SPOUSAL SUPPORT IN WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP CAREERS

Experiences of Women in Top Leadership Positions

Lappeenranta–Lahti University of Technology LUT

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ABSTRACT

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Spousal Support in Women's Leadership Careers – Experiences of Women in Top Leadership Positions

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Leadership is often studied through different leadership styles, skills, or personalities. Less is said about what happens behind all that. This thesis examines how women in top leadership positions experience spousal support, identifies the types of spousal support that female leaders believe are most meaningful, and explores how spousal support evolves throughout different career and life stages. This study uses a qualitative approach with six semi-structured interviews with female leaders holding top positions in Finnish companies. Data were analysed inductively using the Gioia method.

The findings show that spousal support is not steady, and its importance can change depending on women's life and career situations. Practical support was most visible and important when children were young, and it was described as something the couple agreed on together rather than a sacrifice one has to make. In addition, emotional support was seen as most important in the long run, and it was harder to replace than other forms of spousal support. Also, partner's self-esteem stood out as a factor for spousal support to work. Lastly, findings show that even when practical tasks were shared or handled by a partner, the mental work of organizing and planning everyday life often remained with the women.

This thesis adds to existing research on spousal support by showing how the importance of different forms of support shifts across women's life stages in top leadership positions. The study suggests that supporting women in leadership is not only about workplace arrangements, but also about understanding the realities they face at home.

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Johtajuutta tutkitaan usein erilaisten johtamistyylien, taitojen tai persoonallisuuspiirteiden kautta. Vähemmän huomiota on kuitenkin kiinnitetty siihen, mitä kaiken tämän taustalla tapahtuu. Tässä pro gradu -tutkielmassa tarkastellaan, miten ylimmissä johtotehtävissä toimivat naiset kokevat puolisolta saamansa tuen, millaisia tuen muotoja he pitävät merkityksellisimpinä sekä miten puolison tuki muuttuu uran ja elämän eri vaiheissa. Tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena tutkimuksena, ja aineisto koostuu kuudesta puolistrukturoidusta haastattelusta, jotka on tehty suomalaisissa yrityksissä johtotehtävissä oleville naisille. Aineisto analysoitiin induktiivisesti Gioia-menetelmää hyödyntäen.

Tulokset osoittavat, että puolison tuki ei ole pysyvä ilmiö, vaan sen merkitys vaihtelee naisen elämäntilanteen ja uravaiheen mukaan. Käytännön tuki korostui erityisesti silloin, kun lapset olivat pieniä, ja sitä kuvattiin parisuhteen yhteisenä sopimuksena pikemminkin kuin toisen osapuolen tekemänä uhrauksena. Lisäksi emotionaalinen tuki koettiin pitkällä aikavälillä tärkeimmäksi tuen muodoksi, ja sitä pidettiin vaikeammin korvattavana kuin muita puolison tuen muotoja. Puolison hyvä itsetunto nousi esiin keskeisenä tekijänä toimivan tuen mahdollistajana. Tulokset osoittavat myös, että vaikka käytännön tehtäviä jaettiin tai ne olivat puolison vastuulla, arjen suunnitteluun ja organisointiin liittyvä näkymätön henkinen työ jäi usein naisille.

Tutkielma täydentää aiempaa tutkimusta puolison tuesta osoittamalla, miten eri tuen muotojen merkitys muuttuu ylimmissä johtotehtävissä toimivien naisten elämän eri vaiheissa. Tulokset viittaavat siihen, että naisten tukeminen johtotehtävissä ei ole ainoastaan työpaikkojen käytäntöihin liittyvä kysymys, vaan edellyttää myös ymmärrystä niistä arjen realiteeteista, joita he kohtaavat kotona.

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DECLARATIONS

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The originality of this thesis has been reviewed with the Turnitin similarity checking service.

AI usage

The author of the thesis, Mira Kontio, used the following AI-tools during the preparation of the thesis:

1. ChatGPT (OpenAI)
    a. Purpose of use: Topic selection, brainstorming and translation support
    b. Explanation of the use of the tool: Used in early stages to help choose the topic and brainstorm ideas, assisting with language editing and to help translate the interview quotes and author's own writing from Finnish to English.
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    a. Purpose of use: Structuring the thesis, clarifying instructions and texts, and language editing, assisting with the references.
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3. Grammarly
    a. Purpose of use: Language editing.
    b. Explanation of the use of the tool: Used to correct grammatical errors and improve sentence structure.

Responsibility

The author, Mira Kontio, takes full responsibility for the content of this thesis and has reviewed and edited the content generated by the possible use of AI tools.

1 Introduction

Reaching the top of an organization is often associated with leadership skills, experience and career choices. Less is said about what happens outside the workplace. The everyday life of leaders does not organize itself. Children need to be picked up, dinner needs to be made, and there is often a need for support after a long demanding workday. For many women in top positions, the partner is part of this everyday picture.

As more women enter leadership positions, there is growing interest in how home responsibilities are managed and how women balance their careers and lives outside work. While leadership is often studied through organizational and professional perspectives, the role of support at home has received less attention. This thesis explores what happens behind closed doors at home. More specifically, it examines how spousal support is part of women's leadership career and how female leaders[1] experiences spousal support.

1.1 Background and Significance of the Study

In Finland, women have become more visible in leadership positions; however, they still remain underrepresented in the highest leadership positions (Kullas, 2025). According to Keskuskauppakamari (2026), the representation of women on the boards and executive teams of Finnish listed companies has increased, but chief executive officer (CEO) positions are still mostly held by men.

Previous research has shown that female leaders often face challenges related to gender expectations and balancing work and personal life. According to Eagly and Karau (2002), traditional gender expectations continue to shape assumptions about leadership and household responsibilities. At the same time, work-family research has shown that work and family are closely connected. For example, Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) described conflicts that may arise between work and family roles, while more recent research has shown that family can be a source of support and enrichment for work (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). In this context, a partner has been recognized as an important factor in women's careers.

[1] In this thesis, the terms women and female leaders are used for consistency with the terminology adopted by the participants and prior research. The study does not differentiate between sex and gender.

Heikkinen et al. (2014) and Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2008) have shown that spouses can provide emotional, practical, and career-related support that influences women's careers and well-being. Moreover, a partner can also act as a barrier, making a woman's career more difficult (Välimäki et al., 2009).

1.2 Problem Statement

Although spousal support has been recognized as an important factor in women's careers in previous studies (Heikkinen et al., 2014; Ezzedeen and Ritchey, 2008), less is known about how spousal support may change across different career and life stages, particularly among women in top leadership positions. (Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2004; Björk-Fant et al., 2024) have shown that social support and work-family situation may change across life stages; however, these studies have mainly focused on social support more widely, rather than reflected in spousal support.

To address this gap, this study examines how female leaders in top leadership positions experience spousal support and how they describe its role at different life stages. This study uses a qualitative research approach and is based on six semi-structured interviews with female leaders holding executive positions in Finland. The interviews were analyzed inductively using Gioia method, which allows themes to be created from participants' own words (Gioia et al., 2013).

1.3 Research Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to understand how female leaders in top leadership positions experience spousal support. More specifically, the study seeks to explore the role of spousal support in women's leadership careers and everyday lives.

The main research question of this study is:

How do female leaders in top positions experience spousal support?

To answer this question, the following sub-questions are addressed:

1. *What forms of spousal support do female leaders in top positions identify as most meaningful?*
2. *How does the role of spousal support change across different career and life stages?*

1.4 Scope of The Study

This study focuses on female leaders working in top leadership positions in Finland. The main focus is on the support provided by a partner and how it is experienced in the context of female leadership careers and lives. Although the study focuses on spousal support, additional findings also occurred from the data. Therefore, the findings of this study reflect the participants' own experiences.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the topic, the research aim, and the research questions. Chapter 2 presents the literature review. Chapter 3 describes the research process and methods used in the study. Chapter 4 presents the findings, and Chapter 5 discusses the findings and concludes the study.

2 Literature Review

This chapter reviews earlier research on female leadership, spousal support, and work-family dynamics. First, the chapter examines gender and leadership, focusing on the gendered expectations associated with leadership positions. Next, moving to forms of spousal support in women's leadership. Lastly, the chapter discusses work-family dynamics and theoretical perspectives.

2.1 Leadership and Gender

There was a time when women's leadership was studied very little. Early research largely focused on male-dominated samples and masculine leadership styles, whereas more recent scholars have recognized female leadership as a distinct and valuable area of research (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Consequently, the focus has shifted from questioning women's leadership abilities to understanding how women lead and what their leadership contributes to organizations. A central theme in the literature is that women's leadership is shaped by broader social, cultural, and organizational contexts. Rather than entering leadership roles as gender-neutral actors, women's leadership is shaped and evaluated through gendered expectations and norms (Ridgeway, 2011).

