

2023

## Lived Experiences of Female Executives Leading During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Jane L. Ryan

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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2023

Abstract

Lived Experiences of Female Executives Leading During the COVID-19 Pandemic

by

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MS, Walden University, 2013

BA, Ashford University, 2011

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

August 2023

## Abstract

This basic qualitative study was conducted to explore the authentic leadership experiences of women as they navigated through the COVID-19 pandemic, including the challenges they faced, the decisions they made, the lessons learned, and what they would do differently in the future. The conceptual framework used in this study was the role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders and humanistic motivation theory, which were used to examine the gender disparities that pose challenges for female leaders. The research involved conducting online conference interviews with nine individuals. Volunteers met the following selection criteria: identified as a female with five or more years of experience at the executive level, with titles equivalent in responsibility to Director, Controller, Assistant Vice President, Vice President, up to C-Suite, and responsible for a minimum of five direct reports; and were executive women in a U.S. organization that was not part of a health care system during the COVID-19 pandemic through 3rd quarter or more. The interviews were analyzed through coding and the development of themes. The study's findings included four major themes: crisis leadership, fear of the unknown, empathy, and work and life balance. The study's insights may be used to promote positive social change through increased opportunities for women to assume leadership roles in diverse industry organizations, creating a more balanced and equitable professional landscape.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Bernadine and Joseph Loya, whose unwavering support and belief in my passions taught me the importance of perseverance. I am immensely grateful to my daughter, Dr. Katherine Jane Ryan, for inspiring me to complete this challenging endeavor and for being a constant source of motivation. Your remarkable journey to become a specialized medical doctor served as a reminder that giving up was never an option. I am profoundly proud of your achievements and deeply thankful for our enduring love and friendship. Your virtual presence by my side throughout this journey has been invaluable.

I extend my heartfelt appreciation to all the women who participated in my study, as well as to the countless women from the past, present, and future who rightfully deserve equality, equity, inclusion, and a seat at the table. Your knowledge, expertise, innovation, diverse perspectives, emotionally intelligent leadership, contributions, and inherent value are essential to our society. May we continue to strive for a world where every woman is recognized, respected, and empowered.

## Acknowledgments

I am immensely grateful to my committee chair, Dr. Lee Stadlander, for your invaluable guidance and support throughout the entire dissertation process. Your insightful input and unwavering belief in my abilities kept me motivated even during the most challenging moments when the end seemed so far away. Dr. Stadlander, your dedication to making a positive impact in this world and in the lives of others has been truly inspiring. I deeply appreciate your role as my teacher, mentor, chair, and friend.

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Rochelle Michel, a member of my committee. Your valuable insights and guidance were instrumental in shaping the quality and direction of my methodology and overall study. Your expertise and contributions were greatly valued and deeply appreciated.

I am truly fortunate to have had Greg Murphy as my academic advisor throughout my entire doctoral journey. Your continuous support and availability have been invaluable to my success. Thank you for always being there for me and providing guidance when I needed it most.

To my beloved family and friends, your unwavering encouragement and belief in me have been instrumental in keeping me motivated and focused. Your constant presence and words of support have meant the world to me.

Lastly, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my daughter and best friend, Dr. Katie Ryan. Your unwavering belief in my abilities and relentless encouragement have been the driving force behind my educational pursuits. Thank you for standing by me

through every obstacle and challenge, and for always being there for me. I love you more than words can express.



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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This study examined the lived experiences of women leaders as they led their organizations and employees amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. At present, no research exists on how the experiences of female executives may differ from those of male executives during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on society worldwide, resulting in millions of deaths and an immense burden on health care systems (Fontanarosa & Bauchner, 2020). Business leaders across the globe, including in the United States, faced unprecedented challenges during the pandemic (Barzilay et al., 2020; Giuntella et al., 2021; McGovern & McGovern, 2021). The sudden challenges leadership faced included quarantine with no clear course of action when forced to aggressively relocate all non-essential workers to a virtual workspace in their homes (Bartsch et al., 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2020; McNulty, 2020; McNulty & Marcus, 2020; Osland et al., 2020; Tourish, 2020).

Despite the visible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on society, the effect on female leaders remains unclear. Studies have shown that women are more vulnerable to anxiety and depression than men, highlighting the importance of examining the experiences of female leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic (Altemus et al., 2014; Barzilay et al., 2020). The purpose of this study was to gain a first-hand understanding of the challenges faced by female executives during an unprecedented global pandemic in the United States. The following sections of this chapter will include the background, problem statement, research questions, theoretical foundation, nature of the study, definitions, scope, delimitations, limitations, significance, and summary.

## Background

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic and the subsequent quarantine measures in March 2020, leaders in the United States were faced with unprecedented challenges. Research has highlighted the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on corporate executives in the United States (Bartsch et al., 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2020; McNulty, 2020; McNulty & Marcus, 2020; Osland et al., 2020), with emphasis on female executives. This emphasis was justified by the fact that female executives often faced significant disadvantages due to gender inequality and other factors (Azmat & Boring, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges for organizations worldwide, and women in leadership roles faced unique experiences and obstacles. Despite the significance of this topic, a research gap existed regarding the potential differences in the experiences of female leaders compared to their male counterparts. Existing research on leadership during crises primarily focused on the experiences of men or non-gender-specific leadership. For example, a *Harvard Business Review* article (2020), published shortly after the global pandemic announcement, described the leadership behaviors of historical leaders, the majority of whom were men (Koehn, 2020; Mooreland et al., 2020). The article emphasized that during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders will be remembered for their actions and how well they managed themselves, their teams, their organizations, and society (Koehn, 2020; 2017). Similarly, McKinsey and McKinsey (2020) examined leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing the importance of demonstrating empathy and acknowledging personal and

professional challenges faced by leaders and their loved ones. However, the article did not differentiate between the experiences of female and male leaders.

This study was conducted to capture authentic accounts of women leaders who led their organizations and people through the pandemic, from the time the quarantine was enforced in March 2020 to their ongoing leadership experiences. The findings of the current study provide valuable insights into the unique experiences of women leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the findings of this study can help stakeholders develop necessary infrastructure, protocols, training, and empathy needed to improve the lives and careers of female leaders and their employees. The information gained can also increase diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and allyship for women leaders and employees, creating a more people-centric approach to building a sustainable organization (Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC), 2023; Forbes, 2018; Melaku et al., 2020). Overall, this study adds to the existing literature on leadership and crisis management, specifically in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lived experiences of female leadership. This information was essential in comprehending the unique experiences of female leaders, from their normal leadership roles to their swift adaptation to work from home (WFH) environments.

### **Problem Statement**

The COVID-19 global pandemic wreaked havoc on every aspect of life (Hui et al., 2020). The United States was challenged, recording 837,274 fatalities and over 62 million positive cases as of January 11, 2022 (Elflein, 2022). Scholarly research has documented the severity of the crisis and the challenges it posed (Gopinath, 2020;



Hatchimonji et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2020; WHO, 2020). The pandemic unleashed a far-reaching impact on businesses and leadership, leading to a shift in corporate strategies and management practices (Bartsch et al., 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2020, 2022; McNulty, 2020; McNulty & Marcus, 2020; Osland et al., 2020).

The ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic were particularly acute for female executives (Azmat & Boring, 2020). The pandemic revealed the inequalities and structural barriers faced by women in leadership positions, underscoring the need for targeted policies and interventions to address these systemic issues. The current study addressed a meaningful gap in the current research literature because there was a wealth of research on crisis leadership (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020, 2022; McNulty, 2020), with the majority relating to men leading through a crisis (McNulty & Marcus, 2020). However, there was no literature on the lived experiences of women leaders leading their organizations and employees through a crisis nor leading their people through the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Purpose**

The aim of the study was to capture the authentic life experiences of executive and senior-level female leaders in U.S. organizations during the pandemic-enforced quarantine that began in March 2020. I also wanted to capture the unprecedented challenges faced by these female leaders. By gathering the reactions and responses of female executives as they led through the COVID-19 pandemic, critical missing information about the realities that women leaders faced was obtained. Specifically, I examined how these leaders transitioned from routine work and life conditions to full-

blown crisis mode, where all but essential workers had to be quickly moved to work-from-home (WFH environments).

### **Research Questions**

This study explored female executive's lived experiences as they led through the COVID-19 crisis by examining three questions:

1. What were female executives' experiences and personal views while leading through the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What did they learn about themselves, their organizations, and their people during this unprecedented time?
3. What would they do differently in the future when faced with another crisis of this magnitude?

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The theoretical foundation was derived and driven from two theories: Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders and Abraham Maslow's (1943) humanistic motivation theory. The rationale for these two theories derived from the three questions presented earlier which investigated female executives' lived experiences as they led their organizations and people during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.

#### **Eagly and Karau's Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice Toward Female Leaders**

The first theory for this study was the role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders, which proposed that perceived incongruity between the female gender role and leadership role creates open opportunities for prejudice. One form of prejudice

views women as leaders less favorably than men, and the other form of prejudice evaluates male and female leadership behaviors and how female leaders are viewed less favorably when the same behaviors are exhibited by a woman (Eagly & Karau, 1991; 2002; Parente et al., 2021). The relevance of Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders to my study is that it helped explore attitudes toward female leaders as compared to attitudes toward male leaders. This evidence substantiated the need for my study to further investigate any existence of gender inequalities in leadership. This theory is described in detail in Chapter 2.

### **Humanistic Motivational Theory**

The second theory that was chosen was Abraham Maslow's humanistic motivational theory because Maslow suggested individuals were motivated by internal and external drivers. Once basic needs were met, the need for self-actualization (i.e., the inner drive to achieve one's most important skills) became a primary focus (Maslow, 1943; Maslow, 1958). Maslow's (1943, 1958, 1998) research focused on the theory of motivation by examining five levels of primary human needs in order of importance. This theory of motivation was known as Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs referred to one's physiological needs, safety needs, needs for love and belonging, self-esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. These aspects of human needs fit well with this study of women leaders and their experiences leading their organizations and employees in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. The theory provided a better understanding of the factors influencing the behavior of female leaders in the

current global economy under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This theory is described in detail in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

The study followed a qualitative methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and basic qualitative design (Flick, 2018) to examine the lived experiences of women leaders who were leading during the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach provided insights into what was happening during this unprecedented time in history from the perspective of the participants shared during the interviews. Data for the interviews were collected until saturation was reached. Participants were recruited through LinkedIn, a professional online social media platform. A post was placed in female leadership groups, offering unsolicited participation. The study provides details about the characteristics of the participants, including senior-level female leaders who were responsible for five or more direct reports and who were leaders in U.S. organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following definitions were consistently used throughout this study.

*Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI):* When discussing diversity initiatives in the workplace or in other organizations, many professionals reference the term DEI. (Tech Target, 2021).

*Digital transformation:* Digital transformation is the adoption of digital technology by a company. Common goals for its implementation are to improve efficiency, value, or innovation (The Enterprisers Project, 2022).

*Emotional intelligence:* Emotional intelligence (otherwise known as emotional quotient or EQ) is the ability to understand, use, and manage your own emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges, and defuse conflict (Mind Tools, 2022).

*First responders:* A person (such as a police officer or an EMT) who is among those responsible for going immediately to the scene of an accident or emergency to aid (Merriam-Webster, 2022).

*Global pandemic:* An epidemic of an infectious disease occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a substantial number of people (Porta et al., 2014). COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020 by the World Health Organization (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020).

*Humanistic motivational theory:* Humanistic theories of motivation are based on the idea that people also have strong cognitive reasons to perform various actions. This is famously illustrated in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs which describes various levels of needs and motivations (Maslow, 1943; 1958).

*Humanistic psychology:* Humanistic psychology, a movement in psychology supporting the belief that humans, as individuals, are unique beings and should be recognized and treated as such by psychologists and psychiatrists. The movement grew in opposition to the two mainstream 20th-century trends in psychology, behaviorism and psychoanalysis (Buhler, 1971).

*Self-efficacy*: Refers to one's belief in their capacity to execute behaviors necessary to specific performance outcomes (Bandura & Watts, 1996).

*Work from home (WFH)*: A remote work arrangement where employees work from their place of residence rather than in an office building (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020).

### **Assumptions**

It was assumed that the participants in this study would answer the interview questions truthfully, honestly, and to the best of their knowledge and belief. It was also assumed that all participants would correctly identify themselves as female leaders directing their organizations and employees during the COVID-19 pandemic (American Psychological Association, 2022).

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope and delimitations of the study were focused on examining the experiences and personal views of women leaders who had led through the COVID-19 pandemic. The study followed a qualitative research methodology to collect the experiences and personal stories of female executives through one-to-one video conferences or phone interviews. The topic was chosen to fill in the missing scholarly information and provide insights into the realities specifically experienced by women leaders. The study also focused on the challenges female leaders encountered and how their leadership had evolved, potentially differing from male executives in similar positions in corporate America. Additionally, I aimed to reveal the leadership strengths of female leaders who had led their organizations and employees during the COVID-19

pandemic in the United States, providing examples of female crisis leadership never captured before.

The study focused on women in leadership positions with titles such as manager, director, vice president, president, or C-level and other industry-specific titles at equivalent levels, who had at least five direct reports in their functional areas in U.S. organizations across diverse industries. The study excluded women executives outside of the U.S., women without managerial rank, and women in executive positions with fewer than five direct reports. Additionally, the study did not include women in executive positions who had not taken on leadership roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also stopped considering participants once the interview data reached saturation.

### **Limitations**

Possible obstacles encountered during the study included difficulties in recruiting participants for interviews due to the timing of the interviews being in a post-COVID-19 status. Additionally, participants had to adjust to new working conditions in their respective organizations. Data were collected through phone interviews or information communication technology (ICT). Participants connected with me virtually for a real-time, face-to-face live Q&A session, which allowed for meaningful interactions in a private and trusted environment. Using a phone interview as a data collection method presented a limitation in that there was no visual interaction between the researcher and participants. On the other hand, using ICT presented a limitation in that only the top half of the participants was visible during the interview. However, both methods provided

verbal and non-verbal rich data for analysis while ensuring participants felt comfortable and safe.

### **Significance**

A scholarly gap in research was identified describing the experiences of female executives leading their staff, employees, or organizations through the COVID-19 pandemic. This study provides valuable information about women leaders' lived experiences during the COVID-19 crisis. The study's goal was to gain insights into the psychological challenges faced by these leaders and their employees, who had to navigate through an emotionally charged pandemic, coupled with a constant fear of unknown events, and had to adapt quickly to new circumstances. Furthermore, the study's findings can help stakeholders build the necessary infrastructures and protocols, training, and empathy needed to improve the lives and careers of future female executive leaders and their employees. The information gained could also help organizations increase diversity, equity, and inclusion for women leaders and employees, combined with a more people-centric approach to building a sustainable organization where businesses and people can thrive into the future.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 1, the study's topic, and the importance of understanding the lived experiences of female executives leading their organizations and people during the COVID-19 pandemic were introduced. The chapter also provided a preview of the major sections covered in the study, including background, problem statement, purpose, research questions, theoretical foundation, nature of the study, definitions, scope and



delimitations, limitations, significance, and summary. Chapter 2 presents a complete literature review on the lived experiences of female executives leading during the COVID-19 pandemic. This literature review confirmed the identified gap and opportunities for further research to expand knowledge and understanding of the contributions and differences that female leaders make to leadership, mainly corporate leadership, through their lived experiences of leading people through the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic affected and killed millions of people and created a heavy burden on health care systems around the world (Fontanarosa & Bauchner, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic also created an unprecedented crisis for executive leaders worldwide and in the United States (Barzilay et al., 2020; Giuntella et al., 2021; McGovern & McGovern, 2021). The unanticipated challenges leadership faced became real as they were forced into quarantine without a straightforward course of action, and they had to aggressively transition all nonessential workers to a virtual workplace in their homes (Bartsch et al., 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2020; McNulty, 2020; McNulty & Marcus, 2020; Osland et al., 2020; Tourish, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light the importance of having authentic and empathetic leadership and opened the opportunity to build greater awareness around the skills and competencies needed to authentically lead through crisis and going forward (Kochan & Dyer, 2020; Liu, 2020). This movement also opened the opportunity to compare crisis leadership competencies between men and women (Dirani et al., 2020; Ferrazzi, 2021). New vital competencies for leadership across all organizations in the United States began to focus on ethical and empathetic leadership. This was a radical mind shift toward building honesty, trust, openness, mutual respect, and most prominently, addressing how to drive diversity, equity, and inclusion starting at the board of director levels and cascading down to all leadership and throughout the entire organization (Aron, 2021; Collings et al., 2021; Dirani et al., 2020; Hadrich, 2020; Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2020; Roberts & Washington, 2020; Starner, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every area of society. However, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on female executives remained unclear. But women are more vulnerable to anxiety and depression (Altemus et al., 2014; Barzilay et al., 2020), which supports the importance of investigating female executives carrying out their leadership responsibilities during COVID-19 and learning how the COVID-19 disruption may have created more stress, anxiety, and depression in women leaders. There is also a need to promote gender equality and reduce the gender gap (Kışı, 2020). The deficit and inequalities of women in leadership roles validated the gap in research on this topic and highlighted the need for scholarly research exploring specifically the lived experiences of women who led their people through the COVID-19 crisis (Crotti et al., 2020; Michelson, 2020). The magnitude of the COVID-19 crisis showed the importance and urgency of investigating the unexplored gap in scholarly research because no literature addressing female executives' lived experiences leading their organizations and employees through the COVID-19 virus outbreak existed then until now. The purpose of this literature review was to explore the lived experiences of female executives of varying ages and diversity of race in the United States during what became known as the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2020). The specific goals of this literature review were to establish the relevance of the stated problem of corporate executive-level women leading their organizations and people through the COVID-19 pandemic by examining three questions:

1. What were female executives' experiences and views while leading through the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. What did they learn about themselves, their organizations, and their people during this unprecedented time?
3. What would they do differently in the future when faced with another crisis of this magnitude?

