Barriers to women in senior leadership in Australian corporations

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO CHARLES STURT UNIVERSITY FOR THE DOCTOR OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

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Contents

List of figures .................................................................................................................... 6
List of tables ...................................................................................................................... 7
Abbreviations .................................................................................................................... 8
Certificate of authorship.................................................................................................... 9
Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................... 10
Abstract ........................................................................................................................... 11
Keywords: ....................................................................................................................... 12

1 Introduction ......................................................................................................... 13
1.1 Motivation for the research .............................................................................. 13
1.2 Background to the research .............................................................................. 14
1.3 Research problem ............................................................................................. 15
1.4 Key research questions ..................................................................................... 18
1.5 Research aims and objectives ........................................................................... 18
1.6 Research argument ........................................................................................... 19

2 Literature review ................................................................................................. 23
2.1 Introduction ...................................................................................................... 23
2.2 The current state of the nation .......................................................................... 24
  2.2.1 How does Australia fare? .......................................................................... 25
2.3 Why women leaders matter – the business benefits ......................................... 26
  2.3.1 What difference do women make? ............................................................ 27
  2.3.2 The causality debate .................................................................................. 30
  2.3.3 The extraordinary woman versus the critical mass ................................... 32
  2.3.4 How do women leaders improve performance? ....................................... 34
2.4 Why are there not more women in senior leadership? ..................................... 36
  2.4.1 Trusting the pipeline to deliver more women to senior levels .................. 37
  2.4.2 Women lack confidence and need to “lean in” ......................................... 39
  2.4.3 Maybe women do not want the top jobs ................................................... 42
2.5 Sex discrimination is alive and well ................................................................. 45
  2.5.1 On a level playing field, our leaders get there by merit ............................ 45
  2.5.2 The enduring gender pay gap...................................................................... 46
  2.5.3 The dramatic impact of unconscious bias ................................................. 50
  2.5.4 Affinity bias .............................................................................................. 53
2.6 Bias against mothers is the most powerful type of sex discrimination ......... 53
  2.6.1 The motherhood penalty ............................................................................ 54
5.2.1 Unconscious gender bias ................................................................. 162
5.2.2 The motherhood bias ................................................................. 163
5.2.3 Affinity bias and the “boys’ club” .................................................. 164
5.3 The challenge of balancing family and work ....................................... 167
  5.3.1 Time out of the workforce to have children ................................. 169
  5.3.2 Caring responsibilities, the “second shift” and partner support ........ 170
  5.3.3 Flexibility supports women’s careers ............................................ 172
5.4 Success factors for women aspiring to senior leadership ....................... 176
  5.4.1 Confidence and the need to “lean in” ........................................... 177
  5.4.2 Women need a Mentor/Sponsor .................................................. 179
  5.4.3 Positive female role models ......................................................... 182
5.5 Gender balance in senior leadership as a strategic priority .................... 185
  5.5.1 Board sponsorship and C.E.O. support – it starts at the top .......... 186
  5.5.2 Human Resource processes for selection, development and promotion 188
  5.5.3 Reporting and targets ................................................................. 192
  5.5.4 Quotas ......................................................................................... 194
5.6 Limitations and key assumptions ...................................................... 197
5.7 Conclusion ....................................................................................... 198
6 Implications for policy and practice ...................................................... 200
  6.1.1 Acknowledging and accepting that women face barriers ............... 200
  6.1.2 Implementing policy initiatives to remove barriers ....................... 202
  6.1.3 A National Plan for a fairer workplace ........................................ 205
  6.1.4 Recommendations for further research ....................................... 209
7 Conclusion: a time for action ................................................................ 212
References ............................................................................................ 214
Appendices ............................................................................................. 277
  Appendix A. Theories referred to in the discussion ................................ 277
  Appendix B. Invitation letter ............................................................... 280
  Appendix C. Information sheet ............................................................. 281
  Appendix D. Interview questions ......................................................... 284
  Appendix E. Consent form ................................................................. 285
  Appendix F. Ethics approval ............................................................... 286
List of figures

Figure 1. Outline of Chapter 1. ................................................................. 13
Figure 2. Outline of Chapter 2. ................................................................. 23
Figure 3. Gender gap in the Australian workforce.................................... 25
Figure 4. The effect of number of female directors on company value ......... 33
Figure 5. The effect of proportion of female directors on company value .... 34
Figure 6. Proportion of Australians with bachelor level degrees or above .... 37
Figure 7. Australians with bachelor’s degrees or above by age .................. 38
Figure 8. Women’s average weekly ordinary time earnings as a percentage of men’s. 48
Figure 9. Trend in age of first-time mothers in Australia .......................... 57
Figure 10. Effect of corporate governance code amendment on percentage of women on boards of ASX200 ......................................................... 81
Figure 11. Outline of Chapter 3. ............................................................... 96
Figure 12. Recruitment of participants ..................................................... 107
Figure 13. The convergent interview structure ......................................... 109
Figure 14. The convergent interview cycle .............................................. 110
Figure 15. Convergent interviewing and data analysis ............................... 114
Figure 16. Key principles in research ethics ............................................. 117
Figure 17. Outline of Chapter 4. ............................................................... 122
Figure 18. Outline of Chapter 5. ............................................................... 159
Figure 19. Biases that affect women aspiring to senior leadership .......... 161
Figure 20. The challenge of balancing family and work ............................. 168
Figure 21. Success factors for women in senior leadership ....................... 177
Figure 22. Gender balance in senior leadership as a strategic priority ....... 186
Figure 23. Outline for Chapter 6 ............................................................. 200
Figure 24. Model of implications for practice ........................................... 208
List of tables

Table 1. Example matrix of agreements and disagreements about issues ....................115
Table 2. Matrix of issues ...............................................................................................124
Table 3. Main themes from research issues ..................................................................125
Table 4. Australian performance on key gender policy areas........................................204
Abbreviations

A.B.S.       Australian Bureau of Statistics
A.S.X.       Australian Stock Exchange
ASX200       Top 200 companies on the Australian stock exchange
ASX300+      S.M.E. companies on the Australian stock exchange excluding the top 300
ASX500       Top 500 companies on the Australian stock exchange
C.A.G.R.     Compound Annual Growth Rate
C.E.O.       Chief Executive Officer
C.F.O.       Chief Financial Officer
C.I.O.       Chief Information Officer
C.O.O.       Chief Operating Officer
C-1          C.E.O. minus 1 (executive level role reporting directly to C.E.O.)
C-level      Roles containing the word Chief (C.E.O., C.F.O., C.I.O. and C.O.O.)
C-suite      Roles containing the word Chief, also known as C-level executives
E.A.         Executive Assistant
E.B.I.T.     Earnings Before Interest and Tax
G.D.P.       Gross Domestic Product
L.G.B.T.I     Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Intersex
M.B.A.       Master of Business Administration degree
M.D.         Managing Director
O.E.C.D.     Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
P.A.         Personal Assistant
R.O.A.       Return on Assets
R.O.E.       Return on Equity
R.O.I.       Return on Investment
R.O.S.       Return on Sales
S.M.E.       Small to medium enterprise
Certificate of authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge and belief, understand that it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged.

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Abstract

Despite decades of equal opportunity legislation, there is still a paucity of women in senior leadership positions in Australia. Furthermore, although women have become better educated, are entering the workplace in greater numbers, and have been able to reach middle management levels, the progress at senior executive and board levels has been slow, and the number of women reaching these positions remains disproportionately small.

This research identifies that women continue to face many barriers, and discrimination remains an important factor in the ability of women to advance their careers, with even very small levels of unconscious bias having a profound effect. While overt sexism may be less obvious in today’s society, benevolent sexism is no less relevant in terms of its impact on women’s progress, and male managers’ biased perceptions of women’s managerial aspirations and competing family priorities can have a particularly detrimental effect.

Improving gender diversity at senior levels within organisations is not just a social justice issue, there are also sound economic and business reasons for making it a strategic priority in Australian businesses, and awareness of those reasons is growing (Werner, Devillard, & Sancier-Sultan, 2010).

The Australian Public sector has made significant progress and the gap has steadily narrowed over the last 10 years towards a goal of parity, with women now holding 49% of senior executive roles in the Australian Public Service (Australian Public Service Commission, 2017b). This experience demonstrates that with the right policies, strategic goals and supporting frameworks, gender balance is achievable. Unfortunately, this is in contrast to the private sector, where women make up 21% of executive leadership teams of ASX200 companies, a figure that drops to just 12% when considering those line roles with profit and loss responsibility that represent the pipeline for future C.E.O. roles (Chief Executive Women, 2017). More concerning is the fact that 63% of ASX200 companies have no women in line roles, and therefore it is no surprise that women hold only 5% of ASX200 C.E.O. positions and it has been reported that there are less women running Australia’s top companies than men named either Peter, John or David (Liddy & Hanrahan, 2017). So why is it that Australian businesses are not making the sort of progress that the Public Sector has demonstrated is clearly possible?
At a time in Australia’s history when equality is resonating with discourses of social fairness and parliament has legislated for marriage equality, surely the time for “homonuclear reproduction” (Kanter, 1977a) in Australian leadership is over, and the time for “inclusion” of 50% of Australia’s best and brightest has arrived. This research proposes that it will require a comprehensive national approach to bring all of the policy areas together in order to effectively address the ongoing inequality.

This research explores and identifies the reasons why Australian corporations are not making more progress, by conducting 15 qualitative interviews with women in key senior positions to gain their insights into what is preventing organisations from making gender diversity a key strategic goal while exploring the deeper reasons for the on-going gender bias in contemporary Australian business. It also investigates the gender equity initiatives and structural changes that may be needed to support this goal and makes recommendations on what Australia can do as a nation to drive economic growth and business prosperity through key policy measures to address the current inequities.

**Keywords:**

Gender, women, leadership, unconscious bias
1 Introduction

Chapter 1 discusses the motivation and background to this study and outlines the research problem that leads to the key research questions. This chapter also presents the aims and objectives of the research and summarises the research argument, as shown in Figure 1 above.

1.1 Motivation for the research

Like most women of my generation, I was brought up to believe I could do anything. Of the fiercely independent generation X, my parents both worked; my mother having educated herself as an adult to go back to work after having three children at a young age. My sister and I, just like our younger brother, had every opportunity to attain education, the only thing that mattered was our ability to work hard and apply ourselves. When I attended university to study Pharmacy, the pendulum had swung such that this once male-dominated profession was now enrolling more women students than men. Yet even with such bright optimism and confidence, I knew something was inherently unfair in the world.

I still recall my utter frustration and deep hurt that my younger brother was allowed to accompany our adored grandfather on the truck for his courier rounds in the school
holidays whilst I, the eldest sibling had to sit at home – because I was a girl! Then in the early days of my career I was approached about a role, and after spending the day doing unpaid work experience was told that while I was obviously a good pharmacist and that the staff and customers all liked me, “I’ve decided to hire a man – don’t quote me on that”. In more recent years, I have been told that my style is perceived as “too aggressive”, a criticism often aimed at female leaders who display agency, a quality much admired in male leaders.

Today, I see young women Millennial graduates with the same bright optimism, who say “our generation is different”, and yet they still will enter the workforce on less pay than their male counterparts, a pay gap that will continue to widen over the course of their careers. On the whole they are better educated than the boys, but despite being just as ambitious, they will be four times less likely to reach senior leadership, and if they choose to have children, will face significant unconscious bias that will prevent them from realising the same opportunities as the fathers they work alongside. This is the future I foresee for my own girls and what motivates me to be an agent for change. I know improved gender balance in senior leadership is possible because the Australian public sector has already clearly and convincingly demonstrated that it is. Now it is time for the Australian corporate sector to follow suit. After all, if we cannot achieve leadership equality for women who make up 50% of Australia’s population, what chance of success do we have for minorities such as indigenous, Muslim, or L.G.B.T.I. Australians.

