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Women's Lack of Top Leadership Positions in the Public Sector Despite Having Similar Qualifications as Men

Ashley Rodgers
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Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

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Ashley Rodgers

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

Women's Lack of Top Leadership Positions in the Public Sector Despite Having Similar

Qualifications as Men

by

Ashley Rodgers

MPA, Troy University, 2020

BS, Tuskegee University, 2017

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

May 2024

Abstract

Gender inequity is a problem in the United States that has been deeply explored. However, researchers and policymakers still have not determined why gender inequality continues to permeate society. Women in the United States continue to be overlooked for top leadership positions despite possessing similar qualifications as their male counterparts. The lack of women in leadership positions also extends to jobs in the federal workplace, as women hold 44% of positions in the U.S. government. Still, only 34% of those women have positions at the highest level of service—senior executive service (SES) positions. This study elaborated on the problem of why women are not hired into as many leadership roles. Data were collected from interviews with 10 women who have sought an SES or SES-equivalent position in the public sector. The interviews were used to examine the perceptions and experiences of women selected or rejected for an SES or SES-equivalent position, helping to understand better why women are being passed over for leadership roles. The results highlighted the effectiveness of transformational leadership and emphasized the importance of servant leadership and genuine care for followers for SES positions. Additionally, diverse facilitators and barriers, such as the roles of mentors, HR support, and the impact of discrimination and bias, were identified, contributing to a deeper understanding of women's experiences in pursuing SES leadership roles. This study has implications for policymakers, managers, and directors who evaluate applicants for SES and SES-equivalent positions. The study also has implications for positive social change by improving workplace diversity and leadership in businesses' upper echelons.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my future kids and women desiring top leadership positions. To my knowledge, I am the first in my family to achieve a doctorate. I want to be a great example and role model for others to follow in leadership and life. This dissertation sheds light on the inequities, policies, and perceptions between women and men in leadership despite having similar qualifications. I hope that one day, women can be viewed in the same regard as men when it comes to leading in the workplace and organizations. I sincerely desire that the information from this research will shift perspectives, give women first-hand knowledge on navigating this phenomenon, and help contribute to policymakers' literature supporting gender equality.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Women in the United States continue to be overlooked for top leadership positions despite possessing similar qualifications as their male counterparts. Women in the workplace hold 52% of professional-level positions in the United States, yet only 14.6% of those women have senior management positions (Schaap & Shockley, 2021). These discrepancies between these two genders are neither hidden nor new; however, researchers still do not know what factors affect women being overlooked for leadership roles. The underlying causes of this discrepancy in the balance of women and men must be explored to promote equitable opportunities for women. For instance, researchers have found that men are valued more for their leadership potential (Sims et al., 2021); in contrast, actual performance after hiring women is appreciated, showing that men are seen as a preferential first choice for senior executive service (SES) and SES-equivalent positions over women. A *SES position* is defined as a managerial or supervisory federal position linked to individual performance, and an SES equivalent position is a managerial or supervisory role in the public sector at the state and local levels, as well as in non-profit organizations in government as a whole. In this study, I explored why a male gets hired instead of a female, which will provide policymakers and the general working public with the knowledge necessary to give women an equitable opportunity to attain a SES position.

Chapter 1 examines the history of gender inequality in leadership positions and why women must be afforded the same chances at SES and SES-equivalent positions as men. It is crucial to understand the power dynamics between men, women, and society

and why significant gender gaps still exist across all societal aspects (Casad et al., 2022). In this chapter, I will use the literature to contextualize the current policies enacted that attempt to level the workplace playing field between men and women. As SES and SES-equivalent positions rely on structural organizations, this study used the conceptual framework responsible for efficiency and rationality in an organization put forward by the ideas of Frederick Taylor, Max Weber, Henri Fayol, and Luther Gulick to analyze the role women play in such structures (see Shafritz et al., 2016).

Next, Chapter 1 elaborates on the problem of why women are not being hired into as many leadership roles as their male counterparts. In addition, this section provides evidence of the study's relevance and why further studies on this subject matter are required. This chapter also includes a discussion to justify the overall reasoning behind the study's qualitative-based literature and interview design, allowing for proper interpretation and results. This study was based on 10 qualitative interviews with women who have sought an SES or SES-equivalent position in the public sector. Participants were asked about their experiences, expectations, and perceptions related to pursuing an SES or SES-equivalent position, among other things, regarding their experiences. Further queries on the study overview are addressed by defining terms relating to gender inequalities between men and women and structural organization theory and practice.

Background and Context

Gender inequity is an observed problem in the United States. However, researchers and policymakers still have not determined why gender inequality continues to permeate society. The 1960s brought equal employment rights to the nation, which

protected the rights of women and people of color, yet half a century later, there are still pay and hiring gaps between men and women in the workplace (Bishu & Headley, 2021; Randall et al., 1963). Across the board, White women earn 82 cents for every dollar men earn in the same role, and Black and Hispanic females earn less than 70 cents compared to their male counterparts (Carrazana & Mithani, 2023). The focus of this study was leadership role inequities within the U.S. government, and it is essential to note that women in federal positions earn 90 cents for every dollar compared to their male counterparts (see Kochhar, 2023).

Compounding the inequity between women and men in the workplace, although there are policies enacted protecting against discrimination and promoting equal opportunities, such as the Equal Opportunity Act of 1972, these policies do not account for women being physiologically and culturally different than men (Bishu & Headley, 2021). For example, these policies do not account for the barriers regarding pregnancy and motherhood, rendering the policies ineffective in many circumstances (Bishu & Headley, 2021). There are significant disadvantages due to unconscious biases against women and insufficient training regarding such unconscious biases (Russell, 2023). Not only were the biases understood within this work culture, but they were also ineffectively addressed, which is comparative to the problem this study addressed—exploring the current ineffective pathway in which women are hired into leadership roles (Russell, 2023).

Context of the Study: Gap in the Literature

Of all the Fortune 500 companies worldwide, only 14.6% of the chief executive officer (CEO) positions are held by women, despite women making up over half of the workforce (Schaap & Shockley, 2021). Like pay gap inequality data, the public sector offers more promising statistics on women in leadership positions. However, the numbers regarding women in leadership roles remain low compared to the actual workforce. In the U.S. federal workforce, 45% are women, and only 34% hold SES positions (Sweeting, 2023). A 2020 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey report was released but offered no statistics on how many SES positions were held by women (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2020). Numerous studies on gender inequality in the workplace have been analyzed, but none were found with recommendations on best practices for female executives or advancement (Schaap & Shockley, 2021). It is imperative to understand why women are not being chosen for critical leadership roles, including SES and SES-equivalent positions.

Problem Statement

Gender inequalities have persisted for centuries and have created gender role expectations that have negatively affected women in the workforce globally (Smith & Sinkford, 2022). Congruent with this, there is a problem in the public sector in the United States concerning gender equality. The problem is that despite having comparable qualifications, women are consistently underrepresented in top leadership positions compared to men. The Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 was passed in response to increased female workforce representation following both World Wars,

legally mandating that women have an equal chance at the same jobs as men. Despite women having theoretically equal employment rights, current statistics do not show a similar playing field. This problem continues to impact females in the workplace, especially at the leadership or supervisory level because only 14.6% of women in the workforce hold executive leadership roles, and only 4.6% are Fortune 500 CEOs (Schaap & Shockley, 2021; Sweeting, 2023; U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). This problem is further compounded in top leadership positions in the federal workplace, as women hold 44% of positions in the U.S. government. However, only 34% of those women have SES positions (Auriol et al., 2022). Many possible factors contribute to this problem, including the notion that women typically take time away from their careers to start families and the prevalence of gender role bias in the workplace (Schaap & Shockley, 2021; Sims et al., 2021). This study contributes to the body of knowledge needed to address this problem by focusing on the perspectives of women who have sought an SES or SES-equivalent position in a government organization on the factors that promote or impede their successful employment in these positions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of career civil servicewomen who have sought an SES or SES-equivalent position in a government or public sector organization to gain insight into factors contributing to the unequal representation of women in this sector of the workforce. I used a qualitative approach that consisted of semistructured interviews with 10 civil service women with master's degrees or higher, 5 years or above experience, and who have sought an SES or SES-equivalent

leadership position in a government organization in the past 5 years.

The findings of this study offer recommendations to policymakers, employers, and employees in the governmental sector and insight into the leadership hiring process of SES and SES-equivalent positions. The findings add to the advancement of women in the governmental workforce and aid in the persistent goal of an equitable workforce. The need for equity in leadership positions is required, not only for equal opportunities but also for diversity in leadership. Diversity in leadership, which includes having women in leadership positions, is necessary for strategic development, the upward mobility of others, and progressive ideas (Smith & Sinkford, 2022).

Research Question

The formation of qualitative research question (RQ)s holds significant value in producing quality results (Creswell, 2018). There was one primary RQ posed in this study: What are the perspectives, perceptions, and opinions of civil service women who have sought a SES or SES-equivalent position in a government organization?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual basis for this study was rooted in the convergence of the organizational theories of Frederick Taylor, Max Weber, and Henri Fayol (Shafritz et al., 2016). These include organizational theory, gendered organizational theory, and gendered substructure organizational theory, all of which apply to the present study. Luther Gulick's theories on organizational structure in public administration were also used to support this study. Organizational theory assumes that an organization has specific objectives, guidelines, hierarchy, definitions of affiliation, and defined job roles, all

interacting formally and informally (Tompkins, 2023). Although the study of organizational theory is a relatively new science, the fathers of management, Taylor, Fayol, and Weber, solidified management theories in the scientific, administrative, and bureaucratic fields to yield success (Tompkins, 2023). It was noted that these theorists, though established, are all male. The review reflects on and analyzes their viewpoints.

The organizational theory involves five parts including: (a) the individual, (b) the formal arrangement of functions, (c) the informal organization, (d) the demands of the coexistence of informal and formal arrangements, and (e) lastly, the physical system analysis (Mills et al., 2022). The individual refers to the personality, motivations, and attitudes brought into the structure. The formal arrangement of functions refers to the actual job structures, and the informal organization signifies the informal interactions between the individual and the informal group. The formal and informal organizations converge and create a conflict pattern where both sides attempt to negotiate the social norms within the physical setting where they coexist (Mills et al., 2022; Shafritz et al., 2016). In the study, the components that comprise organizational theory within a federal or public sector workplace were analyzed relative to gender roles, as were the informal and formal expectations of the individuals within the structure. When coupled with organizational theory, such analysis provides insight into where an organization is flawed, thereby inhibiting women from advancing into SES and SES-equivalent positions.

The study was also supported by the gendered organizational theory, which examines the organizational dynamics of how gender is defined and the patterns

associated with and within genders (Acker, 1990); this theoretical framework provided insights into how gender affects workplace organizational structure. Shafritz et al. (2016) used Acker's (1990) theories on gender in systems to offer insight into how gender and organizational theory intersect. Acker explained that gender relations in organizations can present as "open and overt, as when managers choose only men or women for certain positions ... on the other hand, gender may be deeply hidden in organizational processes and decisions that appear to have nothing to do with gender" (p. 421). Acker also claimed that structurally, gender cannot be removed from the equation in an organization due to the gravity of the historical and present gender roles and expectations of society. These expected roles are thought to present themselves in any situation or job regardless of the scope of the position held (Shafritz et al., 2016). The key is to accept that gender influences the structure and policies of organizations, which an individual or a leader can use to their advantage or allow themselves to be hindered concerning mobility and cohesion within a system.

Gendered substructure organizational theory focuses on the spatial and physical barriers that affect women in these structures, including employment and residential proximities and adaptations for reproductive requirements (Acker, 1990; Shafritz et al., 2016). When examining a reproductive individual within a formal organization, certain factors, such as the work-life cohesion ideal versus the separation of work and life, can create a collision of past expectations and new norms within the workplace; this can be construed as unavoidable and result in passive uncomfortable changes within the workplace structure (Acker, 1990; Cockburn, 1991). I used these theories and observed

gender relations in the workforce to conclude the data on women not being hired into SES or SES-equivalent positions.

Gulick's structural theories also support understanding the biases that a workplace can create rather than just the relationship between structure and efficiency (Meier, 2010). Gulick suggested that organizations must focus on these biases within government or public institutions, with the motivation behind focusing on public institutions being that these institutions rely on cost-effective and efficient policies (Meier, 2010). Although Gulick did not concentrate on biases between genders, I used his theories within the analysis to offer recommendations on improving women's advancement to SES or SES-equivalent positions within the federal government or other institutions in the public sector. Further, the following questions are the basis for this study and were used in analyzing the dynamics of gender within general or federal organizational theory: "When does process X work and under what conditions? How does a given structure maximize one set of values but not another?" (Meier, 2010, p. S288).

I used a convergence of multiple organizational theory theoretical frameworks as a basis for the context in which women are intertwined with their workplace organization. Social identity theory (SIT) and identity shift theory (IST) served as the basis for the woman as an individual within a structure or organization (see Arshad et al., 2022; Carr et al., 2021). SIT relies on the self-identification of one's values and traits that may fit within a group in an organization (Arshad et al., 2022). In contrast, IST refers to understanding one's sense of self and how the self is presented or mediated among different groups (Carr et al., 2021). These theories will be further examined in Chapter 2

to solidify the context of the self (i.e., the woman) in the organizational structure during the hiring process for leadership advancement and in the general workplace.

Nature of the Study

The specific research design included a general qualitative structure with 10 interviews, which allowed for saturation (see Jackson & Mazzei, 2022). Interview question (IQ)s are included in the appendix. I used purposeful sampling to determine who was selected as a participant. Purposeful sampling was used because it fits best with the qualitative design of the study and is the most appropriate method for identifying and choosing information-rich participants to make the most efficient use of limited resources (see Jackson & Mazzei, 2022). Participants were women professionals who sought an SES or SES-equivalent position in a government organization. If purposeful sampling had not yielded enough participants to reach data saturation, I would have employed snowball sampling, where current participants were asked to nominate other participants who meet the inclusion criteria (see Berndt, 2020; Patton, 2015). The qualitative research design, utilizing open-ended semistructured interviews and purposive and snowball selection of samples, allowed the participants to offer detailed accounts of their lived experiences and perceptions of women regarding their narratives with the leadership hiring process. Open-ended, semistructured interviews benefitted the study, as I asked various pre-determined questions while leaving space for the participant to answer follow-up or probative questions (see Ruslin et al., 2022). The collection of these interviews, paired with previous literature, produced a qualitative basis of the women seeking leadership in government for which data analysis can begin. Thematic analysis

and NVivo coding were used to analyze the coded and paired-down data from the interviews and literature to contribute knowledge to the scholarly literature on policy making. This concise final data may help policymakers develop policies to help women achieve equal gender representation in SES and SES-equivalent leadership positions within government organizations.

Definition of Terms

Affirmative action: This mechanism prioritizes undervalued ethnic groups in the social sector, including workplaces and educational institutions (Sims et al., 2021).

CEO: An executive director of the organization responsible for the entire organization (Schaap & Shockley, 2021).

Epistemology: Refers to an information system that focuses on individuals' experiences (Minelli, 2023).

Executive level: This level consists of the positions that make up a U.S. company. These positions include corporate director, owner, treasury officer, vice president, senior vice president, chief financial officer (CFO), chief information officer, chief operating officer, chairman, and CEO.

Glass ceiling: A barrier for ethnic minorities and women from ascending order, including colored women, to senior management (Singh et al., 2023).

Second generation gender bias: Refers to a seemingly neutral policy or institutional structure. But in reality, the term favors men and discriminates against women comes from the stereotype of gender (D'Agostino et al., 2022).

Sociocultural: A set of social and cultural factors such as race, gender, and class

are relevant when searching for authority within an organization. Additional systems are controlled using controls (Blanche & Côté, 2023).

Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations

Assumptions

This study was grounded in constructivism, which assumes that reality is subjective and individuals' experiences determine knowledge (see Ugwu et al., 2021). Therefore, I assumed that the interviewees offered: (a) accurate recall of their experience and that they (b) met the inclusion criteria, namely that they identified as a woman who held a master's degree along with at least 5 years of experience in the public workforce sector. This assumption also included that these qualified women sought a SES or SES-equivalent position in the last 5 years. These assumptions were reasonable, as the study was voluntary.

The key to garnering the credibility of an interviewee requires prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation of the data presented within the interview (Hays & McKibben, 2021). I used theory triangulation to analyze the findings from multiple perspectives. An emphasis on rigor in qualitative studies supports this study's assumptions (Johnson et al., 2020). I used purposive sampling, which gathers participants who can help answer the RQ (see Johnson et al., 2020). While participation in this study was voluntary, it was assumed that the participants would openly offer information about their experiences within the public sector and the hiring processes for public leadership or SES positions.

Limitations

While all research studies have limitations, the nature of the interview requires that the data gathered are subject to the participant and any bias they may have. The interviewer must be aware of these potential biases and be prepared to ask reflexive questions to the interviewee and analyze the interview data with a reflexive motivation (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). Although participation in the study was voluntary, participants could have withheld sensitive information about their experiences for many reasons, including the notion that some information could be subjected to a security clearance. That was a limitation that was reduced with probative questions (see Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). The participants were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and protect their identities, which may have allowed them to speak more freely about their perceptions and ideas. I conducted the study based on the criteria of women who have worked in public and private sectors and are excluded from leadership positions. Recognizing my potential bias, I relied on the data provided by the participant. I concluded while reflecting on my experiences to ensure they did not affect the data or conclusions.

Scope and Delimitations

I collected data from semistructured, open-ended interviews, which produced responses from participants about their experiences, perceptions, opinions, and feelings. The primary instrument was an interview guide developed by me, and the secondary data collection instruments included a digital recorder to record interview sessions. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to select participants, with purposive sampling as the primary and snowball sampling as the secondary technique (see Stratton, 2021). The

boundaries for the qualitative study were the participants selected for the interviews. I delimited participation to 10 civil service women who sought a SES or SES-equivalent position in a government organization in the past 5 years. The participants must have had 5 years or more of working experience and a master's degree or higher.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to research aimed at elucidating barriers to achieving gender equity. While women are dominating the workforce, women are lacking in leadership positions. Studies show that women are qualified and capable of succeeding in such positions. Statistics demonstrate discrepancies in the number of women hired for leadership positions (Schaap & Shockley, 2021).

