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Female Leadership Challenges

A Comparative Study Between Afghanistan and the Netherlands

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Term   VT22
Subject   Business Administration with
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Level   Advanced
Course code   4FE41E

Acknowledgements

This thesis marks the completion of the 'Leadership and Management in International Contexts' Master program, offered by Linnaeus University's School of Business and Economics in Kalmar, Sweden. Looking back, we can say that the leadership skills and knowledge that we have obtained during the program has exceeded our expectations. We will start our paths as future leaders with confidence, motivation, and an incredible amount of self-knowledge.

We want to show our gratitude to the program's lecturers, for their wisdom and dedication made this thesis possible. Our sincere thanks to Dr. Lundgren for his continuous support and guidance as thesis supervisor, since this thesis would not have been possible without him. We are thankful for his dedication to his role as program director and lecturer, who's lectures have contributed to our personal development and career preparation. We could not have wished for a better lecturer and will remember his classes throughout our careers. We also would like to thank our thesis examiner, Dr. Strzelecka, for her feedback and insights while writing this thesis.

We would also like to express our gratitude to the participants of the conducted research because their willingness and cooperation allowed us to shed light on the female leadership challenges in different countries. Additionally, we thank our families and friends for the motivation and support that they have given us during the process of writing our thesis.

A special thanks goes out to all the girls and women in the world. Your perseverance is incredible and without you, society would not have a backbone.

Abstract

Although the topic is trending globally, clear steps forward for female leadership are yet to be made. This is impacted even more by the fact that little empirical research has been conducted to examine the attitudes towards females in managerial positions from different countries' point of view. Therefore, the aim of this research is to get an understanding of the current state of affairs of female leadership in a more global context, with input from both developed and developing countries. Specifically, it explores the similarities and differences of female leadership challenges in Afghanistan and The Netherlands.

To explore challenges experienced by, as well as strategies of, Afghan and Dutch female leaders, a qualitative study was conducted. Ten semi-structured interviews were done in-person and through video calls, consisting of 5 interviews for each country. Ten participants, meeting the criteria of holding a leadership/management position, were chosen through convenience sampling. The results showed significant similarities and differences in female leadership challenges, as well as strategies.

The unfortunate entanglement of culture in Afghanistan, under Taliban rule, has resulted in the oppression of female leaders. In the Netherlands, female leadership progress appears idealized. Nevertheless, female leaders in both countries share similar strength and strategies to cope with challenges themselves because society seemingly fails to bring change. As the results also show leadership skills specific to female leaders, societies and organizations worldwide should spread awareness and take action in gender equality, unlocking the full potential of female leadership.

Keywords: organization; leadership; management; HR; female leadership; leadership styles; global; Afghanistan; the Netherlands; challenges; barriers; glass ceiling; gender

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1   Introduction

1.1   Female Representation in Leadership

A leader is someone who recognizes areas for development and inspires others to strive toward achieving such improvements. Leaders assist their subordinates and remove obstacles that arise throughout their job. Leadership skills such as empathy and the ability to connect with people are essential for success. Leaders may attempt to make their vision a reality while putting the needs of their followers first. Simply encouraging people is not enough; leaders must also develop a feeling of pride in their job in order to be really effective (Depree, 2004; Bennis, 2009). After years of studying the most successful executives, the way to increase the probability of recruiting a brilliant executive turned out to be simple: hire a female (Ali, 2015).

The survival of an organization depends fully on having quality leaders who direct and guide in the right direction (Ali, 2015). With the increasing globalized economy, characterized by such activities as the rise of multinational and multi-trade cooperation, the need for change of perception about female leaders is also on the rise. The topic of gender equality pervades our system, most importantly in the workspace, where about three quarters of leaders are male, and leadership roles are disproportionately held by males. Statistics in recent times show that the proportion of females in leadership has increased by a mere 4% between 2017 and 2019, but it has not kept pace with the increase of females in the workplace (Coleman, 2020). According to Catalyst (2006), efforts to dismantle the 'Glass Ceiling' (social\invisible barriers) which has been hindering the managerial and leadership attainment of female leaders, have been ineffective and this remains a very important issue, given the large segment of available managerial roles. Therefore, the absence of females in managerial and leadership positions can no longer be ignored (Cordano et al., 2003; Wentling, 2003).

There is this general belief that men are 'internalized' into a leadership role, making the assumptions stronger and thereby creating a form of stereotype in the workplace. Although males and females may transgress their expected social roles, for females moving out of the domestic and supportive role, in order to socialize, means having to take on a shift in identity (Ibarra et al., 2013). Female leadership positions have changed dramatically throughout the years. Females have always had the aptitude and desire for leadership; nevertheless, females

have been unable to progress to positions of leadership owing to political, economic, and social constraints. Women held 18% of administrative posts in the United States in 1972; by 2002, this figure had ascended to 46%. Recent findings indicate that conventional gender disparities in competitiveness have decreased significantly. Leadership changes will continue regardless of gender or social prejudices. The trajectory of female advancement will likely pique future interest in leadership posts (Porterfield & Kleiner, 2005). According to research, female leadership in the present era offers a composite image. In 2007, the vast majority of Americans affirmed their willingness to vote for a female president. However, only 55% of the nation was actually ready for a female president (Eagly, 2007).

Change has also been taking place in the workplace globally that is affecting the decisions about the female 'stereotypical concept', thereby calling for more female leaders in the position (Ngo et al., 2009). They are ethical and civic-oriented and advocate for diversity and equality. Female leaders strive to advance economic, social, and political well-being. Females who are empowered will enhance outcomes and work towards great achievements. Females constantly develop and achieve new milestones throughout various human activities, particularly young girls. Moreover, females have held leadership roles throughout history. Hillary Diane Rodham Clinton, a successful American politician, diplomat, lawyer, author, and public speaker who worked as the 67th Secretary of State of the United States from the year 2009 to 2013, as a United States Senator from 2001 to 2009, the first lady of the United States from 1993 to 2001 and a strong competitor against Donald trump in 2016 presidential election (Bernstein, 2013). Another example is Indra Nooyi, one of the United States' most potent female CEOs. She had a critical role in diversifying and expanding PepsiCo's beverage divisions. She was born in Chennai India into a middle-class family and had continually defied society's strict conventions. She got her MBA from Calcutta's Indian Institute of Management. As a result, she is a perennial member of the World's 100 Most Powerful Women list (Sharma, 1985; Few, 2015).

While both male and female may acquire and demonstrate leadership abilities, there are significant disparities in male and female leaders' qualities and characteristics. Males and females lead in different ways (Rhode, 2017). Panda (2018) elaborates that female leadership benefits a country's socio-economic growth, particularly in underdeveloped nations. The particular role of females in the home generates a network effect, increasing leadership activity, thereby calling for more female involvement in social activities. In addition, this provides

economic stability for females, a platform for self-expression and satisfaction, and individual empowerment. However, while the number of female leaders has grown globally, it is still far smaller than the number of male leaders. Female leadership is more challenging in developing countries, as females confront specific obstacles due to a lack of opportunity, resource constraints, and unique limitations. Females encounter particular problems in developing countries, such as balancing jobs, family life, navigating patriarchal systems, and overcoming discrimination (Panda, 2018).

1.2   Imbalance in Global Female Leadership Research

Females face obstacles that males do not, especially when female leadership is unusual (Eagly, 2007). They encounter different kinds of problems worldwide, and it is much more common in developing countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Africa, etc., females face different barriers in the work field, such as gender discrimination, violence against women and girls, informal work and instability, the gender pay gap (Panda, 2018; Momsen, 2008). Country-specific research in developing economies provides a limited regional perspective on female leadership issues. There is a shortage of knowledge on the macroeconomic issues that hinder female leadership in developing countries. Female leaders have a heightened difficulty level, exacerbated by the stormy circumstances prevalent in developing economies. It is required that policymakers must be aware and work to foster an atmosphere supportive of female leadership, helping the society at large to redefine the concept of leadership, thereby achieving one of the UN 2030 goals on gender equality (Panda, 2018).

Furthermore, Ibarra et al. (2013) argue that little empirical research has been conducted to examine the attitudes towards females in managerial positions from different countries' point of view, therefore having an adverse implication on the role of human resource management. An understanding of the different countries' attitude towards managerial or leadership positions is important in order to effectively utilize the human resources from different countries in this era of global market competition. In specific, there is an urgent need for comparative studies between the developing and the developed countries, so as to understand to what extent the 'Glass Ceiling' has been dismantled, Failure to understand the difference in the leadership style of developing countries and developed countries will put corporations at a disadvantage in the global economy, thereby limiting female contribution to the growth of the corporations (Ibarra et al., 2013).

Momsen (2008) discusses that research on female leaders in developing countries reached into question some of the most basic assumptions about international development. It introduced a gender component into the study of development processes and necessitated the construction of a new theoretical framework. Since productivity was connected with the cash economy, most female labor was overlooked. When it became clear that economic progress would not automatically abolish poverty through trickle-down effects, issues of distribution and equity of benefits to diverse population groups became central to development theory (Momsen, 2008). According to Chatterjee and Pearson (2002), numerous feminist critiques have been leveled toward international development. The early 1970s' integration' paradigm was founded on the notion that women could be integrated into current forms of human development without requiring a significant reorganization of the developmental process. However, it was found that such a significant reorganization is very much needed for women to be part of humanity's development as a society. Furthermore, the growth emphasis of the multinationals seeking foreign markets in order to sustain growth and increase profit has further necessitated the strategic partnership among the emerging markets, making the researchers see the urgent need for comparative studies between Afghanistan and Netherlands. This makes the study of great importance in order to learn the characteristics that influence the success of female leaders in these markets, thereby turning it into a competitive advantage for the multinationals who will want to enter the emerging market (Chatterjee & Pearson, 2002).

1.2.1 *Overlooking Developing Countries: Afghanistan*

Afghanistan is a prime example of a developing country that tends to be left out of female leadership research. It is a country, an islamic emirate currently under Taliban regime, located in southern Asia. It has a population of roughly 32 million and one of the highest population growth rates as a country outside of Africa. Several ethnic groups are found in Afghanistan, with the largest two groups being the Pashtuns and Tajiks, and over 99% of the population follow Islam. It has a GDP of just under $19 billion USD, with a GDP per capita of about $610 USD (O'Neill, 2021). Afghanistan has been suffering from war for four decades, which caused many difficulties such as economic problems, security, gender inequity, etc. Gender inequality is the biggest problem in Afghanistan. Females encounter various educational and fieldwork challenges due to the political and social battles (Desai & Li, 2016; Shayan, 2015). Modernization affected the gender division of labor, increasing both females' dependent

position and burden. Females often lose ownership of resources such as land and are frequently denied access to new technologies. Male mobility is greater than female mobility, both geographically and professionally, and more females are left alone to raise children. Today, females in developing countries bear a double or even triple load of labor, juggling housekeeping, childcare, subsistence food production, and an increasing role in paid work. Females work more hours than males everywhere. Females deal with falling status, increased labor demands and more significant deprivation is critical to developing countries' development programs' effectiveness (Momsen, 2008).

Al Jazeera (2021) explained that the Agreement of Doha, also known as the "Agreement for peace in Afghanistan," was signed by the US representative Zalmay Khalilzad and the Taliban negotiation head Mula Beradar on February 29, 2020. The deal called for the departure of all NATO personnel from Afghanistan in exchange for a Taliban vow not to allow al-Qaeda to operate in areas controlled by the Taliban. If the Taliban honors its agreements, the US will reduce its force from 13,000 to 8,600 within 135 days (by July 2020) and depart entirely within 14 months (by May 2021). The US also pledged to remove five military outposts within 135 days and lift economic sanctions on the Taliban by August 27, 2020. The Taliban launched a massive onslaught on May 1, 2021, as most US soldiers left Afghanistan. In July 2021, the US intelligence community estimated that the Afghan government might fall six to twelve months after American forces leave. The Afghan National Army was in disorder by mid-August, with just two divisions still operational: the 201st Corps and the 111th Division, both stationed in Kabul. The Taliban had conquered Mehtar Lam, Sharana, Gardez, Asadabad, and other towns and districts in the east. The security situation in Kabul dramatically deteriorated in the days before the collapse. According to early August US intelligence, the Afghan government might collapse from 30 to 90 days" and fall within a week. On 15 August 2021, the Taliban launched their attacks on the capital of Afghanistan, Kabul; without any resistance from the Afghan government forces, they entered the city, broke into the prison, released all the prisoners, and within some hours, captured the presidential palace and raised their flag. Once again, the Taliban took control of the whole country after their fall in 2001 (Al Jazeera, 2021).

1.2.2   Idealization in Developed Countries: The Netherlands

As mentioned earlier, female leadership is a bottleneck that is not present in specific countries, but globally. So, what about developed countries? Ngo et al. (2009) state that women experience obstacles in leadership everywhere in the world. This means that it also includes developed countries that, at first glance, may seem further ahead than in reality (Ngo et al., 2009). A country that is often used as an example when discussing societal advancement is The Netherlands, as they appear to be very open minded and individualistic (Graven & Krishnan, 2018). The Netherlands, a constitutional monarchy located in western Europe, has a population of about 17.5 million and is the most densely populated country in Europe. One-fifth of the Dutch were foreign-born and, overall, many ethnicities and cultures can be found among the Dutch. About half of the population does not identify as religious, and the general societal behavior can be typed as individualistic. It is a developed country with a GDP of $1 trillion USD, and a GDP per capita of about $60,000 USD (O'Neill, 2021). But, does it practice what it preaches and live up to their image? According to Graven and Krishnan (2018), the Netherlands generally has high gender equality scores. Females are noticeably present in certain industries, and they collectively make up for 46% of the country's labor force. However, research has found that the Netherlands still has the lowest score from all European countries when it comes to paid worked hours, monthly salary, and female representation in management positions. Moreover, women in the Netherlands account for 33% of the country's GDP, which is 5% lower than average in western Europe. They work less paid hours than male and this is mostly due to the uneven distribution of caretaker roles and other social norms. This is surprising because the Netherlands seems so progressive, as they legalized same-sex marriage first, have a multicultural population and emphasize their openmindedness (Graven & Krishnan, 2018). The western world has received its fair share of research that showed little improvement on female inclusion in leadership, while developing countries are often left out completely. This is an opportunity to dig into the struggles on a global scale and shed more light on what is, what is not, and what should be done.