This chapter provides an extensive review of the literature pertaining to corporate leadership with an emphasis on scholarly research of female executives leading through the COVID-19 pandemic. It also describes the search strategy and theoretical foundation. Then it provides an extensive literature review on the current background and relevant context as well as an in-depth review of female corporate leaders in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

Research for the literature review was conducted by searching the following databases and search engines with relevant keywords: APA PsycNET, APA PsycARTICLES, APA PsycINFO, and Journal of Applied Psychology, SAGE Journals, Oxford Journals, EndNote, Google Scholar, ProQuest, and Taylor and Francis Online. The keywords used for this research included: *female executive leaders; COVID-19; Coronavirus; Global Pandemic; pandemic; work from home; WFH; virtual work; virtually; working remotely; employee engagement; performance management; stress; mental health; diversity; equity; equality; inclusion; empathy; racism; racial violence; discrimination; Black; Asian-American; Pacific Islander (AAPI); intersectionality; work; life; balance; resilience; female executives; women leadership; United States; the U.S.;*

*leading in crisis; crisis leadership; and women leading in crisis.* These search terms applied in Google Scholar pulled related articles in the databases mentioned above.

After conducting a search of the relevant databases using specific search terms, the literature review focused on exploring the lived experiences of female executives of varying ages and diversity of race in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the absence of literature on this specific topic, the review included research that offered information closest to female leaders' experiences during the COVID-19 crisis in areas such as organizations, health care, politics, and government. The peer-reviewed research generated through this search method included articles that were relevant, current, and applicable to this doctoral study.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

This study's theoretical foundation was derived from two theories: Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders and Abraham Maslow's (1943) humanistic motivation theory. The rationale for these two theories was derived from the three questions presented earlier, which investigated female executives' lived experiences leading their organizations and people in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each theory is described in the following subsections.

#### **Eagly and Karau's Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice Toward Female Leaders**

Eagly and Karau's (2002) theory of gender inequalities suggested that changing society's perceptions was necessary for achieving gender equality and equity. The relationship between dominant personalities and perceived leadership depends on gender, with men emerging as leaders more frequently than women (Bandura et al., 2018). Men

are perceived to be more assertive, outspoken, and dominant, whereas women are considered more communal, cooperative, and soft-spoken, insinuating that men were more likely to emerge as leaders than women (Bandura et al., 2018). Individuals with dominant personalities are often perceived as male leaders, giving them an advantage over females (Kim et al., 2020). For example, kindergarten teachers are usually seen as friendly, and most are female, while most firefighters are male (Eagly & Wood, 2016). Several studies validate the gap in gender diversity and inequality in corporate America, and prejudice, stereotypes, and bias toward female leaders exist due to differences in how female gender stereotypes and typical leadership characteristics are perceived (Boyatzis & McKee, 2006; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Goleman, 2021; Goleman et al., 2013). Further, future research is needed on negative opinions of women's authentic management behaviors compared to men (Scheurer, 2005).

U.S. The role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders was essential to this study because it could validate female executives' achieved successes in crisis leadership. Exploring female executives' lived experiences leading their organizations and people in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic opened opportunities to identify themes shared by the participants during interviews. These themes could serve as the basis for developing new research to increase awareness of the role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders and address barriers this can cause female executive leaders. Moreover, this research could expand on this theory of gender differences and perception of differences. U.S. Through the told stories and personal experiences of female executives, the theoretical framework opened opportunities to explore the

motivating factors behind their decisions, which built on the second theory selected for this study, the humanistic motivational theory.

### **Humanistic Motivational Theory**

Abraham Maslow's humanistic motivational theory was chosen for my study because he indicated individuals were motivated by internal and external drivers. Maslow's theory was focused on five levels of primary human needs in the order of importance: physiological needs, safety needs, needs for love and belonging, self-esteem needs, and self-actualization needs (Maslow, 1943, 1958). The aspects of human needs aligned well with the study of female executives in leadership positions and their experiences leading their organizations and people in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic because everyone in the world experienced the five levels of primary human needs combined with many experiencing stress-related emotional and physical effects, such as fear of getting the virus, fear of dying from the virus, safety, uncertainty, loss of social interactions, being confined without adequate information, and often, inaccurate or conflicting advice was given. These experiences caused loneliness, uncertainty, depression, and helplessness, combined with the challenges of getting sufficient food and water supplies (Brooks et al., 2020; Jimenez-Pavon et al., 2020; Matias et al., 2020, Xiang et al., 2020).

Humanistic psychologists had the main goal of promoting self-actualization and better international relations to enhance peace between people, social welfare, and social justice (Bohart & Greening, 2001). As a result, the main objective of humanistic psychology is to examine how people could achieve their potential and contribute at the

individual levels to society's needs. Self-belief is a factor affecting an individual's self-regard and is a significant part of human motivation dependent on cognitive conditions (Bandura, 1997). Individuals tend to grow towards their self-actualization goals when the environmental conditions are favorable (Rogers, 1959).

The motivational theory concept offered insight into intrinsic and extrinsic factors motivating women to demonstrate integrity and commitment to their leadership positions through the COVID-19 pandemic's challenges. Maslow's humanistic motivational theory provided a greater understanding of the factors influencing female executives' behaviors in the current global economy under the COVID-19 pandemic. By applying the rationale of past studies, such as Bohart & Greening (2001), Maslow (1943, 1958), Rogers (1959), and Schneider et al. (2015), I aimed to understand the importance of the lived experiences of female executives leading in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. To better understand a woman's self-confidence, it is crucial to comprehend self-efficacy and self-actualization because a person's belief in their ability to execute behaviors and a plan necessary to achieve specific performance goals reflects confidence in one's ability to exercise control over one's motivation, behavior, and social environments. It is also vital to understand self-actualization, which is the motive/drive to realize one's full potential (Goldstein, 1934; Rogers, 1959) and to be self-aware (Goleman, 2001) to become everything one is fully capable of becoming (Maslow, 1958). This information ties directly into my study's theoretical foundation using the humanistic theory of motivation concerning female executive self-actualization and self-confidence in their



abilities to lead their people and organizations effectively through the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts**

This section provides an exhaustive review of literature that provided insights into the unprecedented global pandemic and the emotional impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on executive leaders in the United States. Data show the United States as the country hardest hit compared to all other countries by the COVID-19 pandemic, with the most significant number of positive cases and deaths (Gopinath, 2020; Hatchimonji et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2020; Stone, 2020; WHO, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic began as a health crisis and quickly accelerated into multiple crises.

#### **Health Crisis**

The COVID-19 pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2 drove severe disease outcomes in terms of death and severe widespread infections unlike ever seen before. The last time a virus was thought to be the worst in history was the 1918 to 1919 Spanish flu, with 675,000 deaths in the United States and over 50 million deaths (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). According to the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), the number of deaths caused by COVID-19 from March 1, 2020, to January 2, 2021, in the United States alone reached 2,801,439. Of that number, the death rate among non-Hispanic Black was 208.4 deaths per 100,000 and 139.8 Hispanic deaths per 100,000, respectively (Woolf et al., 2021). Thus, the United States was experiencing tremendous health, economic, and social ramifications, including shutting down all

businesses and schools, and public gatherings to slow down the virus from spreading (Woolf et al., 2021).

With the COVID-19 pandemic, business leaders quickly needed to figure out how to keep their companies financially sustainable while supporting the needs of their employees. Many organizations could not sustain the impact on their businesses and were forced to close. The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented unemployment, and the health, welfare, and lives of all people were faced with how to survive this pandemic and navigate an unforeseeable future. Leaders in business and more faced with the initial shock of a pandemic were tossed into transitioning and managing from in-office to in-home remote working and building a plan to conduct business with the hopes to reopen their businesses as soon as possible (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020). As these leaders prepared to deal with the crisis and navigate corporate and human challenges, they learned that the path ahead was not predictable because the crisis was unprecedented (Carlsson-Szlezak et al., 2020).

### **Economic Crisis**

The economic shock of the coronavirus challenged leaders' ability to effectively lead their organizations and people through such a crisis. The pandemic took a toll on employees and stakeholders, creating fear due to the mere unpredictability of COVID-19 (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020). Both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations were impacted. Rebuilding the economy and healing nations became an imperative for leaders. However, many leaders found themselves deficient in the skills needed, and their lack of leadership skills only exacerbated the impact of the pandemic (Carlsson-Szlezak et al.,

2020). A crisis of overwhelming uncertainty can cause disorientation due to feelings of lost control combined with emotional disturbances. COVID-19 was a crisis, an unexpected event, and a continuous series of events causing uncertainty (Howitt & Leonard, 2007).

Leaders were not prepared of the pandemic's impact on the most basic needs of human life and society, such as physical and mental health, access to health care and medication, access to groceries and essential items, income, employment, education, safety, childcare, transportation, supply chains, and medical equipment (Fong, 2021; Funk et al., 2020; Rudd, 2021). Attempts to stop the spread of the life-threatening virus challenged leaders to implement mandatory "Stay at Home" quarantines to mitigate the devastation of COVID-19. Social distancing, intended to physically disrupt the spread, severed the flow of goods and people, leading to stalled economies as the COVID-19 pandemic pushed countries into a global recession. It also became apparent that leaders of nations did not act fast enough to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. U.S. To complicate matters, the United States faced constraints with insufficient testing and supplies. As the disease proliferated, social-distancing measures were mandated more broadly and for longer durations to achieve the same effect, further choking economic activity (Carlsson-Szlezak et al., 2020; Fong, 2021; Funk et al., 2020; Rudd, 2021).

### **Racial Crisis**

U.S. On May 25, 2020, bystanders captured on cell phones the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis, MN, police. Security footage, showing continuous and horrific treatment by the officers that turned fatal was also recorded. This enraged citizens, black,

white, and others, leading to protests with banners saying, “Black Lives Matter.” Many of these protests turned violent, and social media quickly spread, posting the horrific abuse of power by the police and the loss of black lives while in their custody (Hill et al., 2020; The Washington Post, 2020). Once again, leadership in U.S. organizations and businesses were challenged with a racial crisis, shortly after the COVID-19 lockdown in March, 2020. Leaders had to address their positions regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion within their respective businesses, including the Federal Government and privately held and publicly held organizations (Biden, 2021; Chen, 2021; Stevens, 2020).

The racial crisis in the U.S. led to a profound introspection among leadership, spurred by societal pressure and the influential role of social media. This prompted a concerted effort to foster diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and allyship within organizations, beginning at the board level and extending throughout the entire workforce (Lawrence, 2023; Melaku et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted racial and ethnic minority groups, as highlighted by Roberts et al. (2020). This disparity was due to the overrepresentation of these groups in low-wage occupations, particularly among frontline service workers, who faced racial inequalities both within and outside of their jobs. Moreover, preexisting health conditions and limited access to healthcare further compounded these challenges. COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted racial and ethnic minority groups, as highlighted by Roberts et al. (2020). This disparity was due to the overrepresentation of these groups in low-wage occupations, particularly among frontline service workers, who faced racial inequalities both within and outside of

their jobs. Moreover, preexisting health conditions and limited access to healthcare further compounded these challenges.

The significance of diversity, equity, equality, inclusion, belonging, and allyship in organizations is relevant to my study, particularly when considering female executive leaders who often face minority status as women, including women of color. Additionally, they bear a critical responsibility to actively engage and provide crucial support to marginalized employees, such as those from black, brown, and other marginalized communities (Center for Women and Business at Bentley University, n.d.). The challenges leadership faced were heightened due to racial discrimination against blacks and then a wave of racial discrimination against Asians during the pandemic (ABC News, 2021; United Nations, 2020). The global pandemic that began in 2020 not only infected millions of people around the world and took hundreds of thousands of lives, but it also brought racial discrimination towards people of Asian ethnicity.

Evidence of racial discrimination against people of Asian ethnicity during the COVID-19 pandemic was ignited by the President of the U.S., Donald Trump, who intentionally wanted to stir hatred towards Asians by referring to the COVID-19 virus as the China virus, the Chinese virus, or the Wuhan virus (ABC News, 2021). This conscious and intentional disregard for human lives by then-U.S. President Trump caused unwarranted prejudice, hatred, and violent crimes against not only Chinese but also American citizens of Asian descent.

While the COVID-19 pandemic contagion continued to spread worldwide, doctors also noted that this virus was hitting hardest those with preexisting conditions

(comorbidities) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). As the COVID-19 pandemic continued to escalate, it revealed yet another comorbidity, that of endemic and historical racism. This time, people of Chinese ethnicity or anyone resembling Chinese were experiencing physical and verbal abuse, unjustified discrimination resulting in assaults and death. This discrimination was believed to be caused by the U.S. president at that time, President Donald Trump, who blamed the COVID-19 pandemic on the Chinese because that was the virus's origination. President Donald Trump called the virus the Chinese virus, the China virus, or the Wuhan virus, even after being told of the consequences, including to American citizens of Asian descent (ABC News, 2021).

The People's Republic of China (PRC) attempted to control the narrative through "Wolf Warrior diplomacy," censoring scientific research linking the origins of COVID-19 to a wet market in Wuhan. Some early triumphal comments by President Xi Jinping about how the number of cases abroad had surpassed those in China poured fuel on the fire (Jiang, 2021, pp. 33–37). Statistics from the American Psychological Association (2020) Monitor on Psychology article on discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on racism in the United States reveal the following:

- Asian Americans: 58% reported an increase in the prevalence of racist views towards their group since the coronavirus outbreak.
- Black Americans: 45% observed a rise in the expression of racist views towards their group during the same period.
- Hispanics: 21% noted an increase in the occurrence of racist views towards their group since the outbreak.

- Whites: 18% reported encountering racist views towards their group since the coronavirus outbreak (p.84).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders in the United States faced a myriad of challenges. These challenges included health crises, economic crises, racial crises, as well as issues of inequality and gender diversity. The persistent lack of women in leadership positions presented a pressing problem that necessitated change (The White House, 2021).

### **Crisis of Inequality of Female Gender in Leadership**

Three common themes were found in my literature reviews: the deficit of women in leadership, the inequalities faced by women in leadership roles, and the exploration of non-gender specific leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Various studies supported these themes, including those by Michelson (2020) and Kişi (2020) highlighting the persistent gap and challenges for women in leadership positions. Additionally, research by McKinsey & Company (2020), McNulty (2020), and McNulty & Marcus (2020) emphasized the need to examine leadership approaches that are not limited by gender during the pandemic crisis.

Azmat and Boring (2020) shed light on workplace gender diversity, the associated challenges of inequality, and the need for organizational attention. Their research emphasized the business case for gender diversity and the specific obstacles encountered by female leaders. Similarly, Bartsch et al. (2020) focused on effective leadership in crisis situations, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the significance of leading employees through such challenging times. Various scholarly

practitioners (Crotti et al., 2020; Michelson, 2020; Schneider et al., 2015) contributed to the discourse on the pandemic's impact on leadership and organizations, confirming the unique challenges faced by female leaders during this crisis. These studies collectively offer evidence-based insights that underscore the importance and relevance of my study.

Schneider et al. (2015) found significant gender disparity in leadership positions, with a greater representation of men compared to women. It was discerning that in almost 30 years since a study on gender differences in leadership conducted by Moran (1992), there remained a deficit of women in leadership roles. Out of the 2021 Fortune 500 list of CEOs of companies, only 41 women, of which only two were black women, made the list. The 2021 list of Fortune 500 companies validated the disparity between male and female executive leaders in the U.S. (Connley, 2021).

Moran (1992, p.1) researched the topic of gender differences in leadership because this topic interested many researchers in the fields of psychology, management, and sociology, especially in recent years, as women had begun to assume more leadership positions. Yet, the proportion of women in leadership positions had not grown significantly in almost three decades since Moran's study and a plethora of other scholarly research conducted (Amorelli et al., 2021; Crotti, 2020; Divillard et al., 2016; Eagly, 2003; Fitzsimmons et al., 2014; Matsui et al., 2014; Rhode et al., 2014; Zarya, 2017).

Efforts for gender equality and equity continued, particularly within leadership roles. The Securities and Exchange Commission approved Nasdaq's CEO, Adena Friedman's proposal for its listed companies' "comply or explain" requirements for



greater board diversity. This approved proposal was a landmark approval, as it would drive diversity, equity, and inclusion into significant boards of directors of companies on the stock exchange (Hinchliffe, 2021).

The persistent inequality and inequity faced by women in leadership roles presents an enduring ethical challenge for both society and businesses. By delving into the lived experiences of women in leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, my study has the capacity to hasten the progress towards achieving true gender equality, thereby fostering greater opportunities for gender diversity and equity in leadership positions. This includes increased representation of women on boards of directors across diverse industries.

According to Dada et al. (2021), gender differences and how these differences impacted female leaders were extremely important to identify correlations between male and female priorities. This information was relevant to my study because it provided data on female leader priorities during the COVID-19 pandemic that could be compared to priorities that surfaced in interviews taken with U.S. female executive leaders who had shared their lived experiences while leading through the COVID-19 pandemic. Although Dada et al. (2021) analyzed leadership focusing on female leaders holding political leadership roles, their study was helpful to my study because it referred to the gender differences in leadership priorities during the COVID-19 pandemic, albeit from a politician's perspective. They also found that female political leaders prioritized more social welfare implications than men, including mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence. Research like this study was essential to this current work because it

provided additional evidence on gender leadership differences during a crisis. For example, their findings showed that female political leaders prioritized the needs of their people (citizens) and took a more socially responsible leadership role, focusing on adopting response and recovery measures.

Additionally, their research supported my study because it explained that female leader priorities reflected the skill of empathy, a core competency of successful leaders (Goleman, 2021). Their research also opened concerns and questions regarding the need for more information on female leaders' lived experiences while leading through the COVID-19 pandemic within and outside the United States. However, their research approach did not consider the influence of their findings on public audiences, which could have opened an area of strategic leadership communication approaches (Dada et al., 2021).

In contrast to studies focusing on women in leadership roles and the inequality and inequity of female leaders compared to male leaders in corporate organizations, Cherneski (2020) found that the health care industry was different, as this industry had a higher representation of female health care leaders than women in non- health care leadership, although it did compare female health care leaders to women in non- health care leadership roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the conclusions their research made noted that, unlike female health care leaders, female leaders in all industries outside of health care remained vastly underrepresented. An interesting note of female leadership strength surfaced, and the authors elaborated upon the visible and influential role many women in Canada and internationally played in response to the

COVID-19 pandemic. However, their study did not include the lived experiences of female leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it primarily focused on female health care leaders in Canada. Their research supported my study because it validated that women in leadership roles outside of health care were vastly underrepresented compared to those in health care and opened concerns and questions regarding the need for more information on female leaders' lived experiences operating during an unprecedented pandemic, within and outside the health care industry (Cherneski, 2020).

