encourage women in leadership positions. It has the potential to create a more inclusive and collaborative environment for people. The development of recommendations will help facilitate the transition of women from management positions to senior leadership. The findings will also expand knowledge about promoting women to senior leadership roles in business. It also helps potential women leaders develop the attributes and abilities needed to achieve and maintain leadership positions in today's sophisticated, global, and competitive technological environment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundation

This study uses the concept of role congruence. Describe the obstacles women face in achieving leadership roles. Leadership emerges because of less positive attitudes toward female leaders than male leaders. Another conclusion is that it is more difficult for women to become leaders and succeed in leadership positions. Many research paradigms suggest that these consequences occur, especially in situations that promote the perception of incompatibility between gender standards and leadership responsibilities (Idem So, 2023). Preconceptions about the role of women in society are directly opposed to preconceptions about the nature of effective leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2005). According to role congruence theory, a group is valued highly when its qualities are considered compatible with the group's normal social role (Eagly & Diekmann, 2005). Stereotype congruence theory, on the other hand, suggests that group members will be discriminated against in a different job or social position until the group stereotype does not have characteristics associated with success in that position. For example, if aggression is considered an effective leadership trait, women may be considered unsuitable for leadership positions. Due to normal compliance, men are seen as more qualified for the position and are more likely to be hired and promoted. This theory is very relevant to women's leadership and work-life balance. This is because role attachment theory describes a bias against female leaders that arises from a discrepancy between characteristics associated with female gender stereotypes and characteristics associated with typical leadership.

2.2 Integrity and Ethics in Leadership

Integrity and ethics are an integral part of leadership, and there is a lot of scholarly interest in the linkage of these concepts. Organizational performance depends primarily on Integrity and ethical leadership, as it is the key to effective management (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Leaders who are fair and lead with moral conduct create a culture of trust and

the right values (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012). There is a close link between Ethical leadership and women's leadership. In their study, Eagly and Carli (2003) mention that due to the societal norms and expectations, women leaders adopt a transformational leadership style that emphasizes empathy, high moral standards, and community wellbeing. This kind of leadership is associated with integrity and ethics, as against transactional or autocratic styles that are not closely related to an integrity-based approach (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Van Engen, 2003).

Moreover, research reveals that there are higher expectations from women leaders, and they are often judged more than their male counterparts (Bear, Rahman, & Post, 2010). Consequently, it was found that women leaders develop higher ethical standards and are transparent in decision-making. Therefore, women are preferred over men in times of crises and when ethical considerations are under public scrutiny (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Though there is evidence of advantages, there exist barriers preventing women from attaining leadership roles. In the male-dominated industries, women often must follow norms and expectations to conform to the existing leadership styles (Hoobler, Masterson, Nkomo, & Michel, 2018). Organizations with women in leadership roles have been found to do better in corporate social responsibility (CSR) performance. In a study, Rahman and Rubow (2011) found that companies with more women on their boards showed higher levels of CSR disclosures and ethical practices. It can therefore be stated that gender diversity at the leadership improves the quality of governance and prevents ethical lapses (Terjesen, Sealy, & Singh, 2009). Therefore, promoting gender diversity in leadership is not only a matter of equal opportunity but also important for ensuring integrity and ethical governance in organizations.

2.3 Women Leadership

Women in leadership positions are associated with positive changes in company culture. According to Catalyst Research (2021), companies with more women in leadership positions tend to have a more inclusive culture, which leads to higher employee engagement and satisfaction. Women leaders play an important role in shaping a culture that prioritizes diversity, equity, and inclusion. Since most decision-makers in leadership positions are men, irrelevant job variables depending on the applicant's gender were found to hurt women applying for these jobs. The rise of women in leadership roles began in the twentieth century, and investors and scholars have recognized the need to promote diversity in leadership positions (Catalyst, 2014b; Fairchild, 2014). Until recently, the share of women in leadership positions has been neglected. Despite technological breakthroughs and legislative reforms by governments and organizations that helped women climb to leadership positions in industry. Like many other countries, female labour force participation is increasing in Malaysia, which means that women in leadership positions need to pay more attention to work-life balance. In Malaysia, cultural and social norms often put pressure on women to conform to traditional gender roles, such as housework and caring responsibilities. These expectations can create significant barriers for women leaders in managing their work and personal lives. Pressure to conform to social norms can affect a person's desire for a leadership role (Matthew, 2023).