Despite this shift, research has shown that leadership continue to be closely associated with male stereotypes, and many female leaders face strong pressure to conform to masculine leadership styles to be taken seriously. This expectation creates a double bind. Women leaders who behave in a more masculine way may be respected but seen as less likable, while those who display more traditionally feminine traits may be liked but not considered competent leaders (Kawakami, White & Langer, 2000). In essence, leadership continues to be culturally associated with traits traditionally linked to men, a phenomenon often summarized by the phrase "think like a leader, think like a man" (Koenig et al., 2011).

One of the most influential frameworks for understanding gender bias in leadership is role congruity theory. According to Eagly and Karau (2002), prejudice arises when there is a perceived mismatch between the female gender role and the leadership role. Women are often viewed as less suitable for leadership positions because the traits traditionally

associated with women, such as warmth and empathy, differ from those commonly associated with leadership, such as confidence and assertiveness. As a result, women may face prejudice and discrimination when seeking leadership roles (Eagly, 2013; Eagly & Diekman, 2005; Eagly & Karau, 2002). This helps explain why leadership continues to be associated with masculine characteristics, particularly in business, politics, and the military.

Eagly and Karau (2002) explain that leadership is often seen as culturally masculine, meaning it is linked to qualities such as competitiveness and confidence, which are typically associated with men. Women in leadership positions may feel pressured about how they should behave. This often creates a double bind for women (Oakley 2000). A double bind is a situation in which following the traditional feminine gender role leads to expectations associated with the leadership role not being met, and when women assume the traditional leadership role, they fail in their own gender role (Kubu, 2018). Women's external features and expressions may conflict with masculine leadership stereotypes. For example, women's tone of voice, pitch, appearance, and dress may not necessarily correspond to traditional perceptions of a leader (Alan et al., 2020). When a woman strives to imitate the expected leadership stereotype, she may be perceived as inauthentic, whereas adapting to a feminine gender role may lead to judgments of ineffective leadership (Offermann & Foley, 2020; Kubu, 2018; Alan et al., 2020).

2.2 Spousal Support in Women's Leadership Careers

Leadership careers do not develop in isolation. There are often various forms of support available to help an individual overcome challenges and advance in their career. Many leadership studies mention support from a supervisor or mentor, and support from social networks. However, spousal support has remained less visible (Heikkinen et al., 2014). For female leaders, this support is often particularly important because experiences at home and work can influence one another (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

The term "spousal support" describes the resources, support, and encouragement a woman receives from her husband or long-term partner to help her balance the demands of her personal and professional lives (House, 1981; Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008). Based on social support theory, spousal support can be viewed as multidimensional concept that includes emotional, instrumental (practical), informational (professional), and appraisal support

(House, 1981). Although House's framework of social support was originally developed in the context of work stress, it has been used more broadly to examine how different relationships affect individuals' well-being and performance. In addition, Heikkinen et al. (2014) found similar forms of support in the Finnish context. These forms are Psychosocial (emotional), Hands-on (practical), and Career assistance (professional) support.

Previous research indicates that spousal support can have a meaningful influence on women's career development, leadership sustainability, and personal well-being (Heikkinen et al., 2014). This influence may be particularly visible among women in leadership roles, where success is not only experienced as an individual achievement, but as something built together with a supportive partner. For example, Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2008) found that emotional reassurance and practical help from a spouse were often identified as key factors in career development. Similarly, Heikkinen et al. (2014) highlight that women in management roles consistently emphasized spousal support and the sharing of household chores as important factors, especially during career transitions.

The forms of support mentioned above directly correspond to the interview themes used in this thesis, such as how partners encourage, help with everyday arrangements, offer professional advice, or are involved in important career decisions. This thesis focuses on three forms of support: emotional, practical, and professional (career-related). These forms of support are described below.

2.2.1 Emotional Support

Emotional support refers to a spouse's listening, encouraging, and understanding approach towards a female leader and her career. From a career perspective, support can be seen as understanding and appreciation of one's career. Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2008), in their qualitative study of female executives, found that emotional encouragement and understanding from husbands was repeatedly mentioned. Some emphasized the importance of emotional support during stressful times. Similar results were found in Heikkinen et al. (2014, p. 81), where the spouse's encouraging, supportive, and understanding attitude was seen as significant from a career perspective.

2.2.2 Practical Support

Practical support can be seen, for example, as housework, childcare, or everyday arrangements. According to Friedman and Greenhaus (2000), practical actions are behavioral support that indirectly affects a woman's career. Practical support is the most visible form that facilitates family integration and frees up energy for career and work. For example, after a working day, the spouse comes to cook and help with the children, saving women's energy and time. Studies have found that practical support was considered necessary, especially when female managers work long hours and travel frequently (Heikkinen et al., 2014; Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008).

2.2.3 Professional Support

Informational support is defined as the offering of advice, suggestions, and information that a person can use to solve problems (House, 1981, p.25). In a career context, informational support (often referred to as professional, career-related support or career assistance) includes giving advice, feedback, and strategic input. Furthermore, it can involve discussing career decisions, providing ideas for challenging situations, and helping individuals think through potential risks.

According to House (1981, p. 25), informational support is the most difficult to define and clearly distinguish from other forms of support, as it may encompass elements of emotional and instrumental support in addition to informational aspects. This conceptual overlap makes the boundaries between different support categories less distinct. Heikkinen et al. (2014), on the other hand, note that career-related support can be easily distinguished from emotional and practical support, as it is designed to be career-focused. In addition, Heikkinen et al. suggest that career support can be viewed in three different forms. First, it may involve practical support from a spouse, such as participation in work-related events and assistance in professional matters. Second, it can take an instrumental, often financial, form by providing economic security, a supportive living and working environment, and access to professional networks. Third, a spouse’s own career decisions may function as support, for example, when husbands make career-related compromises that facilitate their wives’ professional advancement.

2.3 Spousal Support and Work-Family Dynamics

When it comes to work-family dynamics, family has often been seen as a burden on work. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) described this through the work-family concept, where the demands of one role made another role more difficult. For women in leadership positions, this conflict may be particularly strong as both the leadership roles traditional expectations require a lot of time, attention, and emotional investment. However, more recent research has started to study work-family dynamics from a different perspective. Greenhaus and Powell (2006) introduced the concept of work-family enrichment which explains that work and family can enrich each other. From this perspective, family is not always a burden for work but can also be an enrichment. Work-family research has also looked into less visible forms of household responsibility. Hochschild (1989) describes this through the second shift, in which women spend more time on household responsibilities after completing paid work.

In the Finnish context, the work-family context has its own characteristics. Finland has often been described as a relatively gender-equal country, but recent studies show that gender differences in work and daily life have not disappeared. Björk-Fant et al. (2024) found that life stages with young children negatively affected women's work-life balance more than men's. Their findings suggest that traditional gender expectations regarding family responsibilities continue to shape work experiences even in a relatively equal welfare state. Spousal support becomes particularly important within these work-family dynamics. For example, the way a partner participates in daily life may shape the experience of work and family, either positively or negatively. Earlier research has shown that both emotional and practical support from a spouse plays a key role in women's life stages and career transitions (Heikkinen et al., 2014; Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008).

Together, these studies show that work-family dynamics and spousal support are connected. The way responsibilities are divided within the family and the form of support given shape women's experiences at different work and life stages.

2.4 Spousal Support as Part of Social Support Theory

The theoretical framework in this thesis is based on social support theory. House (1981) defines social support as a multidimensional phenomenon that consists of emotional,

instrumental, informational, and appraisal support. In this thesis, the framework is used to examine spousal support provided by spouses or long-term partners to female executives.

Previous research has identified that spousal support is particularly important for female leaders (Heikkinen et al., 2014; Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008). The importance of this support can be better understood through role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and work-family perspectives (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Together, these concepts help explain the importance of spousal support in female career and life stages. In addition, the form of support can change over time. Gordon and Whelan-Berry (2004) found that women at different life stages experience support in different ways. As a result, different forms of support can be important at different stages of life. It is worth noting that social support does not come only from a partner, it can also come from others. Walen and Lachman (2000) argue that support from partners, family, and friends is conceptually different but can fulfill or compensate each other.

To summarize, these perspectives put spousal support as part of social support while also recognizing its unique role in women's leadership careers and lives. Although this study focuses on spousal support, social support may also come from other sources such as family members, friends, peers, and external services. With this in mind, the spouse can be seen as an important source of support, but it is also part of an extended support network.

3 Research Design and Methods

In academic research, a research design refers to the overall strategy used by a researcher to integrate the different parts of a study in a coherent and logical manner, thereby ensuring that the research problem is addressed effectively and that data is collected, measured, and analyzed in a valid and reliable manner (Tisdell et al., 2025). This section discusses research design and methods. The steps used in this research are first explained, followed by the research philosophy. Then, the focus shifts to the processes of data collection, sampling, and data analysis.

