

American University Kyiv

CHALLENGES OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN PUBLIC SERVICE IN
UKRAINE: THE CASE OF THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION
(ВИКЛИКИ ЖІНОЧОГО ЛІДЕРСТВА НА ДЕРЖАВНІЙ СЛУЖБІ В
УКРАЇНІ: КЕЙС СЕКТОРУ ЦИФРОВОЇ ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЇ)

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Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Master Degree

2024

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Artem Kliuchnikov for his invaluable support and guidance throughout the development of this capstone project. Artem's profound expertise, insightful feedback and encouragement were instrumental in shaping the execution of this research. Artem profoundly impacted my personal and professional growth.

Additionally, I am profoundly grateful to the women driving digital transformation in Ukraine who have inspired this research significantly. Their resilience, leadership, and pioneering efforts in a field provide inspiration and influence.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	4
INTRODUCTION	5
CHAPTER 1. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	6
CHAPTER 2. METHODOLOGY.....	23
CHAPTER 3. ANALYSIS	27
CHAPTER 4. DISCUSSION.....	51
CHAPTER 5. FUTURE RESEARCH.....	56
REFERENCES	58
APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	64

ABSTRACT

This research study investigates the discrepancies between male and female leadership in Ukraine's public sector, focusing on the challenges that female leaders face in digital transformation. The Critical Incident Technique is used to analyse the experiences of ten senior female professionals working in the Ministry of Digital Transformation through semi-structured interviews. The study's key findings highlight a range of challenges that female leaders face, such as societal, organisational, interpersonal, and individual. This study fills a critical gap in the literature regarding women in leadership within the public sector, particularly in the digital transformation sphere. It contributes valuable insights to the broader discussion on gender diversity in Ukraine's public sector leadership.

Keywords: Gender disparities, Women leaders, Leadership challenges, Public sector, Digital transformation, Ukraine, Gender diversity

INTRODUCTION

The research focuses on the crucial issue of gender disparities in leadership in the public sector. The project aimed to investigate the challenges of female leaders in the civil service, particularly within the digital transformation sector.

This research employs a qualitative approach using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) to examine challenges faced by women in leadership roles in Ukraine's digital transformation. CIT, chosen for its effectiveness in capturing specific incidents and experiences, involved semi-structured interviews with ten senior female professionals in the Ministry of Digital Transformation. The study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of these leaders' unique challenges, balancing the subjective nature of CIT with rigorous data analysis to ensure a comprehensive perspective.

The analysis found various societal, organizational, interpersonal, and individual challenges. On the societal level, women leaders most often faced ageism, appearance scrutiny, the use of pet names, and penalties for being assertive and ambitious. On the organizational level, women leaders face pressure in a male-dominated environment and double standards in performance and workload. On the interpersonal level, the 'queen bee' effect and balancing professional and personal responsibilities remain complex and individual challenges for women leaders. On the individual level, women leaders have different motivations than male leaders, redefining the traditional notions of leadership.

The research takes a proactive step towards addressing the gaps in the existing literature on the challenges of women leaders in the public sector in the digital transformation. It offers valuable insights that can contribute to the empowerment of women leaders in the public sector. The research contributes to the broader conversation on gender diversity and leadership in Ukraine's public service.

CHAPTER 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are now more women in leadership positions than ever before worldwide (World Economic Forum, 2022). Despite the progress, women are still underrepresented in leadership positions at all levels (World Economic Forum, 2022). The academic research on women facing challenges in leadership positions raises awareness and provides insights into the causes of these challenges. As a result, it is possible to develop strategies to address these challenges, which promotes gender diversity in leadership. The academic discussion on women in leadership started gaining prominence in the early 1970s and has grown and expanded significantly.

Glass Ceiling theory is one of the most widely documented explanations of the challenges faced by women leaders (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Eagly & Karau (2002) state that the popularity of the glass ceiling concept may stem from the rarity of women in significant leadership posts, despite the presence of equality or near equality of the sexes on many other indicators. Eagly and Carli (2007) argue that the glass ceiling theory concept oversimplifies women's challenges in their leadership journeys. The glass ceiling theory suggests that a single, orderly, upward obstacle at a specific high level in organisations prevents women from advancing. However, the reality is much more complex, as women can face various obstacles at different points throughout their careers. Women are not only blocked from advancing when they reach the highest levels of their careers but rather disappear from leadership positions at various stages leading up to that point. Eagly and Carli (2007) suggest the notion of the labyrinth, the complex and uncertain journey that confronts women in their professional careers. Labyrinth theory recognises that women encounter multiple and varied obstacles and that they can arise at any stage of their careers. DeFrank-Cole and Tan (2021) highlight that these challenges stem from societal, organisational, interpersonal and individual factors that impact women in

leadership. Hence, in understanding the challenges of women leaders, the nuanced exploration of the complexity of factors is required. While this literature review is structured around these four levels, it is crucial to recognise the interconnections and overlap between them.

Societal level

The societal level encompasses cultural and social factors that influence gender stereotypes and discrimination, affecting how women are perceived as leaders.

Women often face gender-based restrictions that limit women's access to leadership roles.

The invisible but persistent barriers that prevent women from reaching top leadership roles, regardless of their education, qualifications or achievements, is called the "glass ceiling". It is often attributed to the 'transparent layer' of stereotypes and biased practices that hinder women's career progression (Sabharwal, 2013). It, also called second-generation bias, does not require an intent to exclude or necessarily produce direct, immediate harm to any individual (Hewlett et al., 2013). For centuries, leadership and power have been associated with men, and these historical inequalities between men and women have left a legacy that continues to shape modern expectations and practices. Such inequality is based on their gender and on the idea that men and women are allocated different societal roles. Due to historical changes in women's role in society and the workplace, including non-discriminatory policies and regulations, invisible barriers are holding women back, rather than overt sexism alone (Baretto et al., 2009). These unconscious or subtle biases about women's abilities, leadership qualities, and suitability for top positions, regardless of their qualifications and capabilities, can affect decision-making processes, even when individuals are consciously unaware of them. Many studies on the glass ceiling, including public service, confirmed its existence (Sabharwal, 2013).

Women are often stereotyped as being less competent and assertive than men, which can lead to them being overlooked for leadership positions.

Stereotypes or descriptive norms are associated with both genders. Women are perceived as communal but not very agentic, while men are seen as agentic but not very communal. The studies suggest that people tend to associate leadership with male characteristics and behaviours, such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and competitiveness. This leads to a bias in the assessment of leadership potential. Schein (1975) proposed the theory "Think manager - think male", which has been extensively tested and replicated in various settings around the world, including internationally (Schein, 1996) and over time. Although some variations in perceptions have been observed over time or across different countries, the significant finding that leadership is associated with being male remains prevalent (Sabharwal, 2013). Nett (et al. 2001) also highlight that despite replicated studies worldwide, this bias is found across various cultures and regions, and it is especially robust for male participants. The later consecutive experiments by Schein (2001) revealed that, in the United States, but not in several other nations, women, not men, have adopted a more androgynous view of managerial roles. Male leaders continued to hold the masculine stereotype of leaders, whereas female leaders viewed males and females as possessing traits that would make them successful managers. The "Think manager - think male" notion changes and varies across cultures and time (Nett et al., 2001).

Women are more likely to be penalised for being assertive or ambitious, while men are often rewarded for the same qualities.

Eagly & Karau (2002) suggest the role congruity theory, which draws on empirical research to support its claims. Eagly & Karau (2002) expand on the "Think manager - think

male" approach and explain how the expectation that women exhibit communal characteristics creates incongruity between the stereotypical characteristics of women and those of a manager. As a result, women have less access to leadership roles due to a less favourable evaluation of their potential for leadership, as leadership ability is more stereotypical of men than women. Furthermore, women who become leaders tend to receive less favourable evaluations of their leadership behaviour because of societal beliefs about how women ought to behave. Women who act too assertive may be seen as aggressive, but if they act too nurturing, they may be seen as weak. Any violation of prescriptive beliefs can lead to a negative evaluation of performance. Eagly & Carli (2007) claim that women leaders find themselves in a double bind because whatever style women select, they may leave the impression that they do not have "the right stuff" for powerful jobs. Rhode and Kellerman (2007) state that an overview of more than a hundred studies confirms that women are rated lower as leaders when they adopt authoritative and seemingly masculine styles. As a result, it is harder for women to be recognised as effective in leadership positions.

On the contrary, Eagly and Karau (2002) argue that the perceived suitability of men and women for leadership roles will vary due to cultural norms and the profile of the particular industry (i.e., whether it is stereotypically 'masculine' or 'feminine'). Leadership traits may not necessarily be masculine in predominantly female fields, such as elementary education and social work. These professions require skills that are traditionally associated with femininity, such as warmth, compassion, and the ability to care for others. As a result, leadership roles in these fields are likely to incorporate more communal attributes. One study confirms that women in all industries experienced bias, research also suggests that female leaders experience aspects of bias differently depending on the industry (Stephenson et al., 2022). Law is the most

challenging profession, requiring assertiveness, confidence, and controlling behaviors, which are often associated with men. This incongruity between gender and leadership can lead to discrimination. Other industries, such as healthcare, higher education, and faith sectors, have less challenging environments rooted in service, compassion, and altruism, creating less incongruity.

