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## **Strategies Small and Medium-Size Enterprise Leaders Use to Include Women in Executive Roles to Increase Diversity in Decision Making**

Artema L. Wright  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Artema L. Wright

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University  
2025

Abstract

Strategies Small and Medium-Size Enterprise Leaders Use to Include Women in  
Executive Roles to Increase Diversity in Decision Making

by

Artema L. Wright

EMBA, University of North Alabama, 2021

BSBA, University of Phoenix, 2017

Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

December 2025

## Abstract

Women's underrepresentation in executive leadership remains a persistent challenge for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The SME leaders face difficulty identifying effective strategies to promote and integrate women into executive roles, which limits diversity in decision making and organizational performance. Grounded in social role theory and intersectionality, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry research project was to identify and explore effective strategies SME leaders used to advance women into executive positions. The participants included eight SME leaders in northern Alabama with direct experience implementing such strategies. Data were collected through semistructured interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis framework. Four strategic themes emerged: (a) building inclusive cultures that enable equitable access, (b) institutionalizing advancement pathways for women, (c) empowering women through supportive organizational structures, and (d) leveraging inclusive leadership to drive innovation and performance. Findings suggest that dismantling structural barriers, embedding mentorship and sponsorship, and aligning leadership development with transparent, equitable practices are essential strategies for SME leaders to strengthen diversity and innovation. The implications for positive social change include the potential to expand equitable access to executive leadership by equipping SME leaders with gender-inclusive practices. Women aspiring to leadership roles, human resource professionals, and business executives may benefit from these findings, which support inclusive decision-making, talent development, and broader community representation.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this research project to those who lead intentionally and uplift others.

To the pioneers who break barriers, and to my mentors, colleagues, and friends who have supported my growth, thank you for your guidance. Most importantly, this is for the next generation of women redefining leadership and demonstrating what's possible. You inspire me, and this work is for you.

## Acknowledgments

I give all glory and praise to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, whose guidance, grace, and strength have carried me through every step of this journey. In moments of doubt, He reminded me of my purpose; in moments of triumph, He reminded me to remain humble. This work reflects His faithfulness in my life.

I am deeply grateful to my chair, Dr. Roger Mayer, whose wisdom, encouragement, and steady guidance helped shape this research project from its earliest ideas to its final form. Thank you for challenging me to think critically and lead boldly. To my second committee member, Dr. Ashley Riebel, thank you for your thoughtful feedback, support, and commitment to excellence. Your insights helped refine my work and strengthened its impact.

To my husband, Dr. Lionel Wright, Sr., your love, patience, and unwavering belief in me have been my anchor. Thank you for standing by my side through the late nights, long drafts, and every milestone along the way. You have always demonstrated the importance of education and made it a priority in our home and our lives. Your example inspired me to pursue this goal with purpose and perseverance. To my children, Lionel Jr. and Ametra, you are my greatest motivation. Your resilience reminds me daily why this work matters. And to my mother, Janet, your unconditional love has been my foundation, I am forever grateful.

This achievement is not mine alone. It belongs to every person who lifted me, prayed for me, and reminded me that I was capable. Thank you for walking this journey with me.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Project

As of 2025, in a dynamic global market, inclusive leadership remains essential for addressing the complex multicultural challenges faced by small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs). However, there continues to be an underrepresentation of women in executive roles, which can lead to biases affecting organizational policies and practices (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2022; Johnson, 2022). For businesses to grow and remain competitive, diversity and inclusivity are essential in fostering innovation, enhancing decision making, and improving overall performance (Saha et al., 2024). However, SME leaders often struggle to develop and implement strategies to cultivate a diverse environment.

### **Background of the Problem**

Although there has been some progress in workplace diversity, the business world still faces challenges with diversity and inclusion. Organizations with diverse employees challenge assumptions, identify risks and opportunities that a homogeneous team might miss, and make decisions faster due to varied viewpoints (Gavilán Párraga, 2024). SME leaders struggle to ensure fair representation of women in executive positions (Bloch et al., 2021). According to the Women in the Workplace 2024 report, a concerning reality was highlighted: Women hold just 29% of C-suite positions, indicating that only 1 out of every 4 top-level executives is female (McKinsey & Company, 2024). Additionally, the Women in the Workplace report revealed that a gender gap exists across all races and ethnicities, with men consistently outnumbering women at every level. These statistics underscore the pressing need for greater diversity in executive positions and the

imperative for improved decision making by bringing a wider range of perspectives and experiences. Despite increased attention to these issues, significant barriers still prevent women from advancing to leadership roles, and this underrepresentation limits diverse perspectives from key decision-making processes, thereby limiting informed decisions, hindering innovation and reducing organizations' ability to meet the needs of a broader range of stakeholders (Bullock et al., 2020, Gomez & Bernet, 2019; Herlita, 2025).

SME leaders face significant challenges in achieving diversity in leadership roles, largely because of systemic barriers embedded within institutional structures. The absence of effective mentoring programs also contributes to the slow advancement of this underrepresented group (Carter et al., 2020). The purpose of the current project was to identify and explore effective strategies that promote diversity and inclusion, especially for women in executive positions to increase diversity in leadership and decision-making processes.

### **Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose**

Some SME leaders face significant challenges in fostering diversity within their decision-making processes, primarily due to the underrepresentation of women in executive roles (Bloch et al., 2021). The general business problem that prompted me to search the literature was that, despite growing awareness of the importance of diversity and inclusion, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions within SMEs. This lack of representation undermined diversity in decision making and contributed to biases in organizational policies and practices. The specific business problem was that some SME leaders lacked effective strategies to promote and integrate women into executive

roles, thereby limiting their ability to increase diversity in leadership and decision-making processes.

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to identify and explore effective strategies SME leaders used to promote and integrate women into executive roles to increase diversity in leadership and decision-making processes. The targeted population consisted of eight SME managers working in northern Alabama. The implications for positive social change included promoting diversity and inclusion in SMEs, creating equitable leadership opportunities for women, and providing diverse executive role models to inspire future generations toward a fairer and more just society.

The population for this qualitative, pragmatic inquiry comprised a purposeful sample of senior SME leaders, including C-level executives, general managers, presidents, and department heads. Eligibility criteria for project participants included (a) being an SME leader working in northern Alabama, (b) having successfully used effective strategies to promote and integrate women into executive roles to increase diversity in leadership and decision-making processes, (c) willingness to participate in a digitally recorded interview and a written narrative protocol, and (d) granting agreement to allow publication of data to the public.

Eagly's (1987) social role theory (SRT) explains how societal expectations shape gender differences, particularly in leadership roles within SMEs, by assigning distinct responsibilities to men and women based on cultural norms. To deepen this analysis, Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory highlights how overlapping social identities, such as gender and race, compound experiences of discrimination, offering a more

nuanced understanding of inequality in executive positions. Together, these frameworks provide critical insight into the systemic barriers women face and the strategies leaders can use to foster inclusive decision-making environments.

### **Research Question**

What effective strategies do leaders of SMEs use to promote and integrate women into executive roles to increase diversity in leadership and decision-making processes?

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

#### **Assumptions**

Assumptions in research refer to elements that are accepted without complete empirical verification, functioning as foundational pillars for conducting the project (Levitt, 2021). In the current qualitative pragmatic inquiry, I identified three key assumptions. First, I assumed that the roles of senior leaders and executives are integral in shaping women's integration into executive roles and the decision-making process within SMEs. Second, I assumed that the participants, specifically the leaders and executives, would provide genuine and precise responses. Third, although there may have been sampling bias, I assumed that the selected data collection methods would provide meaningful insights into the strategies employed by SMEs.

#### **Limitations**

Limitations refer to restrictions within a qualitative research project that can affect the results of the project (Park, 2025). One potential limitation I anticipated encountering in my research related to time constraints. The structured timeline imposed by the requirements of my doctoral program may have restricted the extent of data collection

and analysis. Additionally, limited time may have hindered my ability to access participants and build sufficient rapport, which could have affected the richness of the data I gathered.

### **Transition**

In Section 1, I provided the background of the problem and the problem statement. In this overview, I discussed the purpose of the project, the research question, the assumptions, and the limitations of the project. In Section 2, I present a comprehensive review of professional and academic literature. As part of this review, I examine the barriers faced by women in SMEs, the implications of underrepresentation in executive positions, and potential strategies for promoting inclusivity and diversity. In Section 3 of this project, I describe the research methodology, project ethics, the nature of the project, population and sampling, data collection activities, interview questions, data organization and analysis techniques, and the strategies used to ensure reliability and validity. In Section 4, I present my findings and conclusions by identifying themes in my analysis and discussing the results, emphasizing business contributions, professional practice recommendations, implications for social change, and recommendations for future researchers.

## Section 2: The Literature Review

### **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

As part of my academic and professional research, I conducted a literature review on effective strategies SME leaders use to promote and integrate women into executive roles to increase diversity in leadership and decision-making processes. To conduct this review, I used databases such as ABI/INFORM, EBSCOhost, Science Direct, and Thoreau's multi-database search in the Walden University Library to find relevant sources. By using search terms such as *women, female, executive, leadership, management, progression, advancement, promotion, organizational strategies, best practices, qualitative, pragmatic inquiry, interview, minorities, ethnic groups, underserved, marginalized, gender bias, diversity, inequality, social role theory, and intersectionality*, I was able to locate peer-reviewed articles, seminal books, business-focused textbooks, and government reports. I conducted a comprehensive literature review, which comprised a total of 96 references. Out of these, 75% were peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2021 and 2025.

### **Conceptual Frameworks**

This project's conceptual framework was based on two significant theoretical perspectives, including SRT, developed by Eagly (1987), and intersectionality, developed by Crenshaw (1989). SRT, developed by Eagly, explains the origins of gender differences by examining how societal expectations shape behavior and leadership perceptions. SRT provides a foundation for understanding the existence of gender differences in executive roles, particularly in SMEs. The theory suggests that societal

expectations and norms play a significant role in shaping these differences. I sought to identify and explore the effective strategies SME leaders use to promote and integrate women into executive roles to increase diversity in leadership and decision-making processes.