This study will supplement past studies on gender equity in the workplace and leadership positions, explicitly expanding on why women are not being hired and why the few employed are hired. Studies have shown that women often struggle in different settings because of the lack of career advancement opportunities and mentors for successful managerial leadership (Schaap & Shockley, 2021). There is a need to gather diverse opinions and perceptions directly from the individuals experiencing this problem in examining the truth related to realities and facts.

This research aimed to address the leadership gender gap by interviewing women who have and have not received their desired leadership positions. The results could lead to policy development that promotes equal gender representation in the workplace, therefore improving the workforce. Gender equity is imperative to attaining healthy lives and well-being (Leal Filho et al., 2023). This study's findings and subsequent

recommendations may improve working conditions for all genders. While all research studies have limitations, the nature of the interview requires that the data gathered are subject to the participant and any bias they may have. The interviewer must be aware of these potential biases and be prepared to ask reflexive questions to the interviewee and analyze the interview data with a reflexive motivation (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). Although participation in the study was voluntary, participants could have withheld sensitive information about their experiences for many reasons, including the notion that some information could be subjected to a security clearance. This was also a limitation but can be reduced with probative questions (see Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). The participants were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and protect their identities, which may have allowed them to speak more freely about their perceptions and ideas. I conducted the study based on the criteria of women who have worked in public and private sectors and are excluded from leadership positions. Recognizing my potential bias, I relied on the data provided by the participant. I concluded while reflecting on my experiences to ensure they did not affect the data or conclusions.

Summary and Organization of the Remainder of the Study

Chapter 1 examined the history of gender inequality in leadership positions and why women must be afforded the same chances at SES or SES-equivalent positions as men. I elaborated on the problem of why women are not being hired into as many leadership roles as their male counterparts. The conceptual framework used in this study was then presented. I explored the literature that defends the significance of the research and critically analyzes the varying viewpoints of why or why not this study will offer

value to the greater society in the United States and the women who wish to seek SES or SES-equivalent positions. Lastly, this chapter justified the overall reasoning behind its qualitative-based literature and interview design.

In Chapter 2, this study delves into a deeper literature review, providing a framework to understand why women are not afforded the same chances at SES or SES-equivalent positions as men. Chapter 2 also describes, in detail, the theories that comprise the conceptual framework used in this study and will explain why this framework was needed to analyze the problem. In Chapter 3, the details of the methodology and procedures that were used in the study are provided. Chapter 4 presents the data and results of the study. Chapter 5 concludes with a critical analysis of the data within the conceptual framework chosen for the study, summarizes the conclusions, suggests future avenues of research, and discusses the study's implications.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is still unresolved conflict regarding the proportion and treatment of women in managerial roles in the United States (Smith & Sinkford, 2022). Women comprise 52% of all employees in professional roles, but only 14.6% are in senior management roles (Schaap & Shockley, 2021). The primary focus of this research was the leadership responsibilities in SES and SES-equivalent roles, as well as the underrepresentation of women in these posts. The dataset available on SES demographic data from 2020 shows that only 34% of employment in the SES was held by women (Sweeting, 2023). As of 2021, women accounted for 37% of the SES, according to a recent letter from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (White, 2022).

Women also need to be more adequately represented in municipal governance. In this chapter, the literature presented examines why the SES does not employ more women based on theoretical, systematic, social, and biased grounds. The chapter will first provide the conceptual underpinnings for the study, explaining the RQ and highlight on critical organizational and social networks functioning in a workplace. Next, the literature review examines the elements that affect workplace efficiency and bureaucracy in Frederick Taylor, Max Weber, and Henri Fayol's organizational theories (Taylor, 2004). Gulick's thesis on organizational structure looks at the fundamental components of a workplace to understand how women fit into systems. Gulick's gendered organizational theory is used to gradually understand each particular woman in the workplace; his metaphor served as a supportive bridge for this explanatory framework (Meier, 2010). The SIT and IST are thoroughly reviewed to address whether a particular woman fits into

these systems and how she may interact with or be impacted by the system (see Owuamalam et al., 2021). The literature review reveals that women and diversity in leadership contribute to the value and efficiency of the workplace.

After a review of the conceptual framework within a workplace, this chapter examines literature that elucidates problems women encounter in the workplace and what inhibits their upward mobility. The section also discusses why some women do not reach SES or SES-equivalent positions and why few women work in those powerful leadership positions. Since gender equality at the highest levels of management is essential to determine the most advantageous form of management (Infante & Darmawan, 2022), this literature review covers research on gender roles in the workplace and top leadership. For example, gender prejudices may be directly linked to the lack of women in leadership roles in a private corporation (Smith & Sinkford, 2022). The topic of gender prejudice in public employment will be covered in this chapter. The next topic of this literature review is diversity and discrimination in the context of achieving gender parity in the workplace, drawing on various conceptualizations and viewpoints (see Barak, 2022). This discussion should provide a framework for understanding.

Literature Search Strategy

The following databases were searched: PubMed Central, Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effects (DARE), PsycINFO, UpToDate, PubMed, and German Literature. I focused on papers released after 2016 to improve the usability of the sources referenced. This made sure that the publications and papers used had a 5-year interval. The following were among the keywords chosen to search the literature: *senior executive service*,

organizational theory, gendered organizational theory, gendered substructure organizational theory, social identity theory, identity shift theory, SES hiring process, SES reproductive policies, SES gender and minority equity, SES-equivalent positions, gender roles in the workplace, discrimination in the workplace, gender stereotype, and women in leadership.

Conceptual Framework

The study was based on the conceptual framework of organizational theories, structural theory, gendered organizational theory, SIT, and IST. Organizational theory favors private-sector organizations over public-sector organizations (Christensen et al., 2020). According to general organizational theory, an organization's structure considerably influences how individuals think and perform. The research underlines that the public sector's organizational framework is built on democratic ideals and is decision-oriented (Christensen et al., 2020). Frederick Taylor's organizational theory and Max Weber's theory of bureaucratic administration were used as a basis for analysis.

The public sector can benefit from Frederick Taylor's organizational theory, which provides a framework for increased productivity, which leads to more wealth and expanded public service efforts. Taylor's beliefs have been controversial because he concentrated on an authoritarian organizational framework to increase profits (Tompkins, 2023). Max Weber's theory of bureaucratic administration concerns how formal organizations might assist society in producing more products and services to fulfill societal expectations. Weber is regarded as one of the pioneers of organizational sociology and the logical method of bureaucratic research (Bhandai, 2020). His

bureaucratic management theory also considers how people engage with businesses while keeping administrative positions. SIT makes the justification for discrimination inside an organization. According to SIT, individuals who care deeply about their disadvantaged group are more likely to accept a system that disadvantages them if it leads to a better in-group status (Owuamalam et al., 2021). The study of how one's sense of self is conveyed or mediated across various groups is known as IST. SIT aims to describe and predict situations in which individuals view themselves as individuals or members of groups. When taken together, these theoretical frameworks can begin to explain gender inequities in the workplace.

Organizational Theory

The individual, the formal arrangement of functions, the informal organization, the needs of the informal and formal structures coexisting, and finally, the physical system analysis are all part of organizational theory (Rahim, 2023). The individual is the personality, goals, and attitudes incorporated into the structure. Both sides strive to negotiate social norms within the physical context in which they coexist (Shafritz et al., 2016; Tompkins, 2023). All organizational theories assume that organizations have objectives, guidelines, hierarchy, definitions of affiliation, and vigorous ideas of career tracks (Tompkins, 2023). Another assumption of organizational theories concerns how the organization is arranged and creates a motivational structure to yield results (Tompkins, 2023).

Organizational theory usually favors private-sector organizations over public-sector organizations, as economic growth and benefits in corporate America outweigh the

political and social components of the public sector (Christensen et al., 2020). Public interests vary from personal interests because the public sector must consider a more extensive set of norms and values (Christensen et al., 2020). The organizational theory remains a constant stronghold in public sector organizations as it is adapted to fit the public sector requirements. Based on general organizational theory, how an organization is constructed significantly impacts the manner of thinking and the conduct within the organization (Tompkins, 2023).

When examining public organizations, the focus of public organizations is the individuals, specifically public policy (Christensen et al., 2020). Effective management requires understanding the fundamental concepts of organizational theory and management, regardless of whether the organization is in the public or private sector (Rosenbloom et al., 2022). The organizational theory for the public sector is based on democratic values and focused on decision-making for public sector organizations, such as federal banks, military organizations, public agencies, and the police, among others (Christensen et al., 2020). Organizational theory ebbs and flows throughout the decades and can be malleable to fit specific sectors (Shafritz et al., 2016). These organizations differ in many ways, but they were formed to address collective interests and unique duties and generally have constant behavior patterns, resources, and incentives associated with their activities (Christensen et al., 2020).

According to Taylor (2004) and his theory of organizational management, “the principal object of management should be to secure the maximum prosperity for the employer, coupled with the maximum prosperity for the employee” (p. 9). Over the past

70 years, Taylor's theories have been deemed controversial as his focus is on an authoritarian-style organizational system that maximizes profits. However, using the model presented by Christensen et al. (2020), one can see how Taylor's theory of organization or scientific management can be applied to the public sector. For example, Taylor's model is a framework for higher productivity, resulting in increased wealth and public service initiatives (Tompkins, 2023).

Like Taylor, Max Weber's bureaucratic management theory also focuses on organizational productivity (Tompkins, 2023). Weber's ideas focus on how traditional organizations may help society create more products and services to meet social demands. Weber emphasized the tendency of rationalization in organizational administration in contemporary society's public and private sectors. Weber is considered one of the founders of organizational sociology for his contributions, and he pioneered the logical approach to bureaucratic study (Bhandai, 2020). Weber's bureaucratic organizational theory also assesses how individuals interact in or with companies while maintaining their administrative position. As a result, his ideas suggest that the public sector administrations are governed by the laws and hierarchical structure within the system (Tompkins, 2023).

Henri Fayol, the pioneer of administrative management theory, continued building organizational theory alongside Taylor and Weber's theories, aiming for his management ideas to be established and taught to benefit enterprises and society (Tompkins, 2023). However, for an organization to be effective, the leaders must master the systemic tasks and functions such as planning, organizing, delegating, and controlling

(Tompkins, 2023). The SES or SES-equivalent leaders must master such skills for efficiency in the public sector.

Structural Theory

An organization's structure is the base establishment upon which an organization is built and functions (Tompkins, 2023). The foundation of Gulick's structural theory is the natural human intuition to create hierarchical structures within a group setting (Gulick, 1965). Gulick's theory of organization and structure promotes unity of command in coordination and organization. Employees should have only one direct superior to minimize confusion and maximize efficiency (Gulick, 1965). Gulick called for identifying the biases that a workplace may produce rather than only focusing on the relationship between structure and efficiency (Meier, 2010). Because cost-effective and efficient processes drive public institutions, Gulick suggested that companies focus on these biases inside governance or public institutions (Meier, 2010). Despite Gulick's lack of attention to gender biases, I evaluated and will provide recommendations based on his beliefs on promoting women's advancement to SES and SES-equivalent positions in the federal government or other public sector organizations. Gulick's philosophy of organization and structure promotes the unity of command (Gulick, 1965). According to Gulick, companies should work on these biases inside government and public institutions (Meier, 2010).

Gendered Organizational Theory

Gendered organizational theory, which investigates the organizational dynamics of how gender is defined and the patterns connected within and between genders (Acker,

1990), gives insight into how gender influences workplace organizational structure. Business gender relations can be openly overt, such as when managers hire only men or women for specific professions (Acker, 1990). Gender, on the other hand, may be deeply hidden in organizational processes and decisions that look unconnected to gender (Cockburn, 1991). Due to the weight of historical and current gender norms and expectations, Acker contended that gender cannot be systematically eliminated from the equation in an organization. Regardless of the position's scope, these expected duties may be found in every scenario or work (Shafritz et al., 2016). Based on the literature, gender significantly impacts organizational structure and theory.

Compounding on the gendered organizational structure theory, the gendered substructure organizational theory focuses on the geographical and physical obstacles women face within corporate structures, such as employment and residential proximity and adaptations to allow for women to have children (Acker, 1990; Shafritz et al., 2016). When looking at the reproductive individual within a formal organization, certain factors, such as the idea of work-life cohesion versus the separation of work and life, can cause a collision of past expectations and new norms in the workplace (Acker, 1990; Cockburn, 1991).

SIT

Tajfel's SIT can be described as an individual's perception of who they are within a group setting or structure and how an identity progresses through inter and intragroup dynamics (Morris & Webb, 2022). Self-identifying one's ideals and attributes that may fit inside a group or an organization is central to SIT (Arshad et al., 2022). Due to the

situational factors favoring group behavior, SIT makes a case for organizational discrimination (Turner et al., 1979). SIT creates ingroup or community-based thinking, meaning that anyone inside the theoretical or actual community forms a robust social bond (Morris & Webb, 2022). An effect of SIT is intentional or unintentional discrimination or competition against people outside the social group (Guimond, 2023). Contrary to the development of SIT, a diverse workforce leads to achieving organizational goals, and other diversity studies highlight the positive impact of racial variety on performance from a resource-based perspective (Owuamalam et al., 2021). According to the resource-based approach, agencies may preserve a competitive advantage and boost organizational efficiency by amassing critical human capital—the knowledge, skills, and abilities inherent in a single individual (Owuamalam et al., 2021).

Even when there is no practical rivalry between groups, psychological awareness of social group membership can evoke group-interested actions or ingroup bias. This crucial piece of information sparked the development of SIT (Owuamalam et al., 2021; Turner et al., 1979). SIT finds that the counterintuitive tendency for disadvantaged lower-status groups to develop attitudinal preferences and actions that favor higher-status outgroups has questioned the ingroup selecting effect (Davis et al., 2019; Turner et al., 1979). Individuals who feel strongly about their disadvantaged group should be the most inclined to accept a system that presently disadvantages them if they believe it will lead to a more favorable ingroup status (Owuamalam et al., 2021). This argument also serves as the framework for why women have been unable to systematically reject or change organizational systems. Finally, the literature also explains that the social identity model

of systemic behavior claims that social identity considerations can explain system-justifying attitudes, such as the need for stability and a positive social identity within a social group and workplace group (Owuamalam et al., 2021).

In social psychology, SIT studies how personal and societal identities interact. The goal of SIT is to define and forecast the situations in which individuals see themselves as individuals or members of groups (van Knippenberg, 2023). Personal and social identities impact individual perceptions and collective behavior (Farivar & Wang, 2022). As SIT theorizes that individuals construct and define their place in society, three psychological processes are critical including: (a) social categorization, (b) social comparison, and (c) social identification. SIT explains that the individual's character and aims (interpersonal conduct) and the individual's group membership impact social behavior (van Knippenberg, 2023). Based on this concept, individuals prefer positively portraying themselves and their companies. As a result of social identification processes, individuals are more likely to seek out positive attributes, attitudes, and behaviors associated with their in-groups (Hogg & Gaffney, 2023; Owuamalam et al., 2021).

Identity Shift Theory

Modern IST is the knowledge of one's sense of self and how it is expressed or mediated across different groups (Carr et al., 2021). Compared to SIT, where individuals construct and define their place in society, IST looks at how the individual alters their identity to fit into a social group (Carr et al., 2021; Crocetti et al., 2023). Expressly, IST assumes that the self is a composite of numerous identities. When individuals have jobs in the social system, such as caregivers, siblings, students, or television hosts, they

internalize the meanings they apply to themselves. Individuals can have a caregiver identity, a sibling identity, and so on (Crocetti et al., 2023). These individuals have expectations linked to them that stem from a shared culture with others. Individuals in this shared culture or social group comprehend what it is to be human: (a) a caregiver, (b) a sibling, (c) a student, and (d) a television host. As a result, identities connect individuals, culture, and social structure (Crocetti et al., 2023). Shifting one's identity is inherently proactive and presentational. Individuals in the social structure offer a presentation of themselves to fit into the group or culture (Carr et al., 2021).

Literature Review

SES Overview

The SES is a sector in the executive branch composed of the nation's top federal or public sector leaders (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2022). The SES began as an outcome of the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 to establish and "ensure that the executive management of the United States government is responsive to the requirements, objectives, and goals of the Nation and is otherwise of the highest quality" (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2022, p. 1). Individuals holding these positions must have attained certain leadership levels in their field and met the 28 competencies required to enter the SES: There are six core competencies and 22 further competencies. The six fundamental competencies include: (a) interpersonal skills, (b) oral communication, (c) integrity and honesty, (d) written communication, (e) continual learning, and (f) public service motivation. Alongside solid knowledge of the Constitution and years of dedication to public service, the competencies are based on

personal and professional traits identified as beneficial for effective leadership through years of research in the federal and public sectors (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2022). SES positions are within the Department of Agriculture, Department of Defense, Department of Justice, National Treasury, Homeland Security, Department of the Interior, National Archives and Records Administration, Energy, and NASA. Specific responsibilities range from executive, managerial, and supervisory roles to policy-making (Devine et al., 2023).

SES Hiring Process

I examined the hiring process of the SES to investigate the problem. First, the applicants must meet or exceed the required competencies, but there are a few different pathways to being hired into the SES. Candidates must first undergo a rigorous screening process to demonstrate the six competencies described above and connect them to the executive core attributes. The two direct paths to hiring include either working for an agency directly or participating in a 12-month senior executive candidate program (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2022). Open positions are filled via USA Jobs website or by reassigning a current SES member.

It is essential to note that candidates are picked based on their credentials rather than their demographics, and there are no demographic targets to meet (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2022). Fifty-two percent of the workforce comprises women, yet only 37% of SES members are women (White, 2022). The OPM convenes weekly qualification review boards to offer applicants an impartial peer review (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2023).