1.2 Background to the research

In 1902, only a year after Australia’s federation, women won the right to vote and to stand in federal elections. Australia was only the second country in the world, behind New Zealand in 1893, to give women the vote. Edith Cowan, featured on the new Australian $50 banknote, became the first woman to be elected to parliament in Australia in 1921. Women were awarded equal pay in 1969, and the Sex Discrimination Act was introduced in 1984. Australia gained its first female Governor General, Quentin Bryce, in 2008, its first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, in 2010, and in 2011 Nicola Roxon became Australia’s first female Attorney-General.

However such exceptional women remain the minority, with women continuing to be under-represented in senior leadership in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017b; Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2018; Chief Executive Women,
This is despite the fact that women have become better educated, indeed outstripping men in their higher education achievement for over 30 years now (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017a; Department of Education and Training, 2017). Not only have more women been entering the workplace, they have been able to reach middle management in greater numbers. Nevertheless, even with decades of equal opportunity legislation, the proportion of women reaching senior executive and board levels continues to be small (Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2018; Chief Executive Women, 2017; KPMG Enterprise, 2017), and even in gender segregated occupations such as nursing, women progress more slowly than men. For example, in healthcare and education around three quarters of the workforce is female, but they make up only one third of the leaders (Berkery, Tiernan, & Morley, 2014; Eagly & Carli, 2009). So why is it that women are not progressing to the most senior roles?

Fox (2012, p8) says there is a “misguided belief that we live in a post-feminist world and “all that stuff” got sorted out, so whatever happens in workplaces now is not about gender but personal choice”. However, in Australia, like many Western countries, we have a large cohort of middle-class white men retaining most of the power and status in business organisations. Meanwhile women with similar ambitions, skills and qualifications (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017a) either remain stagnating in middle management (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017b) or, disillusioned with their current lack of opportunity, leave the corporate sector to start small businesses (Butcher, 2017; Mitchell & King, 2013). In fact, even those male and female managers who were initially optimistic about the prospect of more women progressing to senior levels have become increasingly negative, with some believing it will not happen in their lifetime (Wood, 2008). Indeed, the current “glacial” pace of change predicts it will take more than 200 years for women to be appropriately represented in senior leadership (Lean In & McKinsey&Company, 2015; Rodgers, 2015), because it appears that women continue to face a number of structural barriers such as workplace processes for recruitment and promotion that favour men, and cultural barriers such as deeply entrenched gender stereotypes that result in discrimination and unconscious bias. These barriers to achieving parity in senior leadership will be explored in the context of the extant literature and responses of the women interviewed in this study.

1.3  Research problem

A large amount of literature exists in the field of gender in leadership and yet there continues to be no explanation to adequately justify the ongoing lack of women in the
top jobs (Chief Executive Women, 2017). Contemporary debate about the “mommy wars” pitting working mothers against those women who remain childless in favour of their careers (Fox, 2012; Gordon, 2018; Johnston & Swanson, 2004; Peters, 2008), the popularly described “opt-out revolution” (Belkin, 2003) of women choosing to leave the workforce for an easier life (Dillaway & Pare, 2008; Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Hoobler, Lemmon, & Wayne, 2014) or the need for women to just, in the words of Facebook’s Sheryl Sandberg, “lean in” (Sandberg, 2013) to get ahead in their careers (Bowles & McGinn, 2008; Institute of Leadership & Management, 2011), suggests that the low number of women in senior leadership may be due to women’s choices, or lack of motivation.

However, Australian researchers have consistently found no significant difference in the proportions of women and men aspiring to senior leadership roles (Sanders, Hrdlicka, Hellicar, Cottrell, & Knox, 2011; Sanders, Zehner, Fagg, & Hellicar, 2013; Wood & Lindorff, 2001). Unfortunately, although researchers find the majority of women want opportunities for career progression, very few believe they have the same opportunities as men for promotion into senior leadership roles (Artabane, Coffman, & Darnell, 2017; Coffman & Neuenfeldt, 2014; Sanders et al., 2011).

Despite Australian equal opportunity legislation, research has found that discrimination continues to be the main driver for the gender pay gap (Cassells, Vidyattama, Miranti, & McNamara, 2009; Diversity Council Australia, 2009) which is evident from graduation (Department of Education and Training, 2017), becomes more pronounced over time and is greatest at the most senior levels (Kee, 2006; Watson, 2010; Yanadori, Gould, & Kulik, 2016). Discrimination also has a profound effect on women’s advancement (Martell, Lane, & Emrich, 1996), even if it is not overt, as demonstrated by research on benevolent sexism and unconscious bias (Moya, Glick, Exposito, De Lemus, & Hart, 2007).

More effort should be applied to improving gender equality in Australian workplaces because of its importance to the future of business success and productivity. A significant amount of international and Australian evidence exists, demonstrating the positive impact women in leadership positions can have on company performance (Carter, Simkins, & Simpson, 2003; Carter & Wagner, 2011; Chesterman & Ross-Smith, 2006; Curtis, Schmid, & Struber, 2012; Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018; Shrader, Blackburn, & Iles, 1997; The Reibey Institute, 2011; Werner et al., 2010; Wood, 2013).
Furthermore awareness of this evidence is growing, but unfortunately gender diversity is not a strategic priority for the majority of companies (KPMG, 2016; Werner et al., 2010).

Given the sound business reasons, if not the social justice issues (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010), why has the private sector not made this a business critical issue? There is no shortage of information on how to make it work (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2013; VIC Government, 2017; Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2017b, 2017c), so why are companies not making it a priority? We have seen the slow pace of change in the private sector in comparison to the gains being made in the public sector in Australia (Australian Government, 2017; Australian Public Service Commission, 2017b). Apart from a few high profile companies such as Westpac (Dent, 2017a; Spicer, 2014), Genworth (Goncalves, 2017), Coca Cola Amatil (Goncalves, 2017; Kalysh, Kulik, & Perera, 2016), and the Qantas Group (Goncalves, 2017; Kalysh et al., 2016), it seems the Australian private sector lacks the impetus to get serious about this important social and economic issue, and the smaller the company, the more likely this is to be the case (Ferguson, 2014; KPMG Enterprise, 2017).

This evidence begs the questions about whether more time is needed for suitably educated women to reach senior ranks, whether most women are choosing to prioritise family life over their careers, or whether women lack the same ambition as men to reach the top of their organisations. As this research will attempt to show, these reasons are without foundation and further research is needed to understand what is really holding Australian listed companies back from taking action, given the wealth of knowledge on the benefits women can bring to leadership roles and business success, and the growing awareness of this knowledge (Werner et al., 2010). Therefore, this research explores why the knowledge is at odds with business policy and practice, and highlights some of the experiences of senior women which illuminate the reasons behind this trend.

This research also investigates the gender equity initiatives and structural changes that may be needed to support the goal of improving representation of women at senior levels of business and examines what can be learnt from the public sector successes. It is possible that without some intervention by government or regulatory bodies, such as targets, quotas or affirmative action at senior levels, the pace of change will remain “glacial”, since too few corporations are choosing to make increasing the numbers of women in senior leadership a key strategic goal.
Interview insights are also reviewed in the context of the published literature, as well as the success of current gender diversity programs, and recommendations are made on what companies can do to overcome the barriers to making it a strategic priority for senior leadership. This research also considers theories of leadership and how they represent and impact on women. It seeks to elucidate the barriers to senior leadership for women in corporate management and explores the deeper reasons for the ongoing gender bias in contemporary Australian business. Consequently, these factors lead to the key research question below.

### 1.4 Key research questions

Before outlining the research question, it is important to mention that the key method used in this study is convergent interviewing. It is generally accepted that the framework of convergent interviewing evolves during the research and, therefore, the research questions tend to be broader and less specific (Jepson, 2008). Gradually, from interview to interview, a more rigorous and detailed interpretation of the situation develops and with each interview questions become open-ended to more focused (Dick, 2012).

Given the research problems described, the key research questions are: a) “what is the state of gender diversity in senior leadership in Australian corporations?” and b) “what factors may be preventing them from making gender diversity in senior leadership a key strategic priority?”

### 1.5 Research aims and objectives

The Australian Government has a track record of promoting gender equality through its legislative power, its education system, and as an employer. Despite Australia’s achievements in these areas, and despite a wealth of data demonstrating the economic benefit of improving gender diversity in senior leadership, the majority of Australian corporations still do not have gender balance in their executive teams. Consequently, this research aims to understand why Australian businesses are not seeking to address this imbalance through their strategic leadership priorities. The results will be used to provide recommendations to Australian businesses and Government on how we might improve the gender balance in senior leadership for the success and economic prosperity of our nation.

The objectives of this research are to:
1. Review the literature concerning women in senior leadership, including the current status, the business impact, theories of gender and leadership, and the enduring structural (business processes) and cultural (attitudes, stereotypes and biases) barriers that exist within Australian businesses.

2. Investigate the experiences of women in executive roles in Australian businesses to understand the reasons behind the gender imbalance in senior leadership and identify the barriers to companies making gender balance in senior leadership a strategic priority.

3. Identify and make recommendations about the gender equality initiatives and structural changes that may be required to support a goal of improving gender balance in senior leadership in Australia.

1.6 Research argument

This research highlights the irrefutable lack of gender balance in senior leadership in Australian businesses (Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2018; KPMG Enterprise, 2017) and argues that for too long research and popular debate has focused on the deficits of women and the need to “fix” them (Fox, 2017), rather than on the systemic and structural changes that can support gender inclusion. The research participants were united in their belief that gender balance in senior leadership should be a strategic priority for Australian organisations because it will lead to greater financial success (KPMG Enterprise, 2017; The Reibey Institute, 2011; Vafaei, Ahmed, & Mather, 2015). Nevertheless, as this research argues, women face a number of structural and cultural barriers to achieving parity in senior leadership and the fundamental problem lies not with women themselves, but with a system that allows discrimination and bias to continue, and is the key reason that knowledge of the business benefits of inclusion is at odds with business policy and practice in corporate Australia.

The patriarchal gender order (Connell, 1987, 2002, 2005, 2009) within Australian society leads to women continuing to carry the bulk of caring responsibilities in our households (Argyrous, Craig, & Rahman, 2016). It was identified that the family responsibilities that are a fact of life for most Australian women during the “years of disruption” (Fox, 2017, p. 39) while children are young, lead to a challenging balancing act between women’s careers and the “second shift” at home (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). It is argued that deviation from the “ideal worker norm” (Williams, 2000), as women seek to balance work and caring responsibilities can lead to significant bias in
the workplace, known as the “maternal wall” (Crosby, Williams, & Biernat, 2004). The research highlighted that workplace flexibility is the key to Australian women remaining attached to the workforce after the birth of their first child as suggested by Argyrous et al. (2016), and the Australian Government has made great strides in recognising the unique challenges women in the workplace face by implementing paid parental leave and childcare support. However, companies need to support women returning to work after having children to avoid the impact of occupational downgrading that often results from career gaps (Ghayad & Dickens, 2012; PwC, 2017) and to ensure their recruitment practices allow highly-skilled women to return to work in roles that are commensurate with their experience and skills, and allow them to be considered for promotion even when they are on maternity leave. Managers need to actively support women’s continued career progression rather than thinking they are doing the right thing by putting them on the “mommy track” (Moya et al., 2007).