3.1 Research Process

The purpose of this study is to understand how female leaders experience the role and support of their partners in their leadership roles. The study seeks to deepen understanding of the emotional, practical, and professional support of a spouse and how women in top leadership positions experience spousal support. The topic of this thesis is particularly topical in Finland, where female leaders have become more visible in business and media. This makes examining spousal support relevant also in a broader social context. The researcher chose not only to focus on spousal support among female leaders in top positions as an interesting research topic but also to consider it a phenomenon that may be relevant to the researcher’s future. Furthermore, the researcher was motivated to explore this topic by curiosity about how spousal support manifests in situations where traditional gender roles are reversed. The topic of this thesis changed several times during the research process. Initially, the thesis was supposed to explore spousal support for female entrepreneurs. However, as the research progressed, the focus shifted towards female leaders in top leadership positions. The main reason was to find individuals in more comparable positions, which allowed for a clearer analytical framework. In addition, focusing on organizational leadership rather than entrepreneurship helped narrow the study's scope and enabled a more in-depth analysis of spousal support across relatively similar professional contexts. As a result, the topic was chosen, and a preliminary literature review on female leadership and

spousal support was prepared. To demonstrate the research process, Figure 1 shows the phases taken in this thesis.

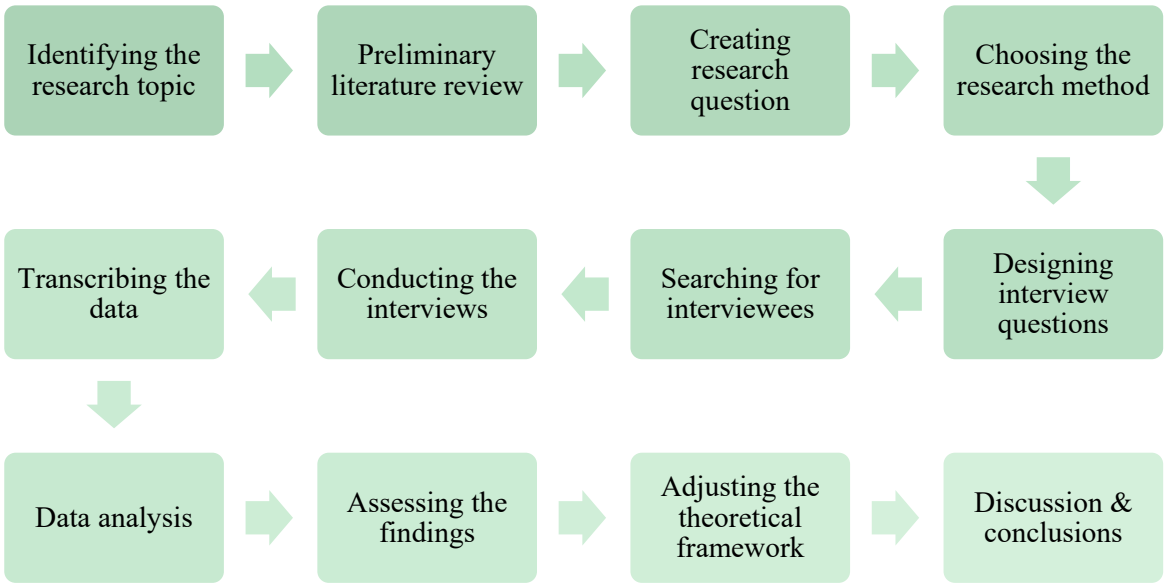

Figure 1. The research process

The preliminary literature review showed that although some research has been done on social support in women's leadership, there is less research on how spousal support affects women's leadership careers and development. After recognizing the research gap, sub-questions were created. This helped the researcher break the research into smaller parts, allowing a closer look at the topics and creating a research plan. Because the research question focuses on experiences, meanings, and interpretations, the research was conducted as qualitative research. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for situations where the topic has not been studied or where a deeper understanding is desired through direct interaction and observation, allowing participants to share their stories freely (Creswell, 2023).

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which allow for both the systematic examination of the research questions and for more open-ended narration by participants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

After transcription, the interview data were imported into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to organize, manage, and systematically analyze them. The Gioia method guided the analysis because it offers a systematic approach to qualitative data analysis. Using the Gioia method, the researcher was able to develop first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions. The theoretical framework was adjusted after the data analysis and assessment of the findings as shown in Figure 1. Finally, the research process concluded with the development of the thesis interpretations and conclusions.

3.2 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy refers to the underlying assumptions and beliefs about how knowledge develops. It influences how researchers understand the world, choose their methods, and interpret their findings (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). Ontology, the study of what is real, concerns itself with the nature of existence and reality. Epistemology, the study of knowledge, focuses on how we know things and what is accepted as valid knowledge. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016) state that accepting one's philosophical position is especially important in qualitative business research, as it directly affects the questions asked, the researcher's role, and the meaning assigned to participant narratives. Together, ontology (reality), epistemology (knowledge), and methodology (how knowledge should be studied) create a framework that guides a researcher's work, called a research paradigm (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). As a result, a research paradigm can be understood as a complete framework that shapes the entire research process. According to Saunders et al. (2016), there are five primary philosophies in business research: positivism, interpretivism, postmodernism, critical realism, and pragmatism.

This thesis adopts an interpretivist paradigm, which holds that people shape reality through their relationships, language, and life experiences rather than viewing it as a fixed truth (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016; Saunders et al., 2016). For this thesis, understanding the careers of women in top leadership positions means listening carefully to how they describe their own journeys, including the role their spouse has played along the way. Every woman's definition of "support" is unique and influenced by her personal, interpersonal, and professional circumstances. This philosophy informed every step of the research process. The interviews were not simply data collection; they were conversations with women who

freely shared their stories. The analysis was guided by curiosity and caring, and desire to understand meaning as experienced by the participants themselves. While the research is not framed within a feminist methodology per se, it is consistent with feminist knowledge-based values: it prioritizes lived experience, highlights voices that are often underrepresented in leadership research, and takes the relational, emotional, and human aspects of leadership (Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011).

3.3 Data Collection

This thesis uses semi-structured interviews as its primary method of data collection. The data were collected through interviews with six women holding leadership positions in Finland. Interviews are often used in qualitative business research because they enable the investigation of complex, context-specific situations and access to participants' personal perspectives (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). In comparison, alternative methods such as surveys may not capture the depth and nuance of personal experiences and interpretations, making them less suitable for understanding the intricate dynamics of partner support in leadership roles (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). In other words, semi-structured interviews offer flexibility, enabling participants to share their experiences in their own words while ensuring key themes related to leadership and partner support are covered. Interviews focused on leadership experiences, career decisions, work-life balance, and different forms of partner support.

As mentioned before, six interviews were conducted to collect empirical data between November 2025 and March 2026. Due to interviewees' high-level positions and busy schedules, interviews were arranged at times and in ways that were convenient for them. Four interviews were conducted face-to-face at the interviewee’s office, one via Microsoft Teams, and one by phone. Each interview was held in Finnish. Before each interview started, the researcher requested a written consent form. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the types of questions to expect, and their rights (voluntary participation, refusal to answer any question, and withdrawal at any time without consequences). All interviews were voice-recorded with their permission to ensure their words were accurately captured. During the discussions, field notes were taken immediately after each interview to record first impressions, contextual details, and observations of

interview dynamics (e.g., body language or emotional expression in face-to-face meetings), which helped with later analysis. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, allowing participants enough time to reflect and speak freely. As the interviews were semi-structured, additional unplanned questions could naturally arise. See Appendix A for the interview guide.

Reflecting on the logistical aspects of conducting the interviews, it is important to recognize how scheduling accommodations and the researcher's presence could have influenced the responses. Arranging interviews at convenient times for participants might have inadvertently affected their comfort level and openness during discussions. Furthermore, the setting, whether in-office or online, may have influenced the dynamics of the interaction (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Acknowledging these factors enhances the transparency of the research methodology and contributes to its credibility.

3.4 Sampling

The individuals selected for the interview were chosen purposively. Purposive sampling is often used in qualitative research to select participants who will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question (Patton, 2015; Creswell, Creswell, 2023). The selection criteria were:

a. Currently or previously holding an executive leadership position (CEO, Executive or Director level)

b. Identifying as a female

c. Been in a relationship during key stages of career development, and

d. Based in Finland

The Finnish context was chosen to narrow the scope. The final sample consisted of six women: four CEOs, one Senior Executive, and one Director, all of whom hold or held senior leadership roles in established Finnish companies. Participants were recruited through professional networks and direct outreach. Table 1 contains general information about the interviewees.