SES Reproductive Policies

Reproductive policies may play a role in whether or not a woman applies for an SES or SES-equivalent position. Although not all women are able nor want to reproduce, most women have another organ entirely (the uterus), which may require medical leave or a fair work-life balance. Initially, organizational leaders did not have to account for the diverse medical and parental affairs that men typically experienced in their lifetime. However, the SES falls under the federal government workforce. Therefore, workplace policies from the U.S. Department of Labor are also policies for the SES. Significantly, SES members benefit from the Family and Medical Leave Act. The Family and Medical Leave Act states that any federal employee can take 12 weeks of unpaid parental or medical leave after working for 12 months or at least 1,250 hours. An amendment to the Family and Medical Leave Act called paid parental leave allows parents of adopted or biological children to take 12 weeks of paid leave, but only for specific categories of federal employees. The data is unclear on whether all SES employees are entitled to this leave (Office of Human Resources Management, 2020; U.S. Department of Labor, 2021).

Future Directions of SES Gender and Minority Equity

The ethnic, racial, and gender mixture of the SES in 2030 and in years beyond will not mirror the American workforce (Carnevale et al., 2023). This conclusion was based on the lack of increase in numbers in the SES for women and minorities. For example, it is estimated that women will make up 41% of the SES in 2030, compared to 47% of the expected civilian workforce (Carnevale et al., 2023). While this increased above 31% of women in 2010, there will still be a considerable gender diversity

imbalance in 2030 (Carnevale et al., 2023). Like racializing, gendering has enormous promise for exposing social equality, but it needs to be studied more in public administration (Pandey et al., 2022). This is partly due to the absence of feminist philosophy in mainstream public administration studies (Pandey et al., 2022). A more diverse SES can result in greater efficiencies, innovation, and effectiveness.

In March of 2022, the OPM released a document titled *Executive Women in Motion: Pathways to the SES Toolkit* to encourage female interest in SES and SES-equivalent leadership positions. This memorandum is a part of the new executive order on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility and supports the Equal Futures Partnership (Biden, 2021). According to the article, the toolkit provides interagency mentoring and collaboration (White, 2022). This new initiative is a promising step toward gender equity in the SES.

SES-Equivalent Positions

SES-equivalent positions include high-level positions in local and state government and general leadership in various public sectors. There are almost 90,000 local governments in the United States, with hundreds of thousands of elected officials (Talukdar, 2023). Local governments employ over 10 million individuals and earn about a quarter of all tax income in the country (Anzia, 2022). The effects of expanding the number of women in the government can extend beyond the national level (Anzia, 2022; Talukdar, 2023). Increasing women's representation at the local level might profoundly alter outcomes, including but not limited to the quality of women's substantive representation (Tusalem, 2022). Local governments are responsible for essential

responsibilities such as allocating government expenditures, collecting taxes, delivering public services, managing land use, maintaining city infrastructure, and developing and implementing public policies (Anzia, 2022). Local politics also have much more institutional variance than state or national politics, allowing researchers to use local politics as a laboratory for studying the effects of institutions in American politics.

Gender Roles in the Workplace

Even though the 1960s introduced equal employment rights to the United States that safeguarded the rights of women and people of color, there are still salary and hiring disparities between men and women in the workplace half a century later (Bishu & Headley, 2021). In the years before the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972, women typically only entered the workforce out of necessity during and after the world wars. Otherwise, women could not hold all-male jobs (Randall et al., 1963). In 1972, the Act mandated that women be permitted to have these formerly all-male positions and legally could not be barred from such employment. This Act marked the beginning of women entering the workforce, and subsequently, female gender roles had to be negotiated and re-defined (Schaap & Shockley, 2021). I defined *gender roles* as cultural expectations about what actions and activities are considered normal or ideal for people based on their perceived gender or sex (see Klein, 2020).

Globally, there have been significant strides in policy and action to empower women to enter the public sector workforce. The Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 and the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, both international treaties adopted by the United Nations General Assembly called for

equal participation of men and women in public life, decision-making, and policy formation (Finkel et al., 2021). Despite these strides, one of the areas not addressed in many of these policies is the gender expectation that women usually serve as primary caregivers in families. Panda (2018) explored this barrier, as many global workforces do not account for a secondary caregiver role or work-life balance required for women. Finkel et al. (2021) also argued that because women make up half of the global population, they have the right to equal employment in their governments at all levels, sectors, and posts. However, another entity is the right to achieve something versus the actual data and act of achieving something. Though women have the same legal rights and can achieve equal opportunities—there are still significant barriers to accessing these opportunities.

Public administration, which is sometimes the largest single employer of women in most countries, must mainstream gender equality, as they have the power and influence to do so (Dar & Shairgojri, 2022). Public administration can model inclusive organizations where women and men participate, leading equally and expediting growth for all (Finkel et al., 2021; Russell, 2023). The article by Finkel et al. (2021) also pointed out that women usually take positions in gendered industries. For example, Finkel et al. explained that women are overrepresented in specific policy areas and underrepresented in others. Women are overrepresented in 15 of the 20 policy categories, with the lowest representation of women in public works and transportation. A yearly study by McKinsey and Company, *Women in the Workplace*, is the most extensive study conducted on women in the workplace in the United States. The 2021 report found that despite

significant gains for women, there still exists a “broken rung” (Thomas et al., 2021, p. 7) on the ladder to managerial positions.

The study argued that women are promoted to managers at much lower rates than their male counterparts. For every 100 men promoted to manager, 86 women were encouraged or promoted. The gains in women in the workplace are significantly lower for women of color and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender queer, and/or questioning women. Another body of research examined potential female leaders and their shortcomings, focusing on women’s lack of assertiveness, drive, and competitive spirit (Ong, 2022). However, based on this data, one of the essential advantages of having women in leadership positions is that they may assist an organization in developing a solid culture and innovating new ideas to promote efficiency and productivity (Thomas et al., 2021). Female lawmakers are more likely to participate in legislative debates about women (Lee, 2022). It has also been demonstrated that women’s representation also influences subnational government spending. There is evidence that increasing the number of women in state legislatures in the United States increases healthcare expenditure and decreases incarceration spending (Courtemanche & Green, 2017; Funk & Philips, 2018). While individual-level interpretations may better understand the mechanisms that aid or limit women’s organizational movement, they frequently neglect the wide range of structural factors that impact appointment decisions. As a result, personal explanations fall short of providing an ample reason for the recent rise in women in leadership roles (Lee, 2022).

Thomas et al. (2021) found that women in leadership contribute significantly to the

well-being of their co-workers and team members. Female managers accomplish this by “checking in on team members, helping them manage workloads, and providing support for those dealing with burnout or navigating work/life challenges” (Thomas et al., 2021, p. 18). Figure 1 shows that female leaders are more likely to offer more employee support. While this undoubtedly benefits the team, the notion that female leaders offer more employee support may be why women experience burnout at a higher rate than their male counterparts (Thomas et al., 2021). Gender parity is critical for everyone to enjoy healthy and happy lives (Leal Filho et al., 2023). The results and recommendations of the present study aim to enhance the working conditions of both men and women. Researchers showed that more women in the executive ranks will encourage more women to participate in organizational leadership roles (Tunyi et al., 2023).

Figure 1

How Managers are Supporting Employees by Gender

% of employees who say their manager has consistently taken this action

| | Manager is a man | Manager is a woman |
|---|------------------|--------------------|
| Well-being | | |
| Providing emotional support | 19% | 31% (+11pp) |
| Checking in on overall well-being | 54% | 61% (+7pp) |
| Workload | | |
| Helping navigate work/life challenges | 24% | 29% (+5pp) |
| Working to ensure workload is manageable (e.g., shifting priorities or deadlines) | 36% | 42% (+6pp) |
| Helping take actions to prevent or manage burnout | 16% | 21% (+5pp) |

Note. From “Women in the Workplace 2021,” by Thomas et al. (2021). Copyright 2021 McKinsey & Company.

Wu et al. (2022) concluded that an executive team with a diverse mix of men and women performs better than one in which only one gender is represented. Though most data and research are conducted with women in corporate America, the outcomes and trends can be applied to the public sector. Based on organizational and structural theories, although there are differences in the public and private sectors, the main organizational goal is productivity and efficient output (Meier, 2010; Tompkins, 2023).

Gender also determines company executives' leadership styles, mainly regarding executive attributes such as delegation and empowerment. An analysis of the research shows that most executive and management board members are male, leaving women to fill lower-ranking roles in firms (Bonet et al., 2020). Men and women are battling gender advantages and disadvantages in leadership and management. The research demonstrated that males are more effective than women in advocating gender-based change (Tunyi et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2020). However, it has yet to be explored if this phenomenon is due to men having more theoretical and societal power in the workforce or due to their attributes. There is a greater chance that men will exert influence on the allocation of leadership positions to females than if women could compete for leadership positions without the intervention of men (Madsen et al., 2020). Managers must ensure that hiring committees have a diverse mix of genders to maintain a level playing field (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022; Tunyi et al., 2023). According to the conclusions of multiple studies, an executive team with an eclectic mix of men and women performs better than one in which only one gender is represented (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022; Tunyi et al., 2023).

One of the essential benefits of having women in leadership positions is that they

can help an organization build a strong culture and innovate. The executive's job is to ensure the team is gender-neutral by electing more women (Cirone et al., 2023). By advocating gender equality and encouraging women to take on leadership roles, the executive plays a significant role in achieving gender equality (Moser & Branscombe, 2022). More women in the executive ranks will encourage other women to participate in the leadership of organizations (Thomas et al., 2021). While no studies explicitly address best practices for female CEOs, studies offered ideas for women in the workplace, such as dressing for their role or fitting in with male colleagues (Schaap & Shockley, 2021). Most of these articles also targeted millennial women (aged 25 to 40), whereas the average SES member is in their 50s (Schaap & Shockley, 2021; U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2023).

Discrimination in the Workplace

An inclusive atmosphere is regarded as a precondition for inclusion since it enables the utilization of various viewpoints and ideas that may help to enhance decision-making processes and improve the performance of diverse teams (Nishii & Leroy, 2022). However, studies show that family-friendly policies have varied effects on men and women (Moore, 2020; Schaap & Shockley, 2021). For example, research shows that women faculty members are less likely than men to take time off throughout critical career stages, even though males are more inclined to do so. This suggests that even when leave rules are in place, women are less likely than men to take advantage of the time off afforded to them (Thébaud & Pedulla, 2022). Since gender discrimination in the workplace has been prevalent for decades, women must fight for equal rights to have the

same chances for upward mobility as their male counterparts. As a result of gender imbalance in the workplace, women are hindered in their ability to perform and grow as professionals (Epstein, 2022). The modern-day workplace is rampant with discrimination, particularly in executive positions, where men outnumber women, including in the SES and in SES-equivalent positions (April et al., 2023). Job discrimination against women is pervasive, and prejudice can be found at every level of society and in organizational structures (April et al., 2023; Rabelo et al., 2021).

Women traditionally only entered labor out of need during and after World Wars I and II before the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972. Women were not permitted to work in all-male occupations before. Then, the Act of 1972 allowed women to hold these previously all-male-occupied occupations, and they could not be legally banned from doing so (Schaap & Shockley, 2021). However, the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 did not equalize the playing field for men and women in the workplace. For example, women face discrimination and biased perceptions when hiring and maintaining their positions. This blatant discrimination can be seen in 1993 when the Supreme Court case *Harris v. Forklift Systems, Inc.* declared gender harassment, which entails discriminating between genders throughout the recruiting process, to be illegal (Schaap & Shockley, 2021). The Supreme Court only proclaimed in 1998 that gender discrimination was covered by Title VII, which prohibits sexual harassment (Yu & Lee, 2021). Despite gender discrimination and harassment being illegal, countless cases go unreported or are deemed too minor to bring to attention. Often, direct or unintentional gender discrimination can be intertwined with company policy, such as with childcare

policies and sick leave, or solidified in the perceptions of the employees or hiring managers (Panda, 2018; Yu & Lee, 2021).

A significant indicator of success for both men and women in the workforce is the ability to participate in the economy. Women require additional support to properly participate in the economy's development (Ge et al., 2022). Studies reveal numerous reasons why more males hold leadership roles within companies in many countries where women cannot participate because of a lack of resources (Panda, 2018). Current feminist scholars contend that women of color and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender women remain marginalized outsiders, double or triple disadvantaged by their gender, ethnicity, and sexuality in a political system designed by and for White heterosexual males (Hartless, 2023).

D'Agostino et al. (2022) explained the urgency for similar studies and their implications on public sector organizations. Public sectors are intended to be places where diversity is valued, and principles such as equity are cornerstones. In addition, specific norms and methods for professional growth govern the public sector workplace (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018). By conceiving gendered organizations in the context of second-generation gender bias (SGGB), one can begin to comprehend gender as a set of social connections and practices rooted in organizational culture, providing insight into why equality may not be attained. Norms may not lead to a meritocracy regarding career development (D'Agostino et al., 2022). In particular, from the perspective of a representative bureaucracy, workforce diversity may improve an organization's

legitimacy and responsiveness to a diverse society, which has prompted numerous diversity management efforts in public organizations (D'Agostino et al., 2022).

Gender Stereotype

D'Agostino et al. (2022) examined the gendered organizational practices within the workplace of U.S. state-level managers. The researchers used *SGGB* to understand the underlying gender biases and expectations. In this study, the *SGGB* is defined as gender stereotypes that hinder women's access to success or upward movement within an organization. These gender stereotypes are embedded in the structure and patterns of the workplace and usually and unintentionally benefit men while barricading women (Panda, 2018). D'Agostino et al. showed that women are held to a disproportionately higher standard than their male counterparts – this was observed in how women felt perceived by their supervisors and how performance reviews and workplace mistakes were handled. For example, one male respondent reflected on the difference between himself and female co-workers saying, “Whereas, for my female counterparts when we get together and talk about our evaluations, they seem to get more scrutinized to a certain degree for [things such as] dress code” (D'Agostino et al., 2022, p. 8). Another female respondent explained a specific incident where she was punished harsher than her male coworker:

[Y]ou could not go home for lunch in the state vehicle. I did this once, and he (supervisor) brought it to my attention. I was reprimanded, and I have been there a year already. That same week a male counterpart went home with the state vehicle and took a two-hour nap, and our lunches were only an hour, and when he came back, they just laughed about it. He was not reprimanded like I was, and I was

threatened to get (sic) written up. (D'Agostino et al., 2022, p. 8)

Although these are specific and individual experiences, D'Agostino et al. (2022) explained that all the female respondents experienced disappointment in their treatment in the workplace and how they were exhausted from constantly proving themselves or asserting their competence to their supervisors and other employees. Due to gendered prejudices in businesses and cultures, women are held back in hiring, appraisal, and promotion, preventing them from progressing up the corporate ladder (Panda, 2018). Negative stereotypes about women are so common that women describe common themes of how women are supposed or expected to behave in these gendered workplace settings (Schaap & Shockley, 2021). For example, in D'Agostino et al.'s study, one of the participants described holding themselves back from complying with the gender norms in their workplace.

van Veelen and Derks (2022) found that a lack of women in leadership positions directly results from gender bias in the workplace. van Veelen and Derks argued that these biases include having a firm conviction that one's masculinity has given males an advantage in many businesses and government organizations and the belief that some men should only hold certain positions. Women remain underrepresented in decision-making roles all around the world. Women account for 38% of management and 31% of senior executive positions. These averages reveal a consistent pattern: women's numbers decrease as decision-making authority and influence grow (Finkel et al., 2021). Gender bias in the workplace can also account for leaders' behavior that their gender can influence, which might inhibit women from rising to the top of the corporate ladder due

to gender stereotypes and disparities in perception (D'Agostino et al., 2022).

Regarding gender bias, jobs in management and at the executive level are typically associated with men, while employment in secretarial and receptionist support is generally associated with women; however, a shift in attitudes and perceptions is allowing more women to compete for formerly male-dominated positions (Bishu & Headley, 2021). In addition, workplace diversity is associated with higher levels of job satisfaction when the minority group is represented at the top, and some organizations are prejudiced against the representation of groups based on race, gender, or ethnicity (Lee et al., 2020).

Problems Faced by Women in Leadership Positions

Obstacles for women in leadership roles in large firms or organizations face barriers such as the glass ceiling effect (Taparia & Lenka, 2022). A *glass ceiling* was defined by Singh et al. (2023) as an invisibility of constraints, a powerful illusion of choice, and a glamorization of image. Discrimination, a lack of mentors, and a lack of awareness about women's leadership positions are some possible causes (Thomas et al., 2021). According to the research findings and equity common sense, women should have a voice in decision-making (Taparia & Lenka, 2022). In fast-paced environments, a shift in leadership style is essential, and unfavorable stereotypes about female leadership have no substance (Bishu & Headley, 2021). The literature shows the unconscious bias of many individual results in fewer women in leadership positions than men (Suveren, 2022).

Burnout

Women experience burnout quicker than men, which doubled during the COVID-19 pandemic (Thomas et al., 2021). An assumption based on research is that more women than men had to take on the role of caregiver for their children while working from home during the pandemic (Panda, 2018; Thomas et al., 2021). Thomas et al. (2021) explained that burnout in the *Women in the Workplace 2021* report is measured by self-reported burnout in men and women considering leaving the workforce or downshifting their careers. According to the study, 42% of women said they experienced burnout “often or almost always in 2021,” higher than in 2020, where only 32% of women reported such burnout (Thomas et al., 2021, p. 13).

Gender Preconceptions

Women’s career progression is hampered by gender preconceptions, which prevent them from seeking leadership roles (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). For example, women who wish to advance in their careers are worried that losing their flexibility may cause a conflict between work and traditional gendered home responsibilities (Ely & Padavic, 2020). On the other hand, preconceived beliefs about the gendered division of labor at work and home unfairly disqualify women willing to make the sacrifices required to rise in leadership roles (Ely & Padavic, 2020; Panda, 2018). Researchers Hoobler et al. (2016) focused on studying how female leaders such as CEOs, board of directors, and managers increase financial performance in various sectors and organizations as compared to male leaders and found that women highly impact the productivity of employees, which in turn increases the financial performance of the organization. Despite

the continuous research into these issues, scholars argued that these barriers or the glass ceiling in the form of gender bias will impede women from reaching the highest levels of leadership unless they are addressed immediately (Finkel et al., 2021).