Women leaders thrive when things go well because they are emotionally, intellectually, socially, and physically oriented, and they adapt to major changes without losing direction. A strong core offers women leaders the confidence to take on new challenges, adapt, and learn. Core leadership goals help in creating physical fitness, while core confidence opens you up to listening to your social instincts and loving yourself. They belong if they make mistakes. However, when women take on leadership roles, success is not guaranteed because they can fail. Male and female leaders function differently because their goals are implemented and achieved in different ways. As a result, some people will be more successful than others. Female leaders, on the other hand, are more likely to fail than male leaders, especially in male-dominated workplaces (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). In these male-dominated societies, failure is associated with women being nominated for leadership roles, especially during economic downturns or when the position involves a high risk of failure (Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Male leaders may fail or do the same in the same scenario as female managers, yet female managers are considered unsuccessful. Furthermore, female leaders in Malaysia experience role conflict due to work demands and family responsibilities. One of the things she says motivates women to become leaders is personal fulfilment. Many women have a strong desire to advance in the workplace, take on challenging tasks, and make a significant impact (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

2.4 Work-Life Balance among Women Leaders

Work-life balance refers to the ability to balance work and family duties. Working women with raising families and children have the greatest leadership challenges (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Sandberg, 2013; Hess & Kelly, 2015). Women are more likely than men to be absent from work or take time off from work due to emergencies or family commitments during the peak of their careers (Rose & Hartmann, 2008; U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2016). When leaving children to work, women have more problems than men. As a result, they choose to work part-time or take a year off from the workforce. Many women return after vacation. Organizations, on the other hand, assume that women with children are not on the fast track to leadership roles, thus disqualifying many women from leadership positions (Laughlin, 2011). Except for 12% in the private sector (U.S. Department of Labour, 2015), certain organizations in most U.S. states do not provide paid family leave. Furthermore, only five states provide temporary disability benefits to women after childbirth. Women in other states depend on their employers to provide unpaid leave as well. Female employees may hesitate to use their employer's family-friendly policies for fear of questioning their dedication to the business or organization (Klerman et al., 2012). Another study of men and women in the oil business found that women were more likely to resign than men because of family obligations and a lack of work-life balance. Women often abandon their occupational goals to continue

their partner's work, moving to a different state or country (Sprunt et al., 2013). Women face a gender imbalance in leadership roles, yet leadership jobs are stressful, time-consuming, and require a higher level of responsibility, leaving no opportunity for other objectives. These barriers prevent women from pursuing leadership positions and men from taking on caring and supportive duties.

In recent years, there has been a significant growth in the number of women in leadership positions in various industries such as business, politics, and academia. However, reaching the peak may be difficult, and it is often necessary for women to make personal sacrifices to achieve professional success. This is where the balance of work is played. The balance of work and personal life is referred to as the balance of work-life. Achieving work-life balance is important for women in leadership or women's leadership for their well-being and success. Some reasons are that women in leadership roles often work for hours and withstand significant levels of stress. This may hurt their physical and emotional well-being. Having a work-life balance gives female leaders the mental space they need to make better decisions (Academy, 2023). To summarize, work-life balance is important for women in leadership or female leaders. The balance of work can lead to better health and well-being, improved productivity, better results, setting examples, and better retention and use. To foster a supportive and inclusive work culture, the organization must prioritize the balance of work for all employees, especially female leaders.

3. METHODOLOGY

We focus on the leadership experiences of eight women in senior management positions in the corporate sector. Purposive sampling was used as the sampling technique, which deliberately selects people or cases with specific qualities or experiences relevant to the research. In terms of experience, most participants will be selected from individuals with more than ten years of professional experience, to guarantee enough experience and training as leadership criteria. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online due to their hectic schedule. Furthermore, the interviewer can easily collect information during the interview by recording the session and taking notes, allowing the entire session to be transcribed. Interview questions aim to obtain comprehensive information about the investigated topic from the respondents (Medeiros, 2012). However, if no new information or ideas emerge from the interviews, the sample size is enough, and the data becomes saturated. Three procedures were conducted to understand the phenomenon. We evaluated the interview transcripts after transcribing the individual interviews and disaggregating the data by categorizing or classifying the information. Second, coded data was analyzed by comparing different data codes and themes within and across relevant variables in the research and looking for codes that do not support common patterns in detail. Finally, reframing or re-creation of broad themes and codes was done to provide insights, provide interpretations, and situate results in the current concept (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Demographic profile of informants' companies