Benassi et al. (2020) gave insight into how women with and without children responded differently during the lockdown imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in Italy. Benassi et al. (2020) studied the psychopathological impact the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Italy had on women with children and women without children, including protective factors for mental health. The results found significant differences between women with and without children; for example, women with children had more anxiety symptoms than women without children. However, according to Benassi et al. (2020), women with and without children experienced negative repercussions from men in the workplace. An important comparison to make about Benassi et al.'s (2020) research work, relevant to my study's findings, was to evaluate if American female executives' lived experiences leading their people during the COVID-19 pandemic also had similar challenges balancing their personal lives between female leaders with and without children. The present study's results had the potential to contribute more valuable data to this area of important research.

Many studies provided insights into the differences between men and women as leaders, from leadership styles to leadership strengths and weaknesses, to the challenges female leaders faced that the opposite sex did not (Dada et al., 2021; Luoto & Varella, 2021; Moran, 1992; Purkayastha et al., 2020). The strength of this research provided gender-specific leadership preferences and the different focus of male and female leaders. For instance, Luoto and Varella's (2021) work contextualized sex differences in the COVID-19 pandemic and elaborated upon leadership in an evolutionary framework. Researchers Luoto and Varella (2021) suggested that female leaders focused on reducing human suffering caused by COVID-19, while male leaders focused on short-term risks, with their intentions focused on minimizing potential harm and seeking to minimize economic disruptions. This research was relevant to my study because it specifically pointed out that female leaders focused more on reducing direct human suffering, exhibiting strength in empathy, a critical leadership skill (Goleman, 2021; Luoto & Varella, 2021).

Studies showed that female leaders had strengths different from male leaders; for example, as mentioned by Luoto and Varella (2021), female leaders were more concerned with the well-being of others compared to male leaders. Female leaders appeared to exhibit more empathy and compassion and took action to minimize the pain and suffering of others (Goleman, 2021). Yet, when it came to the study conducted by Purkayastha et al. (2020), their research focused on whether women leaders were significantly better at controlling the contagion during the COVID-19 pandemic by comparing female political leaders with male political leaders during the pandemic.

Furthermore, Purkayastha et al.'s study found insufficient evidence to support which gender was stronger due to several limitations and potential confounding that made it impossible to conclude the causal impact of women leaders on pandemic outcomes (2020).

The strength of my study was that when it came to controlling the contagion, neither male nor female leaders had an advantage. Neither male nor female leadership styles produced an advantage over the other in controlling the contagion, most likely because the COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented. Furthermore, no one knew how to best mitigate its wrath until teams of scientists, both male and female, came together to develop vaccines to begin to slow the COVID-19 pandemic down and bring the contagion under control. This research was relevant to my study because it proved that when gender was not an issue, leadership, both male and female, could collaborate and successfully work together towards the achievement of a common goal.

My study's literature review addressed an unexplored gap in scholarly research because no literature addressing female executives' lived experiences leading their organizations and employees through COVID-19 existed. To date, two publications came the closest to this study's gap. McKinsey & Company (2020), McNulty (2020), McNulty and Marcus (2020), Michelson (2020), and Kişi (2020) provided different views on leadership in general, non-gender specific, as well as information referencing men leading through the crisis—specifically men leading through the COVID-19 pandemic. Sargent and Stajkovic's (2020) research focused on female governors' governmental leadership leading through the COVID-19 pandemic. Huang's (2020) research also

looked at female and male leaders in government referencing two female leaders: New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Secretary to the Governor of New York Melissa DeRosa.

Furthermore, my qualitative study explored the lived experiences and personal views of female executive leaders in the United States. According to Huang (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic taught us that female leadership brought positive outcomes and fewer disconnects in business continuity and employee engagement through cooperation, collaboration, empathy, inclusion, and a calm, clear communication leadership style. Huang referred to Cheng's (2020) theory of category in her book entitled "x+y, A Mathematician's Manifesto for Rethinking Gender." Cheng argued that her mathematical category theory explained why gender bias exists.

An example of Cheng's (2020) unique perspective was illustrated through a simple math problem for children: "If Alex has seven cookies and Sam has three cookies, how many cookies do we need to give Sam to make sure they have the same number of cookies" (Cheng, 2020, p. 73)? Cheng's math problem highlighted the concept of equality and equity, aiming to give both children an equal number of cookies. She then related this to a higher-level math problem comparing  $x$  and  $y$ , rather than focusing on how to make  $x$  equal to  $y$  (2020). Notably, Cheng explained that when people investigated whether  $x$  and  $y$  were the same, they thought about it in the context of which things could seem the same or different. She further provided an example using three cookies and three apples, highlighting that while they may appear the same in numbers, individuals may prefer one over the other based on nutritional content and personal taste

preferences (Cheng, 2020, pp. 73-74). Mathematician Cheng emphasized the importance of flexible and critical thinking and asking deeper questions. Her theory of category was relevant to this study because it shed light on gender differences and gender biases, emphasizing the need for such flexible and critical thinking in understanding these complexities.

Furthermore, Cheng's (2020) Category theory was what Huang's research on female leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic referred to when Huang mentioned Cheng's notion of congressive qualities (Huang, 2020, Abstract). These congressive qualities, such as cooperation, collaboration, empathy, inclusion, and clear, concise communication style, were exhibited by female leaders in government during the COVID-19 pandemic and were associated with their success (Huang, 2020, Abstract). Interestingly, the successful character traits mentioned by Cheng were also directly linked to emotional intelligence competencies (Goleman, 1996).

Cheng (2020) brought forth a fresh new theory that challenged the status quo regarding gender bias. Cheng urged readers to consider the possibility of removing gender from the equation when evaluating the behaviors that contribute to success. Non-gender specific behaviors such as self-confidence, resilience, or risk-taking could be crucial factors. Category theory emphasized the importance of focusing on individual behaviors rather than gender. Depending on one's perspective, gender often seemed to change based on how someone's behavior was examined. This was due to society's tendency to reward traits associated with males, such as competitiveness. The belief that men were more competitive than women sometimes served to justify the predominance

of men in certain industries or positions of power. To achieve true equality, a shift in thinking was necessary, including redefining what success entailed. This required transforming the contexts in which we all existed, rather than solely focusing on personal identity (Cheng, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic marked an unprecedented time in history. The outbreak of the coronavirus led to a global health crisis, an economic crisis, racial tensions, gender inequality, mental health challenges, a leadership crisis, and a talent shortage. Whether leading corporations, organizations, governments, hospitals, or countries, leaders of all genders faced ongoing challenges stemming from the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The World Health Organization and various scientific authorities had predicted the possibility of a virus like COVID-19, and their predictions turned out to be accurate (Carlin et al., 2019; Morens et al., 2020). In the fall of 2020, the anticipated second wave of COVID-19 infections became a reality, as projected (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). This prompted a global race to develop vaccines, involving expert scientists from diverse backgrounds. Saving lives and containing the virus became the primary focus (Funk et al., 2020). Initially, there were understandable concerns and hesitancy surrounding vaccination, but it was projected that over 75% of Americans would be vaccinated by the end of 2021 (Geekwire.com, 2021). However, once vaccines were safely produced, the challenge shifted to meeting the high demand and ensuring equitable distribution across the population. Surprisingly, a significant number of people expressed fear of vaccination, leading to ongoing cases of severe illness and deaths,



although at a reduced rate. The coronavirus continued to pose a threat in the United States and globally.

In April 2021, Karpman and Zuckerman (2021) conducted the Health Reform Monitoring Survey, the findings of which were published by the Urban Institute. The survey revealed that while more than half of Americans had received the COVID-19 vaccine, the pandemic persisted, causing severe illnesses and deaths. Among those who remained unvaccinated, many expressed skepticism and concerns about the potential side effects and risks associated with the vaccine. Some individuals lacked access to health care providers, while others relied on alternative sources for vaccine information, which deterred them from pursuing vaccination (Karpman & Zuckerman, 2021). During this period, as efforts focused on vaccinating as many people as possible, a mental health crisis started gaining attention due to the profound physical and emotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals' lives. The simultaneous occurrence of multiple crises in the United States further intensified the anxiety experienced by people from all walks of life.

### **Mental Health Crisis**

The rise of mental illness in the U.S. during 2020 and 2021 held significant relevance for my study. This was because it shed light on the personal experiences and leadership obstacles encountered by female executive leaders amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The research and data collected during this timeframe provided valuable context and insights that contributed to a deeper understanding of their struggles and challenges.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic extended beyond the physical health crisis and economic downturn, affecting the mental health of a significant portion of the American population. According to the annual 2021 State of Mental Health in America report, from January 2020 to September 2020, over 500,000 individuals reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety and/or depression, with September 2020 recording the highest severity rate since the onset of the pandemic (Reinert et al., 2021). Multiple surveys and reports highlighted the increased levels of anxiety and depression during 2020 and 2021 because of the pandemic. For instance, a survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA) revealed that 8 out of 10 adults considered the COVID-19 pandemic to be a significant source of stress, and 2 out of 3 adults reported an increase in their stress levels since the start of the pandemic. Additionally, a notable finding was that many adults, regardless of race, identified police violence towards minorities as a significant source of stress in their lives (American Psychological Association, 2020).

The increase and prevalence of mental illness in the U.S. during 2020 and 2021 were reflective of the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals' mental well-being. These findings not only underscored the widespread psychological toll of the crisis but also emphasized the importance of examining the specific challenges faced by female executive leaders in navigating this unprecedented situation. By exploring the lived experiences of these leaders, we can gain valuable insights into the ways in which they managed their own well-being, supported their teams, and addressed the complex intersection of personal and professional responsibilities during this

challenging period. Such understanding is crucial for informing future strategies and support systems to promote the mental health and resilience of female leaders in times of crisis.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, everyday stressors persisted alongside the added uncertainty that everyone experienced. In a report conducted by the APA, it was found that 65% of adults reported feeling stressed due to the uncertainty of the current times in the U.S., while 60% felt overwhelmed during the isolation periods caused by mandatory stay-at-home orders and even after quarantine measures were lifted (American Psychological Association, 2020). Furthermore, the pandemic exacerbated existing racial and ethnic disparities, leading to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and mental health conditions among marginalized groups. Persistent systemic social inequities, discrimination, and compounded health conditions further contributed to the mental health concerns faced by racial and minority groups during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kim et al., 2020; Millett et al., 2020).

Hennekam and Shymko (2020) conducted a study in France that offered relevant insights into the lived experiences of professional men and women during quarantine in the COVID-19 pandemic. Their research involved 85 qualitative surveys and the diaries of 20 individuals, documenting their experiences during quarantine and continued confinement for three weeks. The study identified two patterns in how men and women coped with the pandemic. The first pattern showed increased masculine and feminine reactions to the crisis, while the second pattern revealed a new awareness that transcended traditional gender roles. These findings have potential implications,

suggesting that the pandemic may have increased perceptions of work-life balance and prompted a shift towards a more egalitarian mindset within households. While the study was conducted in France, the experiences shared by the participants provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by professionals worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly due to mandatory work-from-home and stay-at-home orders. The research sheds light on the unprecedented challenges faced by millions of families because of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns and domestic confinement experienced in many countries.

Giuntella et al. (2021) proposed that the mandatory stay-at-home orders implemented to combat the spread of the coronavirus had a negative impact on the mental health of individuals. The COVID-19 pandemic had significant effects on people of all age groups, leading to notable changes in physical activities, sleep patterns, and overall mental well-being, particularly among younger adults. Their study highlighted the emergence of a mental health crisis during the pandemic, with a concurrent increase in depression rates coinciding with the implementation of work-from-home measures, stay-at-home orders, campus closures, and social distancing measures. These findings support the relevance of my study by emphasizing the profound disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected various aspects of people's lives, including work, education, and social interactions.

A plethora of news stories highlighting the mental health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic began circulating worldwide, drawing attention to the impact on leadership at all levels and the detrimental effects on employees' mental well-being. One

online news story gained global recognition for shedding light on the mental health challenges faced by employees and the need for employers to seek solutions, including the utilization of technologies like AI (Oracle & Workplace Intelligence, 2021). In line with this, Oracle and Workplace Intelligence (2021) conducted a comprehensive study involving over 12,000 participants across 11 countries, including employees, managers, HR leaders, and C-Suite executives. Their findings reinforced the struggles experienced by executives in adapting to the pandemic, leading to unforeseen burnout, with senior-level executives facing the greatest difficulties in adjusting to remote work. Their study also revealed that India, UAE, China, and the U.S. had the highest percentages of workers reporting significant negative effects on their mental health due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, their data indicated that senior executives experienced more mental health issues compared to their employees, and employees were more receptive to using AI for support than their superiors. Their report played a crucial role in my study because it validated the challenges faced by executives during the pandemic, providing statistical evidence to support the findings that C-Suite executives struggled with mental health issues (53% reported difficulties) and had challenges managing increased stress and anxiety (35%). Moreover, a significant majority (85%) reported difficulties in adapting to remote work, highlighting the magnitude of the challenges posed by the shift to virtual work environments.

Barzilay et al. (2020) investigated the impact on mental health due to severe social distancing during lockdown experienced by health care workers, such as stress, anxiety, and depression related to work demands during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Barzilay et al.'s (2020) results revealed people were worried more about others than themselves when reporting COVID-19 concerns; this told us that health care workers possessed altruistic personality tendencies that helped increase their resilience against worry, anxiety, and depression personally. Thus, reflecting on the importance of the need for more research on the impact of mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic on female leaders beyond health care workers. Additional research was necessary to provide more data and better understand the related stress, anxiety, and potential depression experienced by female executives as they led their people and organizations through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, leaders and employees under their watch were not the only people dealing with health-related issues (physical and psychological)—these leaders and employees had families they personally were living with and were concerned for their well-being. It was evident why people were stressed and struggling emotionally (Smith, 2021). Even individuals who typically were the calm ones during a storm could not remain resilient. Understanding what everyone was feeling during this crisis was very important to communicate what was needed without increasing anxiety in oneself or others. Empathy was a critical skill for everyone to strengthen, especially leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic because empathy required one's ability to take one's self out of their own head and put themselves into someone else's shoes and genuinely care about what that person was feeling and why; this also required the skill of actively listening to whomever you were speaking with and aligning your message, clearly and understandably, to communicate you care (Goleman, 1998). Stress and anxiety were

taking a toll on all human lives and executives in the U.S. were no exception. The U.S. and the world were entering into a leadership crisis.

### **Leadership Crisis**

The COVID-19 pandemic had an enormous impact on leadership, particularly female executives, because women were then and still are today coming from a disadvantaged point due to gender inequality and for many other reasons to be discussed in my study exploring the lived experiences of women leading their organizations and people through the COVID-19 pandemic (Azmat & Boring, 2020; Bartsch et al., 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2020; McNulty, 2020; McNulty & Marcus, 2020; Osland et al., 2020). To the best of my knowledge, there currently remains no literature addressing female executives' lived experiences leading their organizations and employees through a crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic. In this present study, the definition of female executives was women in leadership positions with titles of manager, director, vice president, president, or C-level as well as other industry-specific titles at equivalent levels who were responsible for five or more direct reports in any one of the broad functional areas commonly found within U.S. organizations from diverse industries, e.g., human resources, accounting, and finance, information technology, operations, sales, and marketing.

Evidence from multiple scholarly practitioners, for example, (Bartsch et al., 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2020; McNulty, 2020; McNulty & Marcus, 2020; McWilliams, 2020; Osland et al., 2020), addressed the importance of leadership in a crisis and how to lead employees during the COVID-19 pandemic effectively. Their research was relevant

to my study because it provided information about the huge impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on leadership and organizations and validated the challenges leaders faced during this crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened corporate leadership challenges around the world. The impact of the coronavirus crisis was felt in every home and workplace. Not one human life could avoid the fallout from the pandemic, especially in the U.S., where the rising numbers of cases continued to escalate rapidly and get out of control. Leaders in the U.S. faced another challenge, rebuilding their organizations and businesses with a strong social spotlight placed on the importance of having a workforce representative of diversity, equality, equity, and inclusion. To understand the challenges diverse groups were grappling with during the COVID-19 pandemic environment, the management consulting firm, McKinsey & Company, conducted a study using surveys and interviews across 11 developed and developing countries (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020). They discovered the severity and prevalence of challenges among diverse groups. Women were worried about their health and safety of on-site workplaces and mental health issues combined with an increase in responsibilities in their personal lives. This suggested that the stress of the “double shift” continued to be a gender issue around the world.

In an online article published by McKinsey & Company (2020), minorities in countries predominantly white were especially worried about workplace health and safety and their future career opportunities while trying to balance their responsibilities at home. This disparity compared with their white counterparts was particularly stark for people of color (POC) in the United States.



Most leaders across functional business areas were unprepared for what they were facing because COVID-19 was an unprecedented event in history. Many leaders found themselves ill-equipped with the necessary leadership skills and competencies to effectively lead during the pandemic. These competencies included emotional intelligence, social consciousness, empathy, and compassion to validate, affirm, and support all employees, especially people of color, in three crucial ways—at the team, organizational, and societal levels (Goleman, 2021; Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2020; Roberts et al., 2020). Kerrissey and Edmondson (2020) posited the importance of empathy as a critical leadership skill in uncertain, fast-moving times of crisis because to have empathy meant having the ability to take oneself out of your own head and into another's shoes. It was the responsibility of leaders to put themselves in another's suffering and to apply strong empathy and critical thinking skills, combined with their position of authority to pave the way forward.

According to McKinsey & Company, leaders had an opportunity to build a more equitable and inclusive workplace that would strengthen their organizations far beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Businesses that achieved sustainable growth and performance were led by those leaders who seized the moment to support their employees (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020). My study contributed to existing research by providing greater depth of evidence through female executives' lived experiences leading their organizations and people through the COVID-19 pandemic.