Another sub-theme shown by statistics is the demanding nature of leadership occupations, which is incompatible with women's overwhelming domestic responsibilities (Panda, 2018; Thomas et al., 2021). Women aware of these realities are less likely to want to be in leadership positions. These unwritten rules and practices influence how women are assessed, leading to additional resistance when women adopt formally implemented work-life policies. Based on their study into women in healthcare, Javadi et al. (2016) offered three recommendations to support women with leadership potential. The first recommendation is to provide scholarships for leadership training. The second recommendation is to create opportunities for leaders and followers to share their visions. The third recommendation is to pair young girls with mentors to help develop their leadership skills. Javadi et al. argued that these recommendations can serve as a next-step guide for women who have struggled to obtain their desired top leadership roles.

Female Leadership Styles

In a fast-paced environment, a shift in leadership style is essential, and unfavorable stereotypes about female leadership have no substance (Bishu & Headley, 2021). According to research, the unconscious bias of many individuals results in fewer women in leadership positions than men. Their gender can influence leaders' behavior, inhibiting women from rising to the top of the corporate ladder due to gender stereotypes

and disparities in perception (Bishu & Headley, 2021). As a result of transformational leadership, huge organizations that deal with current technology are more likely to innovate (Rafique et al., 2022). According to studies, transformational leadership and innovative work practices have been found to go hand in hand (Rafique et al., 2022). Workplace diversity is associated with higher levels of job satisfaction when the minority group is represented at the top (Kaur et al., 2022).

Microaggressions In the Workplace

Women executive leaders reported experiencing more microaggressions in the workplace than their male coworkers, such as being interrupted or spoken over, having judgment questions in their area of expertise, and having others comment on their emotional state (Thomas et al., 2021). Microaggressions are generally based on stereotypes linked with a single minority social identity, such as gender, color, ability, status, or sexual orientation (Bond & Haynes-Baratz, 2022). Thirty percent of senior female leaders reported experiencing microaggressions, whereas only 16% of senior male leaders reported experiencing such microaggressions (Thomas et al., 2021).

It is essential to review that women of color, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and women with disabilities face statistically significantly more microaggressions and do so more frequently than their male counterparts (Parikh & Leschied, 2022). For example, female employees who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning risk both direct and indirect forms of victimization at work, such as being passed over for promotions or dismissed, verbal or physical violence, insulting remarks, and discrimination (Clevenger et al., 2023). These other

microaggressions include:

...hearing people express surprise at your language skills or other abilities, hearing or overhearing insults about your culture or people like you, being confused with someone else of the same race/ethnicity, feeling like you are expected to speak on behalf of all people with your identity, and having others comment on your hair or appearance. (Thomas et al., 2021, p. 29)

Businesses must act fast to eradicate such microaggressions due to their pervasiveness and harmful impact on creating genuinely equitable and inclusive environments (Bond & Haynes-Baratz, 2022).

Organizational Preconceptions

Women have been overlooked or pushed out of positions of power and have been for decades. Ely and Padavic (2020) argued that women being held back from leadership positions lies in the disconnect between what the organization perceives as the problem and what women view as the problem. The qualitative data showed that the expectation to overwork overall strained both men and women in the workplace, but the psychological differences divided men and women (Ely & Padavic, 2020). Men have been historically trained to put providing and work first and family second, whereas gender roles have conditioned women to put family first and work second (Ely & Padavic, 2020; Thomas et al., 2021).

Ashikali et al. (2020) found no significant disparities between male and female state employees when taking sick leave for themselves, their children, or their parents. The same study found no significant inequality between men and women because state

employees work compressed schedules or flextime (Ashikali et al., 2020). These data hint at progress in gender fairness, yet the data might indicate issues with state employees not making full use of their leave choices, taking too much time off, or not having enough flexibility (Ashikali et al., 2020).

The hiring managers and general workforce share this bias knowingly or unconsciously, leading women to be hired less frequently than men even though they have the same qualifications (Panda, 2018). Publicized gender bias is analyzed in *Women and Politics: Paths to Power and Political Influence* (Dolan et al., 2021). The researchers drew parallels between the recent election of the first U.S. Vice President, Kamala Harris, and the 1992 Year of the Woman's election, where women elected to Congress increased by 60% (Dolan et al., 2021). Likewise, the 2020 elections to Congress saw an increase of female seats across both the Democratic and Republican parties, and most female candidates were running for U.S. president (Dolan et al., 2021). The difference between the 1992 and 2020 surges is that record elections followed 1992. Then, with a plateau of female candidates and female polls, the 2020 female election surge was met with momentum to elect a woman in the Oval Office (Dolan et al., 2021). Long-standing societal issues lie within democratic institutions whose elected members do not reflect their citizens, especially the lack of women in office Matthews (2019).

No female presidential candidate passed the primary election in 2019. Instead, former Vice President Joseph Biden was nominated for and voted into the president's office (Orhan, 2022). While this was a win for the Democratic party, the women running for office did not prevail. The Republican candidate and then-current president, Donald

Trump, ran unopposed, which is typical for sitting presidents. There were more qualified women than men running for U.S. president, yet a man, Joseph Biden, was elected (Dolan et al., 2021). Although Biden chose Kamala Harris as his vice president, making history, there is an argument that this race was symbolic of women in the public workforce. Orhan (2022) argued a causal association between attachment to diffuse gender norms and political opinions based on theories of gender roles and their impacts. Based on these developments, research and organizations must continue to ask what barriers they face and why they are not rising in the federal government as much as their male counterparts. Orhan further argued that promoting intersectionality and diversity and addressing bias within the political workplace has brought change within these structures.

Facilitators for Women Gaining Leadership Positions

Several facilitators have been instrumental in helping women gain leadership positions in civil service despite the barriers. One powerful facilitator for women is—women. In Fernandez et al.'s (2021) study, women cited a sense of responsibility and a desire for success as facilitators for career advancement. Smith and Sinkford (2022) emphasized that for career advancement, women must be able to adapt and negotiate around obstacles likely to slow down promotion and leadership advancement. Identifying the facilitators instrumental in women gaining leadership is essential to show how women have overcome career obstacles using factors that can be developed and implemented by future generations of women. The most important facilitators for women gaining leadership are mentorship and working in a conducive organizational culture (Carleton et

al., 2018; Christy & Wu, 2020; Coleman, 2020; Eibl et al., 2020).

Conducive Workplace

The ability to rise to a leadership position is often determined by how conducive the workplace is to having women in leadership roles. Barkhuizen et al. (2022) emphasized that a supportive workplace culture benefits women aspiring to leadership. A culture of such diversity would include tailored training and mentoring for women, awareness of work-life balance for both men and women, rather than seeing women as the primary caregivers, and recognition of SGGB that can be countered with unconscious bias training (McDowall & Doyle, 2023). Culture plays a crucial role in making the workplace women-friendly, and conducive policies and judging everything through an equal lens are essential (Annabi & Lebovitz, 2018). Organizations must adapt their cultures and retention strategies to better tap into the pool of available female talent. For companies, gender equality is more than a social justice issue; it is a source of competitive advantage (Byrd & Sparkman, 2022). Recruiting, retaining, and promoting women into leadership roles may be impossible without specific support and climate resources for women's advancement (Alli et al., 2021).

Organizations must change their cultures and retention strategies to better tap into the pool of available female talent and ensure that their workplace is conducive to women's leadership potential. Cirincione-Ulezi (2020) explored the potential barriers some Black women face when pursuing and attaining leadership positions in the applied behavior analysis field. Identifying environmental factors that interfere with Black women's ability to perform their jobs effectively in a positive work environment

conducive to leadership can predict barriers other Black women face (Cirincione-Ulezi, 2020). For companies, gender equality is more than a social justice issue; it is a source of competitive advantage. Strategies and policies supporting a conducive environment for women gaining leadership positions in the 21st century include pay equity, flexible work schedules, paid parental leave, teleworking opportunities, and a people-focused solid culture (Bhakuni, 2023).

Mentorship

Mentorship facilitates leadership by providing informal and formal support and guidance to help junior-level women navigate their career paths. Barkhuizen et al. (2022) argued that mentorship is an essential facilitator for women in overcoming career challenges. Women in early career stages benefit from having female mentors and leaders (Fernandez et al., 2021). Mentors or supervisors carved out a piece of the pie for mentees, facilitating their career success (Fernandez et al., 2021). Early career faculty were involved in manuscripts and given unique roles in existing projects (Fernandez et al., 2021). The participants in Fernandez et al.'s study reported having mentors of various genders, races, and ethnicities, with a mix of positive and negative experiences; however, several participants noted that having female mentors was beneficial. In addition to serving as role models, participants identified female mentors as facilitating career advancement. Some participants described how having a female mentor provided validation and increased authenticity (Fernandez et al., 2021).

Francis and Stulz (2020) studied women's career progression in academia. They found that facilitators for career advancement included mentoring and collaborative

nurturing, giving back to others, including the university, and flexibility. Coleman (2020) noted that mentors and role models can assist women in their career advancement. There are many forms of mentoring, such as peer mentoring. However, the archetype depicts an older person guiding a novice (Coleman, 2020). Mentoring can be especially beneficial to women. Steele et al. (2023) found that mentoring for women tends to give simple, transactional information and provide psychosocial support.

Summary

Chapter Two overviewed the inequity in the number of women in management positions and their treatment in the workplace to create a foundation to understand why more women are not in leadership positions within the SES or SES-equivalent positions. Theoretical, sociological, systemic, and prejudiced reasons why more women are not employed in SES or SES-equivalent positions were studied in this chapter. In this study, I focused on the absence of women in senior leadership positions within the public sector, especially in the SES or SES-equivalent positions.

First, this chapter explained the conceptual framework that underlies the main issue and offers insight into workplace organizational and social networks.

Organizational theories of Frederick Taylor, Max Weber, and Henri Fayol were examined to understand how they impact workplace bureaucracy and efficiency. Gulick's gendered organizational theory was also used as a framework and a link to understand better individual women in the workplace. Therefore, the chapter also reviewed SIT and IST.

Secondly, the chapter reviewed the literature but not before overviewing the SES

and SES-equivalent positions in the public sector. Next, the literature review described the challenges women confront in the workplace and the limitations they may meet, especially in a federal workplace. This discussion also included ideas regarding why more women are not in higher leadership positions in the federal government. The literature further reviewed the history and impact of gender roles in the workplace. Chapter Two examined discrimination and gender stereotypes in the workplace. I used the SGGB framework to identify gender prejudices and expectations. Finally, the chapter discussed the problems women face in the workforce.

Chapter 3 will review the research methodologies used to explain why women are underrepresented in top-level management roles while having the same amount of education and experience in the same field as male candidates. Chapter 3 outlines the RQ that guided the research; the RQ helped me stay focused on their issue. In addition, the chapter includes a summary of the data collection procedures, the tools used to collect research in the study, and the demographics of the study participants. Finally, the chapter discusses data analysis methodologies and any concerns in the study that may have arisen throughout the research process, such as trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Chapter 3: Research Method

This study was conducted to examine women's lack of top leadership positions in the public sector despite their qualifications being similar to those of their male counterparts. The study aimed to understand the rationale for appointing leaders and why women are underrepresented in SES or SES equivalent positions. The purpose of the qualitative study was to understand the experiences of career civil servicewomen who have sought an SES or SES-equivalent position in a government organization. I focused on women in the public sector with master's degrees with at least 5 years of experience in the public sector and who have sought an SES or SES-equivalent position in the past 5 years. The results help provide a better understanding of why women have been underrepresented in top management roles in public sector organizations and how this can be rectified; it also includes awareness of the bias in the public sector.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed analysis of the research methods used in the study to investigate the disparities that lead to women being underrepresented in SES positions, albeit with the same level of education and experience in the public sector. The chapter also describes the rationale of the study and my role as the researcher. The methodology employed for the analysis is discussed, along with the rationale for choosing the method, which includes a description of the participant selection criteria. The chapter provides an overview of the methods used in collecting data, instruments used to acquire research in the study, and the demographics of the participants in the study. Lastly, the chapter provides the data analysis methods and discusses any issues in the study involving trustworthiness and ethical considerations that may have been encountered during the

study process.

Research Design and Research Method

The research design and method adopted for the study was a general qualitative approach. This qualitative research type is used to examine existing phenomena and underlying meanings and contexts. This method involves *how* and *why* questions and provides the context and deeper understanding of why the phenomena exist (Cypress, 2018). A qualitative research design contextualizes several philosophical paradigms that help understand how and why things are the way they are in a given setting (Mulisa, 2022). Qualitative research achieves this via the data gathered from participants through open-ended questions, questionnaires, and structured or semistructured interviews (Allan, 2020). The researcher analyzes the research findings by looking at themes and patterns that emerge from the data collected from the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Qualitative research was chosen as the most appropriate method for the present study as it helped explain the perspectives and lived experiences of women seeking top leadership positions. A general qualitative research design was used to understand the perceptions and experiences of highly qualified women at the civil servant level who have sought senior management positions in different public sector positions in their careers (Mayring, 2019). The aim was to gather perceptions and opinions of these women on the reasons underlying the disparity in women being hired into top-level job management despite having sufficient qualifications (Ruan, 2022). This method explained why there are significant differences in male and female representation in SES or SES-equivalent positions (see Lindgren et al., 2020). This research design was also

chosen as the study used interviews as its primary data source. The present study asked women who had made it to the top or had applied for leadership positions to explain the hardships and barriers encountered throughout their careers and lend their insight into what might be the reason for the differences in the appointment of women to top-level management jobs as compared to men. To comprehend this phenomenon, I developed a RQ that I used as a guide throughout the study period: What are the perspectives, perceptions, and opinions of civil service women who have sought a SES or SES-equivalent position in a government organization?

While other methods may help focus on real-world problems, such as case studies, these do not provide a proper qualitative analysis of the research (Twining et al., 2017). These methods also fail to provide an iterative analysis required to derive meaning from the participant. I followed a general qualitative approach to consider three internal perceptions women hold about themselves: What do they perceive of leadership positions? Do they think women are discriminated against when hiring for SES or SES-equivalent positions? How do they perceive their leadership styles, and does their leadership style qualify them to hold SES or SES-equivalent positions? Another important goal of the present study was to determine the factors in the work environment contributing to women's belief that they are excluded from top-level senior management. This included investigating factors that have existed in the past, present, and future that contribute to women in senior management not getting equal opportunities. Another dimension explored via this technique was understanding the relationships between the participants and the phenomenon under study and how the phenomenon affects the

participant. There is a difference between telling a story and reliving it; the participants chosen for examination provided a firsthand encounter of what they have experienced in their careers; hence, opinions and perceptions carry a lot of weight. The barriers and the obstacles presented in the study were identified from encounters with people who have direct experience with these challenges.

Role of the Researcher

In the present qualitative research study, I was a human instrument and an objective viewer (see Wa-Mbaleka, 2018). I looked to understand the experiences of career civil service women who have sought a SES or SES-equivalent position in a government organization. I identified the methods to collect data in the study and was involved in the participant recruitment process. After contact with the participants, I informed them of the expectations of their participation and briefed them on the aim of the research at the end (see Roberts, 2020). I prepared consent forms for the participants; once they confirmed their participation, I prepared IQs and documented the interview information.

It must be disclosed that I was employed in an organization that had potential participants who met the inclusion criteria. However, I did not know any of those individuals personally. I did not encounter any situation in which a participant was my subordinate or a superior.

I engaged in reflexivity practices throughout the study to mitigate potential researcher bias. Reflexivity involves a researcher thinking critically about how their values, opinions, thoughts, beliefs, and worldviews influence each facet of the research

process, including decision-making, data collection, data analysis and data interpretation (Olaghere, 2022). I used journaling and memoing to maintain a complete awareness of my thoughts, opinions, and beliefs throughout the research process (see McGrath, 2021). To this end, I journaled before and after engaging in any research-based activity, including participant selection, development of the interview protocol, data collection via semistructured interviews, and data analysis. Similarly, memos were used throughout the data collection and analysis process. In addition, I took field notes during the interview process to document my thoughts, opinions, and beliefs regarding the participants' interviews (see Khan & MacEachen, 2022).

Methodology

Participants

The general population under investigation was female employees seeking leadership positions, whereas the target population was female employees who had sought to attain an SES or SES-equivalent position. The aim was to select 10–15 participants or as many participants as needed to reach data saturation. The participants were women with master's degrees who have sought a senior position in top-level management in their career with exceptional skills demonstrated in several capacities and have or have not been able to attain a SES or SES-equivalent position. The participants chosen were women professionals who had sought an SES or SES-equivalent position in a government organization within the last 5 years. The rationale for selecting these women for data collection was to help identify perceived biases they have faced during their careers, facilitations for success, and obstacles that have hindered them from gaining

top management jobs within government organizations (see Harris et al., 2018).

A mixture of purposeful and snowball sampling techniques was used to select participants for the study (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this qualitative study, the primary method used to recruit participants was purposeful sampling to select participants who are knowledgeable about the research topic and have experience with the phenomena under study (see Noyes et al., 2018). The participants were women at the peak of their careers who may or may not have been able to break the glass ceiling, and their perspectives, perceptions, and opinions were examined during the interview process.

A total of 10 women were purposefully selected for this study, and recruitment ended when data saturation was reached. A sample size of 12 participants leads to data saturation in 98% of interview-based qualitative studies (Guest et al., 2020). However, if I had observed that data saturation had not been achieved after conducting 10 interviews, I would have undertaken additional interviews until the study reached data saturation.

To recruit participants, I sent a recruitment flyer to various professional networks that included women who have attained or are seeking high-level positions, who then sent the recruitment flyer to their networks. I verified that all participants met the inclusion criteria by asking for details regarding the SES or SES-equivalent position they applied for. This information was kept anonymous and was only used for screening purposes. Women chosen had wide-ranging affiliations in politics, education, career experiences, and business. I aimed to seek diverse participants in terms of age and race. All the participants met the minimum selection requirement, which included having at least 5 years' experience in their field and a master's degree, and they sought an SES or SES-

equivalent role in the previous 5 years. Candidates who did not meet the criteria were excluded from the study. This type of research requires participants who have experienced the phenomenon and can express and communicate their perceptions and opinions (Khoa et al., 2023).

