

**The complexity of childbearing and career
advancement in senior leadership in South Africa**

by

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ABSTRACT

It is globally recognised that there is an underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions. Although there have been multiple studies over the decades that have explored the career trajectory of women, the dearth of women on these levels has resulted in a lack of studies on them.

Professionally employed women who undergo identity transitions to motherhood, have been known to pay career costs for pursuing family goals. This study sought to understand the complexities associated with childbearing as it pertains to career advancement of women to upper echelons of leadership. 15 senior women leaders were interviewed, using a semi-structured, qualitative approach, to gain deeper insights into the issue.

Based on the findings, a conceptual model has been built to illustrate the forces at play. Career ambition, stereotypes, gendered leadership roles, shared identities and leadership support are some of the key constructs of the model. The model illustrates how these forces interact before and after a woman experiences an identity transition to motherhood. This study makes a novice contribution to the field of leadership and gender studies.

KEYWORDS

Career ambition, identity, career advancement of women, leadership, childbearing

DECLARATION

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

Shayleen Dennis

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CHAPTER 1: PROBLEM DEFINITION AND PURPOSE

1.1 Introduction and Background to the Research Problem

The demographic landscape of the workplace has changed significantly over the years and as such the demand for diversity at senior levels in organisations has increased significantly (Glass & Cook, 2018). This has prompted the discussion of the significance of women in senior leadership and ignited a keen interest from academics and practitioners to understand the complex relationship between gender and leader emergence (Lemoine, Aggarwal, & Steed, 2016). The dearth of women Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) has resulted in a lack of studies on them and as such a lack of insights into women's career advancement (Athanasopoulou, Moss-Cowan, Smets, & Morris, 2018).

While the proliferation of literature over the past few decades has raised the level of consciousness of the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions globally (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Fitzsimmons, Callan, & Paulsen, 2014; LaPierre & Zimmerman, 2012; Perrault, 2015), it has not shifted the rate at which women are advancing to upper echelons in organisations. This, despite the evidence that women have made significant gains in education and labour force participation (Allen, French, & Poteet, 2016).

There is much controversy around the reasons this problem persists however bias against women has been pervasive over time and gender to a large extent, has moderated the ascent to senior leadership positions (van Esch, Hopkins, O'Neil, & Bilimoria, 2018). Hence, some governments worldwide have introduced quota systems to ensure that women are fairly represented in leadership roles (Mölders, Brosi, Bekk, Spörrle, & Welppe, 2018).

Women have typically been considered suitable for female-dominated occupations such as nursing and teaching, however they have been considered less suitable for more male-dominated occupations (Joshi, Son, & Roh, 2015) as these roles have generally

been associated with masculinity (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). The stereotypes that have been associated with men, women, and leadership; have enabled men to emerge as leaders by virtue of the association of leadership with masculine traits. Over time however, the leadership stereotype has become androgynous, resulting in women being perceived as more leaderlike (Lemoine et al., 2016). Leadership is now considered in the context of a combination of both masculine and feminine traits which women are more likely to possess (Athanasopoulou et al., 2018). Despite this, the underrepresentation persists.

Women's stifled career advancement has been attributed to both individual and situational factors (Allen et al., 2016). Leader categorization theory (Lord, De Vader, & Alliger, 1986), role congruity theory and social role theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) have, to a large degree explained why this problem persists, however, the complexities extend far beyond the traditional factors, and the strategic avenues that have been explored have not delivered the expected results from a gender equity perspective.

Extant literature posits that real and symbolic gender diversity on board level enhances the board's legitimacy and trustworthiness resulting in effective market performance of the business (Perrault, 2015). More women on an organisation's board of directors is found to have a positive association with overall performance (Hoobler, Masterson, Nkomo, & Michel, 2018) and lower overall risk for the organisation (Perryman, Fernando, & Tripathy, 2016), yet progress in terms of women representation at senior levels remains stymied.

The two perspectives that prevail in literature that explain the gender discrepancies are; the career choice perspective and the discrimination perspective (Frear, Paustian-Underdahl, Heggstad, & Walker, 2019). The one posits that gender discrepancies exist because of choices that the individual makes, and the other because of the gender biases that are prevalent in society. Frear et al. (2019) argue that these prevailing perspectives are not mutually exclusive as there is evidence to suggest that both perspectives can be true, dependent on the context and the moderating variables.

The variable that has been preserved as a prominent factor throughout the decades is the family-related variable, namely childbearing; which has long been associated with career costs for women (Frühwirth-Schnatter, Pamminger, Weber, & Winter-Ebmer, 2016). A recent study even found that having more children at home was advantages to men's career success yet not for women's (Frear et al., 2019). Over time childbearing has emerged as highly significant, having severe consequences to career advancement of women, particularly in the context of inadequate childcare (Klettner, Clarke, & Boersma, 2016). Childbearing is linked to a woman's identity, and as it is a "culturally meaningful and visible identity" it can be linked to a compromised professional identity (Little, Major, Hinojosa, & Nelson, 2015).

Organisations have been attempting to fix the gender parity issue with numbers or by ticking boxes for the imposed quotas, however, there is a business imperative to have a fair representation of women in senior leadership as previous studies have shown this to be beneficial on a number of performance metrics (Glass & Cook, 2016). These authors also found that more diversity on senior levels is associated with benefits beyond just business, but equity practices as well. Even more pertinent is that the strategy of the organisation is set by the chief executives and the board jointly, making it critical to ensure gender diversity at these levels.

There is also academic rationale for further investigation into the subject of this underrepresentation as well as the factors influencing it. The fact that male CEO's dominate corporate leadership, creates another dimension in that the literature is subjected to implicit male bias (Ho, Li, Tam, & Zhang, 2015). This study was conducted to shed light on this underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in the South African context with a specific lens over the consequences of childbearing on professional image and upward mobility. The insights that have been gained can build on existing ideas and could possibly influence future policies and practices of organisations.

1.2 Research Problem

The aim of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of childbearing as a complexity that to some extent defines gender inequality and the rate at which women can advance in their careers to the upper echelons of their organisations. It seeks to understand how the experience of childbearing for professionally employed women shapes future career decisions and upward mobility.

The research will aim to:

- Understand how professionally employed women who become mothers negotiate between their professional identity and their new identity as mothers
- Understand if there are the negative consequences of childbearing on career advancement of these women to senior leadership
- Establish what the main factors are that affect a woman's career advancement to senior leadership in South Africa
- Understand how the representation of women in senior leadership positions in South Africa can be improved

The literature review will articulate some of the theories that describe existing factors related to the research problem.

1.2.1 What is known about the problem

The definition of leadership has, in recent years, been redefined to embrace a more “transformational” leader perspective which is generally associated with a more feminine outlook (Saint-Michel, 2018). This shift in perspective bodes well for women in senior leadership as it enables them to be viewed as leaders (Badura, Grijalva, Newman, Yan, & Jeon, 2018). Even though the definition of leadership has evolved to include traits that are more feminine in nature; the status quo of this underrepresentation at senior levels still exists (Reguera-Alvarado, de Fuentes, & Laffarga, 2017).

Recent reports confirm this paucity of women in senior leadership and albeit some progress has been made, the rate of change shows a slowing trend (Catalyst, 2018). Women hold 6.2 percent of CEO positions at the S&P 500 companies (Catalyst, n.d.). Government quotas and bottom-up approaches such as mentoring and leadership have not yielded the desired outcomes and as such other strategies such as the “trickle-down effect” could be explored, as evidence suggests that it is more effective than bottom-up approaches (Gould, Kulik, & Sardeshmukh, 2018). The trickle-down effect refers to women in senior leadership positions being influential to those women in the pipeline and to the organisation as a whole, and places further importance of having a fair representation of women in senior leadership in order to effect the change and yield the necessary transformation (Klettner et al., 2016).

This gender gap is further amplified at seniority level with evidence suggesting that even though great strides have been made in the developed labour markets, the gap is widening in emerging and developing economies (World Economic Forum, 2019). There is not just a moral case but a business and societal case for gender diversity at senior leadership levels (Bodin & Schmidt, 2019). Research has shown that having more women in senior leadership has not only financial benefits, but organisations deliver improved performance on other metrics such as innovation and corporate social responsibility, linkages with stakeholders (Devnew & Storberg-Walker, 2018) and it contributes towards quality decision-making (Ruiz-Jiménez, Fuentes-Fuentes, & Ruiz-Arroyo, 2016).

Gender diversity in an organisation and performance are seen to be strategic assets and companies with a more diverse workforce are predicted to outperform competitors with less diversity (Bodin & Schmidt, 2019). At the same time, organisations also make the assumption that nonwork roles, such as family, compete with investment into one's work role (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013).

Childbearing is known to come at a cost for women, either in terms of lower wages, periods of parental leave or even longer career breaks (Frühwirth-Schnatter et al., 2016). Fitzsimmons & Callan (2016) state that the most forces are at play when a woman is in middle management as this tends to coincide with childbearing and family rearing years. Childbearing is said to have consequences for women's professional image and subsequent to this, women's career advancement.

1.2.2 What is not known about the problem?

"Gendered forces" is a term used by Fitzsimmons and Callan (2016) which implies that the problem of this underrepresentation of women in senior management cannot be explained by a single variable. These authors suggest that gendered forces are at play at various levels: individual, organisational as well as societal.

Furthermore, there are multiple variables at each of those levels and as such this further heightens the complexities of both the problem and the complexities of the appropriate solutions. There are multiple forces at play when a woman is professionally employed and becomes an expectant mother, and subsequently a mother.

Given that the nature of these forces is complex, and involves psychological underpinnings, more could be done to explore these complexities.

1.2.3 What previous research has suggested still be explored

Koch, D'Mello, and Sackett (2015) suggest an understanding of how the impact of gender stereotype changes over time and after certain events. In the case of childbearing as a pivotal event in a woman's life; an investigation could be conducted as to how this influences these stereotypes and as a result, advancement to senior leadership.

Ladge, Humberd, and Eddleston (2018) conducted a recent study which revealed the importance of aspects such as maternal confidence, managerial support, and work hours. These are said contribute to the experience that new "professionally employed" mothers have on work-family conflict (WFC) and their intention to stay in the organisation. These authors suggested further research be conducted to understand how work-relevant outcomes can be impacted by the nonwork domain.

Joshi, Neely, Emrich, Griffiths, and George (2015) posit that future research should go broader and deeper into understanding the complexities that explain this persistent inequality. As research of this nature has been heavily focused on developed countries, it has been suggested that the next wave of research investigate the awareness of these gender issues in emerging markets (Joshi, Neely, et al., 2015). This research will focus on the South African context, which is said to be an emerging market.

1.3 Purpose Statement

As indicated in the introduction and research problem; business, society and academia all hold evidence that calls for better representation of women in senior leadership positions. The purpose of this research is to examine the experiences of professionally employed women who have experienced childbearing, to understand whether childbearing has severe consequences to their advancement to senior leadership positions in organisations within the context of South Africa.

This research could make a novel contribution to literature, and could also serve as guidance to organisations who have made the development of women leaders a matter of priority on their agenda (Offermann, Thomas, Lanzo, & Smith, 2019). It could further contribute to the growing body of knowledge on gender diversity and the appointments of women to leadership positions in South African organisations (Chizema, Kamuriwo, & Shinozawa, 2015).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

To begin this study this study, the researcher conducted a review of previous studies on gender and career advancement. The literature review includes relevant literature that relates to the phenomenon of the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions, globally and in an emerging market context.

This review uncovered that there is a multiplicity of reasons associated with the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership. It is a complex phenomenon that has many interrelated variables that are context dependent; which makes it almost impossible to underscore any precise reason. This literature review will examine some of the critical factors that have been recorded to date. Albeit a vast amount of literature exists; most of the literature is limited in that it has studied women in senior leadership, and as evidenced, these women are a rarity.

2.1.1 Definitions

Senior leadership positions are defined as those that are one level below the CEO, CEO level and above (Klettner et al., 2016). For the purpose of this study **Career advancement** is defined as the vertical progression of an individual within an organisation or industry. **Childbearing** refers to when it is that a woman is with child and it could also refer to motherhood.

2.2 Underrepresentation of Women in Leadership Positions

Authors have been studying women's career trajectory to senior management for decades (Derks, Van Laar, & Ellemers, 2016; Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995; Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; Hoobler, Wayne, & Lemmon, 2009; Hoobler, Masterson, Nkomo, & Michel, 2018a). In a recent global study, an increase in the number of women executives

was revealed (Bodin & Schmidt, 2019). The evidence strongly suggests that the contribution that women leaders make in organisations is significant, yet women are still underrepresented in senior leadership positions (Glass & Cook, 2016). Senior leadership positions are generally those that are one level below the CEO, CEO level and above (Klettner et al., 2016). This scarcity is at odds with the evidence of multiple empirical studies which have demonstrated the economic value that women bring to firms (Ho et al., 2015).

Upon recent inspection of the stock exchange listed companies, it was revealed that no country throughout the globe has more than 10 percent representation of female CEO's or chair roles (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2020). In an age where diversity and inclusion has become top of the agenda in business, it could be argued that this number hardly reflects progress of that agenda. This, especially when one considers that women outnumber men in many graduate and undergraduate programs (Grant Thornton, 2016; Pew Research Center, n.d.). Therefore, this underrepresentation can hardly be framed as a supply and demand issue.

The nature of leadership is that it is competitive, demanding and shaped by experience and as such some opt out and some are selected out (Bear, Cushenbery, London, & Sherman, 2017). Bear et al. (2017) affirm that the reasons for this vary; from characteristics, skills, motivation and preference to the most salient being gender. The main challenge for women is attaining a senior leadership position (Bono et al., 2017) and maintaining it. In order to understand why women do not make it to senior leadership, one would have to assess what occurs when women are on the way up and specifically at critical juncture points in their lives, one such point being when a woman is pregnant.

The research to date has mainly focused on financial performance of gender diversity in senior leadership which does not adequately represent the full impact that women have on an organisation (Glass & Cook, 2018). The notion that having women in senior leadership positions has a positive effect on the organisation on numerous metrics is echoed throughout literature.

2.3 The Labyrinth

Eagly and Carli (2007) introduced a new term called the labyrinth. This, they claim should be a replacement of the metaphor of a “glass ceiling”. The glass ceiling is a term that is commonly known as a set of invisible barriers that prevent women from reaching the upper echelons of leadership (Groeneveld & Bakker, 2020). However, Eagly and Carli (2007) do not believe that this metaphor aptly describes the situation today. While they acknowledge that these invisible barriers persist due to systemic gender biases, they argue that the glass ceiling describes a barrier at a certain level of seniority. This, by implication would mean that women have similar opportunities to men at entry and mid-level position.