Eagly and Karau (2002) also stress the significance of studying how stereotypes of leaders differ across various countries. The overall status of women in particular society may play a role in shaping these stereotypes. Western nations tend to have higher levels of women's participation in leadership roles and greater overall gender equality than Eastern nations. As a result, women in leadership may face more significant role incongruity in Eastern nations than in Western nations.

One meta-study (Koenig et al., 2011) claims that stereotypes change as culture changes over time, which changes in a manner that reduces women's role incongruity concerning leadership. The definition of effective managerial practices has evolved with a growing emphasis on democratic relationships, participatory decision-making, delegation, and team-based leadership skills. Stereotypically feminine qualities are increasingly perceived as essential leadership qualities in contemporary organisations; hence, the perceived incongruity between leader and female gender roles may have diminished, leading to increasing shares of women in leadership positions. For example, research conducted in South Africa revealed that both male and female Generation Z students prefer transformational leadership over transactional leadership, with both genders considering feminine qualities to be more important in a business leader (Bornman, 2019). Some research indicates that the growth of women leaders promotes a more balanced and androgynous view of leadership, ultimately reducing biases against current and potential women leaders (Koenig et al., 2011).

Organisational level

The organisational level explores the policies and culture of institutions, which can create biases in the workplace and community. Bias does not require an intent to exclude but instead creates a subtle and pervasive work structure and environment that makes it difficult for women to succeed (Hewlett et al., 2013).

Women have difficulty navigating masculine organisational structures and work practices.

Various organisational structures and work practices were created to fit men's lifestyles and circumstances when women represented only a small portion of the workforce (Ibarra, 2013). Gender stereotypes are more likely to occur in organisations mainly populated by men or require more male attributes to succeed (Heilman et al., 2019). Managerial culture has been established based on norms and values primarily associated with masculinity (Broughton & Miller, 2009). It may lead to "boorish" corporate cultures. According to researchers, senior women leaders worldwide struggle to establish their unique leadership identity in male-dominated environments (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). Furthermore, some women deliberately avoid such environments.

Many women have experienced the challenge of being the only woman in a room full of men, especially early in their careers (Broughton & Miller, 2009). Furthermore, informal male networks, 'old boys' networks, tend to exclude women from top jobs (ILO, 1997). Sheridan (2001) has explored how the "old boys" network has affected women's representation on public boards in Australia. She discovered that the network continues to restrict women's career advancement and that knowing the right people is often more important than having the right qualifications or knowledge when accessing board positions. Another study by Singh and Vinnicomb (2003) found that men can also be affected by exclusion from cliques and the old

boys' network. However, this exclusion is usually temporary for men, whereas it can be permanent for women due to gender.

Performance feedback also can hinder women's ascension to higher roles. One study of performance evaluations showed that feedback given to women was found to be vaguer and more focused on soft skills. In contrast, men were given more specific, strategically oriented advice. Hence, men are generally provided with feedback that is more useful for their career advancement than that given to women (Correll & Simard, 2016).

Women are held to higher standards.

Studies have shown that women are often held to higher performance standards and must work harder to be considered professional equals (Lyness & Heilman, 2006). When women are promoted, they receive better performance ratings on average compared to their male colleagues who were also promoted. Additionally, women's job performance evaluations are more significant than men's in the promotion decision-making. This suggests that women are subject to stricter or more demanding promotion criteria.

Women have more expectations in stereotypically feminine roles. For example, one study on healthcare shows pressure on women physicians to spend more time with patients and provide more emotional support than is expected of male physicians (Bertakis et al., 2003). Gender stereotypes prevent women physicians from getting positive evaluations and feedback in their jobs. The negative evaluation of female physicians is mostly not because they lack the ability and competence, but it has more to do with gender role incongruence.

Women are more likely to be placed in more precarious leadership positions than men and may be more likely to be scrutinised for their performance.

The glass cliff theory, proposed by Ryan and Haslam (2005), explains the challenges women leaders face and states that women are more likely to be appointed to leadership positions when an organisation is in crisis, and the risk of failure is higher, for example, when an organisation faces financial difficulties, declining performance, or a challenging competitive environment. Ryan and Haslam (2005) conducted a series of experimental laboratory studies that showed that participants were much more likely to select a female candidate for the position when the company's performance was declining than when it was said to be improving. Furthermore, when that failure occurs, women, rather than men, must face the consequences and are singled out for criticism and blame. Ryan and Haslam (2005) provide an extension of the Role Congruity Theory and argue that in crises, people may not automatically "think manager–think male" but may be more likely to "think crisis–think female". Women's leadership qualities, being understanding, helpful, and aware of the feelings of others, are ones that are seen to be particularly useful in times of crisis. It is expected that women leaders will bring these traits to the table.

There is a growing body of research that supports the glass cliff theory. Ryan and Haslam's (2005) research focused on the British corporate sector, and Glass and Cook (2016) focused on Fortune 500 in the US and showed that women are more likely than men to be promoted to high-risk leadership positions and often lack the support or authority to accomplish their strategic goals. Furthermore, female leaders typically have a shorter duration or period in those roles when compared to their male counterparts. Smith (2015) applied the theory to public administration. Using a national sample of the US's local education agencies, this study supports the glass cliff theory. Sabharwal (2013) examined women's challenges in Senior Executive Service in various US federal government agencies and found correlations to the theory. (Yang

et al., 2021) also provided evidence that women may face a glass cliff in the field of municipal management in the US because women are more likely than men to be hired as managers during times of fiscal stress and increasing budget deficits.

At the same time, studies have been conducted that challenge the glass cliff theory. A study by Groeneveld et al. (2020) found no evidence of a glass cliff in Dutch civil service organisations. A study in the federal regulatory agencies in the US found that the likelihood of women being placed in leadership positions during risky situations is influenced by the level of visibility of the organisation (Smith & Monaghan, 2013). Nutley and Mudd (2005) state that men and women face glass cliffs similarly in the public sector. However, women are at a higher risk of experiencing adverse outcomes because they often lack the supportive networks to help them navigate and succeed in these challenging positions. Research suggests that organisations overlook or underestimate the importance of behind-the-scenes work, such as building a team or preventing a crisis. Women are more likely to engage in this type of work, while men are more likely to perform heroic work. Although these practices were not intended to be discriminatory, their overall effect is to put women at a disadvantage. (Ibarra et al. 2013).

Interpersonal level

The interpersonal level examines the relationships between women leaders and their followers, peers, and supervisors, including factors like work-life balance and mentorship.

Women have difficulty finding work-family balance.

The traditional division of labour among women and men contributes to imbalanced work-life situations as women are still primarily responsible for family and caregiving (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women may face the pressure of family responsibilities, mainly if they are mothers.

Women's careers are often interrupted, leading to less job experience, fewer hours of employment, slower career progress, and lower earnings. This can make it difficult for them to compete for leadership positions. (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Studies show the cognitive bias that mothers are viewed as less competent and less committed than otherwise identical workers who are not mothers, which is called the 'motherhood penalty' (Benard et al., 2008). On the other hand, married men tend to have better outcomes in terms of wage negotiations and opportunities for promotion, which may be due to the perception of stability and responsibility that comes with being married. (Beauregard, 2007). On the other hand, married women may be expected to take on less demanding jobs, as reported by the same research (Beauregard, 2007). Singh and Vinnicomb (2003) found in the study that for both men and women, families were a barrier, where women reported a lack of energy, while men faced financial burdens supporting their families.

Many women are aware of the 'motherhood penalty.' As a result, younger women who aspire to leadership positions often assume that home-related stress will interfere with their work. This indicates that young women recognise the possible difficulties of balancing work and family life, mainly when traditional gender roles typically assign caregiving responsibilities to women (Savela et al., 2015).

Women lack social capital and access to informal networks.

One of the most destructive results of the work/family balancing act is that women responsible for childcare do not have the flexibility to work in the afternoon and outside of administrative hours, often leading to a lack of social capital and the ability to build a professional network. As Eagly and Carli (2007) stress, one study suggests that social capital is even more necessary to managers' progress than the skilful performance of traditional managerial

tasks. Furthermore, leadership positions are often filled through informal networks and relationships (Ibarra et al., 2013). This can lead to a cycle in male-dominated industries where men predominantly promote other men. Men's networks provide more informal help than women's, and men are likelier to have mentors who help them get promoted. Meanwhile, men in positions of power tend to direct developmental opportunities to junior men, whom they view as more likely than women to succeed.

Women lack role models.