I briefed the participants on what the study required and how their input could help inform policy recommendations in the public employment sector. All the participants were provided with consent forms, allowing them to commit to the research voluntarily. The participants were free to withdraw their participation at any time without penalty. The consent forms included information on the purpose of the study, the procedures used to collect the data, the risks and benefits of being in the study, how participant privacy was protected, and how their identities were kept confidential during and after the study.

Instrumentation

Open-ended, semistructured interviews were used in the study to gain perspectives and opinions on women and how and why they believe women do not attain the same top management level as their male counterparts despite having similar qualifications. Semistructured interviews were selected as an instrument for the investigation since they helped me have a discussion that allowed the participants to talk freely about the issues that hinder and facilitate women in their career paths. Interviews are commonly used in qualitative studies as they help the researcher understand how the phenomena affect the participants and provide an in-depth analysis of their views and perceptions (Mohajan, 2018). The participant can help clarify or substantiate their claims

or unclear points in interviews. Due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the participants' being from various states and locations, the interviews were conducted through Zoom. Each participant was provided with a 60–90 minute session. Each participant was given enough time to discuss what they have faced during their career life and the challenges and barriers they encountered when trying to get top leadership roles in government organizations.

Before conducting the actual study, IQs were validated by a field test with an individual who met the criteria for study inclusion, the results of which were not included in the study. This ensured that the IQs were easily understandable and effectively addressed the study problem statement (see Yeong et al., 2018). The IQs and guide are included in Appendix A.

Through these IQs, the participants' perceptions and opinions were garnered. Before the interviews were conducted, field testing of the IQs was done to ensure the questions were appropriate given the purpose of the study and that they addressed the study's RQ. Field testing helps researchers validate their assumptions and ensure the IQs are suitable for the study (Coorevits et al., 2018). The feedback from the field testing was incorporated into revisions of the IQs. The interviews were recorded and automatically transcribed by Zoom. I reviewed the transcripts to ensure they were transcribed correctly, made edits as necessary, and then sent them to participants for member checking within 72 hours (see Candela, 2019). The participants were assigned pseudonyms after initial contact to protect their identities. Any reference to the participants in my calendar, Zoom meeting names, the recorded interviews, and the transcripts derived from the interviews

were coded with the chosen pseudonyms. All collected data were stored on a device I owned and under my sole control. The device was password-protected. Participants were assigned a pseudonym, and their names were not included in the data. The data were coded, and all personally identifiable information was removed. Data will be kept for at least 5 years and then destroyed by deleting the files and reformatting the drive.

Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis and NVivo coding to analyze the coded and winnowed – or paired data from the interviews (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The thematic analysis allows the researcher to derive themes from transcribed interview data (Ezzy, 2013; Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Braun and Clarke’s (2006) recommendations for a six-phase thematic analysis to find the emerging articles from the discussions were incorporated into this study. The six steps according to Braun and Clarke are:

Step 1: Become familiar with the data. To start the research, the researcher will familiarize themselves with the interview data. The researcher will read and reread the interview transcriptions and note the critical themes throughout the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Step 2: Generate initial codes. This phase involves organizing our data in a meaningful and systematic manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding simplifies large amounts of data. Depending on the researcher’s perspective and RQs, different methods can be used to code (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After emerging themes are identified, a code, is a word or phrase that is used in research to capture and summarize the essence of a portion of data (Aspers & Corte, 2019).

Step 3: Search for themes. Theme concepts refer to patterns that capture significant insights into data or RQs (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In essence, a theme is characterized by its significance and not by any hard and fast rules (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In NVivo, the coding process will involve gathering related data into a container referred to as a node (Wilson & Anagnostopoulos, 2021). The researcher will use theme nodes to represent the themes and emerging topics from the interviews with participants. The organization of data in the first step of data analysis will help make coding and organizing themes easier (Noyes et al., 2018).

Step 4: Review themes. During this phase the researcher reviews, modifies and develops the preliminary themes that were identified in the previous step (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is important that themes are coherent and distinct from one another and analyzed to ensure they make sense, that the data support to the themes and that all themes are fully identified or separated when necessary (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After finding and organizing codes, themes will be identified to provide cohesion for the results, conclusions and future directions sections of the study.

Step 5: Define themes. In this step, the researcher's job is to uncover the essence of each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once the coding and thematic analysis are concluded, the study's results will use the themes developed in these sections to come up with conclusions that will help highlight the barriers for women seeking leadership positions.

Step 6: Write-up. The final step is to synthesize all of the themes and write up the results to answer the RQs (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Consistent opinions, perceptions, and

beliefs identified by the participants in the study will be analyzed, and recommendations to change the phenomena will be discussed.

Issues of Trustworthiness

To maintain the research study's quality and integrity, I employed the four dimensions of trustworthiness identified by Lincoln and Guba (1986). An investigation should maintain the four aspects of trustworthiness including: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability. Trustworthiness is a critical aspect of research; I ensured it was maintained throughout the study.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the importance of the study findings representing the truth (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). I was responsible for ensuring the study's credibility and as such, worked in tandem with committee members to align the RQ and the study methods used to ensure the study provided meaningful data and conclusions (see Lincoln & Guba, 1986). I reviewed the interview transcripts several times, and transcripts were subjected to member checking to ensure the data accurately reflect participants' experiences (see Shenton, 2004). The study findings were shared with other researchers to ensure that all the study aspects were adequately described. Any misunderstandings were corrected before the completion of the work.

Transferability

Transferability ensures that a study's outcomes can be reproduced when a similar analysis is conducted, albeit by another researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). To enhance transferability, I provided a detailed description of the method used to carry out the

research, the data collected, and the methods used in analyzing data (see Shenton, 2004). Sufficient information was provided about the study's participants to determine if there were potential effects of sampling bias, and participants will be chosen across various demographics to collect a representative sample (see Shenton, 2004).

Dependability

To circumvent threats to dependability in the study, I maintained consistency throughout the research project (see Shaw & Satalkar, 2018). I provided a rationale for the research design used (see Rose & Johnson, 2020). I also carried out dependability through constant communication with committee members, who acted as external auditors and helped provide me with the most efficient and reproducible methods to apply during the research process.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to how neutral and open to bias a study is, so throughout the research process, I ensured that potential biases are identified and noted to avoid compromising the quality of the study (see Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Confirmability was provided by maintaining an audit trail, so that other researchers could evaluate the primary data and the study's conclusions (see Nassaji, 2020). I conducted journaling exercises to remove personal bias from the study. Using reflexive journaling throughout the research process is a strategy to identify researcher bias since qualitative research cannot be completely objective (Kross & Giust, 2019). A reflexive journal is a tool that allows researchers to analyze and reflect on their research process and the outcomes of their research. Journaling increases self-awareness and credibility (Kross & Giust, 2019).

In this study, journaling allowed me to express any considerations regarding methodology, assumptions, and beliefs that might have influenced the process. Member checking was used to prevent researcher bias. At this point, I ensured that additional participants provide similar answers to those already included and that further interviews would not likely contain new emerging data. Guest et al. (2020) noted that saturation is reached when the data from the discussions have reached the point of minimum returns. No further data were included once the last interview is completed.

Ethical Considerations

The data collection process involved the use of interviews; hence there was the potential to abuse research by taking advantage of participants (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). To ensure that the chances of participants being exploited were nullified, I provided the participants with a consent form detailing every step taken during the research process and will offer them a chance to leave the study if they felt uncomfortable (see Appendix B). Approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained before data collection began to ensure that all ethical considerations were addressed. Creswell and Creswell (2017) noted that quality research should be ethical and follow all the steps and guidelines. Participation in the study was voluntary.

I performed the interviews using Zoom. Zoom offers password protection for confidentiality and the ability to record to either the host's computer or Zoom's cloud storage (Gray et al., 2020). However, it is better to save the recorded interviews to a researcher's private and secure computer or virtual storage provided by the researcher's

academic institution to protect participant confidentiality because data saved to a company's cloud storage is at risk of exposure to hackers (Gray et al., 2020). All data were stored on devices owned and under the sole control of me separate from any identifying information. The device was kept in a secure location inside my locked home with security protections. I was the sole holder of all passwords protecting the data and the device where data were stored, and that device contained the latest, recently-updated security software. The aim was to make participants as comfortable as possible to gain their understanding, opinion, and perception of women in leadership roles (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Ruan, 2022). I relied on human subjects as the primary data source, hence the need for IRB approval to conduct the research (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The IRB provided the data collection techniques applied in the study, which were reviewed to ensure that a study follows all the ethical considerations required. There was limited risk to participants beyond what is normally experienced in their routine day. However, in the event that a participant became uncomfortable during an interview, they could have requested a break or discontinue participation at any time.

Importantly, participants' identities remained confidential throughout the entire research process. All participants were assigned a pseudonym, namely P1, P2, P3, ..., and P12, as a mechanism to protect participant anonymity and ensure confidentiality. All resources derived from the participants, including emails, interview recordings, and interview transcripts, were classified by the participants' pseudonyms only. Participants were required to sign an informed consent form prior to the scheduling of interviews, so as to ensure their voluntary participation in the study.

Summary

I aimed to understand the experiences of career civil servicewomen who have sought a SES or SES equivalent position in the public sector. I used a qualitative study approach that consisted of interviews with 10 civil servicewomen who had a Master's degree with at least 5 years of experience in their field and had sought a leadership position in a government organization in the past 5 years. This chapter detailed how I conducted the research, including the research design and the study's inclusion criteria. Reasons for using the qualitative study design were discussed. The chapter also discusses the instruments used to collect data and explains using interviews as the primary data collection method. The data analysis methods were also discussed, and the study's rationale for using coding techniques was detailed. Lastly, I examined the ethical considerations involved in the research and how the quality of the survey will be maintained. The next chapter analyzes the data collected in Chapter 3 and discusses the findings based on thematic analysis.

Chapter 4: Results

Individuals working at U.S. corporations experience gender inequities. For instance, White women earn 82 cents for every dollar that men make in the same role, and Black and Hispanic women earn less than 70 cents compared to their male counterparts (White, 2022). Gender inequities are not only present in the private sector but also in the public sector. In particular, women are underrepresented in the SES and other SES-equivalent positions (Jackson & Bouchard, 2019). The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of career civil servicewomen who have sought an SES or SES-equivalent position in a government or public sector organization to gain insight into factors contributing to the unequal representation of women in this sector of the workforce. Understanding the experiences of these women may elucidate mechanisms to promote gender equality in the SES and SES-equivalent positions.

I devised one RQ to address the purpose of this study: What are the perspectives, perceptions, and opinions of civil service women who have sought a SES or SES-equivalent position in a government organization? In Chapter 4, the findings of this qualitative study are presented. First, the participants' research setting and essential demographic characteristics are presented. Next, details regarding the data collection and analysis methods used are provided. After providing evidence of trustworthiness, the study's findings are presented, highlighting essential themes extracted from the analysis of the participants' interviews. Chapter 4 closes with a summary and a transition to Chapter 5.

Research Setting

Following IRB approval (IRB #01-06-23-1053870, awarded on January 6, 2023), the recruitment flyer was sent to various professional networks that included women in high-level positions. The recruitment flyer was also posted to the Walden Participant Pool page. Three responses from potential participants were received at varying intervals after posting the recruitment flyer. The first participant responded within 1 week, the second participant within 3 months, and the third participant after 6 months. The remaining participants were recruited through snowball sampling. The recruitment flyer instructed potential participants to email me to indicate their interest in the study. Each potential participant was contacted by email to provide them with the informed consent form. The participants generally returned the informed consent by email with the words “I consent” within 36 hours. Once they indicated their informed consent, interviews were scheduled at a mutually convenient time and date.

Demographics

The participants were all required to meet the following inclusion criteria:

1. The participants were women holding a master’s degree or higher.
2. The participants had at least 5 years of experience in the public sector.
3. The participants must have sought an SES or SES-equivalent position in the last 5 years.

I confirmed with each participant that they met the inclusion criteria. Due to the sensitive nature of the participants’ employment, which required security clearances, some demographic information was not collected. Many participants worked in offices with

few women, and reporting ages, states, and government offices could have led to their identification.

Data Collection

Data collection began on January 12, 2023, 6 days after receiving IRB approval to conduct the study. Ten 1-hour interviews were scheduled using my Walden University email address. All participants completed the interviews. Five additional potential participants gave informed consent but did not complete interviews due to scheduling conflicts. All interviews were conducted using Zoom. Participants were assigned a participant identification number, such as P1, for data collection and identification purposes and to protect their confidentiality throughout the study. Participant identification numbers were assigned based on the order in which they completed the interviews.

The interview guide was followed during the interviews to ensure that all participants were asked the same questions. However, prompting questions were added when necessary to clarify the participants' answers and maintain a conversational atmosphere. Notes were taken during the interviews to promote researcher reflexivity. Data were collected using Zoom's recording feature to capture the audio responses to the IQs. The interviews lasted between 17 minutes and 56 minutes. A summary of the interview data is provided in Table 1.

Table 1*Summary of Interview Data Collected in This Study*

| Participant | Interview | Duration | Transcript pages |
|-------------|--------------------|--------------|------------------|
| P1 | January 12, 2023 | 17 minutes | 7 pages |
| P2 | January 12, 2023 | 17 minutes | 7 pages |
| P3 | January 13, 2023 | 23 minutes | 12 pages |
| P4 | February 26, 2023 | 33 minutes | 13 pages |
| P5 | April 12, 2023 | 56 minutes | 16 pages |
| P6 | August 19, 2023 | 33 minutes | 11 pages |
| P7 | August 29, 2023 | 28 minutes | 11 pages |
| P8 | August 31, 2023 | 27 minutes | 10 pages |
| P9 | September 12, 2023 | 31 minutes | 11 pages |
| P10 | September 18, 2023 | 30 minutes | 9 pages |
| MEAN | N/A | 29.5 minutes | 10.9 pages |
| TOTAL | N/A | 295 minutes | 109 pages |

Note. Transcripts were typed in Time New Roman, Font size 12, single spaced

The interviews were concluded by thanking the participants for their time and informing them that the recording had been stopped. The online transcription software Otter.ai was used to transcribe the data. The transcriptions were reviewed line-by-line compared to the original audio recordings to ensure that each transcription was accurate. During this comparison, the transcripts were cleaned to eliminate duplicate filler words. After transcriptions were completed and verified, I emailed each participant a copy of their transcript to allow them to complete the interviewee transcript review (see Rowlands, 2021). Participants were asked to acknowledge receipt of the transcript, evaluate it to ensure their responses were accurate, and email me feedback. Two participants (P1 and P2) responded to the transcript review email, indicating no changes were needed. The other participants did not respond to the transcript review email.

Data Analysis

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phased methodology, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. In Phase 1, familiarization with the data occurred by reading the interview transcripts multiple times. Any personally identifiable information revealed by the participants was redacted from the interview transcripts during this phase. For instance, some participants mentioned what governmental agency employed them; this information was redacted to protect their confidentiality.

Phases 2 and 3 were the coding and axial categorization phases. During Phase 2, descriptive codes were applied to the participants' significant thoughts and ideas. Coding allows meaning to be assigned to textual data without losing information (Saldaña, 2021). In Phase 3, similar codes were grouped using pattern recognition. Once grouped, the codes were assigned to axial categories encompassing all codes. Discrepant cases were identified in this phase. A *discrepant case* was defined as a code applied to only one participant's interview. There was one discrepant case specified in this study. Participant P2 indicated that they received help from human resources (HR) in applying for a SES or SES-equivalent position, while the other participants did not mention such help. The relationship between axial categories and codes is shown in Table 2. At least four participants were represented to qualify as a category.

Table 2*Categorization of Codes into Axial Categories*

| Category | Codes | Participants |
|--|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. The participants identified facilitators of career advancement | Mentors | P1, P6, P8, P9, P10 |
| | Human resources | P2 |
| 2. Some participants had no facilitators to career advancement. | No facilitators | P1, P4, P5, P7 |
| 3. Women will advance when organizations empower them without discrimination | Empower women | P1, P2, P5, P6 |
| | Network opportunities | P7, P8 |
| | No discrimination | P2, P5, P6, P8 |
| 4. Application challenges prevented advancement | Application challenges, deadlines | P1, P3, P7, P8 |
| | Competition | P1, P7 |
| | Lack of information | P1, P2, P8 |
| 5. Discrimination and bias prevented advancement. | Discrimination, bias | P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, P10 |
| | Internal promotions | P1, P6, P7 |
| 6. Organizational barriers can prevent advancement. | Culture | P1, P7 |
| | Discrimination, bias | P2, P7, P9 |
| | Qualifications, experience | P5, P6, P8 |

Phase 4 was the constant-comparative phase. During this phase, all participants' responses were read according to each IQs to solidify codes and categories further. To this end, each participant's response was read to IQ1, then IQ2, and so on, until all IQs had been exhausted. This helped examine the data across participants, solidify the codes, and ensure the patterns identified were confirmed across the entire data set.

In Phase 5, I organized the categories into themes. During this phase, I refined the categories to ensure they encompassed all codes and were descriptive. Two themes were extracted from the analysis of the participants' interviews. Theme 1 addresses facilitators to career advancement. Theme 1 was formed from Categories 1–3. Theme 2, barriers to career advancement to the SES, was created from Categories 4–6. Theme 1 represents nine participants, while Theme 2 represents all participants. After organizing the categories into themes, Phase 6 involved examining the data analysis holistically. During

this assessment, it was ensured that logical meaning had been extracted to answer the study's RQ.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of qualitative research indicates the validity and reliability of a study's findings. Trustworthiness is an important concern for promoting the quality of qualitative research (Adler, 2022). Qualitative researchers must consider four aspects of trustworthiness when designing and executing their studies: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability. In this section, I describe the essential aspects of the trustworthiness of my study.