Instead, the argument for the use of the labyrinth metaphor, is that it more aptly incorporates the complexities that women face in their career paths. There is a plethora of literature on bias that exists on all levels in organisations. The metaphor of the labyrinth comes from ancient history and the symbolic meaning in the context of women’s professional endeavours is that it represents a path that is not linear, or one-dimensional but instead like a maze filled with many “twists and turns” (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Among the aspects that these authors list as obstacles are gender bias and discrimination against women, resistance to women as leaders, leadership, demands of family life and underinvestment in social capital. All of these are well documented in literature.

2.4 Women and Career Ambition

Benschop, van den Brink, Doorewaard, and Leenders (2013) state that career ambition has been understudied and make reference to this “paradox of ambition” (Sools, Van Engen, & Baerveldt, 2007). These authors posit that career ambition is gendered because women have to demonstrate that they have career ambition as it is not self-evident. They argue that ambition should be viewed as a social construct and not as an individual characteristic or personality trait in order to understand gendered practices in ambition. They support the view that ambition is fostered through social and relational interactions,

positive feedback and support and encouragement from superiors and peers. They posit that the “gendered and power-laden” nature of ambition can be further illustrated by the relationship it has to “challenging tasks”, which are generally associated with leadership positions. They argue that teaching young children or looking after the elderly can be just as challenging however, it is not viewed in the same light as solving a business problem and as such it a gendered construct.

Upward career mobility has been associated with career ambition (Benschop et al., 2013). Career ambition is associated with the stereotypical traits of a leader (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016) and because career ambition is said to be gendered, this can reproduce inequality as women are generally the caregivers. Benschop et al. (2013) used the concept of “hegemonic masculinity” to analyse the power dimension of ambition. They acknowledge that the concept has evolved over time, however the commonality is in the power and status inequalities between women and men, and men and men. Their study revealed how hegemonic masculinity manifests itself in how ambition is viewed; both from a female and male perspective; in that longer working hours and prioritising work are social practices that are glorified in a normal work context. By virtue of this hegemonic masculinity, women would be placed at a disadvantage if they have flexible working hours and their availability either before, during or after-hours does not match up to their male counterparts.

In a recent study conducted by Athanasopoulou et al. (2018) with 12 female CEO’s and 139 male CEO’s of global corporation which explored what is it that enables women to become CEO’s. Personal ambition and confidence were cited as some of the key aspects to success. Some women in the study believed that women lack confidence despite their high potential. Even though they acknowledged the setbacks of childbearing, they still placed part of the blame on women themselves for not pursuing their career goals with as much boldness as men. Another interesting aspect of this study was that women described the moment where they realised their leadership potential earlier on in their

careers as a “coming-out” moment of self-acceptance as opposed to a celebratory moment.

In a recent study, The KPMG Women’s Leadership Study over 3000 professional women were surveyed and the findings revealed that six in ten women (64 percent) stated that they aspire to be a senior leader of a company or organisation in the future (KPMG, 2015). In the same study, more than half (56 percent) of the women stated that they aspire to be on the board of a company or organisation. More the 60 percent of the women in the study stated that they believed the most critical time for companies to show support and development of leaders is in the thirties. This, as mentioned earlier on in this paper, is usually the time that professionally employed women consider starting families. This demonstrates that women desire to be in senior leadership roles, and there is still much that organisations can do to create a conducive environment for this growth to occur.

This perspective that success and ambition are not gender neutral would suggest that how a woman’s career ambition is articulated could be altered by her context. It is undeniable that women do have ambition for senior leadership, however it can be argued that this ambition is negatively affected by how they believe they are perceived and whether they feel as if they belong. These perceptions can change after a critical juncture in a woman’s life, such as when a woman becomes a mother. It can also be negatively affected by overt or covert discrimination and whether they believe they are fairly compensated

2.5 Upward Mobility

The term upward mobility refers to an upward hierarchical advancement in an individual’s career. The recent study conducted by Javdani and McGee (2019) showed that a woman’s career mobility is largely dependent on whether they have children or not. These authors found that women without children were less likely to receive a promotion than their male counterparts, however in the case of women and men having children; a

woman's chance at a promotion is just as likely as the male counterpart. This would then beg the question as to why some of the underrepresentation of women at senior levels has been attributed to them pursuing family goals.

van Esch et al. (2018) conducted a study to investigate perceived riskiness in senior leadership decisions. Perceived riskiness is a new narrative and is defined as "the degree of uncertainty and the significance of the outcomes from the selection decision." These authors found that women with moderate qualification were perceived as more risky than their male counterparts and disadvantaged for senior leadership roles. However, women who were more qualified than their male counterparts; and perceived as less risky; did not have any advantage over the men. While women have to produce stellar qualifications to offset their perceived riskiness for senior leadership, men who moderately qualified would be given the benefit of the doubt over women holding the same moderate qualification.

These authors supported these findings by illustrating that the selection gap between moderately qualified and highly qualified women was greater than between moderately qualified men and highly qualified men, to the extent that highly qualified women were eight times more likely to be selected than women who were moderately qualified. Highly qualified men were found to be less than four times more likely to be selected than moderately qualified men. This selection bias further exacerbates the issue of underrepresentation as it makes a woman's ascension to senior levels much more difficult.

2.6 Gender Bias

There is sufficient evidence that suggests the dearth of female representation at senior level cannot be attributed to inadequate leadership skills. It has been known that gender bias has been ingrained in workplace decision making for some time (Koch et al., 2015) and it can be brought about when men and women are judged differently as a result of

gender stereotypes. Stereotypes are known to be an effective barrier to women's advancement to positions of leadership (Koenig et al., 2011; Kossek, Su, & Wu, 2016; Rosette et al., 2016, Ryan et al., 2016).

Rosette, Koval, Ma, and Livingston (2016) make reference to two types of agentic biases that women are faced with, namely agentic deficiency and agentic penalty. Agentic deficiency refers to the perception that women lack the agency to be in a leadership role and agentic penalty refers to the social and economic drawback that women face when behaving with agency as this violates prescribed gender roles. The authors also make reference to two classifications of stereotypes; namely prescriptive stereotypes and proscriptive stereotypes. Prescriptive stereotypes refer to beliefs about how a person ought to behave and proscriptive stereotypes refers to how a person ought not to behave. Women face a double-bind in that if they meet the agentic requirements of a leadership role, they are penalised to the extent that it affects how they are evaluated (Rosette et al., 2016), which ultimately affects their career progression.

From an educational perspective and an occupational perspective, women have made tremendous leaps throughout the past several decades. In the South African context, women are equally as educated as men and are found in some instances to be more educated and more skilled (PWC, 2019), yet they do not move up the ranks at the same rate as men do. There is only one female CEO in the top forty Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) listed companies, and in Africa, women represent just five percentage of CEO's (KPMG, n.d.).

Dezső, Ross, and Uribe (2016) argue that there is also evidence to suggest an implicit quota on women in senior positions exists, implying that organisations see marginal benefit to having women in senior leadership and as such make an effort to maintain a lower target of women at these levels. The evidence also suggests that women are promoted to high-risk leadership positions without the necessary support or authority, making it difficult for them to reach the business's strategic objectives (Glass & Cook, 2016).

2.7 Leadership stereotype and Career advancement

Understanding why leaders who display similar leadership behaviour have the different career trajectories, to date remains a challenge (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2020). These authors pose the question as to whether the current leadership theory favours a dominant minority.

In Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity model, the incongruity that produces biased evaluation is between stereotypes of women and stereotypes of leaders. Role congruity theory is a proposed explanation for this gender bias in the workplace as it explains the bias in terms of the congruence between stereotypes held about the job requirement and stereotypes about a gender group (Eagly & Karau, 2002). It argues that if there is incongruence between stereotypical gender traits and the gender stereotype of the job, then the greater the gender bias (Koch et al., 2015). It leads to expectations about how members of the group ought to behave (Koch et al., 2015).

Social role theory suggests that women are more strongly identified with fulfilling the family role than men (Eagly & Wood, 2012). "Role congruity theory is grounded in social role theory's treatment of the content of gender roles and their importance in promoting sex differences in behavior. However, role congruity theory reaches beyond social role theory to consider the congruity between gender roles and other roles, especially leadership roles, as well as to specify key factors and processes that influence congruity perceptions and their consequences for prejudice and prejudicial behaviors" (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Role congruity theory assists in understanding the prejudice that has existed towards women and explains the scarcity in senior leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Earlier studies have demonstrated the masculinity stereotype associated with a leadership role (Koenig et al., 2011). Men have been typically associated with agentic traits such as dominance, aggression, self-confidence, ambition and emotional toughness (Abele, 2003; Koch et al., 2015; Fitzsimmons et al., 2014), whereas communal attributes such as

empathy, kindness, helpfulness and affection are more associated with females (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Meta-analytic research has confirmed that greater gender bias exists when the gender and gender stereotype are incongruent, however there has been recent findings that the reverse is true in certain instances; where more leniency would be applied when evaluating a woman in a masculine-stereotyped roles (Koch et al., 2015).

Ely and Thomas (2001) point out that based on earlier studies, that the placement of more of an underrepresented group in a workplace, further exacerbates the problem of discrimination, in that the majority group, which in this case would be men; would be threatened by the minority group, that being women. According to Hoobler, Wayne, and Lemmon (2009) gender role orientation in organisations is a strong predictor of attitudes towards women advancement, however Eagly and Karau (2002) argued that the leadership behaviour that is displayed, differs from actual beliefs.

Much of the research that has contrasted these two roles has shown that women leaders are disadvantaged because of the perceived mismatch between prototypical agentic leader traits and the communal traits associated with the female gender (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Because of this perceived inconsistency, the two roles are typically viewed as incongruous, and research based on role congruity theory has shown that this perception of role incompatibility has detrimental effects for women with respect to leadership effectiveness, leader emergence, evaluations of leadership abilities and perceptions of leadership styles.

Other research has found that once women are able to break through the glass ceiling, they may experience a leadership advantage relative to men (Rosette & Tost, 2010). Particularly women in senior leadership positions, are more likely to be viewed as highly agentic, and now as the construct of what it means to be a leader changes to one that embraces transformational leadership (Saint-Michel, 2018), these women are viewed more favourably. Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2014) argue that women will experience less prejudice when organisations move away from the traditional masculine view of leadership to one that embraces more of a feminine and transformational leadership style.

In a recent study, Athanasopoulou et al. (2018) highlighted the significance of childbearing as barrier, in that all but one of the male CEO's interviewed acknowledged the tradeoffs that women have to make as a result. One of these CEO's even pointed to the relevance of the timing of childbearing, advising that motherhood is not recommended between the age 25 to 30 years as the result would be "path dependent". The women CEO's in the study, also acknowledged the setbacks associated with the motherhood decision, however interestingly they also placed part of the responsibility on women for the disparity in the rate of career advancement for both men and women.

In another study however, it was found that delaying parenthood was not a recommended strategy and instead it called for a deeper understanding about how one could derive value in leadership positions from having a family, as a higher family role and transformational leadership were closely associated (Dumas & Stanko, 2017). This view would call for a shift in perspective about how women leaders are viewed and if it is found that value is derived from a woman having a family, it would further build a case for more women to fulfill leadership roles.

According to a recent study, Zenger and Folman (2019) found a statistically significant difference between men and women for most leadership competencies. Furthermore, the study indicated that women possessed more of the leadership competencies than men. Yet, only 4.9 percent of Fortune 500 CEO's and 2 percent of S&P 500 CEOs are women and the numbers are declining globally (Zenger & Folman, 2019).

2.8 Navigating New Identities and Perceived Professional Image

Roberts (2005) described professional image as "the aggregate of key constituents (namely clients, bosses, superiors, subordinates, and colleagues) perceptions of one's competence and character". Meister, Sinclair, and Jehn (2017) highlight the significance of perceptions, particularly at a leadership level in organisations signalling that perceptions matter.

Research has traditionally placed an emphasis on personal attributes such as the way an individual dresses, communicates and behaves (Little et al., 2015), however more recently there has been raised awareness on the role played by social identities. These authors highlight that when studying career dynamics, there is an imperative to interrogate identity as a multiple, recognising that this perspective allows for an enhanced understanding of the evolving nature of these identities, particularly work identities.

Caza, Vough and Puranik (2018) group identity work that individuals engage in into four modes: cognitive (in thought), discursive (in talk), physical (in symbols) and behavioural (in actions) activities. Cognitive identity work pertains to the mental efforts that an individual engages in either consciously or subconsciously. Discursive identity work refers to the narrative, the tone and the language that an individual engages in. Physical identity work relates to how an individual uses their body and material objects in their environment to engage in identity work. Behavioural identity work relates to how an individual behaves, their actions that they engage in to build, revise or maintain their identities (Caza et al., 2018).

These authors summarised the dominant identity work concluded over the past few decades as: personal identities, role identities and collective identities illustrated in table 1 below extracted from their article. This articulates what it is that an individual does when they engage in identity work.

Table 1: Dominant identity work theoretical perspectives

Theory and representative articles	What types of identities are worked on?	How do people engage in identity work?	When do people engage in identity work?	What motivates people to engage in identity work?
Social identity theory Foundational: Tajfel and Turner (1979) - Alvesson (2000) - Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) - Löwstedt and Räisänen (2014) - Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2006)	Collective identities	- Position themselves relative to ingroups and outgroups - Change how they define groups in which they are members	- When collective meanings are changed or challenged - When ingroup/outgroup distinctions become salient	- Self-enhancement - Distinctiveness - Belongingness
Critical theory Foundational: Foucault (1980) - Alvesson & Willmott (2002) - Brown & Lewis (2011) - Boussebaa and Brown (2017) - Covaleski et al. (1998)	Collective identities	- Resist and/or engage with attempts at control from dominant institutional discourses	- Ongoing, in response to discursive attempts to shape identities	- Maintaining continuity and individuality
Identity theory Foundational: Stryker and Serpe (1982) - DeRue and Ashford (2010) - Jain et al. (2009) - Järventie-Thesleff and Tienari (2016) - Knapp et al. (2013)	Role identities	- Change self to align with role - Change role expectations - Change self or others' perceptions of roles	- New roles - Self vs. other expectations - Multiple roles	- Self-verification
Narrative Theory Foundational: Bruner (1991) - Beech and Johnson (2005) - Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) - Watson (2009) - Wright et al. (2012)	Personal identities	- Creating and updating stories that draw on personal histories and available discourses	- Ongoing but heightened during transitions/change - Ambiguous or unexpected events	- Coherence and plausibility

There are various meanings assigned to an individual and as such an individual possesses multiple identities (Ibarra, 2007). Dependent on the context, these social identities can be detrimental to an individual, particularly in the workplace particularly for women, where the social identities are not aligned with effective leadership. As mentioned in the previous section, women face the stereotype of being nurturing and emotional, which are qualities that are generally not associated with leadership and as such a professionally employed woman who goes through a transition of childbearing is likely to engage; using all the modes mentioned in the above section; in these types of identity work.