Adeyemi-Bello et al. (2017) looked deeper into the contradicting findings of the aforementioned study to research possible causes. What they found was that, overall, the Dutch still hold a less positive perception with regards to females in leadership and management positions. Dutch females tend to celebrate female leadership but are still held back by ongoing, though gradually changing, social norms that are held into place by Dutch men (Adeyemi-Bello

et al., 2017). For example, females that are pregnant are sometimes forced by their organization to quit their job once they reach the start of their maternity leave. Also, the healthcare sector is generally perceived as a female world, some still picture a top-level manager as a male individual, and taking care of the household tends to be seen as a female responsibility (Alpaslan, 2020). Further research done by Equileap (2021) found that female-inclusivity programs remain underused by Dutch organizations, the number of females in leadership positions is only a third of the number of male, there is a 14,7% pay gap per hour, only one organization has full gender equality rates in their management positions, just to name a few (Equileap, 2021). This instigates that further research needs to be done in the Netherlands to contribute to the inclusion of females in leadership.

1.4 Research Aim & Questions

Although the topic is trending globally, clear steps forward for female leadership are yet to be made. This is impacted even more by the fact that little empirical research has been conducted to examine the attitudes towards females in managerial positions from different countries' point of view. Therefore, the aim of this research is to get an understanding of the current state of affairs of female leadership in a more global context, with input from both developed and developing countries. Specifically, it explores the similarities and differences of female leadership challenges in Afghanistan and the Netherlands. Therefore, the following research questions have been formulated:

- How do female leadership challenges in developed and developing countries present themselves? A comparative study between Afghanistan and The Netherlands
  - What challenges do female leaders experience in both countries? What are the main similarities and differences?
  - How have successful female leaders in both countries coped with these challenges? Are there similar strategies that can be identified?

1.5 Reading Guide

Now that the topic of this research has been introduced and its aim and objective have been formulated, an overview of this thesis' structure will be given. The second chapter, literature review, will identify and investigate existing literature and other theories that are relevant to this study will be reviewed. This is done to form a solid foundation for the research that was conducted. The second chapter will be followed by chapter three, which will discuss the

methodology of the research. It contains information and justification with regards to the strategy, design, data collection and analysis methods, ethics, and limitations. The research process is described from start to finish and all choices regarding the research will be elaborated upon. Subsequently, chapter four will follow with the analysis of empirical data used for the research. Its purpose is to critically describe what empirical data has been used, how it contributed to the research. This chapter will be followed by the fifth chapter, which is where the results of the research will be presented. Then, the subsequent sixth chapter finds its basis in the research results. It is where these results are discussed and elaborated upon. Then, chapter seven will follow and conclude this thesis. In this final chapter, conclusions of this research are drawn and the research questions of this thesis are answered.

2 Literature Review

2.1 *Defining Leadership*

This thesis intends to build its research on the basis of a number of concepts and theories. The overarching theme of this thesis is female leadership and aims to conduct research amongst females in leadership positions at the organization they work for. But what exactly does leadership mean in modern times to begin with? After having reviewed existing definitions and literature, Silva (2016) argues that leadership today can be defined as "The process of interactive influence that occurs when, in a given context, some people accept someone as their leader to achieve common goals." (Silva, 2016, p. 5). So, when applying this definition in an organizational context, leadership would refer to an individual whose aim is to attain company goals by building voluntary followership from their employees or subordinates, characterized by its synergistic nature of influence. As this research aims to identify female leadership challenges, it would be important to know what exactly makes someone a leader in the first place. Is there one specific skill set that determines whether one is a leader, or does leadership exist in more than one form? Also, what are the outcomes of the actions and behaviors of a leader? To find answers to these questions, two leadership style models will now be explored.

2.1.1 *Full Range of Leadership Model*

Avolio and Bass (1991) argue that leadership can be practiced by individuals through eight different leadership styles. Each style is based on the extent to which the leader's behavior is considered to be effective and active. From least to most effective and active, the styles consist of the following: laissez-faire, passive management-by-exception, active management-by-exception, contingent reward, individualized consideration, Intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence. Laissez-faire leadership is characterized by a passive attitude from the leader and implies that they do not get involved in leading their subordinates. The other six are split between either transactional or transformational leadership, with the first three falling under transactional leadership. Transactional leadership can be seen as a traditional management style with a short-term focus. It arose near the beginning of the 1800s during the industrial revolution and was put in place to get the tasks done and to perform well, with the salary being the motivation for subordinates to do so. Here, most of the leader's leadership outcomes are organized work processes that generate consistent quality at a

fast pace under their close supervision. Subordinates are led to meet the performance requirements through a system based on rewards and punishments; where good performance means salary and additional incentives, poor performance means penalties. Transformational leadership, on the other hand, goes beyond this self-interest. This leadership style is long-term oriented and means that a leader aims to achieve goals through positive change, by creating a vision that inspires subordinates to feel intrinsically motivated to perform well and possibly transform into leaders themselves. The workplace atmosphere is maintained in a way where trust is ensured and the leader is truly respected by their employees (Avolio & Bass, 1991).

In terms of the eight leadership styles by Avolio and Bass (1991), laissez-faire leadership is characterized by a hands-off approach where leadership is very passive. The leader may fulfill their role at the start by providing training, but after that, subordinates are free to make their own decisions and set their own deadlines. The leader provides little to no feedback, takes no responsibility, and rarely supervises the work that is being carried out. This results in a lack of task- and role clarity amongst subordinates and a poor team culture, though it does stimulate innovation and quick decision-making. Secondly, leaders with a passive management-by-exception style tend to be characterized similarly to the previous style. The leader is hardly ever present and leaves all the subordinates to do their work by themselves. With this transactional leadership style, the leader does step in. Though this only happens when there is no option for them other than taking control of a problem before it is too late. Thirdly, active management-by-exception leadership can be described as a transactional style where a leader handles issues as soon as they arise. The work processes are closely monitored for mistakes rather than things that have been done well. Similar to micromanaging, these leaders step in only when a problem has surfaced and generally try to fix and prevent problems without involving subordinates. Fourthly, contingent reward leadership is a transactional style where a leader clearly communicates the roles and expected performance of their subordinates. The leader engages in the work processes regularly and rewards good performance with more than monetary incentives; attention is paid to the emotional and psychological needs on the workfloor, which the leader willingly meets when their subordinates do what is expected from them too (Avolio & Bass, 1991).

When looking at the four transformational leadership styles by Avolio and Bass (1991), the first one is individualized consideration. Leaders who lead using this particular style

advocate two-way communication and treat every individual with care and genuine concern. They recognize that every subordinate has their own mental needs, which results often in motivated and well-performing subordinates. Also, these leaders tend to act as a coach by offering support throughout the work process without bringing across a feeling of monitoring. Secondly, leaders leading with an intellectual stimulation style aim to achieve great subordinate performance by risk-taking, challenging them to oppose ideas and think outside the box. They create a workplace atmosphere where creativity is encouraged and innovation is key. Subordinates are stimulated to raise the bar continuously and the leader intends to intrinsically motivate them through increased task ownership. Thirdly, an inspirational motivation leadership style is characterized by the ability to communicate the vision in a way that inspires their subordinates to feel in line with the values and overall vision, resulting in individuals that are all intrinsically motivated to perform outstandingly. The leader's communication includes symbols to create a sense of belonging, team drive, purpose, and meaning amongst their subordinates. Lastly, the leadership style of idealized influence leadership is when a leader acts as a role model for subordinates that has great ethical norms, morals, and values. They are able to communicate their mission and vision in a way that subordinates can identify with them, are motivated to follow and emit a great sense of trust and respect for their leader (Avolio & Bass, 1991).

2.1.2 Six Leadership Styles Model

There is also another leadership style model that has been developed, namely the Six Leadership Styles by Goleman (2000). The leadership styles in this model find their basis in a leader's emotional intelligence capacities and the degree to which they create resonance amongst their subordinates. The first leadership style is commanding leadership, which implies that a leader takes an authoritative approach to their leadership style. Commanding leaders focus on achievements and expect their subordinates to comply with them all the time, without room for discussion. They have all the authority and portray that through instructing their subordinates on tasks using one-way communication. The second one, coaching leadership, is characterized by behavior where a leader steers subordinates to being able to work independently, as they are the ones that provide solutions. Moreover, their drive for people's improvement on an individual level results in this leadership style having a rather long term focus; they lead to create subordinates that are prepared for their future. Third, visionary leadership can be described as an inspirational and motivational approach to leadership where the leader aims for subordinates to form an inspiring vision for the future. This type of leader is confident about themselves and

thrive during times of change or disruption. They can guide people through uncertain times thanks to their ability of creating followership amongst their subordinates.

The fourth leadership style is pacesetting leadership, where a leader creates a one-way relationship with their subordinates. The leader acts as the example of how the work should be done and expects outstanding performance. They are achievement driven and set the pace for the work that needs to be done. Fifthly, there is the style of democratic leadership. This is characterized by a leader's focus on stimulating collaboration and problem solving. By using active communication strategies and techniques between themselves and their subordinates, there is room for discussion. Such leaders stimulate others to share their thoughts and ideas, and they take decisions collaboratively. The sixth leadership style is affiliative leadership. Leaders adopting this particular style tend to be more focused on maintaining their subordinates' mental and physical health. They constantly ensure that there is a harmonious team atmosphere and focus less on high performance and achievement of results. They have a strong sense of empathy and are able to solve interpersonal issues well (Goleman, 2000).

2.1.3   Female Leadership Styles

Considering the aim of this research, a closer look into these leadership styles will be taken by examining the styles that are more prone to be adopted by female leaders. This would allow one to form an understanding of the behaviors and activities of a female leader, before moving on to the actual research already. According to Umar (2021), numerous studies indicate that female leaders with democratic leadership styles may inspire and encourage members of the organization and enable others to contribute to its success in accomplishing its objectives. In addition, female democratic leaders have positive ties with all members and tend to be empathetic when it comes to keeping relationships with their constituents. However, it takes a leader who has flexibility in dealing with members to achieve organizational progress. Improving work performance and organizational skills towards organizational members might indicate the good influence of female leaders' democratic leadership styles in numerous organizations. Furthermore, female leaders use an informational approach that emphasizes the leader's role as a facilitator of change, which occurs when one or more individuals interact with one another so that leaders and followers increase one another's motivation and morals. It includes the following elements: direct, affirm, participate, delegate, remind, and assess. This is included in the concept of situational leadership, which has four dimensions: narrating, selling,

participating, and delegating. Female leaders usually involve the other members of the organization in their decisions. Female leaders use five stages in the decision-making process: communication, gathering information from the person in charge, gathering information from various sources, collaborating with the person in charge, and finally reaching a decision (Umar, 2021).

2.2 Leadership & Gender

Hughes et al. (1996) stated that in the mid-1980s, it was generally believed that leaders seemed somewhat taller and more intelligent with a charismatic look than their employees. However, the concept of leadership changed with the period. Currently, it is strongly believed that individuals or a group of people influence and guide followers or other members of an organization is leadership. Additionally the leader should have four competencies: intrapersonal skills, controlling one's emotions, and being readily amenable to authority. Second, interpersonal skills, establishing and sustaining interpersonal ties. Third, business skills are budgeting, planning, coordinating, and monitoring business activities, and the fourth is leadership skills, which are placing all employees together and encouraging a high-performing team (Hughes et al., 1996). As stated by Ford and Rohini (2012), everyone could be a good leader, even more so when we look at it from a gender perspective. Both males and females are capable of leadership and gender should not become a barrier to an individual's leadership potential. According to several study results, the positions of females and males are complementary; neither one should be superior. Male and female leadership traits may be combined to create a unified force for the organization (Ford & Rohini, 2012).

2.2.1 No Change Despite Awareness of Female Leadership Challenges

Nowadays, the manner in which organizations operate internally has undergone a significant transformation. Gender should no longer be an issue allowed at work and the road to equality is being paved as we speak. According to Umar (2021), prior to the twentieth century, females were often at a disadvantage anywhere at the workplace. Ford and Rohini (2012) argue that this disadvantage is because leadership is strongly intertwined with the individual's way of functioning. Many attributes of an individual's capacity to lead can be linked to their biological characteristics. These are often the result of gender disparities between males and females and have led to gender inequality, placing females in unfavorable conditions. Prior to the twentieth century, many females were put in unfavorable positions due to the pervasive patriarchal culture

in society. However, societal reforms have resulted in a decrease in discrimination against females, including in organizational leadership positions. The awakening of females in the globalization period has resulted in changes in development. females nowadays are tasked with a variety of jobs. They have shifted their focus away from solely being a wife or mother and toward maximizing the quality of their human existence (Ford & Rohini, 2012).

Umar (2021) adds that the advancement of human civilization has resulted in a change in the pattern of prejudice against females. As a consequence, several females have held leadership and management positions. Numerous studies have shown that females can excel in their leadership roles. Many female executives use democratic leadership approaches for organizational communication. This leadership style enables female executives to influence the organization's productivity and performance positively. According to Role Theory, the study's findings indicate that female leaders demonstrate an empathetic side in a two-way connection via inspiring and motivating members. Female leaders command, engage in, delegate, and assess organizational members (Umar, 2021). Then what is it exactly that has caused the current place of females in modern society? Why is it happening and rooted so deeply in society? In lieu of this research's aim of identifying female leadership challenges in a more global context, what shape(s) has this taken?