A study conducted by Tourish (2020) argued that the COVID-19 pandemic was also a crisis of leadership. He emphasized that there was a void of competent leadership

at that time and therefore it was important for more scholarly practitioners to conduct studies on the topic of critical leadership competencies because it could contribute to this knowledge base by challenging the self-serving theories of business elites that had come to guide much leadership decision-making. Elite theory refers to power relationships, e.g., political power or leadership power. The core meaning is that in any society or group, there must be a minority group making major decisions that rule over the majority. Three characteristics of elitism are group cohesion, consciousness, and conspiracy, which are present when elite groups are united (Mahima, 2020).

Tourish's (2020) research, while not gender-specific, appeared to represent male leadership vs. female leadership because it referred to the predominant leadership style guiding leadership decision-making, which would point towards male leadership since they were the majority. Tourish elaborated that today's elite business leaders' decision-making could be hazardous when there was a lack of evidence to guide organizations and their people during unpredictable crises. Furthermore, leaders had less information, experience, and resources when radical uncertainty existed (Tourish, 2020). This body of research knowledge was relevant to my study because it provided insight into the negative effects of self-serving theories of business elite decision-making. For example, the negative effects of business elite decision-making were that decisions were made by upper-class, wealthy individuals with the power to pull strings to get what they wanted (Witten, 2018).

Cunningham's (2020) research underscored the significance of emotional intelligence, emotional agility, and empathy as key competencies for strong leaders in my

study. By exploring these competencies, my study aimed to deepen the understanding of how they influenced female executives' leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. Goleman's (1998) work further supported the notion that leaders with these competencies were better equipped to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic and effectively lead their organizations and employees.

A plethora of scholarly leadership research was published related to the global pandemic caused by COVID-19, which was relevant to my study as each one provided evidence regarding the importance of strong leadership or the lack thereof. For example, since the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the world and put country after country in lockdown in the first quarter of 2020, numerous surveys on the impact of COVID-19 were conducted. Ernst & Young LLP (EY U.S.) conducted a study using the Global Board Risk Survey before the COVID-19 outbreak from a U.S. corporation perspective. This survey reflected the impact on leadership, including U.S. leaders, as it surveyed 500 global board members and chief executives (CEOs) not affiliated with EY. It was found that before the COVID-19 pandemic, 64% of respondents felt that their organizations would be prepared to respond to adverse risk events in terms of planning, communications, recovery, and resilience. However, as we have come to realize, leadership in the U.S. was not adequately prepared for a crisis of this magnitude (Lewis, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges to organizations, pushing leadership to navigate uncharted territory. With the sudden shift to remote work due to lockdown measures, leaders had to swiftly adapt and ensure employees had the

necessary resources and security measures in place to work effectively from home. These unforeseen circumstances highlighted the critical need for crisis leadership and effective crisis management planning to foster resilience across various aspects of businesses, as emphasized by McKinsey & Company (2020; 2022).

McWilliams' (2020) survey provided valuable insights into the lack of crisis leadership prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the survey was conducted before the pandemic, it shed light on the importance of organizational preparedness for such crises, which proved crucial as the public health crisis quickly transformed into a global economic crisis. The study revealed that organizations across different functional areas, from human capital to supply chains, were challenged by the rapidly evolving situation, highlighting the significance of crisis management strategies.

The findings of McWilliams' (2020) survey indicated a need for improvement in the skill levels of board members and CEOs, as only 64% believed their organization's skill sets were adequate for managing risks. These results underscored the importance of leadership in times of crisis and their ability to effectively lead employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The unexpected challenges of leading remote teams and entire employee populations who were required to work from home due to the pandemic were examined, shedding light on the specific difficulties faced by women and employees in general during this transition. Issues such as domestic abuse and violence were unfortunately not exempt from the impacts of the pandemic, regardless of job title or pay (Hatchimonji et al., 2020; Kofman & Garfin, 2020). McGregor and Doshi (2020) further explored the

challenges faced by business leaders, irrespective of gender, in managing virtual workers and motivating them in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A survey conducted by Gartner (2020) among human resource professionals revealed that during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, around half of the companies surveyed had more than 80% of their employees working from home. These companies expressed an interest in continuing remote work arrangements even after the pandemic subsided, as they recognized the benefits of improved productivity and performance facilitated by better connectivity and communication technologies. The findings of the Gartner survey align with my study, as it supports and describes the efforts and challenges faced by female executive leaders in transitioning their teams to remote work with little notice during the pandemic. The survey also indicated a growing acceptance of remote work as a future trend. Gartner (2020) encouraged further research by scholars and practitioners to explore the benefits of remote work resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and to delve deeper into this new workplace setting.

Through my study, I aimed to contribute to the body of scholarly and evidence-based research by examining the lived experiences of individuals during the mandatory lockdown that compelled them to work from home. This included a specific focus on the experiences of female executives leading their teams and organizations in a virtual work environment, addressing the unforeseen challenges that emerged during that time. These studies, including my own, highlighted the existing research gap on this topic and emphasized the necessity for ongoing scholarly research to explore and understand the experiences of women in leadership roles during the COVID-19 crisis in the United

States. Societies worldwide continue to grapple with the emotional and physical challenges posed by the pandemic, and the findings of this study represent just the initial steps towards acquiring valuable insights. The knowledge gained can help organizations foster greater diversity, equity, and inclusion for female executive leaders and employees, while adopting a more human-centered approach to building sustainable organizations where both business and people can thrive collaboratively into the future.

Understanding human emotions and recognizing the impact of our feelings and behaviors on our work performance and interactions with others was deemed crucial for creating a sustainable and collaborative work environment. The concept of emotional intelligence, particularly emotional competence, provided valuable insights into self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, social awareness, and social competence. These competencies encompassed the ability to empathize, influence, build rapport, and establish trust with others, enabling effective communication in any situation and the management of stressful circumstances (Goleman, 2021; Goleman et al., 2013).

Throughout the years, numerous studies have emphasized the advantages of leaders possessing strong emotional intelligence. These studies and the concept of emotional intelligence were highly relevant to my research, as they underscored the critical importance of leaders having robust emotional competencies. By exploring the experiences of female executives leading through the COVID-19 crisis, my study aimed to contribute new insights to the existing body of research on leadership and emotional intelligence, with a specific focus on gender-specific aspects of female executive leadership and their levels of emotional competence. Goleman (1998) highlighted the

significance of “soft skills” and made a compelling case for their essentiality. He emphasized that qualities associated with emotional intelligence were key factors in identifying star performers and were crucial components for excellence at work, particularly in leadership roles.

In his book, “Working with Emotional Intelligence,” Goleman (1998) mentioned a study that examined the significance of emotional competence in executive and leadership roles. The study involved hundreds of top executives from 15 global companies, including IBM, PepsiCo, and Volvo, and the findings were revealing. Among cognitive abilities, pattern recognition emerged as the distinguishing factor between star performers and average ones. Pattern recognition entails the ability to identify meaningful trends and see the bigger picture by assimilating vast amounts of information, enabling strategic thinking for the future. Goleman further asserted that a leader’s success, as well as an organization’s star performers across all positions, was strongly associated with their level of emotional intelligence. Emotional competence was found to be twice as important as purely cognitive abilities in every field, and for achieving success at the highest levels, emotional competence accounted for virtually the entire advantage.

Brienza and Cavallo (2002) conducted a study on emotional competence and leadership excellence, focusing on differentiating competencies among top performers within Johnson & Johnson Consumer & Personal Care Group (JJC&PC Group). The study involved 358 randomly selected managers who represented the JJC&PC Group, and over 1400 employees participated in a comprehensive multi-rater survey consisting of 183 questions measuring various leadership competencies, including emotional

intelligence. The results revealed a direct correlation between a manager's emotional competence and their status as a top performer, highlighting significant differences between high-performing and mediocre managers. Competencies such as self-confidence, achievement orientation, initiative, leadership, influence, and change catalyst were identified as differentiating factors among the highest performers. Gender differences were also observed, with supervisors rating females higher in adaptability and service orientation, while peers rated females higher in emotional self-awareness, conscientiousness, developing others, service orientation, and communication. Male managers were scored highly by their direct reports in terms of change catalyst competence. Additionally, peers and supervisors recognized high-potential managers with strong emotional competencies, although this recognition was not shared by their subordinates (Brienza & Cavallo, 2002).

Overall, studies on leadership and emotional competence have consistently emphasized the significance of emotional intelligence in distinguishing influential leaders from others. This realization should serve as a wake-up call for leaders, organizations, employees, and corporations to recognize the importance of emotional intelligence in achieving and sustaining growth in a rapidly changing world. Goleman (1998) strongly emphasized the relevance of emotional intelligence as a critical competency for successful leaders. In his book, he documented how emotional intelligence matters and plays a crucial role in reaching and maintaining top positions in any field. He highlighted that emotional intelligence skills are equally, if not more, important than cognitive skills, and their significance increases with the complexity of the job. Therefore, organizations



aiming for survival and success in the future must learn to leverage emotional intelligence. Additionally, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, has further emphasized the need for stronger leadership, and there is a pressing need for more scholarly research to comprehend the competencies and contributions of female leadership compared to traditional male-dominated leadership experiences (Goleman, 1989; 2021; Goleman et al., 2013; Koehn, 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2020; 2022).

Despite an extensive literature review, no existing research on executive women's lived experiences leading through the COVID-19 pandemic was found. Therefore, the aim of my study is to provide a deeper understanding of the firsthand experiences and challenges faced by women in executive roles as they led their organizations in the United States during this unprecedented pandemic. This research seeks to capture the authentic lived experiences of female executives from the moment the pandemic-induced quarantine measures were implemented in March 2020 and throughout their ongoing experiences leading their teams amidst the COVID-19 crisis. By gathering reactions and responses from the participants, this study will provide crucial insights into the realities and specific challenges encountered by female executives, including the rapid transition to remote work environments for all but essential workers and how they addressed these challenges.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced organizations to adapt quickly and navigate unprecedented challenges, placing a spotlight on leadership effectiveness. Leaders who demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and a strong ability to communicate and inspire

their teams emerged as authentic and strong leaders. On the other hand, those who struggled to navigate the complexities of the pandemic and address the evolving needs of their organizations and employees faced difficulties in maintaining stability and achieving desired outcomes (Koehn, 2020). In addition to the challenges posed by the pandemic, corporate leaders in the United States also grappled with the talent crisis, which further tested their leadership capabilities. The talent crisis, characterized by a shortage of skilled workers and the need to attract, develop, and retain top talent, posed significant challenges to organizational growth and success during this tumultuous period (Maurer, 2021).

### **Crisis of Talent**

The COVID-19 pandemic posed not only a health crisis but also a talent crisis that affected organizations across the United States (Maurer, 2021). As workers were abruptly transitioned to remote work settings in March 2020, they experienced various stages of grief and had to adapt to the new work-from-home reality (McGovern & McGovern, 2021; MHA, 2020). However, over time, professionals showcased their resilience and ability to thrive in remote work environments, discovering newfound productivity and efficiency (Alonso, 2022). The pandemic prompted individuals to reassess their priorities, leading to a shift in the talent landscape as workers realized they had the power to choose their work setup and lifestyle (LinkedIn News, 2021). This talent crisis presented yet another unexpected challenge for corporate leaders in the U.S., adding to the already demanding responsibilities faced by female executives leading through the COVID-19 pandemic (Maurer, 2021). The significance of the talent crisis in the context of this study

lies in its portrayal of the additional challenges and complexities that U.S. leadership had to navigate during the pandemic.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The research conducted on female executives' contributions during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the significance of delving deeper into their experiences and leadership approaches. By gaining a better understanding of how female executives tackled unparalleled challenges and made strategic choices, organizations could extract valuable insights to improve their own leadership effectiveness. Further research in this field would not only address the existing gap but also foster a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of leadership dynamics amidst crisis situations.

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged in the first quarter of 2020, triggering a global health crisis that led to a subsequent wave of outbreaks and the emergence of new virus variants, such as the B.1.617.2 or Delta variant of SARS-CoV-2 (Hui et al., 2020; Hagen, 2021). The Delta variant proved to be even more contagious than its predecessors, increasing the urgency for effective leadership and crisis management (Hagen, 2021). The relevance of this ongoing global pandemic further underscores the critical importance of strong leadership in navigating and responding to such crises.

After conducting extensive reviews of the current literature on leadership during the global pandemic, it became apparent that there was a scarcity of scholarly research in the field, particularly regarding the contributions of female executives during this time. However, the limited existing studies provide valuable validation of the crucial role played by female leaders in effectively navigating the challenges posed by the COVID-19

crisis (Huang, 2020; Sergent & Stajkovic, 2020). This research gap presents an optimistic opportunity for future exploration and investigation, offering the potential to gain deeper insights into the experiences and impact of female executive leadership throughout the course of the pandemic.

In my study, I will utilize the relevant and current scholarly research available to gain a better understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on female executive leaders in the U.S.. These leaders guided their teams and organizations through the unprecedented challenges brought about by the pandemic, which led to a nationwide lockdown from March 2020 onwards. By exploring the experiences of female executives during this crisis, I aim to uncover insights that can foster equality, equity, and positive inclusion within organizations. Additionally, I believe this research will provide valuable best practices for leading through future crises and mitigating the adverse effects of a pandemic or similar events.

The momentum of this research continues to grow, as discussed in Chapter 3, which provides the rationale for the research design. This chapter establishes the connection between the literature gap and the detailed research methods, including a review of the qualitative research questions to be employed and the justification for the study. Through this research, I seek to identify shared experiences, challenges, and themes among female executive leaders during this unprecedented period, as well as the motivating factors driving their decisions. Additionally, I aim to identify common themes that can be leveraged to bridge the gender gap in leadership and enhance equality, equity,

and inclusion initiatives, with a particular focus on authentic leadership qualities required for leading the future workforce.

In conclusion, this qualitative study will delve into the lived experiences and personal perspectives of female executive leaders in the U.S. who navigated the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. While previous scholarly work has contributed valuable insights on leadership in crisis situations (Bartsch et al., 2020; Goleman, 1998; McGregor & Doshi, 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2020; McNulty, 2020; McNulty & Marcus, 2020; Osland et al., 2020), the available literature on female leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic remains limited. Therefore, there are ample opportunities for conducting meaningful research to further validate the importance and contributions of female executive leaders in today's corporations and beyond. The COVID-19 pandemic, despite its dark curse, has also served as a catalyst for rethinking and redefining strong leadership in the 21st century, with this study's findings marking just the beginning of a larger conversation. Chapter 3 provides the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, methodology, issues of trustworthiness, and concludes with a summary.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The primary objective of this qualitative study was to delve into the lived experiences of female executives who led during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, aiming to uncover the challenges they encountered and the decisions they made. To achieve this objective, the U.S. focus was on female leaders' continued experiences leading their direct reports, staff, and, in some cases, the entire employee population during the COVID-19 pandemic and the unprecedented challenges that ensued. By gathering their reactions and responses, the study fills gaps in information on the realities faced by female executives as they navigated the transition from normal conditions to rapidly adapting to remote work environments and addressing the unique challenges that arose.

The major sections of this chapter include the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology employed, the logic and criteria for participant selection, the instrumentation and data sources, the interview questions used, the procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection, and the data analysis plan. Additionally, the chapter addresses the issues of trustworthiness, including internal and external validity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The ethical procedures followed in the study are also discussed, and the chapter concludes with a summary.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

This study followed a qualitative method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and a basic qualitative research design (Flick, 2018) to investigate the lived experiences of female executives in U.S. organizations who led during the COVID-19 pandemic. The rationale

for choosing this qualitative research design was to gain an in-depth understanding of the firsthand experiences of female executives as they navigated the challenges of leading during a global pandemic. The study was designed to answer three specific research questions:

1. What were female executives' experiences and personal views while leading through the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What did they learn about themselves, their organizations, and their people during this unprecedented time?
3. What would they do differently in the future when faced with another crisis of this magnitude?

The use of a basic qualitative design allowed for a comprehensive understanding of what transpired during this unprecedented time, as reported by the participants themselves (Flick, 2007). Interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams. The interview process involved asking each interview question and then actively listening to each participants' answers while taking online notes, recording, and then interpreting the verbal responses from transcripts and notes taken (Turner, 2010). The qualitative approach adopted in this study offered the opportunity to identify common themes shared by the participants, which could serve as a foundation for future research aiming to enhance understanding of women's leadership behaviors and draw lessons from this significant historical event.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My role as the researcher was to conduct interviews with participants in an unbiased and impartial manner. Drawing from my extensive experience as a human

resource and management consultant, as well as an executive coach for over 25 years, I maintained a neutral stance during the coaching process and applied the same approach as an interviewer in this study. I regularly worked with individuals in leadership positions, encompassing various levels within organizations.

To recruit participants, I utilized LinkedIn by posting a recruitment flyer (see Appendix D) in professional women groups. It was crucial for me to ensure that there was no personal connection with the women who expressed interest in participating, other than through my network of over 18,000 members on these platforms. I avoided directly soliciting, inviting, encouraging, or asking anyone I personally knew to take part in the study. The “request to participate” clearly stated the qualifications and criteria for participation, further excluding individuals who had a close personal relationship with me.

Maintaining impartiality and objectivity was also important during the interviews to ensure that participants provided genuine and unadulterated accounts of their experiences (Salmons, 2014). With my extensive experience in conducting interviews with clients, I had received training and adhered to the American Psychological Association’s guidelines for reducing bias (American Psychological Association, 2019). In the unlikely event that I developed personal passion for the stories shared by participants, I ensured to keep those sentiments to myself and reflected on them privately in my journal, reinforcing the need to maintain objectivity during the interviews. As the researcher, interviewer, and observer, I remained neutral and refrained from sharing any of my personal experiences. This was crucial to prevent any potential influence on



participants' answers (Stadtlander, 2018). The study relied on collecting raw data that solely represented participants' unadulterated stories.

To mitigate ethical issues, I conducted the interviews online via videoconferencing, scheduling them individually and by appointment. The interviews took place in my home office, where I lived alone and ensured no interruptions, avoiding any ethical concerns associated with conducting the study within a work environment. This approach also minimized conflicts of interest and power differentials. Conducting interviews online allowed me to ask each question, listen actively and take detailed notes, as they shared their answers and stories. I sought approval to record the audio portion of the online videoconference interviews to ensure accuracy and to review the interviews later, ensuring that no valuable information was lost in my notes. The audio recordings were also used to create the transcripts of each interview.