Nevertheless, it must also be recognised that 79% of women aged 25-54 and working full-time have no children under 12 and family-friendly policies are not the only answer (Optimiss Consulting, 2013). The research also argues that unconscious bias, the most significant issue identified in this research, not only intersects with women’s family responsibilities described above, but also results in the exclusion of women from sponsorship and promotion afforded to members of the “boys’ club”, a form of “affinity bias” (Fisher & Kinsey, 2014; Turnbull, 2016), where leaders recruit, sponsor and promote others like them, and career advancement decisions are made over drinks, golf and other shared interests. Although Australian organisations would claim that their leaders are chosen on merit alone, research finds that this type of bias manifests in the workplace as identifying people who are a “good fit” for the role (Linos & Reinhard, 2015; Turnbull, 2016), and since the majority of hiring managers at senior levels are men, they continue to hire other men in their own likeness and the cycle of men outnumbering women in senior leadership is perpetuated (Kanter, 1977a; Wheeler & Sojo, 2017). In fact, modelling found that as little as 1% bias in favour of men, can result lead to a skewed proportion of 65% of men reaching the top versus 35% of women from a starting point of 50:50 (Martell et al., 1996).

As recommended in the research, recognising, accepting and tackling unconscious bias through implementation of appropriate policies will be necessary to ensure adequate representation of women at all levels of the organisation, and these policy initiatives require an understanding by businesses that better business outcomes will result. The
research argues that structural changes are needed, including H.R. practices for recruitment, development and promotion that ensure equal opportunities for women to reach the top, including practices such as anonymising and comparing resumes in pairs or groups, following a very structured interview and decision-making processed that reduce affinity bias caused by over-emphasis on rapport-building, ensuring gender balance in both the candidate pool and interview panel, and adopting a “50:50: if not why not” approach to every decision (Baird, Evesson, & Oxenbridge, 2014; Fox, 2017). Additionally, the research emphasised that when women have the opportunity to be mentored by leaders at the very top, their career advancement equals that of men but since this type of sponsorship is less likely to occur naturally for women, it will require organisations to put formal programs in place. In order to avoid backlash from men who think that programs that support women are “anti-men” (Riordan, 2017), or backlash from women who feel that assistance is not needed and undermines confidence in women’s capabilities (Foges, 2018), it may be more palatable to frame programs around “inclusion” as opposed to “diversity” (Oswick & Noon, 2012) and ensure both men and women are represented in equal numbers which can only be seen as good for all employees.

Finally, the research argues that as with all strategic business objectives, “what gets measured gets managed” (Drucker, 1954), which means that organisations will need to be held accountable to set targets and report on gender inclusion in senior leadership. Only then will business leaders put effort and resources into changing the policies within their organisations to ensure women are provided with the same opportunities as men to aspire to the top jobs, as well as linking C.E.O. and senior executive remuneration to achieving those targets because “what gets rewarded gets done” (LeBoeuf, 1985). A.S.X. reporting requirements introduced in 2011 have had a significant effect on the proportion of women board directors on the ASX200, increasing from just 8% in 2010 to 26% in 2018 and more work is needed to achieve the same gains in other large to mid-size Australian organisations, and to improve the gender balance at the C.E.O. and executive level across all businesses. As argued in the research, the public service has demonstrated that it is achievable (Australian Public Service Commission, 2017a; NSW Government, 2018), and now it is time for the Australian Commonwealth Government to lead by example, setting targets for women in politics, and requiring Australian companies to do the same.
At a time in Australia’s history when equality is resonating with discourses of social fairness (Kirton et al., 2007) and parliament has legislated for marriage equality, this research asserts that the time for “inclusion” of the best and brightest of 50% of Australia’s people has arrived. Since women make up half of Australia’s population, there is a strong moral argument that they deserve equal access to health, education, economic participation, earning potential, and political decision-making power (Schwab et al., 2017). However, gender parity also has a vast bearing on the growth of economies and businesses, with World Economic Forum data showing that it clearly correlates with G.D.P. per capita, and economic competitiveness (Schwab et al., 2017). Therefore this study proposes that the Australian Government implements a National Plan for gender equity, which will drive policy in those areas that have been found to provide the most compelling economic case and drive improvements in G.D.P. (Vilosio et al., 2017): 1) greater political empowerment for women which leads to improved women’s labour market participation and reduced gender pay gap, and 2) gender balance in senior leadership which will lead to greater financial success of Australian businesses. As part of a National Plan, the Australian Government also has an important role to play in educating the community about the economic benefits of equality and inclusion. This is because targeted public investment into gender equality promotion has been found to create a particularly strong impact on G.D.P. compared to investment into education and general labour market programs (Vilosio et al., 2017). Only when Australia as a nation commits to gender equality in the workplace, will Australia be able to reach its true economic potential and deliver a stronger and more sustainable future for Australia and all of its people.
2 Literature review

Figure 2. Outline of Chapter 2.

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided the background to this study and outlined the key research question. Chapter 2 presents and analyses the relevant literature on gender in the workplace as it relates to diversity in senior leadership, in order to provide context to the research question.
The extant literature finds that despite decades of equal opportunity legislation, Australia still does not have substantial numbers of women in senior corporate leadership positions (Chief Executive Women, 2017; KPMG Enterprise, 2017). Further analysis provides the global context for Australia’s progress in this regard, finding the situation similar to the U.K. and the U.S. but perhaps lagging behind neighbouring New Zealand. The underlying reasons for the paucity of women in the top jobs in Australian corporations are explored in depth in this chapter, in light of the wealth of data describing the benefits of gender diversity in senior leadership.

This chapter discusses the deep societal stereotypes about gender roles and persistent masculine perceptions of leadership that result in ongoing gender bias in contemporary Australian business and create a significant barrier to women in their pursuit of senior roles. The intersecting issues of motherhood are also discussed, including the challenge women face in balancing career aspirations with family responsibilities. This chapter also explores the role of gender in our society, including the effects of entrenched patriarchy, in the context of evolving feminist theory.

Finally, this chapter investigates the gender equity initiatives and structural changes that may be needed to support Australian businesses to make gender diversity in senior leadership a key strategic goal.

2.2 The current state of the nation

Women currently hold 26% of board positions in Australia’s top 200 companies (Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2017). However, this proportion decreases significantly with the size of the organisation, with women representing just 9% of board directors of small to medium enterprises (S.M.E.s) in the ASX300+ (KPMG Enterprise, 2017). At the senior executive level, women make up just 21% of the top roles in the ASX200, including less than 10% of C-suite positions (Chief Executive Women, 2017). Only 5% of C.E.O. roles are held by women in the ASX200 (Chief Executive Women, 2017), and this reduces to 3% in ASX300+ (KPMG Enterprise, 2017). Importantly, there are still 21% of ASX200 companies that have no women executives. Additionally, 63% of ASX200 companies have no women in line executive roles defined as those roles with profit and loss accountability that are directly responsible for driving key commercial outcomes, as opposed to functional roles such as human resources, legal and compliance (Chief Executive Women, 2017). Since line
executive roles are traditionally seen as a stepping stone to C.E.O. (Chief Executive Women, 2018), this may also help explain the low number of woman C.E.O.s.

While women make up 60% of university graduates, and 46% of the workforce, gender representation in the talent pipeline declines with increasing seniority in Australian organisations, as seen in Figure 3, with men still dominating senior levels of management in Australia (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2017a). It has been reported that, at the current rate, gender equality will not be achieved for hundreds of years (Rodgers, 2015). Given this picture it is unsurprising that many young Australian women believe that their gender is, or will be, a barrier to their future leadership opportunities (IPSOS Australia, 2016).

Figure 3. Gender gap in the Australian workforce. (Researcher’s own graph. Data sources: Catalyst, 2017; Chief Executive Women, 2017; Department of Education and Training, 2017; KPMG Enterprise, 2017; Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2017a)

2.2.1 How does Australia fare?

Similar to the Australian situation described above, women held only 24% of senior roles across the world in 2016 and one third of global businesses had no women in senior management roles (Catalyst, 2017). Global 100 companies fare slightly worse, with 22% of executive roles held by women in North America in 2017, and only 15% in Europe in 2017 (20-first, 2018). While the proportion of women in senior positions is growing worldwide, like Australia, parity will not be reached for many decades at the current pace (Catalyst, 2017).
Despite these similarities at the macro-level however, Australia’s position in the O.E.C.D. “women in work index” (PwC, 2017) has declined over recent years, due to the entrenched gender pay gap and high rates of part-time work amongst women, while a number of other countries including neighbouring New Zealand have seen significant gains. In fact New Zealand now holds fourth place in the O.E.C.D., just behind the Nordic countries Iceland, Sweden and Norway. Meanwhile Australia has fallen to number 16 out of 33, slightly behind the U.K. and just ahead of the U.S.. The main difference between Australia and New Zealand, otherwise relatively similar countries, is reported to be the gender pay gap (PwC, 2017) and the reasons for this may warrant further research. Australia’s position is also affected by the low rates of female full-time employment (the third lowest in the O.E.C.D.), a phenomenon which also deserves further investigation given that just a 6% increase in Australian female workplace participation has the potential to provide a $25 billion uplift in G.D.P. (Daley, 2012).

The World Economic Forum’s global gender gap report (2017), also reveals this discrepancy between New Zealand and Australia, ranking number 9 and number 35 respectively. This difference is mainly reflected in the political empowerment score (women in parliament and with ministerial roles) with New Zealand’s score increasing to 0.43 (1.0 being parity) while Australia languishes at 0.23. Given that evidence from the World Economic Forum suggests that women’s political decision-making power and wider economic participation are correlated, this could provide some insight into why New Zealand ranks better than Australia on female workplace participation and the gender pay gap and may also warrant further research attention. Certainly the World Economic Forum recommends that countries need to make gender equality an important part of their development if they wish to remain competitive (Schwab et al., 2016) and targeted public investment into gender equality promotion has been found to create a particularly strong impact on G.D.P. (Villosio et al., 2017).

2.3 Why women leaders matter – the business benefits

Gender equality in Australian workplaces is not just a feminist issue (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010; Caro & Fox, 2008), it is also important to the future of Australian business success and productivity. A growing body of evidence describes the benefit that gender diversity has on company performance (Wood, 2013). Furthermore, awareness of this evidence is growing, but unfortunately gender diversity is not a strategic priority for the majority of companies (KPMG, 2016; Werner et al., 2010). Nevertheless, a number of organisations continue to advocate for companies to make it
a priority, including the Australian Institute of Company Directors (Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2017), The Male Champions of Change (Condon, 2014; Male Champions of Change, 2017), and the Australian Council of Superannuation Investors (Khadem, 2017).

2.3.1 What difference do women make?

Despite initial statistical uncertainty due to low numbers of very senior women leaders, a significant amount of evidence now exists, demonstrating the positive impact women in leadership positions have on company performance (Glass & Cook, 2018; KPMG Enterprise, 2017; The Reibey Institute, 2011; Vafaei et al., 2015).

An early study by Shrader et al. (1997) demonstrated the benefits female leaders can bring to organisations. They determined by analysing the 200 largest companies in the United States, that those with high percentages of female managers also perform well financially on Return on Sales (R.O.S.), Return on Assets (R.O.A.), Return on Investment (R.O.I.) and Return on Equity (R.O.E.). While the researchers did not find any association between higher percentages of women on the executive management team or board and improved financial performance, they reasoned that this was because there were simply too few of them since at that time, women made up only 4.5% of the top management teams and there were no female C.E.O.s.