Aspiring leaders need role models whose styles and behaviours they can model and evaluate based on their standards and others' responses. Social identity theory emphasises the importance of role models in shaping workplace identities. In mentorship, leaders and followers develop a shared sense of belonging, reinforcing the mentor's influence through a shared identity. Consequently, social identity can help leaders overcome their weaknesses by adopting a prototypical leadership style that the group can identify with (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). The lack of female leaders means fewer role models, as it may imply to young potential leaders that being a woman is a disadvantage, discouraging them from considering senior women as reliable sources of guidance and support (Ibarra et al., 2013). Furthermore, "queen bee syndrome" examines how some women in leadership positions might not actively mentor and even underestimate the career commitment of women at the beginning of their careers, thereby contributing to the lack of female role models (Faniko et al., 2020). One way that women cope with gender discrimination in their careers is by emphasising their differences from other women and applying the gender stereotypes they have encountered. When women experience bias, they may feel the need to prove that they are not like other women and that they are capable of performing as well as their male counterparts. Also, male stereotypes associated with leadership

cause women to disengage from stigmatised groups to assimilate with non-stigmatised groups (Derks et al., 2016).

Individual level

The individual level focuses on personal characteristics and experiences that may influence women's leadership, such as personality, skills, and values. Many studies identify self-imposed barriers as one of the factors limiting women in leadership positions.

Women tend to diminish and undervalue their professional skills and achievements.

Being visible at work allows employees to demonstrate their skills, get prominent assignments, and build strategic relationships. Women appear less willing to engage in self-promoting or assertive behaviours or take the risks necessary for leadership roles (Rhode & Kellerman, 2007; Fielding-Singh et al., 2018). Women in the workplace often adopt a low-key approach to avoid conflict, soften their assertiveness with niceness, and quietly work behind the scenes to get things done. Women are less likely to assert themselves and negotiate for what they want, and if they do, they are considered less socially attractive, less likeable, and less hireable (Bowles et al., 2007). Research on a women's professional development program at a large U.S. non-profit confirms that many women often choose to stay out of the spotlight at work (Fielding-Singh et al., 2018). As a result, women may be less likely than their male colleagues to gain the assignments, positions, and support necessary for leadership roles. Singh and Vinnicomb (2003) found that pursuing perfectionism can hinder women's progress. It often leads to additional time to complete a task or a job to the highest possible standard. This trait is closely linked to the impostor syndrome, where individuals feel the need to deliver exceptional work to prove their worth and avoid criticism. Many women strive to gain more experience and develop additional

skills, working hard to remain in the pipeline long enough to be deemed qualified to apply for a senior position. In contrast, men often do this with ease.

Gender stereotypes affect how people attend to, interpret, and remember information about themselves. A self-confidence gap exists between women and men (Schuh et al., 2014). Nevertheless, more women suffer from a lack of self-confidence than men (Broughton & Miller, 2009). Boys may receive messages that emphasise competition, self-confidence, and the importance of innate ability, which may be socialised to be more modest and cooperative. As a result, cultural attitudes toward women as leaders continue to suggest to women that it is often inappropriate or undesirable to possess those characteristics (Enloe, 2004). Furthermore, attribution theory in psychology examines how individuals explain the causes of their successes and failures. Men are more likely to attribute their success to their innate abilities. At the same time, women are more likely to attribute their success to external factors such as luck or temporary internal qualities like effort (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The international study by Broughton and Miller (2009) also highlighted that women tend to make fewer speculative job applications than men, particularly when they feel they do not meet all the qualifications for the job. Write (2021) highlights studies that women do not apply to leadership positions unless they think they have 100% of the competencies, whereas men will apply if they think they have 60% of the competencies. This lack of self-confidence also affects their ability to negotiate salaries, leading to lower pay than men.

Women have different motivations.

Evidence shows that younger women express equal or greater ambition for leadership than men. However, their ambition is vulnerable to decrease over time and with experience, which can contribute to gender leadership gaps (Beaupre, 2022).

Women and men have different motivations. A study has shown that women tend to have more life goals but place less importance on power-related goals. This is because women associate more negative outcomes, such as time constraints and tradeoffs, with high-power positions. They also perceive power as less desirable and are less likely to take advantage of opportunities for professional advancement. Although women view high-level positions as equally attainable as men, they consider them less desirable (Gino et al., 2015). Furthermore, women value finding meaning and making a positive impact through their work more than just financial gain and power, which highlights the intrinsic motivation. Women express concerns about pursuing a career growth trajectory regarding the personal sacrifices made by people in leadership roles (Beaupre, 2022).

Understanding the women in leadership in the public sector in Ukraine

A literature review on women leaders' challenges has revealed many complex societal, organisational, interpersonal and individual obstacles. While some argue that women face a single, outdated glass ceiling, others claim that women are confronted with a labyrinth of hurdles. The literature review shows that the labyrinth is a more accurate description. On a societal level, women often face gender-based restrictions that limit women's access to leadership roles. These gender biases lead to the fact that women are often stereotyped as being less competent and assertive than men and being penalised for being assertive or ambitious, while men are often rewarded for these same qualities. On the organisational level, women have difficulty navigating organisational structures and work practices and are more likely to be placed in more precarious leadership positions than men and may be more likely to be scrutinised for their performance. On an interpersonal level, women struggle to balance family responsibilities and the extra time required for these responsibilities. As a result, there is

less time and opportunities to access social capital and access to informal networks. There are fewer female role models for mentorship and inspiration; furthermore, senior women leaders might underestimate the career commitment of women at the beginning of their careers. On the individual level, women tend to diminish and undervalue their professional skills and achievements, which leads to a lack of nominations for leadership roles. Also, women are less motivated to become leaders with age and experience and have a different motivation prioritising meaning and impact over power-related goals. It's important to note that this literature review does not capture all existing challenges and perspectives. However, it highlights and structures key challenges that are being discussed in the academic debate.

At the same time, the literature review shows that the nature of these challenges may differ depending on the industry, region, and context and may change over time (Nett et al., 2001). While there are many studies on the challenges of women leaders in different countries, sectors, and organisational settings and periods, research on Ukraine is limited. This knowledge gap presents a significant opportunity for further analysis.

Ukraine has solid legal policies for gender equality, from international and regional commitments to national and local policies. While challenges remain in the implementation of policies, nevertheless, they have contributed to the advancement of women on various levels of society (EU4GenderEquality: Reform Helpdesk, 2023). There are attempts to gain insights into the topic in Ukraine for awareness raising and strengthening advocacy for the implementation of policies. Several studies analysed the data on the number of women in leadership in different sectors: overall business (UNDP, 2021), IT sphere (DOU, 2023), civil service (National Agency for Civil Service of Ukraine, 2023), local politics (Council for Europe, 2020), and parliament (International Centre for Policy Studies, 2017). The studies highlight the lack of women in these

sectors in general and/or leadership positions. While these studies confirm the gender disparities, only anecdotal or surface-level explanations of women leaders' challenges are provided. The underlying factors and specific experiences contributing to these disparities are not explored.

Analysing the women leadership in civil service, the data from the National Agency for Civil Service of Ukraine (2023) shows that the country's civil service has 122,410 women and 41,143 men; women hold a significant majority, representing 74% of the total civil servants. However, the number of women holding leadership managerial positions relative to the total number of employees suggests a different dynamic. Only 0.053% of women occupy Category A positions, signifying senior civil servants and "first" managers and 22.54% in Category B, which includes deputy heads of state bodies and heads of structural units in territorial bodies. Such data raises the possibility of a glass ceiling phenomenon within the civil service sector since many women are disproportionately underrepresented in top leadership roles.

However, there is no analysis of women facing challenges moving into leadership positions, such as from Category C to Category B and Category B to A. And there is no analysis of women's difficulties holding leadership positions in Category A and B. For example, suppose a woman started her career at the lowest level in Category C and aims to reach the highest rank in Category A. In that case, different experiences are progressing from Category C to Category B and Category B to A. A woman might start her career as a middle-level business professional and hold a position in Category B and may have a different experience moving to Category A. Some factors contributing to challenges in both cases overlap, but some differ depending on when women start their careers. Women's journey has the complexity and variety of challenges that appear along the way. Routes to the centre exist in both cases but are full of twists and turns, both expected and unexpected.

As DeFrank-Cole and Tan (2021) state, women are not a monolithic group but a wide variety, and careful exploration is required of different kinds of women in examining challenges in leadership. Women's challenges and factors can vary depending on the industry, region, and context and can change over time. This complexity underscores the need for a focused and context-specific study to delve into the more nuanced experiences of women facing challenges in the civil service in Ukraine. The government's digital transformation sector is selected to capture women's journeys in leadership roles. The research will focus on the challenges women leaders face in Ukraine, especially within the digital transformation sector in government. It will shed light on the unique hurdles women face in leadership roles on the societal, organisational, interpersonal and individual levels. It will contribute to the broader discourse on gender diversity in leadership.

CHAPTER 2. METHODOLOGY

The research employs a qualitative approach using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) method to investigate key challenges women leaders encounter in Ukraine's digital transformation. The choice of CIT as the primary research method in this study is based on its suitability for capturing specific experiences and challenges. It is a retrospective and flexible method that allows participants to recall and recount their experiences in their own words, thus reflecting and providing insights. The study's research question is 'What are the specific challenges that women leaders face in the sphere of digital transformation in Ukraine?' CIT is a suitable method for answering this question because it allows for collecting rich and detailed data on complex and multifaceted societal, organisational, interpersonal and individual issues.