Each participant was provided with a consent form, attached to an email to each individual who met the qualifications to voluntarily participate in my study. The consent form provided a comprehensive explanation of the study's process, their expectations, their role, and how the collected information would be used and benefited (Owens, 2010). The consent form was essential to ensure the integrity of the study without a signed consent form. Instead, each participant provided "I consent" in their reply email to me stating they reviewed the consent form and were a fit for the purposes of my study (Xu et al., 2020; Teachers College, Columbia University, Institutional Review Board, n.d.).

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Logic and Criteria**

Participant selection for this qualitative research involved identifying a specific population of female executive leaders in the States who had led their employees during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. To qualify as participants, women needed to identify as female, have at least 5 years of experience at the executive leadership level, hold titles equivalent in responsibility to director, controller, assistant vice president, vice president, senior vice president, executive vice president, or C-Suite positions, be responsible for a minimum of five direct reports, and be based in the United States. Additionally, participants needed to be willing to allow me to record the audio portion of the online videoconference interviews. These criteria helped clearly define the inclusion and exclusion criteria for participation, excluding male gender, female executive leaders with less than 5 years of experience, and individuals who knew me personally.

To ensure robust data collection and identify common themes, I set a minimum participation target of 10 individuals. This number was deemed sufficient to reach the saturation point, where a consistent pattern of responses was expected to emerge. If the initial 10 participants did not yield the desired common themes, I planned to include additional participants until saturation was attained, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the data.

### **Instrumentation and Source of Data**

The instrumentation chosen to collect data on the lived experiences of female executives leading through the COVID-19 pandemic was through online videoconference

interviews. This type of information and communication technology (ICT) to gather qualitative data became the normal way of conducting qualitative data collection, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic forced most workers throughout the world to work from home virtually during quarantine (Statistics Solutions, 2021). The Internet continued to expand the way business communications were conducted at that time (Broberg, 2021).

Furthermore, the use of online interviews allowed access to participants to collect data and ask questions to diverse participants who could be located anywhere and in any time zone, using a computer, smartphone, or tablet. This broadened the opportunity to achieve sufficient participants and saturation of information needed for this study. This method of interviewing and collecting data for scholarly research continued to evolve and prove itself valuable as a communication tool leveraging the information and communication technologies (ICT) of that time during the questions and answers of participant interviews. This also allowed me to add interview data with other research collected through observation and notes taken about each participant or noting a common phenomenon or thread of answers building toward saturation (Salmons, 2014).

Interview research is a personal form of collecting data. I had to engage with the participant being interviewed to motivate them to elicit the information and rich responses needed (Salmons, 2015). Therefore, engagement, trust, and professional respect had to be built (Lyons, 2012). This required the researcher to be experienced in conducting online interviews, which involved understanding how to recruit participants online, quickly building rapport with each participant online, conducting Q&A online,

and adhering to ethical research guidelines. It also meant adapting to a new way of inquiry, transitioning from in-person interviews to a virtual and digital method (Salmons, 2015).

I had extensive experience conducting online videoconferencing interviews and coaching executives to conduct interviews effectively and successfully for this study. I was also trained and skilled in interviewing through both my academic studies in psychology and my 20-plus years in business, where I worked with executives from Fortune 50 companies to private equity and family-owned businesses. Much of my career involved one-to-one inquiry, whether it was through due diligence during mergers and acquisitions, interviews, focus groups, or other forms of one-to-one communication necessary for business outcomes.

The primary source of data was collected from interviews with a representative group of female executive women who had led their people through the COVID-19 pandemic. Interview data was collected from 10 female executive leaders or until saturation was achieved, as discussed in the Participant Logic and Criteria section above. The recruitment of participants for this study came through LinkedIn, an online professional social media platform. A post was placed in female executive groups offering unsolicited participation. The characteristics of the participants, such as being female executives responsible for five or more direct reports and having five or more years of experience with executive titles leading in U.S. organizations through the COVID-19 pandemic, were posted.

### ***Researcher-Developed Instruments—Interview Questions***

The interview questions were carefully crafted to capture authentic stories and experiences from the participants as female executives who had led through the COVID-19 pandemic. The Pre-Interview Questionnaire and Interview Questions were listed in Appendixes B and C, offering a comprehensive framework for data collection. These questions aimed to delve into the challenges, strategies, and lessons learned by the female executives during that unprecedented time.

### **Procedures for Recruitment**

The recruitment of participants for this study was conducted by me and came through LinkedIn, an online professional social media platform. I placed a post in female executive groups, offering unsolicited participation. The post seeking volunteers to participate in this study needed to be written in a compelling manner to attract female executives and pique their interest in the study's purpose. Therefore, prior to offering unsolicited participation, awareness of the study's purpose and its value to science, society, and potential participants had to be written and posted in the female executive groups where the unsolicited recruitment would take place. It was important to consider the audience and the social media platform being used, as it required a different communication style compared to describing the purpose and value of the study for academic and scientific purposes. When writing about the study on social media, it needed to be crafted creatively to spark interest and initiate discussions in the female executive groups on LinkedIn (Salmons, 2016).

LinkedIn uses hashtags #. Hashtags # are used to connect with others who share an interest in your hashtag # topic. By inserting a pound symbol # before an unbroken word or phrase creates a hashtag, i.e., #executivewomen #leadingthroughCOVID-19, #COVID-19, #leadership #corporatefemaleleaders, etc. (Dorney, 2022).

### **Procedures for Participation**

To participate in this study, first, qualified participants agreed to voluntarily participate in the study after finding the posting or tweet on social media interesting enough to inquire about the study and express their interest. They then proceeded to sign the consent form, which was included in the post via a hyperlink, and agreed to the qualifications and terms to participate. The post included contact information for those interested in participating in the study, which was done by providing my email address in the post (Salmons, 2016).

Once the consent form was reviewed and agreed to, participants received an email from me containing the necessary information to prepare for and schedule their one-to-one videoconference interviews using Calendly, an online application for scheduling meetings. By using an online application, meeting scheduling was automated, eliminating the need for manual communication such as calls or emails for each participant and the hassle of manually sending calendar invites. Additionally, it allowed for the creation of a dedicated calendar specific to this study and a participant worksheet to centralize participants' information. This worksheet served as a place to enter notes and track the status of their participation (Calendly, 2022). After completing these initial steps, the interviews commenced one by one until saturation was achieved.

## **Data Collection**

Data was collected using multichannel ICTs (Information Communication Technologies), where each participant could connect with me virtually online in real-time, face-to-face live Q&A interview sessions (Salmons, 2016). This online research method provided a private setting for meaningful interactions, creating a trusted environment that facilitated the exchange of information through elicited questions and answers. The online interviews also allowed for data collection through observation of the participants' body language, as the interviews were conducted. These observations, combined with the participants' answers, facilitated a rich exchange of both verbal and non-verbal communication in the online setting. The videoconference methods created a virtual reality environment where it felt as if the researcher and the participant were in the same room, as they could see each other live and engage in a live Q&A session. This form of communication, known as synchronous communication, enabled immediate information exchange, and allowed both the researcher and the participant to give their undivided attention to the dialogue (Salmons, 2016). The only limitation of this ICT method was that only the top half of each individual was visible; however, it was sufficient to provide rich verbal and non-verbal data to the researcher while ensuring the safety and comfort of the participant.

By combining both types of data, namely the verbal answers to interview questions provided by the participants and the nonverbal observations made by the researcher, valuable insights could be gained. In some instances, certain information may have raised concerns or prompted the need for further probing through additional specific

questions to explore and delve more deeply into details that either reinforced or conflicted with a participant's initial answer to an interview question.

After the interviews were completed and the data analyzed, a summary of the findings was written. Participants in the study were provided with a copy of the summary of findings, which encompassed the insights gathered from the combined interviews. Additionally, participants were given the option to receive a copy of the published dissertation, should they desire it.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The raw data was collected during the recorded audio of online interviews. Saturation was reached after interviewing nine participants and therefore, a 10<sup>th</sup> participant was not needed. A search for common themes was conducted as part of the analysis to determine if the saturation point had been reached. Since saturation was achieved after nine participant interviews, the analysis was completed, and the summary of findings was prepared. However, if saturation had not been reached, additional participants would need to be interviewed until a point of saturation was achieved.

After reaching data saturation, the collected data was analyzed and interpreted using a manual process that did not require the use of any qualitative software. I searched for common themes and identified them, subsequently assigning them to specific research questions. Some answers may have pertained to more than one research question, and such instances were noted. A table was created, linking the list of Interview Questions in the left-hand column with the corresponding Research Questions answered in the right-hand column (refer to Appendix C).



## **Issues of Trustworthiness**

### **Credibility**

Stadtlander (2018) emphasizes that the credibility of the study's data is contingent upon recognizing and documenting the saturation of data, obtained through participant interviews and observations. By thoroughly identifying and documenting saturation, the study's findings gain increased trustworthiness and reliability. This underscores the importance of ensuring that sufficient data has been gathered and analyzed to reach a point of saturation in order to enhance the credibility of the study's outcomes.

### **Transferability**

Transferability takes place when the results and validity of a qualitative study can be generalized or transferred to other studies. This study achieved transferability through a clear and detailed account of the interview process, which was carefully documented. Researchers interested in the study's findings will be able to assess the transferability of the results to their own research based on the provided information. This assessment, known as a thick description, relied on the extent to which the study adequately documented the methods and settings of the interviews. For this study, the interviews were conducted online via videoconference, with detailed information about the participants, Q&A sessions, and observations of body language (Korstjens & Moser, 2017, p. 122).

### **Dependability**

To ensure the dependability and accuracy of the data methods, it is crucial to maintain a comprehensive audit trail throughout the entire study. This entails

documenting every aspect from the beginning to the end, including a confidential list of interviewees and a record of the specific questions and answers provided by each participant. Additionally, it is important to align these responses with the relevant research questions, which can be achieved by referring to the table provided in Appendix C (Stadtlander, 2018). By diligently maintaining such an audit trail, the study's data can be considered reliable and trustworthy.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability was established by maintaining a robust and transparent documentation of the study's findings, which highlighted the researcher's impartiality. The trail of information was presented in a clear and accessible manner, enabling anyone to trace the progression of the study and independently evaluate its validity (Stadtlander, 2018). This commitment to transparency and openness enhanced the confirmability of the study, instilling confidence in the reliability of its outcomes.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Anytime human subjects were involved in the research, the researcher always had a moral and ethical responsibility to uphold. The U.S. Code of Federal Regulations (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013) mandated the use and obtainment of consent forms. Volunteers agreed to and accepted the conditions of the consent form via reply email to the researcher by stating, "I consent to participate."

Obtaining informed consent protects human subjects by ensuring their understanding of a study's benefits, risks, and necessary information, so that participants can feel confident about their participation in this study. The researcher was responsible

for making sure prospective participants had the capacity to give consent. Capacity to consent included participants understanding the information provided and being of legal age to sign the consent before participating in the study. Also, informed consent when performed online required the researcher to pay close attention to detail, providing comprehensive information about the study, the parameters, and expectations for participation (Salmons, 2015).

Prior to the selection of volunteer participants, each person was informed of all aspects of their participation in this study to ensure confidentiality, treatment of participants with respect, no deceit, and reporting clear and truthful results, ensuring an ethical study was conducted. The necessary steps were taken to inform participants that their participation was voluntary and that they could stop and withdraw from the study at any time. Strict adherence to all IRB ethical guidelines was followed as volunteers were prepared for participation in the study, interviews were conducted, data was collected, analyzed, and reported without violating the confidentiality of each participant. A clear explanation of the process, duration, methods, procedures, and purpose of this study was given to each participant prior to them agreeing to the consent form.

Each participant was advised that their privacy would be maintained and shared only with the researcher's Chair and Committee Member, as well as the institutional review board (IRB). Adherence to IRB guidelines and university requirements, along with ethical procedures, was taken into consideration for all ethical issues. Additionally, participants were assigned pseudonyms prior to analyzing the interview data collected.

The data will be kept in a confidential folder accessible only by the researcher for a period of five years, after which all data will be destroyed.

In addition to obtaining informed consent, participants were given access to information specifically designed to address any ethical concerns arising from their involvement in the study. This information aimed to empower participants to raise and discuss any ethical issues or concerns they might have had during the course of the research. By providing a clear trajectory for addressing ethical matters, the study ensured that participants' voices were heard, and their ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the research process (Salmons, 2015).

### **Summary**

The focus of this study was to explore the lived experiences of female executives in U.S. corporations who led their people and organizations through the COVID-19 pandemic since the quarantine of all nonessential workers to WFH. The study sought to find out if there were common experiences, challenges, and themes found between female executives leading during this historical period and what were the driving forces motivating their decisions.

The pandemic raised severe challenges, causing a threat to people's health, livelihood, safety, and security (Gopinath, 2020; Hatchimonji et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2020; Stone, 2020; WHO, 2020). COVID-19 had an enormous impact on leadership (Bartsch et al., 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2020; McNulty, 2020; McNulty & Marcus, 2020; Osland et al., 2020), particularly for female executives, because they were coming from a disadvantaged point due to gender inequality (Azmat & Boring, 2020). To date,

no scholarly research on the lived experiences of female executives leading their people during COVID-19 existed. The study aimed to establish the relevance of the stated problem of corporate women leading their organizations and people through the COVID-19 pandemic and its importance to society as the U.S. and the world slowly recovered from this pandemic. In its wake, positive outcomes could surface through greater gender equality and equity, including diversity of race leveling the leadership playing field going forward. Chapter 4 provided an in-depth review of data collection and analysis.

## Chapter 4: Results

This study was conducted to explore the personal accounts that female executives experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. To understand these experiences, three research questions were developed related to female executives' experiences and personal views while leading through the COVID-19 pandemic, what they learned about themselves, their organizations, and their people during this unprecedented time, and what they would do differently in the future when faced with another crisis of this magnitude. The findings presented in this chapter helped to close a gap in research by addressing how the lived experiences as women may have differed from men leading through the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. This study identified the challenges female leaders in the United States faced and the decisions they made, which were unique to each individual. Similarities in experiences were identified in the common themes during the analysis of data collected from one-to-one online interviews. Thirteen interview questions were used for nine executive women who qualified and volunteered to participate in the study, sharing their lived leadership and personal life experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 4 delves into the study's setting, offering a comprehensive overview that encompasses detailed information on the demographics of the participants and their pertinent characteristics. The chapter further outlines the rigorous process employed for data collection, ensuring the reliability and validity of the study's findings. Additionally, the data analysis method utilized in the study is explained, shedding light on the systematic approach taken to analyze and interpret the collected data. Furthermore, the

chapter presents evidence of trustworthiness, addressing key aspects such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which enhanced the overall trustworthiness of the study. Additionally, the chapter provides a detailed explanation of the collective results found during the online interviews with nine female executives who had led the people they were responsible for during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. It concludes with a final summary of the chapter.

### **Setting**

Participants for this study were recruited by posting a public notice online in the form of a flyer. The flyer was posted on LinkedIn, which serves as an online professional networking site with various professional groups representing diverse industries and preferences, such as Executive Women in Leadership, National Association of Professional Executive Women, and Executive & Professional Women's Association. These groups offered a platform for female executive leaders to connect and network with each other.

Once potential participants met the criteria and expressed their willingness to be interviewed online via videoconference, they were sent an email containing a consent form and were requested to respond with "I consent to participate." The email also included a pre-interview questionnaire (see Appendix A). Upon receiving their consent and completed pre-interview questionnaire via email, as the interviewer, I provided them with a Calendly link to schedule a time for our one-to-one interview.

There were potential personal or organizational conditions that influenced participants and their experiences at the time of the study. For example, these female

leaders experienced the impact on human and organizational life as they led through the unknowns of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some experienced reductions in their own pay to help staff remain working and avoid being laid off. Others lost talented individuals either due to illness or the need to care for a sick family member, or simply because of the lack of available daycare due to business closures. Budget cuts were implemented, and travel restrictions prevented face-to-face interactions with clients and employees. However, it is important to note that these events did not influence the interpretation of the study results. They were acknowledged, taken into consideration, and recorded as part of the participants' experiences.

### **Demographics**

The participants in this study comprised of nine female corporate executives who responded and completed the pre-interview questionnaire. An advertisement was posted in professional female executive groups on social media, specifically on LinkedIn. However, the majority of participants were recruited through a snowball sampling method, where individuals who saw the advertisement shared it with others they knew who might be interested in participating. Personally, I did not have prior acquaintance with any of these women, and they were not part of my social media network when the recruitment efforts began.

These nine participants met the volunteer requirements and actively led their respective people and organizations in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic. They shared their firsthand experiences starting from the onset of the quarantine in March 2020



and continued through at least the first three quarters of 2020 or beyond. The selection of participants was based on meeting the required qualifications:

- Must identify as a female with five or more years of experience at the executive level, with titles equivalent in responsibility to director, controller, assistant vice president, vice president, up to C-Suite, and responsible for a minimum of five direct reports.
- Must be an executive in a U.S. organization that is not part of a health care system during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic through 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter or more.

Table 1 presents the anonymous assigned code given to each interviewee. Using code names for people who were interviewed is an important process in qualitative research to analyze data and protect participants' identities. Furthermore, the participant demographics outlined in Table 1 represents the pertinent information such as age, marital status, years of leadership experience, whether they have children or not, degree level if any, and race.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

Assigned Name	Age ( $M=44.89$ yrs.)	Marital Status	Years of Experience ( $M = 21.11$ yrs.)	Children	Degree	Race
#1 DC	53	Single	26	2	Ph.D.	Black
#2 DJ	62	Married	39	2	Bachelors	White
#3 MS	47	Married	21	2	College	Other
#4 LS	41	Married	22	2	Bachelors	White/Native American
#5 CF	38	Single	17	0	Bachelors	White
#6 SM	35	Married	8	2	MBA	White
#7 AW	47	Partnership	24	0	MBA	White
#8 LH	49	Married	23	2	Bachelors	White

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#9 SP	32	Married	10	1	Bachelors	White
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### **Data Collection**

The nine participants were interviewed using questions that were specifically designed and linked to the research questions (see Appendix C). Some variations were made in the data collection process from the original plan presented in Chapter 3, as saturation was achieved after interviewing the nine participants. During the data collection phase, there were instances of technology glitches that caused unexpected circumstances. However, a backup plan was in place to ensure that no data was lost. These glitches were mainly due to poor internet connections, but they occurred only in a few interviews, and the backup recorder successfully captured any missed dialogue.