In addition, to further understand how various forms of inequality overlap and interact, I use Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory. Crenshaw developed intersectionality theory to explain how different types of discrimination can intersect and create distinct experiences of oppression for individuals belonging to multiple marginalized groups. Together, these theories offered valuable insights into how societal expectations and structures influence individuals and groups.

SRT is a robust theoretical concept that has consistently been leveraged to understand gender differences in behavior and expectations and the implications of these differences in various organizational contexts (Eagly & Wood, 2012). In this literature review, I explored SRT's foundational principles, its relevance in the context of women in executive roles in SMEs, and the insights from various research studies that employed the theory in related domains. SRT includes a psychological perspective that is used to explain gender differences in behavior, cognition, and emotion. Theorists use SRT to describe societal expectations and prescriptions associated with gender roles, which significantly drive observed behavioral differences between men and women (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012). These roles are perpetuated by socialization processes from early childhood, wherein boys and girls are taught how to behave in ways considered appropriate for their gender.

Gender roles are socially constructed and typically come with specific behavioral expectations. Historically, societies have assigned distinct responsibilities to men and women, commonly associating men with the role of breadwinner and women with that of caretaker (Eagly, 1987). SRT has been used by researchers to explain behavioral differences between genders, suggesting these differences stem from learned behaviors shaped by societal expectations rather than innate biological traits. According to Eagly (1987), individuals develop and reinforce these behaviors as they internalize and conform to the roles prescribed by society. Conforming to societal expectations for their gender is often rewarded (Eagly & Wood, 2012), while deviating from these expectations may lead to prejudice and reinforce the cycle of social roles (Eagly & Wood, 2012). SRT challenges the notion that observed behavioral differences between genders are inherent biological traits, emphasizing instead that they are learned behaviors resulting from societal expectations.

### **Barriers and Challenges in SMEs**

SME leaders encounter diverse organizational, societal, and industry-specific challenges that limit optimum functioning. The challenges limit leaders' ability to integrate women into executive roles and enhance decision making. Runde et al. (2021) identified several challenges that SME leaders face when integrating women's roles, including social norms, education, skills gaps, legal discrimination, time constraints, confidence, risk preferences, and access to information and networks. The challenges varied across social demographics, depending on the culture, values, organizational policies, industry regulations, economic growth levels, and access to resources. The

challenges spanned organizational, societal, and industry perspectives, necessitating specific interventions. The subsequent paragraphs provide an in-depth perspective on the challenges through the lens of previously published literature.

Workplace challenges hinder women's integration into leadership roles.

Organizational cultures, policies, and practices limit women's advancement. Bowles et al. (2019) found that women often hesitate to negotiate better job offers due to social backlash, seeing men as better suited for leadership. Carter et al. (2020) noted that women frequently experience isolation and unequal decision making, making them vulnerable to unwritten workplace rules, which hamper mentorship and competency development. Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023) identified gender bias and stereotypes as key barriers to women's progress in executive roles. Negative stereotypes portray women as weak, while bias leads organizations to prefer men for higher positions. The integrative review by Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi revealed that challenges include negotiation hesitance, isolation, and gender bias, all of which adversely affect women's career advancement in diverse settings.

Society-specific barriers against women in executive positions regarding social issues limit their well-being. Societies operate under various rules, customs, values, cultures, and beliefs that may hinder women from rising into executive positions in their respective organizations. Hudson et al. (2024) found that societies define roles for men and women, leading to negative stereotypes against women who aspire to positions traditionally held by men. The gender stereotypes subject women to specific roles, often considered simple, while men are subjected to complex and technical tasks. Jaxon et al.

(2019) also found increased prejudice in the role of women due to the rising social stereotypes. The belief that women can only perform specific jobs subjects them to discrimination and isolation from the leading positions. Graham et al. (2021) found that women in top roles experienced bias, stereotypes, work–life balance issues, and a lack of role models. The lack of role models points to the failure of women to rise into higher positions and become effective in their respective roles. Harris (2019) identified gender stereotyping, bias, and discrimination as critical barriers that discourage women from advancing beyond common social standards. The society-specific barriers revolved around gender discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping, preventing women from achieving the desired professional excellence.

Industry-specific barriers also prevent women from rising to executive positions in the workplace. Global societies have developed notions that women or men can only perform better in specific industries, creating a ceiling in their roles. Holladay et al. (2023) found that gender inclusivity is lacking in various industries. The selection criteria implemented by diverse organizations promote the recruitment of men into the top positions and single out women. Koenig et al. (2020) and Tremmel and Wahl (2023) found that leadership roles across industries seem masculine and shape the expectations of an ideal leader. The stereotyped perspectives cause industry leaders to prescribe job descriptions, qualifications, and roles that conform to male standards rather than female standards. Marvel (2021) also found that men benefit from occupational advantages, while women and racial minorities encounter diverse obstacles that limit their advancement into higher leadership roles. The challenges translate to norms and cultures

that determine the selection of people for the top positions; the prevalence of discriminatory and stereotyped cultures limits the opportunities for women to rise into executive positions.

### **SRT and Gender Stereotypes in Leadership**

Stereotypes arising from socially defined roles are a critical concern addressed by SRT. Bowles et al. (2019) argued that deeply ingrained societal beliefs about gender roles shape perceptions of women as less ideal workers and unsuitable for leadership, underscoring the powerful influence of societal expectations on gendered and occupational roles. Further highlighting these gender-based stereotypes, Koenig et al. (2020) conducted a comprehensive analysis of leader stereotypes across various paradigms. My research project revealed a strikingly prevalent association between leadership and masculinity. These findings demonstrated the challenges women face in aspiring to leadership roles, as these roles often contradict traditional expectations regarding feminine behavior. In this respect, applying SRT to the project of leadership can shed light on how societal expectations shape leadership styles, behaviors, and perceptions.

Gender-based expectations often lead to biases when evaluating leadership effectiveness, resulting in the glass ceiling phenomenon (Samuelson et al., 2019). For instance, women are often expected to possess communal and nurturing attributes, while men are expected to have assertive and independent traits. These expectations can hinder women's progress in leadership positions, as they are not evaluated based on their actual skills and abilities. The glass ceiling thus refers to the invisible barrier that prevents

women and other marginalized groups from advancing to higher levels in their careers despite their qualifications. Eagly and Carli (2007) studied this phenomenon and found that gender stereotypes play a significant role in its perpetuation. Therefore, it may be essential to recognize and challenge these biases to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace.

### **Implications of SRT in SMEs**

SMEs often have more flexible organizational structures, making the application of SRTs particularly relevant for understanding how gendered expectations influence leadership dynamics (Koçyiğit & Akkaya, 2020). Harris (2019) asserted that understanding the challenges women encounter in leadership roles necessitates an exploration of the societal roles prescribed to them. Notably, the expectations surrounding caring and caregiving may be amplified in smaller organizations, where the boundaries between personal and professional spheres may be more fluid. SMEs, therefore, present a unique context for examining the implications of SRT within leadership and organizational dynamics. As argued by Harris traditional gender roles and expectations can influence the experiences of women in leadership roles in SMEs. For instance, women might face heightened expectations related to caregiving due to the often close-knit and familial nature of SMEs. The fluidity between personal and professional roles in SMEs can exacerbate the tension between societal expectations and leadership aspirations for women. This situation is especially evident in the caregiving domain. Within SMEs, the integration of personal and professional life may be more prevalent due to the absence of clear boundaries between roles (Malshe et al., 2017).

Consequently, women leaders in SMEs may require assistance in balancing their leadership responsibilities with caregiving obligations.

Additionally, gendered expectations in SMEs can impede women's advancement into leadership roles. The prevailing societal norms that associate leadership with masculinity can lead to biases and limited opportunities for women within SMEs (McAdam et al., 2019). For example, gender-based stereotypes may result in women being perceived as less suited for certain leadership positions, further reinforcing gender inequalities in SMEs. Understanding SRT within the context of SMEs is thus crucial for addressing these challenges. Recognizing the intersection of societal roles and organizational dynamics enables the implementation of strategies that promote gender equality and inclusive leadership practices. By undermining gendered expectations and fostering a supportive and inclusive environment, SME leaders can provide opportunities for women to overcome societal barriers and thrive as leaders (Mainiero & Gibson, 2018). Leaders can empower women to overcome societal barriers and thrive by implementing policies, fostering an inclusive culture, and providing targeted support.

### **Strategies Informed by SRT to Enhance Diversity**

Understanding the behavioral expectations SRT sets can inform strategies to counter biases and promote diversity in leadership. Carter et al. (2020) highlighted mentorship as a key strategy for enhancing diversity, demonstrating through a qualitative project on a gender equity leadership development program equips women with the tools to navigate workplaces influenced by SRT. In this respect, at least, mentorship programs can be crucial in supporting women's advancement in leadership positions. According to

Carter et al., women who participate in mentoring relationships gain valuable guidance and support in navigating gendered expectations and biases. Mentors can help women develop strategies to address challenges arising from societal roles and expectations, ultimately contributing to their success in leadership roles.

In addition to mentorship, by implementing structured selection processes that counteract gender biases, organizations can work towards increasing the representation of women in leadership positions. Holladay et al. (2023) proposed an 8-step process for inclusivity in leader selection that explicitly aims to address biases stemming from gendered role expectations. Their research underscores the importance of proactive interventions to overcome the impact of SRT on leadership opportunities. The 8-step process suggested by Holladay et al. (2023) includes awareness-building activities, such as educating decision-makers about the influence of societal roles on leadership perceptions. The process also emphasized the need for standardized evaluation criteria and committee diversity to minimize the impact of gendered expectations. By following this process, organizations can create a more inclusive environment that enables women to thrive in leadership roles. Implementing diversity and inclusion strategies informed by that SRT can, therefore, help organizations overcome biases and promote a more balanced representation of leaders. By raising awareness about the impact of societal roles and gendered expectations, organizations can create a culture that values diversity and equal opportunities. Mentorship programs and structured selection processes are two examples that offer practical approaches to addressing the challenges SRT poses.