Women experience a few critical identity changes in the form of big life events such as marriage, pregnancy, motherhood and divorce. Little et al. (2015) suggest that dependent on how these identities are viewed, it can pose a threat to the individual. These authors

provide a distinction in identity management and social identity management. Identity management being those aspects of an individual's identity that can be concealed, whereas social identity relates more to an individual managing the perceptions that other have of them. They posit that the salience of pregnancy makes it difficult for a woman to conceal the identity and therefore subjects the individual to possible stereotypes.

Women who experience identity transitions are more likely to engage in strategies to manage perceptions, however as Fox and Quinn (2015) point out, this pivotal time in a woman's life could fundamentally change the way they view their workplaces and careers dependent on their experiences and how they believe they are perceived. Context is critical to perceptions and stigma, and although pregnancy might be praised in certain contexts, it may be stigmatised in the work context (Fox & Quinn, 2015). In their study of pregnant women in the workplace, these authors found that these women experienced discrimination because of their pregnancy status as employees. These women perceived that they were viewed as more emotional, that they would opt-out of the careers after giving birth and that they were less committed. This discrimination, they posit, is linked to a decrease in job satisfaction and an increase in turnover intention. They also found that workplace support and work-family culture reduce pregnancy stigma. While there is an acknowledgement in this study of the inevitability that some women will choose to exit the workforce; these women reflect the minority.

This is supported by much earlier studies which found that as women transition to motherhood, they experienced feelings of systematic exclusion at the workplace, which in turn creates insecurities and guilt (Millward, 2006). The author suggests that this translates to women feeling pressure to prove their worth upon their return from maternity leave and the violation of psychological contracts (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998). The same study illustrated back then that women who were more experienced and educated than other women in the organisation were likely to work much further on in their pregnancy term and return back much sooner than allocated maternity leave.

Women face intense scrutiny in positions of leadership which is intensified when they are pregnant (Meister et al., 2017). These authors studied internal identity asymmetry experienced by women in leadership positions in male-dominated industries and found that the likelihood of these asymmetries is experienced at personal and professional transition points in a woman's life. The study found that women respond to this asymmetry in various ways, either deliberate or less deliberate. The responses, they suggest would involve three stages: attempting to resolve or reduce the asymmetry by influencing others or by adapting self, tolerate the asymmetry, or escape the asymmetry.

Paustian-Underdahl, Eaton, Mandeville, and Little (2019) found career motivation to increase throughout pregnancy as the women in this study reported various strategies that they engaged in to manage their image, such as "shortening maternity leave, going the extra mile, maintaining the same work pace as before pregnancy, and not requesting accommodations". One could argue though that this might not be a luxury available to all women who decide to pursue career ambitions and pursue having a family. Furthermore, these women could inadvertently set a precedent that other women would feel pressure to live up to. All of which could further contribute to discriminatory practices against women and perpetuate this diversity gap in leadership.

2.9 Work-family Conflict (WFC) and Leadership Aspirations

With more women in the workforce than ever before, domestic and household responsibilities have been cited as some of the possible barriers that discourage women from leadership aspirations (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018) as women shoulder most of the domestic and childcare responsibilities.

Offermann et al. (2019) states that a failure on the part of organisations to acknowledge the work-home interface is unlikely to deliver effective results in terms of meeting the challenges of dual-career families. These authors argue that if there is an understanding that individuals are a product of "their out-of-work environments, their culture, their families and their own aspirations and orientations" that this can assist in the individual

bringing more of their talent to the organisation and derive greater satisfaction and success.

However Basuil, Manegold and Casper (2016) state that even though work-family provisions might have a positive impact on employees; it will have little value if it is perceived to have a negative impact on career advancement. Therefore, it is a fine line that organisations have to walk between creating programs that assist with work-family conflict, and ensuring that employees perceive these to be in their best interest. These authors also found, that consistent with social identity theory mentioned in the previous section, that if supervisors and subordinates have shared realities; such as both are both females, or both mothers; this could have a positive effect on self-esteem and can foster commitment. Although their analysis found the same to be true for non-parents, the effect was not as significant as for parents. This further supports the argument of the importance of having women in senior roles who have shared identities with other women below them in the organisational structure, so as to create comradeship and build confidence.

2.10 Conclusion

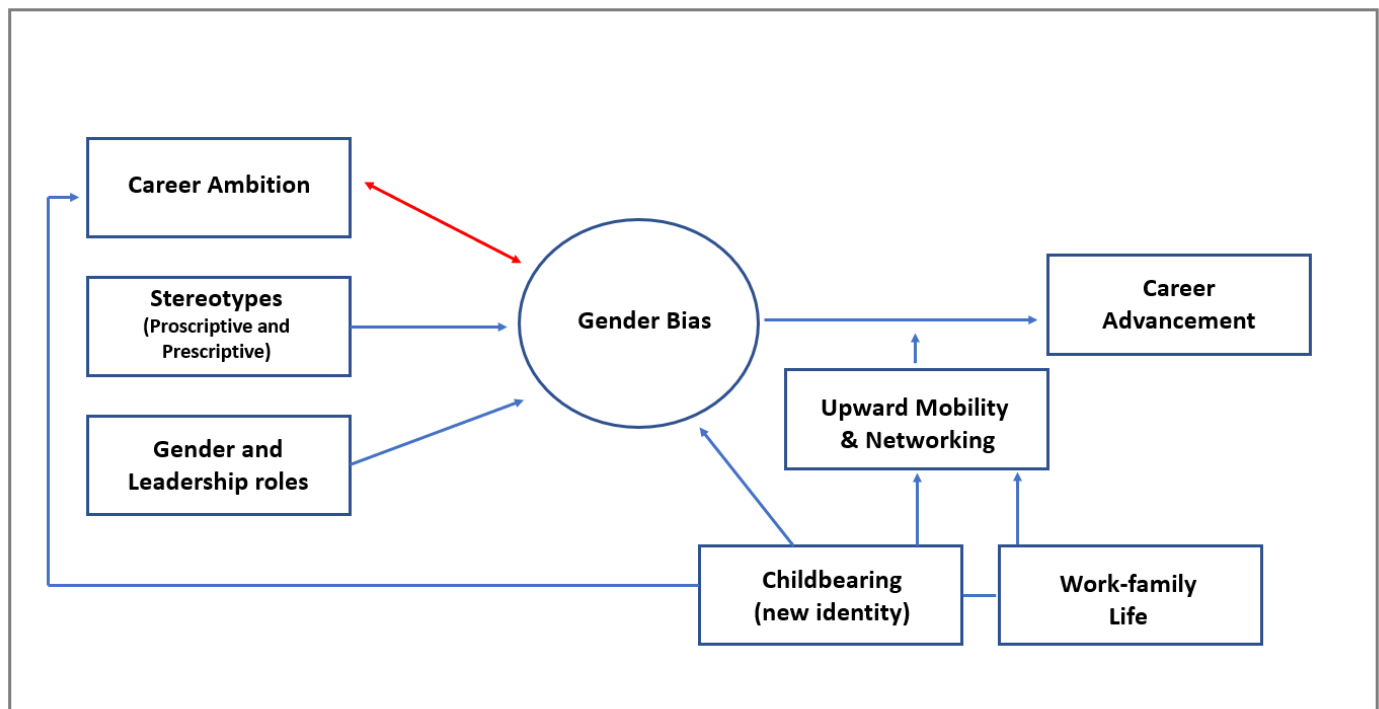
The literature review has provided definitions and explored the various constructs as they pertain to the complexity of childbearing and the career advancement of women to senior leadership. As much as career advancement is about agency, it is contextual.

In the context of childbearing and the work environment, there are a number of factors at play. Childbearing can influence career ambition in professionally employed women, which in turn can influence career decisions and advancement. Refer to Figure 1 in the section below for the conceptual model that has been created to illustrate the interconnectedness of these constructs and how these interact to ultimately affect a woman's career advancement.

2.11 Conceptualising Childbearing in Career Advancement of Women

The main theories underpinning the conceptual model are identity theory (Ibarra, 2007), and social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Figure 1: Career advancement conceptual model



This conceptual model has been derived from the literature review in Chapter 2. It suggests that if career ambition is gendered, that this leads to gender bias which ultimately affects career advancement. The same is true for stereotypes and the perceptions about gender and leadership role. This section of the model pertains to all women who aspire to be in senior leadership. However, the next section of the model pertains specifically to women who transition to becoming professionally employed working mothers and face additional obstacles from an identity and gender bias perspective. Childbearing and work-family life are the additional elements that sometimes serve a hindrance in a woman's upward mobility and ultimately a woman's career advancement.

Childbearing shapes a woman's identity and dependent on how that new identity is perceived by the social actors in the workplace, it could have an effect on her career ambitions and in due course her career advancement. The findings in Chapter 5 of this study will determine the validity of this model and provide insights as to whether there might be additional elements that should be included.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The literature review in the previous chapter serves as a base for the research questions outlined below. This research aims to answer these four questions:

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: How do women navigate between becoming a mother and career ambitions?

Research question 1 aims to understand the identity crisis that women pursuing career advancement face within the South African context. Answering this question could confirm existent literature and it could possibly establish new insights.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: What are the perceptions relating to childbearing for women pursuing leadership positions in South African organisations?

Research question 2 aims to understand how the perceptions that these women hold either of themselves, or the ones they believe others (subordinates, peers, superiors) hold of them; influence their career ambition and subsequently their career advancement to senior leadership.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3: How does childbearing influence a woman's leadership style and career advancement?

Research Question 3 aims to understand whether the journey to motherhood changes a woman's leadership style.

RESEARCH QUESTION 4: How can the representation of women in top leadership position in South Africa be improved?

Research Question 4 aims to obtain perspective from women who have already reached seniority in the organisations, on their beliefs about what could be done to improve representation of women on these levels. This, from both an individual and an organisational perspective.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This section provides details on the methodological choices and research design that was used to answer the research questions stated in the previous section. These research questions were derived from the literature review in Chapter 2. Based on the nature of these research questions, a qualitative approach was adopted.

A qualitative approach was followed to gain an understanding of the complexities that are associated with childbearing as it pertains to women in senior leadership and their career advancement. Due to the limited time constraints of the study, a mixed-method approach might not have been feasible and as such the qualitative method was most suitable.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, then subsequently analysed into categories and themes on a software tool. These themes were created from the key constructs that were identified in the literature review in Chapter 2.

4.2 Research Methodology and Design

4.2.1 Rationale for chosen method

Creswell, Hanson, Plano, Hanson, & Clark (2007) provide guidance in terms of the criteria that should be used in the selection of one approach over the other, which begins with a philosophical assumption about the nature of the reality, and then the nature and forms of knowledge.

It is on this bases that the researcher employed an interpretivist, inductive approach to the data collection and analysis, to be able to address the research questions. Interpretivism perspective relates to how social actors interpret and construct meaning to their realities and others' perceptions of it (Wahyuni, 2012). This perspective recognises

the uniqueness of each individual's background, their unique assumptions and unique experiences, within the broader social context.

Saunders and Lewis (2017) highlight the appropriateness of this philosophy for business and management research. The way that knowledge was gathered for this study is subjective (Creswell et al., 2007), and it was through this lens that the researcher was able to gain deep insights.

Interpretivist philosophy and qualitative are strongly connected, particularly if the researcher seeks to understand complex social environments through experiences, perceptions and sentiment (Thanh, Thi, & Thanh, 2015). The researcher sought to understand meanings, themes, patterns, motives, reasons which are all subjective to the experiences of the participants.

These insights were gathered through an exploratory, qualitative study. When research questions require textual data, then a qualitative approach is appropriate (Williams, 2007). Qualitative research is exploratory in nature with the aim of gaining in-depth insights into the various dimensions of the problem under analysis, where the researcher is both the subject and the object of the research (Almeida, Superior, Gaya, Queirós, & Faria, 2017).

Exploratory studies are about discovering or uncovering new insights and information pertaining to a topic (Bluhm, Harman, Lee, & Mitchell, 2011). The lack of women in senior leadership positions has resulted in a lack of depth of understanding about the phenomenon. Over the years there has also been a lack of qualitative studies in management research which has deprived research of quality contributions (Beigi & Shirmohammadi, 2017). An exploratory study enabled the generation of the meaning and depth about the participants experiences.

Anderson (2010) cites the strengths of qualitative research as follows: (1) Interviews can be studied in a more in depth way. (2) Can be guided in real time and not restricted to set questions. (3) Allows for the research framework and direction to be revised based on

any new information that emerges. (4) Data is often more compelling than quantitative research as it is based on human experience. (5) Nuances and complexities about the research subject can be discovered that could be missed in positivists enquiries. (6) Even though the data cannot be generalised to the larger population, it can be transferable to another setting.

4.2.2 Population

This population was selected on the basis of addressing the research questions posed (Saunders & Lewis, 2017) and had characteristics relevant to the study (Anderson, 2010). The population can be described as female senior manager, executives, directors and CEO's who have experienced childbearing before or after holding a senior leadership position.

All participants were between the ages of 30 and 55 and have had a tenure in senior management for a minimum of six years and extensive experience and expertise in leadership positions, both middle and senior management. The population was not industry specific and came from industries such as financial, media and advertising, consulting, business management, communication and information technology.

4.2.3 Sampling method and size

Participants for this study were identified through non-probability purposive sampling (Saunders & Lewis, 2017). The researcher made use of their own network of contacts to identify and select participants. Due to the nature of it being a qualitative study, a smaller sample of fifteen participants was selected. Qualitative studies require intensive, detailed work and therefore demand a smaller sample (Anderson, 2010).

These participants had all had experience on senior management level and had experienced childbearing while either in middle or senior management. All participants were currently in the private sector or had experience in the private sector.

The number of participants from the various industries is represented in the **Table 2** below:

Table 2: Industry and Position of Sample

Industry	Position	Number of Participants
Financial	Managing Director	1
	Customer Experience Manager	1
	Director: Head of Digital	1
	Head of Corporate Functions	1
	Divisional Executive IT	1
Consulting	Director: Cyber Security Strategy	1
	Senior Manager	1
	Senior Partner	1
	Senior Manager: Infrastructure	1
Technology	Chief Executive Officer	1
Media & Advertising	Chief Strategy Officer	1
Mining	Chief Legal Officer	1
Construction	Financial Manager	1
Oil & Gas	Senior Manager	1
Recruitment	Managing Director	1
	Total number of participants	15

4.2.4 Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis was the individual perceptions and opinions of the women who had experienced childbearing while on middle or senior management level. This was in line with the aim of the research which was highlighted in Chapter 1.