The chosen instrument for data collection was online videoconference interviews, conducted through either Microsoft Teams or Zoom videoconference applications. Using these online videoconference platforms proved to be an efficient and reliable method as it facilitated interviews with female executives across the country, eliminating geographical limitations. It also provided flexibility in terms of scheduling the interviews and allowed for the recording and transcription of each session. The interviews commenced on October 3, 2022, and concluded on October 11, 2022, with each interview lasting approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Prior to the interviews, interviewees had agreed to volunteer 45 minutes to an hour of their time, as outlined in the consent form.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process was initiated by organizing the recorded transcripts of each interviewee and the accompanying notes. A template was created consisting of three

columns. In the first column, each interviewee was assigned a number (#) along with their first and last name initials to maintain confidentiality, for example, Interviewee #1 DC, Interviewee #2 DJ, and so on. This approach allowed for unbiased analysis of the raw data. The second column of the template listed the interview questions in sequential order, along with the corresponding answers provided by each interviewee. The third column was dedicated to coding their responses.

Employing the template facilitated the review of the participants' answers, enabling the identification of similarities and discrepancies among them. This process facilitated an inductive approach, progressing from coded units to broader representations such as categories and themes, as depicted in the table format of the template. Thematic analysis is a flexible technique in qualitative psychology research, allowing for the inclusion of new themes, removal of redundant themes, and refinement of existing ones as they emerge (Brooks et al., 2015).

During the analysis process, quotations were employed to give prominence to the precise codes, categories, meanings, and themes that emerged from the collected data, underscoring their importance. Furthermore, any discrepancies identified during the analysis were duly acknowledged and given consideration, with particular attention given to highlighting such disparities on the coding worksheet in blue. This meticulous approach aimed to ensure a comprehensive and accurate analysis of the data, considering both the notable patterns and any contrasting elements.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Evidence of trustworthiness is comprised of four areas: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). These four areas of quality criteria were used for this qualitative research. Credibility was achieved when the data collected reached a saturation point during the data analysis and coding steps of this study. The analyzed and coded data was collected through online interviews with each participant and observations of such saturation were made (Stadtlander, 2018).

Transferability refers to the applicability of the researcher's data. In other words, transferability came from the "thick description" given by participants and collected by the researcher during the interviews. Transferability informs researchers whether the results and validity of this qualitative study could be generalized or transferred to their own or other studies. Transferability was achieved through a clear and very detailed account of the interview process documented. This study's interviews were conducted online via videoconference, and all information regarding the participants being interviewed and actions identified related to how the interviews were conducted through questions and answers were recorded (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

Dependability is about the accuracy of the data methods used and how dependability was achieved. This study kept an audit trail of the entire study. The audit trail detailed everything, i.e., a confidential list of all interviewees and a list of the interview questions and answers given by each participant, and a well-documented alignment to each research question (Stadtlander, 2018).

Confirmability is about neutrality whereas the interpretation needed to be grounded in the data not by the researchers' viewpoints. Confirmability was achieved through a strong trail of documented findings of the study and this was reflected in my unbiased opinions as the researcher. This trail of information was written so that anyone could follow the trajectory of the study and see it for themselves (Stadtlander, 2018).

### **Results**

This study explored female executive's lived experiences as they led through the COVID-19 pandemic. Interview questions were developed and linked to the research questions mentioned above (see Appendix C). By linking the interview questions to the research questions, rich and thick answers were shared by each participant during our one-to-one interviews, which revealed their lived experiences, personal views, and stories they remembered as they reflected on this unprecedented time in history of crisis leadership. From these thick descriptions of data collected, several themes emerged and were organized with mentionable participant responses related to each major theme and subthemes.

The following content provides an explicit connection between the research questions and the participant's answers to the interview questions. By analyzing the insights and stories shared by the interviewed participants, the study gained a comprehensive understanding of their personal views, lessons learned, and future perspectives in navigating the multiple crises presented by the pandemic.

**RQ 1**

The first research question was “What were female executives’ experiences and personal views while leading through the COVID-19 pandemic?” The participants in this study recognized the challenging environments they were operating within, as the COVID-19 pandemic brought forth a multitude of crises such as health, economic, racial, inequality, mental health, leadership, and talent crises. The participants’ diverse stories shared during the interviews and their examples provided in each theme shed light on the varied experiences they encountered as they navigated through the multiple crises. For example, how to effectively transition from in-office to working virtually out of each person’s homes; how to ensure employees, clients, or customers were taken care of; and the delivery of services as well as relationships built were not lost.

***Crisis Leadership***

The COVID-19 pandemic presented U.S. an unprecedented crisis (Barzilay et al., 2020; Giuntella et al., 2021; McGovern & McGovern, 2021). Additionally, the unforeseen challenges leadership faced included being forced into quarantine with no clear course of action, being required to aggressively relocate all non-essential workers to a virtual workspace in their homes (Bartsch et al., 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2020; McNulty, 2020; McNulty & Marcus, 2020; Osland et al., 2020; Tourish, 2020). Regardless of gender, leaders in corporations, organizations, governments, hospitals, and countries were continuously challenged by the consequences caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants in this study were leaders who had experienced the successive crises that unfolded. The ability to navigate through multiple crises emerged as an

ongoing major theme for each participant. However, their experiences of the crises varied, as evidenced by a few stories they shared in response to interview questions.

Participant #1 DC spoke about the challenges she faced when all travel had to stop. She reflected:

How were we going to serve our clients and keep our business afloat when the way we always worked, traveling to client sites, and conducting in-person training, abruptly came to a halt because we could not travel? I had to quickly assess and prepare our people with new skills to train virtually.

Participant #2 DJ had a very different experience: “my organization’s work and the people I led were essential workers to our client, a major nationally known food and consumer goods store providing goods to the general public needed to survive during the lockdown.”

Participant #3 MO experienced crisis leadership differently than others:

It was definitely an employee adjustment, many on my team are female, and many with young children who were in daycare centers before Covid. When the forced lockdown orders were enforced, not only were we dealing with this change, but young moms were also dealing with how to take care of their children when all daycare centers closed.

Participant #4 LS shared:

I’m in marketing and we had just won a new client in CA in February. So, we were quickly working towards getting to know the client as much as possible and we were getting ready to travel and head into a huge meeting scheduled for March

12th and 13th. Then our company put quarantine into place, and we all had to work virtually. Luckily our client agreed to meeting virtually. So, this was our first virtual, like truly virtual experience for two full-day meetings. Um, and we weren't equipped for it. But we figured it out.

### ***Fear of the Unknown***

A common theme experienced by all participants in this study was the fear of the unknown. They were not alone, as the entire world was living through the unknown during this unprecedented time in history. However, these female leaders stepped up to every challenge and forged through the unknown crisis after crisis.

Participant #1 DC shared her fear during the pandemic surrounding the business: “Wow, we had to figure out how to reinvent our business because it impacted a whole lot of different parts of our business. We had to make some drastic changes within our business to stay afloat.”

Participant #3 MO shared her fear of being pregnant during this time: “A new leadership experience for me surrounded the fear of being pregnant at this time and the fear of being laid off because my business was always conducting ‘in-store demonstrations’...”

Participant #5 CF shared her fear for continued revenue stream:

We were in an office environment, and we weren't sure if we would lose our clients, our business, or our revenue streams. Anyone that was making above \$100K was asked to take a cut in pay so that this money could be used to help others less fortunate and to ensure they would not lose their jobs, with the promise



of giving it back once we were in a better spot. I was more than happy to help out because I would much rather help my team make sure they have jobs especially during this time.

Participant #6 SM shared her greatest fear during this time:

I was very pregnant at the time COVID hit and was working out of two offices. I was spending at least 20 hours at my client's corporate office, a major consumer goods store and the remainder of the time at my company's office. Then we were told to work from home. I delivered my baby on May 5<sup>th</sup> and I remember being terrified.

Participant #7 AW shared her fear for a colleague:

The first couple weeks in March there were many conversations and discussions taking place. I remember vividly thinking about my star performer for 20 years being in Barcelona and wondering if she would be able to get back safely before the borders were shut down.

## **RQ 2**

The second research question, "What did they learn about themselves, their organizations, and their people during this unprecedented time?" aimed to uncover the valuable insights gained by female executives throughout the pandemic. The participants recognized that the crises presented an opportunity for personal and professional growth, as well as organizational learning. The participants' experiences highlighted the lessons learned for example the importance of adaptability, resilience, and empathetic leadership in addressing the challenges faced by their organizations and people. Through their

stories, the study revealed the valuable lessons these executives learned about themselves, their organizations, and the individuals they led.

### *Empathy*

Perhaps one of the most memorable and consistent themes was how these women exuded empathy and they consistently demonstrated empathy as a priority and acknowledged everyone's experiences including personal and professional challenges during the crisis.

Participant #3 MO "One of my people had Triplets that were 2 yrs. old -- the rules changed I had to be more flexible and empathetic."

Participant #5 CF shared her experience wondering how she could do more:

I experienced a lot more emotional labor than I had to do before. I noticed a lot of people were getting a lot more stressed and were on the edge about things. So, I had to work at digging deeper into why they were feeling this way and to better understand what they were dealing with at home, and I often asked myself what I could do to help support them more.

Participant #6 SM "I became aware of abusive relationships that used to go on behind closed doors became visible due to lockdown. I always consider myself to be an empathetic leader and I learned the importance of checking in with my people."

Participant #9 SP shared her experiences making others feel better:

Being a mom with a newborn, there was no way I would have gone into an office or out in public. So, we started Zoom calls and Zoom happy hours and we had an employee who was pregnant and so we even did a Zoom baby shower for her.

Many of my people were young and living alone in apartments. I made it a point to check in on them and make sure they were doing ok. More empathy and understanding of what others were going through was needed.

### ***Work and Life Balance***

An aha moment during the COVID-19 pandemic came when there was a significant adjustment from life as we knew it. People's lives were significantly altered as social distancing and measures to slow the spread of the coronavirus, including forced quarantine, moved workers to virtual settings. This change transformed the way lives were lived, affecting socialization, parenting, running errands, working from home, and finding balance within one's life, making everything more complicated. Participant #1 DC shared her experiences keeping work and life balance when confined to her home:

When you go from being able to travel and you are away from home you leave whatever you need to do at home and travel and work. Being grounded and no traveling made me more visible and accessible to my son who would ask, "what's for dinner" and I'd say it's in the freezer LOL. Having someone peek around the corner of your office and say aren't you cooking?

Participant #2 DJ shared her experiences of balances work and life responsibilities with family members all confined to home during quarantine:

My family would not know if I was on the phone and would just walk in and ask what's for dinner? I also have an elderly mom who's in memory care a mile away. I would get so busy, that I had to put on my calendar, go see mom.

Participant #4 LS shared her experiences working from home with a newborn:

Working from home with a newborn. I had a newborn baby at home and there were no spots open at any daycare. I was on like six different waiting lists to get a spot for him. I couldn't get him in until he was one year old. So, I then worked from home with a newborn for a year. <laugh>. Yeah. Oh my. Oh. But you know what's interesting is people became so accustomed at that time to seeing your kids knowing more about like your home life. I never felt, like I was shamed for having a baby on my screen with me or if he made a noise. There were times when I was highly stressed about if he started crying because depending on who was in the meeting, but, for the most part, I even had clients that were like, Go get your baby, I wanna see 'em.

### **RQ 3**

The third research question, "What would they do differently in the future when faced with another crisis of this magnitude?" focused on the participants' reflections and future preparedness. Given their experiences in leading through the COVID-19 pandemic and the diverse crises it brought forth, the participants' shared their perspectives on how they would approach future crises. The participants' stories and insights provided valuable information surrounding their strategies, improvements, and changes they would implement to better navigate and lead during similar crises in the future. For example, providing greater empathy to all whom they touched and were responsible for; to reach out and check-in frequently to ensure their employees were safe and were able to work from home efficiently; and finding creative ways to maintain communication, engagement, and continuity of work to employees as well as clients or customers. The

specific participant answers shared, and the examples given in each identified theme provide the explicit connection between my research questions and the interview questions and the participant answers.

### *Empathy*

Understanding what everyone was feeling during this crisis was very important to communicate what was needed without increasing anxiety in oneself or others. Empathy was a critical skill for everyone to strengthen, especially leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic because empathy required one's ability to take one's self out of their own head and put themselves into someone else's shoes and genuinely care about what that person was feeling and why; this also required the skill of actively listening to whomever you were speaking with and aligning your message, clearly and understandably, to communicate you care (Goleman, 1998). Stress and anxiety were taking a toll on all human lives and executives in the U.S. were no exception. The United States and the world were entering into a leadership crisis.

Participant #7 AW shared her experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and what she learned from this experience and would do in the future. She shared her focus will be on “remembering compassion, remembering to stay in touch.”

Participant #8 LH shared her experiences and what she learned and would do differently into the future:

I have learned to be clearer in my communication (better clarity in communication). I became more empathetic as a leader – these last two years have changed my outlook. Previously I was setting the roadmap and vision and

let's go. During this time, it is changed to "listening, enrolling, and working to make accommodations and changes. How you get them there is in service of them vs. inservice to the company.

### ***Crisis Leadership***

Evidence from multiple scholarly practitioners, for example, (Bartsch et al., 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2020; McNulty, 2020; McNulty & Marcus, 2020; McWilliams, 2020; Osland et al., 2020), addressed the importance of leadership in a crisis and how to lead employees during the COVID-19 pandemic effectively. Their research was relevant to my study because it provided information about the huge impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on leadership and organizations and validated the challenges leaders faced during this crisis. During my interviews it became vividly clear, the COVID-19 pandemic had an enormous impact on leadership, particularly female executives.

Participant #7 AW shared her experiences and what she would do differently when faced with another crisis in the future. She shared:

Continuing one of my like silly superpower things about building trust and loyalty. And it's a lot easier to do that when you're across the desk or when they see you going out of your way because you're on the road three days out of the week because you want them to know it's important to see them. And that when you're there, you're going to sit and you're going to have a meal and you're going to ask more personal questions than sometimes the virtual world has enabled. So, I must work harder at building all of that. So maybe that has made me a greater leader because I actually think about the reality of the pandemic.

Participant #6 SM shared her experiences and what she would do in the future.

She spoke about how her leadership skills strengthened. She said:

The softer skills surfaced unlike before. I had to retrain myself and unlearn negative behaviors. I used to be cold, direct, intimidating... I found a huge racist unconscious biases. I felt like I had always told myself, I am not racist, I don't look at people differently. Today and going forward working on making different choices.

### **Summary**

In summary, this chapter provided readers with how this research study was conducted and the results and findings it produced. It began by describing the setting, outlining how potential volunteer participants were informed about the study, the qualifications required for participation, and the process they would undergo. The chapter aimed to provide readers with a clear understanding of how the study was conducted, and the outcomes achieved.

The data collection method was explained, which involved one-to-one online interviews where participants shared their personal experiences, viewpoints, and challenges faced as leaders in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a flexible technique commonly used in qualitative psychology research to analyze raw data. The analysis process was detailed, starting with the analysis of recorded audio interview transcripts. Participant demographics and characteristics, included the number of participants and qualifications, were also described. A template was used to analyze the interview data, allowing for the

identification of similarities and disparities in participant answers and the emergence of categories and themes.

From there, the evidence of trustworthiness describing credibility (data collected until saturation was reached was explained), transferability (stating how well the results and validity could be generalized or transferred to other studies was explained), dependability (reflecting the accuracy of the data methods used), and confirmability (well-documented findings of the study reflecting unbiases of the researcher) were explained.

The results were then organized into four major themes that emerged from the responses: Crisis Leadership, Fear of the Unknown, Empathy, and Work and Life Balance. The first major theme, Crisis Leadership, emerged from every participant's response. Several quotes were given as examples that signified their grit, creativity, emotional intelligence, and unique leadership quality that was forged through the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

The second major theme was Fear of the Unknown. This common theme came from all participants in this study. The COVID-19 pandemic had a visibly significant impact on all humankind and all areas of society, and female executive leaders were no exception nor exclusion from the unprecedented effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their life stories were shared openly and genuinely.

The third major theme that was evident with all participants—Empathy. Each female executive mentioned the importance of empathizing with their people, going out of their way to make sure their people felt safe, valued, and had emotional support when



needed. For some, the move to virtual work from home was just another day. Still, for others, this was a significant life adjustment that came with many emotional and social challenges.

The fourth and final major theme was Work and Life Balance. This was an interesting topic all women cared to discuss with one of the most challenging side effects of working virtually, figuring out how to work from home when spouses, and children were everywhere and the female domestic demands, as well as work and leadership demands, were constant.

In Chapter 5, an overview and interpretation of the study's findings are addressed. The findings will be expanded upon based on the extensive literature review provided in Chapter 2, offering deeper insights into the research topic. Additionally, Chapter 5 discusses the study's limitations, provides recommendations for future research studies, and proposes the potential contributions of this study to positive social change. Finally, a robust conclusion will be presented, summarizing the key findings and their implications.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of female executives in the United States who led their employees and organizations through the unprecedented COVID-19 global pandemic crisis. This study was conducted to fill a gap in literature and contribute to empirical research and society by capturing the authentic stories these women told as leaders in U.S. companies facing the unknown world caused by the global pandemic that began in 2020 and the aftermath.

Nine participants were interviewed using 13 interview questions and every participant used the entire hour scheduled. The participants all came from diverse backgrounds comprising multiple ethnicities/races, education, senior leadership titles, years of experience, different industries, married with and without children, living with a partner, single, and living in all different parts of the United States. Interview questions were written to link the three research questions to my study's purpose.