Initially developed by the psychologist Flanagan as a quantitative approach to analysing observational data, CIT has since expanded into a valuable research approach for understanding real-life issues and challenges and is recognised as an effective exploratory and investigative tool (Hettlage & Steinlin, 2006); hence it has since been used in a wide range of disciplines and as a qualitative method, including in recent leadership studies.

The CIT allows collecting and analysing detailed personal narratives that offer a unique human perspective. Hettlage and Steinlin (2006) highlight that such a tool helps reflect on professional practice. The CIT focuses on collecting and analysing critical incidents or events that are significant in the lives of individuals or groups. Critical incidents can be associated with past or current experiences or observations in everyday life or professional practice and can be positive or negative. It facilitates understanding the issues and obstacles people face occasionally (Serrat, 2017). Tripp (1993) also notes that critical incidents are not necessarily dramatic or obvious but are straightforward accounts of commonplace events that occur in professional practice. Serrat (2017) expands that critical incidents are not spectacular. However, events or

circumstances can make one stop and think, revisit one's assumptions, or impact one's personal and professional learning. Due to its retrospective nature, the CIT technique is a valuable reflective tool for enabling women professionals to recall their experiences of the leadership journey using their own words, thus reflecting and providing insights.

Hettlage and Steinlin (2006) highlight some advantages of using the CIT technique, which is relevant to the current study. The CIT technique helps identify and analyse rare events or circumstances that might not be picked up by methods of investigation dealing with everyday episodes (Serrat, 2017). CIT's emphasis on gathering detailed and context-specific data is particularly advantageous in this research, as it identifies precise challenges and incidents that may not be apparent through quantitative methods or general qualitative inquiries. The CIT technique turns complex experiences into rich data and information, as most people enjoy telling stories and being listened to. Primarily, when data and information are collected anonymously, researchers can obtain deep information about individuals' emotions, feelings, and actions and find new meaning (Serrat, 2017). As a result, in this research, women will share their lived experiences, including emotions, feelings, and actions of individuals, which would enrich the data on challenges they face.

Limitations of CIT

According to Serrat (2017), the CIT technique has some limitations. Critical incidents are told by participants based on individual perceptions, memories, honesty, and biases; hence, there is a level of subjectivity, which might lead to difficulty in obtaining a completely objective understanding of organisational issues. Furthermore, not all incidents told by individuals are equally relevant or significant. Hence, careful analysis should be conducted. Participants might be reluctant to share critical incidents. Sharing personal experiences, especially those related to

adverse events, can be uncomfortable or sensitive for individuals. This reluctance can hinder the effectiveness of the technique.

The process of investigating and analysing critical incidents can be time-consuming and laborious. Collecting and evaluating the data may require substantial effort, which can be a limitation, mainly when time is a constraint.

Hettlage and Steinlin (2006) also highlight additional limitations. The CIT technique does not produce complex quantified data; hence, for outsiders, results might not look representative as they only reflect "special cases".

Using the CIT technique requires in-depth knowledge of a particular field or domain being studied. The quality and relevance of the incidents gathered and the ability to place answers in the proper context heavily depend on the interviewer's expertise. Consequently, if the interviewer lacks expertise, the data quality may suffer.

The quality of the data obtained from the CIT interviews technique depends on how well the incident reflects everyday situations. Researchers should ensure that the incidents relate to the participants' daily lives and are not too abstract. The incidents should mirror situations, challenges, or achievements that participants can easily understand and relate to. Doing so makes the participants more likely to provide richer and more authentic data, leading to better insights gained from the research.

Data collection

This research collected qualitative data, specifically semi-structured face-to-face interviews with women in Category A and B positions within the Ministry of Digital Transformation. Category A comprises senior civil servants, also known as "first" managers, while Category B includes deputy heads of state bodies and heads of structural units in territorial

bodies. The personal network at the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine was used to contact women leaders. Ten interviews were conducted from 15 November 2023 to 15 December 2023. The interviewees were told that the interview was confidential and anonymous. The interviewees were told that questions were about their professional experience. No incentives were offered to participants as their participation was voluntary. Each interview's time varied based on the answers given by the interviewees, usually 1 hour but at most 1 hour and 30 minutes. The nine questions were asked, which are shown in Appendix 1.

The interviews were conducted over Zoom. The interviews were recorded on the computer, which has a passcode, and deleted from the iCloud and computer after completing the research project.

All interviews were conducted in Ukrainian to accommodate the language capacity. All the primary data was gathered in the form of audio recordings and was transcribed. The analysis was conducted in Ukrainian, and the results were written in English.

CHAPTER 3. ANALYSIS

Women in the Ukrainian government reported that several challenges affect their careers and professional lives. Such challenges occur on a societal, organisational, interpersonal and individual level. The experience of these challenges is not uniform among all women, as each woman's experience is unique, shaped by her circumstances and the specific context. Not all women encounter these challenges to the same extent or in the same way. The depth and nature of these issues vary significantly from one individual to another. However, some patterns are observed, indicating common challenges, which are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of findings on challenges

Level	Challenge
Societal level	Double bias of ageism and gender
Societal level	Appearance Under Scrutiny
Societal level	The use of pet names
Societal level	Penalty for being assertive or ambitious
Organisational level	Pressure in the male-dominant environment
Organisational level	Double standards: performance and workload
Interpersonal level	"Queen bee syndrome"
Interpersonal level	Work-life conflict

Individual level	Different motivation
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Societal level

Double bias of ageism and gender

One of the most significant challenges women face is the stereotype of 'age' and being a young female professional. While ageism is often associated with older individuals, these women's experiences highlight a different aspect where youth becomes a disadvantage, leading to premature judgment and underestimation. They emphasised how a combination of ageism and gender biases shaped their colleagues' professional perceptions of them.

One example involves an interviewee who faced stereotyping during a job interview for a government role. Her young age and being a woman made her feel judged about her competence and suitability for the role: *'I could sense right away that they looked at me as a young green woman, and the interviewers' tone implied why I was even applying for the position'*.

Another interviewee's experience during a meeting about a new project further illustrates this issue. She perceived that her ideas were extensively questioned and critiqued, not on merit, but due to assumptions about her inexperience and lack of technical knowledge, influenced by her age and gender. She also highlighted: *'If you are a young woman and you have no one to protect you such as Deputy Minister or Minister sitting next to you..then you can simply not be listened to.'* It implies that young women may feel the need for higher-level support to gain the same level of respect and attention as their male or higher-level counterparts. This need for external validation or 'protection' to be listened to reflects a significant disparity in how young professionals, particularly women, are treated.

A particularly telling instance was shared by an interviewee, who was mistaken for a student in a professional setting because she looked youthful: '*At that time, I was a representative in the courts. There was a case when I was asked in court whether I had even finished school. And I said I have a master's degree in law with an excellency diploma.*' Such incidents highlight "role incredulity" when women get mistaken for interns, trainees, administrative assistants, etc, because of their youthful looks.

Additionally, another interviewee recounted a remark she received: '*Oh, my God, how come you are already doing such work at your age?*' expressing surprise or disbelief that someone her age can perform at a certain level or hold specific responsibilities. The statement suggests that there are preconceived notions about what someone of her age should or should not be capable of.

These incidents highlight double bias that intersects age and gender and equates both being young and female with a lack of knowledge or capability, overlooking the individual's actual skills and experience.

During the literature review, double bias and ageism were not initially identified as a prevalent challenge encountered by women leaders. However, during this research, it emerged as a significant theme frequently discussed by many women. One recent study (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2023) highlights that women in the workforce face age bias regardless of how old they are. 'No matter what age the women were, it was 'never quite right' for leadership' (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2023, para. 4) . Gendered ageism is a double whammy for professional women, as they face both age and gender bias, resulting in "never-right" age bias. The study highlights that many younger women also experienced a credibility deficit, which occurs when women's statements and expertise are not believed. As interviews showed, women leaders in the digital transformation

sphere faced both age and gender bias, creating a double bias that they must overcome in their professional experience.

Appearance Under Scrutiny

Several interviewees discussed the judgment they felt their colleagues made about their appearance. One interviewee highlighted how she was told: *'You are too pretty to do those hard things at work'*. She stressed that, from one perspective, male colleagues complimented her appearance; however, she felt it was an insult and undermined her professional capacities.

Another interviewee discussed how she presented a large-scale and complex project that was significant to her. *'And when the presentation finished, I received an email. 'Thank you for the presentation, but focusing on the content was tough because I was mesmerised by your beauty. Moreover, I was furious... and the situation disappointed me'*. The interviewee highlighted that she felt that her appearance was under scrutiny. She mentioned that she would prefer to be praised for her professional abilities rather than her appearance, which undermines her professionalism. The same interviewee highlighted how, during the event at the business trip, she was asked to do an opening speech, and when she agreed, there was a surprise and comment from the organiser: *'I thought that you were here for the beauty'*. She added her dismay, *'I am sure that if it were a man, he would not have been told this phrase'*.