4.2.5 Data Collection Tool

The data presented in this study was gathered from the semi-structured online interviews. Semi-structured interviews are recommended as one of the most useful methods of gathering data for exploratory studies (Saunders & Lewis, 2017). It would have been ideal to have face-to-face interviews with the participants but due to the COVID 19 pandemic, the interviews had to be conducted online.

Identified participants were sent an email invitation to participate in this study (refer to appendix 1 for sample email). The email provided a brief introduction of the researcher and the purpose of the study. This was sent with a consent form (see appendix 2 for sample consent form). Upon their acceptance of the invitation and subsequent sign off of a consent form, a meeting was scheduled at a convenient time.

Prior to the start of the interview the researcher obtained permission to record the interview via a recording device. The interview lengths were approximately an hour each, with interviews ranging from 50 minutes to just over an hour. Each interview was subsequently transcribed and these transcripts were used to analyse the data.

To conduct the interview, the researcher made use of an interview guide. The conceptual model presented in Chapter 2 represents the key themes that emerged from the literature review. The literature review was conducted as a result of the problem identified in Chapter 1. To gain a deeper insight to the problem, the themes from the literature review, represented in the conceptual model; was used to generate research questions and these research questions were used to generate each question in the interview guide. This guide is illustrated in appendix 3.

4.2.6 Data Collection

As mention in the previous section, the researcher used semi-structured interviews to gather the data. Upon conducting the first two interviews, the researcher realised that a more organic approach was to ask a broader question and allow issues and themes to emerge. Agee (2009) recommends this approach as broader question can often create the basis for other questions. This is the leeway that semi-structured interviews allow for, in that the researcher was able to adjust the questions and the order of the questions slightly for each interview (Bryman, 2012) dependent on the insights obtained from the participant.

The questions were open-ended allowing for an iterative process to unfold and for the researcher to gain depth of understanding (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The interview guide (refer to appendix 3) was used as a guide to ensure that the necessary themes were covered. All interviews were conducted in English.

The researcher, being a novice had to conduct a pilot interview prior to the interviews to develop interviewing skills (Majid, Othman, Mohamad, Lim, & Yusof, 2017). The researcher noted an improvement in skills for each subsequent interview. Before the commencement of the official interview, the researcher thanked the participant for agreeing to participate and provided a brief introduction and some background information about the researcher and the study to gain rapport with the participants.

Using the interview guide the researcher was able to obtain the necessary insights. The researcher tried to ensure that the participants were comfortable with answering the questions and encouraged participants to be honest and open by reiterating the confidentiality of the interview. The researcher listened attentively and made handwritten notes for each interview, and kept a personal memo so as to keep track of the researcher's own personal bias (Bluhm et al., 2011).

The researcher closed the interview by soliciting any final thoughts from the participant and expressed thanks for their participation. These participants served as key informants who have had personal experiences, attitudes, perceptions and beliefs related to the study (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The handwritten notes, the memo, the transcribed notes and the recordings was used to thoroughly analyse the data.

4.2.7 Data Analysis

Saunders & Lewis (2017) place emphasis on the understanding of the techniques for the analysis of data. A qualitative study involves identifying certain patterns across the different responses and critically analysing them.

In order to make sense of the unstructured data, the researcher followed the following thematic analysis approach to analyse the data (Anderson, 2010): (1) Interviews were read through to extract and common themes. Each interview was read through separately and thoroughly. The researcher made notes throughout this process. (2) Data was split into text and non-text data, and organised on a data matrix, with the use of a qualitative analysis software. (3) Different themes were extracted on the basis of repeated phrases from the interviews. While the researcher captured these common themes, unique elements were also identified, as well as notes on anything that the participant might have highlighted as significant. (4) The researcher made note of any insights that correlated with literature as well as used judgement in identifying anything that the researcher deemed relevant. (5) Thereafter codes were allocated accordingly and catergorised by bringing themes together. Codes were labeled (6) An analysis was conducted before all data had been collected to allow for initial insights from interviews to be used in later interviews and in order to identify when saturation had been reached.

As the researcher iterated between these phases, repeatedly reviewing the data, codes were being created to assign units of meaning to the data (Basit, 2003; Braun & Clarke, 2006). These codes were then categorised into various themes. Albeit frequencies of themes was noted, the researcher aimed to understand the textual data; “what” the participants felt and “why” they felt that way (Basit, 2003).

4.2.8 Data Validity and Reliability

It is widely held that all research must be open to critique and evaluation (Long & Johnson, 2000). The worth of the study, its methodology, the accuracy of the findings and the validity of the assumptions or conclusions should all be able to be put to the test. In quantitative research, there is less of a debate around reliability and validity of the findings (Noble & Smith, 2015). Unlike qualitative which is frequently criticised for lacking the scientific rigour, transparency and reliability of the data (Noble & Smith, 2015). There is also currently no acceptable standard that governs qualitative research; however, validity and reliability are accepted as best practice.

Reliability refers to the consistency of the measuring instrument and validity refers to the whether the measurement instrument is able to achieve what it set out to achieve (Long & Johnson, 2000). These authors claim that while it very difficult to achieve both reliability and validity in qualitative studies, due to their interpretivist nature; they suggest means to establish rigour. The means that the researcher employed to enhance the rigour of the study was to keep a self-reflective journal so that the researcher could make note of their biases and the researcher ensured that data was triangulated. The first question was quite broad, and it allowed for the researcher to extract similarities between the data.

4.2.9 Limitations

All studies do have limitations, and as such, this one is no exception. The qualitative route, although insightful; is time consuming, cannot be quantified and therefore has its limitations. It focuses on meaning and experiences and could at times omit contextual sensitivities and lend itself to ambiguity. Rigour of the research might be difficult to assess as it would be dependent on the honesty of the participants.

The limitations of the sampling method selected is that the findings may not be generalisable to the entire population (Acharya, Prakash, Saxena, & Nigam, 2013). Further, the matter of generalisability is brought to the fore due to a smaller sample size

not being representative of the population (Rahman, 2016). The researcher also acknowledges that the study is influenced by the researcher's perceptions and selection bias and that the findings, based on the small sample size, cannot be generalisable. The study was conducted with participants who were based in the Gauteng region only.

The researcher is also a novice researcher and the quality of the data was heavily dependent on the skills of the researcher (Anderson, 2010). A study of this nature is also subject to the researcher's bias. Anonymity of the participants also makes it difficult to present certain findings.

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter reflects the key findings from the analysis of the data that was collected from the 15 participants and is arranged according to the research questions outlined in Chapter 3. The data was collected from semi-structured interviews which were conducted via online platforms Microsoft Team and Zoom platforms. These interviews had to be conducted online due to restrictions of the current global COVID-19 pandemic.

This section begins with demographic information about each participant to provide some background and context. This is followed by a qualitative analysis of the results from which key themes were derived. These themes are supported by statements made by the participants. Chapter 6 will follow with the interpretation and discussion of the results.

5.2 Description of the sample

The below **table 3** represents the number of participants as well as demographic and background information. A judgmental sampling technique was used to select the 15 individuals. All participants were female and have experienced childbearing while in a middle or senior management role in the private sector. These participants currently hold senior management roles in their business, barring two participants who currently own their own respective businesses. Prior to owning their own businesses however, both did have a considerable tenure in corporate on a senior management level.

Participants have been kept anonymous in this report and are identified by using numbers. These numbers represent the chronological order of each of the interviews. Participants are representative of a diverse racial group within South Africa.

Table 3: Description of Sample

Name	Age	Race	Number of children	Position in corporate	Industry	Additional information
Participant 1	50	Coloured	4	Customer Experience Manager	Financial Services (Banking)	Participants spent over 10 years in the Banking Sector, working for one of the largest banks in South Africa. Currently owns her own business. She officially left corporate about 3 years ago
Participant 2	54	Coloured	2	Managing Director	Recruitment	Participant was a director at a global recruitment company for over 10 years and recently started her own business. *there was a technical glitch with the recording and as such the researcher had to refer to hand written notes
Participant 3	40	Black	3	Senior Manager	Advisory	Participant currently works at a large advisory company *there was a technical glitch with the recording and as such the researcher had to refer to hand written notes
Participant 4	40	Indian	2	Director: Head of Digital Partnerships	Financial Services (Banking)	Participant works at one of the largest banks in South Africa and has experience in a senior management role for at least 5 years
Participant 5	43	Indian	2	Head of Corporate Functions	Financial Services (Banking)	Participant works at one of the largest banks in South Africa and has been in senior management for at least 5 years
Participant 6	39	White	4	Chief Legal Officer	Mining	Participant works for a small mining investment company and has had over 10 years' experience in a management role.
Participant 7	45	White	2	Chief Strategy Officer	Media	Participant works in media & advertising industry and has over 10 years' experience in a senior management role
Participant 8	40	Black	3	Managing Director	Financial Services (Banking)	Participant works at one of the largest banks in South Africa and has had a tenure of over 5 years in senior management
Participant 9	36	Black	3	Senior Manager: Strategy	Mining	Participant works at one of the large mining companies in South Africa and has had a tenure of over 10 years. She has had all 3 children at the same company

Table 3: Description of Sample

Name	Age	Race	Number of children	Position in corporate	Industry	Additional information
Participant 10	42	Black	3	Divisional Executive IT	Financial Services (Insurance)	Participants work at a large corporate and has experience of over 10 years in a senior management role
Participant 11	38	Coloured	1	Financial Manager	Construction	Participant has had over 10 years' experience in a senior management role and was working at a telecommunications company at the time of her pregnancy
Participant 12	40	Black	2	Director: Cyber Security	Advisory	Participant works at a large advisory and consulting company and has had over 8 years' experience in a senior management role
Participant 13	38	White	2	Senior Manager: Customer Experience	Advisory	Participant works at a large advisory and consulting company and had significant experience in corporate, fulfilling a senior management role
Participant 14	44	Indian	2	Chief Executive Officer	Technology	Participant works at a large technology company and has had over 10 years' experience in senior management and has also had experience working for a large multinational
Participant 15	41	White	1	Senior Partner	Consulting	Participant is an expat, however has had experience in a management and senior management role in South Africa for over 10 years

5.3 Presentation of Results

The researcher realised in the first two interviews that when following the discussion guide, participants gave much broader feedback, and the interview would take on a clinical approach with the interviewer having to go back to the questions on the guide. Thereafter the researcher took the approach of asking a much broader question which encompassed a few of the research questions (refer to appendix 3) so as to allow for the interview to be more natural and the researcher built on each of the participants' unique feedback. The researcher considered that this improved approach allowed for much richer data to be gathered.

A thematic analysis was used to identify and analyse the findings from that data (Merton, 1975). The researcher considered the themes that emerged and while some of the themes were explicit, others were implicit in nature. While numeric frequency of themes was taken into account, it was not necessarily considered most salient or most reliable for this research, which is a social phenomenon (Basit, 2003).

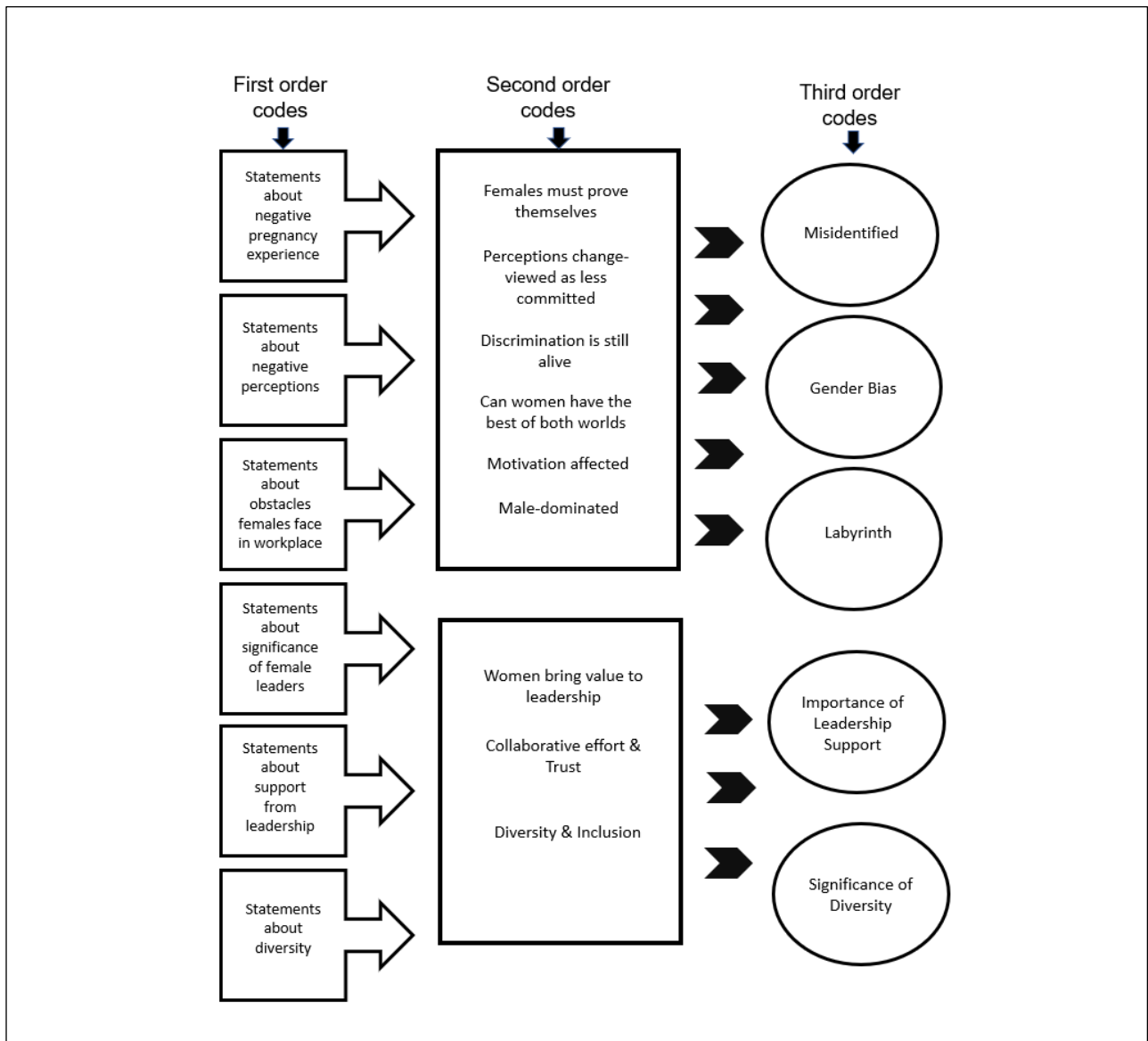
Given the context of the current global pandemic, there were instances where the researcher solicited insights from the participants about how a work-from-home situation would impact working mothers in the long run. The results are sectioned under each research question. Due to the complexities and interdependence of some of the findings on one another, there are some results that could overlap to one or more research question dependent on the way the question was answered. The researcher has only used that piece of data once, however acknowledges that at times, it may be applicable to other research questions.