Credibility

The credibility of a qualitative study is akin to the internal validity of a quantitative study (Johnson et al., 2020). That is, credibility is concerned with the accuracy of the assertions and inferences made by the investigator. A study is said to be credible when other researchers can have confidence in a study's findings (Adler, 2022). To promote the credibility of the study's findings, I established the study's procedures and data collection plan, allowing for methodological rigor and transparency. I conducted the study using Zoom, which allowed the participants to be comfortable in their own surroundings. I also gave participants sufficient time to answer each question, and I ensured I reached data saturation by interviewing three additional participants after saturation had been reached. Data saturation is the point in the data collection and analysis process when no new information is gathered from interviewing additional participants (Guest et al., 2020). In this study, data saturation was defined as the point

when no new codes could be applied to a participant's interview, and codes previously defined could be used to describe the data (see Saldaña, 2021). Details on data saturation are provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Data Saturation Was Observed After Seven Interviews

| Participant | No. of unique codes |
|-------------|---------------------|
| P1 | 14 |
| P2 | 3 |
| P3 | 3 |
| P4 | 2 |
| P5 | 1 |
| P6 | 1 |
| P7 | 0 |
| P8 | 1 |
| P9 | 0 |
| P10 | 0 |

Based on Table 3, data saturation was observed after seven interviews because three participants' interviews were coded solely with codes previously established for other participants. Two other mechanisms promoted credibility. I performed an interviewee transcript review to promote narrative truth, and I engaged in reflexivity, which reminded me to maintain awareness about how my personal thoughts and opinions influenced the data collection and analysis procedures (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Transferability

While credibility is akin to internal validity, transferability is similar to the external validity of a study's findings. Transferability involves understanding how a study's findings can be applied in different contexts to different situations and

populations (Moustakas, 1994). Investigators must provide methodological transparency for transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Therefore, I provided sufficient detail so other researchers can replicate this study. I further promoted transferability by recruiting participants from various regions in the United States. The participants collectively represented seven states in the southwestern, southern, northeastern, and western United States. Both state governments and the federal government also employed the participants. The participants were of varied age ranges and were in different stages of their careers; some participants were mid-career, while others were in their late careers. The broad sampling of the participants allows for greater transferability of the study's findings (Johnson et al., 2020).

Dependability

Also known as the reliability of the research, dependability is characterized as the consistency or repeatability of the study protocols (Johnson et al., 2020). The methodology, procedures, and processes in collecting and analyzing the data were documented and reported to promote dependability. Throughout the study, I evaluated whether the analysis process was congruent with the accepted standards for the research design. As suggested by Korstjens and Moser (2018), an audit trail was kept to document the research process rigorously. A complete set of notes on the decisions made during the research process was maintained, including reflective thoughts, sampling, research instruments, the emergence of the findings, and information about data management. Adopting an audit trail enables the auditor to study the transparency of the research path (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Confirmability

Through confirmability, researchers safeguard against researcher biases. To mitigate researcher bias, I used bracketing (see Moustakas, 1994) and reflexive journaling (see McGrath, 2021). Using a combination of bracketing and reflexive journaling increases a researcher's reflexivity (Habibullah et al., 2023). In the remainder of Chapter 4, I demonstrate that the findings are based on the participants' interview responses by providing transparent, in-depth descriptions of how the data were collected and analyzed. To promote confirmability, I used verbatim participant quotations to support my statements. Another way the qualitative researcher develops confirmability is through rival explanations and negative cases. Negative cases regularly deliver a strategy to distinguish the norm and are critical to recognizing the complete experience (Coleman, 2022). I addressed discrepant cases when applicable to the study's findings. Finally, I used member checking of the data to enhance the confirmability of the study. Member checking, also known as participant or respondent validation, is a technique for exploring the trustworthiness of the results (Candela, 2019). Participants were sent a summary of the results to inquire whether their thoughts were reflected in the findings.

Study Results

The results section is organized into three subsections. First, the participants' thoughts on leadership are presented in preliminary findings. Throughout this discussion, the participants' ideas about leadership qualities are documented. The initial findings also include a discussion of leadership qualities prevalent among female leaders compared to male leaders. In the second subsection of the results, the participants' descriptions of their

leadership pursuits are presented. This is completed individually for each participant since the participants' experiences varied greatly. Finally, the third subsection discusses the participants' thoughts on facilitators and barriers to employment in the SES or at the SES level.

Preliminary Findings

In this section, the participants' thoughts on the qualities that should be possessed by leadership are described. The participants described both general leadership strategies, as well as leadership styles.

Transformational Leadership is an Effective Leadership Style

Eight participants described aspects of transformational leadership when asked to describe leadership and leadership qualities, identifying idealized influence, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation. Table 4 shows the participants' thoughts about how leaders should exhibit the transformational leadership style.

Table 4*Participants Identified Transformational Leadership as Important for Advancement*

| Participant | Tenet | Excerpt from interview |
|-------------|------------------------------|--|
| P1 | Idealized influence | “It doesn’t necessarily mean that you have to control them until they feel like they are not in the best place, you can be a leader by example.” |
| P2 | Individualized consideration | “You also have to have certain good qualities of a leader, a good leader. That includes relationship building.” |
| P4 | Idealized influence | “I feel like a true leader is present for their team or the person that that’s looking up to them and just letting them know that they have that support when they’re when it’s needed.” |
| P5 | Inspirational motivation | “Well, you know, we’re going to pick out some things and improve some things and work together and develop teamwork and camaraderie.” |
| P7 | Intellectual stimulation | “A leader has to bring out the best qualities in people by stimulating them to be their best.” |
| P8 | Inspirational motivation | “Just motivating people, and keeping people aligned with the mission of the organization.” |
| P9 | Idealized influence | “Leadership is a privilege given to us by those who follow. I like that quote, because everybody isn’t born to be a leader. Somebody has to be a follower.” |
| P10 | Idealized influence | “I look at a commitment. It is something that you have to demonstrate every day, and people have to believe that you believe in what they are doing.” |

As shown in Table 4, the participants spoke about transformational leadership, a leadership style where leaders act as role models for exemplary performance and inspire followers through individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation (see Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leaders exhibit idealized influence, acting as role models for their employees. Participants P1, P4, P9, and P10 identified idealized influence as an essential leadership quality. P1 explained that leaders should lead by example, saying, “It doesn’t necessarily mean that you have to control them until they feel like they are not in the best place. You can be a leader by example.” For these participants, leaders should exude the qualities they are trying to develop in their followers. P8 spoke about inspirational motivation, indicating that influential leaders

motivate their followers to align their goals with the organization's goal. According to P2, this can occur through individualized consideration, where leaders build relationships with their followers. Thus, the participants believed that influential leaders are transformational leaders.

Other Leadership Styles as Necessary for Advancement to the SES

The participants also spoke to other aspects of leadership that were not transformational. Two participants spoke about the need for servant leadership and genuinely exhibiting care for followers. For instance, P3 said:

I believe a leader should be a servant leader. I feel like a leader should be someone that's there to support you, someone that's there to help you through any process, whether it's emotionally, whether it's encouragement, whether it's reality of letting you know, this is where you are, and this is where you want to be.

For P3, leaders exhibit genuine care and concern for their followers, allowing followers to better themselves. P10 also spoke about servant leadership, saying, "Leadership is servant. You're a servant to the people that you support, and the staff that you are asking to work on behalf of what you're trying to do." P10, like P3, also believes that leaders are servants to their followers, with the result of servant leadership being achievement. The participants collectively believed that effective leaders exhibit transformational and servant leadership styles.

Participant P7 spoke about the need for transactional leadership, especially considering the nature of government jobs. P7 said,

Leaders need to be task-oriented and ensure their employees are task-oriented as

well. In the government, quality is necessary, but experience is determined based on how much work you churn out. You need experience for advancement. The people selecting candidates for the SES will look at your work track record and your other experiences. Being task-oriented is necessary for the SES. Being a woman, you have to have all of your ducks and experiences in order.

Participant P7 indicated that the government is task-oriented, which is consistent with findings in the literature (see Bass & Riggio, 2006). P7 believed that transactional leadership is necessary for advancement to the SES because the candidates are judged on experience, which comes from completing tasks. Thus, transactional leadership may be an important leadership style in the government that enhances the ability of candidates to obtain SES positions.

Experiences of Women in Obtaining Leadership Positions

This section presents the participants' perspectives on obtaining SES-equivalent leadership positions. Thematic analysis for this section was complex because each participant's experiences varied, and common themes were difficult to ascertain. Therefore, consistent with the phenomenological research design (Moustakas, 1994), each participant's perspectives on career advancement to SES-equivalent positions are presented.

Participant P1

Participant P1, an African American woman in the northeast U.S., went to work for the government early in her career. She immediately realized that she needed to further her education once she became employed. She explained, "Immediately [once] I

got there, I realized that I had to do something about my education because of the stagnation that comes when you get a job. I wanted to advance my career. So I got a master's." P1 realized that she needed to advance her education to advance in her career. After being denied a position at the SES level, she began thinking about furthering her education again. She said, "I thought that they might think of something else. So now, I'm still thinking of something else because positions here are competitive and I tend to not get opportunities as much as I want them." P1 believed that education is essential to why she was passed over for leadership opportunities.

P1 spoke about the training and induction process of her current leadership position. She said, "When I applied within my organization, it took close to three months to get a response. The induction process wasn't easy because now you're working under many supervisors, which, at times, is really challenging." P1 found the induction process into her current leadership position to be challenging. P1 identified the application process as difficult for SES-equivalent positions, identifying deadlines and required credentials as factors that influenced her denial of her application.

Participant P2

Participant P2, an African American woman in the northeast U.S., worked for a state government, having found employment with them early in her career. She explained:

I think that time I was applying. There were a few slots that were advertised. I don't think they had many people apply for the job and that's how I managed to be among the four shortlisted candidates. So that is how it happened. I was called

for an interview and waited for a response, which I got a positive response after a few months.

P2 believed she was hired by the government out of necessity because there was a lack of applicants. P2 described her experience with applying to a leadership position in a different department. She said:

I applied to change departments because I thought the pay was better and it would be an opportunity to gain experience in this new department. But that time, I felt they were a bit biased because they recruited only one female and the rest male candidates.

P2 believed that her application to an SES position was unsuccessful because she was female and the process was biased toward males.

Participant P3

Participant P3, an African American woman in the northeast U.S., worked in procurement at the state government level. Procurement is the process of locating and agreeing to terms and purchasing goods and services from external sources (Johnson et al., 2021). She spoke about not being selected for an SES position in the federal government, but did not give specifics about her experience. She said, “The first time I applied for an SES position, I was rejected before the interview process. The second time, I was invited for an interview, but didn’t get the job.” P3 applied to the SES twice and was not selected either time. She found it challenging to travel to complete the application and interview process. She said, “I was in a different country. I had to like travel. I think what can be done about that is just being read the documents, and if the

applications can be done online from anywhere, it could be better.” P3 indicated that the application was a barrier because it needed to be done in person, and they were stationed in a different country at the time they applied to the SES.

Participant P4

Participant P4, an African American woman in the western U.S., entered public service in an entry-level position after serving three tours in the U.S. Army. She worked her way up to leadership roles throughout her career. She believed she encountered barriers at every stage of her career development, including sexual assault in the military and sexual harassment and discrimination while in government service. She said,

I’ve dealt with more sexual harassment, racism, and assault than anything else in the military. The government, the majority of the time, I’ve forced to put a smile on my face, but I absolutely hate it. It just pays the bills.

At the time of the interview, she worked for the federal government in a leadership position and had applied for SES-equivalent jobs twice in her career. She spoke about how the SES was stacked against women and had pre-selected the male candidate they wanted. She said,

I was the most qualified for the position and I had a great interview, but I got turned down. It was a running joke in the office that the government had already selected the White male candidate they wanted for the position. However, they had to post the position and go through the motion of pretending to choose the right person.

P4 strongly believed that the government needed solid anti-discrimination policies and

that executives and employees were required to be educated about racial and gender-based discrimination.

Participant P5

Participant P5, a Caucasian woman in the southwest U.S., was an upper-level employee working under a deputy in one of the branches of the Department of Energy. When applying to the SES, P5 encountered a situation like P4, finding that the selection committee had already preselected the candidate they wanted. P5 explained,

When I applied for the position in the SES, it turns out whoever they had wanted didn't get their application in time. So they went in and extended it so [that] this guy could get his application in. I did not know this until afterward.

P5 found out after the application had closed that the selection committee had extended the deadline to allow an individual preselected for the position to complete the application. This type of nepotism is reportedly high in U.S. government promotions (Oldfield, 2020). Participant P5 now invests in mentoring other women who are seeking leadership positions.

Participant P6

Participant P6, an African American woman who worked in the northeastern and southern U.S., was an enlisted member of the U.S Air Force working in compliance and assessing risk management undertaken by the Air Force. She also handles complaints from Air Force members about violations of policies and programs. She had been in her position, a senior-level position, for 23 years at the time of the interview. P6 explained her career progression, saying:

I didn't have any real issues advancing through the ranks until I got to about E7, which is Master Sergeant. It becomes a lot more competitive because you have the narrowing of individuals, including women, especially in the cybersecurity field, which is predominantly more male-oriented. It becomes more difficult to get the rank and climb the enlisted ladder unless you're willing to move and sometimes move out of your direct career field and go to something else that may provide you a little bit of an opportunity and then be willing to come back, but maybe not to the same location.

She explained that she only encountered challenges advancing after she reached the seventh enlisted rank, E7. She also discussed how individuals leave their fields temporarily to take other assignments for promotion, which then allows them to come back to their original career path. Participant P6 applied to an SES-equivalent position, saying, "I also applied for a different position, a chief position, which is the highest enlisted rank in the Air Force." She also discussed the preselection of a candidate, saying that she believed that "sometimes the leadership already has a person in mind that they want. It's more or less predetermined to some degree." P6 had a similar experience to participants P4 and P5 with the preselection of candidates for the SES-equivalent positions.

Participant P7

Participant P7, a Caucasian woman in the northeastern U.S., worked in a government administration office within the Executive Office of the President of the United States. She consistently works with members of Congress as part of her

employment. She had applied to managerial positions but described her organization as “flat” and “not having many managerial positions.” When she applied to administrative positions, she was unsuccessful in securing an interview, which she believed was due to the office preselecting an individual for the position.

She explained, “It was well-known who was being groomed for the position. I threw my hat in, but I had no expectation of actually getting the position, which is sad.” P7 further explained that she thought the residency requirement negated her application. P7, like some of the other participants, experienced challenges ascending to leadership positions due to the preselection of less qualified candidates. She later was selected for a leadership position in her organization.

Participant P8

Participant P8, a Caucasian woman in the northeastern U.S., was a healthcare specialist working under the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. She temporarily served as a deputy director and applied for a deputy position, an SES-equivalent job. She described the process of applying to the position as challenging from a logistic point of view. She explained:

I felt like I was at the mercy of our HR to get through. So that was difficult. The people, like the director, and anyone I work with on my teams, nobody can help that much. At a certain point, it just comes down to that process, which can be very frustrating.

P8 found the process of applying to SES-equivalent positions challenging, which hindered her ability to succeed in the application process. She also explained that she felt

uncomfortable applying for an SES-equivalent position, saying, “What other people are thinking, what’s the long-term plan for me being here and how am I being evaluated, that was pretty unclear. So yeah, it just felt uncomfortable.” P8 found the process of applying uncomfortable because expectations were not clearly set regarding how candidates were being evaluated.

Participant P9

P9, an African American woman in the southern U.S., took a government position directly out of college and worked through different positions to obtain leadership roles. She worked in various offices in compliance, inspections, and quality assurance. She spoke about applying to jobs for which she was qualified. She described, “I applied for a job as a policy and planning program manager, I was very qualified for the job and had all the requirements for the job, but I didn’t get chosen for the job.” When she asked her supervisor why she was not chosen for the position, he avoided the question, making her feel like there was no real reason for her not getting the position.

Participant P10

Participant P10, an African American woman who worked in the northeastern and southern U.S., was nearing the end of her career and was a program manager in a local government. Before her current position, she worked in the state government as a program manager. She experienced ageism discrimination based on age when applying for an SES position.

She explained, “I feel that because of my age, I didn’t get the position.” She expressed severe disappointment over not being considered for the position, especially

given her qualifications and experience. She now devotes herself to helping other women apply for upper-level positions. She said, “I feel like my job should be helping other women move up and be able to take my position and other people’s position.” She explained that she takes her role as a mentor seriously regarding helping others take over her position and similar ones. P10 currently works in a leadership position at a government-funded non-profit organization, an SES-equivalent position.

Barriers and Facilitators to Becoming SES Employees

The previous section examined the participants’ thoughts regarding their journeys to applying for SES or SES-equivalent positions. In this portion of the interview, participants were asked about their experiences with facilitators and barriers to obtaining leadership positions at the SES level. Two themes were extracted, assessing the facilitators and barriers to SES-level positions. In Theme 1, the participants identified facilitators of career advancement, whereas in Theme 2, the participants identified barriers to advancement.

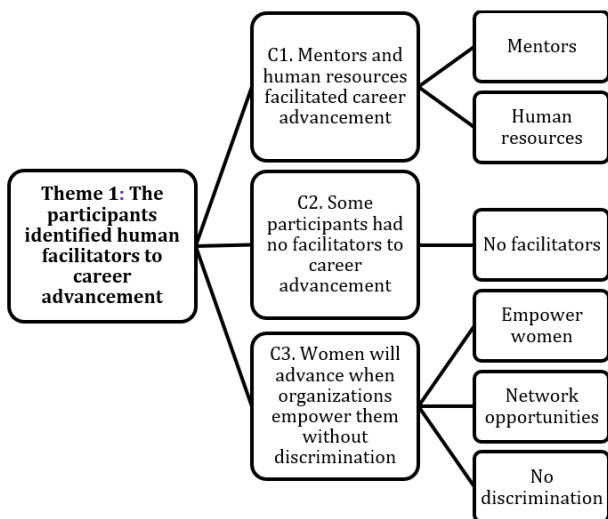
Theme 1: The Participants Identified Facilitators of Career Advancement

In Theme 1, the participants described facilitators of career advancement that they encountered throughout their careers. Three categories contributed to the development of Theme 1. In Category 1, the participants identified mentors and HR as facilitators of their career advancement. In Category 2, some participants indicated that they experienced no facilitators to career advancement. In Category 3, the participants recommended that government agencies empower women and end discriminatory practices to promote gender equality in the SES. The codes and categories contributing to the development of

Theme 1 are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Codes and Categories Contributing to the Development of Theme 1



Category 1: Mentors and HR Facilitated Career Advancement. The participants believed that mentors and human resource officers facilitated their career advancement. Regarding mentors, P1 said, “Someone to guide me through the application process because when it was being done, you did an application virtually and manually. So I had someone to help with that. The application mentor, [an employee] was friendly.” P1 had a mentor who helped them with their application, which they described as challenging and requiring much attention to detail. They also described the mentor as friendly and knowledgeable, helping them navigate the complex application process.