Table 1. Overview of the interviewees

Participants	Role	Age Range	Relationship Status	Children
A	Director	50-55	In a relationship	Yes
B	Chief Executive Officer	50-55	In a relationship	Yes
C	Chief Executive Officer	50-55	In a relationship	Yes
D	Chief Executive Officer	55-60	In a relationship	Yes
E	Senior Executive	50-55	In a relationship	Yes
F	Chief Executive Officer	55-60	In a relationship	Yes

Ethical guidelines were carefully followed during data collection. As noted, each participant signed a consent form prior to the interview, which explained the aims of the study and ensured confidentiality and anonymity. Given the interviewees' relatively high profile, special care was taken to protect their identities. Interviewees were given pseudonyms (e.g., "Participant A"), and any potentially identifying information (such as specific company names, unique job titles, or personal names mentioned in the interviews) was either generalized or omitted from the transcripts and thesis. Ensuring anonymity was particularly important in this study because participants hold high-profile leadership positions. Even a small detail could reveal their identity. Recognizing this made the ethical responsibility to protect their confidentiality not only procedural, but also deeply personal and essential throughout the research process.

Even though the sample size was small, it was sufficient for this study because, in qualitative research, data quality is more important than the number of respondents (Patton, 2015). Each participant was expected to offer unique insights, and common themes would emerge

through comparative analysis. The goal was not to achieve statistical representativeness, but rather to gain deep insight from each participant’s perspective. Moreover, the small sample size allowed the researcher to invest time in each interview and subsequent analysis, which is crucial for depth.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data from this study were analyzed using the Gioia method, which provides a systematic approach to conducting inductive qualitative analysis (Gioia et al. 2013). The methodology is built on three steps that start with participants' own words and move towards more abstract themes. The analysis starts by identifying a first-order code, in which the data is condensed into codes that correspond as closely as possible to the participants' own words. Then, the codes are grouped into second-order themes, where the researcher finds similarities and patterns in the data. After this, themes are combined into aggregate dimensions that present the main key phenomena in the study (Gioia et al. 2013). NVivo software was used to organize the data and support the coding process throughout the analysis. Since the interviews were conducted in Finnish, all quotes used in this thesis were translated into English by the researcher. Translation tools were used as support, but each translation was checked against the original to make sure the meaning was maintained. Figure 2 outlines the process of data analysis in this study.

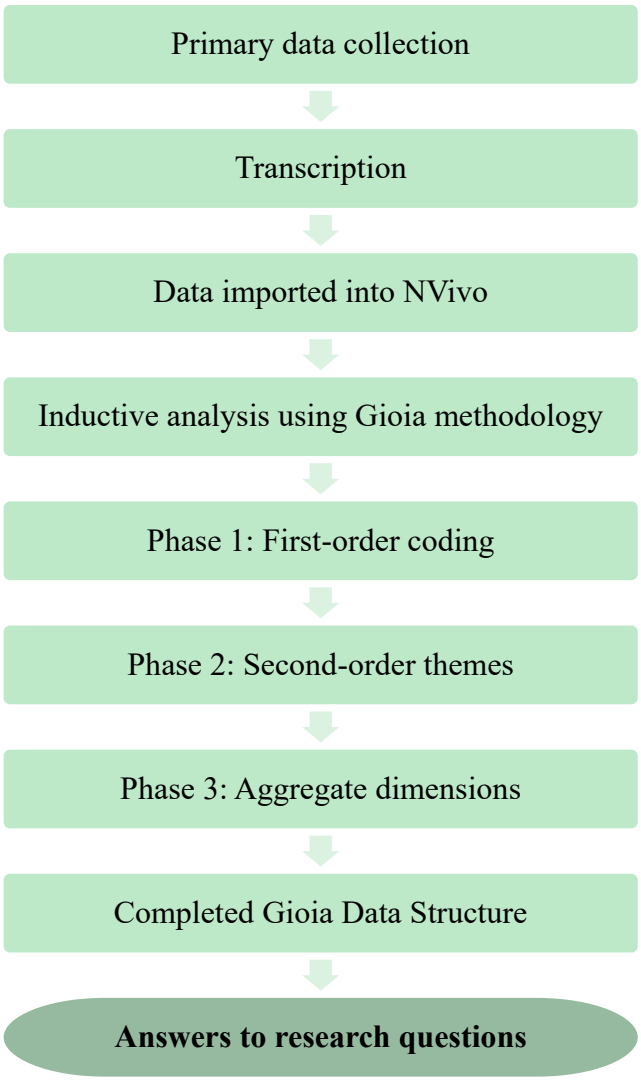

Figure 2. Data analysis process of the study

The process started by uploading all transcribed interviews to NVivo software. By following the Gioia method, the analysis in NVivo began with first-order coding, where each interview was coded separately and inductively, staying close to participants' own words. The "Code in Vivo" tool was used to create codes. In addition, the "Code Selection" tool was used to capture longer sentences that included important findings. Then, similar first-order codes were grouped into themes. These themes were formed after all six interviews were analyzed into first-order codes. This allowed the researcher to compare the data more easily. In the final stage, the themes were grouped into aggregate dimensions that finalized the data structure. The full Gioia data structure is presented in Figure 3.

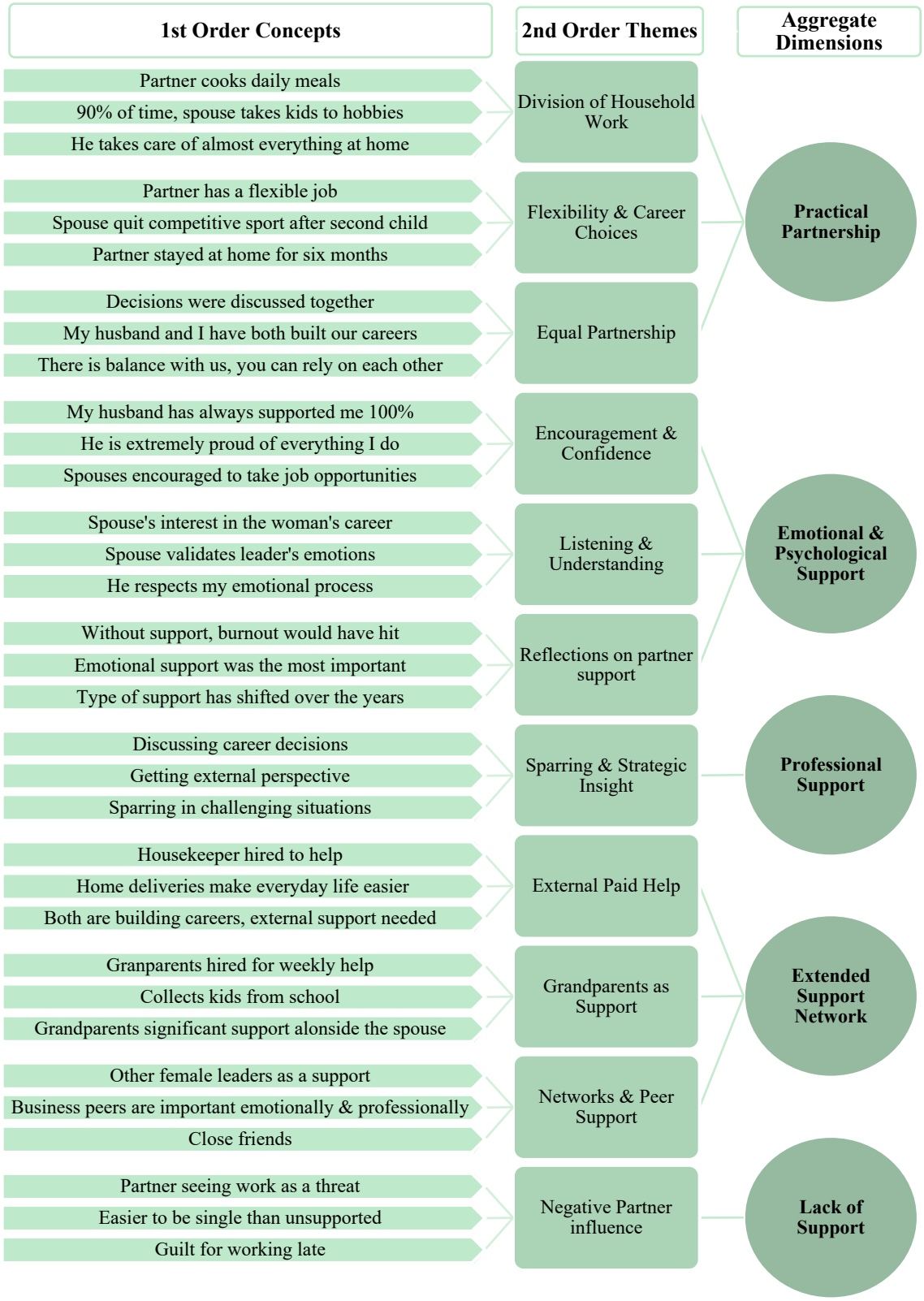

Figure 3. Gioia data structure

4 Findings

This chapter presents the findings from six semi-structured interviews with female leaders holding top leadership positions in Finnish companies. The findings are organized around five aggregate dimensions: Practical partnership, Emotional and Psychological support, Professional support, Extended support network, and Lack of support. These dimensions, shown in Figure 4, directly reflect both the theoretical framework of the study and the additional themes that arose from the data. Each dimension includes a set of second-order themes that emerged from the first-order concepts based on participants' own words.