## **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality offers a powerful framework for understanding how various social identities shape individual experiences and influence systemic power dynamics. Intersectionality provides a lens for examining the way gender, race, and class affect systemic power dynamics and personal experiences (Hopkins, 2019). In organizational leadership, especially within SMEs, intersectionality is vital for understanding women's complex challenges and barriers in climbing the corporate ladder (Bauer, 2014). Leaders who embrace intersectionality are better equipped to recognize and address these unique challenges and implement strategies to enhance women's representation in executive roles (Bullock et al., 2020). Therefore, it is crucial for SME leaders to recognize the importance of intersectionality in promoting gender diversity and creating a more inclusive workplace culture.

The glass ceiling and the varying obstacles that women face emphasize the need for an intersectional approach to address the barriers to women's advancement in leadership roles across various organizational structures, including SMEs. A significant challenge to women's progress in leadership positions is the glass ceiling, an invisible barrier that hinders underrepresented groups from reaching top leadership roles (Bloch et al., 2021). This barrier becomes even more evident when considering intersectional identities such as race, where women of color may face intensified obstacles due to the interplay of gender and racial biases (Bloch et al., 2021). This complexity underscores the need for an intersectional approach to address these challenges comprehensively.

To fully understand the complexities of career advancement, it is also essential to consider the role of gender dynamics in negotiations. Bowles et al. (2019) asserted that societal stereotypes and biases shape how women negotiate and what they negotiate for in career advancement, calling for a redefinition of traditional negotiation norms to address these gender-based challenges. Additionally, performance evaluation often perpetuates gender stereotypes, as highlighted by Hudson et al. (2024), creating further barriers for women, particularly those facing intersecting forms of marginalization. Recognizing the influence of these gender dynamics is therefore crucial in navigating and overcoming the obstacles that women face in their career progression.

Practical strategies, such as mentorship, coaching, and tailored leadership development programs, play a crucial role in facilitating the inclusion of women in executive roles. Carter et al. (2020) underscored the significance of mentorship in promoting gender equity in leadership, while the success of the “Awakenings” program, as demonstrated by Martínez-Martínez et al. (2021), highlighted the effectiveness of authentic leadership development programs in breaking through the glass ceiling. Furthermore, Gomez and Bernet (2019) provided empirical evidence supporting the notion that gender diversity, specifically at leadership levels, enhances organizational performance and outcomes. To promote gender equity in executive roles, practical strategies like mentorship, coaching, and tailored leadership development are crucial for improving leadership skills and organizational performance

The journey to inclusive leadership within SMEs has challenges. Fernandez et al. (2021) identified both perceptual facilitators and barriers to career progression among

early-stage female investigators in health sciences. Moreover, issues such as gender-based barriers, traditional gender roles, and existing stereotypes significantly hinder women's leadership advancement (Graham et al., 2021; Haines et al., 2016; Koenig et al., 2020). These obstacles perpetuate biases that portray women as less competent, influencing promotion and hiring decisions, and limiting their opportunities.

Consequently, it is crucial for the advancement of inclusive leadership within SMEs to actively confront and dismantle these obstacles that impede women's career progression.

### **Complementary Attributes of SRT and Intersectionality**

The concepts of SRT (Eagly, 1987) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) within SMEs work together to provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers women face in achieving equitable workplace opportunities. Intersectionality's framework highlights how organizational structures perpetuate gender stereotypes, particularly regarding women's advancement to executive positions. By integrating SRT and intersectionality, Skouteris et al. (2023) have found valuable insights into the complex dynamics of leadership and the challenges women encounter in reaching top leadership roles. A key area of interplay is the emergence of stereotyping, which limits women's potential in the workplace and in leadership positions (Newman & Newman, 2020; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SRT explains how managers' preconceived expectations based on gender can shape perceptions of behavior and responsibilities (Hanek & Garcia, 2022). Therefore, while intersectionality examines the simultaneous impact of multiple barriers, SRT complements this by addressing ingrained gender stereotypes perpetuated within organizational structures that hinder women's progress to executive positions.

SRT and intersectionality complement each other in highlighting the challenges that must be addressed to overcome gender inequality in the business sector. Bullough et al. (2021) found that men in the United States are perceived as more entrepreneurial due to the association of traits such as dominance and competitiveness with masculine characteristics. Consequently, men are associated with commercial and high-growth ventures, while women are associated with social and low-growth businesses. Intersectionality theory also examines the intersection of gender and entrepreneurial leadership, as well as how societal constructs such as social and human capital can impact women's ability to succeed in leadership roles (Howard et al., 2019). Both theories emphasize the importance of challenging societal perceptions and stereotypes surrounding gender and entrepreneurship in order to address gender inequality in business.

### **Critical Insights and Gaps in Current Research**

SRT provides valuable insights into gender role dynamics but also faces criticism from scholars. Hyde (2005) introduced the Gender Similarities Hypothesis, challenging SRT's generalizations by emphasizing the substantial overlap between males and females in various psychological traits. Baron-Cohen (2002) proposed the "Extreme Male Brain" theory, suggesting that certain gender differences may have biological origins. Cahill (2006) highlighted inherent neurobiological differences between male and female brains, indicating potential influences on cognitive and emotional functions. Joel et al. (2015) presented evidence for the mosaic theory, which posits that individual brains exhibit a mix of characteristics typically considered male-typical and female-typical. These

discussions underscore the complexity of gender differences and the need for a comprehensive approach that integrates biological, individual, and societal perspectives.

Moreover, while SRT offers a comprehensive framework for understanding gender dynamics in leadership, there are limitations when applying it to SMEs. Research gaps exist, as most studies have focused on larger organizations, leaving a need for more examination of gender dynamics within SMEs (Garcia-Solarte et al., 2018). Additionally, SRT's predominantly gender-focused perspective could benefit from integrating intersectional perspectives that consider the multi-dimensional nature of identity, including factors such as race, class, and other social categories (Bloch et al., 2021). By acknowledging these limitations and exploring alternative theoretical perspectives, stakeholders can gain a deeper understanding of gender dynamics in SMEs and develop effective strategies to address gender disparities in leadership roles.

### **Potential Themes and Phenomena**

SME leaders employ various strategies to enhance operational efficiency in areas such as recruitment, employee training, flexibility, and organizational culture. Regarding recruitment, SME leaders often turn to external sources to attract highly qualified candidates from a wider talent pool due to their resource limitations (Daw & Tawk, 2023). These external recruitment strategies enable SME leaders to attract individuals with essential skills that align with the organization's culture, and candidates are expected to demonstrate potential and a willingness to grow within the organization. However, some SME leaders face challenges in recruiting effectively due to constraints, and employees must quickly adapt to the organization's culture (Daw & Tawk, 2023).

These conditions underscore the need to create inclusive cultures, implement intentional strategies to advance women, empower employees through supportive structures, and leverage inclusive leadership to foster innovation and equity.

SME leaders employ various approaches to train their employees. These methods include off-the-job training, communities of practice, continuous learning, cross-training, mentoring, and coaching. SME leaders prioritize continuous learning and development by investing in workshops, online courses, and on-the-job training to ensure that their employees' skills remain current (Khan et al., 2023). Inclusive training programs are implemented to cater to the diverse needs of candidates from different backgrounds. This helps them to develop skills and address intersectional factors (Behrends, 2019). Additionally, SME leaders utilize cross-training to enhance flexibility and versatility among their employees. This enables them to perform various organizational roles (Alifah & Sukmawati, 2021). Despite the recruitment challenges that SME leaders face, they continue to explore new ways to attract and retain top talent, thereby enhancing their productivity and growth.

Flexibility plays a crucial role in the success of SMEs, allowing them to adapt to changes in the business environment and strengthen their financial performance. Strategic flexibility is associated with SME growth, but a lack of competent leaders can hinder its implementation (Brozović et al., 2023). SME leaders prioritize adaptability and the ability to pivot in response to market conditions or unexpected challenges. Flexible work options, such as remote work and flexible hours, have become increasingly important, particularly in the post-pandemic landscape, as they can attract and retain top talent (Sen

et al., 2022). Agile methodologies are also being adopted to increase flexibility in project execution and product development. Overall, these strategies address challenges related to limited resources, promoting diversity and skill development, and enabling leaders of SMEs to adapt to a dynamic and competitive business environment.

### ***Encouraging Innovation and Inclusion in SMEs***

Leaders of SMEs often encourage innovation and creativity among their employees by creating a culture that promotes proposing and implementing new ideas. Transparency and communication are essential elements of this culture that help build trust and cohesion in the workplace. To enhance the performance of SMEs, their leaders should foster an inclusive workplace culture. According to Leso et al. (2023), creating organizational diversity and inclusion committees can be effective in addressing intersectional issues and making employees feel comfortable sharing their insights and experiences. Leaders of SMEs who establish these committees have recorded good performance. Business associations can provide SME leaders with valuable resources, knowledge, and potential partners (Vatamanescu et al., 2020). To promote inclusion and relationship-building among employees from diverse backgrounds, SME leaders organize networking events. Moreover, sponsorship and mentoring programs can also help SME leaders grow and expand their business.

SME leaders adopt various promotion strategies to enhance their performance in a highly competitive environment. Online advertising, email marketing, and social media marketing, such as utilizing platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram, have been shown to positively impact the performance of SMEs (Etim et al., 2021). Investing in

digital marketing and social media presence enables SME leaders to reach a broader audience and enhance their visibility (Tchelidze, 2022). Referral programs, partnerships, and inclusive campaigns that celebrate diversity are effective ways for SME leaders to expand their customer base and improve credibility, reputation, and market reach.