No ID	Year of Business	Nature of Business	Position of the Informant
C1	14	Offshore and Outsourcing Services	Senior Manager
C2	27	Media and Entertainment	
C3	59	Audit & Assurance, Advisory and Tax Services	
C4	75	Automobiles Services	
C5	60	Banking Services	
C6	25	Healthcare Company	
C7	25	Assurance, Advisory, and Tax Services	
C8	33	Electricity Services	

The 8 Malaysian companies were interviewed. The results below are to answer the first research question, which is: what are the drivers for women to become leaders in the early stages of their careers?

RQ1: What are the drivers for women to become leaders in the early stages of their careers?

Table 2. Codes, sub-themes and themes

Codes	Sub-themes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Effective communication skills are crucial for leaders to express their vision, cultivate relationships, and inspire others to step out of their comfort zones. - Practice effective communication. Even though you may be good at something, if you can't communicate well, it hinders your ability to grow and move forward. - Research indicates that emotional intelligence (EI) is highly valued among employees, as it significantly impacts team leadership and emotional understanding. - A good leader is self-aware, willing to take on additional responsibilities, learn independently, and seek feedback to identify strengths and areas for improvement. - Try your best to do everything well. No matter how small or big a task seems, complete it in the best way possible. - Be proactive and proactive, do not limit yourself, always go beyond your professional scope, and strive to learn from others. - Be open to constructive feedback from your superiors and continually seek feedback from your superiors for improvement. - Learn to be proactive in the workplace and take the lead when opportunities arise. - Openly express opinions and ideas outside of routines, being open to new ideas and change in the current work culture, as change is the only constant in life. - Know the difference between an attempt and a conclusion. employers and indeed society. Look for people who are making a big difference, making a difference. - Learn – Continuous learning and acquiring skills enable you to make accurate decisions, take calculated risks, and add significant value. - Participate in activities that require you to step out of your comfort zone. - Read more and monitor the business environment to identify business trends and capitalize on opportunities for growth and innovation. - Fail fast but learn from it and come back stronger. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improve Communication skills - Practice effective communication - Understand your own and others' emotions - Not afraid to take on new responsibilities - Seek feedback to discover their strengths - Give the best in every task - Go beyond the job scope - Always seek constructive feedback from superiors for improvement - Learn to be proactive - Be brave in leading new opportunities - Open to new ideas for changes - Seek those who make an impact - Constantly learning - Come out of your comfort zone - Be aware of the business environment - Fail fast 	<p>Communication skills</p> <p>Going the extra mile</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develop critical thinking skills – Effective leaders can consider the impact of their decisions on the overall bottom line. You can predict potential problems before they occur. - Instead of asking questions to superiors, seek solutions and try again, as you may not always be correct. - Openly express opinions and ideas outside of routines, being open to new ideas and change in the current work culture, as change is the constant in life. - Enhance their contribution in the workplace by taking a more proactive role in developing critical thinking through asking questions and thinking processes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Critical thinking skills - Be a problem solver - Voice out opinions and ideas - Develop critical thinking 	<p>Critical thinking skills</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus on building relationships and networks with people from diverse backgrounds. - Being visible in networking allows others to understand your roles and qualities, facilitating potential collaborative work and enabling the discovery of new, interesting roles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Networking with people with diverse backgrounds - Being visible 	<p>Networking</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Being passionate about your work can significantly enhance your performance. - To achieve success, be self-driven, gritty, and humble, set meaningful goals, and remain passionate and perseverant through iterations, believing in the power of iteration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High Passion - Have grit - Build strength with humility - Stay passionate and persevere 	<p>Grit</p>

Table 3. Themes mapped with the informants

Theme	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8
Communication skills	/	/				/		
Networking		/				/		
Going the extra mile	/	/	/		/	/	/	/
Critical thinking skills	/		/		/		/	

Theme 1: Communication skills

Communication skills are an important aspect to be able to provide good information and contentment for the people you are conversing with. With good delivery, it will make the information you provide easier to understand (Rachmawati, Lumbanraja and Siahaan, 2021). A competent leader is a leader who can communicate effectively with their followers in the organization (Wangchuk, 2021). According to Brown (2013), effective communication skills help to expand connection with organization members, improving teamwork, decision-making and timely challenges. It is also a way to convey meaning by influencing individuals, groups or organizations in a targeted manner. For leaders to communicate effectively, they need to build a common understanding of ideas, explain ideas clearly, and communicate with their subordinates to make sure their subordinates have a clear direction and goal to understand and achieve easily (Gilley & Mcmilan, 2009).