The participants represent different industries, yet similarities arose in their stories and experiences of partner support. Similarly, important differences were observed in how support was expressed and experienced at different stages of life. In particular, one participant reported the opposite experience, describing that she didn't receive the necessary support from her partners. This provides a valuable contrast that strengthens analytical insight.

Figure 4. Aggregate dimensions

4.1 Practical Support in Everyday Life

Across the interviews, the most visible form of support came through sharing *household chores*. Participants described situations where their partner took on household chores, childcare, and running day-to-day errands. This support was not experienced as a

convenience but rather as a structural enabler of a career, especially in an era when children were small and the responsibilities of female leaders increased simultaneously.

How the partner managed everyday life at home varied across interviews, but the logic was similar. In some cases, this meant cooking most of the meals, taking the kids to practice, and caring for the children. In addition, in some situations, the partner was home alone while the female leader had to travel for a long period of time. What mattered most was not the exact distribution but the knowledge that home was taken care of without constant fighting or reminders.

Female leaders shared moments when their partners had to carry most of the responsibilities at home, especially during particularly demanding periods at work. For example, during COVID-19, one of the females was managing a company crisis group while also leading redundancy negotiations. This combination left no room for anything else. In that situation, her partner stepped in in a simple and practical way.

> *"At the time, I was leading the COVID crisis team, and at the same time we also had change negotiations (YT). As HR Director, I was leading those negotiations as well, and he prepared all the meals every day. That was a huge support "– Participant E*

Similarly, another participant described a time when she was extremely exhausted and close to burnout. During that period, her partner took on most of the household responsibilities.

> *"Especially last autumn, my husband was a huge help by taking care of things at home, because I just didn't have the energy. I couldn't even manage to talk or anything. When I got home, I would basically just collapse onto the bed." – Participant C*

These small gestures, where partners notice when help is needed without being asked and steps in when leaders are under pressure were a recurring theme in the interviews. It was not about grand gestures, but about simple things that made everyday life easier for the women.

Flexibility and career choices. In some cases, support went beyond household chores. Some spouses have made adjustments to enable women to pursue a leadership career, such as staying home after a child was born, giving up competitive sport, or being more flexible when family dynamics needed it.

> *"He stayed home with the children and took care of the children and the food, and I was able to build my career during that time" – Participant A*
>
> *"My partner gave up competitive sport when our second child was born." – Participant D*
>
> *"At some point, it becomes almost necessary to choose one career over the other when children come and so on. We chose my career." – Participant B*

Additionally, a partner's burnout can be a challenge for both the family and the partner. Participant C mentions in her interview that her husband's burnout was a significant help for her career. Together, they agreed that her husband would stay home from work and focus on the child and household chores.

> *"My husband had a bad burnout period and had too much going on at work. We decided that he would stay home. It was a huge help for me when I had a lot going on at work. My husband took care of the home, so I didn't have to stress about housework." – Participant C*

When adjustments were made, the spouse did not see them as a sacrifice but as conscious decisions made together. In other words, spouses saw these as a compromise and a logical decision. It is also worth mentioning that some spouses had more flexible work schedules compared to females which made the decision easier.

A related and important finding was that several partners were happy with their work and did not share the leaders' career ambitions. They were genuinely satisfied with their current jobs and had no desire to climb the organizational ladder.

> *"My spouse has been completely happy in his expert role and has never had that kind of ambition to become a manager." – Participant C*
>
> *"He has said he doesn't want that. It's not his dream." – Participant B*

Partners' satisfaction and the ability to be flexible when needed were crucial to ensuring practical arrangements worked smoothly. When participants were asked directly whether they felt their spouses had made real sacrifices, most participants were clear that there hadn't been any major sacrifices, and they felt that the work was divided quite evenly between them.

> *"We haven't had a situation where one person takes care of the home. We have done this quite equally." – Participant E*
>
> *"Sometimes we agreed that you stay home in the morning and then we switch, and I take the afternoon. We tried to arrange things together. In the end, it was quite equal." – Participant C*

The sense of *equal partnership* extended to major decisions. Many participants described that decisions were made together or simply announced to each other, as there was already an underlying agreement in place. In other words, whether it was about accepting a CEO position, a relocation, or a financial matter, the decisions were made together. Participant D, whose husband spent twenty years occasionally living in different cities for work, described how both career changes and work assignments were simply announced to each other rather than negotiated.

> *"When my husband gets an assignment somewhere, it's an announcement. And when I get a promotion, it's also an announcement, but with full support." – Participant D*

In contrast, Participant C called her husband to help her make a decision within ten minutes and together they concluded that she should accept the job and see what the future would bring.

> *"When I was asked to lead the consumer business, I was like, 'How much time do I have to think about it?', and I was told 10 minutes. After that I went outside to call my husband, telling him that this is the situation now, what should we do." – Participant C*

Lastly, several participants mentioned a conscious decision to lower standards as a shared strategy. A less tidy home, ready-made meals and fewer social interactions were accepted as a trade-off to make everyday life easier and reduce stress from both. This sounds minor, but it's not. This kind of arrangement made everyday life easier, reduced stress from both, and freed up time and energy for what matters more.

It is worth noting that even in the most equal partnerships, invisible housework often fell to a woman. Physical tasks, such as taking kids to activities, cooking, and cleaning, were often shared or handled by the partner. But what is sometimes called meta work often stayed with the women. Keeping track of children's appointments, parties, taking care of the gifts,

organizing holidays and making grocery lists were things that participants described as their responsibility.

4.2 Emotional and Psychological Support at Home

Practical support builds the base for leadership, but most participants described emotional and psychological support as the most meaningful part of their partner's contribution. This kind of support worked more on a personal level. It validated feelings, built confidence, and created a sense that someone important truly believed them. Compared to practical support, the effects were less visible, but, in participants' own words, they often lasted longer.

Encouragement and confidence. Spouses often encouraged women to take on job opportunities. They believed in them even when the women did not believe in themselves. This kind of encouragement was much needed when leaders were doubting themselves and when career decisions were made. In particular, Participant E mentioned in her interview that her husband encouraged her to apply to a consultancy firm when she was uncertain.

> *"He once told me to apply to company B because I have such good credentials. I was a bit like, no one gets in there. He was the one who pushed me to go for it." – Participant E*

Similarly, Participant C's husband encourages her to take the job offer while she is hesitating about what she should do on such short notice.

> *"My spouse kept saying that of course you should apply, why wouldn't you. You can definitely do it, who could do it better than you." – Participant C*

Nearly every participant brought up that their partner was not bothered by their success, higher income, or greater public visibility. Instead, partners were proud of what leaders had achieved.

> *"He is extremely proud now of everything I do, and I don't see any kind of jealousy whatsoever." – Participant B*
>
> *"My husband has been, in a way, more proud of what I've done." – Participant C*

The importance of this finding becomes clearer through the contrasting case of Participant F, whose experience is discussed in more detail in section 4.5. Her partners responded to her professional success with jealousy and irritation instead of pride. The difference was not in the leaders themselves but in what partner brought into the relationship.

Partners' self-esteem emerged as one of the most common factors in the interview. Most of the participants mentioned it directly when explaining why their partner was able to support them. Partners who felt confident in themselves and their careers did not have to compete or compare with each other. As a result, this allowed them to be proud of their women's achievements.

> *"He has a good enough self-esteem." – Participant A*
>
> *"I have a husband with very great self-esteem…. It is important that the man has good self-esteem and does not easily fall into the societal model. The man's self-esteem and communication skills matters." – Participant B*
>
> *"For my husband, this has never been an ego question. Many men feel that a woman's success would somehow make them smaller. My husband has just been like, well it's good that you bring money to us so he also gets to enjoy it. He has been, in a way, more proud of what I've done." – Participant C*
>
> *"My husband is very comfortable with himself." – Participant D*

The partners' self-esteem was described as a necessity for other forms of support to function. Where it was present, the relationship worked as an enabling environment. In contrast, when it was absent, as in Participant F's case, the same achievements created tensions rather than support.