Participant P6 also relied on the advice of mentors to help with the application process. P6’s mentor also helped them ensure they approached the application for the new position in the correct way. P6 described,

I had a very good friend, a mentor. [They] were in the military, and our careers somewhat mirrored each other, in the aspect that we did some of the same jobs, and maybe a year or so apart. So, in speaking to her about the opportunities that I had a chance to apply for. I got a lot of feedback about how you want to ensure that whatever position you approach, you have a well-rounded view, but you're also strong in your beliefs of what would help the organization be better.

P6's mentor helped them become a more well-rounded candidate for leadership positions by advising them on how to approach the application. P6's mentor noted that organizations hire individuals who fit the organization's needs; P6's mentor helped P6 align their application with the needs of the organization.

Other participants got encouragement from their coworkers and managers regarding applying for new leadership positions. P8 described, "The director of the policy division asked me to fill in for the role. She was a facilitator because she wanted me in a position. My current managers at the time encouraged me to do it as well." P8 had someone in a leadership role help with her promotion by advancing her to the leadership position in their absence. This gave P8 the necessary experience that was a prerequisite for the position she applied for. P8 also received encouragement from managers in leadership positions. P9, like P8, received encouragement from individuals in leadership positions. P9 said,

The crazy part is, for me, I live in Mississippi, and we're a very red state; we're a very racist state, but the most help I've gotten has been from White males. Most of them have worked with me, or they've deployed with me, and I've just gotten a

lot of support from them. I have high regard for all of them.

P9 explained that the support they had received had been from White men in leadership positions, which surprised P9, given that she worked in the deep South. For these participants, mentorship and encouragement from other employees and managers facilitated to obtaining leadership positions. It stands to reason that facilitators for future pursuit of SES or SES-equivalent positions would include mentors and encouragement from coworkers.

P2 spoke about HR as being helpful during the SES or SES-equivalent application process. This represents a discrepant case in the data because P2 was the only participant to express these thoughts. P2 said, “This is a public service. Some clerks and a lot of secretaries help you. They collected the documents, made me aware that the documents were being worked on, and during the shortlisting, they communicated on and during the selection.” P2 described the HR agents as helpful in collecting documents and maintaining communication throughout the process. P2’s experience with HR was different from that of the other participants. This finding may be due to regional differences or differences in the staffing of various government agencies.

Category 2: Some Participants had no Facilitators for Career Advancement.

Some participants reported no facilitators for career advancement to SES or SES-equivalent positions. For instance, P4 said, “There were no facilitators. It was just me. I assisted myself and had the support of my husband.” For P4, there were no facilitators; she was left to navigate the application process herself without any assistance. Participant P1 also was frustrated by the lack of support for navigating the application process. P1

said, “At times when you’re frustrated, I feel like you can’t call them to be sure of what they really expect from you in terms of documents and credentials.” P1 indicated there was no support from the application office, and she struggled to understand what documents and credentials were necessary to pursue before applying for the position. Similarly, P7 simply stated, “There weren’t any facilitators for me. I went through the process on my own.” Later in the interview, P7 indicated difficulty getting her foot in the door. For instance, no one in that office would tell superiors about P7’s particular resume. The complex nature of the SES or SES-equivalent application required assistance, but these participants did not receive help. They did not perceive any facilitators to the recruitment and application process involving SES or SES-equivalent positions.

Category 3: Women will Advance When Organizations Empower Them

Without Discrimination. I next asked the participants what organizations could do to facilitate women obtaining positions in the SES. In this category, the participants spoke about how organizations should empower women through training and networking while ending discriminatory practices. Three codes contributed to this category: (a) empower women, (b) networking opportunities, and (c) no discrimination.

The participants believed that organizations could empower women to help them gain leadership opportunities. For instance, P1 said,

I think having people who are recruiting or even people who are determining decisions should also be women at the top. Also empowering women by just giving them an opportunity to serve and giving credit where it’s due, always recognizing someone’s efforts. You cannot be in an organization for more than 10

years with no words, no motivation, no promotion attempts. These are the factors that help women to grow.

P1 believed women would be empowered when recognized for their accomplishments and allowed to pursue leadership positions. They also thought women should be part of the decision-making process when choosing between candidates. P1 also mentioned that women can sometimes be in an organization for years without getting promoted or being empowered in their work, a situation not conducive to advancement.

P2 believed that organizations should “give room for training and empowerment.”

Participant P6 also believed that leaders should empower their employees, saying:

I think leaders are always planning for the next person to take their position, regardless of what that person looks like. I think if you, as a leader, can recognize that even though the person doesn't have all of the skills that they need, they have the potential to be that type of leader, can advocate for other women, to rise to the occasion and be in those types of leadership roles. So, I think that is the potential to see what this person can do and what this person can bring to the table.

P6 believed that leadership should empower women to rise into leadership roles. P6 believed that leaders consistently assess who can fill their positions and that women should be given an equal chance. These participants believed that empowering women through acknowledgment and leadership opportunities would increase their capacity to succeed in obtaining an SES or SES-equivalent position.

Two participants spoke about networking opportunities as essential for women obtaining SES-equivalent positions. For instance, P7 said, “Women should be able to have

networking opportunities with leaders who have achieved what they want to achieve. If that's the SES, women should network with other women in the SES." P7 believed networking with other women in the SES could enhance a female applicant's ability to obtain the position.

P7 further explained, "Sometimes it's hard to get these positions without someone in your corner. Networking is critical. Sometimes it's not what you know; it's who you know." P7 believed that having a mentor within the SES was important for advancement, as that person could advocate for an individual's application. P8 also mentioned networking as a critical facilitator of obtaining leadership positions and promoting advancement. Speaking about her organization, she said:

[A redacted network] is a nice network to have. There are people who started in that program years ago who are now in more executive positions that can offer advice and are just part of that network. So that's very helpful.

P8 spoke about a program that provides mentoring and networking for executives who had completed and successfully advanced in their careers. These participants believed that networking is an essential facilitator of career advancement.

The participants spoke about the need to end discriminatory practices regarding promotion to the SES. For instance, P2 said, "There should be no racism. There should be no feminism factor or masculinity factor. Let's look at the qualifications. Let's look at experience." P2 alluded to the racism and sexism currently present in the government and indicated that such practices needed to stop. Instead, selection committees should look at experience and qualifications. P3 also spoke about how some organizations were more

inclusive than others. P3 said,

I think policies are important. It's in terms of maybe policies on gender and inclusivity. If the policy is quite friendly to women recruitment, then there will be more opportunities for these women to get jobs in senior positions. But, if the policies are not so friendly or people are lax in terms of encouraging women to go for the positions, then the possibility of having women in these positions is very low.

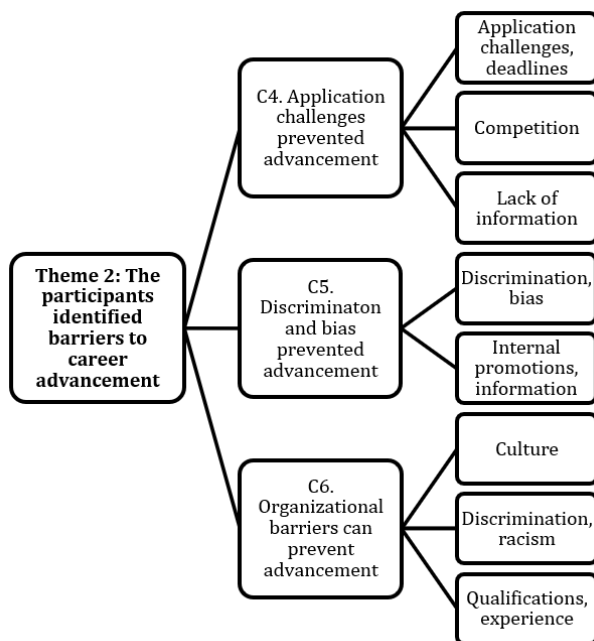
P3 believed that policies regarding women vary from agency to agency, and agencies with supportive policies will facilitate career advancement for women. Both P5 and P6 also indicated that inclusiveness was an important facilitator. The participants believed the government needed to promote inclusiveness and gender equality for women to be encouraged to the SES.

Theme 2: The Participants Identified Barriers to Career Advancement

In Theme 2, the participants' descriptions of barriers to career advancement are presented. Three categories contributed to the development of this theme. In Category 4, the participants described how application challenges prevented advancement. In Category 5, the participants described how discrimination and bias prevented advancement. The codes and categories contributing to Theme 2 are shown in Figure 3. All participants are represented by this theme.

Figure 3

Codes and Categories Contributing to the Development of Theme 2



Category 4: Application Challenges Prevented Advancement. The participants described the application process as complex and confusing, believing that the application process itself prevented their advancement to SES or SES-equivalent positions. Three codes were used to develop this theme: (a) application challenges and deadlines, (b) competition, and (c) lack of information. The data for each code are presented in turn.

Application Challenges and Deadlines. Some participants indicated that the application itself and the deadlines associated with the application prevented career advancement. P1 indicated that there were times when she could not understand or identify which documents and credentials were required for the position. She said, “At

times when you feel like you're frustrated, you can't even call them to be sure of what they really expect from you in terms of documents and credentials." P1 found that there was no application support for the confusing application, indicating that there was no one she could call for clarification. She ultimately solicited help from an application counselor to help with the application.

Participant P8 also spoke about challenges with the application itself. P8 explained:

To help me with the HR application process, we had a special assistant person in our group who helped me a little bit with that, but I sort of felt like I was at the mercy of our HR to get through. So that was difficult. The people, like the director, and anyone I work with on my teams, nobody can help that much. At a certain point, it just comes down to that process, which can be very frustrating. P8 explained that she felt the HR process could be smoother and easier to navigate. Despite having someone help her, she still found applying for SES-equivalent positions tedious and arduous. She further described, "The HR barriers are just that I wasn't communicating directly with HR, I was communicating through this assistant in our group. There's just a lot of layers." P8 further explained that she was one "layer" removed from actually speaking directly with the individuals responsible for ensuring complete applications. This was challenging regarding meeting the requirements regarding documents and credentials, a process time-limited by the strict deadlines associated with applying to the positions.

Participant P1 spoke about the deadlines, saying, "At times, the deadlines are so

very fixed, and you have to work with them, regardless of where you are.” P1 alluded to the fact that the application must be filled out in person due to her living overseas, which further provided challenges to the application process for some participants, including P3, as described in the previous section.

Competition. Three participants spoke about the competitive nature of positions at the SES level. These participants believed competition was a barrier that prevented them from obtaining these positions. For example, P1 said, “The jobs are very competitive jobs. So your chances are quite low.” P1 explained that the chances of obtaining an SES-equivalent position are low due to the competitive nature of the position and the propensity for the position to attract multiple candidates. Participant P6 also spoke about the competitive nature of the positions. She said, “It becomes a lot more competitive because you have the narrowing of individuals, including women, especially in the cybersecurity field, which is predominantly more male-oriented.” For P6, They were advancing to senior-level positions because it was increasingly difficult because of competition and the male-dominated nature of her field. Participant P7 spoke about how the structure of their organization increased the competition for positions at the managerial level and in the SES.

P7 described,

If you want to move up the scale, you have to apply to another position, generally a managerial position. Where I am, to go all the way up the scale, the next opportunity for somebody in my agency is the SES, which, of course, you have to apply for its competitive service. After you do that program, you might have been

applying for a managerial role. This, it's fewer of them within [my organization], it's a pretty flat organization.

P7 spoke about the competition for managerial positions in their organization, which was redacted to protect the participants' confidentiality. For P7, obtaining an SES position was challenging because accepting an administrative position was just as challenging and competitive. For these participants, competition diminished their ability to obtain SES positions.

Lack of Information. Some participants spoke about how a lack of information about the position and application process hindered their ability to obtain SES or SES-level positions.

P1 explained that “at times, you don’t have all the information needed to apply to the position. So you spend your time chasing information.” P1 indicated they had to “chase information” to apply for the position on time and with the correct documentation. P4 stated that the application process was “convoluted, confusing, and the epitome of a guessing game.” For these participants, a lack of information about the requirements for the position, especially regarding the required documentation, was a challenge to obtaining an SES-level position.

Participant P2 was assigned an application coordinator in the HR department to help her with her application. Still, like other participants, she found the information lacking even with extra support.

P2 said, “I think she didn’t pass along the information on time or even communicate with you. Just saying you didn’t qualify is good. You don’t have to wait for

something.” P2 was not told she was not qualified for a position or didn’t have the necessary documentation; she believed her HR specialist should have given her this information before she applied for the position. For P2, information about the qualifications and documentation necessary for the position was limited. She implied that she did not receive the position because she didn’t have the required qualifications or documentation but was not told in advance.

Participant P8 spoke about a different type of lack of information. She indicated that the expectations of her interim position as deputy director were not explained to her and she experienced role ambiguity. She said,

Another barrier was that I just didn’t know what was expected of me in that role. I talk to another deputy director in our group just to get advice from her, and it’s just hard to know what the higher powers have in mind for moving people around and who’s leading.

P8 was temporarily promoted to a deputy director position, but she could not determine what her specific role was in that position. She was given the position without notice and struggled to understand the expectations. She believed this experience hindered her ability to obtain a subsequent SES position.

Category 5: Discrimination and Bias Prevented Advancement. Many of the participants spoke about discrimination and bias that prevented them from advancing to the SES. For instance, P5 spoke about how she had to alter her behavior to work in the government. She explained, “But I think that women have to be, the double-edged sword, there’s a name for it. Anyways, where you can’t be too outspoken, or you’re perceived as

aggressive, you can't be too competent or you're a threat." P5 found that she had to act in a certain manner in order to advance in her career. She felt like "to be an SES I felt like I had hit the glass ceiling so hard." P5 described her career as having hit the glass ceiling, a term used to describe how women can only advance so far in their careers compared to White men. For P5, gender-based discrimination and bias prevented her advancement. P9 experienced explicit racial discrimination. She explained, "When I had a White commander, the very problem was being Black. So, as far as that he gave me a program that was basically a blank sheet of paper. He held me back because I was Black. I was a Black woman." P9 felt like she was held back due to racial and gender-based discrimination.

Participants P4 and P1 also experienced discrimination. P4 explained that "you see people's implicit biases. They exist in the government entity." P4 finds that individuals working in the government have an implicit bias that makes the workplace uncondusive for women. For P10, ageism was a challenge. She explained, "The barrier was I felt like my age. Okay. Because, today, a lot of people just really, they would think, are you retiring? And then I'm like, nah." P10 believed that her age prevented her from obtaining an SES job. Because she was older, the selection committee did not think she was appropriate for the position. Thus, for some participants, intersectionality may be a consideration; the participants described discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, and age.

The participants also spoke about internal promotions and the promotion of preselected individuals. P4 explained that "at the government, even if you know who you

want in a position, you have to open it up to others and go through the motions of picking who you wanted in the first place.” P4 believed that for some government positions, including the SES, candidates were preselected, but the government opened up the position to others out of obligation. P1 also perceived internal promotion to be a challenge. P1 said, “It could be an internal position, but you go ahead and apply even though they want someone who is within or maybe someone who is on a referral basis. So that is a challenge.” P1 found that some positions were slated for internal promotions, rather than being genuinely open to outside candidates. This was another type of bias experienced by the participants.

Category 6: Organizational Barriers Can Prevent Advancement. In Category 6, the participants described how they experienced organizational barriers preventing their advancement to the SES. Three codes contributed to the development of this category, culture, discrimination and bias, and qualifications and experience. Each code is discussed in turn.

Culture. Some participants described organization culture as a challenge for women in government positions. For instance, P6 said,

And knowing how to maneuver that and building your network of mentors, I don't necessarily believe in having one specific person as a mentor. I have a collection of them because [they] can provide you with different things, different life lessons, different experiences. So, I prefer to keep it that way. I think the barrier in that sometimes is when you're not particularly a part of that inner click.

P6 believed that organizational culture could prevent advancement, especially in the case

of internal promotions and referrals. P1 found an antiquated culture in her organization. She explained, “At times, it’s culture; maybe people have that attitude that women belong maybe at home.” She believed some individuals viewed women as homemakers, rather than government employees. She further explained,

Women have a lot going on. One time you will go on leave; one time, you also need to go on maternity. So I feel like this, at times, people see it as inconveniencing, and it denies them an opportunity.

P1 believed that individuals view maternity leave as an inconvenience, which can hurt women’s chances of advancement. For these participants, culture can sometimes limit their ability to advance to the SES.

Qualifications and Experience. The participants believed that discrimination and bias prevented them from having the same qualifications and experiences as their male counterparts. For example, P5 said, “Mid career is where we really break down. We might send women through mid-career leadership training, but then we don’t ensure that they get slot and start that trajectory towards SES.” P5 indicated that support for women stops mid-career rather than continuing with leadership support and mentoring. Lack of mentoring, in turn, can lead to a lack of experience and qualifications for senior-level jobs. Participant P6 believed that some job descriptions, qualifications, and experiences are tailored toward male candidates. She explained,

Even though the position may be written that a female or a male could apply, there are specific qualifications for the position that narrow the focus of the pool of applicants you will have. If not intentionally, those kinds of things can dwindle the

applicants one will get. P6 believes that some job qualifications may be tailored toward certain genders and demographic groups, which can reduce the number of available positions for women. For some participants, qualifications and experiences can limit their advancement to the SES, especially if women are not allowed to have the same experiences as men.