“It is essential for a leader to possess effective communication skills to lead effectively. Communicating well allows a leader to express their vision and ideas, foster relationships, as well as inspire others to step out of their comfort zone.” – C1.

Communication is the key factor that bonds and creates effective teamwork. Organizational members should exchange information and engage in communication to discover other members’ competence and intentions to develop a strategy and plan their work (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2016). The pattern of power punishes women for being forceful and suppressing their speech, whereas males are permitted to talk, even if it means interjecting. It sends a powerful message to promote open, honest dialogue and to seek out diverse opinions rather than relying just on input, allowing women to speak out (Sandberg, 2013).

“Even though you may be good at doing something, if you’re unable to communicate well, it will dampen your ability to grow and move forward.” - C2.

As claimed by Halima and Abdul Razak (2013), men and women come from two different practices of communication. Female leaders focus on the relationships with people, compared to male leaders focus on the issues or tasks (Mangan, 2019). Women leaders also focus on empathy. They tend to share information, ideas and build a relationship with their teams (Appelbaum et al., 2013). It was found by Hill and Wheat (2017) from their qualitative study, fundamental approaches practiced by women leaders are teamwork-oriented and open communication approaches involving collaboration, relationship building and information sharing. Better connections will be established, and lean will follow as women feel empowered, appreciated, and trusted.

“Communicating to understand emotions also plays well into managing a team and being a good leader.” – C6.

Theme 2: Networking

Women’s ascents into leadership positions are hampered by a lack of strong networks. According to studies, networking is a more valuable kind of social capital than actual job performance for professional growth. Possessing a network of powerful leaders is a prescription for career success (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hewlett et al., 2010).

“Focus on building relationships and network with people from diverse backgrounds.” – C1

Women in positions of leadership should take the initiative to establish both informal and formal opportunities for networking and mentorship with other women in positions of leadership through a variety of channels.

“Being visible allows others to understand what your roles and qualities are. It provides a platform for potential collaborative work.” – C6.

Theme 3: Going the Extra Mile

Women are expected to be feminine; thus, those who exhibit hardness, decisiveness, and assertiveness, all attributes that are ‘male’, are not highly liked by their peers (Broughton & Miller, 2009).

“A good leader is not afraid to take on more responsibilities. They usually take on responsibilities beyond their current position and take charge of their self-learning.” – C1.

On the other side, women who don’t exhibit enough of those traits are thought to be unsuitable for the highest jobs.

“Because they are self-aware, they tend to seek feedback to discover their strengths and areas of improvement.” – C1.

Indeed, promoting women's leadership and work-life balance is about more than just equality and justice. It is also important to promote a more diverse, inclusive, and productive work environment.

“Always go beyond your job scope and be eager to learn from others.” – C2

Mentoring and sponsorship are two better methods of supporting women in leadership roles and helping them achieve work-life balance. Create mentoring and sponsorship programs, for example, that connect women with experienced executives who can mentor and help them grow in their jobs. This can benefit leadership development.

“Be open to constructive feedback from superiors and constantly seek feedback from your superiors to improve yourself.” – C2

“Learn to be proactive in the workplace and don't be afraid to lead when opportunities are made available.” – C5

Additionally, family support programs such as extended parental leave, on-site childcare facilities, and assistance for employees with caregiving duties are available. This helps both men and women in managing their work-life balance better.

Theme 4: Critical Thinking Skills

Critical thinking is important because it may include pausing, reflecting, and revising assumptions (Chatfield, 2017). Critical thinking skills enable individuals to make educated decisions, solve complex issues, and overcome obstacles.

“An effective leader can weigh the impact of their decisions on the overall business outcome. They can anticipate potential issues before they happen.” – C1.