Furthermore, one interviewee discussed that such compliments on being beautiful bring double feelings since it is *'a very personal characteristic, not a work characteristic'*. She described how, at a previous job, a male colleague of the same age and position was never commented on his looks, but she did. *'From the point of view of a man, he was handsome, stylish. However, for some reason, people told him regularly that he was so smart, but I was just*

beautiful .' This disparity underscores a gendered bias in professional environments where women's looks are often given undue attention.

These experiences demonstrate how such comments reduce a professional individual to their physical appearance, implying that women's looks are more important or relevant than their professional skills, knowledge, or contributions. This is demeaning and perpetuates the idea that a woman's value is tied to women's looks rather than their competencies. These types of comments reinforce gender stereotypes that prioritise a woman's appearance over intelligence or professional abilities. It suggests that regardless of a woman's role or expertise, her physical appearance is still subject to evaluation and commentary.

The use of pet names towards women.

One of the predominant challenges raised by most women was the discomfort and professional undermining they felt because male colleagues called them by pet names and diminutives such as 'girl' or other forms. While some pet names may be used to express affection in the home or romantic relationships, women felt that they were not appropriate in the workplace and undermined their authority.

Some interviewees highlighted how they had this experience before working in the digital transformation sphere. One interviewee stresses that in one male-dominated sphere, there was a case when she led a large, important project. During meetings with clients, investors and colleagues, her manager addressed her in a caressing way. He felt that it undermined her input and achievements within the project in front of other colleagues as well as clients: *'it's not just my authority within the organisation; it's just that your clients and investors attitude towards you goes down... as there was a tiny cat, a bunny, who quickly jumped in and made a document, it just felt like they were reducing the contribution of my work to the project'*. Interviewee

mentioned that afterwards, she asked her manager not to do it anymore. The interviewee felt that women in leadership could stop this behaviour. However, women in more junior positions are terrified to confront it.

For another interviewee, this experience took place within the digital transformation sphere. She mentioned that in one situation with a disagreement, the colleague from another ministry called her 'a girl'. *'If I were a man in my position, this head of department would not have written 'boys'. He used the word 'girl' to belittle me. He could have just written 'colleague'. So why was the word girl used?'*, highlighting the discrepancy in how pet words are used to undermine women but not men. The interviewee felt it was a tactic to diminish her professional identity and credibility, suggesting she is not on the same level as her male counterparts. There is also an issue of the age stereotype, as the term 'girl' was used to imply inexperience. The interviewee stressed that such a situation is an environment of disrespect for her. Hence, she had to discontinue further communication with this colleague.

Another interviewee told how her male subordinate, whom she directly supervised, called her a 'sunshine' regularly. While she perceived that it was not meant to offend, overall, she felt that there was a level of unacceptance of her as a female leader. Such a situation created a peculiar professional relationship. On the surface, the term 'sunshine' appeared friendly. However, it simultaneously diminished her perception as a leader and conveyed a subtle undercurrent of not regarding her with complete seriousness. This dual nature of the term highlighted the complex nuances of gender dynamics in professional settings.

As Diehl and Dzubinsky (2020) highlight, using pet names implies that women do not belong in professional settings and lack competence. This practice can be seen as a form of gendered communication, where women are addressed in ways more appropriate for familial or

intimate relationships, such as being referred to as mothers, sisters, daughters, or wives rather than as professional equals. Such language comes across as condescending and demeaning as it diminishes the professional identity of women, treating them as though they are children rather than competent adults in a professional setting. Furthermore, this practice might even stem from intimidation by women's abilities. By using diminutive and demoralising pet names, there is a possibility that some colleagues attempt to 'put women in their place', subtly undermining their competence and authority.

Penalty for being assertive or ambitious.

One interviewee described how she and another female colleague had to assert the position in negotiations with male business partners. Their effort to maintain a position, at times raising their voices for emphasis, was later construed negatively in social media posts: *'how we treated them inappropriately, and how bad it is for the civil service and in the context of European integration.'* Interviewee stressed: *'Men whom two women cornered prevented from achieving what they wanted, and the only thing they could get hold of was to highlight that we are unbalanced women who showed emotions'*. This tactic suggests a bias where women's expressions of emotion or passion in a professional context are used to undermine their arguments or positions, labelling them as 'unbalanced'. It can also be examined as a common challenge where women's assertiveness in professional settings is often misinterpreted as emotional instability or aggression, and there is also a double standard in how emotional expressions are perceived differently based on gender. Interviewee emphasized: *'When a man shows emotion... this is a typical story. If you are a woman and you raise your voice, it means you are hysterical and unbalanced, and you have no place in such structures[government body] at all.'*

Additionally, another interviewee highlighted the double standards women face in professional settings, particularly regarding self-defence or assertiveness in challenging situations. She pointed out that women who stand up for themselves or push back are often labelled as 'a bitch,' a pejorative term used by both men and women. This label penalises women for behaviour that is typically accepted or even admired by their male counterparts, reinforcing a gendered bias in workplace dynamics.

As the literature review suggested, such a situation is a common challenge for women in leadership roles and supports role congruity theory. Women who become leaders tend to receive less favourable evaluations of their leadership behaviour because of societal beliefs about how women ought to behave. While assertiveness and emotional expressions are often seen as strengths or normal behaviours in male leaders, they can be used against women to portray them as less competent or professional.

Organisational level

Pressure in the male-dominant environment

Many women highlighted their experiences in a predominantly male environment and how they felt more pressure in such settings. One interviewee described how she felt intimidated during a job interview where she faced a panel of experienced men. It was a stressful and intimidating interview process for her. There was an emotional toll on this experience, highlighting the intense pressure and subsequent emotional reactions, such as a breakdown after the interview: *'It is not that they asked prejudicial questions, but it's more about the atmosphere and the tone.'* Such a statement highlights the subtlety of intimidation, highlighting how non-verbal cues impact women in male-dominated settings. It was not overt discrimination but rather the underlying tone and atmosphere that seemed unwelcoming and dismissive of her capabilities.

Another interviewee describes a challenging situation where she entered a room to present only to find herself as the only woman in a room full of men. She felt pressure and self-consciousness about her appearance (being in a brightly coloured suit among men in black sweatshirts), contributing to discomfort and heightened scrutiny. The interviewee described how she did not present well due to various factors; however, *'I felt these condescending attitudes of the men, which deeply affected me. It felt like they were patronising me, almost as if they were implying that it's expected for a 'pretty girl' to fail in front of men.'*

Similarly, another interviewee spoke of her experience pitching a new project idea to senior male officials from the business. The interviewee, being younger and the only woman in the meeting, faced the feeling of underestimation: *'Our meeting lasted about an hour and fifty minutes, and I was subjected to intense criticism. They questioned my understanding of the situation, asking, 'Do you even realise what you're getting into, and who do you think you are?' They doubted my knowledge, saying, 'You have no idea how this works.' They challenged my expectations, asking, 'Why do you think it will work as you imagine?'*. The story highlights the difficulty of asserting professional competence in a male-dominated environment with a predisposition to undervalue one's skills and ideas due to gender and age. The interviewee recounted that she felt being perceived as "stupid" and "uneducated" because she is a woman.

Another compelling account details an interviewee's efforts to launch an e-service in collaboration with another government agency known for its male-dominated workforce. During crucial meetings, she outlined the e-service's structure and the agency's role in its development. However, she faced significant challenges from older, higher-ranking male officials. She was either not greeted back or outright ignored. In a particularly stark incident during a Zoom meeting, she was abruptly disconnected from the discussion: *'My colleagues told me not to worry*

because these people never faced women who told them what to do, as before women were the ones who sorted papers in the office'. While the interviewee described that she established a working relationship with these officials, her experience highlights the additional efforts required by women to establish their credibility and authority in such settings. She believes that part of the problem of establishing an effective working relationship with government agency representatives was her identity as a young female professional.

The literature review highlighted that many women have experienced the challenge of being the only woman in a room full of men, especially early in their careers (Broughton & Miller, 2009). Women leaders in the sphere of digital transformation also faced both crude and overt challenges in male-dominated environments. Such challenges stem from the gender stereotype about the role of women in the professional environment, such as women being less capable, which leads to underestimation, scrutiny and overall additional pressure.

Double standards: performance and workload

Many women raised the issue that women are often held to higher performance standards and must work harder to be considered professional equals. Such experiences occurred in their careers, mainly before joining the digital transformation sphere.

One interviewee highlighted her previous experience working at a local government body, where the older female manager had different and more demanding requirements for female professionals. Such behaviour formed a particular culture where women were treated differently overall. She mentioned: *'At that time, some male colleagues had a corresponding impression of the female colleagues, as the culture had already formed: do your writing, I'm working on the manager's assignment, and you're just a typewriter, type some more.'* The same interviewee also highlighted how, in digital transformation, she feels that women must work

more because of prejudices that such a sphere requires intellectual capabilities. However, normal working relationships get established after some time, and a particular level of effort and persistence is needed.