Listening and understanding. Many participants valued their partner's ability to listen and understand. Throughout the years, partners have learned when to give advice or try to fix a problem, and when to simply be present and listen. A couple of participants described situations where they needed to process difficult experience, and in those moments, they wanted their partners to be present and to recognize the situation rather than offer solutions.

> *"I need to go through a certain process and my husband knows that, and then he just listens." – Participant A*

In more emotionally charged moments, this took the form of agreement. When participants were frustrated or upset, they didn't want their partner to offer perspective or solutions. They wanted their partner to agree with them.

> *"My husband has always known how to agree. He completely agrees with me when he knows that I will get through the situation anyway, but it's better to agree at that moment when the emotional reaction is present." – Participant D*

Reflections on partner support. When participants were asked which form of support had been most significant, emotional support was most consistently named. Practical support was also mentioned as central, but over a longer period, emotional support was described as having a longer-lasting effect.

> *"Definitely the emotional support, absolutely." – Participant D*

Participants were also asked how they would have progressed in their careers without their partner's support. None of them said directly that their lives would have been more difficult, they rather described how their career progress might have looked differently.

> *"Without my spouse, I might not have dared to make all those moves. The fact that support has always been there in the background has probably given me the courage to take those steps." – Participant A*
>
> *"Would I be this happy and lucky, definitely not." – Participant D*

For some participants, this was a difficult question to answer, because it could be approached from several perspectives. They were not sure which scenario to compare their current life to: the same life with children but without a partner, or a situation in which there might not be children or a partner at all.

> *"If I had had a daily life like this and then had to juggle everything myself, no, I don't think so, I would have definitely developed burnout at some point." – Participant E*

Many participants mentioned how the support they received from their partner had changed across different stages of life and career. For some, practical support was the most visible

form of support in the beginning, especially when children were small, while other forms of support became more vital later on. For others, the order had been different.

> *"At the very beginning maybe emotional. Then professional and now practical, that's how it is. But of course the emotional runs alongside all the time." – Participant B*

> *"When the children were small, practical support was really important, now more the kind of support that comes through understanding, so that without even explicitly saying anything, we roughly know what the other has going on at work." – Participant E*

> *"Of course, back then when we were living that everyday life with small children, the practical support was really important. Now it has maybe shifted more towards emotional support." – Participant C*

4.3 Professional Sparring and Strategic Insights

Many of the participants hold senior positions and, as a result, cannot share everything with their spouses due to non-disclosure agreements (NDAs). *Professional support*, however, was divided among the participants. Some described discussing and sparring about work matters with their spouse, while others mentioned that this was either limited or something they actively avoided. Participant E stood out from the group because her spouse worked in a similar role, which sparked interesting conversation and made it easier for her to discuss work.

> *"We are able to have quite interesting discussions at home as well. We both understand each other's everyday life quite well." – Participant E*

She also described how his background in digital business had provided her with practical advice and knowledge in areas where she was less expert. In addition, participants whose spouses worked in different industries and held somewhat different roles still felt they received professional support. The spouses brought new perspectives. For example, Participant D offered a narrative of how her husband's background provided a different kind of professional perspective. They had conversations about the difference between leadership models and their emphasis on processes and protocols.

> *"We have sparred on leadership-related topics, mainly about how the leadership model in crisis situations is different in his job. What are the points*

> *where processes are needed and how you shouldn't focus on individuals at all, and in which situations individuals do matter." – Participant D*

Similarly, Participants A and B received some perspectives that helped them in their careers. Participant A mentions that her spouse had long experience in managerial work even before her, and she felt she received help from this. Alternatively, B describes how her spouse was able to help her with logistical matters in Sweden.

> *"He had a long managerial background before me, so I have gotten a lot of help from that." – Participant A*
>
> *"My husband is a logistics director. He gave tips on how things work in Sweden." – Participant B*

Even though Participant B receives some professional support, she also mentions that this support has diminished as her career has advanced. Now that she is in a CEO position, the issues are so complex that her husband cannot easily relate to them based on his own work experience.

> *"Content-wise, I don't really get support from there anymore... because my husband simply doesn't have the kinds of challenges in his own role that exist in this role." – Participant B*

Some participants also mentioned that they did not want to bring too many work matters home. For example, Participant C wanted to keep work matters entirely out of the home. She also mentions that her husband works in a completely different field as an IT engineer, and business topics do not really interest him. She described this as a conscious decision and preferred to receive professional support from colleagues or mentors instead.

> *"This has maybe also been a certain choice for me, that I haven't wanted to bring those work matters home either... I've maybe also made a bit of a conscious choice." – Participant C*

However, she also noted that if she really had to get her spouse's view on a work issue, she would, but she does not want to bring work matters up unnecessarily.

4.4 Support Beyond the Partner

Grandparents as support. For some interviewees, grandparents were a significant support. In many cases, grandparents took responsibility for childcare, and this continued for several years. Participant D described her retired father picking up children from kindergarten every day. Moreover, when kids were sick both grandfathers shared the day, with one handling mornings and the other took care of the afternoons.

> *"The firefighter grandpa picked the children up from daycare early every single weekday so the kids would be at home waiting when I arrived. Then when the children were sick, the police granddad took care of the mornings because he woke up earlier and made the meals, and then grandpa took care of the afternoons." – Participant D*

Participant A also emphasized how grandparents were a major support for her family. She also added that the support does not always have to come only from the spouse.

> *"The children's grandparents have also been a huge support. The support network is not necessarily only the spouse, you probably need other people too." – Participant A*

In addition to grandparents, many participants felt they needed *external paid help* but rarely dared to ask for it. One participant mentioned that paid help not only helps her but also her spouse. With the combination of support from grandparents and others, Participant E explained that she has had external support consistently since her second maternity leave. At first, she hired her mother to work part-time for the family and later hired a housekeeper.

> *"Ever since I returned from my second maternity leave, we have constantly had some kind of external help. At one point my mother was basically hired by us for three days a week. Then since 2017, we have had a housekeeper." – Participant E*

In contrast, Participant C mentioned that she made the mistake of not getting external help earlier. She described how she had been a typical Finn who must do everything on her own. For this reason, she only got a cleaner five years ago, even though the help would have been more useful ten years ago, when life was busier.

> *"Nowadays there is help available. I have made that mistake myself, thinking for too long, in a typical Finnish way, that everything has to be done by yourself. We only got a cleaner five years ago." – Participant C*

Participant F also points out that the range of available external services has expanded, and that she, for example, uses food delivery services to make grocery shopping easier after long days.

> *"I also use Wolt a lot to make grocery shopping easier. I don't have to go to the store after a workday because the groceries are brought to me." – Participant F*

Networks and peer support. Participants often felt that their own networks and peers played an important role when advancing in their careers. From them, participants received help with professional decision-making and emotional support. For example, Participant C mentions that some of her friends have been in responsible positions, and with them she has been able to open up and complain about things. She also highlights the importance of her own team and the trust in it.

> *"I do have a few women in my circle of friends who have also been in responsible positions… But my own team also has a really big importance, because they know and live through the same situation." – Participant C*

Similarly, Participant B explained how she has a friend group of five females where everyone is well educated and career-focused, and they are part of her support group.

> *"Women are sitting in the living room with a glass of wine talking about CEO things." – Participant B*

Additionally, manager and mentor support was highlighted as another important source of help during career progress. Participant C explains how she joined a mentorship program and found a mentor who gave her the courage to ask for a promotion. For Participant F, business peers helped with both emotional and professional support. However, she believes that a good manager and a clear structure were the key supports in her career progress. She especially noticed the importance of supervisory work when she was working alone.

> *"In my opinion, learning at work and having a good manager and structure in the work are the things that support you the most." – Participant F*

4.5 When Partner Becomes a Barrier

While previous sections have shown different forms of support, in this section, one interviewee provides a contrast to the others. Participant F has been in a few long-term relationships, but she feels that she did not receive the right kind of support at all. Instead, she feels that her partners felt jealous of her work. This same jealousy was repeated in both long-term relationships. She emphasizes how important it is to choose a partner who supports a woman to succeed in her career.

> *"In my opinion, the partner choice of a successful woman is incredibly important because if you choose partners who are not able to support you in that or do not enjoy your success, then you constantly feel guilty about the work that you do." – Participant F*

Moreover, the participant expressed that she likes to work in the evenings, but her partners felt this took time away from them, which made her feel guilty. As a result, she highlighted how freeing it is to be single because no one is there criticizing her for working late.

> *"It has been very freeing not to have that anymore. Nowadays I can work in the evenings because I enjoy it. No one criticizes me for it." – Participant F*

Yet she does not emphasize that being alone is better than being in a relationship, but rather that it is better to be alone than be with a partner who does not support you.