2.2.2 Glass Ceiling

According to Cotter et al. (2001), females that hold, or strive to hold, positions in leadership and management within any given sector or industry are blocked from reaching their full potential. In addition, the blockage also obstructs individuals that are part of other minorities and therefore do not have the opportunities that the majority automatically has. This can be attributed to a phenomenon that is often referred to as the 'glass ceiling'. This specific term describes the barrier for females to reach higher management and leadership positions, caused by socially accepted norms and expectations. The latter is the reason why the term 'glass' is used; these norms are rooted deeply in a society, causing a high degree of unawareness amongst its unaffected members. For women in leadership, their way up is blocked in plain sight while their society is unaware of it. Cotter et al. (2001) argue that the behavior and commonly accepted ideas of society about roles and norms usually tend to create blind spots. These blind spots make the general public unaware of issues that individuals belonging to minorities or certain genders

might face (Cotter et al., 2001). For females in particular, several theoretical and societal concepts that have contributed to the formation of the glass ceiling can be identified.

2.2.3 Effects of Great Man Theory & Role Congruity

The Great Man Theory (Carlyle, 1841) is an early theory that Spector (2016) argues to have contributed to the female leadership barriers that exist today. This theory is built on the ideology that leadership traits and qualities are innate, with the core one being sincerity and heroism. These further included having an ambient and persuasive personality, as well as being charismatic and intelligent. However, it also communicates that the traits and qualities required to be a leader are only found in males. This belief that males are the ones that are suitable for leadership roles has been in place for many centuries. It stems from humanity's social norms and gender roles that were once created. Traditionally males are strong, should take the lead, make money and protect, whereas females are nurturing, caring, submissive, and should take care of the household (Spector, 2016). From this, Eagly and Karau (2002) concluded that the belief of females not being suitable for holding leadership positions is deeply rooted into humanity and has only just recently been invalidated. They further explain this by the Role Congruity Theory, which argues that the aforementioned belief not only causes males to be favored over females in leadership, but also that the performance of female leaders are evaluated with bias. This contributes to the glass ceiling being kept in place and to gender-biased leadership style beliefs and expectations (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

2.2.4 Effects of Culture

Culture has a significant effect on the development of leadership in a society (Schneider et al., 2014). Taking into account cultural components like norms and values, beliefs, traditions, and gender roles, each country has their own outcome on how female leadership is shaped (Ünal, 2017). Schünemann (2020) argues that first, each society has certain expectations when it comes to gender roles. Many cultures find that males should be the breadwinner, have the most authority and be listened to, whereas females should take care of the household, meet their husband's needs and wishes, and raise children. In such cultures, this leaves females with neither room nor support for starting a career. Eventually, such expectations become a society's standard way of thinking and create a mindset where females are not even considered within the realm of leadership. Second, factors such as beliefs, traditions and dynamics of national culture have an impact on a country's overall male-to-female ratio in leadership positions. In cultures where the

dynamic between genders is based on equality, the aforementioned mindset will not exist on such a scale. This results in the concept of female leaders being nothing but ordinary and thus an even ratio in leadership occupation. In cultures where women are seen as inferior and having only a caretaking role, the male-to-female ratio in leadership positions would show a great difference (Schünemann, 2020). In addition culture also attributes to the specific leadership styles of females in a country (Ünal, 2017). For example, in a culture where leaders are usually considered male, females adopt a masculine and more management-focused leadership style. This happens not only because it is what is expected from them, but also because females would not be able to function in their position in that culture. It is made even harder by the fact that female leaders will be judged and evaluated against different standards than their male counterparts, while the only difference in reality is their assigned gender. On the other hand, in cultures where female leadership is nothing unusual, they are free to develop their own personal leadership style without hindrance of expectations, beliefs, and traditions (Snaebjornsson et al., 2015).

3 Methodology

This chapter will evaluate and examine the selected research design and methodology, followed by explanation of the research choices and assumptions about the method of research made. This methodology chapter will also examine how the data will be collected, and the selected data analysis method further explained. Furthermore, the ethical considerations, research limitations and research integrity are well justified.

3.1 Research Design & Strategy

A research tends to have several different purposes, such as exploratory, explanatory, descriptive, and evaluative approaches. The research questions will want to explore a specific phenomenon, therefore allowing this specific study to use an exploratory approach to explore how female leadership challenges present themselves in developed and developing countries. This approach is assumed to be a good fit because the topic involves social aspects of which its internal processes cannot be quantified. Exploratory research will aim to explore the challenges faced by female leaders between developing countries and developed countries, thereby seeking to understand if there are main similarities and differences within the context of the phenomenon (Cameron & Price, 2009). Exploratory research uses theory, often focuses on 'how' and 'what' questions, and is essential when trying to ask open questions, thereby gaining more insight into the topic of interest (Saunders et al., 2019).

This study allows for a more exploratory way of researching, since the topic has been relatively understudied and the researchers are unsure of its precise nature. This will allow the researchers to collect more in-depth data. Furthermore, the exploratory research approach gives the researchers the flexibility and adaptability to change, since the research will adopt a broad view of female leadership in a more global context. It is further narrowed down to Afghanistan and The Netherlands, representing the developing and developed countries respectively. This will help guide the subsequent stage of the research. Taking it further, scientific research can be approached in three different ways; inductive, deductive, or abductive approach (Saunders et al., 2019). This research will take an inductive approach, as Saunders et al. (2019) argue that most qualitative research uses the inductive approach to develop theory that is based on practical experiences, thereby developing a richer and more recent 'theoretical perspective' than already existing literature. The inductive approach may often use a logical argument based on the

conclusions drawn from the empirical data, making this approach a reasonable research approach adopted (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010).

According to Saunders et al. (2019), a research design should contain clear objectives, specify the sources where the data is collected and how it will be analyzed, and demonstrate consistency with the research philosophy (Saunders et al., 2019). Leung (2015) further argues that "the essence of qualitative research is to make sense of, and recognize, patterns among words to build up a meaningful picture without compromising its richness and dimensionality" (p. 324). The qualitative research method is often associated with interpretivism research philosophy and is focused on rising clarifications of a social phenomenon (Leung, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). It is interpretive because the researchers will have to make sense of the subjective, while examining the socially constructed meaning expressed by the phenomenon being studied (Saunders et al., 2019). Therefore, the researchers argue that the qualitative method is the most appropriate for this research, as it aims to identify the barriers and learn the characteristics that influence the barriers for females in leadership. A mono method qualitative study will be conducted to support the aim of this research; to gain insights into how female leadership challenges present themselves in different countries and will therefore take an exploratory approach.

By using a qualitative research method, the researchers will gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of the participants, in relation to their Leadership style and female leadership barriers being faced, thereby allowing for better understanding of the current challenges being faced by the female leaders (Saunders et al., 2019). Qualitative research will aid the researchers to interact with the participants on a level that facilitates understanding their experiences and stories of the phenomenon of female leadership challenges. Klenke et al. (2015) argue that the qualitative research will result in a narrative that depicts the voice of the participants (Klenke et al., 2015). Therefore, the researchers opt for the qualitative method since it will allow the research to obtain first hand information from the participant's point of view. According to Yin (2018), this is beneficial when conducting small-scale research that allows for a holistic perspective of the narrative (Yin, 2018).

Another component of this research's methodology is the research strategy. Following the exploratory approach and qualitative method that this study adopts, the research strategy that is

applied to this research is a phenomenology strategy. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), a phenomenology strategy can be described as one where a phenomenon is explored to gain insight and to be able to describe that phenomenon's essence. Data is collected that tells about the experience of individuals regarding the phenomenon, which can be used to find similarities and differences between groups, and is used to generate a better picture of the phenomenon in reality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researchers have chosen to apply this strategy for a number of reasons. First, it supports the exploratory approach of this study because this strategy means that the phenomenon of female leadership challenges is explored. Second, it fits well with this research's aim since it will allow for female leadership challenges in both developed and developing countries to be identified and described. Third, this strategy focuses on collecting data that provides the researchers with individual experiences of the phenomenon, which matches well with the qualitative research method that is chosen because such experiences are best captured that way compared to quantitative research. Fourth, the comparative nature this study has, is supported by the fact that the collected data through a phenomenology strategy is suitable for identifying differences and similarities between groups. The two groups that are compared in this study are developing and developed countries, represented by Afghanistan and the Netherlands respectively.

3.2   Sampling

Selecting the interviewees for this research is done by using a convenience sampling strategy. It can be described as a sampling procedure based on convenience rather than random selection, making it useful when conducting a qualitative and exploratory research study (Malhotra, 2019). As Saunders et al. (2019) defined, convenience sampling is a non-probability method of sampling where interviewees are selected on the basis of availability (Saunders et al., 2019). For this particular research, ten interviewees are chosen, five from the Netherlands and five from Afghanistan, that are readily available within the personal network of the researchers on the basis of two criteria: leadership/management role and work experience in either the Netherlands or Afghanistan. The first reason why a convenience sampling strategy is chosen is due to time constraints, as the research is conducted in a rather short timeframe. A different sampling method would be too time-consuming and could lead to an insufficient number of interviewees. Secondly, it is assumed that the atmosphere during the interviews is more easygoing and comfortable. Because the interviewees know the interviewers, they might open up more and give answers with more in depth, which is optimal considering the exploratory

approach of this research. The interviewees chosen for this study (see Appendix 3) are within the age of 30 to 65 years, thereby falling into the category of leaders needed for this research. One of the requirements to confirm the eligibility of the interviewees is that the participant must have been in a leadership role for upwards of three years, as the aim of the study is to know if there are challenges faced by the females in leadership positions.

For this study, five female leaders from the Netherlands are interviewed. Furthermore, five participants from Afghanistan are interviewed, consisting of four females and one male. The purpose of including a male participant in afghan study is due to cultural and ethical considerations. We believe that some female participants may not disclose certain issues owing to cultural and ethical considerations; thus, the male participant may assist us in gaining a deeper understanding of female leadership challenges in Afghanistan. The female participants will discuss their own experiences and ideas about female leadership. The male participant, who is the managing director of an organization that provides vocational education to women in Afghanistan, will address the challenges his middle-level and lower-level female managers experience during their work. Furthermore, he has forty years of experience working for various organizations in Afghanistan, and his contribution to our research will be invaluable.

3.3   *Data Collection & Analysis*

The data collection process consists of several key steps, starting with identifying the interviewees, then the collection of data, which is then followed by the data analysis process. Furthermore, data collection is the process of examining a data being collected, in order to reveal its function and meaning. There are several data collection techniques when it comes to qualitative study design. Documents, records, interviews, and observations are examples of primary evidence. This research aims to obtain information on the personal experiences our participants encounter with their jobs. Therefore, the data collection method of choice is through semi-structured interviews. Saunders et al. (2019) state that through semi-structured interviews, the interviewers will have a way to ensure that the interviews themselves do not wander off topic without influencing the interviewees' answers to questions. It also still leaves room to further investigate statements and insights shared while the interviews are taking place, allowing the interviewers to have a deeper understanding of the data. A semi-structured interview is a data collecting technique that depends on prepared theme frameworks to ask questions. However, the questions are not ordered or phrased in a particular way. Semi-structured interviews are used to

ascertain how participants evaluate their own work ethics, values, and expectations. Semi-structured interviews are often utilized in qualitative research (Saunders et al., 2019). To collect all of the necessary data, we determined that semi-structured interviews are the most appropriate method since they enable us to elicit specific information and ascertain our participants' thoughts, experiences, and expectations. For the research, the interview questions are designed in order to collect data. As we are interviewing males and females, the same questions will be used that are slightly tailored to fit the gender spoken to.

Once the researchers establish contact and interest, the participants receive an email with relevant material and information about the themes and subject ahead of time. In addition the researchers have informed the participants that their answers would be treated with anonymity. The interviews are expected to take about sixty to ninety minutes, but this is not certain due to the semi-structured format of the interviews. It will be conducted in either English or the local languages: Dutch, Pashto, and Persian. The recording of data (usually voice) is being used for data collection purposes. The ability to gather audio data through tape recorders, cellphones, and other devices have significantly improved qualitative research (Saunders et al., 2019). We will record our data through zoom and WhatsApp applications by using laptops and smartphones for our research. However, the date recording will be considered upon the approval of our participants.

To analyze the data that will be collected through semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis will be applied. According to Kiger and Varpio (2020), thematic analysis is a method that fits well with exploratory and qualitative research. It aims to find patterns or recurring themes, identified by the researcher through exploratory and open coding of text like interview transcripts (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The researchers of this study have therefore chosen to apply thematic analysis. Moreover, empirical sources on the topic of female leadership challenges being researched from such a comparative angle are scarce, which the researchers believe is a valid reason for open coding. As explained by Terry et al. (2017), thematic analysis does not need to be based on a theoretical framework due to exploratory and inductive nature. Also, it is deemed to be a strong method for when research is conducted with the aim of making a comparison. The process itself consists of six phases, also applied for this specific research: familiarization with the collected data, creation of preliminary codes, identification of themes, evaluation of the identified themes, definition of the evaluated themes, and production of the

results in writing (Terry et al., 2017). This specific research's analysis process started with reading through the ten interview transcripts and writing down some thoughts that came up while doing so. Then, the researchers coded the collected interview transcript data by reading each transcript on a computer and highlighting every piece of data that could indicate something. Once the coding was completed, the researchers generated every theme the codes could fall under that they could think of. From those themes, the researchers selected the ones they considered to be relevant for achieving the research aim and objectives. To ensure that no theme would turn out to be irrelevant or missed, these were checked again by analyzing the collected interview transcript data. The researchers have done this by dividing the codes over the themes, so that any errors would surface. After this initial round, the themes were officially defined and then the final coding round was done (see Appendix 2).

All the recorded data will be stored on Google Drive, indicating cloud-based data storage. Cloud storage is safe and secure, and cost-effective. The stored data will then be converted to text through transcription. Saunders et al. (2019) describe the process of converting speech from an audio recording into written text, known as audio transcription. Anything with audio and video recordings might fall under this category (Saunders et al., 2019). As we are interviewing multilingual participants, we will use the "google transcribe Speech-to-Text." application to transcribe our data for each language. For some participants who speak Pashto or Persian languages, which are not included in the google system for transcription, we will translate their entire interview into written English, which will serve as the final transcription of our data.