After having iterated a few times between the transcripts, the recordings, the researcher's memos and handwritten notes; the researcher noticed the themes that began to emerge. These themes are displayed under each research question in the below section.

5.3.1 Thematic analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) state that for a piece of data to be classified as a theme, it should capture “something important about the data in relation to the research question”, and that there should be a pattern that exists in the responses. For the analysis of his data, the researcher used an inductive approach, however as Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight, this approach is not void of the theoretical and epistemological commitments of the researcher. Figure 2 below is a representation of the thematic analysis of this study.

Figure 2: Thematic Analysis



5.4 Results for Research Question 1

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: How do women negotiate between becoming a mother and career ambitions?

The interesting aspect of this interview question was that it was not explicitly solicited, nor did the interviewer mention the word “ambition”. However, this theme emerged strongly from majority of the participants.

The key themes derived from the participants’ experiences of childbearing while in a middle or senior management role were as follows:

5.4.1 Anxiety over pregnancy disclosure

This is a salient theme throughout a few of the participants responses about how they felt when they had to disclose their pregnancy status to their superiors. Their main concern was around how they would be perceived, particularly as it pertains to their commitment and in turn their career ambitions

One of the participant’s expressed:

“I think my biggest challenge with being in corporate and being pregnant is that conversation...you build yourself up weeks to have a conversation with your management with whoever you report to, with your director...and you have to psych yourself up for weeks to have the conversation that listen, I am pregnant, because you know the impact it's going to have on them.”

Another participant in responding to whether disclosing her pregnancy was an easy conversation to have said:

“Definitely not and... I feel actually that it's so unfair, that I should have had these feelings to begin with...So, the pregnancy for me was like a big thing. I really had

many conversations in my own mind and conversations with my husband to prepare me for how I would handle this conversation with my boss.”

The same participant explained that about a year after her return from maternity leave had discovered that she was pregnant again, with her third child, she expressed her anxiety about her disclosure as follows:

“I felt like the ground just needed to swallow me whole to put me out of my misery because I felt like I need to justify my actions I needed to justify why it was that I would have chosen to fall pregnant again, knowing full well... that I was pregnant and I was on maternity leave for like four months.”

5.4.2 Manage identities and hegemonic masculinity

Participants engaged in strategies to manage their image or how they were perceived. This involves the way they dress, their behaviour as well as tactics that they deploy for certain meetings.

Misidentified

A participant who herself is very senior in the organisation relayed a story of an experience that a friend of hers had in a meeting:

“...a friend of mine, who is CEO at [Company Y] the other day, said, she walked into her board meeting and there was a company that was coming to present something to them at the board meeting. Out of everybody in the room, that guy went to her and said, where can you get a cup of coffee? She was just like, stunned, because why do you have to ask me, why do you assume I'm the one that knows where the coffee is? I think he then, sort of was quite embarrassed when you realise that this is her board meeting. That happens often. You can either fight it all the time, or you can laugh about it but it's something that I think we just get used to. I've got colleagues who are

junior to me, you know, who will refer to you as my girl when they're talking to you? It upsets you the first few times eventually, you just, it's par for the course.”

Another participant supported this view by way of example of an experience that she had. She explained:

“With the mining industry, at first, it was difficult. As I say, my leader just walked me through that and it made things much easier. I mean, I'll give you an example that where I felt because remember, being black, being female, and being in IT is something not very usual, particularly in the mining environment. Therefore, there are those funny biases, which one needs to deal with. As a result, I remember a case, where, sometimes I would feel like my voice was not being heard and I raised that and my boss gave me a very different perspective, which I appreciated to this day. That sometimes it is also quite important to understand that the people, my colleagues, the people that I work with, may not have had an experience of working with a black female in IT or seeing that person as a colleague. The closest that they've gotten to a colleague... who is black and female is a maid in their house. Therefore, they are usually giving instructions, not getting instructions from, that particular person and I was like, okay, no, then I understand. Then we had a conversation as a team around, what are some of these biases, and that helped the team, as well. I think it also helped me to understand the cause, when they were sharing their stories. I also understood that actually, it's not just me that has some challenges that I have to deal with the new work force, they also have challenges, they don't know how to work with a black colleague female, and how do you take them through that. It's a similar thing around being a mom that just because of my situation, my situation may be different from yours and understand my perspective, so that we can as a team be able to support each other.”

One of the participants shared that they had tried to recruit a Chief Financial Officer and she was surprised at the statistics that the recruitment company shared with them. The participant explained:

“We’re trying to find a CFO for our company and spoken to a person that does consulting in HR and stuff. And it was shocking the stats. They've interviewed 500 chartered accountants, graduates, like these guys have just qualified as CA’s. ...they've done the psychometric testing for them, and especially the girls their psychometric testing just doesn't match up with them being a CA ...when a girl wants to be in business, they study to be CA because they know at least there’s a career path for us. But by the time you finish, and you're looking into psychometric testing, and it's not at all what you should be doing. Where are the mothers raising daughters to know you can be what you want to be? You know?”

The names we assign

One of the participants expressed her annoyance with the name given to the management meetings. She said:

“When it was first established, it was ... MANCO and I had to like, pull back my tears and like fight this. I also have to be gentle; I couldn't write back copying the CEO, and everyone, all the new Exco, I had to write to the CEO direct and be like, can we please not call this MANCO, but come up with another word that's not MANCO. Now I sent it the other day and literally, all the senior leaders at the firm... I said, you know, I had to be brave and step out of my comfort zone”

Dress code

The way that the participants presented themselves was very important to them. They have to be cognisant of the image that is being projected in a work environment. One of the participants in the mining sector explained clothing was an important factor if one is to be taken seriously in the boardroom. The participant explained:

“Now I wear jeans and white takkies. I think, yeah, I mean, I'm a lawyer within the boardroom. Obviously, dress code has toned down a lot. But still, for us to play in the boardroom, I need to look like everyone else, I need to be taken seriously and

in order to be taken seriously, I need a pair of heels and a pinstripe suit. I'm happy with that because I want to be seen as an equal.”

Following the participant’s comment, the researcher further probed on the subject by asking whether the participant could ever wear a dress and this was her response:

“Depends on your audience but absolutely, if I walk into a boardroom on one of the mines that I work at, and I had to wear a dress and sandals, it's gonna take a lot for me to convince them that I am to be taken seriously. If I walk in and I wear a suit as everybody else around the table is, it starts me off a bit on a higher standing with him. That's a choice. As much as it is, which seats in the boardroom, you got to choose it's all part of the politics.”

Another participant who, although she was also in mining but in a different context as she is a chemical engineer, had this view:

“...I’m always conscious of the fact that I don't want anyone to get the idea that they can have their way with me, because I am one of the only women around the table, and I'm young... I feel like I'm less exposed, I'm not showing off my figure and not drawing any unnecessary attention to myself. That is part of the difficulty in being in a male-dominated industry, because I don't want attention on me, because there aren't any other women like me in the environment. I don't want these men to get the wrong idea that, they can take chances with me and they can be inappropriate”

A very interesting comment was made by one of the CEO’s in explaining the extent that she went, to be taken seriously. Her view was that if she appeared older, that she would be taken more seriously. This participant explained that others always thought that she was much younger than she was. She explained:

“I started putting glasses, so that I could look older.”

Boardroom tactics

One of the participants explained that she employs different tactics for boardroom meetings. Dependent on the objectives of the meeting, she will strategically position herself at the boardroom table where she believes will allow her to gain power. She elaborated:

“If we’re busy negotiating, I’m going to sit at the end of table, and I’m going to open my briefcase in front of you and take up my notes. If I’m there, because I would like you to partner with me, then I’m going to sit on the seat right next to the head of the table. I will never choose the head of the table... It just depends on where you want the meeting to go. If I want you to be friendly towards me. I’m going to sit on your left and if I want to be cold and bad then I’m going to sit on a right. It’s just all part of the politics.”

Another participant had this to say about her boardroom experiences:

“To have to go sit in board meetings and not look uncomfortable also what I tried to do, which I don’t think was necessarily the right thing is for the longest time you try and divert the attention away from your pregnancy to focus on what it is you’re in the meeting for because nobody ever spends 10 minutes discussing pregnancies with men even when their wives are literally in the hospital giving birth.”

5.4.3 Insecurities and guilt

While most of the participants expressed having a pleasant experience of being an expectant mother in a management role, these were all mostly attributed to the fact that they had a supportive team or supportive superior, or both. This, however did not give them a level of comfort, either before going on, or during, maternity leave. These feelings of insecurity in fact intensified while they were on maternity leave. These insecurities were

as a result of feeling that they would be out of touch with what was happening at the office, which might in turn have threatened their jobs. One participant said:

“and, you know, we had a lot of people in our teams that, you know, would love to have my role. I think that was the biggest stress for me was just, I needed to trust more in retrospect...”

One of the participants in a senior management role, who had had her first child only four years ago, was worked out of her position while on maternity leave. Another participant conveyed a story about when she was in a senior management role and was placed under pressure to insist someone on her team who was on maternity leave, come in for an interview as the company was undergoing a retrenchment process. The participant said:

“I had a lady that that got pregnant, right. It was at the time that we were doing restructuring and obviously, when you're doing restructuring, you have to come in for those interviews and all of those things... she had a very unique case. Where she had to choose between a child and keeping her job. For me it was a case of this cannot be right because no man will be put in that position like that. I challenged it and I was like irrespective of whatever, it is not going to happen, she's not going to come for the interviews. She's going to carry on, we will carry on with whatever and we will make sure that there is a space for her.”

One of the participants mentioned feeling guilty over seeing her salary in her bank account while she was on maternity leave. She explained:

“I think the second one was a lot harder than the first one, the first one was all exciting and I was young...it was all exciting and stuff, but then feeling the impact of me actually not being there for 4 months, feeling the guilt for seeing that salary in my account every month, even though I'm working and stuff made in harder at certain time, because now everybody is informed. I was the first woman to take maternity leave at this company. And now I'm going to do it again.”

There were also feeling of guilt over having family responsibilities. One participant explained:

“I think woman, the whole guilt complex that, you know, we live with, as we know, oh my God, I've got to pick up my kids. So, I don't deserve this job.”

Another participant explained having guilt over having to create boundaries in terms of work responsibilities after having a baby:

“... you know, always being the person who would take on extra work, and, you know, we would feel bad for having boundaries in place...”

A participant felt differently about feeling guilt. She expressed that she had waited to have the baby and dedicated the years prior to her work. She explained:

“I was 34 years old and my husband and I had been married for seven years. So, there was no need for ...you know, this was the time I was not going to feel guilty or apprehensive about having a child.”

One of the participants in a very senior role, went through an interview process for 9 months, during which she had discovered her pregnancy. She explained her guilt as follow:

“My boss at the time said look, it's taken us 9 months to bed this thing down. 4 months is not going to break the business. So, they were more than willing for me to go off full time for the maternity leave. I think that, that mom guilt thing is very big but at the same I think in my role, I bear as much corporate guilt as I do mom guilt. When I'm not with the kids, I feel bad. When I'm not at the office, I feel bad. So, it just didn't seem appropriate to start a job and be gone for 4 months.

Another participant, also in a very senior role, expressed her guilt as follows:

“When my son was one month, I wanted to go back to the office, just to make sure that, the guys can actually feel that I am still there, so there was a little bit of guilt. If that makes sense, guilt associated with that and I felt that a number of females that actually goes through that. What is sad is, you will never have to hear a male sharing the same story, as I'm sharing where you feel guilty about raising a family and balancing that with your career.”

5.4.4 Maternity leave

Most of the women were either willing to give up a portion of their maternity leave and return to work, or they did give it up and returned to work. A few of the participants expressed that they worked during their maternity leave or would be involved in certain meetings. Most notable was that the participants felt a sense of responsibility to the team and to the business, particularly those who were in more senior roles as well as a sense of determination to “get the job done”. The participants explained:

“Because that's what people would do. You know, anybody that had a baby, you kind of just carried on with your work with at home?”

“I had like a month that I was off. But I did still open my emails almost every day, I still got work done. So, it was more than 4 months not at the office. Although I did go in for a bunch of meetings. I think it was just 4 months, where my priorities shifted slightly, where I had a great excuse not to be in the office...”

This same participant explained how she took her newborn baby to a very important meeting:

...Which is why with my third one, it was my third baby. She was seven days old, and they had an intense meeting. And they really needed me because I was involved in this transaction from the beginning. And I said, fine, I'll come but I'm bringing her. I remember sitting in this meeting with this seven-day old baby, on my lap. Luckily by that time, they're still fast asleep 24 hours a day. So, I'm sitting

there, you know, working in a meeting and having this baby on my lap. But that's who I am, you know, if we can make it work, we're going to make it work.”

The more senior the role, the more pressure the participants expressed that they felt. One participant said:

“I was, as I said, seven months pregnant when I started this role. So I, unfortunately, took about six weeks leave because it was a brand new role that has a lot of responsibilities. I had board duties, I had director duties, I had exco duties...people two years down the line when the business didn't do well...will completely forget that you were on maternity leave. So, I struck a deal, I suppose with myself, and said, I would take six weeks off full time, and then I would come back sort of half day, and for another six to eight weeks, which was sort of roughly making about ...three and a half months maternity leave”

One of the participants explained how women set a precedent in the organisation by working whilst on maternity leave. She explained:

“...with most women at (Company X) that had babies, you know, and that's how I learned do the, like, do meetings at home? Because that's what people would do. You know, any anybody that had a baby, you kind of just carried on with your work with at home.”

5.4.5 Setting boundaries

Most of the women transitioned easily back into work, however they had to put some boundaries in place in terms of the times that they would leave the office. One participant explained how she had to deal with another executive questioning her about the time she left work:

“...he said so for how long is this arrangement going to work? I said, as long as I'm a mother and he sort of looks at me and I look at him...Like I've said I'm coming

back as a senior technical staff member mid 30's,... I've had a baby and I'm gonna leave the office at 4pm and screw you if you don't agree..."

5.4.6 Support from the organisation

Almost all of the participants interviewed, particularly the ones who were more senior than the rest, placed emphasis on the importance of support from their superiors, particularly in their career advancement.