### ***Understanding Applied Research to Diversity and Decision Making***

Understanding applied research in the areas of diversity and decision-making is crucial due to its significant implications. By studying the impact of diversity on decision-making processes, we gain valuable insights into how diverse perspectives and experiences can enhance problem-solving and lead to more informed decisions. My research aims to help SME leaders recognize the advantages of diverse decision-making teams, including increased creativity and innovation, broader perspectives, and more comprehensive consideration of different stakeholder interests. Furthermore, understanding the potential consequences of homogeneity and the value of diversity in avoiding groupthink allows us to create more inclusive and effective decision-making processes. Ultimately, this information can help empower organizations and societies to embrace diversity and make more informed decisions by considering different viewpoints and avoiding biases, thereby fostering more equitable and successful outcomes in various fields.

While women seeking to enter the job market are disproportionately affected by societal roles and intersectional identities, the factors also significantly impact their career progression and leadership trajectories. Bloch et al. (2021) found that a key consequence is the emergence of inequality regimes in the workplace, exemplified by the

glass ceiling. The authors conceptualize the glass ceiling as an invisible barrier, comprising racialized and gendered undertones, that women face as they seek advancement through the corporate hierarchy. Reinforcing societal roles, whether deliberately or through unconscious bias, hinders women's advancement to high-level positions. Naguib and Madeeha (2023) noted that women have been more successful in attaining leadership positions in the public sector compared to the private sector, an outcome linked to progressive equal opportunity legislation, and argued that gendered roles are normalized through complex practices and hegemonic power structures, which inherently constrain women's career advancement beyond a certain point. Therefore, intersectional identities and societal roles in businesses limit the opportunities for women to advance to leadership positions, even after they have demonstrated the requisite capabilities.

Additionally, social roles and intersectional identities can adversely affect women's ability to demonstrate competence and perform competitively in the workplace due to structural constraints. In this regard, Gray et al. (2019) explained that the perception that women, especially those with parental responsibilities, cannot work long hours or are less committed to their work puts them at a disadvantage. Gray et al. contrasted this scenario with that of their male counterparts, noting that men with parental duties are not penalized and are perceived as more committed to their work. Bowles et al. (2019) further asserted that while women are readily accorded flexible work arrangements, consistent with the perceived notions about their social roles as caregivers at home, they are treated unfavorably when competing for masculine-stereotypic roles in

the workplace. Bowles et al. compared a situation in which men asked for flexible work accommodations with women negotiating for higher pay, demonstrating how entrenched stereotypes directly affected women's opportunities to compete fairly. Therefore, societal roles and intersectional identities permeate other facets of women's careers, including negotiation for competitive pay and opportunities to prove professional competence, ultimately affecting their leadership trajectories.

### ***Shifting Attention to the Processes***

The reality that women face multiple barriers to career progression and leadership roles has been extensively documented. Most of the gendered stratification consequences of inequity in job and promotional opportunities have focused on the glass ceiling, implying that women's challenges are more concentrated at higher echelons of the organizational hierarchy. However, Samuelson et al. (2019) challenged this notion, contending that attention should shift from top-down barriers to bottom-up processes through which they emerge, emphasizing the importance of examining externalities that shape organizational dynamics. The viewpoint provided insights into contemporary debates and discussions on intersectionality and social roles. For instance, women from marginalized communities, such as women with disabilities, women of color, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual women, faced compounded bias and discrimination that further hindered their career progression. In this regard, the organizational conceptualization of leadership diversity has gradually evolved from the arguably limited confines of gender equity to more

nuanced perspectives that underscore such dynamics as marginalization, sexual orientation, and disability.

### **Creating Inclusive Systems**

Understanding the intersection of women's social identities and organizational roles is essential for examining barriers to leadership equity. Women's social identities, such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, and age, may intersect with their social roles, leading to dilemmas or underperformance (Mooney, 2022). Although women may hold top positions, their male counterparts may isolate them in strategic decision-making (Mooney, 2022). This phenomenon is a significant barrier to their full inclusion and effectiveness in leadership roles, reinforcing the need for inclusive strategies that address both structural and relational dynamics.

Wong et al. (2022) discovered compounded challenges in the workplace, including wage disparities and exclusion from top leadership roles, while racial and ethnic stereotypes about work-life balance can limit their access to advancement opportunities (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2020). Black pregnant women, for example, encounter hiring discrimination that not only restrict their access to leadership pipelines but also reinforces male dominance in key decision-making roles (Mehra et al., 2023). These intersecting barriers diminish their ability to contribute fully and effectively in business contexts, often leading to underutilization of talent, reduced innovation, and weakened organizational agility. When firms fail to address these dynamics, they risk perpetuating leadership gaps, eroding employee trust, and missing critical opportunities to build inclusive cultures that drive performance and long-term growth.

Intersecting identities can influence professional advancement, particularly when race and gender converge in promotion decisions. Women of color often face constraints in employability across competitive markets due to these intersecting factors. According to Billups et al. (2022), Black women are frequently perceived as lacking status, which contributes to their placement in lower-tier roles. This perception, shaped by race and gender, limits access to leadership and global employment opportunities. Wong et al. (2022) and Coles and Pasek (2020) found that organizational interventions designed to enhance agency were primarily directed toward white women, overlooking the distinct professional development needs of Black and Asian women. Such disparities in organizational support reflect differential treatment based on racial identity.

### **Transition**

In summary, in Section 2, I provided a comprehensive review of academic literature, where I explored the barriers women faced, including gender stereotypes, unconscious bias, and limited mentorship opportunities in SMEs. In Section 3 of this project, I describe the research methodology, including its ethical considerations, the nature of the project, population and sampling methods, data collection activities, interview questions, data organization and analysis techniques, and the strategies used to ensure reliability and validity. In Section 4, I present the findings and conclusions by highlighting themes from the analysis and discussing results, with a focus on business contributions, recommendations for professional practice, implications for social change, and suggestions for future researchers.

### Section 3: Research Project Methodology

In Section 3, I describe the ethical considerations relevant to this project, with emphasis on my responsibilities as the researcher during the data collection phase. I clarify the nature of the project by explaining and justifying the chosen methodology, design, target population, sampling methods, and participant selection. Additionally, I outline the activities involved in data collection, the development of interview questions, strategies for organizing and analyzing data, and the evaluation of the research project's reliability and validity. The section concludes with a summary that highlights the key elements of my research project and provides insight into the upcoming Section 4.

#### **Project Ethics**

In this project, I outlined my role as a researcher during the data collection process. I designed and conducted a robust methodology and selected appropriate tools to ensure the project's objectives were met. I adhered to ethical standards throughout the research process. Participants were informed of their rights, including confidentiality, the option to participate voluntarily, and the ability to withdraw at any time. I obtained informed consent prior to data collection and secured approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (number 08-04-25-1170394). I secured data and removed any identifying details to protect confidentiality.

My relationship to the topic of strategies SME leaders used to include women in executive roles to increase diversity in decision making was shaped by scholarly inquiry and professional connections. Having worked alongside or collaborated with some of the participants in professional settings, I brought an informed perspective to the research.

These experiences allowed me to witness the challenges and opportunities in fostering diversity and inclusion firsthand. While maintaining academic rigor and objectivity, I used my professional connections to enhance my understanding of the practical implications of the strategies explored in this project, making the research meaningful and relevant.

In my role as the researcher, I remained committed to upholding the ethical principles outlined in *The Belmont Report*, including respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, and ensured informed consent, minimized risks while maximizing benefits, and guaranteed fairness in participant selection (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). Furthermore, I protected confidentiality and strictly adhered to all ethical guidelines to maintain the integrity and credibility of the research throughout the entire process. I ensured that participants were fully aware of the project's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits before they agreed to take part. This involved providing comprehensive information, confirming participants' understanding, ensuring voluntary participation, obtaining written consent, and maintaining ongoing communication to respect participants' autonomy and uphold ethical standards (see Palmer, 2021).

Participants were informed of their rights, including the option to withdraw at any time without consequences. I explained to participants that they could notify me, and their participation would stop immediately. Any collected data would be excluded upon request. No incentives were provided for participation, ensuring voluntary involvement and respecting participants' autonomy. To ensure the ethical protection of participants, I masked their identities and locations using pseudonyms and code numbers. All data will

be securely stored with restricted access for 5 years to protect participants' rights. These steps protected privacy and ensured safety throughout the research (see U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

### **Nature of the Project**

To address the research questions in my research project, I employed a qualitative pragmatic inquiry approach to explore the perspectives and lived experiences of leaders regarding strategies for advancing women in leadership. This approach enabled an in-depth understanding of perspectives and facilitated the exploration of actionable solutions. Pragmatism provided flexibility in addressing the research question, enabling me to focus on practical strategies grounded in participants' experiences. Unlike the quantitative method, which relies on numerical data analysis for scientific investigation (Yin, 2018), the qualitative method allowed for a comprehensive exploration of strategies used by SME leaders to incorporate women in executive roles and the pathways for women to reach executive positions. I delved into the lived experiences of participants to recognize subjective nuances and potential biases (see Tomaszewski et al., 2020). A quantitative approach would not have captured the subjective nature of these experiences or the significance individuals attributed to them (see Lim, 2025). Additionally, although mixed methods may offer insights from qualitative and quantitative angles, a mixed-methods approach did not align with the focus on understanding how individuals made meaning of their experiences (see Bidwell & Báez, 2025).

For the project design, I chose pragmatic inquiry to strategically adapt established qualitative methods, aligning with the research goals and aiming for practical change.

This design included an inductive approach, focusing on individual decision makers in real-world settings. In my project, I used this inductive approach to focus on participants' lived experiences within authentic organizational contexts. I conducted interviews using open-ended questions, which provided valuable insights into ongoing and past events. Furthermore, participants were asked to furnish existing documentation that corroborated and exemplified the successful strategies they had devised and implemented.

I considered and rejected other designs, including phenomenological and ethnographic. Lindseth and Norberg (2022) suggested that phenomenological analysis emphasizes recognizing people's exclusive lived experiences by exploring the significance of a phenomenon. Similarly, Urcia (2021) argued that phenomenology is most suitable when the objective is to explore, comprehend experiences, and discover meaning. Likewise, Barsoum (2022) described phenomenology as an appropriate and reliable framework for studying human experiences with established technologies incorporated into daily life. Conversely, ethnography entails exploring a culture or social grouping (Susanto et al., 2024). I determined that I could not achieve my goal of focusing on individual decision makers in real-world scenarios through phenomenological or ethnographic designs.