3.4   *Methodological Limitations & Ethical Considerations*

When it comes to methodological limitations, a few points can be made. First, using semi-structured interviews means that it is unknown how long an interview will take. Dutch people tend to be very serious about their time management, which could lead the interviewees to be hasty or not have enough time. For this research, however, using another method than semi-structured interviews would impact the data quality negatively. Second, interviewing participants in the month of Ramadan Kareem in Afghanistan is a limitation. The working hours are less, and most people are busy with their prayers and housework, so getting time from participants and conducting the interview this month is a limitation, but we will try to find a suitable time for our interviews. Third, the expensive rate of internet and low internet accessibility in Afghanistan, especially in rural areas, is a significant limitation in our research.

We are focusing on interviewing participants from urban and rural areas. Most people face difficulties with the expensive internet rate with low accessibility in rural areas, which could also be a limitation for our research while conducting interviews. Some internet companies have good coverage in rural areas such as Etisalat, Afghan Besim, and Roshan, but their internet prices are very high. We have a plan to conduct interviews with our participants with high accessibility to the internet, and in case if it is needed, we might take responsibility for internet charges by sending money to our participants to Afghanistan.

Fourth, some interviewees will be interviewed in their local language participants due to a language barrier. Some of our participants speak local languages like Pashto and Persian, so interviewing in the local language and translating them to English can lose data's originality. However, we take much precaution with keeping the data's originality while translating. Fifth, finding top-level female leaders and influencing them for interviews in Afghanistan is a limitation. The focus of our study is to investigate the challenges of female leaders in the Netherlands and Afghanistan. Thus, it is significant to find top-level leaders for our study; however, it is a limitation due to cultural differences, privacy, and many other factors influencing a female leader for interviewing. However one of our group members belongs to Afghanistan and has connections. Due to his network he influenced female leaders for the study.

Now that the methodological limitations have been discussed, a closer look will be taken at this research's ethical considerations. The term "research ethical concerns" refers to the standards that researchers use to plan and execute their investigations (Saunders et al., 2019). First, one ethical consideration we might face during the research would be informed consent. This refers to how participants are informed about the research concept. As a result, we need to recognize participants' responsibilities and work processes and get their consent and authorization to conduct the study. Second, we might have difficulties gathering data about women's roles in the Netherlands and Afghanistan due to cultural differences. Thus, we must deliver participants thorough and exact information about the study in advance and persuade them to contribute to the research.

Third, anonymity should be respected. The anonymity of data collected from study participants indicates that the project does not collect personally identifiable information about participants (e.g., name, address, email address, etc.) or that the data acquired cannot be linked to

participants' identities. Due to significant cultural differences and human privacy, most participants are hesitant to give their personal information, particularly in Afghanistan, a developing nation. As a result, we must be aware of this obstacle. Fourth, another ethical consideration is that of discrimination. When looking at the Netherlands specifically, it has a very multicultural population. Therefore, the sampling of Dutch interviewees should and will be free of discrimination. This is done by ensuring an equal ratio of ethnicity. Fifth, we have to respect our participants with their right to withdraw, as well as voluntary participation. We have already contacted some of our target group participants and provided them with enough information about the study. We give them the freedom to choose participants in the study voluntarily, and they can withdraw from the research group at any time.

4 Results

This chapter will provide the results of the semi-structured interviews that were conducted. Five of the interviews were with interviewees from Afghanistan, and another five were with interviewees from the Netherlands, meaning that ten interviews were conducted. Afterward, those interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. This process allowed the researchers to identify and categorize essential data into twelve themes, as well as to create a complete overview of those results (see Appendix 2). This section is applied as follows: the findings of the twelve themes of the Netherlands are presented first, followed by the twelve themes of Afghanistan. The purpose of presenting the result of each country separately is that as we are using the phenomenal approach strategy, which analyzes everyday human experiences without suspending the researchers' prior beliefs about the phenomenon; rather than being forced by an investigator, findings are allowed to arise. Furthermore, we use thematic analysis to investigate the underlying meaning of a spoken or written document while considering the social and historical context.

4.1 The Netherlands

4.1.1 Female Leadership Strengths

When looking at the results of the Dutch interviews, a number of female leadership strengths were given. First, every interviewee found that people-skills are a female leadership strength. People-skills characteristics were discussed during the interviews, such as being empathetic, supportive, and approachable. Secondly, three out of five interviewees found that females have a leadership approach while males have a management approach, as one of them stated: “*Compared to men I think women are true leaders. Where male leaders just aim to cross the finish line on their own through their team's efforts, female leaders aim to cross the finish line as a team.*”. All of the five interviewees mentioned several characteristics falling under this strength, including taking responsibility, perseverance, passion, and diplomacy. Third, several interviewees find communication skills to be a strength of female leaders. Two characteristics of communication skills were mentioned in particular, namely being active listeners and more open than their male counterparts. Fourthly, according to the Dutch interviewees, organizational culture is a female leadership strength. Throughout the interviews, organizational culture-related characteristics including feedback, fairness, democracy and inclusivity were discussed, with one

interviewee stating: "*Women bring democracy and inclusivity to the workplace*". A fifth female leadership strength that was given by interviewees is short- and long-term planning, with characteristics being project management and problem solving.

4.1.2 Difficulty of Achieving a Leadership Position as a Female

The interviewees from the Netherlands all find that achieving a leadership position is more difficult for females than for males. According to them, there are several factors that cause this difficulty. First, double standards is a factor that was mentioned by four of the five interviewees. Throughout the interviews they explained how this factor is seen in reality, such as women being criticized no matter what she does, and as one interviewee said: "*Women are forced to always defend every move, are underestimated, and not taken seriously. Compared to men, we have to put in twice the work to get half as far*". Another factor that was given by multiple interviewees is that of traditional gender roles and norms. One interviewee explained: "*...because of the way people see us and our role in society, which was formed a long time ago but is still held by society.*". One interviewee mentioned another factor that makes it more difficult for women to achieve a leadership position, namely objectification. She stated: "*...and next to that, we also have to deal with being objectified at the office, or everywhere basically, every day.*".

4.1.3 Preparation for Leadership as a Female

If we look at the results from the Dutch interviewees, three out of five initially said that they had no specific preparation for their role as a female leader. One of them elaborated: "*I wasn't really prepared for it. To be honest, right before starting my first leadership position, I started to feel scared because I didn't think that I was fit for the job anymore.*". The remaining two interviewees explained that they both grew up in a female-supporting environment and that they were supported by other women at some point in time: "*Before getting my first management position, I had a female manager at two of the organizations I previously worked at. They were great leaders and never hesitated to teach me some useful tricks and ways to develop skills.*". On the other hand, when the interviewees discussed the support they felt over the years, two of them noted that daily life as a woman in itself has already been a way to prepare. One of them said: "*Daily life as a girl and woman. Unfortunately, women start experiencing the impact of sexism from a very young age. So we try to learn to keep our own heads up.*". Another interviewee

noted: "*I think that growing up in a female-supporting environment has prevented my spark from dimming as a young girl.*".

4.1.4 Society's Effect on Their Own Leadership as a Female

Of the data collected from the Dutch interviewees, a number of things were found. First, all interviewees in some way explained that society has a negative impact. They have experienced it in multiple ways, including having self-doubt, acting tougher, feeling incompetent or insecure, needing to prove themselves, or becoming a perfectionist. In addition, three out of five interviewees mentioned the false image about female leaders to be one of the causes. One of them said stereotyping and gender norms are taboo, making it hard for change to happen. Three out of five interviewees discussed how society negatively impacted their work by receiving little recognition and male colleagues making decisions based on assumptions. One interviewee mentioned: "*Also, the work that female leaders have put in to get to their position hardly ever gets recognized; people will either think that she had to sleep with the boss to get there, or that she got there by giving up a homelife.*". However, each of the interviewees also noted how the hardships as a woman in society have impacted their leadership positively. Things like having airtight reasoning, empathy, and resilience would be examples according to them. One of them explained: "*...I empathize with my employees because that is what I missed and needed back in the day.*".

4.1.5 Personal Choices Made to Reach a Leadership Position

Of the five interviewees from the Netherlands, two of them have mentioned that they had to decide whether to follow their dreams when the opportunity first came to them. For one this meant moving to the city and for the other it meant breaking up with their partner and becoming an expat, explaining: "*I broke up with a previous partner back then, as I had goals in life that didn't match theirs.*". Three out of five interviewees said that a personal choice they made was to go against the Dutch female norms. The first interviewee chose to have kids later in life, the second chose to never have kids at all, and the third one said the following: "*To move past the belief that women should get married in their late 20s, have babies some years later, and then grow old without any other aspirations.*". One interviewee said that for her, it was the choice whether to face the challenges of female leaders or not. She stated: "*Though I did have to decide if I, as a woman, was going to put myself through the ordeal that female managers deal with.*".

4.1.6 Work-Life Balance

When it comes to the Netherlands, all five interviewees answered that they never really had any difficulty with balancing their work and life outside of work. When asked how they managed this balance, their answers included: "*I never really found that to be a problem, I always have a clear overview of my to do list. It also helps that I am comfortable with leaving unfinished tasks for the next day.*" and "*Pretty damn good haha!*". Three out of five interviewees discussed that they manage their work-life balance by having an altered family situation. These altered situations include having a relationship without living together, a stay-at-home dad, and having worked less hours when their children were young. Furthermore, three interviewees said that one of their principles is that they neither do work at home nor take any work home. One interviewee noted: "*I have a personal rule I live by: leave all means of work-communication at the office when you go home. That way, I fully disconnect from work and truly connect at home.*". Additionally, numerous interviewees mentioned that they have some form of external help with this. These forms include confidence-therapy, personal development therapy, hobbies, and the organization they work for having defined work-life balance policies.

4.1.7 Female Leadership Role Models

Regarding the Dutch interview results on role models, the first two stated that they do not have any specific role models. Rather, they have been inspired by many female leaders over the years. The third interviewee mentioned their grandmother, explaining: "*My grandmother. She joined the resistance in World War II. She also had several jewish people and one British pilot hiding in their house for a very long time, who all survived because of it. This British pilot crashed in a field close to her house in the middle of the night. She ran over there, found the wounded pilot and secretly nursed him till he recovered. They have remained befriended by flying over to visit each other every few years and by writing letters, until his death a few years ago. She still has very good contact with his wife and son, who actually flew over last year.*". Interviewee four stated that her mother is her role model, having raised her and her brother by herself. The fifth interviewee's role model is Margaret Thatcher, as she stated: "*Oh yes! I used to be in awe of Margaret Thatcher. The things that she has achieved as a woman in a time when women were less active as leaders are just amazing. I do not want to be exactly like her, but her toughness is something I respect.*".

4.1.8 Role Networking Played in Their Own Success

The Dutch interviewees all said that networking played no significant role in their own success. As two of them stated: "*Not really, just finding the confidence to apply for jobs that may seem out of your league at first.*" and "*No. I don't think that networking is still as important as it used to be. Not in the Netherlands at least.*".

4.1.9 Help to Achieve Their Leadership Position

For the Dutch interviewees, first, two out of five said that they did not get any specific help. They discussed how they helped themselves and should give themselves credit for the work they put in: "*I used to think that I had to thank this position to the, mostly male, people I worked with over the years. But then I realized that I am the one who put in all the work. I helped myself.*". Second, two out of five interviewees mentioned their loved ones as help in achieving their goals by being supportive and a source of motivation. Third, two out of five interviewees gave credit to a CEO they (used to) work for. One interviewee explained: "*...the founder and CEO of the organization I work at is quite young. This set the tone for the organizational culture, which I find to be very open, dynamic, and progressive. This could be a factor that influenced me getting hired.*".

4.1.10 Encountered Challenges Becoming a Female Leader

During each of the five interviews with the Dutch interviewees, multiple challenges have been discussed. First, different challenges related to sexism were pointed out. One interviewee mentioned that stereotyping is one of the challenges she faces as a female leader. Three interviewees found that gender discrimination is another challenge, which one of the interviewees clarified by giving the example of biased job application processes. Three out of five interviewees also found that favoritism is a challenge for female leaders. According to one of them, an example of this particular challenge is having less opportunities than their male colleagues. Another three interviewees said that prejudice is a challenge for female leaders, consisting of commonly held assumptions and expectations people have. Second, every interviewee discussed challenges that are linked to mental health. These included self-doubt, successes not being recognized, and external opinions and judgments, with one interviewee saying: "*In the beginning, I used to second guess myself a lot because of men underestimating my capabilities.*". Fourth, four out of five interviewees mentioned harassment as a female

leadership challenge. Fifth, double standards was mentioned by two interviewees as a female leadership challenge. They clarified that they experience this through things like being compared to their male colleagues and having to meet different assignment quality criteria for the same taks.

4.1.11 Personal Strategies

If we look at the data collected from the Dutch interviewees, two of them mentioned therapy as a personal strategy, including mindfulness therapy, resilience training, and mental therapy. They stated: "*I see a mental health professional from time to time, just to have a mental checkup instead of a physical one.*". and "*...mindfulness therapy every now and so often.*". Another personal strategy, according to three out of five interviewees, is self-motivation. One of them explained: "*It was really hard sometimes, but I always kept on believing in myself and my capabilities. Also, I tried to stay humble by sometimes looking back at previous accomplishments to remind myself of the great things that I already did.*". There were also two personal strategies that were both mentioned by two out of five interviewees: having supportive people in their circle and maintaining personal development/goals. They noted: "*I kept unsupportive people away from me. Knowing that you can always count on the people around you truly goes a long way.*" and "*I set personal goals for myself, both short- and long-term. Personal development is the greatest tool to make the world a little bit better in my opinion.*". One interviewee mentioned their strategy was all about facing reality, explaining: "*I'd say I faced the challenges instead of really overcoming them. The times are changing now and that has probably made it at least a little bit easier to overcome them. But there is still a long way to go!*".