The one participant found out that she was pregnant after she had accepted a promotion. She explained that she experienced support from the leadership, but that there were concerns from some of her peers.

"So, because I had just moved from one department to a new department. I literally found out I was pregnant, because I moved department, it was, I guess it was just trying to find my feet in my new role, and go for a promotion then three months after that, going on maternity leave...just my peers around me just thought it just happened too quickly after been given a break, they waiting to find out if I'm going to come back after the baby, or maybe have considerations post the baby, but I worked for two very amazing female and male, a few people that are very supportive and just said, I mean, pregnancy is a natural thing that needs to happen."

Only one of the participants claimed to have had a completely undesirable pregnancy experience at work. She worked at the time, in a male dominated organisation and was the only female of colour on her level. This participant did not return to work after her maternity leave and explained how this has had subsequent consequences for her career ambition. She was the Group Chief Financial Officer at the time, and had worked her way up the ranks for seven years. Subsequent to her leaving, she was unable to secure a job on the same level and was forced to take a less senior role. The question has come up a

few times in interviews which has affected her confidence and willingness to participate in the workforce with the same passion as before.

5.4.7 Best of both worlds

One of the participants who confessed to slowing down after the birth of her child due to personal reasons. She explained:

“I've had this conversation with so many women in the past year. A lot of them say that, they think you can have both? I don't think you can have both personally. ...unless you work for like a unicorn of an organisation. I think because, I think it's very very very hard to have both...”

Some other participants expressed that it is possible to have the best of both worlds, but to be able to prioritise. One participant explained:

“Yes, you can. For me, there's one weapon you need to remember is to forgive yourself. Some days you're going to be a horrible mother because you need to work. Other days you're going to be a bad employee because you've dropped the team, you have to go look after your kids. So, they do coexist. They can coexist.”

5.4.8 High work ethic

All of the participants who commented about work ethic, felt strongly about their need to deliver good quality work. One participant explained:

“I gave more hours to my work because I am very strict with myself with regards to ensuring that I deliver on what the expectations are but not only that, I go over and above the call of duty all the time.”

Another participant's comment was:

“I decided a very long time ago that I was not going to be identified by my race, or my color, or my age, I was going to be known for delivery. I was going to do it exceptionally well...”

It was also a common theme that the women, prior to having babies were very committed and dedicated to their work. One of the participants expressed that she went to the extent of not even having a social life. The participant explained:

“Not having a social life. I was in office before 7 every day, I worked...at times when I needed to report on board meetings, I'd go home, shower, have dinner and go back to the office, and probably getting home early morning. I would still work at home and shower and change and go back to the office for the board meetings. Weekend were never mine; I would be called every hour to discuss things and have to be available any and every hour. I was just working hard to prove myself”

One of the participants had to travel just two months after having her baby. The participant explained:

“Even when I came back, the guys were really surprised that, within two months you are already traveling. For me that was one of the key audits that we needed to do in Indonesia. It was also just to show, as I mentioned out of guilt... that actually I can do the job and my job is important.”

5.5 Results for Research Question 2

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: What are the perceptions relating to childbearing for women pursuing leadership positions in South African organisations?

The aim of Research Question 2 was to understand the perceptions that women believe their peers, colleagues and superiors had of them when they were expectant mothers and thereafter became mothers, and to establish whether they believed that there were negative perceptions. Understanding the experiences of childbearing particularly in women in management will assist in gaining an understanding of how these women internalise particular events.

5.5.1 Perceptions about competence

Findings reflect participants' concerns around how they were perceived when they were expecting, particularly as it pertained to any perceptions about being pregnant and an inability to fulfill tasks. This view was expressed by one of the participants:

“At the same time, I, was quite insistent on not letting it change how I was perceived. People have a way of treating pregnancy, like it's an illness in corporate... I will be going off in a few months' time but I'm not disabled. My brain isn't disabled, I'm well able to keep going...”

“I think pregnancy aside, there's always an assumption that you can't do much more. We had a PA, who, when she told one of her line managers that she was pregnant about two years ago, he said to her, so are you going to be able to carry on working. I mean, I said, I'm pregnant. I didn't say I'm dying...but you get that a lot and as I said men can have 10 children, nobody ever asked them if they can continue to do their jobs.”

This notion of an inability to fulfil responsibilities was supported by other participants in relaying their experience.

“So, there was this perception at my employer, that when you want to have kids, you [are] better suited to be outside consulting, because consulting is so demanding. So, we saw a lot of people that joined, did their articles or joined the firm at a junior level and as soon as they got to manager, senior manager level, after they got married and they were thinking of having families, they would leave, because of the perception that in consulting you don’t stop it’s not an 8 to 5 job, you [are] constantly busy.”

Another participant expressed the following on how it is implied that she would be incapable of being both pregnant and taking on new responsibilities.

“If I were pregnant, I think that they would be thinking, okay, let’s give her a chance to have her kids who else is available for this. So absolutely perceptions have everything to do with this.”

Another participant expressed how pregnancy can cause a woman to be perceived as the weaker gender. She explained:

“...and with that childbearing role it’s seen as a weaker gender. It’s just we evolved in the workplace to be as strong as men and to be as capable as men and so much more. But then when you’re pregnant when you want to have a child and all of a sudden it just puts you back into that picture of being the weaker and... I’m only speaking from experience I know there’s woman out there that did not have this.”

5.5.2 Perceptions about commitment level

Multiple participants expressed concerns of being perceived as less committed to their work due them pursuing their family goals. Their concerns were around not being able to overextend themselves as they would under normal circumstances as well as the time that they would be away on maternity leave. The participants expressed the following views:

“what are people going to think about me? What are my superiors gonna think of me, and they probably gonna think that I'm not as committed to my work as what my other colleagues are?”

“I think that pregnancy and being away for like, two years giving birth does not communicate a message of commitment, maybe it communicates a message, okay I feel that in our organisation I have always been known as, an achiever, as someone with high potential but being pregnant for I don't know, over a period of six years having three pregnancies. I think that it casts a shadow of doubt on my level of commitment to actually doing what it takes putting in the long hours, the extra effort at work to get ahead.”

5.5.3 Perceptions about emotional state of women

A few participants made reference to how a woman's emotional state is brought to the fore when she is pregnant. A participant explained:

“Obviously, when you are expecting everyone assumes that you are already emotional.”

Another participant expressed that there was an expectation for her to subordinate her emotions:

“There's a lot of expectations on women that I don't think are... fixed expectations around men... when I was made partner, one of the other senior men at the firm, again, well-meaning came to me and said something like, um, well, you know, you can never cry at work again. Why can't I cry at work? He's like, because then you'll be seen as weak and you have to play with the big boys now. I'm like, I don't, why can't I... I'm emotional, I get upset at work, if something's wrong, like, I have emotions about it, why do I have to be manly about doing my job. So those are the

they're more..., or less about being just being a mother than being a woman in the workplace.”

5.5.4 Perceptions about a woman's role

A few of the participants detailed boardroom experiences where they were perceived to be the personal assistant and were asked to either provide water or coffee, or it was assumed that they could arrange for the coffee. Participants expressed the following:

“... because I do think especially in mining, I think the woman's role is still administrative, I think for and I'm sorry to categorise like this, I'm just speaking from my experience I'm not trying to you know speak or generalise at all, but very often white males 50 plus that is in mining and that has had a career in mining assumes if there's one woman in there that she's only at the meeting to take minutes. It is the perception and we've come a long way but I mean the amount of times ...because you are the female it's assumed, you're there to bring the tea or type up my minutes it's something that has come a long way but it still happens...”

Another participant's comment supported this view:

“It was almost like the female should only be PA's or executive assistant and not in senior roles.”

Another participant commented

“I do think that there is still many men in this world that have a very different perception. And they kind of feel that our roles should not merge as much as they do. If you choose to have children, you should have children. If you choose to work, then you should work.”

5.5.5 Perceived judgement for work-family balance

Participants expressed feelings of being judged for their choice of pursuing a career and a family. One participant explained:

“The HR manager has told me that none of the other male partners ever get this comment ever. I get it every single time and I get so angry about this because first of all, I'm like, well, who are you judging that like, essentially, by telling me I don't have a work life balance? You're telling me I'm a bad mom, which I'm definitely not a bad mom...I've made specific choices about being with my child. Um, the other thing is, that I run comrades, so I can't be doing nothing with my life if I'm able to run for comrades. I have a pretty good marriage and, like, I have friends... Who are you to judge me for what I do with my life? I have two significant things being running and a happy family.”

Another participant had this to say:

“If I started talking about children, I am going to look weaker than the rest”

5.6 Results for Research Question 3

RESEARCH QUESTION 3: How has childbearing influenced your leadership style and career advancement?

The aim of Research Question 3 was to understand if childbearing has had a positive effect on their leadership style and to understand what effect it has had on their career advancement?

Most of the participants views, on their leadership styles, were that it has given them greater perspective, that they were able to realise their capacity, and also gained empathy.

5.6.1 Greater perspective

One of the participants expressed her experience on how having children has influence her leadership style. She said:

“So, they have really helped me be more understanding and helped me understand that we each bring different things to the table...understand that people have different strengths that they bring to the table, as I said at times they are like chalk and cheese, they have made me understand that you can sit with a team of people...talk about what you want to achieve.”

Another participant said:

“...I think you know you’ve got others to consider and I do want to leave a better world for them than the one that I found. I want to play a part... I want to leave the world better for them.”

The same participant explained that it gave her a greater perspective on life:

“I think the number one thing it’s taught me is to choose your battles, to understand that some things are just not worth fighting. I think it’s made me a lot more balanced, it has also increased my capacity hugely, but it does allow you the benefit of not sweating small stuff...actually be able to decide what it is you want to do, and you just have a different perspective. You know, you’re able to take a step back and see a bigger picture, which I was not able to do before, I felt like, you know, you’re actually so selfish when you’re a single person and the only way to get that out of that, you know, you you’re standing with your nose against the mirror, and your perception is so narrow...”

5.6.2 Trade-offs

Participants emphasised the trade-offs that they had to make due to them being expectant mothers. There were personal and business sacrifices that had to be made and ones that they were prepared to make.

One participant explained that at times, even work, no matter how important would have to be deprioritised to make room for family matters. She said:

“I often say to people, there are lots of balls in life, and you need to choose which one are glass and which ones are rubber because the rubber once you drop them, some of them can bounce back. The glass ones when you drop them, it’s gonna take you forever to pick up every piece of glass to work together. So, I’ve made the decision that my health is a glass ball, my family is a glass ball. Everything else is a rubber ball that can be dropped. I might be in trouble today; tomorrow might not get that second promotion I was hoping for, but it will definitely bounce back.”

Participants were prepared to give up significant opportunities. Another participant said after been offered a director role at one of the largest global organisations that:

“I realised at some point that if I took this director role, I wasn’t going to be able to have a second kid, there was no way at that level, that I could make space for a

child. So yeah, I made the decision to leave when they offered me the role, they actually offered me the role. And I said, No, I'm sorry, I need to go off and do some important things..."

Participants who had discovered that they were pregnant about the time they had accepted their job offers, were even prepared to give up the offer on the basis that they would have to go on leave soon after starting the new job. One participant said:

"With the first one I had just literally found out that I was pregnant and had lunch setup with my, at the time, my future boss to give me my formal offer. At lunch, I said to him, look, I need to just disclose something, but ..., it's very early stages. So, I'm not comfortable with this being public information, but I feel like I need to let you know, given the fact that I'm about to join your organisation, I am pregnant. I also understand that without trying to feel like I'm apologising for having a baby, organisations hire because they need people on board. So, if my need to go off for 4 months, in 7 months' time is going to be a problem, we can review the situation."

Another participant in the same position stated:

"...before I could accept the offer, I found out I was pregnant. So here is this wonderful offer and here is this big news also interesting news that I am expecting. So obviously, starting a job and already you are going to be asking for your maternity leave, and all of that. I just felt you know what, it's okay. I approached them, I told them that guys...I am happy to basically withdraw from the contract, meaning the employment contract that we were about to sign."

A participant also expressed that she had to place her studies on hold.

"I mean, if I look at that, now, I had to put away my doctorate up to a point where I felt my kids were self-sufficient, so that could be one of the other key things where, you make a decision and make compromises or sacrifices rather, for your kids, just

because you're a mom, and for me to start a doctorate when my baby was one years old or something was really not going to work for both the family and myself.”

One of the most significant trade-offs made by one of the participants was the decision to not have a second child. This she explains, was due to both career and personal goals. She explained:

“Well, I mean, I think I'll be completely honest, I made a very significant trade-off, but it wasn't just me as I decided not to have a second child. I didn't think I could balance a second child and my work responsibilities. What I wanted to do in terms of my own personal needs, and my husband, and so we did not have a second child at least in those first early days either some or all of those things will be sacrificed and I wasn't willing to make that sacrifice.”

Some participants believed that there was stagnation experienced in their career due to them having children. The participants expressed the following:

“So I think with...maybe not my first promotion in the company but certainly my second and my last, I ... got promoted in that, I probably would have been up for the promotion, the year that I was pregnant. I know, for a fact, for one of them, and I had a senior partner saying, you know, you are pregnant, just give it another year. Rightly or wrongly, so I think it does definitely play a factor. I don't know what the right answer is, whether it's don't let them hold you back. Just because you, you're pregnant, versus listen to them. Actually, nobody wants to be a brand-new mother, with a baby and also in the new, like, executive role, trying to make sense, sense of it all. I don't know where the right answer lies but I do know that if I compare myself to two very good friends of mine, male friends who have, similar age, similar industry, similar qualifications, theirs has been accelerated in a different way because they haven't had, the extra sort of, life changing events of having kids and if they have, it didn't happen directly to them.”

“I think that limits your progression through the organisation somewhat. I don't think anybody says this but definitely I think that it would, it does, that's my sense... I don't think I necessarily would have been at a different level; I think I would have arrived at each level sooner.”

“...motherhood should be a place where females can still enhance and grow in their careers. I don't think that it should be once you had a baby that, your career... should halt to a stand still or be nonexistent. I think once you actually get the right balance, you should be able to move forward.”

5.6.3 Improved leadership style

Almost all the participants claimed to have improved their leadership style after having children by having developed a higher level of emotional intelligence and gaining a greater perspective on life. Participants stated:

“And in many respects, I think it makes us better employees.”

“... I think that, as a mom, I think you develop a higher level of empathy. An EQ, which I think as a leader, is very necessary, and also, it's missing in our space. So, you know, I think kids do that to you.”

“I think it does, it has made me a stronger and a better leader for many reasons, I think. The version of myself before ‘mom’, I always struggled with conflict, people pleaser, you know, would sort of go to the ends of the earth, etc. Although I still, you know, I still have an exceptionally high work ethic, I just know... you've learned to, to push back when you when you need to but I think the propensity to be taken advantage of was bigger before I became a mother.”