### **Population, Sampling, and Participants**

The population for this project consisted of leaders from various organizations who had experience with leadership development and initiatives promoting gender diversity. Using purposive sampling, I selected individuals who were positioned to provide meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation. I used a sample

size of eight participants, which aligned with qualitative standards for depth and richness of data. Participants represented a diverse range of professional backgrounds to ensure a broad spectrum of perspectives.

To recruit participants, I used purposive and snowball sampling methods.

Purposive sampling enabled the intentional selection of leaders who met the eligibility criteria, utilizing professional networks and online forums to identify suitable individuals (see Dunwoodie et al., 2023). Snowball sampling provided flexibility by requiring only a minimum number of cases in each category rather than a fixed number (see Dunwoodie et al., 2023). Snowball sampling complemented the project by encouraging existing participants to refer other eligible leaders within their professional networks, broadening the participant pool and helping me recruit individuals who may have otherwise been inaccessible.

A sample size of eight participants was selected to balance the depth and breadth of data collection. This size was appropriate for the qualitative research project because it helped me provide diverse insights while maintaining manageability and reaching data saturation, where no new themes emerged (see Pearse, 2021). Practical considerations, including participant availability, willingness, and resource limitations, further justified this sample size. To establish a working relationship with participants, I prioritized clear communication of the project's objectives, along with assurances of confidentiality and flexible scheduling to accommodate their commitments. Transparency, responsiveness to inquiries, and expressions of gratitude fostered trust and encouraged meaningful engagement throughout the project.

### **Data Collection Activities**

As the primary data collection instrument, I used semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted virtually via secure video conferencing to allow for scheduling flexibility and geographic inclusivity. I began by establishing rapport with participants, reviewing the informed consent process, and reminding them of their rights. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was recorded with the participant's permission. I ensured accuracy by transcribing the recordings verbatim and verifying transcripts against the audio files. Field notes were also maintained to capture observations and reflections during and immediately after the interviews. The Interview Protocol is located in Appendix A.

To carry out the data collection process, I followed a clear protocol. I began by thoroughly reviewing interview questions, ensuring recording devices were functional, and setting up a comfortable environment for participants, whether in person or via video conferencing (Robinson, 2023). During the interviews, I established rapport by providing an overview of the project and obtaining informed consent (Verhoest et al., 2024). I guided the conversation using the protocol, took observational notes, and audio-recorded the sessions with permission to ensure accuracy. Each interview concluded with a summary and an opportunity for participants to ask questions or provide feedback.

My data collection techniques also included observations during the interviews to capture non-verbal cues, as well as careful documentation of participants' responses. I ensured that my methods were thorough by piloting the interview protocol to refine questions, triangulating data with additional observations, and conducting member

checks to confirm the accuracy of findings (Sabnis & Wolgemuth, 2023). The interview protocol (see Appendix A), and introductory email (see Appendix B) formed the basis of my data collection strategy. I identified potential participants to receive the introductory email by informally recruiting through professional networks, personal referrals, public directories, and social media platforms such as LinkedIn. According to Sahakyan (2023), a deliberate and structured approach ensured the collection of high-quality data while upholding ethical and professional standards throughout the process.

### **Interview Questions**

The interview questions for my research project were as follows:

1. What challenges do women typically face when pursuing or serving in executive roles within your organization?
2. What leadership development initiatives has your organization implemented to support women's advancement and involvement in strategic decision-making?
3. How have your efforts to support women in leadership influenced your views on organizational growth and innovation?
4. How does your organization's culture and leadership style impact women's access to executive opportunities?
5. What innovative approaches or changes do you believe could enhance the inclusion of women in executive positions?
6. What role should senior leaders play in ensuring equitable access to leadership roles for women?

7. In your opinion, what are the most critical factors for advancing women to executive roles?
8. Based on your experience, what advice would you offer to peers aiming to improve diversity in executive leadership?
9. Have you noticed any unexpected outcomes – positive or negative – from initiatives that promote diversity in executive decision-making?
10. What additional comments do you have about advancing women into executive leadership roles?

### **Data Organization and Analysis Techniques**

To ensure a systematic and effective approach to data organization and analysis, I maintained research logs and organized all data using NVivo software. I coded the data using both deductive codes, based on the dual conceptual frameworks, and inductive codes that emerged from participant responses. Once I had organized the data, I moved to the next phase of categorizing and identifying patterns. I employed thematic analysis to develop themes that reflected common strategies and insights across participant experiences. I ensured credibility by using member checking, allowing participants to review summaries of their responses for accuracy.

Journalizing research activity provided transparency and a traceable record of the process (Connaway et al., 2022). Reflective journals documented personal insights, evolving interpretations, and conceptual breakthroughs, encouraging critical thinking and enabling the progression of ideas (Ahmed, 2024). I used reflective journaling to capture

emerging patterns and interpretation during coding and theme development, while comparing personal observations with interview data and notes to strengthen my analysis.

To analyze the data, I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis involved six key steps: (a) familiarizing oneself with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the final report. This flexible method served as the primary data analysis approach for this research. Thematic analysis, aligned with the pragmatic inquiry research design, offers flexibility in uncovering both anticipated and emergent themes, ensuring comprehensive data exploration.

The data analysis process followed a logical and sequential approach. First, I transcribed and reviewed the collected data to ensure accuracy and familiarity with the content. I then organized the data, including interview transcripts and my reflexive log, by establishing dedicated digital folders. Additionally, I maintained a central index that documented all sources with relevant metadata, ensuring systematic tracking and efficient retrieval throughout the analysis process.

Once the data were organized, I coded them systematically using NVivo, assigning labels to significant elements. Ahmed et al. (2025) highlighted that an application such as NVivo can bring structure to qualitative analysis, enhancing consistency and promoting rigor in thematic identification. I employed a mind-mapping technique to organize these codes into broader categories, helping to identify patterns and relationships. Following this, I analyzed the categories to identify overarching themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and relevance.

Once I identified key themes, I focused on correlating them with the existing literature, including recent studies published after I wrote the proposal, to situate findings within the broader academic context. I also aligned the themes with my project's conceptual frameworks, ensuring consistency and theoretical relevance. This step strengthened the depth and credibility of the analysis by connecting findings to established knowledge. I will securely store all raw data, including interview transcripts, research logs, and reflective journal entries for a minimum of 5 years, then I will delete it. This will ensure compliance with ethical guidelines and allow for future reference if needed.

### **Reliability**

To ensure dependability in this research, I implemented several strategies that strengthened the reliability of the data collection and interpretation process. One key approach was member checking, through which researchers my interpretations of the data with participants to confirm their accuracy and resonance with the intended meanings of the participants (Riazi et al., 2023). The member checking process helped me validate my findings and address any potential misinterpretations, ensuring that the conclusions authentically reflected participants' perspectives (Turner & Hagstrom-Schmidt, 2022). Additionally, I conducted a thorough review of interview transcripts to verify their accuracy against the recorded audio data. This step ensured that all responses were captured and that no details were overlooked during the transcription process. By reviewing and cross-checking each transcript against the original audio recording, I

minimized transcription errors. This practice also strengthened the dependability of the data (Turner & Hagstrom-Schmidt, 2022).

To further enhance dependability, I practiced using the interview protocol with my friends and family members. This practice allows researchers to refine the questions, identify areas for improvement, and ensure that the protocol was clear and effective (Gani et al., 2020). This testing phase also enabled me to evaluate the consistency of my approach, ensuring that the methodology could be reliably replicated.

Supporting these strategies, I drew on established best practices from scholarly sources. For instance, Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasized the importance of member checking as a technique for validating qualitative research findings, while Morse (2015) highlighted the value of systematic transcript reviews in ensuring data accuracy. These sources guided my efforts to maintain dependability throughout the project. By integrating these measures—member checking, transcript reviews, and a practice test, I ensured a rigorous and dependable research process. These practices contributed to the trustworthiness of the findings and upheld the integrity and reliability of the project.

### **Validity**

To ensure credibility in this research, I employed several strategies to validate the accuracy and authenticity of the findings. Member checking played a critical role, as I shared interpretations of the data with participants to confirm that their perspectives were accurately represented. Additionally, I provided participants with the opportunity to review their interview transcripts, ensuring that the recorded data aligned with their intended responses. Triangulation further enhanced credibility by incorporating multiple

data sources, interview responses, observational notes, and reflective journal entries, to cross-verify findings. These strategies were supported by Turner and Hagstrom-Schmidt (2022), who highlighted member checking and triangulation as key components of establishing credibility in qualitative research.

To address transferability, I provided detailed and context-rich descriptions of the research process, participants, and findings. These descriptions enabled readers to determine the applicability of the project's results to their own contexts or future research endeavors. By offering thorough explanations and supporting them with scholarly references, I ensured that the findings were presented in a way that allowed other researchers to draw meaningful comparisons or extend the project's implications.

I established confirmability through a transparent and systematic approach. I maintained a reflective journal throughout the research process, documenting personal thoughts, decisions, and potential biases to ensure that interpretations were grounded in the data rather than subjective assumptions. An audit trail was also created, detailing every step of the research process from data collection to analysis so that the findings could be independently verified. This approach aligned with the recommendations of Minh (2025), who emphasized the importance of an audit trail in maintaining confirmability.

Ensuring data saturation was a priority to strengthen the reliability of the project's findings. I continued data collection until no new themes or patterns emerged, indicating that the data had reached a point of redundancy. This approach ensured that the analysis was comprehensive and that key themes were fully developed. Bouncken et al. (2025)

and Christou (2025) underscored the significance of data saturation as a fundamental criterion for rigor in qualitative research.

To ensure credibility, I validated findings using member checking, transcript reviews, and triangulation. Detailed descriptions addressed transferability, while a reflective journal and audit trail established confirmability. Data collection continued until saturation was reached, ensuring comprehensive and reliable analysis. These strategies provided a solid foundation for rigorous and trustworthy research.