Nevertheless, a later study of 2,500 Danish firms from 1993-2001 by Smith, Smith, and Verner (2006) confirmed that there is an association between higher proportions of women in senior leadership positions and better financial performance. Controlling for factors that may affect firm performance, such as company size, age, sector and export practice, when considering four objective measures of financial performance, they identified that the percentage of women in senior leadership had a positive effect on organisation performance. Like Shrader et al. (1997), they also discuss the limitations of low female C.E.O. numbers – for in this study, in 2001, women comprised only 4.3% of C.E.O.s in the largest Danish firms. This is also reflected in recent Australian research by KPMG Enterprise (2017) who found that women comprise only 3% of C.E.O.s in the ASX300+, but that those companies with female C.E.O.s were able to deliver 9% increase in revenue in 2016, compared to the average of just 0.5%. Global research of more than 3000 companies conducted by Credit Suisse during the period 2013-2016 (Dawson, Natella, & Kersley, 2016) also found that companies with female
C.E.O.s outperformed companies on average with 19% higher Return on Equity (R.O.E.) and 9% higher dividend payouts.

Credit Suisse (Dawson et al., 2016) also found that those companies with more than 15% female top managers outperformed the market by 2.8% Compound Annual Growth Rate (C.A.G.R.). This increased to 4.7% for companies with 25% senior women and 10.3% for those companies with more than 50% of women at the top (Dawson et al., 2016). Similarly, research by McKinsey of 366 companies in Canada, Latin America, the United Kingdom, and the United States was able to identify that companies in the top quartile for gender diversity were 15% more likely to have returns above the industry averages. The most marked impact was found in the United Kingdom, with every 10% increase in gender diversity leading to a 3.5% increase in E.B.I.T. This perhaps reflects the fact that the U.K. lags behind Australia and the U.S. in terms of the proportion of women in executive positions (Hunt, Yee, Prince, & Dixon-Fyle, 2018).

Conversely companies in the bottom quartile for gender diversity are less likely to achieve above average returns and they lag the industry (Hunt, Layton, & Prince, 2015). When McKinsey updated this data set in 2017, expanding it to over 1000 companies across 12 countries, the impact of greater executive level gender diversity continued to grow, with companies in the top quartile being 21% more likely to outperform the market on profitability as measured by E.B.I.T. margin compared to the bottom quartile, and 27% more likely on long-term value creation as measured by economic-profit margin (Hunt et al., 2018). Importantly, McKinsey’s research found that executive team diversity demonstrates the strongest correlation with higher profitability, and concluded that this is because this is where the bulk of the strategic and operational decisions that impact company profitability are made (Hunt et al., 2015).

Therefore, it is important to consider the proportion of women in revenue generating line executive roles where they tend to be under-represented compared with those in functional executive roles such as human resources, legal or corporate affairs (Chief Executive Women, 2017; Krivkovich, Robinson, Starikova, Valentino, & Yee, 2017). McKinsey also found that the top quartile higher performers also had a much greater proportion of women in line roles compared to the bottom quartile by ten to one (Hunt et al., 2018).

A study by multi-national food services and facilities management company Sodexo demonstrated these benefits within its organisation (Anand, 2016). This study of 50,000
employees in 80 countries reviewed the association between performance and gender balanced management teams defined as those consisting of at least 40% of men and 40% of women. Sodexo found that gender balanced management teams produced more sustained and predictable financial results including 23% higher gross profit than non-gender balanced teams. Additionally gender-balanced management teams achieved better results on other indirect profit drivers such as brand image, customer retention and employee engagement (Anand, 2016).

Recent research by Glass and Cook (2018) on all Fortune 500 companies from 2001 to 2010 reviewed four different business outcomes: corporate governance strengths, product strengths, community strengths, and diversity strengths, finding that companies with either women C.E.O.s or gender diverse boards were associated with stronger business and equity practices. The researchers also found that gender diverse leadership teams produced stronger business and equity outcomes (Glass & Cook, 2018).

When considering the impact of gender diversity at the board level, 2011 research by Catalyst analysed the financial performance of the Fortune 500 companies from 2004-2008, demonstrating that those with three or more women board directors significantly outperformed companies with none by a convincing 84% on return on sales, 60% on return on invested capital, and 46% on return on equity (Carter & Wagner, 2011). Similarly, McKinsey’s research on European companies with more than two women directors from 2005-2007 found that on average, these companies outperformed the market on operating result, return on equity and also share price growth (Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger, & Baumgarten, 2007). Additionally, global research by the Credit Suisse Research Institute examining 2,360 companies, found that those with women on their boards performed better than those with no women, achieving higher returns on equity, better growth, higher price to book value ratios and lower gearing over a six year period (Curtis et al., 2012). By 2016, Credit Suisse found that for nearly 3,400 companies, the excess C.A.G.R. increased to 3.5% for companies with women on boards compared to those with all male boardrooms and this was underpinned by superior company performance (Dawson et al., 2016).

These findings are also replicated in Australia, where research conducted by the Reibey Institute showed that the average return on equity over five years for companies with women directors was 9.2% compared with those without women directors at only 0.5%, the average for the ASX500 being 4.5% (The Reibey Institute, 2011). This research was
confirmed by Vafaei et al. (2015) who found that with the introduction of governance reporting and increasing appointments of women on boards of ASX500 companies since 2010, that there was a positive correlation between board diversity and company financial performance after controlling for a number of variables.

Compared with more objective financial measures of performance, share price is a more variable measure of company success because of its inherent subjectivity. Nevertheless, in the United States, a study by Catalyst of 638 publicly listed Fortune 1000 companies, (Carter et al., 2003) found that after controlling for factors such as industry type, company size, and other measures, a positive relationship exists between the proportion of women on boards and company value as defined by Tobin’s q (the ratio of the market value to the replacement cost of a company’s assets (Chung & Pruitt, 1994)). They also found that boards with more insiders are less likely to have women members, suggesting that women are more likely to be outsiders. Perhaps this is reflective of sustained low levels of female executives and C.E.O.s from which insiders would typically be drawn.

A recent global survey of 21,980 firms from 91 countries found a positive correlation between profitability and the proportion of women in corporate leadership for both the board of directors and the executive team (Noland, Moran, & Kotschwar, 2016). The positive impact on company performance was greatest for female executives, followed by female board members which highlighted the importance of creating a pipeline of female managers who can succeed to the top. For profitable firms, moving from no female leaders to 30% was associated with a 15% increase in the net revenue margin (Noland et al., 2016). The analysis found no evidence of any effect of board quotas that exist in some countries, and the authors concluded that if increasing gender diversity in corporate leadership results in increased profitability then quotas may warrant consideration particularly if the lack of women in the C-suite reflects a level of discrimination.

### 2.3.2 The causality debate

There has been debate about whether greater gender diversity is correlated with better company profitability and share prices. Two such studies have suggested that there is no causation, rather it is the companies that are already performing well financially that are more likely to appoint more women (Adams & Ferreira, 2009; Farrell & Hersch, 2005). It is important to note, however, that these studies analysed shareholder value as
opposed to financial performance and that gender bias may operate in subjective stock performance measures as described by Haslam, Ryan, Kulich, Trojanowski, and Atkins (2009). There can be a mismatch between negative investor perceptions of female board participation, and the underlying realities of company financial performance. Therefore, shareholder value may not be indicative of true company performance and any impact women may have on it. Objective measures of financial performance may be more useful when determining correlation between the proportion of women on boards and improved performance. Indeed, Smith et al. (2006) tested for causality using accountancy-based measures, finding that the positive correlation between the number of women on boards and company performance was due to board diversity influencing performance, not the other way around. This causality was also confirmed in Australian research of ASX500 companies by Vafaei et al. (2015).

In addition, the findings of Adams and Ferreira (2009) are equivocal. While gender diversity improves shareholder value of companies with weak governance, they pointed out that for companies with strong governance, it may lead to over-monitoring and interference with efficient management, potentially affecting performance. However, women bring important benefits to corporate governance, due to women taking fewer investment risks than men (Barber & Odean, 2001; Charness & Gneezy, 2012; Felton, Gibson, & Sanbonmatsu, 2003).

While Farrell and Hersch (2005) found that women were appointed to better performing and lower risk companies, they speculated that this may be because the demand for women directors is high and therefore they can be more selective about the companies they choose to join. However the United States may have been in a unique position at that time due to requirements by major institutional investors for board diversity (Carter et al., 2003; Dobbin & Jung, 2011) and this is in contrast to the glass cliff theory in which researchers in the United Kingdom found that women are appointed to lower performing companies (Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, & Bongiorno, 2011). More often than not, women are appointed to C.E.O. positions as a last resort, when companies are in crisis, and fewer male contenders are willing to put up their hands at such a risky time (Ryan et al., 2011). It is more likely for women C.E.O.s to be given riskier opportunities and face the blame for poor outcomes over which they had little control. The appointment of female C.E.O.s is often viewed as a signal of decline, and they may receive a skeptical reception (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Additionally there is evidence female C.E.O.s (Patten, 2018) and directors (Alberici, 2018) may also be discarded in a
crisis, accompanied by unfair personal criticism compared to men in similar circumstances (Alberici, 2018). By default, women C.E.O.s’ tenure is shorter and they typically receive fewer rewards, regardless of the outcome (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

Haslam et al. (2009) found that the adverse share market reaction to women joining boards results in overvaluation of all-male boards by 38% and attributed the U.K. Global Financial Crisis to this overvaluation of all-male boards. Haslam et al. (2009) claimed that companies with women board members represent better investment opportunities and companies with all-male boards should be avoided. Credit Suisse also found a better return for investors for companies with women board members (Dawson et al., 2016).

Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2011) tested the glass cliff hypothesis, finding that C.E.O. appointments had a status quo bias – that is, male C.E.O.s tend to be replaced with males (or female C.E.O.s with female). When considering male versus female attributes, Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2011) found that if a company is doing well, a C.E.O. with stereotypically male skills is preferred whereas when a company is in crisis, C.E.O.s with stereotypically female strengths were chosen. This confirms the glass cliff theory but Dawson et al. (2016) claimed that it is only because boards and investors are considering a narrow performance criteria range and the decision to replace a C.E.O. is often a short-term director-driven decision, rather than response to the long-term company financial health. Nevertheless Dawson et al. (2016) found solid correlation that companies with female C.E.O.s are attractive to investors, with the market willing to pay a 19% premium due to significantly higher financial performance.

### 2.3.3 The extraordinary woman versus the critical mass

With only a very limited number of extremely talented women reaching the top of Australian corporations, it seems that being extraordinary remains the implicit prerequisite for women’s entry into leadership (Barnett, Morley, & Piterman, 2010). It is important to recognise, however, that the appointment of a single extraordinary women may not be enough. Indeed, that Farrell and Hersch (2005) were not able to demonstrate any performance benefit from adding women to boards may be due to their suggestion that the appointment of a token woman was made in response to calls for diversity and that once companies satisfied the minimum requirements, they made no further effort to improve board diversity. Such single appointments may not satisfy the need for critical mass, since research by McKinsey (2007) and Catalyst (2007, 2011)
demonstrated improved performance for organisations with three or more women on boards (Carter & Silva, 2011; Desvaux et al., 2007; Joy, Carter, Wagner, & Narayanan, 2007). Indeed, Desvaux et al. (2007) found that once a critical mass is attained, performance increases significantly. The threshold appears to be around 30% (three women out of an average of ten management committee members), with no significant difference in performance being seen below this number. Additionally, it was found that boards with three or more women have better governance than all-male boards (Brown, Brown, & Anastasopoulos, 2002). This was confirmed by Credit Suisse research (Dawson et al., 2016) which found that companies with three or more women directors had market capitalisation that was twice the size as those with two, and three times as large as companies with no female directors (Figure 4).

![Figure 4. The effect of number of female directors on company value. (Researcher’s own graph. Data source: Dawson et al., 2016)](image-url)

Due to differing board sizes, Dawson et al. (2016) also looked at the proportional representation of women on boards and found the tipping point at 20-30% representation (Figure 5) which aligns with the threshold found by Desvaux et al. (2007).
This may reflect Kanter’s theories about tokenism - in response to their status as token members of a group, women may try to blend in, whereas once women reach a critical mass, they are able to have more influence and effect change in an organisation (Kanter, 1977a). It was found that two token women (or less than 20%) is not always enough to overcome the problems of tokenism (Kanter, 1977b) so it is perhaps unsurprising that Desvaux et al. (2007) and Dawson et al. (2016) found the threshold for improved financial performance was around 30%.