The four major themes identified were crisis leadership, fear of the unknown, empathy, and work and life balance. The crisis leadership theme revealed that all participants possessed the ability to lead through crisis effectively despite facing numerous unknowns. The fear of the unknown theme confirmed that these female executives experienced fear of the unknown during the pandemic along with many others globally. For example, studies suggest that the pandemic created a period of uncertainty and risk, which presented a threat to people's physical and mental health and lives worldwide. The emotional response to a situation where one has limited or minimal understanding of, essentially a lack of knowledge is a real response when facing the fear

of the unknown (Milroth & Frey, 2021; Raub, 2021). Albeit the female executives in my study displayed confident and empathetic leadership, and faced their fears head-on. The third theme, empathy, demonstrated that all participants displayed a high degree of empathy and recognized the importance of understanding their employees' emotions and challenges during the pandemic. They went above and beyond to offer support, advice, and resources to ensure a work-life balance. Lastly, the work and life balance theme illustrated that this challenge, which existed pre-COVID-19, became even more critical during the pandemic. The female executives exhibited flexibility, adaptability, and stress-resilience, while also seeking assistance from others when required.

Chapter 5 builds from the information provided in Chapter 4. The following sections of this chapter describe the interpretation of the findings and expands on the extensive literature review provided in Chapter 2, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, implications for social change, and my conclusions.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

My study's findings provided insights into the unique personal experiences and challenges women executives leading in U.S. organizations faced during the pandemic. This new information extended knowledge in the discipline compared to peer-reviewed literature found in Chapter 2. The conceptual framework that guided my study was the role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders and the humanistic motivation theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Maslow, 1943). These two theories examined gender disparities that continue to challenge and motivate female leaders today. This information

validated the challenges these women faced as leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in the United States. Using a basic qualitative design provided me with the ability to look at what happened during this unprecedented time in history from the participant's point of view as they shared their first-hand experiences during interviews (Flick, 2018).

Analysis of data collected during online interviews with nine participants achieved a saturation point. Through this analysis, four major themes emerged from participant responses: crisis leadership, fear of the unknown, empathy, and work and life balance. As I began my one-to-one interviews, I became aware of the similarities as well as differences these women experienced. They genuinely wanted to share their stories as they lived out a time in leadership unlike ever before. These stories became the missing data in literature that captured reactions and responses as each participant reflected to when the COVID-19 pandemic and forced-quarantine began in March 2020. The following sections include my interpretations of the findings.

### **Crisis Leadership**

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of crisis leadership, specifically focusing on ethical and empathetic leadership. This focus also addressed the need for greater gender equality, diversity, gender equity, and inclusion in U.S. companies. According to various sources, leadership in crisis requires several competencies. For example, leaders in a crisis must put aside their fears and anxieties and bring forth courage while leading by example (Simpson, 2020). My study revealed that female executives who led through the COVID-19 pandemic crisis possessed the competencies needed to lead through a crisis. The participants in my study demonstrated

courage and led by example. They stated that they would never ask their team to do something they were not willing to do themselves.

Leaders also need to be able to communicate clearly and concisely and demonstrate empathy and compassion towards others, be self-aware, possess strong emotional intelligence, and understand the impact of emotions and behaviors on oneself and others (Simpson, 2020). These crisis leadership competencies, while not all were specifically mentioned by participants in the current study, were implied. For example, Participant #5 CF reflected on communicating effectively with empathy and compassion toward others: “I needed to ask more personal questions than before like what are you doing to socialize? Are you safe? How’s your family?” Participant #8 LH exhibited self-awareness and extended empathy and compassion. She added:

We had a lot of young single people at work and for them it was very difficult because there was a lot of isolation that people felt during that time. Some days I was their counselor, just being an ear and listening because they were so confused and alone.

Further competencies include agility and decision-making (Carl, 2020). Agility involves being able to respond quickly to emerging situations and lead through change. Decision-making entails making informed judgments with limited information and empowering those closest to the situation to make expedient decisions. Participant #1 DC demonstrated decision-making with limited information when asked what stood out the most during the COVID-19 pandemic. She shared her initial uncertainty “because we didn’t really know what it would do to our business. We had to reinvent our business

because it impacted several different parts of our business. We had to make some drastic changes to stay afloat.” Participant #2 DJ showed decision-making with limited information when her company told everyone to quarantine. She had to make her own decision on the meaning of nonessential workers at that time. She shared:

Wow, we were working with our customers and clients, and it was a crazy time.

They said nonessential personnel gets quarantined, but we really felt like we were essential personnel because we were responsible for keeping our client, an American multinational corporation that brings quality brand merchandise e.g., groceries, household supplies, in stock, so we considered ourselves essential.

In addition to these competencies, emotionally intelligent leaders are better equipped to handle crises is supported by research in the field of psychology (Goleman, 2017). Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and regulate one’s own emotions, as well as others’ emotions, and use that information to guide one’s behavior. Leaders who have high emotional intelligence demonstrate the capacity to understand and support their team members’ emotions, fostering trust, rapport, and inspiring swift action, particularly during vulnerable and uncertain times (Goleman, 2017). Leaders who possess emotional intelligence and who are able to manage their emotions, understand the emotions of others, and respond effectively and supportively, are more likely to navigate a crisis successfully and guide their team towards a positive outcome (Goleman, 1998).

Participant #2 DJ shared an example of self-management also known as self-discipline, self-regulation, and self-control to block out disruptive thoughts or distractions

(Goleman, 1998). She shared that she had to discipline herself to focus and not wander outside of her home office area because it distracted her: “I tried to stay in the dining room all day because if I wandered around the house, I’d see every little thing that needed to be done.” Participant #4 LS provided an example of self-awareness and awareness of others, when asked to tell me about her leadership experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and what stood out the most:

Everyone had a different interpretation – I felt like – I was trying to be sensitive and considerate to how people reacted to this new reality (some scared and some everything is fine). I tried to connect and give them an open door to me and made sure they knew they had an outlet. In crisis all deal with it differently – trying to be empathetic and human – no matter what they were feeling. The ones that felt it wasn’t a big deal, they needed to be cognizant of others feelings and show empathy to others feelings.

During my interviews, some female leaders also shared that they held virtual baby showers. They tried to simulate gatherings in person as virtually as possible. These female leaders showed compassion, empathy, and connection to their people frequently. Despite the existing crisis they were dealing with, they sought to establish a sense of community and balance between work and life.

Female leaders in my study demonstrated their leadership strengths during the COVID-19 crisis. Through the exploration of their lived experiences, valuable insights into crisis leadership competencies emerged. The crisis leadership competencies the participants exhibited emphasized the critical importance and increased imperatives

towards gender equality, gender equity, and the need for a more diverse and inclusive workforce in corporate America and worldwide.

My study adds scholarly literature to crisis leadership with a focus on female leaders rather than solely men or non-gender specific literature available. Most of the literature available related to crisis leadership focused on men leading through a crisis (Barzilay et al., 2020; Giuntella et al., 2021; McGovern & McGovern, 2021; McKinsey & Company, 2020; McNulty, 2020). Furthermore, my study revealed the leadership strengths, skills, and abilities of female leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic; these examples of women leading through a crisis were never captured before. Participant #3 MS told her story about how she demonstrated strong female leadership during a crisis. She said the rules had changed:

I had to be more flexible and empathetic to my people than ever before. As a leader, I had to deal with this crisis with patience and understanding. I understood that work would be performed with some home-life responsibilities and interruptions. I also understood that these situations were unusual times, and we would move through this crisis together.

Another participant #4 LS shared a story reflecting exemplary female leadership during a crisis:

We had just won a huge brand-new client in February, and they were based in California. I remember we were quickly working towards getting to know the client as much as possible. We were getting ready to travel and head to a huge meeting scheduled for March 12th and 13th. Then my company's executive



leadership put an immediate quarantine and no travel policy in place. I was left with the challenge of figuring out how to serve this new client virtually without jeopardizing or losing them in the process. Everyone on my team was anxious about what was taking place. I was also nervous about it as I realized this pandemic virus could be much bigger than we initially thought. I had to make decisions fast and use whatever information I had in doing so. I pulled my team together, and we had a call with our newly acquired client and agreed to hold virtual meetings instead of in-person ones. March 12 was our first virtual meeting with our new client. We weren't equipped for it, but we figured it out collaboratively. Our office manager had a laptop, and we took that and stacked books up on a table at the front of the room, and we made it work.

Though limited, research supports my study's findings that women excel as leaders during crises. Purkayastha et al. (2020) revealed that countries led by women during the COVID-19 pandemic were more successful in containing the virus than those led by men. The authors concluded that societies that prioritize diverse leadership and inclusive decision-making were more likely to effectively curb the spread of the virus (Purkayastha et al., 2020).

### **Fear of the Unknown**

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unknown and rapidly spreading virus that caused fear and uncertainty because people did not know much about it initially. This fear of the unknown triggered anxiety and stress in many individuals, which was further exacerbated by the constant news coverage of the pandemic, the rising number of cases

and deaths, and the various measures put in place to contain the virus, such as lockdowns and social distancing measures. The pandemic has also had a significant impact on mental health, with many individuals experiencing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions due to the chronic stress and uncertainty caused by the pandemic (Coelho et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought changes to families' routines, with enforced social isolation and quarantine measures, as well as possible financial insecurities and care responsibilities overloaded. Given these potential stressors for family dynamics, this study uncovered a definite fear of the unknown during this period in history. This was true for all leaders interviewed. This finding did not surprise me because the entire world, female and male, feared the unknown during this unprecedented time. I found numerous scholarly articles that support this finding of fear and stress that are not gender specific. In addition, women in general have reported higher stress levels than men during this time. There also continues to be a need for more research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health (Barzilay et al., 2020; Coelho et al., 2020; Giuntella et al., 2021; Oracle & Workplace Intelligence, 2021; Smith, 2021; Xiang et al., 2022). My study added evidence to this field of study and firsthand experiences of female leaders.

Participant #2 DJ is an example of disruption to families' routines while in quarantine. She shared that she could see that the female associates on the team had a different dynamic than the men:

Women were also homemakers in addition to their jobs. You would get accustomed to kids running behind them while on video calls – OMG can't

somebody watch the kids for two minutes? This statement was commonly heard.

The men, on the other hand, who traveled a lot weren't used to being home. We all got cabin fever and had to get out for a walk or walk the dog or step away from the computer. Otherwise, work would lock you in 24/7.

Participant #3 MO brought another story about the significant impact of quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic and how it affected men differently. She shared:

Male counterparts managed their stress differently because as females we bore the pressure and weight of being a leader. We were often a mother, a wife, and the go-to person for anything needed at home. We were more visible than our male counterparts.

Giuntella et al.'s (2021) study provides insight into the mental health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors' analysis revealed a simultaneous increase in depression and the implementation of work-from-home policies, stay-at-home orders, campus closures, and social distancing measures. Their study reinforces the relevance of the current research by emphasizing that the pandemic caused significant disruptions to daily life, impacting how people worked, studied, and interacted during the crisis. Similarly, the participants in this study shared their experiences of stress caused by the pandemic. The following transcript excerpts are from interviews in which participants discussed their stress levels when the pandemic became a stark reality.

Participant #6 SM shared her answers to her leadership experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and what stood out the most. Her response focused on the fear of

the unknown and as a business leader, her leadership experience revolved around the fear of being pregnant at that time. She explained how she was always focused on conducting demonstrations in-store:

There was a very real fear of being laid off or taking a pay cut. I was very pregnant at the time COVID hit and worked out of two offices. I spent at least 20 hours at my client's corporate office, a major consumer goods store, and the remainder at my company's office. We were told to work from home. There were no in-store demonstrations once the quarantine started. I delivered my baby on May 5, and I remember being terrified. Participant #6 SM continued another fear of the unknown as it related to leadership changes during COVID-19. A newly appointed CEO came in, and her peers and others she knew were terminated or left alone. She said she had been cut off from leadership meetings. A male leader came in March who cut out anyone at the director level (me at that time) from leadership meetings. He made decisions about his people, and I remember feeling dread that the glass ceiling was back.

Participant #6 SM's fear of the unknown related to little or no communication from her leadership team at the top. This was an outlier because the others felt their companies communicated constantly as the pandemic worsened. Participant #3 MO shared her fear of the unknown as it related to so much turnover taking place. She was experiencing many layoffs of people she knew, and she feared she might lose her position as the COVID-19 pandemic progressed. She also shared the fear of not being able to

show her leadership worth to her boss when working remotely. She shared a question: “how do I show credibility and value?”

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on all sectors of society, including and especially female leaders because of the multiple work and life responsibilities they deal with daily. Research on the link between gender and susceptibility to anxiety and depression suggests that women may be more vulnerable to these mental health problems than men (Altemus et al., 2014; Barzilay et al., 2020). My study magnified the importance of examining the pandemic’s impact on female leaders. It brings new information to this topic by focusing on the lived experiences of women executives during the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic brought significant disruption and challenges that increased stress and anxiety levels for everyone. This was the first global crisis that hit the U.S. hard. According to the World Health Organization, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a 25% increase in anxiety and depression worldwide. The need to adapt to remote work, remote teams, and economic uncertainty while balancing leadership and caregiver responsibilities (which often fall disproportionately on women) can all contribute to increased stress and anxiety (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022; World Health Organization [WHO], 2020).

### **Empathy**

Empathy is a core competency measured in the social-awareness quadrant of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998). Three key takeaways were identified from two major studies in my literature review regarding women in the workplace. These studies focused on how women’s leadership differed from male leadership. The first study

mentioned was by McKinsey (2021), the largest study of women in corporate America, and the second study was by Miller and Freedman (2021), the world's largest study of emotional intelligence and their study speaks to the facts that female leaders when compared to male leaders in similar positions, demonstrated more emotional intelligence than men. These studies pointed out that their research found emotional intelligence as a differentiator that helps female leaders close the gap on the advancement ladder (McKinsey, 2022; Miller & Freedman, 2022).

The pandemic exacerbated gender inequalities in various areas, such as pay and job security-causing stress and anxiety levels. Recent evidence shows that female leaders can manage crises better than their male peers. For example, a senior contributor to *Forbes Magazine*, Zalis (2022), found that female leaders outperformed male leaders in areas such as leading with empathy and leading with vulnerability, both critical skills in times of crisis. The women in my study's experiences confirmed their fortitude and abilities to lead through crises with empathy, vulnerability, and resilience.

Empathy was identified as a critical skill for everyone to strengthen, especially for leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was because empathy required one's ability to take oneself out of their own head and put themselves into someone else's shoes, genuinely caring about what that person was feeling and why. It also required the skill of actively listening to whomever one was speaking with and aligning one's message, clearly and understandably, to communicate that one cared (Goleman, 1998). The following transcript responses were from interviews with participants regarding the

empathy consistently exhibited by all leaders with their staff and others. Participant #3

MS explained:

During the pandemic, they had to be more flexible and empathetic to their people than ever before. They had to be more patient and accept that work would be performed differently with home-life responsibilities and interruptions. They also had to accept that these were unusual times, and they would get through the crisis together.

Participant #6 SM shared her experience and realized the importance of checking in with her people. She learned more than she wanted to about abusive relationships in homes. She said “abusive relationships that used to occur behind closed doors became visible due to lockdown. I always consider myself an empathetic leader and through this experience, I learned the importance of checking in with my people frequently.”

Participant #7 AW shared her story and how she knew she needed to show more empathy. She said:

Working from home created less connectivity. I also realized that while my life was fairly simple, many others were not. People were struggling through many different dynamics during COVID making it a very interesting leadership challenge to deal with. Leading with empathy was what I did.

Participant #8 LH also shared a similar story. She emphasized that more empathy and creating connections were needed: “I created ongoing regular connections with my team and others.”

The COVID-19 pandemic was a pivotal time in history when society started actively fighting for their lives; safety became the number one priority to ward off the COVID-19 virus (WHO, 2020). This unprecedented time brought to light the importance of authentic and empathetic leadership and opened the opportunity to build greater awareness around the skills and competencies needed to authentically lead through crisis and going forward (Kochan & Dyer, 2020; Liu, 2020). This movement also opened the opportunity to compare crisis leadership competencies between men and women (Dirani et al., 2020; Ferrazzi, 2021). The female leaders in my study all exhibited strength in empathetic leadership.

New vital competencies for leadership across all organizations in the U.S. began to focus on ethical and empathetic leadership. This was a radical mind shift towards building honesty, trust, openness, and mutual respect. Most prominently, addressing how to drive diversity, equity, and inclusion starting at the board of director levels and cascading down to all leadership and throughout the entire organization was needed (Aron, 2021; Collings et al., 2021; Dirani et al., 2020; Hadrich, 2020; Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2020; Roberts & Washington, 2020; Starner, 2020).

In my study, all the female leaders exhibited strong ethics and empathetic leadership and the role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders was essential to this study because the female executives in my study achieved success in crisis leadership and possessed leadership competencies such as empathy and resilience that were needed to effectively lead. Their leadership as women was evident, which demonstrated strength and progress in breaking down gender leadership prejudice.



Exploring the lived experiences of female executives leading their organizations and people in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic opened opportunities to identify themes shared by the participants during interviews. These themes could serve as the basis for developing new research to increase awareness of the role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders and address the challenges and barriers encountered by female executive leaders. Moreover, this research expanded upon the theory of gender differences and perception of differences. Exploring the female executives' lived experiences leading in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic was a study of leadership that had never been conducted before.

The purpose of my study was to explore the lived experiences of female executives as they led others during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of my study were important because they documented gender-specific leadership information and demonstrated the success achieved in crisis leadership by female executives. This validation showed that female leaders possessed the competencies necessary to lead in the new world post-COVID-19 pandemic. Through the personal stories and experiences of the female executives, the theoretical frameworks I selected provided opportunities to explore their leadership successes during a crisis and the motivating factors behind the decisions they made, contributing to this field of study.

The second theory selected for this study was the Humanistic Motivational Theory, which helped me investigate the motivating factors that contributed to the ability of the women in my study to effectively lead during a crisis. The main goals of this theory promoted self-actualization and better international relations that enhanced peace

between people, social welfare, and social justice (Bohart & Greening, 2001). In other words, the objective of humanistic psychology was to examine how people could achieve their potential and contribute at the individual level to address society's needs.