Summary

Chapter 4 provides the research setting and the data collection and analysis protocols. Data were collected from 10 women in senior-level state, federal government, or government-funded positions. The participants answered semistructured IQs to understand their experiences applying to the SES or SES-equivalent positions. The participants' experiences varied and were detailed individually to describe the data clearly. Thematic analysis was used to extract two themes from the participants' interviews. Theme 1 describes the participants' descriptions of facilitators for advancement to the SES or SES-equivalent positions. Some participants identified some facilitators as mentors and HR representatives. Other participants described the absence of facilitators. The participants also believed that organizations should empower women, provide networking opportunities, and discard discriminatory practices to help women advance to positions in the SES.

Theme 2 surrounded barriers to SES and SES-equivalent positions. The participants identified process factors, including intricacies of the application, documentation, and qualifications necessary for the position. Other participants highlighted discrimination and implicit bias as important factors preventing women from

achieving SES-equivalent positions. Organizational barriers were also identified and discussed. In Chapter 5, the study's findings will be interpreted in the context of the academic literature and the study's conceptual framework. The implications and limitations of the study are discussed. Recommendations for future research and practice are also provided.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of career civil servicewomen who have sought an SES or SES-equivalent position in a government or public sector organization to gain insight into factors contributing to the unequal representation of women in this sector of the workforce. This study used a qualitative approach that consisted of semistructured interviews with 10 civil service women with master's degrees or higher, with 5 years or above experience, and who have sought an SES or SES-equivalent leadership position in a government organization in the past 5 years.

Through the study's key findings, I revealed a consensus among eight participants on the efficacy of transformational leadership. Attributes such as idealized influence, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation were highlighted, portraying transformational leaders as exemplars who lead by example, motivate followers, and foster individual relationships. While transformational leadership was emphasized, two participants underscored the importance of servant leadership and genuine care for followers as complementary styles crucial for SES positions.

I also examined the findings of women's experiences pursuing SES leadership positions in this study. Women's experiences obtaining leadership positions were diverse, hindering the identification of common themes. In Theme 1, participants identified facilitators of career advancement, categorizing them into three groups. Category 1 highlighted the role of mentors and HR in facilitating career progression, while Category 2 outlined instances where participants experienced no specific facilitators. Category 3

emphasized participants' recommendations for government agencies to empower women and eliminate discriminatory practices, promoting gender equality in the SES. Theme 2 delved into participants' descriptions of barriers to career advancement, presenting three distinct categories. In Category 4, participants highlighted how application challenges, such as complexity, deadlines, competition, and lack of information, hindered their progress. Category 5 underscored the impact of discrimination and bias in preventing career advancement, a noteworthy concern expressed by all participants. In Category 6, participants outlined organizational barriers impeding SES advancement, citing three factors: (a) culture, (b) discrimination and bias, and (c) qualifications and experience. Therefore, the findings I analyzed in this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the nuanced factors influencing women's journeys toward leadership positions in the SES, encompassing both facilitating elements and persistent barriers.

Interpretation of the Findings

The study findings align with the existing literature's emphasis on the positive impact of transformational leadership on organizational outcomes, particularly in fostering innovation in fast-paced environments (see Ming, 2023). Participants in the study recognized essential transformational leadership qualities, such as idealized influence, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation. The participants stressed the importance of leaders acting as role models and motivating followers through goal alignment with the organization's mission. Two participants in the study underscored the need for servant leadership and genuine care for followers, complementing the literature's call for a flexible and adaptable approach to

leadership in the evolving business landscape (see Ming, 2023; Pandey et al., 2022).

The current study's findings align, in some aspects, with existing literature on gender diversity in leadership positions. Kohli et al. (2011) projected that the SES in 2030 would not proportionally represent the ethnic, racial, and gender composition of the U.S. workforce. The current study resonates with this projection, as participants' experiences suggested persistent gender disparities in SES leadership roles. The study revealed that women-identified facilitators such as mentors, human resources, and organizational empowerment align with the notion that a more diverse leadership can result in greater efficiencies and innovation (see Finkel et al., 2021; Qin et al., 2014).

The identified barriers, including application challenges, discrimination, and bias, echo the existing discourse on gender imbalances in the workplace described by Thomas et al. (2021). This corroborates with studies that assert the existence of a broken rung in the ladder to managerial positions for women, highlighting the persistent challenges in their upward mobility (Thomas et al., 2021). The notion of a glass ceiling effect, hindering women's progress in leadership roles, was also reflected in the study's findings, suggesting that discrimination, a lack of mentors, and awareness gaps contribute to this phenomenon (Glass & Cook, 2016; Singh et al., 2023).

The study's emphasis on microaggressions experienced by women leaders, such as being interrupted or spoken over, aligns with previous findings underscoring the persistent gender-related challenges women face in the workplace (Thomas et al., 2021). The importance of a supportive workplace culture, inclusive policies, and the role of mentorship in facilitating women's career advancement resonates with previous

arguments (Coleman, 2020; Fernandez et al., 2021). The study's findings contribute to and align with the existing literature on gender disparities in leadership positions, emphasizing the ongoing challenges women encounter and the need for organizational reforms to address these issues.

Conceptual Framework

When interpreted within the conceptual framework, the study's findings help to comprehensively understand the complexities surrounding leadership styles, organizational structures, and gender dynamics within the public sector, particularly the SES and SES-equivalent positions. The conceptual framework incorporates organizational theory, structural theory, gendered organizational theory, SIT, and IST, offering a multi-faceted lens to analyze and interpret the results.

As presented by Frederick Taylor and Max Weber, organizational theory serves as a foundational framework for understanding the public sector's structure and decision-making processes. The current study findings align with the principles of organizational theory by recognizing the significance of leadership styles, such as transformational leadership, in driving productivity and achieving organizational goals (Tompkins, 2023). The emphasis on democratic ideals in public sector organizations, as highlighted by Christensen et al. (2020), resonates with the study's focus on SES and SES-equivalent positions, where effective leadership is essential for addressing societal expectations.

Structural theory, rooted in Gulick's principles of unity of command and organizational structure, provides insights into the hierarchical arrangements within public sector organizations. The study acknowledges the importance of organizational

structure in influencing workplace dynamics and biases, particularly about gender (Meier, 2010). Examining gendered organizational theory further deepens this understanding by exploring how gender norms and expectations contribute to administrative processes and decisions (Acker, 1990). I highlight the need for diverse leadership styles, which resonates with Gulick's call to identify organizational biases.

SIT offers a lens to understand how individuals perceive themselves within a group setting and how group dynamics influence behavior. The study findings, emphasizing the impact of transformational leadership and the role of mentors, align with SIT's assertion that individuals seek positive attributes associated with their in-groups (see Owuamalam et al., 2021). The study's recognition of women's challenges in leadership positions ties back to SIT, explaining how societal norms and expectations contribute to discrimination within organizations. Finally, IST complements the framework by exploring how individuals alter their identities to fit into social groups. Through the study findings, I addressed the importance of leadership styles beyond transformational, indicating a proactive and presentational aspect of identity shift within the workplace (see Carr et al., 2021). The study's findings align with and contribute to the existing theoretical and conceptual frameworks, offering valuable insights into the nuanced interplay of leadership styles, organizational structures, and gender dynamics within the public sector in SES and SES-equivalent positions.

Limitations of the Study

While yielding valuable insights, the study had inherent limitations that warrant acknowledgment for transparency and to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. The

interview format, common in qualitative research, introduced a potential source of bias, given the participants' perspectives influenced that data interpretation. The voluntary nature of participation may have led to the omission of sensitive information, especially regarding security clearances, despite efforts to mitigate this through probative questioning (Berg & Lune, 2017). An additional limitation arises from the study's focus on individuals who did not secure SES positions, potentially overlooking valuable perspectives from those who successfully navigated barriers. Two individuals who were recruited held SES positions. However, there were challenges with finding times available for interviews. Although pseudonyms ensured participant anonymity, it may not have eliminated the risk of bias, as I, who shared similar criteria with participants, could have inadvertently influenced data collection and interpretation. Despite these limitations, I employed reflexive questioning and careful data analysis to minimize bias (Creswell, 2018).

The study adhered to the four dimensions of trustworthiness proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1986) to maintain the quality and integrity of the research. Ensuring the trustworthiness of this qualitative research, akin to internal validity, credibility was fortified through meticulous procedures, Zoom interviews, data saturation confirmation, and techniques like interviewee transcript review and reflexivity. Similar to external validity, transferability was promoted by methodological transparency, detailed study information for potential replication, and participant recruitment spanning diverse regions and career stages and ethnicities. Dependability, akin to reliability, was achieved through comprehensive documentation, an audit trail, and ongoing evaluations aligning with

research design standards. Confirmability, guarding against biases, was enhanced by strategies like bracketing, reflexive journaling, and participant validation through member checking. These efforts collectively bolstered the reliability and validity of the study findings across these critical dimensions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, I recommend a multifaceted approach to understanding gender dynamics in leadership roles. The following focal points provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding to inform interventions promoting gender diversity and inclusivity in leadership, particularly for women in SES and SES-equivalent roles.

Longitudinal Exploration

Conducting comprehensive longitudinal studies is essential to track the multifaceted career trajectories of women in SES and SES-equivalent roles over time. This approach enables a nuanced analysis of the sustained impact of various leadership styles, organizational structures, and external factors on the professional journeys of women (Thomas et al., 2021). By capturing the dynamics of career progression, researchers can offer valuable insights into the long-term efficacy of leadership interventions and organizational policies to promote gender diversity in leadership.

Intersectional Perspective

Future research should adopt an intersectional lens that considers the interplay of gender with other social identities, such as race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, to advance the understanding of gender dynamics in leadership (Acker, 1990; Shafritz et al.,

2016). Recognizing women's unique challenges with intersecting identities is crucial for developing targeted interventions and policies addressing diverse experiences within the broader context of gender equity (Owuamalam et al., 2021). This approach ensures a more inclusive and nuanced exploration of barriers and facilitators to career advancement.

Comparative Sector Analysis

Extending the research scope to include comparative analyses between the public and private sectors is vital for identifying sector-specific manifestations of organizational theories and leadership styles (Christensen et al., 2020). Investigating how these factors influence gender dynamics in leadership roles allows for identifying sector-specific challenges and best practices. This comparative approach contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the contextual factors shaping women's careers in different organizational settings.

Organizational Cultural Investigation

A deeper exploration of the role of organizational culture in fostering gender diversity is necessary (Coleman, 2020). Research should investigate the cultural norms, values, and practices that influence women's career advancement, examining how organizational cultures support or hinder gender-inclusive leadership. Understanding workplace cultural dynamics provides insights into the mechanisms that contribute to creating inclusive environments and can inform strategies for cultivating gender diversity in leadership roles.

Leadership Program Evaluation

Rigorous evaluations should be conducted to assess the effectiveness of leadership development programs for women in the public sector (Finkel et al., 2021). This involves examining the impact of such programs on skill development, confidence building, and the ability to navigate barriers to career advancement. By systematically evaluating the outcomes of leadership initiatives, researchers can provide evidence-based recommendations for refining and tailoring programs to address the specific needs and challenges faced by women aspiring to leadership roles in the public sector (Thomas et al., 2021).

Implications

Based on the study's findings, significant implications span individual, familial, organizational, and societal levels. Methodologically, the study serves as a blueprint for future research, enriching the understanding of gender dynamics in leadership. These implications can provide a roadmap for practitioners advancing gender-inclusive leadership transformations. The specific implications will now be discussed in turn.

Positive Social Change

The study's findings hold the potential to empower individual women in leadership roles by offering insights into effective leadership styles and strategies for navigating gender-related challenges. Women in SES and SES-equivalent positions may benefit from increased awareness of the impact of transformational leadership and the significance of organizational culture in shaping their career trajectories. This knowledge could enhance their leadership capabilities and resilience in overcoming barriers and

fostering positive change at the individual level (Coleman, 2020). Positive social change at the family level may occur due to women achieving greater success in leadership roles.

As women in SES positions contribute to more inclusive and equitable workplace environments, these positive values can extend to family dynamics. By challenging traditional gender norms through their leadership, women may inspire positive changes in family structures and expectations, fostering a more egalitarian division of responsibilities and opportunities (Tompkins, 2023). The study's implications for organizational change are substantial, especially in the public sector. Organizations can leverage the insights into effective leadership styles and the impact of organizational culture to create environments that promote diversity and equality. Implementing gender-inclusive policies, leadership development programs, and addressing biases can contribute to a more balanced representation of women in leadership roles (Christensen et al., 2020). Additionally, the study's societal impact is reflected in its potential to inform policies that advance gender equality in leadership across various sectors. Policymakers can draw upon the research to design and implement initiatives aimed at reducing gender disparities, promoting diversity, and eliminating barriers to women's career progression (Finkel et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2021).

Theoretical Implications

The methodological approach employed in this study, including using interviews to capture qualitative insights, can serve as a model for future research exploring gender dynamics in leadership. Researchers may find value in adopting a mixed methods approach to triangulate findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the

complexities involved. The longitudinal aspect of the study design offers a methodological blueprint for investigating the long-term effects of leadership interventions on women's career trajectories (Creswell, 2018). The study's alignment with organizational theories, SIT, and IST contributes to the theoretical understanding of gender dynamics in leadership (see Shafritz et al., 2016). Future research can build upon these theoretical frameworks, expanding the knowledge base on how organizational structures, leadership styles, and social identities intersect to shape women's experiences in leadership positions. This study encourages scholars to explore the dynamic interplay between individual identity shifts and broader organizational and societal contexts.

The empirical findings on the effectiveness of transformational leadership and the impact of organizational culture provide practical insights for organizations seeking evidence-based strategies for promoting gender diversity (Smith & Sinkford, 2022). Organizations can use these empirical findings to develop targeted interventions, training programs, and policies that create more inclusive leadership environments (Finkel et al., 2021). Empirical evidence highlighting the positive outcomes of gender diversity can catalyze change at various levels (Smith & Sinkford, 2022). Practitioners, particularly those involved in leadership development and organizational change efforts, can benefit from the study's recommendations. Implementing transformational leadership training, promoting inclusive organizational cultures, and addressing biases in hiring and promotion processes are practical steps organizations can take. Mentorship programs and initiatives fostering work-life balance can be integral to organizational practices supporting women's career advancement.

Conclusion

In this qualitative study, I delved into the experiences of career civil service women aspiring to SES or SES-equivalent positions, uncovering critical insights into the factors contributing to gender disparities in this sector. The findings highlighted the efficacy of transformational leadership, with attributes such as idealized influence, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation proving crucial. Complementary styles, particularly servant leadership and genuine care for followers, were also underscored by some participants. The interpretations of these findings align with existing literature on transformational leadership and gender diversity, emphasizing the need for diverse leadership styles and the persistent challenges women face in leadership positions.

The conceptual framework, integrating organizational theory, structural theory, gendered organizational theory, SIT, and IST, provided a multifaceted lens to analyze these complexities within the public sector. The research maintained trustworthiness through credibility and transferability measures by acknowledging study limitations, such as potential bias from the interview format and the focus on individuals without SES positions. Recommendations for future research encompass longitudinal exploration, an intersectional perspective, comparative sector analysis, organizational cultural investigation, and leadership program evaluation. These recommendations aim to deepen the understanding of gender dynamics in leadership roles.

The implications of this study extend from individual empowerment to societal and policy reform. Empowering women in leadership can lead to positive social change

at the individual and family levels, challenging traditional gender norms. Organizations, especially in the public sector, can foster positive change by implementing inclusive policies informed by the study's findings. The study also provides methodological and empirical implications, serving as a model for future research and offering practical insights for organizations seeking evidence-based strategies for promoting gender diversity. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender disparities in leadership roles, emphasizing the importance of leadership styles, organizational structures, and cultural dynamics in shaping women's experiences. It provides a foundation for future research and actionable recommendations to drive positive transformations in gender-inclusive leadership.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Opening Script:

Hello, NAME. My name is Ashley Rodgers. I am a doctoral student at Walden University. This research is part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Public Policy and Administration. This research study is about equal gender representation in senior executive service (SES) and SES-equivalent leadership positions within government organizations. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of career civil service women who have sought a SES or SES equivalent position in a government or public sector organization with the intent of gaining insight into factors contributing to unequal representation of women in this sector of the workforce. I have received your informed consent. Do you have any questions about that before we move on? (answer questions). As a reminder, as a volunteer participant you may stop this interview at any time. Also, if you need to take a break before continuing, I am happy to accommodate. All of your information will remain confidential and everything that you share with me will be kept private. I will not use your name or other identifying factors in my research.

Interview Questions:

- 1) Let's begin with discussing your current role.**
- 2) Tell me about the type of job you would enjoy doing.**
- 3) Describe your journey working for the federal, state, or local government, and how you arrived at your organization.**
- 4) Please describe leadership and what it means to you.**

5) Tell me about an experience when you applied for a leadership position in the federal, state, or local government.

a. Was this leadership position within your organization?

b. Please provide specific examples of the facilitators you encountered when applying for the role?

i. What is your opinion of the facilitators you encountered?

c. Please provide specific examples of the barriers you faced when applying for the role?

i. What is your opinion of the barriers you faced?

6) What are your thoughts on the leadership potential of women as compared to men?

7) Tell me about some organizational facilitators you believe accommodate the inclusion of women in SES or SES-equivalent positions.

8) Tell me about some organizational barriers you believe prevent the inclusion of women in SES or SES-equivalent positions.

9) What advice would you give women applying for leadership positions?

10) Is there anything about your experience we have not discussed that you feel is important to add to this conversation?

Closing Script:

I have no further questions. I may reach out to you if there is a need to clarify information. I will also email a copy of the transcript of this interview within the next 72 hours so that you can ensure the accuracy of the transcript and provide any necessary

clarification. If you have any questions or concerns you can contact me at any time by calling [REDACTED] or emailing me at [REDACTED]. Thank you for your time. Goodbye.