Critical thinking skills can be very useful in the context of female leadership and work-life balance. Problem-solving is one of them, as the ability to identify and deal with challenges is essential to maintaining work-life balance.

“Find a solution rather than bring problems to your superiors – you may not be right but try and try again!” – C1.

Critical thinking helps leaders find new answers to problems in their professional and personal lives. Making educated judgments is also important for successful leadership and achieving work-life balance. Critical thinkers analyze the benefits and drawbacks of various options and predict possible outcomes.

“Be ready to speak up or voice out opinions and ideas [through proper methods and channels of course] on top of pre-existing routines in place and be open to new ideas and to the idea of bringing changes to your current work culture, be it from you or those around you, as the only constant in life is change.” – C5

It also requires creative thinking for women leaders to come up with new answers to complex situations. It is also important to create new approaches to combine work and personal life. Be more proactive by asking questions and thinking through processes to help develop critical thinking, which adds value to their contributions to the workplace.

Theme 5: Grit

Grit is defined as “perseverance and a strong desire for long-term goals” (Duckworth et al., 2007a, p. 1087). Grit aids in the achievement of a long-term superior aim. Courage is associated with persevering in the face of adversity and failure over time to achieve greater goals (Duckworth & Gross, 2014). Grit is characterized by both strength and drive. Self-control, on the other hand, requires goal-directed self-regulatory efforts (Vardhan & Mahato, 2019). Grit is the determination and perseverance required to achieve long-term goals. Working on long-term goals requires maintaining a vision and making progress toward it over a week, month, or year (Vardhan & Mahato, 2019). Courage pushes a person towards greater goals through persistence and perseverance (Duckworth & Gross, 2014). To keep moving forward despite significant failures, determined individuals can develop new behaviours and lower-level goals. Courage has been defined by researchers in the last century as persistence, perseverance, and the ability to work hard (Duckworth et al., 2007). Courage has two components: persistence of desire and effort. Grit is defined as determination, strength, and drive (Vardhan & Mahato, 2019). Courageous people do not deviate from their goals despite resistance, lack of positive feedback, or obstacles. On the other hand, they remain determined and do not give up (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009).

“To be self-driven, have grit, and build your strength.” – C5

“Even if it only gets harder, stay passionate.” – C8

“Be passionate about what you do as it will help to motivate yourself to do better.” – C4

According to Caza and Posner (2018), resilient leaders have high creativity. Intelligence is important. Non-cognitive qualities predict success, according to different studies. Driven by passion, people pursue difficult long-term goals that require sustained and focused attention over time (Duckworth et al., 2007a). According to Duckworth and Gross (2014), the mediating effect of courage supports people's ability to achieve their goals. However, there is a gap in the academic literature regarding how courage affects female leaders in companies (Cza & Posner, 2018). Self-control and persistence are highly related factors and predictors of success (Duckworth et al., 2007a). Self-control has a moderate effect on the persistence of female leaders in a male-dominated economic environment. If unconscious bias in the workplace continues to hinder the development of women leaders, women may struggle to advance because of the unconscious trap of the

double bind (Baker, 2014; Caza & Posner, 2018; Duckworth & gross, 2014; Ely et al., 2011; Schimschal & Lomas, 2019; Sriram, Glanzer & Allen, 2018).

How do women balance their commitments and professional ambitions for career advancement?