2.3.4 How do women leaders improve performance?

There are a number of studies that suggest there are valid underlying reasons for better performance in companies with greater gender diversity. Woolley, Chabris, Pentland, Hashmi, and Malone (2010) found that the collective intelligence of a group is correlated with average social sensitivity of participants, the degree to which conversation is taken in turn and shared equally, and the proportion of women. The collective intelligence of a group increases when it includes more women, due to improved social sensitivity, and that the best operating teams tend to be those with more women. Woolley et al. (2010) concluded that greater diversity in gender, age and opinions improves outcomes and avoids dangerous “group think”. These findings are also consistent with Phillips and Loyd (2006), who reported that diverse groups are likely to prepare better, debate a wider range of data, and get the right answer more often.
Indeed Phillips (2014) finds that the benefit of diversity is not just because people with
different backgrounds bring new information, or different perspectives. She maintains
that when we are with people who are similar to us, we expect them to hold the same
information we do, and to share our perspective. This means firstly that, when we hear
disagreement from someone who is different, it provokes more thought than if we hear
dissent from someone similar, because we automatically assume they may hold
information that we do not possess and may have different perspectives. Secondly
because of that assumption, we expect to have to work harder to reach a consensus in a
diverse group, compared with a more homogenous group who we expect will share
similar perspectives and agree with each other more readily. Therefore, Phillips (2014)
concludes that diverse groups apply more effort which, while they may not enjoy it, can
lead to better outcomes.

Despite not finding evidence of improved shareholder value, Adams and Ferreira (2009)
suggest that there are several benefits that come with more female directors. Directors
participate further in decision making through increased attendance and committee
assignments which may reflect the extra effort Phillips (2014) highlighted occurs in
diverse teams. Additionally, there is tighter monitoring of the C.E.O. with increased
propensity for turn-over due to non-performance, and there is better alignment with
shareholder interests because of greater equity-based compensation of directors. Also,
research suggests that boards with female directors have a lower risk of insolvency
(Wilson, 2001), that women tend to be much more risk averse than men as investors
(Barber & Odean, 2001), and optimistic men have increased investment volatility while
this is not the case for optimistic women (Felton, Gibson, & Sanbonmatsu, 2003).
Therefore, it appears that despite the presence of negative bias from some investors,
there are valid underlying reasons for the improved financial performance of
organisations with more women in senior leadership positions.

Additionally, a 2008 McKinsey study of 9,000 Western managers and leaders described
nine key leadership criteria that correlate with company financial performance and
noted that five of these behaviours are applied more frequently by women than men
(Desvaux & Devillard, 2008). The study found that women showed strengths in
coaching and mentoring; clearly defining expectations and rewarding achievement;
building respect and making ethical decisions; motivation; and participative decision
making. Men on the other hand were better at individualistic decision making as well as
monitoring performance, errors and gaps and taking action when needed. Therefore the
idea that gender diversity at the leadership level may foster a balance in the nine key performance enhancing leadership skills has merit (Desvaux & Devillard, 2008).

Importantly, there may be one area where women leaders are needed more than ever. That is, companies with more women leaders may be better placed to take advantage of growing women’s buying power. Reports by The Boston Consulting Group, Neilsen, and Goldman Sachs found that the majority of household purchasing decisions are controlled by women, and their influence is continuing to grow (Neilsen, 2011; Silverstein, Sayre, & Butman, 2009; Toohey, Colosimo, & Boak, 2009). Women are said to represent a similarly powerful consumer base in Australia (Derby et al., 2013). An estimated 80% of daily consumer decisions are made by women (Silverstein & Sayre, 2009), which means women are likely to control an estimated $250 million of retail expenditure in Australia based on reported retail turnover (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018b). According to Brennan (2017), this growth in women’s buying power is due to five key factors: women’s educational attainment, higher labour force participation, increasing breadwinner status, achievement of management and professional roles, and control of wealth.

2.4 Why are there not more women in senior leadership?

Much research has endeavoured to explain the slow progress of women advancing to senior leadership roles, but even when women do “all the right stuff” (Stroh, Brett, & Reilly, 1992) like their male counterparts, thus excluding such factors as inferior skills and education, or time out of the workforce, there is still a marked difference. More recently, the phrase “lean in” was coined by Facebook Chief Operating Officer, Sheryl Sandberg (2013), again suggesting that women just need to do the right things to get ahead. However research shows that those strategies such as putting your hand up for promotion, going the extra mile at work, and networking with senior managers do not provide the same career advantages for women as they did for men (Carter & Silva, 2011; Stroh et al., 1992). It has also been proposed that women may not want the top jobs, however despite the challenges faced by women due to unequal distribution of household responsibilities after childbirth (Argyrous et al., 2016; Hochschild & Machung, 2012), research finds that having children does not reduce women’s leadership ambitions (Coffman & Neuenfeldt, 2014) and while women and men start out with the same ambitions, women’s wane over time as they are exposed to the glass ceiling effect and fail to receive constructive feedback that may help them progress their careers (Correll & Simard, 2016).
2.4.1 Trusting the pipeline to deliver more women to senior levels

The pipeline theory (Nancherla, 2010) has been used to justify the paucity of women in senior leadership, that is, when there are enough women with the necessary education, training, experience, and aspirations to succeed, parity will be realised. However, the pipeline has been supplying suitable women for decades. Women in Australia not only make up the greater proportion of graduates (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017a), their workforce participation has increased to 47% of the workforce (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2018a) and they are increasingly entering management occupations (Evans & Kelley, 2008; International Labour Organization, 2015; Le & Miller, 2002; Wood, 2008). In fact, Australian women have outstripped men in their higher education participation for more than 30 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017a; Le & Miller, 2002). Nevertheless the poor representation of women at senior management level continues (Chief Executive Women, 2017). In 2017, women hold just 16% of CEO roles and 37% of manager roles according to statistics from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency, meaning the norm in leadership is still predominantly male (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2017a). Given the large numbers of qualified women in Australia, it is surprising that more of them are not appointed to senior roles. In fact, more women than men have completed bachelor and postgraduate degrees (35% and 28% respectively) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017a) and the gap continues to widen as shown in Figure 6 below.

![Figure 6. Proportion of Australians with bachelor level degrees or above](Researcher’s own graph. Data source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017a)
Even in the 50-64 year-old population from which board directors would typically be drawn, there appears to be plenty of qualified women as demonstrated in Figure 7. Indeed, Women on Boards now have a membership of 4100 board-ready women seeking positions (Women on Boards, 2018a). Conversely, the pipeline for women in senior management has not been described as a concern, and there continues to be a clustering of women in senior and middle management without the predicted progression of women into the top positions (International Labour Organization, 2015).

![Figure 7. Australians with bachelor’s degrees or above by age](image)

(Researcher’s own graph. Data source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017a)

In Australia, at the graduate entry level, women are among the most qualified candidates. Women have made up approximately 60% of all graduates since 2000 (Department of Education and Training, 2016; Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, 2001) including important professions such as law and business from which those in senior ranks are often drawn. Women remain well represented at the professional level but there is an enormous discrepancy at senior leadership levels, with men being four times more likely to reach executive level and 19 times more likely to reach C.E.O. level (Data source: Chief Executive Women, 2017). Therefore, despite the fact that decades of women graduates have provided a sufficient pool of qualified female contenders for progression to every level (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017a; Le & Miller, 2002), the pipeline has failed to deliver and it appears that many women in reality face a barrier to progressing beyond middle management.

This barrier has been popularly described as the “glass ceiling” effect, defined by Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, and Vanneman (2001) as a gender or racial difference that
affects the ability of individuals to advance to higher levels, that increases over the course of a career and is not explained by any other job-related factors. They found when testing four key criteria, that it was a distinctively gender-based effect, that is, racial differences did not have a glass ceiling effect in men. Perhaps therefore, it should be more correctly termed the “women’s glass ceiling” as it remains an important descriptor for the barriers women face in trying to reach senior management levels in organisations (The Economist, 2017).

2.4.2 Women lack confidence and need to “lean in”

Sandberg’s (2013) popular book “Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead” became a number one bestseller, a cultural phenomenon and a catch-phrase for empowering women, resulting in Sandberg becoming the new face of feminism on the cover of Time magazine (Luscombe, 2013). Today there are 40,000 lean-in circles around the world and 85% of members believe this attitude has made a positive change in their lives (Lean In, 2018). Since improved self-confidence has been shown to lead to tangible improvements in performance (Ehrlinger & Dunning, 2003), this may be beneficial. Nevertheless, critics have argued that Sandberg’s philosophy largely ignores the systemic gender bias in organisations (Faludi, 2013; Vinnicombe, 2013; Williams, 2000), and such “fix the women” (Bowles, Babcock, & Lai, 2007, p. 85) strategies have long been criticised as ignoring the gendered social context from which this behaviour difference emerges (Deaux & Major, 1987; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Kolb, 2009; Watson, 1994).

It has been proposed that a lack of self-confidence in the workplace may stem from societal attitudes to girls and boys, however perceptions that women exhibit a lack of self-confidence have been heavily critiqued, could be unfounded and may stem from unconscious bias. These issues will be explored in further depth throughout this chapter. Nevertheless, it has been asserted that risk-taking behaviour in the playground is encouraged in boys but not in girls (Pallier, 2003; Sahlstein & Allen, 2002; White, Cox, & Cooper, 1992). This may reflect research by Steinmayr and Spinath (2009) which found that men are more likely than women to overestimate their ability to take on jobs for which they lack the experience, which may be driven by childhood activities that help boys develop risk-taking ability, leading to more self-confidence about risk taking later in life (Hoffman, 1972) Additionally, while it is socially acceptable for girls to be shy, “bossiness” is often strongly discouraged and these factors may reduce the
opportunities for girls to develop assertiveness and self-confidence (Doey, Coplan, & Kingsbury, 2014).

Women’s lack of self-confidence in the workplace was reported in early research by Rudman (1998) which found that women had a tendency to rate themselves lower than men and found it difficult to accept praise from others. This can lead to the so called “imposter phenomenon”, a term coined in 1987 by clinical psychologists (Clance & O'Toole) to describe high achieving women who do not believe they deserve their success, remaining convinced they are frauds despite evidence to the contrary. Rather than competence, they attribute their success to luck or others’ false beliefs. This phenomenon, however, has since been shown to affect both men and women in similar numbers (Lebowitz, 2016).

Nevertheless perceptions of a lack of self-confidence continue to be reported as an issue for women managers (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003) and was confirmed by research from the United Kingdom, which found that women managers lacked confidence and self-belief compared to their male colleagues (Institute of Leadership & Management, 2011). Similarly, in a recent study of 173 business men and women in Western Australia found that the most significant gender difference in the workplace was self-confidence and self-promotion, with almost all women reporting that they had struggled with self-doubt throughout their careers (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2015). Additionally, research undertaken in the New South Wales public sector (Baird et al., 2014) found that women were reluctant to seek promotion to senior executive roles due to lack of confidence. This body of evidence suggests that self-doubt may lead to women being less likely to apply for more senior positions, and to have lower career expectations despite having the same skills and experience as their male counterparts.