Another interviewee mentioned that writing official documents is a significant part of any government official job. However, she thinks women are sometimes expected more because they demonstrate themselves as more responsible workers: *'These are greater demands for women as they are more responsible... In my own experience, I saw this, and it was very offensive ..sometimes when I write a 10-page paper and get edits from the manager, I need to write more and more, but when, for example, a guy wrote a 3-page paper on the same thesis, it is okay. I think that women immediately show a more responsible attitude, giving rise to greater demands on them.* She further explained, *'I think that women immediately show a more responsible attitude, giving rise to greater demands on them.'* Another interviewee also highlighted her approach to being supportive in the workplace, emphasising her initial efforts to assist her colleagues as much as possible. Over time, it fostered an expectation among her peers that she would always be available to help, inadvertently creating an additional workload for herself. Women in leadership roles are often expected to be more nurturing and accommodating than their male counterparts, which can lead to additional burdens not typically placed on male leaders. These insights reveal the tendency to burden women more due to perceived characteristics like responsibility and support/nurture. In this case, a woman's extensive work was subjected to rigorous scrutiny and revision, whereas a male colleague's shorter and less detailed work was readily accepted. This narrative highlights a common yet subtle form of gender bias in the workplace: the tendency for women to take on more responsibility, either due to internal motivation or external expectations, can lead to an inequitable distribution of

workload and scrutiny. This heightened sense of responsibility, while a testament to their commitment and diligence, results in women facing more intense evaluations and greater workloads than their male counterparts. Another interviewer highlighted the situations when she had to pick up the responsibilities of her male colleague because she felt the responsibility to do so. One of the cases was when a male colleague had to present to an international audience but refused, so she presented despite having difficulties presenting in English. The interviewee felt she had to 'save the situation' and do extra work because of her heightened sense of responsibility.

One interviewee also highlighted that women are expected to be better communicators and organisers with all stakeholders in the project. *'I think women are better at communicating with everyone involved and making sure everyone is happy, but at the same time, it's more expected from us than male colleagues; hence, in the end, we expected to do more... it's more about service orientation compared to male project manager... everyone has to be happy with your project.'* The interviewee also highlighted that the expectation to manage communications and relationships effectively often involves significant emotional labour, which can be mentally and emotionally draining. Such aspect of the work is often invisible and unaccounted for, yet it takes a toll on women leaders. This case also shows how women are often perceived as naturally possessing communal qualities like empathy, communication skills, and a service-oriented mindset. At the same time, such a valuable trait works against women as they feel the expectation to not only fulfil their role but also to excel in these areas more so than their male counterparts.

One interviewee encountered how her contribution of ideas and suggestions during the meeting was overlooked compared to males with similar ideas. *'I said some idea at a meeting,*

and I was not heard, and my male colleague said the same thing in different words, and everyone said yes, that's right. .. I understand that they didn't want to offend me personally or anything.

But it's very upsetting for me, and it makes me feel insecure.' Her account highlights a subtle yet pervasive form of bias where women's contributions at work are undervalued or ignored, leading to undermining a woman's sense of security and self-worth in a professional environment.

Another interviewee also highlighted the double standard of women expecting to do more work, which leads to demotivation and emotional distress under some circumstances: *'To get it, you must make twice as much effort. And this is unfair. And it hurt me so much because I always worked hard. I always worked harder than my male colleagues.'*

Also, one interviewee mentioned that she experienced how women's bad performance at work is often attributed to their status outside work : *'If a man is not working well, nobody looks at outside factors. But a woman's bad performance can be attributed to her status outside work, for example, if she has kids and does not have time to perform better'*. This insight also points to a gender-biased double standard in professional environments. While men's performance issues are generally viewed in isolation from their personal lives, women's professional struggles are often attributed to their roles outside of work, such as being a parent. This unfairly penalises women for their family commitments and overlooks other potential factors contributing to their work performance. Such a perspective undermines women's professional identity. It perpetuates a stereotype that women, especially those with familial responsibilities, cannot be as committed or competent in their jobs as their male counterparts.

Another interviewee discussed how she witnessed the situation when a female colleague was invited to be a speaker at the conference because of a personal tragedy. She mentioned that it was implicitly said. The interviewee discussed how a female colleague was not invited because

of her competencies but because of the pity of her family circumstances. *'Do you think a man would have been pitied and given a spot? It's only women who are treated with such pity.'* Such incident highlights how women are more likely to be seen through the lens of their personal lives and emotional experiences rather than their professional abilities.

Literature review showed that women are often held to higher performance standards and must work harder to be considered professional equals (Lyness & Heilman, 2006). Furthermore, women have more expectations in stereotypically feminine roles. (Bertakis et al., 2003). The interviews with women leaders in the sphere of digital transformation confirm that they face similar challenges.

Interpersonal level

Work-family (personal life) conflict

Balancing professional responsibilities with personal or family responsibilities has long been considered challenging for women. In exploring the challenge of work-family balance, the interviewees raised a range of diverse situations, reflecting the varied experiences and strategies employed by women leaders to manage such aspects of their lives. This variation in experiences underscores the complex and individual nature of work-family balance.

Gender Bias in Job Interview Questions

Two interviewees recounted experiences from their early career job interviews, where they faced intrusive questions about their personal lives. One interviewee highlighted the discomfort and confusion caused by such inquiries, which are unrelated to one's professional qualifications: *'One of the questions was, who am I living with? When am I going to have children? And somehow, I was very embarrassed. What does this have to do with who I am as a professional?'* Another interviewee shed light on the underlying rationale for these questions,

explaining that *the interviewer who conducted the interview had some experience and institutional memory. For example, I will hire a man because a woman will go on maternity leave, fall in love, get married, and move to another city; I will hire a man because it is more reliable. But it is very wrong to draw such conclusions.*' Such assumptions, often not directed at male candidates, are based on the belief that a woman's family commitments might interfere with her suitability for the role or professional obligation. Such inquiries perpetuate the stereotype that women's primary role is of a caregiver, which can influence perceptions of professional commitment as secondary to their potential family roles, a bias not commonly applied to men.

Pressures for Women Returning to Work After Maternity Leave

One interviewee's experience exemplifies the pressure women often face when deciding to return to work from maternity leave. She recounted the reactions she received when she announced her plan to return to work six months after childbirth.: *'When I said that I plan to return to work in six months, some people reacted with shock and disapproval, questioning, 'What are you doing? What about your child? You will regret it when the child says the first word or starts to walk, and so on.'* This response highlights societal expectations placed on women, often dictating that their primary responsibility should be childcare, especially in the child's early years. Such perspectives can be detrimental by imposing guilt and doubt on working mothers and reinforcing the stereotype that a woman's professional aspirations should take a backseat to her family responsibilities. One interviewee described such pressure: *'I went through such a path of doubts and mental torment..'*

Another interviewee highlighted her colleague's experience returning to work after maternity leave: *'Our colleague, when she gave birth, worked and breastfed for up to a year. She*

came to work, and she carried these bottles so that she could breastfeed. She worked like this for a year. She is a mother and a working woman'. Such experience illustrates how women have to juggle professional responsibilities with the demands of motherhood.

An interviewee shared her reactions to a professional woman whose husband opted for paternity leave instead of her taking maternity leave. She highlighted how a woman was treated with sympathy and pity. Such a situation, when a woman is being sympathized because she is not on maternity leave, reflects deeply ingrained gender norms and expectations about parenting roles. Women have been expected to take on the primary caregiving responsibilities, including maternity leave after childbirth, while men are expected to continue working. Men taking paternity leave challenge these, leading to misplaced sympathy towards the woman. This sympathy often stems from the presumption that the man is neglecting his 'role' as the provider, compelling the woman to fill in rather than other circumstances, such as the couple's mutual and deliberate decision.

One interviewee highlighted the challenge she faced in maintaining their professional standing, especially in leadership roles, when she took maternity leave. She stressed that during women's absence, there's a risk of being replaced or losing the professional standing they had achieved: *"You will lose the level you were at, especially if you are in a leadership position. If you are a man, you don't go on maternity leave, so it's harder to be undercut. If you go on maternity leave, then it's just easier to be undercut"*, indicating an inherent gender inequality where women are at a disadvantage in terms of career progression due to maternity-related absences.

Dual Duties: The Intersection of Motherhood/ Home Duties and Professional Development

One interviewee highlighted how motherhood impacts a woman's professional life by having primary responsibility of childcare for women: *'When women give birth, their ability to work decreases. For example, small children get sick. The nuance is that when men leave the house and have children, they know that there is a mother, and if the child gets sick, the woman will take care of it, and it will not affect him and his work. He will not run to the hospital, or it rarely happens. Most of the time, it's women who will run'*. Another interviewee highlighted that family affects professional development: *'It affects you greatly because you must consider your family's needs'*. At the same time, one interviewee mentioned: *'it is logical that managers can question if women can combine their responsibilities'*, acknowledging that it is a widely accepted notion within many professional settings.