### **Transition and Summary**

In Section 3 of my proposal, I addressed the project's ethical considerations to ensure full compliance with professional and institutional guidelines, prioritizing the protection of participants' rights and confidentiality. I defined the nature of the project, establishing a strong framework to guide the research. I described the population, sampling methods, and participant selection, which provided the context and focus for my research. I also outlined the data collection process, including the semi-structured interviews, and explained the systematic techniques I used for organizing and analyzing the data. Finally, I detailed the strategies implemented to strengthen the reliability and validity of the findings. In Section 4, I present the results of my research project, including the key themes that emerged from the analysis, their alignment with the conceptual frameworks, and the implications for business practice and social change.

## Section 4: Findings and Conclusions

Through this qualitative pragmatic inquiry, I identified and explored effective strategies SME leaders use to promote and integrate women into executive roles to increase diversity in leadership and decision-making processes. The overarching research question was the following: What effective strategies do SME leaders use to promote and integrate women into executive roles to increase diversity in leadership and decision-making processes? I focused on understanding how these strategies contributed to increased diversity in organizational decision making. Through virtual interviews and thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, I explored how SMEs approached advancing women into leadership positions to foster more inclusive and representative decision-making processes.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

I uncovered four key strategic themes: (a) create inclusive cultures and equitable access, (b) implement organizational strategies to advance women, (c) empower women through supportive structures, and (d) leverage inclusive leadership for innovation and performance. Each theme included effective strategies, which I detail in Table 1 indicating the most common topics discussed by participants.

**Table 1***Strategic Themes and Effective Strategies*

Strategic theme	Effective strategy
Theme 1: Create inclusive cultures and equitable access	Revise hiring and promotion practices Foster transparent decision making Promote fair assessment and equal opportunity Expand networking and visibility opportunities
Theme 2: Implement organizational strategies to advance women	Launch mentorship and sponsorship programs Develop leadership pipelines Encourage senior leader advocacy Recognize and celebrate women's achievements
Theme 3: Empower women through supportive structures	Offer flexible work arrangements Build confidence through exposure and support Increase system understanding for visibility Plan intentionally for equitable advancement
Theme 4: Leverage inclusive leadership for innovation and performance	Leverage diverse perspectives Address resistance through education and modeling Align culture and leadership for impact Showcase success stories

**Theme 1: Create Inclusive Cultures and Equitable Access**

The first theme identified through thematic analysis emphasized the importance of creating inclusive organizational cultures and ensuring equitable access to executive leadership roles within SMEs. Participants described a range of structural and operational challenges that limited advancement opportunities for qualified professionals. In response, they outlined several effective strategies that SME leaders can implement to improve access and inclusion (see Table 2).

**Table 2***Creating Inclusive Cultures and Equitable Access*

Effective strategy	Description
Revise hiring and promotion practices	Eliminate default bias by making recruitment and advancement processes transparent, inclusive, and merit based.
Foster transparent decision making	Create open forums and share organizational systems to help women understand and influence leadership pathways.
Promote fair assessment and equal opportunity	Ensure all candidates are evaluated equitably and given access to compete for executive roles.
Expand networking and visibility opportunities	Encourage women's participation in professional networks and community spaces to build trust and access.

One strategy was to revise hiring and promotion practices to ensure transparency and reduce reliance on informal networks. P4 noted that “many senior positions ... aren’t even publicly advertised,” while P5 emphasized that “people tend to hire others who look, think, and operate like themselves.” These insights suggest that formalizing recruitment and promotion processes can expand access to leadership roles and reduce default bias (see Bowles et al., 2019).

Another strategy involved fostering transparent decision making and open forums. P8 described efforts to “open the aperture to be more transparent,” which helped team members understand organizational systems and decision pathways. P1 added that transparency and encouragement “empower individuals to use their voice ... and

contribute to advancement.” These practices support inclusive leadership models that prioritize openness and shared accountability (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Participants also recommended promoting fair assessment and equal opportunity. P3 stated “everyone must be given the opportunity to apply and compete for those roles,” underscoring the importance of merit-based evaluation. This aligns with Carter et al. (2020), who emphasized that equitable access requires intentional planning and performance-based feedback.

A fourth strategy was to expand networking and visibility opportunities. P4 explained that in private practice “it’s all about networking,” and P5 noted that “when advancement is based too heavily on personal networks ... individuals are often overlooked.” These findings suggest that SME leaders should create structured opportunities for professional engagement and visibility to support leadership development (see Malshe et al., 2017).

Participants also discussed operational challenges such as limited mentorship access and work–life integration. P3 shared that “individuals often find themselves without the kind of role models or mentors they can turn to,” and P5 noted that “access to mentorship networks is uneven.” These insights reinforce the need for formal mentorship programs and leadership development initiatives (see Carter et al., 2020).

Work–life integration was another area of concern. P2 remarked that “caregiving and household responsibilities ... limit availability for demanding leadership positions,” and P5 described the dual role of family and career as a barrier to advancement. These

findings support the implementation of flexible work arrangements to accommodate diverse professional needs (see Harris, 2019).

In summary, Theme 1 highlighted four effective strategies for SME leaders seeking to create inclusive cultures and equitable access to executive leadership: (a) revising hiring and promotion practices, (b) fostering transparency and open communication, (c) promoting fair assessment and equal opportunity, and (d) expanding networking and visibility pathways. These strategies are grounded in participant experience and supported by existing literature, offering practical guidance for improving leadership diversity and organizational performance.

### **Correlation to the Conceptual Framework**

The findings associated with Theme 1 align with the conceptual foundations of SRT and intersectionality theory, which offered a structured lens through which to understand organizational dynamics that influence access to executive leadership. SRT, as articulated by Eagly (1987), explains how role expectations shape perceptions of leadership suitability. Participant responses illustrated how certain leadership behaviors such as assertiveness and strategic decision making were interpreted differently depending on the individual's background and role alignment. For example, P7 noted that assertiveness was often misinterpreted, while P8 described how leadership qualifications were scrutinized in contexts where prior military experience was valued. These examples reflect how organizational norms and expectations can influence leadership access and evaluation.

Intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), complements SRT by examining how multiple identity dimensions such as professional background, caregiving responsibilities, and organizational role interact to shape leadership trajectories. P6 described how organizational structures influenced access to leadership development, while P8 emphasized the impact of leadership style and transparency on team engagement. These insights support the notion that leadership access is shaped not only by individual capability but also by institutional design and cultural alignment.

The findings reinforce the importance of implementing targeted strategies to address these dynamics. Specifically, participants recommended revising hiring and promotion practices to increase transparency (P4, P5), fostering open forums and decision-making processes to improve system understanding (P1, P8), and expanding networking and mentorship opportunities to support leadership development (P3, P5). These strategies reflect intentional organizational interventions that align with the theoretical constructs of SRT and Intersectionality by addressing structural and cultural conditions that influence leadership access.

In summary, the conceptual frameworks provided a robust foundation for interpreting the findings of Theme 1. They underscore the importance of designing inclusive organizational cultures that promote equitable access to executive leadership through transparent systems, fair evaluation, and strategic development pathways. Without such interventions, SMEs may continue to face limitations in leadership diversity and organizational performance.

## Theme 2: Implement Organizational Strategies to Advance Women

This theme highlights the intentional strategies SME leaders use to support women's advancement into executive roles. Participants described a range of organizational practices that increased visibility, access, and leadership readiness. Four key strategies emerged from the data: launching mentorship and sponsorship programs, developing leadership pipelines, encouraging senior leader advocacy, and recognizing and celebrating women's achievements (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

### *Implementing Organizational Strategies to Advance Women*

Effective strategy	Description
Launch mentorship and sponsorship programs	Pair women with mentors and advocates to increase visibility, confidence, and access to leadership.
Develop leadership pipelines	Offer targeted training, decentralization, and exposure to strategic decision-making roles.
Encourage senior leader advocacy	Promote women through direct support, sponsorship, and modeling inclusive leadership.
Recognize and celebrate women's achievements	Publicly acknowledge contributions to reinforce inclusion and inspire future leaders.

Participants consistently emphasized the value of structured mentorship and sponsorship in supporting women's leadership development. P1 shared, "Making sure there are pockets of mentorship programs to pair women leaders with one another... allows them to see women in these particular roles." P2 noted that mentorship was

integrated into performance reviews, helping women build connections with senior leaders. P3 described his personal commitment to mentoring a female deputy by bringing her into leadership forums to observe and learn. These programs were seen as essential for navigating organizational systems and building confidence. This aligns with Carter et al. (2020), who emphasized mentorship as a key driver of leadership equity.

Participants highlighted the importance of creating structured pathways for leadership development. P6 emphasized that “mentorship and sponsorship have always helped,” especially when paired with opportunities to lead strategic initiatives. Leadership decentralization and reorganization were cited as effective ways to open new roles. These findings support Holladay et al.’s (2023) inclusive leader selection model and Martínez-Martínez et al.’s (2021) research on authentic leadership development programs that help break through advancement barriers.

Several participants described how direct support from senior leaders played a critical role in advancing women. P3 stated, “I’ve encouraged her to go after the tough jobs... I believe in her, and I know she can do it.” P6 emphasized the importance of having “key people you can turn to,” noting that sponsorship from outside one’s immediate team can expand leadership perspectives. These examples reflect the importance of advocacy in building trust, visibility, and access to decision-making spaces.

Recognition was identified as a powerful tool for reinforcing inclusion and motivating advancement. P6 shared that celebrating contributions “creates space for every demographic to be seen and valued.” Participants noted that public

acknowledgment of women's leadership helped normalize their presence in executive roles and encouraged others to pursue similar paths. These practices align with Fernandez et al. (2021), who identified recognition as a perceptual facilitator of career progression.