This was also reflected in a 2008 McKinsey publication which cited internal research from Hewlett Packard that found women only apply for roles if they think they meet 100 percent of the job criteria, while men were willing to apply when they only meet 60 percent (Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger, & Meaney, 2008). This statistic has become a truism that is often quoted (Hannon, 2014; Kay & Shipman, 2014a, 2014b; Mohr, 2011; Sandberg, 2013), but according to Rice (2014), there is no specific source for this claim and it is merely an anecdotal story that is not backed by valid research. Nevertheless, in order to test this theory, Mohr (2011) surveyed over one thousand predominantly professional American men and women, and found that the most common reason for
women not to apply for jobs for which they did not meet 100% of the qualifications was not because of a lack of confidence, but rather because they believed the stated criteria were prerequisites and that they would not be considered if they did not meet all of them. In fact, only 10% of women and 12% of men indicated that they did not apply because they did not think they could do the job. Mohr goes on to say, however, that the value of the “H.P. finding” is that it highlights the need for women to be better informed about how the hiring process works. She states that when women realise that men are not “playing the game that way” (Mohr, 2011, p. 32), they feel more comfortable to apply for jobs even when they do not meet all the stated criteria.

Interestingly, Sturm, Taylor, Atwater, and Braddy (2014) found that women’s lack of confidence may be due to their insecurity about how they think they are perceived by their manager and this may stem from the fact that rather than developing a thick skin, Johnston (2016) found that being exposed over a lifetime to stereotypes and biased evaluations can result in reduced confidence. Indeed, in an in-depth analysis of more than 200 performance reviews in a large technology company, Correll and Simard (2016) found that women received only half as much feedback on their business outcomes as men, but were 3.2 times more likely to receive feedback on their aggressive communication styles. Similarly, in an analysis of 250 performance reviews from Silicon Valley employees, Snyder (2014) found that 75% of women received criticism of their communication styles compared to only 2% of men, using common descriptors such as “abrasive” and “aggressive”. Whereas Snyder (2014) found that men received constructive feedback focused on suggestions for further skill development, the majority of women also received negative feedback about their tone, the need to step back and to be less judgmental.

Additionally, research by Guillén, Mayo, and Karelaia (2018) found that while appearing self-confident increased men’s influence in organisations, this was not the case for women. The researchers found that it was not enough for women to appear self-confident, they also needed to build social support, which may reflect the social backlash that occurs when women behave against gender stereotypes (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004; Rudman, 1998). This issue will be discussed in further detail later.
2.4.3 Maybe women do not want the top jobs

Even if capable, it is assumed that many women are simply unwilling to seek senior roles, due to a lack of ambition or personal choice, and it is certainly true that some women do not want career advancement or choose rather to be there for their children (Hakim, 1995; Jogulu & Wood, 2011; Reid Boyd, 2002). While Hakim’s work has raised the ire of a number of critics (Crompton & Lyonette, 2007; Ginn et al., 1996) and provided ex-Prime Minister John Howard with ammunition against the paid maternity debate of the day (Jay, 2005), Hakim’s “preference theory” which sought to explain and predict women’s family and work choices may provide a simple framework to think about women’s work-life choices (Hakim, 1998). Preference theory (Hakim, 1998, 2000) claims that women’s lifestyle choices falls into three main categories:

a) work-centred lifestyle (Hakim, 1998): women who prioritise their careers and achievement values and often remain childless by choice (approximately 20%)

b) home-centred lifestyle (Hakim, 1998): women who prioritise family life and sharing values. They often have many children and little paid work (approximately 20%)

c) adaptive lifestyle (Hakim, 1998): women who seek to combine paid jobs with family commitments. Absolute priority is not given to either activity or the accompanying values (approximately 60%).

While opting out of work in preference for family (Dillaway & Pare, 2008; Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Hoobler et al., 2014) has been described in mainstream news as a revolution (Belkin, 2003), the proportion of women prioritising family life over work according to Hakim’s theory is actually relatively small (20%). While Hakim’s model may be considered simplistic, since women find many ways to juggle their work and family commitments between the constraints of their work structure and the choices available to them (Cartwright, 2008), nevertheless as described by Hakim, the majority of women seek to balance family and work, or even prioritise work.

In fact, a recent survey by Egon Zehnder (2017) found that 61% of Australian women in the early stages of their professional careers aspire to senior executive leadership roles in their companies. This confirms earlier research that finds managerial aspirations of men and women are very similar (Wood & Jogulu, 2006; Wood & Lindorff, 2001). Interestingly, U.S. research by Ely, Stone, and Ammerman (2014) found that while women start out with the same ambitions as men, they are far less likely to achieve them
which is likely the reason that women’s ambitions adjust over time. While the authors found that most men expect their careers to take precedence over their partners’ (and they usually do), nevertheless they dispelled the “opt-out revolution” myth that a large proportion of women are leaving the workforce to care for children (Ely et al., 2014). In reality, women are often disappointed that their careers are not as important as their partners’ and remain dissatisfied with the incompatibility of work and family. Importantly, recent research from the Netherlands found that workplace initiatives that help women balance their family demands can increase their level of aspiration (Fritz & Van Knippenberg, 2018).

Additionally, it appears a number of women who are disillusioned by the lack of career opportunity leave corporations to start their own businesses. This is supported by figures from the Australian Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry cited by Fox (2012) stating that 78% of women running their own business were previously employed in middle to upper management. Mitchell and King (2013) reported in the Australian Financial Review that the number of women business owners increased by 14,000 in the previous five years and rose by almost 25% over the past decade, compared to an increase of only 1% for men. More recently, Butcher (2017) found that a third of small businesses are now owned by women, compared to a little over 20% ten years ago. Mitchell and King commented that most women go out on their own after becoming frustrated at having to work harder than their male peers, to achieve the same privileges and pay within corporations. It seems the male-dominated organisational culture means women continue to have to “work twice as hard for half as much” (Pinto & Williams, 2008). Conversely, a recent study by Foley, Baird, Cooper, and Williamson (2018) found that women may feel forced into entrepreneurship in order to manage their competing family demands.

Nevertheless, the number of women willing to strike out on their own in small business confirms that there is no lack of confidence or ambition of women in Australia. Certainly, a 2011 Bain and Company survey of 842 Australian business men and women found that virtually the same number of men and women aspired to leadership roles, at 76% and 74% respectively (Sanders et al., 2011). However, although the majority of these women wanted opportunities for promotion and progression, only 15% of those surveyed believed they had the same opportunities as men for promotion into senior leadership roles.
According to 2014 U.S. research by Bain and Company, while 43% of women aspire to top management at the beginning of their careers, this drops to just 16% within two to five years of professional experience (Coffman & Neuenfeldt, 2014). In contrast, while the number of men with the same ambitions is lower at the start at 34%, they continue to remain confident they will reach the top after the same amount of time in the workplace. Additionally, upon reaching senior levels, while the ambition and confidence to progress to the highest level executive positions increases for all employees, it is more obvious for men, with more than half believing the “C-suite” is within reach, compared with less than a third of women at the same level (Coffman & Neuenfeldt, 2014).

This decline in ambition upon women reaching the senior management level was also seen in Egon Zehnder’s (2017) Australian survey. Egon Zehnder claim the decline in ambition is due to women being exposed to the “glass ceiling effect”, when reality sets in about the challenges women face in attaining senior leadership roles. The reasons behind this are explored in more depth by Coffman and Neuenfeldt (2014), but importantly, this research dispels the myth that women’s career aspirations decline with having a family, as they found that the level of ambition does not differ with marital status or parental responsibilities. The reason for the decline was rather found to be the negative experiences that women encounter during the mid-career period when ambitions normally start to take shape and confidence is built (Coffman & Neuenfeldt, 2014). The researchers found three particular areas of perception that lead to a reduction in ambition and confidence in women during this time. Firstly, there is a mismatch between the stereotypical ideal worker and the preferred working style of many women, which will be discussed in further detail later. Secondly many women face a lack of meaningful recognition and support from their managers, and thirdly they see the lack of female role models at the top of their organisations (Coffman & Neuenfeldt, 2014). It seems that over time women may indeed end up with lower confidence and ambition than men to seek the top leadership positions, but it is not for the reasons often assumed (family responsibilities), and according to Coffman and Neuenfeldt (2014), it is the frontline managers who can make the biggest difference to ensure organisations can attract and retain the next generation of top talent of both genders. This includes giving more than the “vague” feedback that women typically receive from their managers (Correll & Simard, 2016).

Female C.E.O.s in particular can make a big difference as research by Credit Suisse (Dawson et al., 2016) found that they are 50% more likely to have women in C.F.O.
roles and running business units than their male counterparts. The authors claim that instead of just promoting women into functional roles that offer more flexibility, as is the tendency for male managers (Hoobler et al., 2014), female C.E.O.s are bringing women up through the pipeline into roles that allow further career development opportunities, because they have greater awareness of the barriers to progression women face and are motivated to actively address it.

2.5 Sex discrimination is alive and well

Anti-discrimination and Equal Employment Opportunity (E.E.O.) policies have existed for decades in Australia, and have contributed to many important advances for women, including lifting of the marriage bar (Sawer, 2016) and the right to equal pay (Equal Pay Case, 1969). State (e.g. Anti-Discrimination Act 1977 (NSW)) and Federal legislation (Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986 (Cth); Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999 (Cth); Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth); Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012 (Cth)) that covers both public and private sector organisations has enabled women to participate more fully in the workforce. Despite legislation, however, the numbers of women in senior leadership remain low with only a very small percentage of women progressing to the highest ranks (Chief Executive Women, 2017). While the numbers of women in middle management have increased, this has not translated to senior management and executive levels (Chief Executive Women, 2017; Lyness & Heilman, 2006) and it is not possible to explain women’s continued slow and unbalanced career advancement. Additionally, it is likely many women in the workforce today have never experienced the discriminatory employment policies from the previous generation and as such may not fully appreciate the significant advances made possible through E.E.O. legislation, and because of ongoing unconscious bias (to be discussed in more detail below), may see the legislation as largely irrelevant.

2.5.1 On a level playing field, our leaders get there by merit

The belief in a “fair go” (our opportunity to capitalise on our ambition and natural ability (Herscovitch, 2013)) is embedded in Australian society (Levine, 2006). Consequently, we have a strong need to believe Australian workplaces are fair, and companies often assert that career progression is underpinned by merit alone. It is not the case, however, that everyone receives the same opportunities. Howard and Wellins (2009) found that from very early on in their careers, women’s progress slowed, and
they had much less chance of being identified as potential managers or executives. As a result, they were not offered the same development opportunities such as training, mentoring and secondments, as their male colleagues, which then became an obstacle to being considered for promotion.

Additionally, Fox (2012) discusses the problems of the existing homogenous power group (of white 50-something males). She says that people recruit and promote those that are like them. Although choosing a team of people who look and think like you is standard business practice, in fact these like-minded and look-alike groups do not reflect the merit principle at all and if Australian workplaces truly are meritocracies, then there should be higher representation of women at senior levels. Despite demonstrated reasons to increase gender diversity in leadership, many still argue against affirmative action because it violates the merit principle and could reduce a company’s ability to employ the best person for the job (Braund, 2010; Son Hing, Bobocel, & Zanna, 2002; Whelan & Wood, 2012). On the other hand, if considerable bias against women exists in the workplace then the merit principle does not work since discrimination prejudices the assessment of merit. Furthermore, Sealy (2010) found that those who believe in merit do not oppose preferential treatment for women if they perceive there is significant workplace discrimination.

Sealy (2010) also found that women became disillusioned with the notion of merit over time because progression seemed less influenced by ability and experience and more by politics. It seems that women start out believing in the principle of merit but later, an absence of senior women in their organisation leads them to question the meritocratic processes of their organisations. If women are to believe in a fair process, they need to see evidence of companies promoting women to senior leadership positions.