Another interviewee highlighted how, in her previous experience in a male-dominated government sphere: *'the leadership did not want to see too many women because she would get pregnant, go on maternity leave, etc.'*. This perspective reflects a traditional viewpoint where women's potential for pregnancy and family responsibilities are seen as liabilities in the professional context. However, it's noteworthy that all the women interviewed mentioned that such blatant prejudice does not exist in the digital transformation sphere. Furthermore, they highlighted that workplace flexibility, such as flexible work hours and remote working options, supports them in managing work-life balance.

Two interviewees highlighted the struggle of discussing the challenges of maintaining a balance between their personal lives and the demands of their leadership roles. They highlighted the toll of extensive work commitments, often leading to a significant reduction in personal time. One interviewee candidly shared: *'I dedicate my all to work. Sometimes, in those particularly tough moments, I pause and realize that I haven't done anything for myself all week, simply*

because I'm too exhausted. ' Such a statement highlights how the leadership role can leave with little to no time for personal pursuits, leading to exhaustion and frustration. This struggle often results in a significant reduction in time and energy for personal activities and self-care. Another interviewee partially attributed her prolonged working hours as a contributing factor to her relationship ending, citing unmet expectations of being more present at home and fulfilling specific domestic responsibilities. Reflecting on her current situation, she desired to reduce her work commitments as she often feels devastated; hence, she would like to manage better and prioritize her personal life.

The majority of interviewees discussed that they managed to achieve a balance between their professional responsibilities and personal lives. They highlighted the importance of a strong support network, such as partners and family members, in helping to manage their multiple responsibilities. This support often manifests in shared responsibilities at home, hiring additional help such as nannies, or understanding when work demands extend beyond regular hours. One interviewee stressed: *'It must be the family's decision that you start working under what conditions, and it must be a balanced decision they can make. There is always a solution. But there has to be a desire, first of all. And there must be an agreement in the family.'* The interviewee further highlighted that careful management is required to achieve the balance: *'We just choose management, that is, we work out an algorithm, we adjust, we delegate, and we cope with it successfully... you just have two roles: here you are a boss, here you are a mother and a wife, and so on; you don't need to change or replace them; you just have two social roles, and you have to fulfil them.* Another interviewee also highlighted the support from a husband: *'My husband understood that I needed it; he understood that I would not stay at home'*. However, she also highlighted the choice women have to make if there is no support at home: *'if there is no*

support or conflicts at home because of work, you will never realize yourself and have to choose either a career or a family. Another interview further highlighted the role of parents in supporting her professional career: 'In my previous work, my parents understood that my work started at 6 am and ended in the middle of the night, and they were ready to sit with the child until the age of 3 until the kindergarten started. Also, no kindergarten will take a child at 5 in the morning when you go to the office, so family support is essential here.'

Similarly, women mentioned the support from family and partners to meet the work demands, even if it means longer hours and extra engagements. For instance, one interviewee noted: *'My husband is calm about sometimes I have to work on Saturday or Sunday... It's my choice that this is how we do things. And in any case, there is no negativity about it'*. This statement reflects an understanding and supportive dynamic that facilitates professional commitments. Another interviewee shared a similar experience, stating: *'Well, in our family, there is no problem with the fact that if I am working late, he knows that I am working late, so I will come home, dinner is prepared, everything is tidied up'*. This example highlights a partnership where domestic responsibilities are shared, allowing her to focus on her work without additional stress about home duties. Such cases reflect a shift in traditional gender roles and expectations, showing that women can thrive professionally and personally when domestic responsibilities are shared, and partners understand professional commitments.

These accounts underscore the importance of a supportive home environment in enabling women to pursue their career goals without sacrificing their family life or personal well-being. Alongside the support at home, many interviewees highlighted the flexibility and the culture of the Ministry of Digital Transformation as supportive in pursuing leadership and managing work-life balance. Some interviewees highlighted the flexibility offered by the organization, allowing

her to work from home or adjust her schedule as needed, which is beneficial for her as a professional woman, especially in circumstances like children's illness. Another interviewee highlighted the flexibility in organizational culture with a focus on results over a strict 9-to-6 schedule, which is helpful for women who may need to balance work with other responsibilities, such as childcare.

"Queen bee syndrome"

The literature review showed the crucial role of role models in shaping aspiring leaders. Therefore, the scarcity of female leaders presents a significant gap in role models for young, potential leaders, discouraging them from considering senior women as reliable sources of guidance and support.

Interestingly, most interviewees did not consider the presence or absence of role models as a significant factor influencing their professional growth. However, one interviewee's experience starkly contrasted with the experience of others. She highlighted that when she transitioned from a male-dominated sphere where being a woman was a clear disadvantage to another sphere where many women were leaders, her attitude towards herself changed: *'There was a huge percentage of women in this team of reformers. They were just such strong, powerful women leaders, absolutely self-made... Because of these women and their example, as they headed departments and ministries, they showed what it means to be a successful woman who is not afraid to express her opinion, take responsible positions, or take responsibility. When I started in this sphere, I started to follow the example that there is no shame in being a woman here because in my previous work [heavily male-dominated government sphere] if you are a woman, you are zero...'* This story underscores the transformative impact of female role models

on this interviewee; seeing women in positions of power and leadership redefined an individual's understanding of what is possible for themselves, challenging preconceived notions and biases. Another interviewee mentioned that she does not have role models. However, she discussed she is profoundly influenced by her female manager, a source of inspiration : *'She is such an example for me. She is a woman who is probably not typical for our society, who also does not set herself limits and works very hard... I'm probably lucky to work with such a person'*. This statement highlights the positive impact of having a female leader who breaks societal stereotypes and demonstrates a strong work ethic and limitless ambition, providing a powerful example for other women in the workplace.

The concept of 'queen bee syndrome', as highlighted in the literature review, addresses a phenomenon where women in leadership positions may underestimate or even undermine the career commitment of women at the beginning of their careers. This behaviour can contribute to the lack of female role models and hinder the development of supportive networks for aspiring female professionals. Two interviewees highlighted their experience of women leaders actively undermining their younger female colleagues' achievements and contributions.

One interviewee described a case where an older female colleague treated her as a competitor. This situation became evident when she received increased responsibilities from their manager, which seemed to cause discomfort or resentment in her colleague. She recalled: *'When our manager raised my level of responsibility and gave me individual tasks, it was very painful to her. She constantly told our manager that I took too many sick days when my kids were sick'*. This behaviour reflects a lack of support and a competitive attitude that can be detrimental to the professional growth of younger women. As the interviewee highlighted: *'Women see you as a rival, not an ally.'*

Another interviewee echoed a similar experience, where her female manager imposed different and more challenging requirements on female professionals, an issue already discussed in the context of double standards in performance and workload. She felt that her older female colleague was actively undermining her, creating an environment that was not conducive to her professional development.

The "queen bee syndrome" presents a unique barrier where female leaders' expected support and mentorship might be just absent but replaced with competition and challenging requirements compared to male colleagues.

Individual level

Different motivation

Several interviewees highlighted the motivating factors to pursue leadership roles as creating impactful and innovative products and services and the ability to resolve problems and help citizens. As one interviewee highlighted: *'I am always motivated by power in terms of my ability to help people. You recognise the problem, you solve it, and it's a powerful understanding that you can solve a big problem for many people. For example, I can make a great digital service so citizens don't have to suffer with all these papers'*. The interviewee stressed that leadership is about enabling impactful solutions for many people. For interviewees, leadership is not about authority and power but about leveraging that authority to contribute to society and make a difference on a larger scale, especially at the state level.

A strong desire for ongoing personal and professional growth emerged as another critical motivator. Pursuing knowledge and its application in new and diverse areas was highlighted as a significant driving force. An interviewee reflected this by stating: *'I don't expect praise because everything I do is for myself; the investment in a project is always my investment. And the*

motivation is very often to make the best of what exists... how to do something most creatively'.

This highlights the intrinsic value of self-improvement in leadership roles. Moreover, the autonomy and the freedom to be creative and autonomous to develop self-sustaining products is highly motivating.

Conversely, some interviewees cited recognition from peers or family as a motivator. They pointed out that acknowledging their work's impact provides a sense of fulfilment. However, the absence of such recognition or the failure to see tangible results from their efforts was mentioned as a source of frustration and potential demotivation.

The literature review highlighted that women often have a different motivation from men. Interviews confirm that intrinsic motivations primarily drive women. They value making a meaningful impact and contributing positively to society over acquiring power or financial gain. The interviewees' desire for ongoing personal and professional growth, autonomy, and creativity aligns with the literature's findings that women have more life goals. This indicates a broader perspective on career development, focusing on continuous learning, self-improvement and personal expression.

Such motivations differ from traditional structures prioritising different values, such as competition and power. The emphasis on intrinsic motivations and broader life goals contributes to redefining what constitutes leadership success. This perspective moves away from traditional metrics like financial gain or hierarchical power and towards more holistic measures like impact, personal fulfilment, and contribution to society.

CHAPTER 4. DISCUSSION

The interviews with women leaders in the digital transformation sphere highlighted the challenges women face throughout their careers. No single obstacle prevents women from advancing, as suggested in the glass ceiling theory, but instead, there are various obstacles at different points throughout their careers. The experiences of women leaders in the digital transformation sphere are relevant to the notion of the labyrinth that Eagly and Carli (2007) suggest, as there is a complex and uncertain journey in their professional careers. The interviews showed that women leaders face various challenges at various levels - societal, organisational, interpersonal, and individual.