### **Correlation to the Conceptual Framework**

The strategies described in Theme 2 align with SRT (Eagly, 1987), which explains how leadership perceptions are shaped by social expectations and learned behaviors. By implementing mentorship, sponsorship, and structured development programs, SME leaders actively challenge traditional role-based assumptions and expand the definition of leadership (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) is reflected in the tailored nature of these strategies. P2 described how mentorship was embedded in performance evaluations to ensure equitable access across diverse identity groups. P6 emphasized the value of sponsorship from outside one's immediate team, illustrating how external perspectives can help individuals overcome systemic limitations. These findings reinforce the importance of inclusive leadership development as a mechanism for promoting equity and expanding access to executive roles within SMEs.

### **Theme 3: Empower Women Through Supportive Structures**

Theme 3 highlights the organizational conditions and leadership practices that empower women to navigate executive spaces with confidence and resilience.

Participants emphasized that internal development must be supported by external structures to foster leadership readiness. Four effective strategies emerged: offering flexible work arrangements, building confidence through exposure and support,

increasing system understanding for visibility, and planning intentionally for equitable advancement (see Table 4).

**Table 4**

*Empowering Women Through Supportive Structures*

Effective strategy	Description
Offer flexible work arrangements	Support work-life integration to reduce barriers for women balancing professional and personal responsibilities.
Build confidence through exposure and support	Provide access to leadership spaces and feedback to strengthen self-efficacy.
Increase system understanding for visibility	Help women navigate organizational structures to influence outcomes and pursue advancement.
Plan intentionally for equitable advancement	Use structured planning to ensure women have access to growth opportunities and leadership roles.

Participants described how flexible scheduling and work-life integration policies helped reduce barriers to leadership. P2 noted, “Women are disproportionately expected to manage caregiving and household responsibilities... limiting their availability for demanding leadership positions.” P5 added that this dual role “can become a barrier,” while P6 emphasized that expectations around work-life balance often burden women disproportionately. These insights support the need for organizational flexibility to accommodate diverse leadership trajectories (Harris, 2019).

Confidence was identified as a critical factor in leadership development. P3 stated, “The challenges for women rising to executive roles are both internal and external.

Internally... it's often about building self-confidence." P6 shared that mentorship "expands your thinking and unlocks solutions you might not have considered on your own." These reflections align with Newman and Newman (2020), who emphasized resilience as a key trait in overcoming workplace stereotypes.

Participants stressed the importance of understanding organizational systems to gain visibility and influence. P8 explained that "understanding how the system works is the first level of achieving executive roles." This strategy helps women navigate decision-making structures and position themselves for advancement, reinforcing the importance of transparency and access.

Fair assessment and structured planning were seen as essential for leadership access. P3 noted, "Everyone must be given the opportunity to apply and compete for those roles." This sentiment reflects the need for intentional leadership development pathways that support equitable competition and visibility.

### **Correlation to the Conceptual Framework**

Theme 3 aligns closely with SRT (Eagly, 1987), which explains how leadership behaviors are shaped by societal expectations and reinforced through socialization. The emphasis on confidence, exposure, and adaptability reflects the psychological work required to overcome internalized norms (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) adds depth by showing how overlapping identities such as caregiving status, age, and professional background compound leadership challenges. P5's reflection on balancing family and career illustrates how these

intersections influence advancement. Together, these frameworks support the need for inclusive structures that empower women to lead authentically and confidently.

#### **Theme 4: Leverage Inclusive Leadership for Innovation and Performance**

This theme explores how inclusive leadership practices contribute to innovation, performance, and cultural transformation within SMEs. Participants linked gender-inclusive strategies to improved morale, strategic outcomes, and organizational adaptability. Four effective strategies emerged: leveraging diverse perspectives, addressing resistance through education and modeling, aligning culture and leadership for impact, and showcasing success stories (see Table 5).

**Table 5**

*Leveraging Inclusive Leadership for Innovation and Performance*

Effective strategy	Description
Leverage diverse perspectives	Use inclusive leadership to drive innovation, creativity, and better decision-making.
Address resistance through education and modeling	Confront bias and misconceptions by modeling inclusive behaviors and offering training.
Align culture and leadership for impact	Ensure leadership values reflect inclusive practices that support organizational growth.
Showcase success stories	Highlight the impact of women leaders to reinforce inclusive norms and inspire change.

Participants emphasized that inclusive leadership drives innovation and better outcomes. P5 stated, “Supporting women leaders has reinforced my belief that diversity

of thought drives innovation, transformation, and better outcomes.” These insights reflect research by Gomez and Bernet (2019), who found that gender diversity enhances performance and creativity.

Resistance to diversity initiatives was acknowledged as a challenge. P5 noted, “Some people view diversity initiatives as preferential treatment... that’s a tough mindset to shift.” P8 emphasized the importance of modeling inclusive leadership to change perceptions. These reflections support Bullock et al. (2020), who emphasized leadership commitment as essential for cultural transformation. Participants described how transparency and open communication foster trust and collaboration. P8 shared, “Creating a culture of openness and transparency... helps everyone in the organization... and I absolutely think it helps women.” These practices align leadership values with inclusive outcomes, reinforcing the strategic value of cultural alignment.

Recognition was seen as a powerful tool for reinforcing inclusion. P6 stated, “By identifying and celebrating those contributions, the organization creates space for every demographic to be seen and valued.” This strategy helps normalize women’s leadership and inspires broader participation.

### **Correlation to the Conceptual Framework**

Theme 4 aligns with SRT (Eagly, 1987), which explains how disrupting traditional gender norms can lead to broader organizational benefits. The participants’ emphasis on inclusive leadership and transparency reflects a shift away from role-based bias toward merit-based advancement. For example, P8 described how open forums and

transparent decision-making processes created space for diverse voices to be heard and valued.

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) adds depth by highlighting how inclusive practices benefit all underrepresented groups, not just women. P6's account of recognizing and celebrating women's contributions illustrates how visibility and validation contribute to organizational growth. These findings underscore the importance of embedding diversity into the cultural fabric of SMEs not only to support women's leadership but to enhance innovation, resilience, and long-term success.

### **Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice**

The findings of my research project make both practical and scholarly contributions to advancing women in executive leadership roles within SMEs. Drawing on thematic insights and grounded in SRT (Eagly, 1987) and Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), the research provides a dual message: one directed toward business and organizational leaders seeking actionable strategies, and another aimed at the academic community for further theoretical and empirical exploration.

For SME leaders, I present a compelling case for embedding gender-inclusive practices into core business strategy. Participants identified persistent structural and cultural barriers, such as biased perceptions, underrepresentation, and exclusionary hiring practices that limit women's access to executive roles. These findings align with prior research by Bowles et al. (2019) and Koenig et al. (2020), which emphasized the role of gendered stereotypes in shaping leadership perceptions. As P1 noted, "When you don't

see other women beside you... it can feel isolating,” underscoring the importance of visibility and representation.

My research project also highlights effective strategies that leaders can implement to counter these barriers. Mentorship and sponsorship programs, targeted leadership development, and transparent organizational cultures were cited as transformative. P2 shared, “We’ve integrated these efforts into our performance reviews... pairing women with mentors who can help them build connections with senior leaders.” These practices confirm the value of structured interventions, as supported by Holladay et al. (2023), who proposed an eight-step inclusive leader selection framework.

Importantly, the findings demonstrate that diversity is not only a moral imperative but a strategic advantage. P5 emphasized, “Supporting women leaders has reinforced my belief that diversity of thought drives innovation, transformation, and better outcomes.” This aligns with Gomez and Bernet (2019), who found that gender-diverse leadership enhances organizational performance. Recent studies (Herlita, 2025; HRMARS, 2025; Ibáñez et al., 2025) further validate that women-led SMEs outperform peers in adaptability and innovation.

Leaders are encouraged to foster cultures of openness and transparency, as described by P8: “Creating a culture of openness and transparency... helps everyone in the organization... and I absolutely think it helps women.” By dismantling structural barriers and investing in inclusive practices, SME leaders can unlock the full potential of their workforce and position their organizations for sustainable success.

Through my research, I contribute to the academic discourse by applying SRT (Eagly, 1987) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) to the SME context, a domain often underrepresented in leadership diversity research (Crenshaw, 1989; Eagly, 1987). The integration of these frameworks provides a nuanced understanding of how societal expectations and overlapping identities shape women's leadership trajectories.

The findings invite further inquiry into the psychological dimensions of leadership development. Participants emphasized the importance of confidence and resilience, echoing Hyde's (2005) Gender Similarities Hypothesis and Joel et al.'s (2015) mosaic theory, which challenge binary assumptions about gendered traits. P3 observed, "Internally... it's often about building self-confidence," suggesting that leadership potential is influenced as much by internal belief systems as external structures.

Intersectionality was particularly noticeable in participants' accounts of compounded barriers faced by women of color and those with caregiving responsibilities. P5 described balancing family expectations with professional aspirations, illustrating how societal roles intersect to shape leadership experiences. These insights extend Bloch et al.'s (2021) conceptualization of the glass ceiling as a racialized and gendered construct.

Future researchers should build on these findings by examining the long-term impact of inclusive leadership strategies on SME performance, employee retention, and innovation. Longitudinal studies and cross-sector comparisons could further illuminate the mechanisms through which diversity drives organizational success. Scholars are also encouraged to explore the role of informal networks and cultural dynamics in shaping leadership trajectories, particularly in resource-constrained environments.

In conclusion, my research bridges theory and practice by offering a grounded, context-specific analysis of gender diversity in SME leadership. It provides business leaders with actionable strategies and invites scholars to deepen their engagement with intersectional frameworks, advancing both organizational transformation and academic understanding.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The findings of my research have meaningful implications for advancing social change through leadership practices, organizational culture, and scholarly inquiry. By identifying the structural, cultural, and psychological barriers that hinder women's advancement in SMEs, and by highlighting effective strategies for inclusion, this research offers a roadmap for transforming not only individual organizations but also broader societal norms around leadership and equity.

### **Implications for Business and Organizational Leaders**

For business leaders, especially those operating in SMEs, the study underscores the transformative potential of inclusive leadership practices. Implementing mentorship and sponsorship programs, transparent hiring processes, and inclusive organizational cultures can lead to tangible improvements in employee morale, innovation, and retention. As P5 noted, "Supporting women leaders has reinforced my belief that diversity of thought drives innovation, transformation, and better outcomes." These practices not only empower individual women but also foster more dynamic and resilient organizations.