> *"With a good partner it's probably easier, but with the wrong partner, it's better to be alone. Especially when you can express yourself in different ways." – Participant F*

To summarize, this chapter has presented the findings of the analysis through five aggregate dimensions: practical partnership, emotional and psychological support, professional support, extended support network, and lack of support. Together, these dimensions show how spousal support appeared across participants' careers. The next chapter discusses these findings.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter focuses on discussion of the findings presented in the previous chapter in relation to existing literature on gender and leadership, spousal support, and work-family dynamics. The first section looks at the three main forms of spousal support and how they relate to previous research. The second section focuses on the extended support network and the double burden that participants continued to carry. The third section discusses the importance of choosing the right partner, which was one of the extra themes that came up in the interviews. The discussion ends with a summary of the theoretical contributions. Lastly, chapter goes over practical implications, limitations and future research, and conclusions.

5.1 Spousal Support Across the Leadership Career

The findings of this study show that spousal support has three main forms: practical, emotional and psychological, and professional support. These forms of support differ in the daily lives of female leaders, and their relative priority changes over time. This is in line with House (1981), who originally identified four types of social support: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal. These are also consistent with Heikkinen et al. (2014), who grouped support into psychological, hands-on, and career assistance in the Finnish context, and with Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2008), who identified six different categories of support among executive women in the United States. In this thesis, the three forms of support reflect these earlier frameworks, but also offer new perspectives on how support is seen and works in practice.

One thing that became clear across the interviews is that none of the forms of spousal support can be considered a fixed characteristic in any relationship. It can be argued that its existence and form depend on many factors, such as the partner's personality, the family's life stage, the spouses' motivations and interests, and so on, rather than something expected to have while being in a relationship. This aligns with Gordon and Whelan-Berry (2004), who discovered that women appreciate support differently across life stages. Moreover, it also completes the findings of Välimäki et al. (2009), who identified different spouse roles in women's careers. This sets the frame for the next sections.

Practical support was the most visible form of help, especially during the years when children were small and leadership responsibilities were growing at the same time. Spouses took care of household chores such as cooking and caring for the children, managed everyday errands, and, in some cases, stayed home for a period of time. This finding confirms what has been said earlier. Heikkinen et al. (2014) and Ezzedeen and Richey (2008) both note that practical support matters especially when female leaders have long working hours or a lot on their plates. Moreover, Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) explain that practical actions as a form of support give women more time and energy for their careers. Similarly, Greenhaus and Powell (2006) note in their concept of work-family enrichment that experiences and resources from one role can enhance performance in another. Yet, the findings of this study show something that these frameworks pay less attention to. Practical support was often not understood as a sacrifice by the partner but rather as a compromise and a logical decision made together within the relationship. This was often supported by the fact that the partner did not have similar career ambitions. As a result, practical support should not be seen as a one-way contribution, as many of the earlier studies explain, but rather as a shared arrangement where both make an effort in order to support woman's leadership career. The findings of this study suggest that practical support based on mutual compromise and communication may be more sustainable over a long career than support based on the sacrifices of a single individual.

Even though practical support was visible in daily routines, participants described *emotional and psychological support* as the most meaningful in the long run. As can be seen in the findings, partners were described as encouraging women to apply for jobs they were hesitant about, believed in participants even when they did not believe themselves, listened when the participants needed to process difficult experiences at work, and showed that they were proud of their achievements rather than feeling threatened by them. This finding is in line with Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2008), who reported that emotional encouragement and understanding from husbands were repeatedly mentioned by female executives. Heikkinen et al. (2014) found the same thing in the Finnish context, where the spouse's supportive, encouraging, and understanding attitude was seen as significant from a career perspective. In addition to the existing literature, this study offers a possible explanation for why emotional support was named the most important form in the long run. In general, practical support can be replaced by external services such as a cleaner, a housemaid, and so on. Professional support was not seen as mandatory as other forms of support. A specific type

of emotional support from a partner; on the other hand, cannot be outsourced. As an illustration, some of the interviewees mentioned that they received emotional support from outside sources, but it was not the same as what they often received from their spouse. For example, friends and peers could support participants by listening and offering advice, whereas a partner is generally more present and knows the participant better. As a result, it allows partners to provide the right kind of support. This irreplaceability may be the reason why participants said that emotional support had been the most important form of support in their leadership careers.

Unlike practical, emotional and psychological support, professional support was not as meaningful to participants in this study. It is worth noting that professional support in this study was understood as relatively narrow. Encouraging participants to apply for jobs or listening about “bad” workdays were categorized under emotional and psychological support, while professional support was more about sparring conversations or career-related advice. This choice follows the logic of Heikkinen et al. (2014) who similarly define career assistance as support that is directly targeted at the career. Keeping this in mind, some participants described sparring conversations with their partners about leadership, work challenges, and strategic decisions. However, it was mainly at the surface level, as participants' NDAs and differences in the partner work field limited what could be discussed. Additionally, some partners did not want to bring work home. Interestingly, literature itself is not in full agreement about how to separate professional support from others. House (1981, p.25) notes that informational support is the most difficult form to define and separate from others, as it overlaps. Whereas Heikkinen et al. (2014) argue that career assistance can be clearly separated from other forms of support as it is directly directed at the career. The findings of this study fall somewhere in between. In this study, the distinction remained relatively clear because the categories were analytically defined in advance. Without the definition, the overlap would likely have made it more difficult.

The last observation applies to all three forms of support. The importance of support changed over time. Most participants described practical support as a significant form of support when children were young, whereas emotional support appeared to become more important at the beginning of the relationship or later in women’s careers when children were older. However, emotional and psychological support was described most important in the long run. Previous studies by Heikkinen et al. (2014), Välimäki et al. (2009) and Ezzedeen and

Ritchey (2008) have linked spousal support to career development and transitions. Similarly, Björk-Fant et al. (2024) treat work-family resources as something that evolves across career stages and life. However, less attention has been paid to how the importance of spousal support shifts across career and life stages. The findings of this study suggest that understanding this dynamic process is important.

5.2 Why Support Beyond the Partner Matters

The findings of this study show that spousal support did not work alone. Instead, each participant had some kind of extended support, including grandparents, peers, mentors, female friends in top positions, and external paid services. This extended support network worked alongside the spousal support. This aligns with social support theory discussed in the literature review. For example, Walen and Lachman (2000) explain in their study that support from a partner, family, and friends can work together. In other words, if one support is missing something, another can try to fill the gap. A similar pattern can be seen in this study, where participants used external support when their partner could not provide all the help that was needed.

This was the clearest in participants D and E's interviews. In Participant D’s family, the husband occasionally had to live in another city for work; therefore, he was often absent from daily life. As a result, the arrangement with D’s parents and her parents-in-law enabled her to return to work after maternity leave and maintain her career while her children were young. For Participant E, the situation was different, but the underlying pattern was the same. Her husband worked in a similar role, which meant that household chores were often shared, but external help was still needed for both to continue building their careers. In both cases, the partner was supportive, but work circumstances limited the amount of practical support they could provide on a daily basis. Under these circumstances, extended support networks have become necessary. While the main focus of this study remains on spousal support, grandparents, paid external support, and peers also seemed to play important roles at different stages.

The findings also point out structural and cultural gaps in accessing this support. Both participants with and without support from grandparents described using external paid services. However, those without regular family support felt that it was sometimes difficult

to find the right help when it was needed. As an illustration, one participant described needing help with everyday tasks such as dog walking, organizing daily life, cooking and driving children to their hobbies, but did not know where to find such services. Another noted that she would have preferred one trusted person rather than several different service providers.

In addition to practical difficulties, participants mentioned that asking for help felt difficult. One noted that she had been without external paid help for too long, thinking in the typical "Finnish way" that everything should be done herself. The participant also described a "good mother–good wife" mindset that she had noticed among other women. This mindset reflected that women should take care of everyday tasks. In the interviews, it was discussed that these experiences may have reflected older societal expectations regarding women's responsibility for household work. This aligns with Välimäki et al. (2009, pp. 598-599) 's research, which describes how women were traditionally associated with domestic responsibilities, whereas men were seen as breadwinners. Although women's role in working life has changed, some of these expectations may still remain. The findings of this study show that women in leadership positions may still feel uncomfortable asking for help, even though it is more socially accepted.