4.1.12 Advice to Current and Future Female Leaders

The interviewees from the Netherlands have given a number of pieces of advice for female leaders of today and tomorrow. First, three pieces of advice were discussed that come down to self-motivation: believe in oneself, celebrate each success no matter how big or small. Second, three out of five interviewees advise female leaders to support other women: "*...please support fellow women! Don't compete with one another or bring each other down, we're in it together.*". Third, two interviewees noted that asking for help is never wrong and that they encourage doing so. Fourth, two interviewees said that female leaders should trust themselves and their capabilities. Fifth, one interviewee mentioned: "*Have supportive people near you.*", with another interviewee also giving this advice. Sixth, one interviewee said that it is important

to have personal development goals. They explained that this will bring fulfillment and keep the fire going. Lastly, a piece of advice given by one of the interviewees that refers to the personal values of a female leader. She stated: "*Apply at organizations where the culture and values are in line with what you believe in.*".

4.2 Afghanistan

4.2.1 Female Leadership Strengths

The result of interviews in Afghanistan, a number of points were discussed regarding the strength of female leadership. First, every interviewee described that awareness of culture is essential for female leadership. According to the interviewees, Afghanistan is a cultural society, so awareness of society's culture is the first point for female leadership. Second, all interviewees talked about the importance of ethical behavior, including honesty, fairness, integrity, and understanding for female leadership. Third, they have interconnected the significance of ethical behavior due to culture. Fourth, three interviewees described that females believe in themselves more than males, so they survive in these leadership positions. Fourth, three interviewees found that when females get leadership positions, they have incredible skills in persuasiveness, leading communication, and support of subordinates. Fifth, two interviewees explained that females are impacted by society's problems more than males, especially females' hardships. A male interviewee discussed that "...*females are emotional and sensitive; they understand society's problems more than males, especially the problems of females that how much are they suffering.*"

4.2.2 Difficulty of Achieving a Leadership Position as a Female

When looking at the difficulty of achieving a leadership position as a female, several responses were given by interviewees. All the interviewees agreed that it is more difficult for females to achieve leadership positions than males, and they discussed some below significant barriers to achieving female leadership positions. First, All five interviewees agreed that the current rulers (Taliban) surplus problems of current and future female leaders. They explained that in previous democratic governments, females worked in many top-level positions but unfortunately, after the collapse of the democratic government, most of the female leaders fled from the country, and the remaining are being threatened daily. One of the interviewees worked as a regional leader in a vocational training organization. She explained: "*I was working for ten years as a regional leader, but after the rise of the Taliban again, I have been threatened daily.*

The Taliban have sent an official letter to our office and asked for my dismission. Our office had no choice but to dismiss me from my job.".

Second, all five interviewees mentioned that culture is a significant societal barrier to female leadership. One interviewee explained that Afghanistan is a cultural society and it is a misconception that females are not capable of leadership and cannot look after Islamic rules while being in a leadership position. One of the interviewees said, "*Well, it is a misconception that females are only for home or grave,"* Two interviewees also explained that Afghanistan is a strictly religious and cultural society, and the problem is that society mixes religion and culture. One of the interviewees stated: "*Islam teaches us that males and females have the same right for education and working, but unfortunately, society takes this right from us.*". Third, three interviewees explained that females get less support from society than males. Society prefers male leaders, which is why females get less support from society. Fourth, two interviewees explained that males are dominant in this society; females have to obey their fathers, brothers, husbands, and even sons, which causes dependency of families on males.

4.2.3   Preparation for Leadership as a Female

Now, the results of females' preparation for leadership will be discussed. From the Afghan interviewees, all five interviewees explained that strong social behavior, awareness of society's culture and society's problems influenced them for leadership positions and their ability to adapt to society made them leaders. Second, three interviewees explained that their self-confidence, family support, and the ability to work in remote areas made them succeed in reaching leadership positions. Third, two interviewees have discussed that the shortage of female leaders and society's compulsions assist them in getting leadership positions. One interviewee stated: "*Well, society needs us in some positions such as baby delivery, meeting with females, working in hospitals and many more, so that is the reason that society actually prefers females over males.*".

4.2.4   Society's Effect on Their Own Leadership as a Female

Examining the result of society's effect on female leadership, all Afghan interviewees found that society badly affected female leadership and discussed several arguments. First, all five interviewees explain the difficulties during community mobilization. They said it is very challenging for female leaders to mobilize the community for cooperation. It was also mentioned

that it is a cultural society and most communities are not ready to accept female leaders in their areas, that is why females get less support from society. Second, two interviewees discussed that their culture has both a positive and negative impact on their work. They said that if females work within the limits of culture and succeed in gaining society's trust, then society will help them in every condition. But if females could not succeed in gaining society's trust and could not succeed in influencing them, then the interviewees said it is very challenging for females to work. In lieu of this, it was mentioned that currently, very limited females have succeeded in gaining society's trust and influencing them. Third, two interviewees found that there is a misconception about females' ability in leadership: society thinks that females can not operate as leaders. Fourth, according to two interviewees, slander and false allegations against them and their work is the biggest challenge in society. One interviewee stated: *"Unfortunately, I have heard slander and false allegations against me and my work by myself. They are calling me a characterless woman.".* Fifth, two interviewees said that it is a dominant male society: "*...males never want us to be superior to them. They always want to be in the lead positions.*".

4.2.5   *Personal Choices Made to Reach a Leadership Position*

We will now look at the result of personal choices that made females reach leadership positions. First, four interviewees revealed that they followed their dreams and desire to be leaders. Second, three interviewees explain that their desire to help poor society, especially women in bad conditions, made them leaders. One interviewee who worked as an advisor at the Afghanistan ministry of women affairs stated: "*It was my obligation to help my poor society, day-night I was working on reaching the voice of females to high authorities.*". Third, two interviewees explained that their courage made them leaders, as one of them said: "*I had the guts to face a religious and strictly male-dominated cultural society.*".

4.2.6   *Work-Life Balance*

The result of how females maintain their work-life balance consist of a number of points. First, all five interviewees explained that they encounter difficulties balancing professional and personal life. Second, two interviewees discussed that they have children and find it challenging to balance their professional and personal life. One interviewee stated: "*I have nine children, and my younger daughter was one month old when I left her with my husband and went back to fieldwork. I was there in the field for twenty days or sometimes more than a month. We do not have parental leave in Afghanistan as you guys have in Europe.*". Third, two interviewees

discussed that their family members help them with the housework. One interviewee said she prioritized the crucial tasks: "*I always focus on prioritizing my essential tasks whenever it's personal or professional tasks. I always try that personal and professional life does not affect each other poorly.*".

4.2.7   Female Leadership Role Models

Observing the result of female role models in Afghanistan, interviewees named some females. First, all five interviewees were inspired by freedom fighter Malala Maiwandi. Afghanistan's national folk hero Malalai of Maiwand, also known as Malala or Malalai Anna, rallied Afghan warriors during the battle of Maiwand. During the second Anglo-Afghan war, she fought with Ayub Khan and was a prominent figure in the Afghan victory at the Battle of Maiwand in 1880 and was finally martyred in that war. One interviewee stated: "*Malala Maiwandi teaches us two lessons; first, females are not less than men in any field, even if it is a crucial war; second, fight for your rights and freedom till you die.*". Second, three interviewees named Zarghona and Nazo Ana as their role models. According to them, they named the best mothers of empires Ahmad Shah Abdali and Mirwais Khan Neka who educated their sons and were their advisors in the field of victories. Third, one interviewee reveals that Queen Soraya is her role model, who was the first Afghan queen consort as the wife of King Amanullah Khan. The interviewee explained that she had a significant role in Amanullah Khan's modernizing measures, notably with women's liberation. Fourth, one interviewee named her mother as a role model. She stated: "*My mother is my role model; she suffered and struggled too much to educate all her six children in this terrible situation. She worked and managed her personal life very well. She served this nation for 50 years.*". Fifth, one interviewee named Dr. Sima Samar and Zarifa Ghafari as her role models. According to the interviewee, Dr. Sima Samar is a female Afghan human rights advocate and activist, and social worker who served as Afghanistan's Minister of Women's Affairs from December 2001 to 2021. Furthermore, the interviewee was inspired by Zarifa Ghafari's braveness. According to the interviewee, Zarifa Ghafari was the mayor of Maidan Wardak province in Afghanistan. She got this position through free competition, and despite much opposition from the community, she did not give up. She stands against the militants; although she received many threats from the Taliban even though they killed her father, she fought till the end.

4.2.8 Role of Networking

Regarding the role of networking in the success of female leadership in Afghanistan, first, all five interviewees agreed that networking positively impacts females' leadership success. They revealed that having a network connection for female leaders is essential in Afghanistan. Second, three interviewees explain that networking is highly essential, and if female leaders have a network connection, especially in rural areas, society will cooperate with them more. Third, one interviewee stated: *"The role of networking in our society cannot be denied, but NO in my case."*. Fourth, one male interviewee who works as a managing director in an organization explained the importance of networking for female leadership. He explained: *"Once we announced one female position for a rural area, two females were shortlisted and interviewed, one female was highly qualified but had no connection in that rural area, but another female was not that much qualified but had great network connection, she was the daughter of a tribal leader, and we had no choice to appoint her for the position. I know it is wrong; we appoint a less qualified female, but she had a network and could survive in that society. Society will also support her due to her father who is a tribal leader."*.

4.2.9 Help With Leadership Position Achievement

The study found some information following the result of whether the females get support to achieve leadership positions. First, all five interviewees revealed that their own passion and hard work caused their success. Second, two interviewees explained that their family is educated and therefore got their family's support to achieve this position. Third, one interviewee explained that her aunt helped her to achieve this position: *"I was her assistant, and she prepared me for this job. She was my teacher, my guide. Unfortunately, she died in a road bomb blast last year and the office appointed me to her position."*.

4.2.10 Encountered Challenges Becoming a Female Leader

Females encounter different challenges in becoming a leader. First, All five Afghan interviewees agreed that war is the most significant challenge for females to become leaders. Two interviewees whose ages were fifty-plus have explained that war is the creator of all other problems; one interviewee said, *"I am 63 years old. I am a witness of peace and war in Afghanistan. We never had these kinds of challenges for women as the war has created now. This war terribly affects our society"*. Second, all five Afghan interviewees discussed that the current

Afghanistan rulers (Taliban) are a vital challenge for females to become leaders. One said: *"We had many female leaders in society in the previous democratic government, but unfortunately, now everything is over. The Taliban will never let us be in the lead position again. Never Ever"*. Third, four interviewees point out militancy as the biggest challenge. They said that for decades militancy had been a significant issue for female leadership; Militants have more power in rural areas. One interviewee said, *"It is a very serious problem for females, dozens of our females' colleagues have been killed by militants in recent years. Still females get threats daily."*

Fourth, four interviewees indicated cultural problems for females' leadership. They said Afghanistan is a strictly cultural society, and it is a misconception about females that they can't be leaders; they underestimate females' abilities and always prefer males as leaders. Therefore, society is not ready to accept females in leadership positions; that is why females get less support from family and society compared to males. Fifth, three interviewees indicated the mixture of religion with culture as the most significant challenge; one said: *"Unfortunately, our society mixes up religion with culture; Islam never stops women from work and education; It is an Islamic obligation that women and men have the same rights, but sadly society took our this right.".* Sixth, two interviewees named male dominance (gender discrimination) as a challenge for females leadership which causes serious prejudice against women. They said females face discrimination while recruiting and promotion. One said: *"Well, it is a dominant male society, Males never want females to be in the lead position, not yesterday, not today, and I am sure not tomorrow".* Seventh, a male interviewee discussed that sexual harassment and asked for sexual favors against recruiting and promotion is a challenge for females in leadership positions. He stated: "*I think it is a very serious issue; maybe females can't discuss this issue due to ethical considerations, but sadly we have this issue in our society. Some females face sexual harassment and ask for sexual favor for recruiting and promotions.".* Finally, three interviewees discussed that balancing personal and professional life is a challenge for female leaders. They said females have to work outside, and at the same time they have to take care of their families. Very limited number of females get family support in their housework.

4.2.11 Personal Strategies

Observing the result, some points of females' personal strategies against these challenges have been discussed. First, accept the reality: all five interviewees agreed that they have accepted that women are currently on the dark side and failed to succeed in some problems such as war

and changing society's mentality fast. Second, four interviewees discussed that having a good reputation, such as ethical behavior and awareness of culture and religion in society, could be essential in overcoming females' challenges. Third, four interviewees point out community mobilization as an effective strategy to overcome female leadership challenges. They said Afghanistan is a wartorn, religious and cultural society, and it is significant for female leadership to mobilize the community for collaboration. Furthermore, a female needs to know the process of community mobilization. One interviewee said, *"71 % of Afghanistan's population live in rural areas, and every area has a slightly different culture. So before working in society, we study the society's culture, types of clothing, and way of living. Then we try to contact community and religious leaders and try to influence them first, which is itself a very challenging task. If we succeed in influencing community and religious leaders, then we can start working in society."*

Fourth, all five interviewees describe that understanding and awareness of culture is the most suitable strategy to overcome female challenges. They said we are working in a strictly cultural society, so we assure the community that we are one of them, we are not against their culture, religion, and traditional values. One interviewee said, *"while I am working in the community, I wear my hijab and the same clothes as the community's culture. I have tried to pray with the community together rather than pray alone. I have tried to join their wedding parties, eat, and sit with them. I always try to participate in their happiness and sorrow."* Fifth, Never compromise with religion**:** four interviewees discussed that religious issues are so sensitive, so female leadership must be aware that they should never do such activities which are against religion. one interviewee stated: *"I am sure you know about Farkhunda and Mashal Khan, they have never said anything wrong about religion, but a religious scholar put false allegation of them, and everyone knows what happened with them, Farkhuda burnt alive in the heart of capital Kabul and Mashal Khan killed by his own classmates in Bacha Khan university. So be careful with religious issues*." Sixth, three interviewees believed self-confidence is the best strategy to overcome these challenges. One said*, "yes, we have problems, but it does not mean we should surrender."* Seventh, two interviewees said females should intelligently treat militant groups. They said we always try not to conflict with militant leaders. Eight, three interviewees mentioned that support from family and friends can play a significant role in overcoming challenges.