On the societal level, women leaders most often faced ageism, appearance scrutiny and the use of pet names. Such challenges stem from gendered stereotypes and biases about women's professional abilities. Societal preconceptions of what a woman of a particular age is capable of lead to "never-right" age bias. Younger female professionals are seen as inexperienced, leading to underestimation and credibility issues. Moreover, women's physical appearance is frequently emphasised and scrutinised over their professional competencies, overshadowing and undermining their professional skills and contributions. Such challenges stem from traditional gender roles where there is an emphasis on a woman's appearance. Hence, looks are more important or relevant than professional competencies.

The practice of being addressed by pet names and diminutives also undermines women's professional identity and authority. It stems from the traditional view of women in familial or intimate roles (such as mothers, sisters, daughters, or wives) rather than as professional equals. Also, such practices infantilise women; hence, they are treated as children rather than competent adults in a professional setting. Furthermore, this practice might even stem from intimidation by

women's abilities and pet names are used to demoralise women and 'put them in their place'. Penalty for being assertive and ambitious was highlighted but to a lesser extent compared to others. It stems from traditional gender roles where these qualities are associated with masculinity, marking such behaviour as unfavourable in women. Women expressing assertiveness or ambition are often labelled as 'emotional' or 'hysterical', while similar behaviour in men is seen as usual or even admirable. Hence, women face a double standard that penalises them for traits typically valued in leaders. While some women in particular situations felt that biases in behaviour were purposeful, most believed they were largely unconscious and unintentional, as they were deeply embedded in societal structures in Ukraine. Women noted the shift in attitudes towards women in professional settings. However, the subtle nature of the biases makes them harder to address because they are not always understood and recognised by those who exhibit them.

On the organisational level, women leaders highlighted the pressure in a male-dominated environment and double standards in performance and workload. While not every woman experiences the same pressure in male-dominated environments, the research shows it is a prevalent and significant challenge for many women leaders. Women feel intimidated and under intense scrutiny, especially when they are the only woman or among a few in predominantly male settings, making it harder to establish their credibility and authority. Such environments can be unwelcoming or even hostile, making it more challenging for women leaders to develop their presence and authority. Condescending attitudes, underestimation of skills, and doubting women's expertise, even in non-verbal ways like body language or tone of voice, contribute to feelings of pressure and underestimation. Women leaders also face higher performance standards and greater workloads. Although it is not explicitly stated or demanded, many women must

work harder than their male colleagues to be recognised as professionals of equal footing. Women's contributions are sometimes overlooked or dismissed compared to their male counterparts. Furthermore, women take on more emotional labour in managing communication and relationships, which is often invisible and undervalued. Moreover, lastly, women's performance is often viewed through the lens of their personal lives, while men's is evaluated in isolation. The experiences of women leaders in digital transformation resonate with findings from the literature review, confirming the prevalence and impact of these challenges in the professional sphere.

On the interpersonal level, balancing professional and personal responsibilities remains a complex and individual challenge for women leaders. Women highlighted challenges such as gender bias in job interviews related to women's plans regarding childbirth, pressures post-maternity leave and juggling professional and motherhood/partner duties. The research showed that women face intrusions into their personal lives during interviews unrelated to professional qualifications, reflecting biases about women's role as primary caregivers and assumptions about family commitments interfering with women's careers. Women also face additional scrutiny when returning from maternity leave because of societal expectations placed on women, often dictating that their primary responsibility should be childcare, especially in the child's early years. Such perspectives can be detrimental by imposing guilt and doubt on working mothers and reinforcing the stereotype that a woman's professional aspirations should take a backseat to her family. Furthermore, women highlighted the various degrees in managing double duties of motherhood/home with professional development. Most women leaders believe they effectively manage the dual responsibilities of motherhood or home life and their professional growth. However, some still find balancing these roles challenging, reflecting varied experiences

handling these double duties. Women who effectively manage dual responsibilities highlight the role of a supportive home environment with shared responsibilities and understanding partners. Workplace flexibility and focusing on results rather than rigid schedules can significantly facilitate work-life balance for women with different responsibilities.

In addition, the 'queen bee syndrome' emerged as a challenge for some women. This phenomenon involves senior women leaders who might underestimate or undermine the professional aspirations of other female colleagues. While some women highlighted how seeing women in power can inspire and empower other women, challenging preconceived notions and biases about women leaders, others experienced the 'queen bee syndrome'. Such challenge stems from internalised gender competition that does not only hinder separate individuals but also can hinder the development of a supportive network for aspiring female professionals. The presence of female role models is crucial, yet 'queen bee syndrome' can contribute to a scarcity of such role models, impacting women's career development.

On the individual level, while women leaders did not identify significant challenges, their narratives revealed nuanced and inspiring motivations in their leadership journey. Women leaders did not highlight stark challenges. However, it told subtle motivations driving women leaders to pursue leadership roles. This aligns with findings from the literature review, emphasising different motivations of women leaders compared to male leaders. Women leaders described a desire to solve problems and create impactful services for citizens. Leadership is seen as a tool to enable positive change and improve the lives of others rather than to leverage authority for personal gain. Women leaders also highlighted the desire for knowledge and personal development as a crucial driving force. Leadership as a platform for self-improvement and intellectual growth highlights the intrinsic value of the learning process. The interviews

confirm the literature review findings that women leaders are often driven by intrinsic motivations like impact, growth, and personal fulfilment, as opposed to the extrinsic motivations of hierarchical power and financial gain commonly associated with men in leadership. The interviewees' aspirations redefine leadership success to include impact, personal growth, and contribution to society, creating a more inclusive and meaningful leadership vision.

CHAPTER 5. FUTURE RESEARCH

The present research on women leaders in the Ministry of Digital Transformation has shed light on their experiences and challenges. However, it's crucial to expand the understanding by exploring women's leadership journeys in other spheres and organisational cultures. Ministry of Digital Transformation is a relatively new government body that started operation in 2019. Hence, it has a less entrenched culture compared to traditional government bodies. Compared to other government bodies, the Ministry of Digital Transformation operates within a more dynamic and fluid culture, characterised by a younger workforce and a focus on innovation, which influences the experience of women leaders. For example, women leaders within traditionally male-dominated cultures will have different experiences and challenges. As the literature review shows, the nature of these challenges may differ depending on the industry, context, and organisational culture, and all of these characteristics may change over time. Studying these other environments will allow to analyse different experiences and, in the future, conduct a comparative analysis of how organisational culture influences the nature and severity of challenges women leaders face.

It is essential to conduct quantitative research in this field to enable gathering and analyzing data from a more extensive and diverse group of female leaders across different sectors. By utilising statistical methods, it's possible to generalize the results to a larger population of women leaders in Ukraine. This will give a comprehensive overview of the challenges faced by women leaders. Quantitative research can also reveal patterns and correlations that are not easily visible in qualitative studies. This will significantly contribute to the existing knowledge base.

While the Ministry of Digital Transformation provides valuable insights, it represents a specific sector within government. Future research should broaden its scope by investigating the experiences of women leaders in diverse professional settings, such as business, non-profit organisations, etc. This broader perspective will reveal sector-specific challenges and opportunities women leaders face, allowing for the development of tailored solutions and support systems across various industries.

Moving beyond just identifying challenges, future research should explore and evaluate practical solutions for overcoming them. This could involve investigating the effectiveness of existing interventions, such as parental leave policies and flexible work arrangements, in supporting work-life balance for women leaders across different organisational contexts. Additionally, research can explore innovative approaches like leadership development programs tailored for women and the effectiveness of mentorship initiatives in fostering supportive networks and promoting career advancement. By employing rigorous evaluation methods, the impact of these interventions could identify opportunities for further improvement. Pursuing these research directions can develop a deeper understanding of the complex challenges women navigate in leadership roles. This knowledge will be crucial for developing effective interventions, fostering supportive environments, and accelerating the journey towards gender equality in leadership positions across all sectors.

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APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Looking at your work experience from the very beginning, when you first got hired to your first job, and until now, can you summarise the biases towards you as a female employee that you have experienced firsthand and have seen other women in the workplace experience?
2. Think about leaders who were admired by the team where you worked. Why have these leaders been admired? What qualities contributed to this perception?
3. Have you noticed variations in the standards applied to women compared to men in your professional experience? Can you describe any differences or particular situations that stand out to you?
4. What are specific instances of how organisational culture, policies and practises or organisational structure has influenced your professional life in pursuing leadership positions and their experiences within those roles?
5. How has your family context influenced your work life? Could you share specific instances from your experiences when your family context impacted your professional life and vice versa when work-related challenges affected your personal life significantly?
6. Could you share specific instances from your experiences when having or not having role models impacted your professional life?
7. What is your experience in developing professional networks? How hard or easy has it been?
8. What specific motivators or factors drive you to seek leadership roles?

9. What obstacles or discouraging factors have you encountered that affect your drive for leadership positions?