At the community level, increasing women's representation in executive roles can serve as a catalyst for broader cultural change. When women occupy visible leadership positions, they become role models for younger generations, challenging stereotypes and expanding the perceived possibilities for women in the business world. This visibility can inspire more equitable participation in economic and civic life, particularly in underserved or marginalized communities. As noted by Mainiero and Gibson (2018), inclusive leadership in SMEs can ripple outward, influencing local economies and contributing to more equitable labor markets.

Institutionally, organizations that prioritize gender equity are better positioned to meet the demands of a diverse workforce and customer base. Research by Bullock et al. (2020) and Gomez and Bernet (2019) confirms that gender-diverse leadership enhances organizational performance and stakeholder trust. By embedding equity into leadership development and decision-making structures, SMEs can model progressive business practices that align with global sustainability and social responsibility goals.

### **Implications for the Research-Scholar Community**

For scholars, this study contributes to a growing body of literature that integrates SRT (Eagly, 1987) and Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) to examine leadership through a multidimensional lens. The findings underscore the importance of ongoing research into how gendered expectations and overlapping identities influence access to and experiences of leadership. This is particularly relevant in the SME context, where informal structures and limited resources can both hinder and enable innovation in equity practices.

I encourage future researchers to pursue longitudinal and comparative studies that assess the long-term impact of inclusive leadership strategies on organizational and societal outcomes. It also calls for a deeper investigation into the psychological dimensions of leadership development, including confidence-building, resilience, and identity negotiation. As Hyde (2005) and Joel et al. (2015) suggested, moving beyond binary gender assumptions allows for a more nuanced understanding of leadership potential and behavior.

At a societal level, research that informs and evaluates inclusive practices contributes to the dismantling of systemic inequities. By generating evidence-based recommendations, scholars can influence policy, education, and organizational standards, ultimately shaping cultures that value diversity, equity, and inclusion. This aligns with the broader goals of social change, creating environments where individuals of all identities can thrive, contribute, and lead.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Future researchers should build on this study by examining the long-term impact of inclusive leadership strategies such as mentorship, sponsorship, and transparent hiring practices on women's advancement and organizational performance in SMEs (Carter et al., 2020; Holladay et al., 2023). Longitudinal studies could assess how these interventions influence career trajectories and business outcomes over time. Comparative research across industries can help identify sector-specific challenges and best practices, particularly in fields such as healthcare, finance, and technology, where gender disparities persist (Bloch et al., 2021; Koenig et al., 2020). Intersectional analyses are also necessary

to explore how overlapping identities, such as race, status, and age, shape leadership experiences, extending Crenshaw's (1989) framework.

Additionally, researchers should investigate how organizational culture, informal networks, and leadership styles either facilitate or hinder women's access to executive roles (Bullock et al., 2020; Mainiero & Gibson, 2018). Exploring technology-enabled inclusion strategies, such as remote work and AI-driven HR tools, may reveal scalable solutions for resource-constrained SMEs (Sen et al., 2022). To address the time constraints identified in this study, such as limited access to participants and compressed data collection periods (Park, 2025), future researchers could extend timelines, leverage virtual interviews for broader reach, adopt mixed methods to enrich data, and engage in collaborative or multi-site studies to enhance depth and diversity of perspectives.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative research project addressed a critical business issue: the underrepresentation of women in executive leadership within SMEs. Despite the well-documented benefits of diverse leadership including improved innovation, strategic performance, and organizational resilience, many SME leaders lack effective strategies to promote and integrate women into top roles (Gomez & Bernet, 2019; Herlith, 2025; HRMARS, 2025). In my research project, I identified and explored effective strategies that some SME leaders use to promote and integrate women into executive roles to increase diversity in leadership and decision-making processes. Through thematic analysis grounded in SRT (Eagly, 1987) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), I

revealed how societal expectations, organizational norms, and overlapping identities shape women's leadership trajectories.

Through thematic analysis, four strategic themes emerged. First, creating inclusive cultures and equitable access emphasized revising hiring and promotion practices, fostering transparency, promoting fair assessment, and expanding networking opportunities (Bowles et al., 2019; Carter et al., 2020). Second, implementing organizational strategies to advance women highlighted launching mentorship and sponsorship programs, developing leadership pipelines, encouraging senior leader advocacy, and recognizing women's achievements (Fernandez et al., 2021; Holladay et al., 2023; Martínez-Martínez et al., 2021). Third, empowering women through supportive structures focused on offering flexible work arrangements, building confidence through exposure, increasing system understanding, and planning intentionally for equitable advancement (Hyde, 2005; Joel et al., 2015; LinkedIn, 2025; Newman & Newman, 2020; Samuelson et al., 2019). Fourth, leveraging inclusive leadership for innovation and performance demonstrated how inclusive practices, such as valuing diverse perspectives, addressing resistance, aligning culture with leadership values, and showcasing success stories drive organizational transformation and long-term success (Bullock et al., 2020).

Collectively, these findings underscore the complexity of gendered leadership dynamics and the transformative potential of inclusive practices. By implementing these strategies, SME leaders can strengthen leadership diversity, improve performance, and contribute to positive social change through equitable access to executive roles.

For business and organizational leaders, the findings offer a clear mandate: dismantling structural biases and investing in mentorship, sponsorship, and transparent leadership development are not only ethical imperatives but strategic necessities. Inclusive cultures foster innovation, trust, and performance, as supported by recent scholarship (Bullock et al., 2020; Gomez & Bernet, 2019; Herlita, 2025). For the research-scholar community, the study contributes to a growing body of literature that calls for intersectional, context-specific inquiry into leadership equity. It highlights the need for longitudinal, comparative, and psychologically informed research that can inform both theory and practice.

The implications for social change are far-reaching. By promoting women's leadership in SMEs, organizations can catalyze broader cultural shifts, empower communities, and model equitable business practices. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics, addressing limitations such as time constraints through extended timelines, mixed methods, and collaborative designs (Park, 2025). Ultimately, this study affirms that advancing women's leadership is not a peripheral concern; it is central to building resilient, innovative, and inclusive organizations in a rapidly evolving global economy.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol	
<p>Introduce the interview and set the stage. Introduce myself and the purpose of the interview thereby setting the stage.</p>	<p>Hello, my name is Artema Wright. I am a Doctoral Candidate with Walden University. The purpose of this interview is to identify and explore effective strategies SME leaders use to promote and integrate women into executive roles to increase diversity in leadership and decision-making processes. I am going to ask you ten questions to which I would like your responses to. Then, I will conclude the interview. Do you have any questions?</p>
<p>Watch for nonverbal cues. Paraphrase the participant response. Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in depth.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Interview Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What challenges do women typically face when pursuing or serving in executive roles within your organization?</li> <li>2. What leadership development initiatives has your organization implemented to support women's advancement and involvement in strategic decision-making?</li> <li>3. How have your efforts to support women in leadership influenced your views on organizational growth and innovation?</li> <li>4. How does your organization's culture and leadership style impact women's access to executive opportunities?</li> <li>5. What innovative approaches or changes do you believe could enhance the inclusion of women in executive positions?</li> <li>6. What role should senior leaders play in ensuring equitable access to leadership roles for women?</li> <li>7. In your opinion, what are the most critical factors for advancing women to executive roles?</li> <li>8. Based on your experience, what advice would you offer to peers aiming to improve diversity in executive leadership?</li> <li>9. Have you noticed any unexpected outcomes – positive or negative – from initiatives that promote diversity in executive decision-making?</li> <li>10. What additional comments do you have about advancing women into executive leadership roles?</li> </ol>

Wrap up the interview thanking participant.	Thank you for participating in the interview, an integral part of my research project.
Schedule a follow-up interview to perform member checking with the participant.	I will contact you in a week to schedule a time for us to review the accuracy of my interpretation of your interview responses.
Follow-up Member Checking Interview	
Introduce myself and purpose of the follow-up interview to set the stage.	Hello [Interviewee], Thank you for taking this time to meet with me again to review the accuracy of my interpretation of your interview responses.
I will share a copy of the succinct synthesis for each individual question. I will bring probing questions related to other information I found to ensure the information is relevant and adheres to IRB approval.  Walk through each question, read the interpretation, and ask: Is my interpretation correct? Did I miss anything? Or would you like to add anything?	I will read the questions one at a time and my interpretations of your responses to them and ask you if my interpretation is correct.
	1. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation –perhaps one paragraph.
	2. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation –perhaps one paragraph.
	3. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation –perhaps one paragraph.
	4. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation –perhaps one paragraph.
	5. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation –perhaps one paragraph.
	6. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation –perhaps one paragraph.
	7. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation –perhaps one paragraph.
	8. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation –perhaps one paragraph.
	9. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation –perhaps one paragraph.
10. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation –perhaps one paragraph.	

## Appendix B: Invitation Email

You are invited to participate in a qualitative research study focused on addressing the underrepresentation of women in executive leadership within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This study explores the specific strategies SME leaders use to promote and integrate women into executive roles, with the goal of identifying practices that enhance leadership diversity and improve organizational performance. As a senior leader, your insights are essential to understanding the challenges women face in attaining and serving in executive roles, the initiatives your organization has implemented to support their advancement, and the broader impact of these efforts on culture, innovation, and strategic growth. Grounded in Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) and Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), this research aims to offer actionable guidance for SME leaders committed to building inclusive and high-performing organizations.

### **About the study:**

- One 30-60 minute face-to-face or virtual audio interview that will be audio-recorded (no video recording)
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

### **Volunteers must meet these requirements:**

- Serve in a business leadership role
- Possess knowledge and experience in core business practices
- Have actively contributed to decision-making at the senior leadership level

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Artema Wright, a DBA student at Walden University. Interviews will take place in August 2025.

Please reach out to Artema Wright at [artema.wright@waldenu.edu](mailto:artema.wright@waldenu.edu) to let the researcher know of your interest. You are welcome to forward it to others who might be interested.