One of the participants who had a bad experience at work expressed that she would not be willing to give as much of herself to another business in future as motherhood has given her a new perspective on what is important.

5.7 Results for Research Question 4

RESEARCH QUESTION 4: How can the representation of women in top leadership position in South Africa be improved?

The aim of this research question was to understand from the participants' perspective what they believed other women needed to do to advance their careers, and what business could do to improve the representation of female leadership. The question was also geared to solicit the factors that serve as a hindrance to career advancement.

5.7.1 Shared identities

“Yeah, I think it's very important to have good leadership. By good leadership, I mean, someone who understands, who has values which are very much aligned to yours because if you are a woman having children, you obviously are not just an employee, you have a life at home, you have responsibilities towards your family, and having children is part of that responsibility you are fulfilling.”

One of the participants got quite emotional and cried when she explained her perspective on the significance of having more females in leadership roles. The participant said:

“...I really have a desire to see women thrive above the perception that society has of us, that our abilities are not limited by what society thinks of us, but only by our own desires for your future. I get almost emotional about it. You know, we have so many young girls. I mean, I'm mentoring a girl in one of the trusts that we have, and you just sometimes realise the picture of her future is so narrow and the more we show that it is normal for us to have, not just jobs but careers, the more we mould that. I believe the more we'll get these girls out of it... now I'm all emotional.”

5.7.2 Planning and support

Some of the participants expressed the importance of a support structure. One participant said:

“I think that definitely is its support structure. I think getting that support structure...me and my husband sit down, well before Covid we'd sit down on a Sunday, and literally plan, you're doing this drop off, you're going to attend this soccer”

5.7.3 Men leaders to support women

One of the participants expressed that she does not necessarily believe that women are the only ones that can help other women or be supportive, she explained:

“I mean, one thing I just want to add is I don't think that women are particularly more supportive of women with children. I haven't found that and again, I know I'm not that. So, having a woman manager that's not the answer. I think men are just as capable of understanding your personal context. Sometimes, more so.”

Another participant had a different perspective. She said:

“We need men to be working with us and not seeing us as threats.”

5.7.4 Women must prove themselves

Multiple participants expressed that they have experienced some form of discrimination either blatant, or sometimes subtle. They expressed that they believe they have high work ethic, yet constantly are expected to go above and beyond to prove themselves.

One of the participants recounted:

“It was a partner that we work with and I went to visit him to do like a courtesy call because I was the head of the partner group at that time. I sat down with him and he was like, Hi ..., oh, so you're (Company X's) BEE person...but (Company X) is basically trying to make themselves more black so they're just hiring people. I took such exception. I said to him, you know, that's really sad that you think that but you know, I'm hoping that as we work with each other, you'll figure out that I wasn't

hired because of the color of my skin. It was a kudos to me, I suppose, when I left, and I said goodbye to him, because we actually became good friends after that and he said to me, I'm so sorry for that comment. It was, you know, really uncalled for. He said, to me, you've proven but, you know, once again, you've got to prove it..."

5.7.5 What can business do?

Most of the participants expressed the need for greater flexibility in business. One participant said:

"Which is, you know, you decide to be a parent, you need time to do that it doesn't happen in the background on it's own, you actually need to be able to be present, you need to have time allocated to it. I mean, this is one of my goals in life was to be a good parent. We've got to work in environments that allow for them and don't make you feel guilty."

5.7.6 The Impact of COVID 19 on Work-family conflict

There were mixed views on whether working from home would be beneficial for women. The participants shared the following views:

"Yeah, look, I think it certainly has been very beneficial for females, because no matter how much support you've got around you, kids have got away of running out to the room to mum whenever they need anything, particularly when they are young. So, it's a case of... but at the same time I think ...the problem with this is the moms are the ones that have actually borne the brunt of lockdown. Which is a problem because you end up thinking but wait what is everybody else's job in the house. I also think that the problem with the lockdown situation is we've gone back to an environment where women are the ones that are just expected to take on more and to do more without needing or asking for support."

“it's going to change the way everybody works going forward. I think it's going to show that you don't necessarily need to be micromanaged. Your bum doesn't need to be on the seat at the office for you to be working...The degree of trust was forced because there wasn't an option because that trust was enforced upon everybody... So maybe in future it means that anyone, not only moms that, people can work more flexibly, flexibly and for moms specifically, maybe it means that you can structure your day in such a way that you can do school pickup every single day, you can get to see your kids because you pick them up personally and you can still continue working and it can be seamless.”

“I do think it helps. Because if I am at home, and I'm able to work from home, whether I do that at night, or whether I do that in the morning, or whenever I do it during the day, there's more flexibility for me to work in my strengths. And also, be able to, you know, be the and cook a meal for the family in the evenings. So I do think for that because it's created flexibility for us. It is definitely a benefit.”

One of the participants expressed a different view as she felt that working from home has exposed her to her family. She stated:

“You do have to hide your work from family, so I mean, I've always worked like a maniac at the office and come home and try and have some quality time to connect. Then as soon as the kids fall asleep I carry on working but they don't see it. So, they don't know, they don't quite understand the situation. That hasn't been possible here and now because they're here the whole time. It's also just been particularly bad, it has been particularly bad, but they can see it. They can see and they can see all the stress which is awful and it's terrible. My daughter's developed reflux. The doctor says this is stress. She's worried about me when she's in therapy. She worries about me, and there's nothing I can do about it. I'm unable to parent properly. So, the tradeoff is quite severe if you ask me.”

5.5.7 Awareness of self

The participants expressed that women need to become more aware of themselves. The participants expressed the following views:

“I think to know who you are, and be unapologetic about it.”

“I guess, as females, you constantly have to remind ourselves of that, because if you go around and look at most studies that have been done, females want to take 10 out of 10 of every single requirement that the opposite sex can take four out of 10 and believe they can do it. So, I guess it starts with belief.”

“I honestly think if you just believe in ourselves and find mentors that you need to find a mentor that will really really push you and support you and help you build a network.”

“I think...you grab them, you do so well that you get noticed, because when you get noticed, you can actually start demanding...of what you want to do.”

“I think from a female perspective is definitely working smarter than men do, working smarter in general. So allow it allowing yourself to be noticed putting yourself in positions, we have been persistent. So consistently, doing good work, would we be noticed. That is obviously a good aspect?”

5.8 Conclusion of Results

This chapter concludes the findings from the fifteen interviews conducted with the participants for this study. Some of the constructs that have emerged from the findings are supported in literature. Chapter 6 will address and discuss these findings in detail and will propose a modified conceptual model based on any new insights that have emerged from the findings.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

6.1 Introduction

In Chapter 6, the findings represented in the previous chapter will be discussed. The concepts and constructs that emerged out of this study will be evaluated and juxtaposed to that of the literature review presented in Chapter 2. This is reviewed against the Research Questions which were identified in Chapter 3.

As referenced in Chapter 4, the researcher analysed the data inductively as the aim was to understand the textual data (Basit, 2003), which was based on the researcher's own interpretations. Question one was quite broad which allowed for common themes to be identified. Some themes emerged explicitly and others were implied.

6.2 Discussion of Results for Research Question 1

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: How do women navigate between becoming a mother and career ambitions?

Research Question 1 sought to gain a deeper understanding of the identity crisis that women experience when they pursue their family goals as well as career goals. It sought to confirm how career ambition was influenced for these professionally employed women and whether it in fact had a positive or negative influence over both their identity and their career ambition. The question used to answer this research question was quite broad, which allowed for rich insights to be gathered and from which other questions could be built (refer to appendix 3 for interview guide). This set the tone for the rest of the interview.

The below section will discuss the findings from Research Question 1.

6.2.1 Career Ambition

This study found that the participants experienced anxiety over their careers and career ambition when they were pregnant. This was mainly due to the demanding nature of their jobs particularly at more senior levels and the perceptions that they believed others had of them. As there are fewer positions available at these levels, the competition is intensified.

Bear et al. (2017) claim that the path to leadership is shaped by experiences. These authors cite abilities, character, motivation, preferences and gender as some of the reasons that an individual would self-select out of the workforce. This is found to be true as it pertains to the participants in this study, particularly those in senior leadership positions who have experience childbearing. The anxiety that they experience starts at the time they discover that they are pregnant and based on the feedback they receive, either explicit or implicit, they will either gain confidence to pursue their goals or alternatively their career ambitions will be stalled or derailed.

Professionally employed women, who experience childbearing face an additional obstacle in their career labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007) as there are new biases that exist when a woman becomes pregnant. The participants in this study demonstrated a desire to be viewed as professionals and capable of being able to perform their work responsibilities despite their pregnancy or family status, yet it was evidenced in the data that they felt a need to prove themselves and demonstrate their career ambitions by going over and above the call of duty.

Not only were they sacrificing maternity leave and time with their new babies, they also went to great lengths to prove their capabilities. These females needed to put their career ambitions on display in order to be taken seriously, congruent with an earlier study by Benschop et al. (2013) which revealed the gendered practices that are prevalent in ambition.

6.2.2 Negotiating new identities

The findings illustrate that some of participants did feel intensified scrutiny when in their pregnancy state. This is consistent with the study by Meister et al. (2017) which found that when women experience a major transition in their personal or professional lives, that they are likely to feel misidentified in the workplace. This is because others begin to view them differently. The participants also attempted to divert attention away from the pregnancy to focus on the task at hand so as to mitigate being misidentified.

These feelings of scrutiny are not only intensified when a woman is pregnant but also when she fulfills a leadership role (Meister et al., 2017). The data in this study supports this view by of a number of participants citing examples of overt and covert discrimination. One of the participants expressed a way that she handles such situations when she felt misidentified or discriminated against. She was able to place here emotions aside and engage in an open and honest dialogue so that she was able to gain perspective and be able to offer perspective. The strategies that were employed by these women to construct a professional image is consistent with some of the literature that suggests that in their attempt to achieve this, women employ these strategies to influence the perceptions of their social identity (Little et al., 2015).

Some of women mentioned the dress code as a strategy that they employ to gain power. This dress code involved a more masculine style. Particularly for the participants in extremely male-dominated environments such as mining. This behaviour further supports hegemonic masculinity as the ideal which some have argued perpetuates and legitimises the inequalities that exist (Benschop et al., 2013).

The participants experienced tensions about their identity and engaged in all forms of identity work; personal, social and collective; to recreate or maintain their identities as professionals (Caza et al., 2018).

6.2.3 Shared Realities

The commonality among all the participants who expressed having a good pregnancy experience was that they all had supportive leadership. Some attributed this support to the fact that those leaders themselves had families.

Basuil et al., 2016 conducted a study, in which they used shared reality theory to explain the benefits of shared family-characteristics between subordinate and superior. These authors suggest that this shared reality can enhance self-esteem and foster commitment as subordinates perceive the supervisor to be supportive.

Only one participant in the study did not necessarily buy into this notion of shared realities as she specifically made mention of the fact that she does not believe that women are more supportive of woman with families. However, this participant also did share that she herself was not particularly more empathetic of other females. Becoming a mother, and transitioning through that role together with the other challenges that she faced made her firmer with others in that she expected the same sort of resilience from them.

6.2.4 Conclusive Findings for Research Question 1

Research Question 1 sought understand the identity crisis that women experience when they pursue their family goals as well as career goals and investigate how this in turn influenced career ambition.

The research findings concluded that professionally employed women who experience identity transitions in the form of pregnancy, still face some level of social stigma. This is consistent with the findings in the study conducted by Fox and Quinn (2015). These women perceived that they would be viewed in a different light and that it was easier to maintain a workplace identity before going through the transition of pregnancy. The findings prove that women indeed engage in various strategies to either build, maintain or destroy perceptions of their identities that others hold of them.

Although there was an acknowledgement that organisations have made drastic improvement over the years, in terms of creating facilities for working mothers to accommodate their needs in the form of rooms where breastfeeding mothers can express and the like; there is still work that needs to be done from the perspective of addressing biases, and particularly those of a subtle nature.

The findings suggest that gender bias affects a woman's career advancement and that childbearing does create an additional barrier to upward mobility because of the bias associated with it. This is consistent with the findings in previous studies which investigated how bias influences career advancement (Koenig et al., 2011; Kossek, Su, & Wu, 2016; Rosette et al., 2016, Ryan et al., 2016).

Negative perceptions related to childbearing creates identity tension for women which affects motivation and in turn career ambition; which ultimately affects career advancement.

Leadership support is central to motivation and career advancement as illustrated by all the participants who were still able to thrive in their careers after going through pregnancy transitions.

6.3 Discussion of Results for Research Question 2

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: What are the perceptions relating to childbearing for women pursuing leadership positions in South African organisations?

Research question 2 sought to understand how perceptions influence career ambition and subsequently career advancement to senior leadership for women who have experienced childbearing. The below section will discuss the findings from Research Question 2.

6.3.1 Perceptions Matter

The participants in this study were concerned over the perceptions that their subordinates, peers and superiors had of them when they were pregnant. They perceived that others questioned their competence, their level of commitment, their emotional state and their professional role. Participants did not want to be seen as weak. They were aware that as they underwent the transition to motherhood, that their identities were under much scrutiny.

The participants all claimed to have a high worth ethic and that they have had to work exceptionally harder than their male counterparts to attain their level of success. Women have to endure many obstacles; the obstacle of breaking through the leadership stereotypes. Once the transition to motherhood takes place; they have to break through additional stereotypes about mothers who also pursue careers. This is consistent with the Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity model which explains some of the gender bias experienced by women in the workplace.

6.3.2 Work-family Conflict

The participants in this study shoulder most of the work-family responsibility in their homes. They take care of the household responsibilities as well as the childcare responsibilities. The participants expressed an advantage that working men have over them in that the males in senior positions, usually have stay-at-home wives. The participants who have attained greater levels of seniority have cited having proper support structures in place in the form of childcare support and hired domestic help.

Participants expressed concerns around this work-family conflict and how it can create a state of guilt. Corporate guilt as well as mother guilt. While most of the participants still demonstrated career ambition, there were a minority who believed that women can simultaneously succeed at both roles.

Perceptions play a role in the work-family conflict as some participants expressed that when there is a conflict, and work has to be deprioritised, that this could lead to them being perceived as less committed.

6.3.3 Conclusive Findings for Research Question 2

Research question 2 sought to understand how perceptions influence career ambition and subsequently career advancement to senior leadership for women who have experienced childbearing.

The findings illustrate that there is much emphasis on perceptions and how perceptions influence career advancement and career ambition. Meister, Sinclair, and Jehn (2017) confirm the significance of the role that perceptions plays, particularly at a leadership level.