4.2.12 Advice to Current and Future Female Leaders

Multiple points have been discussed as advice to current and future female leaders during each of the five interviews. First, all five interviewees said women have to believe in themselves, their abilities and skills. They should prepare their mind for leadership in this strictly cultural society. Second, all five interviewees said that women should be aware of cultural and religious values. They should never take a step out of cultural values. Assures society that you are one of them, you have the same God, same religion, and same cultural values. Be a symbol of good character. Third, two interviewees said females should support each other in this challenging time; furthermore, females should help their girls get educated; as much as girls get educated today, our future female leaders could succeed in their lives.

5 Discussion

In this chapter, the major findings of the study will be discussed. It includes significant findings from the results (see Chapter 4) that are further explored for their meaning. These will be put into context of the literature review (see Chapter 2) and related back to previous studies (see Chapter 1), as well as to the questions posed in the introduction (see Chapter 1.4). Following that, the corresponding limitations and notable results will be given and elaborated on. Then, some research implications of this study will be discussed.

5.1   *Similarities and Differences in Female Leadership Challenges*

Everyone can become a good leader, even more so when considering gender. Males and females are equally capable of leadership and gender should not act as a barrier to leadership ability (Ford & Rohini, 2012). If females get support from society, they could improve economic, social, and political conditions and empower women to improve results and strive for significant accomplishments (Sharma, 1985; Few, 2015). Females have always had the capacity and desire for leadership. But political, economic, and societal obstacles have prevented their advancement to leadership positions (Porterfield & Kleiner, 2005). This study found that Dutch and Afghan female leaders indicated gender discrimination and favoritism as challenges, often leading to female leaders having fewer chances than their male counterparts. Although Afghan leadership acknowledged that culture favors and encourages males over females, they said that the misconception that women cannot be leaders underestimates female leaders' potential (Schneider et al,. 2014. Umar (2021) described that, globally, females suffer from gender disparities between males and females. This leads to gender discrimination and places females in unfavorable conditions due to the pervasive patriarchal culture (Umar, 2021). Moreover, The Afghan and Dutch female leadership identified sexual harassment and prejudice as crucial obstacles. Sexual harassment affects female leadership in both nations. Afghan female leadership describes that females face this obstacle in recruiting and promotion. In addition, prejudice is a challenge for female leaders, consisting of commonly held assumptions and expectations people have from females in both countries. Observing the female leadership difficulties, as Spector (2016) argues through directing to the Great Man theory (Carlyle, 1841) that allegedly led to today's female leadership barriers, is confirmed by females in both countries.

Contrastingly, balancing personal and professional life appears to be a challenge for female leaders in Afghanistan but not in the Netherlands. Afghan females get less support from family members in balancing their personal and professional life; thus, they must maintain both simultaneously. This supports the statement made by Eagly (2007) that females face obstacles, most especially where female leadership is unusual (Eagly, 2007). In order to find a level ground for these challenges, some of the leaders mentioned that they have to prioritize and find family members to help. This explains a shift in identity when females tend to socialize or play a leading role (Ibarra et al., 2013; Ford & Rohini, 2012). Dutch female leaders discussed mental health challenges, including self-doubt, successes not being recognized, and external opinions and judgments, while Afghan female leadership did not mention these as challenges. This is what Snaebjornsson et al. (2015) argue; in a society where the female leadership is nothing but unusual, they are free to develop themselves in their personal leadership style but with invisible hindrance and expectations (Snaebjornsson et al., 2015).

5.2 *Borderless Societal Impact on Female Leadership*

Sadly, the recent collapse of Afghanistan's democratic government and rise of its current extremist government has made it impossible and dangerous for females to work at all, which is a crisis that the Netherlands does not have. Desai and Li (2016) argued that females experience different challenges in Afghanistan and other developing countries, caused by ongoing political battles as well as social barriers (Desai & Li, 2016). Therefore, in light of the aim of this study, experiences from female leaders before the collapse have been extensively explored. Cotter et al. (2001) explained the challenges for females to achieve leadership positions as the 'glass ceiling'; an invisible and unacknowledged barrier that obstructs females from reaching higher positions (Cotter et al., 2001). The underlying reasoning and perspectives are somewhat different from each other, but the results show that the 'glass ceiling' is present in both Afghanistan and the Netherlands.

Female leaders in both countries experience a lack of support from society and are affected by double standards at work. Sexism at work is present in both countries, as males are given opportunities and assignments out of favoritism, which Eagly and Karau (2002) have described through role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Moreover, female leaders in both countries are also faced with the societal barrier of what people expect a leader to be. As Spector (2016) argues through referring to the Great Man Theory (Carlyle, 1841), males are

often still falsely seen as the embodiment of a leader (Spector, 2016). Due to this, female leaders in both Afghanistan and the Netherlands currently suffer from feelings of self-doubt, become insecure, or are forced to act masculine as leaders.

Surprisingly, the findings show that the female leaders from Afghanistan stress the importance of networking in their society, while the Dutch female leaders find the complete opposite. In Afghanistan, it is believed that it has a positive impact on female leadership success. If a female leader has a network, especially in rural areas, society cooperates with the leader and it will determine the extent to which the leader will succeed. In the Netherlands, networking does not play an important role in attaining a leadership position. The Dutch interviewees mentioned that it is rather due to their hard work paying off. This can be viewed as the society building and impacting on leaders individually and collectively.

5.3   Contrasting Role of Culture in Female Leadership

Interestingly, both countries discussed their society's impact a lot. However, in Afghanistan it is noticeably viewed from a more deep cultural and religious perspective while in the Netherlands it is viewed from a norms and roles perspective. Males in Afghanistan have a higher status by default due to the culture and religion and this hinders females in achieving higher positions. This can be described as a patriarchal culture (Ford & Rohini, 2012) and lines up with results from a study by Ünal (2017) on national culture's effect on leadership in an Islamic, developing country. Furthermore, according to Schünemann (2020), the process of outgrowing traditional beliefs as a country is difficult and takes a lot of time (Schünemann, 2020, p. 31). This is seen in the Netherlands, as results show that it is caused by the remnants of a traditional thinking pattern on females' role in society. This confirms what Adeyemi-Bello et al. (2017) stated regarding the Dutch social norms still being held into place (Adeyemi-Bello et al., 2017). Additionally, Afghan female leaders value awareness of culture, since having a good reputation and community mobilization are essential for female leaders to thrive.

Afghanistan is a religious and cultural society, and it has the most significant effect on female leadership. Ünal (2017) describes that culture significantly affects female leadership development in society (Ünal, 2017). Therefore, Afghan female leaders must be aware of their country's religious beliefs, norms, values, sentiments, and traditions. Consequently, a female leader with cultural and religious understanding may acquire the trust and support of the

community and achieve a good reputation in society; without cultural and religious knowledge, female leadership cannot earn a good reputation and get support from society. Having supportive family and friends is therefore essential for female leadership to operate in such a cultural society. Also, Dutch and Afghan female leaders describe stereotyping as one of the challenges at some point. But this study has found that stereotyping is considered to be a part of Afghan culture, against female leadership and their abilities. It is a misconception that females can not be leaders, like Schneider et al. (2014) discussed that culture plays an essential role in leadership.

Contrastingly, from the conducted interviews, it is apparent that role model(s) played a role in the female leaders' journey in both Afghanistan and the Netherlands. However, the Afghan leaders noticeably perceive it in a very cultural manner compared to the Netherlands. Role models in Afghanistan include freedom fighters, human rights advocates, folk hero Malalai of Maiwand, and Queen Soraya. The Dutch interviewees stated that they did not have any particular person as a role model but have been somewhat inspired by public female leaders over the years. Some of them mentioned family like their grandmother or mother.

5.4   *Shared Recognition of Female Leadership Strengths*

Evidently, when looking at perceived female leadership strengths, the study shows that ethical behavior and communication skills are strongly perceived as strengths of female leaders in both Afghanistan and the Netherlands. In the two countries, such ethical behavior includes fairness, honesty, empathy, and diversity and inclusion. Communication skills in the two countries include openness, feedback, and active listening. The word 'ethical' was not used directly by Dutch interviewees but rather considered as leadership skills and organizational skills. Nevertheless, the characteristics the Dutch interviewees mentioned overlap with ethical behavior and communication. Umar (2021) argued that a democratic leadership style (Goleman, 2000) would be the most successful and innate one for females (Umar, 2021). This is confirmed by the communication skills and ethical behavior mentioned by the Afghan and Dutch interviewees in this study. Subsequently, interviewees from both countries indicated that these skills and their overall development as a leader is due to the support of their personal circle.

However, some key differences were found too. In Afghanistan, females' high awareness of culture is considered a strength of theirs. In the Netherlands, no link with culture is made regarding female leadership strengths. They, in turn, find that females have great short- &

long-term planning skills. This may be the result of Afghanistan highly using and respecting their cultural identity, while the Dutch society is less culture-oriented and much more individualistic.

5.5   Universal Perseverance of Female Leaders

According to Ali (2015), the only way an organization can survive is to have competent leaders who direct and steer it on the proper path. The need for a shift in the view of females in leadership positions is also growing. Thus, females need to have the most valuable strategies for overcoming challenges ahead, where almost three-quarters of executives are male (Ali, 2015). As Ford and Rohini (2012) discussed, the awakening of women has brought changes in today's world development. Their self-confidence and passion moved their attention from being merely a wife or mothers to increasing the quality of their lives (Ford & Rohini, 2012). From our research findings on the personal strategies of female leaders, acceptance of reality is a crucial approach for Afghan female leaders. They concurred that they have accepted that women are presently on the dark side and have failed to solve war issues and alter society's attitude.

Furthermore, self-confidence and self-motivation have been found to be crucial strategies for Afghan and Dutch female leaders. In both countries, female leaders underline the importance of having supportive family and friends as a fundamental strategy for overcoming obstacles, and of supporting people in their personal circle in their personal and professional development is essential. The leaders explained that they don't leave everything to the society to help them achieve that, rather they also engage in some external therapy, like personal development therapy, confidence therapy, which helps the mental and physical development of a leader. Therefore, it is important for a leader to stay mentally, physically and otherwise balanced in order to achieve a work-life balance.

Evidently, The findings from Afghanistan shows that most of the female leaders followed their dreams and desires of being a leader in order to work into attaining the leadership role they played, while others expressed that it was their desire to help and be a voice to the poor in the society and to females, that motivated them into the leadership position they held. This is therefore in line with Bennis' (2009) argument, that in mastering the contexts, "giving oneself to a guiding vision and listening to the inner voice" (p. 29) are quite important. From the findings, female leaders gave themselves a guiding vision that gave them the courage to face the religious

cultural society through self-reliance (Bennis, 2009). It is a phenomenon that Afghanistan has in common with the Netherlands since Dutch female leaders expressed that their leadership position was due to the personal decision they made to go against the Dutch female norms. This includes that female leaders choose not to marry at an early stage and to either have kids later in life or not at all. Bennis (2009) argues that 'the first step towards change is to refuse to be deployed by others and to choose to deploy yourself.' (Bennis, 2009, p. 31). By way of leadership by example, leaders from both countries summoned courage to face the challenges female leaders encounter. In the two countries, attaining a leadership role as a female is born out of vision, dream or passion, against all societal norms. It needs a bold step and a personal decision which will guide and drive the vision.

Ali (2015) explains that the existence of an organization is entirely dependent on the presence of competent leaders who direct and lead correctly. Moreover, the need for a change in attitudes toward female leaders increases (Ali, 2015). Thus, as the need for increasing female leaders is growing daily, the Afghan and Dutch female leaders have shared some advice for current and future female leaders. First, believing in yourself is essential. Female leadership should trust in their capabilities. Second, self-motivating and celebrating each success, no matter how big or small, are essential factors. Third, supporting other women and asking for help is always better than competing. Fourth, being aware of culture is advised, especially in a developing country like Afghanistan. Fifth, having personal development goals is essential. Finally, working in organizations where the culture and values align with what you personally believe in is key in finding true happiness.

6 Conclusion

This final chapter will conclude the thesis. Here, the major findings will be presented as to answer the formulated research questions of this study (see Chapter 1.4). The sub-research questions will be answered first, followed by answering the main research question. As the study was conducted with a comparative nature, each research question is answered in that retrospect. Once the research questions are answered, limitations of the study are discussed. Finally, research implications will be discussed.

6.1   What challenges do female leaders experience in both countries? What are the main similarities and differences?

This research found different varieties of challenges experienced by female leaders in their various capacities. The challenges that Dutch female leaders face include double standards, objectification, gender roles and norms, sexism, stereotyping, harassment, male favoritism, mental health, leadership style inauthenticity, gender discrimination, and prejudice. Double standards and objectification are challenges faced by females in the workplace in the Netherlands and entail criticism that is irrespective of what they do. Furthermore, outdated gender roles and norms are still held in Dutch society despite the extent of development in the Netherlands. Also, sexism, stereotyping, gender discrimination, and prejudice are experienced through the efforts female leaders put in their jobs hardly being recognized, as well as male counterparts making decisions based on assumptions. Additionally, male favoritism is experienced through male counterparts getting promotions and assignments females in the workplace were not even made aware of. Together with society's negative impact on females, it resulted most often in self-doubt, acting tougher, feeling of incompetent or insecure, perfectionism, and needíng to prove or explain oneself when actions are made.

The challenges that Afghanistan leaders face include political issues (war and government), cultural effects, lack of support (community and family), male dominance, male favoritism, work-life balance, stereotyping, harassment, objectification, maternity, criticism, and gender discrimination. Afghanistan is a cultural society in which an awareness of the culture and ethical behavior due to culture are well sought for. However, as religion and culture are wrongly being combined, misconceptions that females should only serve the homefront makes female leadership attainment almost impossible; the political issues happening in Afghanistan, war and

the reign of the Taliban, have negatively affected female leadership attainment too. It has decreased the motivation of current and future female leaders. In the Netherlands, female leaders do not experience cultural and political challenges. Furthermore, society affects them badly by favoring males over females and by females not receiving recognition. Females are currently in the dark, keeping prejudice against women alive. These are challenges that female leaders in the Netherlands experience as well. Also, work- life balance is a challenge because Afghan society does not give room for it and generally views females as one who is to be seen but not heard, thereby suppressing their voice. Female leaders have to deploy the help of their family members in order for the homefront not to be affected negatively. Dutch female leaders generally do not experience work-life challenges. This study has also found that some male counterparts in Afghanistan are aware of the fact that female leaders go through different forms of harassment, especially sexual harassement. However, it is a topic that female leaders presumably do not want to mention. In the Netherlands, harassment is also a female leadership challenge. However, it is a topic that seems less taboo for Dutch females to talk about.