2.5.2 The enduring gender pay gap

Historically, the Australian minimum wage has its origins in the Harvester Decision (ex parte H. V. McKay (Harvester decision), 1906) which was referred to as the “living wage” or the “family wage” because it was assessed as the cost of living for a labouring family of a husband, wife, and three children. This decision may have served to legitimise the gender order and financial role of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers and carers and references to a family wage were to continue throughout the century (Hamilton, 2011). This provides a background to the unequal gender relations and order which has long structured social arrangements and the gender culture.
in paid work and family life. Subsequently the Fruit Pickers Case of 1912 considered how the Harvester Decision would be applied to women (The Rural Workers' Union and The South Australian United Labourers' Union v. The Employer (fruit picker's case), 1912) and it was decided that women should not receive a “family wage”, because they were not under an obligation to support a family. Instead women should receive a “living” wage if they were working in jobs performed almost exclusively by women, such as fruit packing or millinery. However, if they were working in jobs in competition with men, such as fruit picking or blacksmithing, they should receive the same award wage as men. The basic wage for women became 54% of the male basic (or minimum) wage, increasing to 75% after World War II. This decision was widely criticised as it was inconsistent with the approach taken to single men who would be paid an amount to support a wife and family they did not have (Hamilton, 2011) and eventually in 1969, the equal pay case led to both men and women receiving the same award wage in Australia (The Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union v. Meat and Allied Trades Federation of Australia (Equal Pay case), 1969).

Yet Borland (1999) found that, 30 years after the Australian equal pay case, whilst reduced, the gender pay gap still existed, with the average wage for women being 84.3% of men’s. In 2018 while we have the lowest gap in 20 years, it is only marginally better at 85.4% (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2018b) and analysis of the Australian Bureau of Statistics average weekly earnings statistics (Figure 8) demonstrates the pay gap has changed little since the equal pay case of 1969.

The National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) estimated the cost to the Australian economy of the gender pay gap to be $93 billion per annum, equating to 8.5% of G.D.P. (Cassells et al., 2009). Women’s labour force participation is negatively impacted by the gender pay gap and if reduced by just 1%, the Australian economy is estimated to grow by $5.5 billion.

Yet despite Australian women graduating in greater numbers and with higher degrees than men, they are economically disadvantaged from the start of their employment. A 2017 survey found that graduate labour market outcomes for men and women are similar except when it comes to salaries (Department of Education and Training, 2017). The survey found that in Australian women graduates on average started on $4,000 (7%) less than their male counterparts, and within three years that gap had increased to $6,000 (9%). This gap is partly explained by the fact that more women graduate from lower paying fields of study, however even in female dominated industries such as nursing, women earn less on graduation and three years thereafter, with the survey finding the gender pay gap for nursing three years after graduation was $8,400 (12%). Additionally, Cassells, Duncan, and Ong (2017) found that women are under-
represented in the top graduate salary bands, with the top 10% of female earners in
graduate trainee positions receiving $81,000 or more, while the top 10% of men earned
at least $88,000, equating to a pay gap of 8%. Compared to their share of the graduate
workforce, 18% less women earned more than $80,000.

A 2010 survey by the Financial Services Institute of Australasia found that 61% of men
believed the gender pay gap is seriously exaggerated and that wages reflect fairly the
differences in skill sets and hours worked (FINSIA, 2010). It is true that occupational
segregation has been found plays a large part in the enduring gender pay gap in
Australia (Borland, 1999) and certainly for lower-paid employees, the gender pay gap
was found to be related to differences in job characteristics (Kee, 2006). However a
Diversity Council Australia (2009) report concluded that the largest factor, contributing
35% of the gender pay gap, was sex discrimination. Interruptions to a woman’s career
(e.g. to raise a family) made up only 9% of the difference, occupational segregation
10%, and share in part-time employment 14%. Similarly, Cassells et al. (2009) found
that the single most important reason for the gender pay gap (60%) was “being a
woman”. The complex factors associated with “being a woman” included choice of
career and working hours, carer responsibilities, work motivation, negotiation skills,
predilection for risk, and importantly, workplace discrimination. Additionally, U.S.
research finds an association between occupational feminisation and reduced rates of
pay (that is when women enter certain occupations in greater numbers the overall
remuneration rate goes down) whereas conversely occupational masculinisation results
in higher rates of pay (Levanon, England, & Allison, 2009) which suggests that society
and workplaces value women less. Importantly, however, Cassells et al. (2017) found
that that an increase in the proportion of women at the senior executive level can reduce
the overall gender gap in organisations.

Conversely, 80% of women surveyed by FINSIA (2010) disagreed that the difference in
earnings between men and women is justified and research findings may support this
perception. Kee (2006) found that the greatest unexplained gap occurred in the upper
quartile of earnings, that is, in senior positions, where men’s wages were
disproportionately higher than women’s. This effect was more evident in the private
sector where salary levels tend to be less transparent that in the public sector. Since
Kee’s research included extensive statistical controls, it concluded that discrimination is
the likely main driver for the pay gap and female managers are disadvantaged,
regardless of the existence of equal opportunity legislation. This disadvantage is also
supported by a subsequent study of Australian managers by Watson (2010) who found that full-time female managers in Australia earn 27% less than their male counterparts and 65-90% of this difference could not be explained by job-related differences. Of the $18,500 pay difference, $12,500 could only be changed by a woman becoming a man (Watson, 2010). Seven years later, in a study for the Workplace Gender Equality Agency, Cassells et al. (2017) confirmed the same gap (26.5%) for managers at senior levels. The pay disparity between female senior leaders and their male counterparts continues to grow throughout their careers to an average of $93,000 (Cassells et al., 2017).

Cassells et al. (2017) also found a tendency for female-dominated workplaces to be lower paid, and additionally, when management teams are dominated by women (organisations with greater than 80% women managers), such as in health care and social assistance or education and training, there are larger management gender pay-gaps in favour of men (rising from 8% to more than 17%). The authors believe that when men are in the minority, they are put on a pedestal and valued more highly, most likely because of unconscious bias due to the stereotypes about men as authority figures. This may reflect research on male leader stereotypes which will be discussed in further detail later (Chesterman, Ross-Smith, & Peters, 2005; Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996). Nonetheless, it doesn’t explain why male graduates are paid more (Department of Education and Training, 2017), given that they are generally unlikely to be either leaders (Cassells et al., 2017), or breadwinning fathers (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007).

When it comes to negotiating on pay, Bowles et al. (2007) found that women were punished for not accepting the first offer made, and also for requesting more so there may be good reason why women have traditionally been reluctant to ask. Nevertheless, Carter and Silva (2011), found that although women may not negotiate as often as men for higher salaries in their first post-MBA job, in subsequent jobs women negotiate at least as often as men, still their salary growth lags behind. In fact in a study of Australian workplaces, Artz, Goodall, and Oswald (2018) found that women do ask for raises, but are only successful 16% of the time, whereas their male counterparts were 25% more likely to be successful.

2.5.3 The dramatic impact of unconscious bias

Prejudice and unconscious biases towards others are a fundamental part of the human psyche that most of us are completely oblivious to (Banaji, 2013). Unconscious,
“hidden” or “implicit” bias is defined as normal human prejudice that is created and reinforced by our environment, background, culture and experiences (Australian National University, 2015; Banaji, 2013; QLD Government, 2018). Irrespective of whether we believe ourselves to be fair-minded, we all experience first impressions, intuitions and assumptions about other people with whom we interact (Banaji, 2013). These unconscious beliefs can often be at odds with our conscious values (Banaji, 2013; Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, & Handelsman, 2012), and are based on associations with cultural and social stereotypes that come from the tendency of our brains to organise social worlds by categorising similarity, while difference is harder for our brains to accommodate (Australian National University, 2015; QLD Government, 2018).

Unconscious bias continues to result in significant discrimination against qualified and experienced women in the workplace (Genat, Wood, & Sojo, 2012). Using a computer simulation, Martell et al. (1996) demonstrated how as little as a 1% bias in favour of men can accumulate over time to prevent women from advancing as rapidly as men. The research modeled an eight level organisation with an equal gender mix and found that after eight rounds of promotions, the most senior level of management was comprised of 65% men and 35% women. This proves how easily even a tiny unconscious gender bias can dramatically affect women’s chances of achieving senior leadership positions within organisations.

A meta-analysis by Genat et al. (2012) found two separate but related types of unconscious bias relating to gender. The first is gender evaluation bias which leads to women being consistently devalued in the workplace compared to men (Davison & Burke, 2000; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992; Goldberg, 1968; Olian, Schwab, & Haberfeld, 1988). The second is the backlash in the form of social or financial penalties that women face when women behave contrary to gender stereotypes (Heilman et al., 2004; Rudman, 1998).

Evaluation bias has been most frequently studied, using a research paradigm pioneered by Philip Goldberg (1968) where subjects were asked to evaluate hypothetical individuals with the same characteristics, the only difference being gender. Goldberg found that women consistently received lower evaluations and much research has confirmed the same results apply, even today (Davison & Burke, 2000; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003).
One of the reasons women are evaluated lower than men can be understood by examining role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The perceived mismatch or incongruity between leadership roles that are traditionally occupied by men, and stereotypical female attributes and social roles leads to women being seen less favourably, but are often framed as “lack of fit” (Heilman, 1983).

Genat et al. (2012) hypothesised that as more women take on traditionally masculine roles, then the evaluation bias should decrease. Indeed, Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, and Ristikari (2011) found that “think manager-think male” (Schein et al., 1996) attitudes have decreased over time. Yet although these societal stereotypes and attitudes about women are held by both men and women, the effect was still found by Koenig et al. (2011) to be greater for men than women, meaning that those in decision-making power (men) will continue to rate women candidates as less competent than men. Additionally, the effect is greater for high-status leadership roles, which means that women will struggle to reach the very top and the perceived mismatch between women and senior leadership is perpetuated.

On the other hand, women who behave in a more masculine way that is more consistent with stereotypical leadership traits such as ambition, assertiveness, decisiveness and self-reliance, may face considerable backlash in the form of negative social or financial penalties (Heilman et al., 2004; Rudman, 1998). Stereotypical female attributes such as warmth, friendliness, sensitivity and collectiveness may be valued in the workplace but they are not generally associated with competent leaders and are deemed less important for most leadership roles than the agency associated with male stereotypes (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). When there is a mismatch between the way someone behaves, and the stereotype expected, the contradiction felt by the observer leads them to make an assessment and rate against that stereotype. For example, a woman who self-promotes may be recognised as competent but could be penalised by being rated as less likeable than a man behaving the same way (Rudman, 1998). She would also be less likely to be hired (Rudman & Glick, 2001) and less likely to be promoted (Heilman, 2001) and could even experience sabotage from others in the workplace (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004).

Unconscious bias can also stem from women having a different leadership style from men which is not as highly valued (Sinclair, 2005). While this difference is acknowledged by both men and women, most men do not appreciate the barriers to
promotion this difference can generate for women. Attitudes to women’s style affect perceptions of their ability to lead and those perceptions can lead to unconscious bias.

2.5.4 Affinity bias

Affinity bias is a natural human tendency to prefer people who are like us (Jenkin, 2016; Turnbull, 2016) which results in a preference to network and socialise with others who are similar to us (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). This type of bias manifests in the workplace as identifying people who are a “good fit” for the organisation and role (Linos & Reinhard, 2015; Turnbull, 2016) based on visual, cultural and demographic factors, and since the majority of hiring managers at senior levels are men, this serves to perpetuate Kanter’s (1977a) “homosocial reproduction” where they continue to hire other men in their own likeness and the cycle of men outnumbering women in senior leadership is perpetuated (Wheeler & Sojo, 2017).