The work-life interface poses an additional layer of challenges for working mothers who have leadership aspirations. Fritz and van Knippenberg (2018) suggest that the easier these role interface, the greater the chance that women will aspire to achieve leadership positions. Ladge et al. (2018) also suggest the demands of work-life are easier managed when a woman believes that she is a good mother. This was evidenced in the findings of the study as most of the participants who were able to balance the work-family conflict, and were in top leadership positions emphasised the importance of a proper support structure which would imply that there is less guilt around the role of “mother” when there is adequate support.

6.4 Discussion of Results for Research Question 3

RESEARCH QUESTION 3: How does childbearing influence a woman’s leadership style and career advancement?

Research Question 3 sought to understand whether the journey of childbearing changes a woman's leadership style for the better. The below section will discuss the findings from Research Question 3.

6.4.1 Empathy and Perspective

Men are usually attributed with agentic traits such as dominance, aggression and self-confidence (Abele, 2003; Koch et al., 2015; Fitzsimmons et al., 2014) and women are attributed with communal traits such as empathy and kindness. The findings from this research illustrate the key constructs being, empathy and perspective. Participants attributed these to having children. They believed that children gave them a broader perspective on life and allowed them to see the world differently.

Interestingly though, another perspective was that there is an expectation that once a woman transitions to motherhood, that they would become more lenient with their subordinates.

6.4.2 Improved Leadership

Overall, the findings revealed that participants believed that having children enhanced their leadership style. The participants expressed that they were able to adjust and increase their capacity after having children.

Inconsistent with the findings from Javdani and McGee (2019); the women in this study did not gain an advantage over their male counterparts after having children. The views expressed were that women have to consistently work harder to get noticed.

6.4.3 Conclusive Findings for Results for Research Question 3

Research Question 3 sought to understand whether the journey of childbearing changes a woman's leadership style for the better.

The findings in this study are that women believe that their leadership style is enhanced after becoming a mother. They claim to have greater empathy and greater perspective. Women are associated with more communal roles and are found to be more nurturing (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The findings would confirm earlier studies that associate women with more transformational leadership characteristics than men (Saint-Michel, 2018).

6.5 Discussion of Results for Research Question 4

RESEARCH QUESTION 4: How can the representation of women in top leadership position in South Africa be improved?

Research Question 4 sought to obtain perspective from women who have already reached seniority in their organisations, what they believe could be done to improve representation of women on these levels. This, from both an individual and an organisational perspective. What are the main factors that help or hinder a woman's career advancement to senior leadership? The below section will discuss the findings from Research Question 4

6.5.1 Leadership support

Of the participants who were in the most senior, high-risk roles, almost all attributed their success to support from leadership. This goes against finding in Glass and Cook (2016) that women leaders who are promoted to high-risk leadership roles, fail to receive support and are not given the necessary authority.

6.5.2 Self

The findings suggest that women need to look inward and start trusting their abilities. The findings also do suggest that women ought to be more deliberate about the role they take on, the organisations that they work for.

6.5.3 Conclusive Findings for Results for Research Question 4

Research Question 4 sought to understand what needs to be done to improve the representation of women in senior leadership positions.

The role of leadership was highlighted as critical to the improvement of women in these positions. The participants also highlighted the importance of self-awareness and belief in the pursuit of career goals.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the conceptual model “Conceptualising childbearing in career advancement”. This model was initially introduced in Chapter 2 and derived from the literature review. This model has been adapted to incorporate the key findings in Chapter 5 and discussed in Chapter 6.

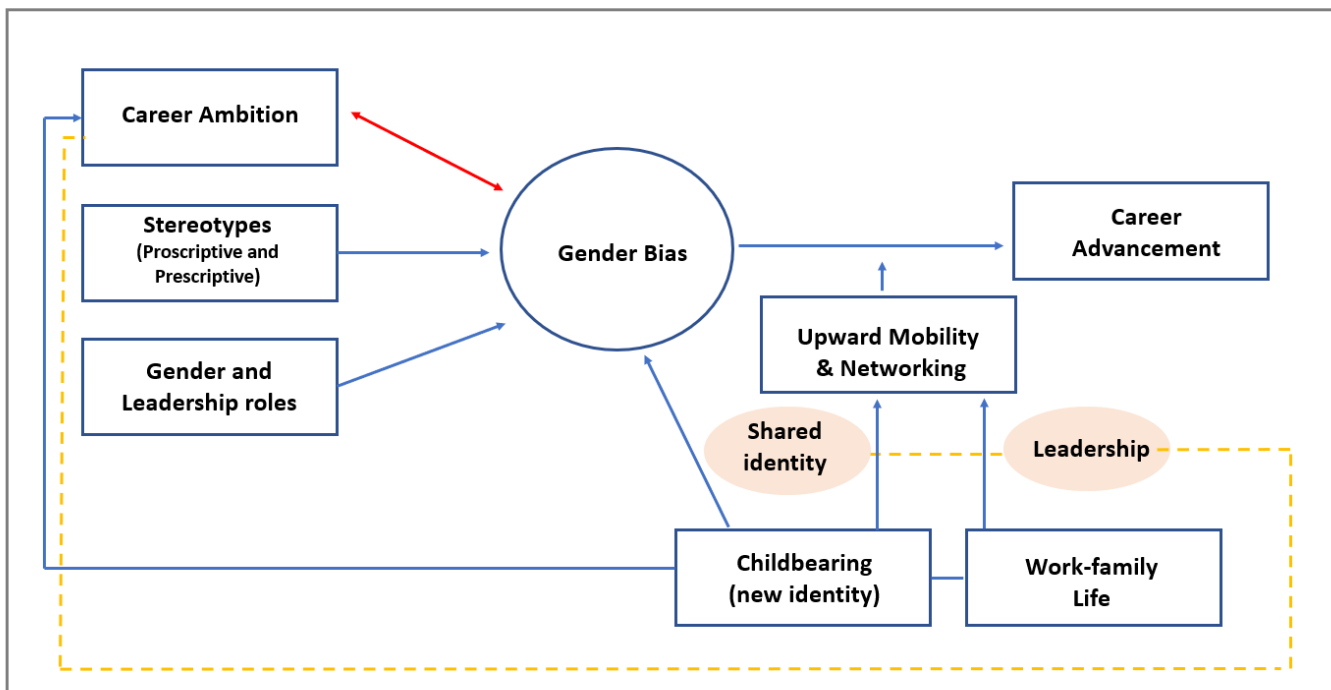
This chapter will also articulate the implications for business leaders, recommendations for future research and the limitations of this study.

7.2 How the model was developed

The key constructs as identified in Chapter 5 findings served as a base for an adaptation of the model introduced in Chapter 2. Chapter 6 explained these findings and themes that pertain to the career advancement of women to senior leadership after experiencing childbearing. The findings from the interviews included additional elements which were not present in the initial model. These additional elements have been incorporated to the revised model.

The model was designed to illustrate the complexity of childbearing as it pertains to a woman’s upward mobility and career advancement to senior leadership.

Figure 3: Conceptualising Childbearing in Career Advancement of Women



7.3 Explanation of the Model

Prior to a professionally employed woman experiencing childbearing, the central elements that influence her career advancement are career ambition, stereotypes, and perceptions about gender and leadership role congruity. These elements interact to a central element of gender bias. Dependent on how a woman is able to navigate these issues, will determine whether she advances in her career.

When a professionally employed woman transitions to motherhood, she faces new obstacles in her career advancement. Due to pregnancy being a visible identity, it is under intense scrutiny which creates more biases, questions and doubts about her role and capabilities. These doubts can have a negative impact on career ambition as it affects the perceptions she holds of herself. As the transition to motherhood takes place, it also adds an additional element of work-life balance that she has to navigate to achieve the upward mobility necessary for career advancement.

This is precisely the point at which the role of leadership comes to the fore. If she has supportive leadership, she is able to transition relatively easily and continue on her upward trajectory in her career advancement. The role of leadership is also linked to career ambition. If she does not feel supported, it could have a negative effect on her career ambition and career advancement. In the instance of having leadership with shared identities, namely women or men leaders who also have families and value family, this will also have a positive effect on the career ambition and upward mobility of these professionally employed women.

The two new themes introduced in the model are leadership and shared identity. These were not included in the initial model; however, they were prominent in the findings concluded in Chapter 5.

7.4 Implications for Business Leaders

While great advances have been made in organisations to create facilities that accommodate professionally employed women who have transitioned to motherhood, there is more that can be done from an educational and awareness perspective. After decades of research, professionally employed women, who have transitioned to motherhood still face social stigma.

This takes a rethinking of current practices as well as naming conventions as suggested in Chapter 5 by a participant. How businesses define success and ambition is important, especially for professionally employed mothers who seek to achieve career advancement. If career ambition is perceived to be gendered, and the narrative is not changed, it could perpetuate the current paucity of women in senior levels of organisations.

As mentioned in one of the findings in Chapter 5, rethinking names that are assigned to management meetings are simple, readily available solutions that signal the

organisation's seriousness about inclusion on these senior levels. There are more solutions that ought to be explored.

7.5 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could look beyond participant's self-reported reflections and seek to find ways to understand the perspective of men in senior leadership as it pertains to women who are experiencing a transition to motherhood. This study was conducted in Gauteng, South Africa with a small sample. Future research could conduct a similar study with a wider sample size and cover a greater geographic region. It could also incorporate women at lower levels of the organisation.

Caza et al. (2018) highlight the need for future research to explore the role of context, to investigate across the various contexts the variables that shape identity. This could be done for professionally employed women who transition to motherhood to gain deeper insights to the forces at play by contrasting the variables and investigating the impact that it has on career advancement.

7.6 Limitations of the study

The findings of this study must take into account its limitations. As highlighted in Chapter 5, the small sample size does limit generalisability of the study. Due to the current global pandemic, face-to-face meetings were not possible and the researcher had to rely on online platforms, which are sometimes unreliable and cause interruptions in the interview. Had these interviews been conducted face-to-face, the researcher believes that it would have created a better sense of trust between participant and the researcher and the researcher would have been able to gain deeper insights, particularly because the threat of cyber-crime would have been removed.

The researcher is also a novice researcher and not expertly trained.

7.7 Conclusion

The literature review illustrated the underrepresentation of females in senior leadership and explored some of the various factors that are at play. This study sought to gain insights to the complexity of childbearing and the career advancement of women in senior leadership in South Africa to make a novice contribution to closing the gap in literature.

The interviews conducted with senior leaders who have experienced childbearing, demonstrated further findings, from which a conceptual model was built. It is envisaged that these findings can serve a necessary platform to engage in the discourse even further, to enable business leaders to create environments where professionally employed mothers with ambitions for senior leadership can thrive.

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9. APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Invitation to participate in research study

Dear _____

My name is Shayleen Dennis. I received your details from _____. I am currently a student at the Gordon Institute of Business Sciences and completing my research in partial fulfilment of an MBA. I am conducting research on the role of childbearing in the career advancement of women in senior leadership positions in South Africa.

I would greatly appreciate time in your diary some time over the next 7 days if you are willing to participate in this study. The interview is expected to last approximately an hour and will be an informal discussion around your experience with the above-mentioned topic. Your participation will be a valuable addition to my research and findings could lead to greater insights that could hopefully inform future business policies with respect to women in leadership. Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings.

Should you be willing, kindly provide me with a few date and time options that would best suit you over the next week for a virtual meeting. I am also available after hours and over the weekend if that would suit you better.

If you have any queries, you are welcome to contact me or my supervisor. The contact details have been provided on the consent form attached.

Sincerely,

Shayleen Dennis

Appendix 2: Consent form

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

THE ROLE OF CHILDBEARING IN THE CAREER ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

Researcher: Shayleen Dennis, MBA Student at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria

I am currently a student at the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science and completing my research in partial fulfilment of an MBA. I am conducting research on the role that childbearing plays in the career advancement of women in leadership positions in South Africa. Due to the nature of this study, only female participants are included as interviewees.

The interview is expected to last approximately an hour and will assist in understanding how childbearing influences career advancement of women in leadership and how organisations can improve policies for women in leadership.

Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty. All information provided by the participants are confidential and their identity anonymous. If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or me. Our details are provided below.

Shayleen Dennis
Email: 04903065@mygibs.co.za
Cell: 072 235 2632

Melodi Botha
Email: melodi.botha@up.ac.za
Telephone number: (012) 420 4774

Participant's Name: _____

Researcher's Name: _____

Signature of participant: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 3: Interview Guide

Provided some background information into the researcher to create some rapport with the participant. Thanked the participant for being part of the research and requested permission to record the interview.

Demographic information obtained:

- Name of participant:
- Age:
- Number of children and ages of children
- Industry?
- Current position in the organisation and tenure in position and company?
- Tell me a bit about your role?

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: How do women navigate between becoming a mother and career ambitions

Question: Can you tell me a bit about your experience of being an expectant mother and being in a management role in corporate? Anything about that experience that you would like to share. Your feelings, and your experience?

Question: Can you tell me about the time you had to disclose that you were pregnant to your superiors and team?

Question: Can you tell me a bit about being in a management role and being female?

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: What are the perceptions relating to childbearing for women pursuing leadership positions in South African organisations

Question: How do you believe you peers, subordinates, and superiors perceived you when you were expecting and how if at all did these perceptions change over time?

Question: How did this make you feel?

RESEARCH QUESTION 3: How has childbearing influenced your leadership style and career advancement

Question: Does where you envisioned you would be in your career at this stage match up to where you are now, and if yes, why and if no, why do you think not?

Question: Please discuss whether you believe you have had the same opportunities as your colleagues or male counterparts on your level to advance in your career?

Question: Can you discuss the career-related factors you took into consideration when you decided to have your children?

Question: Can you give me examples of how being female and being a mother has influenced your career advancement?

Question: How has having a child/ children influenced your leadership style, if at all?

RESEARCH QUESTION 4: How can the representation of women in top leadership positions in South Africa be improved

Question: Can you discuss what you believe causes women to advance in their careers?

Question: Can you give me the 3 most significant factors for you personally?

Question: What do you believe is the significance of having women in senior leadership?

Question: Can you discuss the experience of advancing your career?

Question: How do you think that this “new way of work” due to Covid will impact working mothers? Will it be beneficial for them?

Appendix 4: Ethical Clearance Letter

**Gordon Institute
of Business Science**
University of Pretoria

**Ethical Clearance
Approved**

Dear Shayleen Dennis (Canham),

Please be advised that your application for Ethical Clearance has been approved.

You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data.

We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.

[Ethical Clearance Form](#)

Kind Regards

This email has been sent from an unmonitored email account. If you have any comments or concerns, please contact the GIBS Research Admin team.