6.2 How have successful female leaders in both countries coped with these challenges? Are there similar strategies that can be identified?

6.2.1 Similarities between the Netherlands and Afghanistan

Dutch and Afghan female leadership have some similar strategies to cope with the challenges. First, Accept reality: Both Dutch and Afghan female leaders have adopted the technique of recognizing the truth that women face this challenge as the times are changing, which has likely made it a little bit easier to overcome these obstacles. The second aspect is a strong ambition and dream to become influential leaders. Both Afghan and Dutch female leaders have an intense dream and desire to become successful leaders, and this feature is vital in overcoming their obstacles. The third is self-confidence; both countries' female leadership explains self-confidence, an attitude toward one's capabilities and abilities, as the best strategy to overcome most challenges. Fourth, Supporting other females; Afghan and Dutch female leadership agreed that supporting other females is the most suitable strategy to overcome many obstacles. Fifth, the female leadership of both nations identified having a supportive network as the most effective technique for overcoming obstacles. They agreed that having supportive individuals around might increase one's motivation and drive to overcome obstacles, this is what

Ford and Rohini (2012) argued when they stated that male and female leadership traits may be combined to create a unified force for the organization.

6.2.2 Differences between the Netherlands and Afghanistan

Dutch females have some different strategies for overcoming challenges. First, dare to go against the norms and to be a leader of their own beliefs. Second, go to therapy and training, including confidence therapy, personal development therapy, hobbies, and the organization they work for having defined work-life balance policies. Third, have the confidence to stand up and ask for help, they feel that it is never inappropriate to ask for assistance and actively encourage others to do so. Fourth, maintain personal development/goals by establishing short- and long-term personal objectives for ownself. Fifth, celebrate every success, no matter how large or small. Sixth, take into consideration one's own values and work for companies whose core principles are compatible with one's own. Lastly, acknowledge the efforts they themselves have put in to get where they are now.

Moreover, Afghan female leaders use a variety of techniques to overcome obstacles, including learning assertive social behavior, having a good reputation, learning ethical behavior, and becoming aware of culture and religion in society. Awareness of culture is an essential strategy for Afghan leaders since Afghanistan is a highly cultural country in which it is vital to be culturally conscious. Additionally, having a supportive family is essential for Afghan female leadership to overcome the challenges. They believe that the most influential factor in female leadership is family support.

6.3 How do female leadership challenges in developed and developing countries present themselves? A comparative study between Afghanistan and The Netherlands

This study aimed to get an understanding of the current state of affairs of female leadership in a more global context, with input from both developed and developing countries. Specifically, it explored the similarities and differences of female leadership challenges in Afghanistan and The Netherlands. A number of significant similarities have been found, as well as differences. The female leadership challenges between both countries mainly come from their societies' views and beliefs. This includes challenges such as sexism, gender discrimination, male favoritism, prejudice, and stereotyping. Female leaders in Afghanistan and the Netherlands also experience sexual physical abuse, as objectification and harassment are common practices.

Females subjected to such hostile situations will often not report it out of fear for being fired, especially when the abuser is someone in a senior position.When it comes to differences, female leaders in the Netherlands experience more mental health problems as a result, while Afghan female leaders find more hardships in balancing work and life. Organizations in the Netherlands tend to have policies regarding work-life balance and the government also started to attend to it, which is not the case in Afghanistan. Afghan female leaders currently face a terrible reality under Taliban rule; all their rights have been removed and are in danger every day.

Another major finding was that the effect of culture on female leadership is much bigger in Afghanistan than in the Netherlands. The unfortunate entanglement of culture and religion in Afghanistan has resulted in the oppression of females in general. In the Netherlands, female leadership progress appeared to be idealized because of the increasing public attention without much action. Nevertheless, female leaders in both countries share similar strength and strategies to cope with challenges themselves because society seemingly fails to bring change. In Afghanistan, female leaders create great social skills and learn to be culturally aware. In the Netherlands, therapy and other mental health strategies are key. In both countries, creating self-confidence, having a supportive social network, and having personal ambitions are what brought them to their leadership position.

In conclusion, though female leadership challenges may differ across the globe based on their culture and society, a number of challenges and strengths are shared. It is a problem that has no borders and is not specific to certain types of countries; it happens everywhere. In addition, culture has also been attributed to the specific leadership styles across the globe, which has an impact in organizations and society at large. As the results also show leadership challenges specific to female leaders, societies and organizations worldwide should spread awareness and take action in gender equality, unlocking the full potential of female leadership, thereby reducing gender gaps while achieving social, economic and personal gender equality. It will further have a positive result on females' full involvement in areas like economic stability, good governance and also better social protection, and finally aligning with the 2030 sustainable development goals. The more aware we are of others' experiences in the workplace, the better for us all, in order to create a genuinely inclusive and supportive work environment for all.

6.4   Limitations

Some limitations to this study are to be taken into account. First, the researchers were subjected to a limited timeframe of two months. Time constraints in an exploratory, qualitative research on such a voluminous topic may have impacted the research process. Second, the sampling of participants was set at 5 individuals per country. These were chosen through a convenience sampling strategy as time was limited. A similar study with more participants and another sampling strategy might generate different results. Third, due to low internet accessibility in Afghanistan, the interviewers and Afghan participants experienced occasional technical difficulties. This might have had an impact on the data collection and results. Fourth, all interviews were recorded, done in local languages, transcribed, and then translated to English before being analyzed. In light of the phenomenological research strategy of this study, the process of translation may have influenced the data and results. Fifth, the researchers have been careful to remain objective throughout the research process, thereby adhering to the phenomenological research strategy. However, though unintentional and unknowingly, there is the risk that occasional subjectivity could have occurred during the research process. In addition, the researchers have chosen direct quotes from the interviewees to be included in chapter four. This was done for findings that were expected to enhance the meaning, while other findings did not have direct quotes. All these were chosen without prejudice, but it may depict a form of subjectivity.

6.5   Theoretical and practical contributions

The research therefore contributes to the organization and society at large, with the business literature from a female, cultural, and leadership perspective. As the research explores the challenges faced by female leaders in both Afghanistan and The Netherlands, with further examination on similarities and differences. It also contributed knowledge on the extent of female leadership challenges faced by female Afghanistan leaders with regards to religion misunderstood as culture, with the present political situation in Afghanistan under the leadership of the Taliban. This research has contributed to the knowledge that will help multinationals and leaders make strategic decisions when they aim to expand their market by moving to such developing countries in order to stay successful and competitive. One example is the role culture and religion plays in such parts of the world. In addition, how the female leaders have strategically stayed motivated in spite of the challenges. This study encourages decision makers on how to break the glass ceiling by an all inclusiveness of female participation in leadership

roles and for the multinational not to enter the market with the same mindset as from the parent or original country, this will reduce the amount of frustration leaders will have when recruiting and working with locals, for better productivity and good planning. Furthermore, the study provides multinationals and the organizations that are planning on doing business in these developing countries with the social strategies in order to make better use of the female leaders when entering such markets. This will enable the human resource department of an organization to retain these leaders and make the best of them for a maximum output.

6.6   Implications

This study shows that, besides differences, there are internationally shared female leadership problems. It is a structural issue that requires more attention and action. Not just of organizations, but country-wide institutional change is needed. Taking out these roadblocks, requires strategic support from societies and organizations, which most of them shy away from, and hide under the carpet of culture. If efforts are made to take out these roadblocks, it will mean more inclusivity of females in the workplaces and participation in other leadership roles that are called for. Moreover, this study shows that female leadership advocacy, campaigns, foundations, etc., should also actively serve the non-Western world where it is still the case that females lag behind on virtually all the sustainable development goals and targets. This can be achieved by lending their voice, to ensure that workplace female leadership challenges are mitigated against to the minimum by using HR global compliance strategy, which will help attract more women to apply for open positions while keeping the current employees feeling protected and valued. In addition, as globalization continues to change the way organizations operate and manage employees, the culturally diverse awareness of female hardships at the workplace can benefit multinationals into becoming cross-cultural organizations, thereby enhancing the benefits of cross-cultural adaptation. Within those organizations, HR departments can achieve a deeper cultural impact and reconsider policies regarding (gender) diversity and inclusion. An example of such a strategy policy can be, conducting a pay audit. This is one way to mitigate the pay gap, it will stop negotiation over pay and will tend to expose entrenched biases by employees in organizations. This will help organizations most especially the multinationals that are working towards market expansion by entering new markets to stay competitive, having strategies in place to mitigate the challenges faced by females globally.

Furthermore, this research can function as a starting point for similar research that studies the similarities and differences in female leadership challenges worldwide. Such studies may also include transition countries, so that a true global picture of the current state of affairs can be painted. That way, developing, developed, and transition countries are researched. Also, this research could be a starting point for similar research where the interviews themselves are set up differently to collect data. For example, through group interviews where female leaders from multiple countries are interviewed together in an open manner, allowing for discussions and conversations to happen.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 Interview Questions

Appendix 1A English Interview Questions

1. *What skills or characteristics do females bring to leadership positions compared to men?*

2. *Is it more difficult to achieve a leadership position as a female? And why?*

3. *What has prepared you for leadership as a female?*

4. *How has your society affected your leadership as a female?*

5. *What personal choices did you have to make to reach a leadership position?*

6. *How do you manage your work-life balance?*

7. *Did you have a female leadership role model in your life?*

8. *Has networking been a factor in your success?*

9. *Did you have anyone help you to achieve this position?*

10. *What were the major challenges that had to be addressed to succeed as a female leader?*

11. *How did you overcome those challenges?*

12. *What advice would you give to both current and future female leaders?*

Linnæus University
Sweden

Appendix 1B Pashto Interview Questions

۱. په افغانستان کې د ښځې د نارینه وو په پرتله د مشرتابه بستونو لپاره باید کوم مهارتونه یا ځانګړتیاوي ولري؟

۲. ایا په افغانستان کی د یوی میرمنی لپاره د مشرتابه مقام ترلاسه کول ستونزمن دي؟ ولي؟

۳. تاسو د کومو وجوهاتو پر بناء سره دا مقام ترلاسه کړیدی؟

۴. آیا ستاسو ټولنی ستاسو پر مقام (دنده) باندی څه اثر اچولی دی؟

۵. دی مقام ته د رسیدو لپاره تاسو کوم شخصي انتخابونه درلودل؟

۶. تاسو څنګه خپل کاري او کورنی ژوند عیار کړیدی؟

۷. ایا تاسو په خپل ژوند کې کومه د خوښنی ښځینه رهبره لری چی د هغی د تګلاری څخه متاثره یاست؟

۸. ایا په ټولنه کی ستاسی تعلقات ستاسو په بریالیتوب کې یو عامل دی؟

۹. آیا دی مقام ته د رسیدلو لپاره تاسو سره چا مرسته کړي؟

۱۰. هغه کومی ننګونی دی چی تاسی اونوری ښځینه د رهبری مقام ته د رسیدلو لپاره ورسره مخ کیږی او یا هم ورسره مخ سوی یاست؟

۱۱. تاسو او نوری ښځینه څنګه په هغه ننګونو کی بریالي شوي یاست؟

۱۲. تاسو اوسنی او راتلونکو ښځینه مشرانو ته څه مشوره ورکوی؟

Appendix 2 Thematic Analysis of Collected Data

Appendix 2A Thematic Analysis of Afghanistan Data

Interviewee → Theme ↓	1	2	3	4	5
Female vs. Male Leaders	*-More responsible -obedient -cooperative -Rational, -Intelligent, -Polite and well-disciplined leaders*	*-The education level is not that high, so qualifications will not be that much considered. - How much women are cultural - Character - Previously have a good record at work by culture-wise, character-wise) - Her effectiveness - Her proficiency: How much do they understand the society mentality (Urban area, rural area). Mostly in rural areas, people are conservative and the literacy rate is down so it's significant how the female leader influences them to cooperate.*	*-Skills - Aware of culture - Personal behavior and character - Aware of job description (what is it about) for example if it is an office job she should know what kind of dress she should use, how she is behaving with colleagues especially male colleagues.*	*-persuasiveness - Leading skills - My motivation and morals - Ethical behavior - Politeness -Observation - Sensitive and supportive*	*-Women can understand society's problems, especially women problems better because women work emotionally.*
Difficulty of Achieving a Leadership Position as a Female	*A BIG YES!!! - A bit easy in the previous govt but now more difficult - The current rules ban women entirely in leadership positions. - It is a strictly religious society, and it is a misconception that women cannot obey Islamic and cultural rules, especially*	*Absolutely!!! -Misconception that the leadership position is for males. -Importance of society to males rather than females. -Male can travel to outlying areas for work and training. -Male can stay in the field alone. -Do not have great networks*	*Absolutely! -War is the leading cause of these difficulties. - It is a cultural society. It is believed that women should stay at home, - Male dominance - No support and motivation from family (especially from Male) -Obstacles from society's culture*	*YES -Tradition problems - Mixture of religion with culture - Field work is difficult - Not equally pay - Do not have their own freedom (They should obey their father, brothers, husband)*	*-War -Misconception about women that they are not capable of leadership - Cultural problems - Haven't worked on building women leadership in the country as much as it should be. - Male masculinity. - Do not have proper and safe working environment*