An additional finding that emerged from the interviews was that many participants mentioned "metatyön", the mental work of remembering, planning, and organizing everyday tasks. It is the invisible responsibility to keep daily life running; in other words, knowing who needs to be where and what has to be done. Even when the practical tasks were done by someone else. One participant described this clearly by saying that although she does not do the actual task herself, she still has to do the mental work. She was the person who reminded others, stayed up to date on plans and tasks, and made sure that things were taken care of. This connects to Hochschild (1989) concept of the second shift, where employed women carried both paid work and household chores. Daminger's (2019) concept of cognitive labor describes this more closely. Daminger argues that the responsibility for anticipating needs, planning, and keeping track of everyday tasks often remains with women, even when physical household chores are divided more equally. The findings of this study show that the second shift has not disappeared but has possibly changed form. Practical responsibilities appeared to be shared more equally, or in some relationships shifted even more toward the men when the woman's career advanced. Still, the invisible mental work

seems to remain with the women, as Daminger describes. Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory may help explain why this phenomenon still exists. As reflected in both the findings and the role of congruity theory, the home is still culturally seen as more of a woman's responsibility. As a result, many women may feel they should still be responsible for it even when practical tasks are shared. This may explain why the mental work often remains with women. Even though women's role in working life has changed, cultural expectations about household responsibilities may change more slowly. The findings of this study suggest that mental work is one of the most persistent forms of gendered household duties and does not disappear simply because household chores are shared or reversed.

5.3 Partner Choice as a Strategic Career Decision

The importance of partner choice came up in the interviews when participants were asked what advice they would give to young women aiming for leadership positions regarding relationship and career balance. Some participants emphasized directly choosing the right partner. At the same time, many reflected that when they first met their partner, they had no idea they would be in top leadership positions or how important the relationship and spousal support would become for their career.

Participants repeated similar qualities when describing what kind of partner would be the right one. Shared values, flexibility, emotional support, and respect toward the woman's career were described as important factors. Almost every participant emphasized the partner's self-esteem. Looking at the findings of this study, a good self-esteem appeared to help the partner support the woman's success without feeling jealous or threatened by it. It also seemed to make it easier for men to take responsibility for tasks that are still often culturally seen as women's responsibilities. In addition, participants described it as not a problem for these partners if women held a higher position or earned more than they did.

This finding also reflects the traditional gender expectation discussed earlier in this study. Several participants described supportive partners as men who were positive about women's leadership careers and did not care about traditional gendered expectations. To put it another way, reflecting on the findings, the lack of support negatively affected the leadership career. Both negative and positive experiences described may explain why participants wanted to emphasize the importance of choosing the right partner. To sum this up, even though partner

choice is rarely made with the career consciously in mind, many participants realized how strongly their spouse's support in the relationship shaped their leadership career.

5.4 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to existing research on spousal support by showing that it may vary across a woman's career. Earlier studies have pointed out that the type of support can change and develop (Heikkinen et al. 2014; Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008). The result of this study adds to existing research by showing how the importance of different forms of support changes for women in top leadership positions. Additionally, this study provides a different perspective on practical support. Even though practical support was seen as important in this study, especially when children were young. It was also described as a shared arrangement and a compromise.

Although emotional support has also been recognized as an important form of spousal support in previous research. The findings in this study add to the reason for it. The emotional support received from a partner was experienced as more personal and harder to replace, whereas practical support was easier to replace with external support.

Finally, the study adds Hochschild (1989) second shift concept. The findings show that the second shift has not disappeared but changed form. Even when practical responsibilities are shared equally, the mental work of remembering, planning, and organizing everyday life may still fall to women.

5.5 Practical Implications

As discussed earlier, support from a partner played an important role in helping participants manage their leadership positions. The findings showed that leadership is not only shaped by what happens at work, but also by what happens outside of the workplace. For organizations, this highlights that what happens at home plays a more important role in leadership than is often recognized. Like anyone, female leaders also often balance work and family responsibilities. The findings also showed that even in equal relationships, the mental load of remembering and organizing family life often fell on women's shoulders. This

suggests that visible arrangements, such as flexibility and other workplace practices, may not be enough on their own if the responsibility still falls mainly on women. Therefore, supporting female leaders is not only about work arrangements but also about understanding the realities they face outside the workplace. In addition, findings showed that careers and family situations change over time. As a result, organizations could take different life stages into account when supporting their female leaders.

The findings also raise broader questions about family, support, and leadership in Finland. Even though Finland already has many family policies and support structures, participants still described having difficulties finding and organizing everyday support. For example, one participant mentioned that she would have preferred one trusted person to coordinate external help rather than using several separate service providers. This underlines that the challenge is not only whether support exists but also how easily it can be found and coordinated. On the other hand, support was not only a practical issue. Gendered expectations related to household responsibilities affected how easily participants asked for help or used external support. These findings show that gendered cultural expectations continue to influence how women experience leadership, household responsibilities and support, even when there are support structures available. This suggests that asking for help and using external paid support should be seen as a normal part of everyday life.

5.6 Limitations and Future Research

Like any research, this thesis also has limitations and raises ideas for future research. The sample consisted of six interviews with women in top leadership positions, meaning that the study focuses on this particular group of leaders rather than leaders in general. As a result, a larger sample size could give a stronger understanding of spousal support. Since this study focused only on women who had already reached top leadership positions, it would be interesting to examine women who aimed for these positions but did not reach them. Future research could examine what the reasons were and how spousal support may have influenced their leadership careers.

The findings of this study also raise additional questions. One of the strongest findings was that the partner's self-esteem affected how well he was able to support the woman's career. So far, including this study, the role of the partner has been examined through the

experiences of the female leaders. Therefore, it could be useful to study the partners directly by asking them how they experience providing support and how they see their own role when their wife holds a top leadership position. Future research could also examine how cultural expectations of men as breadwinners may influence their self-esteem in that situation.

5.7 Conclusion

This study set out to understand how female leaders in top leadership positions experience spousal support. It became clear in the findings that spousal support cannot be considered as a fixed characteristic in any relationship. Its existence and form depend on many factors such as the partner's personality, motivations, interests and the family life situation. In other words, the support was not consistent but changed across different career and life stages. Practical support was often seen as the most visible and particularly important, especially when children were young, whereas emotional support was described as the most meaningful in the long run. In addition, alongside spousal support, external support was seen as an important factor in balancing home, family, and work. At the same time, a lack of support could negatively affect women's careers.

To put everything together, the findings show that spousal support plays an important role in how women experience and manage their leadership careers. While previous studies have also recognized different forms of spousal support, this study offers a possible explanation for why emotional support was experienced as particularly important. Unlike other types of support, the kind of emotional support received from a partner is difficult to outsource to someone else. The study also raised questions about how existing support services are organized and how cultural expectations shape their use.

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Appendix 1. Interview questions in Finnish

Osa 1: Tausta ja johtajuuspolku

1. Voisitko kertoa urapolustasi ja siitä, miten päädyit nykyiseen johtotehtävääsi?
2. Mitkä ovat olleet merkittävimmät käännekohdat tai haasteet johtajuuspolullasi?
3. Mikä motivoi sinua johtajana? Miten kuvailisit kokemuksiasi naisjohtajana?

Osa 2: Kumppani ja parisuhde

1. Minkälainen on nykyinen tilanteesi? Onko kumppania? Mikäli kyllä, miten kuvailisit kumppanisi roolia arjessasi ja ammatillisessa elämässäsi?
2. Miten kumppanisi tuki on vaikuttanut urasi etenemiseen ja johtajuusmahdollisuuksiin?
3. Onko kumppanisi tuki (tai sen puute) vaikuttanut hyvinvointiisi, työn ja yksityiselämän tasapainoon tai motivaatioosi?
4. Puhuttiin merkittävistä käännekohdista tai haasteita, miten kumppanisi oli tässä tukena vai oliko?
5. Miten kumppanisi asenteet tai arvot uraasi kohtaan ovat muuttuneet ajan myötä?

Osa 3: Puolison tuen muodot

1. Millä tavoin kumppanisi tarjoaa emotionaalista tukea?
2. Millaista käytännön tukea koet saavasi?
3. Miten kumppanisi osallistuu ammatilliseen tukeen, kuten neuvojen antamiseen tai strategisten näkökulmien jakamiseen?
4. Mikä tuen muodoista on ollut merkittävin johtajuutesi kehittymisen kannalta? Ja miksi?

Osa 4: Työn ja perheen tasapaino

1. Miten sinä ja kumppanisi hallitsette työn ja perhe-elämän tasapainoa?
2. Onko ollut hetkiä, jolloin näiden alueiden tasapainottaminen on ollut erityisen haastavaa? Miten kumppanisi vaikutti tilanteeseen?
3. Koetko, että urasi vaatii uhrauksia kumppaniltasi tai perheeltäsi?

Osa 5: Pohdinta ja neuvot

1. Uskotko, että olisit nykyisessä johtotehtävässäsi ilman kumppanisi tukea? Miksi tai miksi et?
2. Mitä neuvoja antaisit nuorille naisille, jotka pyrkivät johtotehtäviin, liittyen parisuhteeseen ja uran tasapainottamiseen?

3. Uskotko että se mitä olet kertonut on erilaista naisille kuin miehille? Ovatko naisjohtajat eri asemassa puolison tuen suhteen?
4. Onko jotain muuta, mitä haluaisit jakaa, mistä emme ole vielä keskustelleet?