Table 4. Codes, sub-theme and themes

Codes	Sub-Themes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The speaker acknowledges the lack of balance in balancing work and personal life but emphasizes the importance of support from family and friends, as well as cherishing special moments together. - Balancing work and life can be challenging and stressful, as it can be unrealistic to determine the beginning and end of work and vice versa. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No balance - Chasing balance is unrealistic - Chasing balance is stressful 	<p>Balancing is unrealistic</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The speaker prioritizes safeguarding their time to prevent burnout. - The speaker emphasizes the significance of ‘me time’, which involves creating time for oneself to recharge, refocus, and acquire new skills or knowledge for improved performance. - Finding the perfect balance between personal commitments and professional ambitions is challenging due to individual differences. To balance, it's advisable to prioritize personal time, such as hobbies or exercise, and take care of oneself, allowing for self-care. - Finally, remember to take time to de-stress, exercise, rest, eat well and laugh. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Protect my ‘me time’ - Importance of ‘me time’ - Take care of your health. - Have a day off to pamper yourself - Take time to de-stress, exercise, rest, eat well and laugh. 	<p>Protect ‘me-time’</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I’ll then get my priorities right to effectively manage my time. - To achieve balance, one must love their work in both personal and professional aspects, allocate time according to priorities, and commit to them. - Prioritizing life events helps balance personal commitments and professional ambition by making choices at different stages and daily, ensuring that importance is given to important events. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Set my priorities right - Love what you do, both in your personal and professional life - Prioritizing things 	<p>Prioritize</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Finding balance in personal and professional life is most effective through setting realistic goals and regularly reassessing them. - Finding the perfect balance between work and personal life can be challenging, but it’s essential to allocate time for hobbies or exercise. To achieve this, focus on completing tasks and avoid procrastination. - Passionate about a role, professional ambitions become personal commitments, requiring growth beyond boundaries. Utilizing technology allows for seamless management of both. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Setting realistic personal and professional goals - Constantly reassessing these goals - Focus on completing assigned tasks. - Do not procrastinate. - Utilising the latest technology advancements 	<p>Work on the realistic goals</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Working as a working mother can be challenging, especially when raising a family. Many high-performing women drop out of the workplace, but finding balance isn't an easy decision. Superiors understand and accommodate young working mothers, making it a rewarding experience. - I thank God every day for my supportive husband, children, and extended family. - Building trust, confidence, and independence in the family is very important and is the foundation on which we will continue to nurture and build. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have superiors who understand my needs - Supportive husband, children, and extended family. - Build trust, confidence, and independence within the family. 	<p>Support system</p>

The 8 Malaysian companies were interviewed. The results below are to answer how women balance their commitments and professional ambitions for career advancement.

Table 5. How women balance their commitments and professional ambitions for career advancement

Themes	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8
Balancing is unrealistic					/			/
Protect ‘me-time’	/	/		/		/		
Prioritize	/	/					/	
Work on realistic goals	/			/		/		
Support system			/		/			

Theme 1: Balancing Is Unrealistic

Women have acknowledged that holding leadership roles comes with considerable personal consequences (Loeffen 2016). To balance the conflicting demands of multiple roles, women must overcome various obstacles. They attempt to compromise to balance competing priorities relating to their profession, family, and lifestyle.

“As the saying goes, there is no balance in balanced work and personal life! There are days it’s working all the way, and that’s when my support system - husband, children, family, bless them - just rallies around me and is there for me.” – C5.

According to Loeffen (2016), women need a solid support network and can make compromises for their families and personal lives to succeed in leadership roles. Women’s leadership actions may also be constrained by expectations.

“Do you work for five days and live for two days in a week? It’s very daunting to define the beginning and end of work and live one’s life within that, or vice versa. Chasing balance can be unrealistic and stressful.” – C8.

They try to demonstrate their proficiency and strong technological abilities. Also, female leaders want to be more productive than their male peers (Ely et al. 2011), which may contribute to a rise in the demand for the web.

Theme 2: Protect ‘Me-Time’

Making time for oneself is extremely important. It is important to acknowledge that the mind and body are linked, and for them to work properly, they must be in sync. If not, changes are noticeable to both. Stress and tension in the body can appear as discomfort, such as stomach cramps, back and neck pain, and even migraine headaches. And the same principle applies vice versa, as said by Shepherd (2020).

“I’d like to emphasize the importance of ‘me time’, which means to make time for yourself. This is crucial so that you can recharge, re-focus and acquire a new skill or knowledge that helps you perform better, at home and work.” – C2.

“Remember to take time to de-stress, exercise, rest, eat well and laugh.” – C6

Furthermore, delegate tasks such as giving tasks and responsibilities to your team as a leader. Trust the colleagues to manage their responsibilities, allowing them to leave work when necessary. Most importantly, time management strategies like the Pomodoro technique or time blocking can help to handle work responsibilities more efficiently and generate more possibilities for ‘me time’. In reality, prioritizing self-care is just as important to realizing that it’s not selfish as it is to long-term success. Make self-care a priority as part of the leadership approach (Conti, 2019).

“I always make it a point to protect my ‘me time’ to keep burnout away.” – C1.

Theme 3: Work on the Realistic Goals

Realistic goals are flexible and adaptable. Reviewing your action plan and adapting to new situations will help to stay on track with your goals. When things do not go as planned, rely on resilience, independence, hope, and the ability to deal with uncertainty to work through the situation (Perry, 2022).