	wearing hijab in leadership positions. *- Women have less public support, financial support, and political support than men.* *- Many hirers and electors do not believe that women may ever be good leaders. It is some sort of traditional belief.*	*as males.*			
Preparation for Leadership as a Female	*-MY passion* *-My self-confidence and self-esteem* *-my patience,* *-toughness and stickiness*	- The female problems in our society (rural) - Shortage of female leaders *- to expand my own knowledge and experience* *- My ambition also makes me come to the leadership position.*	*-My own desire and passion.* *- My ability to merge into society* *- She should have the skills and ability of leadership (physically and mentally)* *- Compulsions of society: like women, delivery should be only done by women, and interaction with women should be done with women.*	*-Knowledge and skills* *- High expectation from my own self* *-Cooperate and leading skills* *- Strong support from my family*	*-Born in an educated family and most of my family members have worked as leaders.* *- My family believe in women leadership* *- Strong motivation from my family* *- The underestimation of women's power in my society has encouraged me to prepare myself for leadership.* *- Strong social behavior* *-Communication style*
Society's Effect on Their Own Leadership as a Female	*-So badly* *-Society Never supported me* *- Misconception that women cant be a leader*	*Yes!* *- Society affected me badly. (colleagues killed during their work by militants)* *- No cooperation from tribal leaders.* *- Very difficult to influence them* *- Slander and false allegations against me and my work.* *- Facing so many difficulties in community*	*-Society negatively affects female leadership.* *-Society is currently at war and the literacy rate is very low so the society is not completely ready to positively affect women's leadership.* *-It's a cultural*	*-The new government affects our leadership so badly.* *- Male never want to see women superior.*	*-BAD!* *- Inequality* *- Jealousy in my workplace from male and female members* *- Male dominance* *- My society is never being ready to give me the credit for my work.*

		mobilization	*society, and it badly affects them.*		
Personal Choices to Reach Their Position	*-Family support* *-My religious knowledge besides modern education.* *-My punctuality, seriousness and have eagle eyes.* *- Followed my values as a female.* *-Never made my subordinates down and feel low.*	*-My passion for helping the poorer side of society, especially women in such bad conditions.* *- Provide schools at houses.* *- I have to raise women's voices to high authorities.*	*-she should have the guts to face a religious and strictly cultural society.* *-live and work peacefully* *- Self-confidence* *- working environment* *- Networking*	*-Logical and rational thinking*	*- Creativity, positivity* *- Good collaboration with my colleagues* *- My passion and personal desire to be in leading position* *- Wanted to work in the Ministry of women affairs and through them I wanted to help women.*
Work-Life Balance	*-Set reminders for my work.*	*-A tough task for me.* *-Nine children (left 1-month baby at home)* *- Have no parental leave in Afghanistan.* *- My husband helps me alot.* *- can't give time to my family*	*-Very difficult* *-Women should take care of their personal and professional life.* *-She should do her housework after coming home.* *-Mostly she do alot of her work on weekends.*	*-Prioritizing important tasks*	*- To be honest, I made my professional life also like my personal life. I give all my time to my professional life, I worked even on weekends. I want to thank my husband who helps me in house works*
Role Model(s)	Aunt (died in road bomb blast last year)	*-Malala Maiwandi (Freedom fighter)* *-She gave us two lessons. First, women are not less than men in any field, even if it's a crucial war. Second, fight for your rights till you die.*	*-Malala Maiwandi (Symbol of freedom)* *- Zarghona Ana and Nazo Ana(best mothers of empires Ahmad shah Abdali and Mirwais khan Neka)* *- Queen Suraya (How she act against some cultural beliefs)*	*My mother. She suffered and struggled too much to educate all her 6 children in this terrible situation. She worked and managed her personal life very well. She served this nation for 50 years.*	*-Dr. Sima Samar is my female role model. Sima Samar is an Afghan woman's and human rights advocate, activist and a social worker within national and international forums, who served as Minister of Women's Affairs of Afghanistan from December 2001 to 2021.* *- Zarifa Ghafari who was the mayor of Maidan Wardak province in Afghanistan. She*

					got this position through free competition, despite much opposition from the community she did not give up. She stands against the militants although she received many threats from the Taliban even though they killed her father, she struggled till the end. I got inspired by her boldness and braveness.
Role of Networking in Their Success	Absolutely, It is a society where you must have networking	*The role of networking in our society cannot be denied but in my case NO!*	*Absolutely Yes! Networking is the significant factor in female leadership success in this society.*	*-Networking is about sharing, giving ideas, support, and building confidence… so YES networking is a factor in my success.*	*-YES* *- The role of networking cannot be denied* *- Networking is important to success.*
Help to Achieve Leadership Position	My family especially my father	*-Myself first* *-My husband and children*	*-Very limited only in urban areas some people help women in their work* *-Some educated families support women.*	*- Family Members and teachers*	*- My passion,* *- my country women* *- My family, especially my father, believed in me.*
Challenges Becoming a Female Leader	*- First World's difficult task is to be a female.* *- The war affects us badly* *- It is not that easy to be a female and get to where she wants.* *- We have a lot of people in our society; even I have a villain-type person in my family.*	*-WAR* *- Misconception about women that they can't be a leader. only for home or grave* *-Community mobilization* *-Cultural problems* *-Less motivation from society/family* *-Male dominance* *- Terrible attacks on female*	*- War* *- Religious scholars dominance* *- Culture* *- Mixture of religion with culture* *- Financial problems* *- Militancy* *- Sexual harresment*	*-Criticism* *-Leak of family support* *-Leak of society support* *-Male dominance*	*- Gender discrimination* *-Underestimating females roles and rights* *-No motivation* *- Culture* *- Male masculinity.* *- Sexual harresemnt*

	- *Culture affects us badly.* - *Male dominance in every aspect of life is the biggest challenge for us.* - *Balancing personal and professional life is a challenge for us.*	*leaders* - *Changing of governments* - *Personal life* - *Literacy rate in society(rural areas)* - *No corporation from society* - *Treats from tribal or militant leaders (killed dozens of female leaders in recent years).* -*Cultural values*	- *Sexual favour for appointing, promotion* - *Pregnancy problem* - *Most women pushed to prostitution due to her financial problems*		
Personal Strategies	-*Failing in some of the challenges* - *My determination* - *Believe on yourself*	-*Community mobilization: Study the society before.* -*Contact and influence religious leaders and community leaders first.* -*We assure that we are one of them. (we are not against their culture and religion)* -*So much careful with culture and traditional values (wear hijab, pray, eat with them.)*	-*Currently, women are on the dark side, and women fail to succeed in society* -*Women's unity(A unity against war)* -*Civil activities* -*Understanding and awareness of culture* - *Should intelligently behave with militant groups* - *Never compromise with religion*	-*Narcissism (arising from failure to success)* - *Accept myself and don't think what the people and society say about you BUT remember work always within society's culture limits.* - *Influence your family members to believe in you*	-*Believe on yourself* - *women have to work harder than their men colleagues.* - *Do not give up,* - *Improve your knowledge and skills* - *Speak confidently.* - *Women should support each other.* - *Building relationships with society.* - *Don't think what the people think and say about you, you just keep going on but with limitations.*
Advice for Female Leaders	- Nothing is impossible but nothing is easy. - Don't only think about yourself but others. - Be careful with your culture and society. Never ever take a step out of your cultural values. - Feel your people that you are one of them.	-Be aware of cultural values. -Show your community that you have the same God, religion, culture, values, and lifestyle. -Problems occurred, but it doesn't mean we should surrender; keep it up, and I hope we can do a lot even in this challenging time. -Serve this nation; they need us,	-Prepare your mind for leadership in this conservative society -Women should make unity for solving problems. They should start it from their family.	-*Think rationally* - *Be effective* - *Lead but with the limit of religion and culture*	- *Believe on yourself* - *Females should believe on their abilities and freedom* - *Don't start anything when you don't have the guts to finish it. Think about the finishing point before starting.*

	- One last thing. After every dark night, there is a day, So I am sure there will be no darkness in Afghanistan all the time. We hope that the day is coming. Never lose hope.	-Help your girls get educated; as much as we make our girls educated, our future female leaders could succeed in their lives. -Be a symbol of a good character lady, be a cultural lady, be a religious lady. Act the way that your society wants it.	- Aware of culture and religion - Understand the society's values, beliefs. *-she should have guts to face a religious and strictly cultural society.*		*- Break the barriers at any cost.* *- If you are independent you can you can save yourself from sexual harresement, male dominance and many other problems.*

Appendix 2B Thematic Analysis of Netherlands Data

Interviewee → *Theme ↓*	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Female vs. Male Leaders	-actual leadership -communication skills -people-skills -long-term problem solving	-diplomacy -passion -support -feedback	-empathy -fairness -sense of responsibility/owner ship -perseverance -support	-project management -listening skills -approachable -openness -leading vs. managing	- true leadership -communication -empathy -project management -long-term planning -democracy and inclusivity
Difficulty of Achieving a Leadership Position as a Female	-traditional role divide between men and women -outdated but still present	-more difficult -we are stuck in old conceptions about gender roles -women have to push and prove their way up	-yes -not just leadership positions -women will be criticized and judged in all settings	-oh yes -women have to put in twice the work to get half as far -women are forced to always defend every move, underestimated and not taken seriously, objectified daily	-definitely -because of the way people see women and their roles in society, formed a long time ago and still held by society -damaging beliefs like women need to birth children, serve men for life, and not able to do heavy lifting
Preparation for Leadership as a Female	-don't really know -growing up in a female-supporting environment	-parents actively participated in local politics -inspired early on by voices of women that starting getting heard	-wasn't really prepared for it -right before starting their first leadership position, they felt scared and not fit for the job	-daily life as a girl and woman -unfortunately, women start experiencing the impact of sexism from a very young age -so they try and learn to keep their own heads up	-before getting their first management position, they had 2 female managers before. Those women were great leaders and never hesitated to support others
Society's Effect on Their Own Leadership as a Female	-stereotyping created a false image of a female leader/manager -the work that female leaders have put in to get to their	-double standards -taboo -having to justify every action -made them appear tougher because of wanting to overrule	-caused them to not always feel competent enough in the past -due to the image of what purpose men and women should	-it used to make them insecure and harsh -because underestimating made them second guess themself while	-often described as having the right balance between being critical and empathetic -believes that they became critical due

	position hardly ever gets recognized - self-doubt - being a fighter	authority -can make decisions and take actions with rock-solid arguments	have -wants to make everyone feel included and gives extra attention to talented but insecure ones	it also made them want to prove themself to others too much -today, it has made them more resilient because of the hardships they faced as a woman in the corporate sector	to women having to prove themselves a lot at work, unwillingly become perfectionists -has experienced the hardships of being a career woman -empathizes with employees since she missed and needed that back in the day
Personal Choices to Reach Their Position	-to work in their field of passion -to put themself through the ordeal that female managers go through	-moving from their small hometown to Amsterdam alone	-move past the belief of that women are to marry in their late 20s, have babies and grow old without aspirations	-broke up with a previous partner back in the day, as their goals in life didn't match the other's -to expat quite often -to have kids after the age 40	-not to have children. Though they made that decision at a very young age -having a 'lat-relatie' (living apart together relationship')
Work-Life Balance	-husband only works part-time and does household -worked less when kids were little -leaves all means of work-communication at the office when going home -fully disconnects from work and connects at home	-not any different than most men -keeping this balance gets made harder and harder for everyone	-never really a problem -always had overview of tasks and able to leave tasks for the next day -therapy for confidence works well for them. It was one thing that would make leaving work with a clear mind easier	-same as most people probably -luckily she can afford to work less hours per week, so they spend the rest of their time on personal development, hobbies and family -leave work stuff at the office	-pretty damn good -has an apartment in the city where they live alone with their cat -works at a company where good work-life balance is part of the culture.
Role Model(s)	-not in particular -always been inspired by female successes	-growing up in the 70s, many women inspired them to pursue their own	-grandmother who joined the resistance in World War 2, saved a crashed British pilot and had him and 6 jewish people hiding in their house	-their mother. - who raised two kids by herself and has been a great leader in life	-used to be in awe of Margaret Thatcher. -her achievements as a woman in a time when women were less active as leaders are just amazing. Her toughness still is something they respect
Role of Networking in Their Success	-no	-not really -finding the confidence to apply for jobs that may seem out of league at first	-no -doesn't think it is still as important as it used to be. Not in the Netherlands at least	-no	-no
Help to Achieve Leadership Position	-used to think they had to thank a position to the, mostly male, people they worked for - realized that she is the one who put in all the work. I helped myself	-the female CEO of their current company hired them, an almost senior citizen, because she believes in their talents	-supportive friends and family	-not in terms of connections or anything -did get motivation from people close to them	-the founder and CEO of the organization is quite young. This set the tone for the organizational culture: open, dynamic, and progressive -this could be a factor why they were hired
Challenges Becoming a Female Leader	-stereotyping -harassment -gender-based discrimination	-being compared to men -successes being dismissed	-gender expectations -sexism -harassment -double standards	-self-doubt because of men underestimating my capabilities	-external opinions -judgments -self-doubt -fewer opportunities

	-favoritism -mental health	-assumptions -sexism -harassment		-sexism at work -biased job-application processes	-sexism -harassment -double standards
Personal Strategies	-mental therapy from time to time - only kept supportive friends -personal goals, long and short term -personal development	-kept on believing in themself and their capabilities -staying humble by looking back and celebrating all successes	-confidence & speaking up when they need to -has a very supportive personal circle	-resilience training -mindfulness therapy every now and so often	-faced them instead of really overcoming them -times are changing now, which has made it a bit easier -still a long way to go
Advice for Female Leaders	-same answer as question 11	-same answer as question 11 -support fellow women instead of competing	-always believe in yourself -have supportive people near -support other women	-anything a man can do, you can do too! -don't hesitate to get help or assistance -listen to your gut feeling	Listen to your instinct -support women -apply at organizations that share your values -celebrate each success

Appendix 3 Interviewee Overview

Country	Number of participants	Gender	Average age	Permission for data collection
Afghanistan	5	female & male	~ 40	5x yes
Netherlands	5	female	~ 45	5x yes
Overall	10	x	~ 43	10x yes