My study provided opportunities to better understand the critical importance of humanistic psychology and the driving forces that motivated female executives to lead through the COVID-19 pandemic, gaining deeper insight into female executives' self-actualization and addressing society's needs for increased social justice. Women have been and continued to be perceived and treated differently than their male counterparts (Azmat & Boring, 2020; Bartsch et al., 2020; Crotti et al., 2020; Michelson, 2020; Kişi, 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2020; McNulty, 2020; McNulty & Marcus, 2020; Michelson, 2020; Schneider et al., 2015). The lived experiences of female executives in my study reflected progress towards gender equality; however, these women agreed that we still have a long way to go to reach equality and equity, and therefore prejudice and perception of female leaders still exist.

### **Work and Life Balance**

Achieving work-life balance was and continues to be a challenge for all workers in the U.S., particularly for professional women in dual-career partnerships/marriages with young children (Chen et al., 2022). Female leaders often face persistent gender stereotypes and are held to a higher standard than their male counterparts, placing them at an unfair disadvantage. Balancing family responsibilities and work can present significant barriers for women striving to reach top levels of corporate leadership. Many U.S. organizations place an undue burden on female workers, with gender stereotypes

and expectations pressuring them to accept all work presented to them. Working mothers may feel the need to prove their value and commitment to their work, resulting in taking on more work than they can handle. Therefore, it is essential for organizations to recognize and address gender biases and encourage employees to set healthy boundaries and prioritize their well-being (Boorstin, 2022; Carter, 2020; Dastagir, 2021; Eagly & Karau et al., 2002; Hunt, 2022; McKinsey, 2022; Zeng et al., 2018). The findings of my study align with the literature and illustrate the challenges that female executives face in balancing work and life. The following participant responses provide examples of these challenges.

While working from home during quarantine, participant #1 DC was asked what the most significant difficulties were. She shared:

When you are removed from traveling and away from home you leave whatever you need to do at home and travel and work. Being grounded and not traveling made me more visible and accessible to my son. He would ask what's for dinner and I'd say it's in the freezer LOL. Having someone peek around the corner of your office and say aren't you cooking?

Participant #2 DJ shared:

I had to discipline myself not to wander outside of my home office area because it would distract me. I tried to stay in the dining room all day because if I wander around the house, I'll see every little thing that needs to get done.

Participant #4 LS shared her challenges of working from home with a newborn:

I had a newborn baby at home and there were no spots open at daycare. I was on six different waiting lists to get a spot. I couldn't get him in until he was one year old. So, I had to work from home with a newborn for a year. But you know what was interesting is people became so accustomed to seeing your kids and knowing more about your home life. I never felt like I was shamed for having a baby on my screen with me or if he made a noise. There were times when I was highly stressed about if he started crying because depending on who was in a meeting, but, for the most part, my clients would tell me to go get your baby, I wanna see 'em.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, executive women leading organizations in the U.S. were faced with unprecedented challenges. With the lockdown in effect, employees had to transition to remote work and leaders had to act quickly to ensure that everyone had the necessary equipment and secure access to intellectual property to continue working from home. This required leaders to step up and lead differently during the crisis. Business publications highlighted the need for crisis leadership and management planning to build resilience in businesses (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2022). The women in my study shared their challenges in balancing work and life responsibilities while working from home during the pandemic and quarantine. Their experiences supported the literature on work and life balance challenges mentioned earlier.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Possible obstacles were anticipated, including potential difficulties in recruiting participants for interviews. In Chapter 1, limitations of the study were discussed, and it was acknowledged that by the time interviews were conducted in the U.S., participants would most likely be in a post-COVID-19 status and adjusting to their new normal working conditions. This was found to be true during the first quarter of 2023 when the interviews were conducted. Despite this, the participants were able to reflect on their leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was so life and leadership altering that it was easy for them to recall their experiences as if they were right back in March of 2020.

Data collection for this study was conducted via Information Communication Technology (ICT). Each participant connected with the researcher virtually online in real-time, face-to-face live Q&A interview sessions (Salmons, 2016). This online research method enabled the collection of data in a private environment where meaningful interactions could take place, creating a trusted environment that facilitated the exchange of information through questions and answers.

Participants were offered a choice to be interviewed on their phones or via online video conference. All participants chose the online video conference method for interviews. As the researcher, I was able to see participants and they could see me which was my preferred method to conduct interviews because the virtual experience was closer to reality than a phone call which only offered verbal exchange of information. The only limitation of using ICT was that we only saw the top half of each other on the

videoconference. However, this was sufficient to offer me verbal and non-verbal rich data while the participant felt safe and comfortable.

### **Recommendations**

The recommendations for further research were based on the strengths and limitations of the study, as well as the existing literature. The recommendations aimed to address the scholarly gap that this study sought to fill, which was the lack of literature describing the experiences of female executives leading their organizations and employees through the COVID-19 pandemic. The unprecedented nature of the crisis caused by the Coronavirus disease in 2019 (COVID-19; World Health Organization [WHO], 2020) contributed to this gap. The study provided valuable insights from the experiences of women leaders during the COVID-19 crisis, but it was acknowledged that further research was necessary to build upon these findings and close the literature gap.

A future recommendation could involve expanding upon this study by exploring the experiences of male leaders in U.S. corporations who guided their organizations and employees through the COVID-19 pandemic. The study would focus on the period from the start of the enforced quarantine in March 2020 and extended through the third quarter or beyond. Participants would need to meet specific qualifications, such as identifying as male, having at least five years of executive leadership experience, and holding titles with equivalent responsibilities to Director, Controller, Assistant Vice President, Vice President, Senior Vice President, Executive Vice President, and C-Suite positions such as Chief Human Resource Officer, Chief Diversity Officer, Chief Executive Officer, Chief Financial Officer, or other related titles.

Moreover, participants would be required to manage a minimum of five direct reports and be based in the United States. Their consent would be obtained for recording interviews conducted via online videoconferencing. A future study focusing on male leaders during the pandemic would offer valuable insights into their experiences, complementing the findings of this study and contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of leadership during crises.

It is important to note that potential challenges in recruiting participants for interviews could have arisen depending on the timing of the study, as the world may have transitioned into a post-COVID-19 pandemic era for several years. The use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) or telephone interviews may have also presented limitations, as discussed earlier. Conducting a study exploring the lived experiences of male leaders in the U.S. would have expanded upon the current research and provided opportunities for comparing and contrasting their experiences with those of female leaders in this study.

To broaden the scope of the research, it is recommended to include female leaders in similar leadership positions in corporate organizations outside the U.S.. Additionally, a longitudinal study examining the experiences of female leaders over time would be beneficial. Such an approach has the potential to uncover new findings and perspectives, increase the participant pool, and provide a global viewpoint.

### **Implications**

Societies worldwide experienced the emotional and physical challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the results of my study represented merely the initial phase

of the ongoing challenges faced in 2020 and 2021. As of January 2023, the pandemic continued to persist, with a significant number of older individuals succumbing to the virus, albeit not always officially classified as COVID-related deaths (The Lancet, 2023). Concerns arose regarding the potential repercussions of terminating the COVID-19 public health emergency policy, which had been implemented on May 11, 2023. Despite the progress made controlling the rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the virus continues to cause severe health issues and fatalities, demanding continued vigilance and preventative measures in 2023. In an interview with Guest at Emory University, Mendez asked “Does this mean we no longer need to worry about COVID-19?” Guest replied “Just because the public health emergency policy is ending does not mean that COVID-19 is done. It is not done with us” (Mendez, 2023, para. 5).

The findings of my study have the potential to aid stakeholders, including boards of directors, senior leadership teams, and organizational executives, in establishing the necessary infrastructures, protocols, and training programs. These initiatives would enable them to navigate future crises more effectively and lead their organizations in an ever-evolving world. Corporate infrastructures encompass critical physical systems and structures that serve as the bedrock of a business, such as network and IT services, transportation systems, communication networks, and other essential services. These elements provide indispensable support for companies to operate efficiently (Spacey, 2017).

Corporate protocols consist of a set of rules and guidelines that govern employee conduct within an organization, promoting professional and ethical behavior and ensuring



compliance with legal and regulatory standards. These protocols encompass various areas, including communication, data security, and financial reporting. They can be communicated through handbooks, training programs, or other means, and play a crucial role in fostering a productive and safe work environment (Spacey, 2017).

Corporate training programs are vital for enhancing the knowledge and skills of leaders and employees, enabling them to excel in their respective roles. These programs cover a wide range of topics, such as leadership development, communication, and job-specific skills, with the goal of improving performance, productivity, and work quality. Training can take various forms, including classroom instruction, online courses, workshops, and on-the-job training. Effective training programs not only enhance employee performance but also contribute to higher retention rates and job satisfaction by instilling confidence and competence in the workforce (Spacey, 2017).

The findings of my study can guide organizations in developing training programs that prioritize empathy, thereby improving the lives and careers of female leaders and their employees. Furthermore, the insights from my study can aid organizations in advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion for female leaders and employees, fostering a people-centric approach to building sustainable businesses that benefit both the organization and its workforce in the long term. These findings have the potential to drive significant changes, promoting a more diverse and inclusive workforce that better represents the modern world and creates equitable and thriving workplaces for all.

## Conclusion

Previously, no literature had explored the experiences of female executives as they led their organizations and employees through a crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the interviews conducted, I personally gained unexpected insights. One notable discovery was that female leaders demonstrated an innate commitment to safeguarding the lives of their employees and their families. These leaders assumed personal responsibility and accountability for business decisions made during the crisis, acting as a bridge between their employees and corporate leadership while prioritizing both safety and organizational sustainability. Moreover, I learned about the remarkable altruism displayed by these female leaders, as they went above and beyond to support their employees not only in work-related matters but also in personal and familial challenges. Notably, some of these women even accepted significant salary cuts to ensure their employees retained their jobs and income.

This study fills a crucial gap in the existing literature by delving into the experiences of female executives leading their organizations and employees through a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Through in-depth interviews, I discovered that these female leaders showcased exceptional leadership skills, exhibiting empathy, effective communication, collaboration, and sound decision-making abilities. Their experiences provide valuable lessons for leaders across all domains. This finding is supported by research and numerous reputable sources, including *Commerce Bank*, *Fortune*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Forbes*, and *Stanford Medicine*. Additionally, previous research has demonstrated that countries led by women achieved better

outcomes in terms of COVID-19 cases and fatalities (Barrett, 2021; Commerce Bank, 2021; Katz, 2021; White, 2020; Zenger & Folkman, 2020).

In conclusion, this study highlighted the vital role that diversity and inclusion played in leadership during crises, specifically in the context of female leadership. The findings challenged traditional assumptions about gender and leadership, paving the way for further research in this area. By investigating the effectiveness of female leadership during the pandemic, the study provided evidence that women can be as effective, if not better, leaders than men in times of crisis. Moving forward, it remains crucial to continue examining the role of gender in leadership and strive to establish more inclusive and diverse leadership structures that can effectively serve our communities during times of crisis.

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## Appendix A: Pre-Interview Questionnaire

**Pre-Interview Questionnaire**

1. What is your title during the COVID-19 pandemic and today?
2. # Of direct reports? Total # of employees in your functional area?
3. Your Age?
4. Marital Status: Married, Partnership, Single, Divorced, Widowed, prefer not to answer?
5. Do you have any children living at home? If yes, how many? What are their ages?
6. Are you a caregiver of elder parents? Other?
7. How do you identify yourself? What is your gender? Female, Male, Other, prefer not to answer
8. Race: Black, Latinx, White, Asian, Native American, other, prefer not to answer
9. Highest Level of Education?
10. Years of Experience in your field?
11. Years in this position?

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

**Interview Questions**

1. I'd like you to think back to the beginning of the COVID-19 epidemic.
  - a. Tell me about your position at that time.  
Answer:
  
2. Tell me about your leadership experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. What thoughts stand out the most, as you reflect upon first hearing about the COVID-19 pandemic and forthcoming quarantine?  
Answer:
  - a. What new leadership experiences, if any, did you encounter while leading your employees through the COVID-19 pandemic?  
Answer:
  
3. How would you rate your stress levels during this period on a scale of 0 to 10? 10 being the most stressful.  
Answer:
  
4. Do you feel your experiences and levels of stress were different from your male executive peers? If yes, please share those differences.  
Answer:
  
5. Do you believe you managed your stress well during this time? If yes, what were some of the things you did to manage your stress? If no, would you tell me more about that?  
Answer:
  
6. How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect your organization's leadership team?  
Answer:
  
7. How did you set up your home office space?  
Answer:
  
8. Were you able to separate your work time from your home life? If yes, how? If no, what were the greatest challenges?  
Answer:
  
9. What were some of your most significant problems (or challenges) experienced while working from home during quarantine?  
Answer:

10. Now that was the past, let's think about the present. Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has had an effect on equality, equity, inclusion, and belonging in your organization today? If yes, what effect? If no, why not?

Answer:

11. Do you feel leading your people through this crisis has strengthened or weakened your leadership? In what ways?

Answer:

12. Let's talk about the future and leading in the new world. Are you leading differently? If yes, what are you doing differently today?

Answer:

13. Do you believe female leadership in corporate America has greater visibility and more opportunities because of the COVID-19 pandemic? If yes, why? If no, why not?

Answer:

### Appendix C: Interview Questions and Research Questions

The table below lists the Interview Questions in the left-hand column and the Research Questions linked to each interview question are found on the right.

Interview Questions	Research Questions
What thoughts stand out the most, as you reflect upon first hearing about the COVID-19 pandemic and forthcoming quarantine?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What were female executives' experiences and personal views while leading through the COVID-19 pandemic?</li> <li>○ What did they learn about themselves, their organizations, and their people during this unprecedented time?</li> </ul>
As you reflect to the COVID-19 pandemic what thoughts stand out the most?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What were female executives' experiences and personal views while leading through the COVID-19 pandemic?</li> <li>○ What did they learn about themselves, their organizations, and their people during this unprecedented time?</li> </ul>
What were your priorities when you were told that all nonessential workers must immediately move to working from home (WFH)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What were female executives' experiences and personal views while leading through the COVID-19 pandemic?</li> </ul>
How would you describe your leadership experience during the COVID-19 pandemic? Do you feel yours was different from your male executive peers? If yes, please share those differences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What were female executives' experiences and personal views while leading through the COVID-19 pandemic?</li> </ul>
As you reflect on this leadership experience what was it like for you? Your direct reports? Your superiors?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What were female executives' experiences and personal views while leading through the COVID-19 pandemic?</li> <li>○ What did they learn about themselves, their organizations, and their people during this unprecedented time?</li> </ul>
How did this experience affect your organization's leadership team? Board of directors? Private Equity or Venture Capital Owners if any?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What were female executives' experiences and personal views while leading through the COVID-19 pandemic?</li> </ul>
Were you able to separate your work time from your home life? If yes, how? If no, what were the greatest challenges? If yes, how?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What were female executives' experiences and personal views while leading through the COVID-19 pandemic?</li> <li>○ What did they learn about themselves, their organizations, and their people during this unprecedented time?</li> </ul>
Did this experience leading and working from home change your thinking on how you will lead into the future? If yes, how?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What were female executives' experiences and personal views while leading through the COVID-19 pandemic?</li> <li>○ What would they do differently in the future when faced with another crisis of this magnitude?</li> </ul>

What were some of your most significant problems experienced while working from home during quarantine?	○ What were female executives' experiences and personal views while leading through the COVID-19 pandemic?
Do you believe you managed your stress well during this time? If yes, what were some of the things you did to manage your stress? If no, would you tell me more about that?	○ What did they learn about themselves, their organizations, and their people during this unprecedented time?
What new leadership experiences, if any, did you encounter while leading your employees through the COVID-19 pandemic?	○ What were female executives' experiences and personal views while leading through the COVID-19 pandemic?
Do you feel leading your people through this crisis has strengthened or weakened you? In what ways?	○ What would they do differently in the future when faced with another crisis of this magnitude?
Now that was the past, let's think about the present, how are you dealing with the ongoing risks that still exist?	○ What did they learn about themselves, their organizations, and their people during this unprecedented time?
Do you believe there is greater equality, equity, inclusion, and belonging in your organization today?	○ What did they learn about themselves, their organizations, and their people during this unprecedented time?
Let's talk about the future and leading in the new world, what would you do differently?	○ What did they learn about themselves, their organizations, and their people during this unprecedented time?
Do you believe female leadership in corporate America has greater visibility and more opportunities because of the COVID-19 pandemic?	○ What did they learn about themselves, their organizations, and their people during this unprecedented time?

## Appendix D: Interview Recruitment Flyer



### SEEKING PARTICIPANTS FOR STUDY Exploring the Lived Experiences of Female Executives Who Led During the COVID-19 Pandemic

- I am conducting a research study that could help to understand first-hand the experiences and challenges of women leading during a historic pandemic situation in the United States.
- This study's results can help stakeholders build the necessary infrastructure and protocols, training and empathy needed to improve the lives and careers of women leaders and their employees in the future. Societies around the world have experienced the emotional and physical challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the results of this study are just the beginning. The information gained can also help organizations increase diversity, equity, and inclusion for women leaders and employees, and enable a more people-centric approach to building a sustainable organization where businesses and people can thrive into the future.
- This study is part of the doctoral study for Jane Loya Ryan, a Ph.D. student at Walden University.

**About the study:**

- One 45-60-minute online video conference or telephone interview.

**Volunteers must meet these requirements:**

- Must identify as a female with 5 or more years of experience at the executive level, with titles equivalent in responsibility to Director, Controller, Assistant Vice President, Vice President, up to C-Suite, and responsible for a minimum of 5 direct reports.
- Must be an executive in a US organization that is not part of a healthcare system during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic through 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter or more.

**VOLUNTEERING TO PARTICIPATE IN JANE LOYA RYAN'S STUDY IS READY TO ACCEPT VOLUNTEERS.**

**(THE FIRST 10 TO VOLUNTEER WILL BE ASKED TO PARTICIPATE)**

**IRB Approval Number:** 09-20-22-0317907



**TO CONFIDENTIALLY VOLUNTEER,  
PLEASE SCHEDULE AN HOUR WITH ME  
USING MY CALENDLY APPLICATION LINK**