“In my opinion, the most effective steps to find balance are by setting realistic personal and professional goals.” – C1.

Theme 4: Prioritize

Priorities are essential to achieving a healthy balance between women’s leadership and professional life. Identifying one’s values, starting with knowing the core beliefs and what is truly important in both leadership duties and personal life, is one way to help you get your priorities right.

“It is a matter of prioritizing things in your life. At different stages of your life and even daily, you make choices about the priorities for the day, month, and period. By knowing how to give importance to events that matter, we can balance personal commitments and professional ambition.” – C4.

This value should be modified to reflect one’s preferences. It is also critical to set precise, quantifiable, and time-bound objectives for one’s professional and personal lives. Having specific objectives allows us to focus our efforts. Priority is also required. It is critical to establish and prioritize objectives. Determine non-negotiable aspects of life and leadership responsibilities. It is critical to learn effective time management skills to allocate time efficiently. Calendars, to-do lists, and time constraints are useful tools for organizing the day. Effective prioritization is a dynamic process that necessitates

ongoing monitoring and modification. It is also feasible to achieve a healthier and more sustainable balance between women's leadership and work life by aligning priorities with values and concentrating on the most important objectives.

"To find that balance, you must love what you do, both in your personal and professional life. Only then can you allocate your time according to your priorities and commit yourself to them." – C2.

Theme 5: Support System

The success of female entrepreneurs is still significantly influenced by family support. For instance, Tan (2008) claims that in addition to offering help with childcare, parents also provide comfort and support on a psychological level.

"I have been blessed to have superiors who understand my needs as a young working mother and who have gone the extra mile to accommodate me through that phase of my working life." – C3.

"I thank God every day for a supportive husband, children and extended family." – C5.

In certain ways, family support motivates women company owners to advance in their professions (Liu, 2013). Due to varying cultural norms, it is fascinating to see that certain regions are more welcoming to female businesses than others. For instance, Sichuan province men are renowned for their consideration and for helping out with a variety of domestic tasks, such as cooking and cleaning. In Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, a female business entrepreneur said that Chengdu culture is more supportive of women who desire to achieve success with their firms (China Economic Survey, 2009). The findings of the study by Scott et al. (2014, p. 68) also reveal that, among other things, "family background and, in particular, support from parents and spouses are major success variables impacting the performance of female-led enterprises in China".

"It is absolutely important to build trust, confidence, and independence within the family. That is the strong platform that we continue to nurture and build upon." -C5

5. CONCLUSIONS

Leadership, characterized by nurturing and involvement in others, aligns with women's natural desire to mother. This study adds to the theoretical landscape by shedding light on the importance of role unity in the context of work-life balance for women in corporate leadership. The leadership styles discovered provide comprehensive knowledge of how women leaders negotiate their responsibilities, and the insights gained have practical implications for organizations seeking to create settings that promote women in leadership positions. Recognizing and actively resolving role alignment for women leaders is emerging as a critical aspect of promoting individual well-being and overall organizational success as organizations increasingly prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion.

However, suggestions for future research would be interesting to see on how women are affected differently by having either male or female mentors in the workplace. Additionally, it is important to learn and understand how diverse women experience it in the leadership journey. Furthermore, the practical implications of the research highlight the importance of comprehensive and inclusive strategies to foster work-life balance. The proposed policies and initiatives, which cover organizational, cultural, and human dimensions, aim to create an environment where women leaders can thrive personally and professionally. Organizations that use this approach help women leaders directly and contribute to overall organizational performance by promoting diversity, inclusion, and employee well-being. Although the study's limitations include a female-only sample and researchers with a narrow focus, it offers new avenues for future research. Exploring the influence of diverse mentoring relationships and understanding the experiences of diverse women in leadership positions are two topics that warrant additional exploration. Organizations can improve their strategies to better assist and empower women leaders on their journey by continuing to expand their understanding of these interactions.

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AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

Anis Shahrulrizal (Analysis; writing)

Puteri Fadzline Muhamad Tamyaz (Conceptualisation; Supervision)

Nur Sofia Nabila Binti Alimin (Data resources)

Norbaya Othman (Data resources)

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

Not applicable.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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