This type of bias also results in a persistent “boys’ club” culture (Maxwell, 2017) in which male homosocial behaviour (Bird, 1996) results in shared experiences from spending significant leisure time together pursuing similar interests (golf, sports, drinks). While these social interactions are generally unintentional, they create a deep bond between men and exclude women from the significant career sponsorship that members of the “club” benefit from (Fisher & Kinsey, 2014). Women on the other hand, do not share this tendency to form exclusive groups like men (Tiger, 2017) and even though it was initially thought as more women entered the ranks that this behaviour would change, this has not been the case (Greer, 2010). Part of the problem is leaders are often dismissive and women do not usually speak out or challenge the behaviour, even when they are excluded from “in jokes” and banter about what happened during “club” activities. Nevertheless, the #MeToo movement (Chuck, 2017) may have encouraged women to speak up more readily and Australian company Aurizon has implemented a “Stand Up and Speak Up” campaign which encourages employees to challenge in a non-confrontational way by saying “what do you mean by that?” (Fox, 2017).

2.6 Bias against mothers is the most powerful type of sex discrimination

Also described as the “maternal wall” (Crosby et al., 2004; Williams, 2004), mothers face a double bias which deserves to be called out as a specific issue that women face in the workplace, particularly since the majority of Australian women choose to have children (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010). The penalty for women with children
affects many aspects of women’s careers and can have a profound impact on earnings, perceptions of job performance and progression opportunities (Correll et al., 2007; Livermore, Rodgers, & Siminski, 2011).

Considering that men do not face the same penalties, and in fact seem to benefit from becoming fathers (Correll et al., 2007), this demonstrates the significant ongoing workplace gender discrimination that women face. In fact, Bornstein, Williams, and Painter (2012) claim that studies documenting this effect show that bias against mothers is the most powerful type of sex discrimination.

2.6.1 The motherhood penalty

Research by Correll et al. (2007) describes the multiple penalties that mothers face simultaneously in the workplace. In the research, evaluators reviewed job applications for pairs of matched same-gender candidates whose only difference was whether or not they had children. Mothers were held to stricter standards, considered to be less competent and offered lower starting salaries. They were viewed as less committed and less suitable for management training and promotions. Conversely, rather than being penalised, fathers appeared to benefit from parenthood by receiving a wage premium (Correll et al., 2007; Lundberg & Rose, 2000). Furthermore, Livermore et al. (2011) reported that the motherhood wage penalty in Australia was 5% for one child and 9% for two or more, emerging over time due to reduced wage growth.

2.6.2 Motherhood and gender stereotypes

Bornstein et al. (2012) described two forms of maternal wall bias that relate to stereotypes about mothers. The first, prescriptive bias, relates to assumptions about how mothers should behave. They give the example of a lawyer who was told, “Don’t you feel bad leaving your kids at home? Don’t you miss them? My wife could never do that” (Bornstein et al., 2012, p. 50). The clear message being that mothers belong at home. Such statements can be either hostile, as in the example above, or benevolent, for example an assumption that a woman would not want a promotion because she had just had a baby. Glick and Fiske first described this dichotomy in 1997 (Glick & Fiske, 1997) and it was found to still hold true 20 years later (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Lee, Fiske, & Glick, 2010). Yet, even well-meaning benevolent assumptions can severely limit women’s opportunities (Moya et al., 2007). Bain and Company Australian research found that the majority of men (61%) feel that the lack of women’s progress is due to women having competing and conflicting priorities between work and family, in
contrast only 22% or women agree (Sanders et al., 2011). The problem is that the men making those assumptions are predominantly the decision-makers when it comes to women’s progression opportunities (Hoobler et al., 2014).

The second, descriptive bias (Bornstein et al., 2012), concerns assumptions about how women will behave because they are mothers. In this scenario, women’s actions that affirm motherhood stereotypes (e.g. absences from the workplace, mistakes) tend to be noticed, remembered, and used to draw conclusions, while behaviour that is inconsistent with those stereotypes tends to be overlooked or forgotten (working late, successes). Bornstein et al. (2012) found that this leads to women’s successes being attributed to transient, external conditions (good luck) while men’s successes are attributed to reliable, internal causes (talent). This phenomenon is consistent with theory about status beliefs where the successes of high-status people (men) are likely to be attributed to talent and their errors to external circumstances beyond their control, while the reverse is true for low-status people (women) (Foschi, 2000; Ridgeway, 2001; Williams, 2003).

This phenomenon was revealed in recent research into the differences in bonus payments for men and women executives in the United Kingdom. The worst performing companies paid men bonuses of £18,000 per annum and the top performing companies paid £110,000 (Kulich, Trojanowski, Ryan, Alexander Haslam, & Renneboog, 2011). The range for women, however, was £32,000 to £36,000. The researchers concluded that there was considered to be no relationship between company performance and leadership if a woman was in charge.

Furthermore, a study by Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, and Xu (2002) showed that, although businesswomen are seen to be just as competent as businessmen, “housewives” are grouped together with the most stigmatised in the community including (in the words of the researchers) the elderly, blind, retarded, and disabled. Consistent with expectation states theory which explains inequality based on status characteristics (Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zeldtich, 1977; Berger, Rosenholz, & Zeldtich, 1980), motherhood appears to reduce women’s status, leading to the perception that mothers are less competent (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). This may explain why evaluators expected mothers applying for jobs to be less competent (Correll et al., 2007).

Additionally there is a dichotomy that affects women’s decisions about paid work and mothering (Dillaway & Pare, 2008; Johnston & Swanson, 2004). The traditional role of motherhood is that they are at home in the private rather than the public sphere
A “good” mother is always present, at home and giving her full attention and time to child care, whereas working mothers who prioritise paid work over care-giving are by definition not good mothers. Society only allows for two alternatives. Women are either mothers or workers; at home or at work, but not both (Johnston & Swanson, 2004).

2.6.3 **Do women have to choose between motherhood and a career?**

Despite legislation, policies, and practices designed to create more family-friendly workplaces, some women may feel they have to choose between motherhood and a career. Australian research by Simpson, Ross-Smith, and Lewis (2010) found that a number of female senior executives interviewed contended that they chose to rule out motherhood, because they felt it was incompatible with a demanding and successful career. Furthermore, research by Torchia, Calabrò, and Huse (2011), found Australian women managers were twice as likely as their male counterparts to have no children.

There has been much contemporary debate about the choices of women to stay at home versus remaining in the workforce (Dillaway & Pare, 2008; Reid Boyd, 2002) and unfortunately, these choices may draw criticism from other women, described as the mommy/mother wars (Fox, 2012; Johnston & Swanson, 2004; Peters, 2008). According to Fox (2012) those women who regret not having children may feel they gave up a great deal to reach the top and resent other women “having it all”. Whereas those who did not want children may feel resentful of mothers seeking special treatment in the workplace (e.g. paid maternity leave, flexibility) as this reinforces traditional stereotypes. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that family responsibilities do not last forever and 79% of women aged 25-54 working full-time do not have any children under 12 years of age (Optimiss Consulting, 2013).

2.6.4 **The balancing act**

For those women who want to “have it all”, balancing career aspirations with family responsibilities appears to be one of the biggest challenges, and some successful women face a wrenching decision of having to choose between demanding careers and intensive family lives, a dilemma described by Blair-Loy (2006) as “competing devotions”. Having children necessitates taking at least some time out of the workforce. The age of first-time mothers has been increasing in past decades (Day, Lancaster, & Huang, 1997; Eldridge, Sedgwick, & Cotter, 2017; Laws, Abeywardana, Walker, & Sullivan, 2007), with the highest rate now in women aged 30-34 years (Australian
Bureau of Statistics, 2016), an age which often coincides with peak career development years.

Figure 9. Trend in age of first-time mothers in Australia. (Researcher’s own graph. Data sources: Bacchi, 1985; Day et al., 1997; Eldridge et al., 2017; Laws et al., 2007)

While there is a social trend for women to marry later (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017c), other reasons for delaying childbirth are not only for women to be more financially secure (Taniguchi, 1999; Wilde, Batchelder, & Ellwood, 2010), but also to accumulate more skills and work experience before taking time off (Hammarberg & Clarke, 2005; Lemoine & Ravitsky, 2015). The timing of childbearing has an impact on women’s wages, with those who delayed childbearing until after 28 years of age being better off, related to their accumulated work experience (Taniguchi, 1999), an effect that was confirmed by Wilde et al. (2010). However, the limitation on women’s biological childbearing years makes it impossible for most women to make it to the pinnacle of their careers before having children, no matter how hard they try. In fact, a survey of Australian women seeking in vitro fertilisation found that they were more likely to have a tertiary degree, and were more likely to be employed in the highest levels of occupation classification – managers, professionals or associate professionals (Hammarberg & Clarke, 2005) so it may be that delaying childbirth in order to build a career is not without its costs.
While it is possible that senior women may choose to take less time off than the average 32 weeks (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013), with the current fertility rate of 1.8 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016), most women will need to take more than one period of maternity leave from the workplace. These times away from the workplace can result in significant interruptions in women’s career trajectories (Hewlett & Luce, 2005) and solutions need to be found to keeping women linked to the workplace during these times (Vencat, 2006). Remaining childless is still a minority decision in Australia, but despite this reality, women may face potential career penalties when they take time off to have children (Taniguchi, 1999; Watson, 2010).

Once women are back at work after a period of maternity leave, they are often faced with the “second shift” (Hochschild, 1989) which describes the work performed at home on housework and caring responsibilities in addition to women’s paid work. This is particularly relevant, as having children has been found to increase the gender divisions of labour in Australia (Craig, 2007), with women performing the bulk of the unpaid work at home and men doing more paid work (Craig & Bittman, 2008; Craig & Mullan, 2011; Kotila, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Kamp Dush, 2013; Wood & Jogulu, 2006). This is in contrast to countries like Sweden where having children does not change the gender division of labour (Dribe & Stanfors, 2009). In Australia, this “double burden” was described as a major issue in the Government’s 1992 “Half-way to Equal” report (Australian Government, 1992), but even today, women still spend twice as much time as men on caring for children and domestic duties (Argyrous et al., 2016; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017b; Schulte, 2014).

Researchers found that dual-income couples tend to negotiate more over domestic duties (Carlson & Hans, 2017) and as women take on more senior roles and become “breadwinners”, this division of labour starts to shift back a little (Lyonette & Crompton, 2015). Additionally, outsourcing childcare and other domestic duties can be a successful way to reduce the demands of the “second shift” (Hochschild, 1989) and reduce tension between couples (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009) and has been shown to narrow the gender gap (Craig, Perales, Vidal, & Baxter, 2016).

Recent studies have also examined the importance of encouraging managers to display support for working parents (Jogulu & Wood, 2011; Ladge, Humberd, & Eddleston, 2018) as women are more likely to leave if there is insufficient support for family-work balance (Singh, Zhang, Wan, & Fouad, 2018). Additionally, Fritz and Van Knippenberg
(2018) found that the initiatives that support work-life balance such as flexible workplace arrangements, onsite childcare, and leave of absence arrangements can increase leadership aspirations for both men and women. The authors suggested that this is particularly important for women as they carry a higher caregiver burden.

Flexibility has been found to be key to women remaining attached to the workplace after the birth of their first child (Argyrous et al., 2016) and can also help senior women manage the multiple demands placed on them at work and at home. The Fair Work Act \textit{(Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth))} provides Australian employees the right to request flexible work arrangements such as part-time work or job sharing, altered working hours and different work locations (e.g. working from home) (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2018). Making flexible work arrangements available has been identified as a key strategy in reaching parity in senior leadership in the public sector (Baird et al., 2014; Stewman, Yamagata, & Dodge, 2000) and yet a 2015 report for Chief Executive Women produced by Bain and Company found that less than 50% of Australian organisations offer flexible policies (Sanders, Zeng, Hellicar, & Fagg, 2015). However the report found that those companies that are embracing flexibility are reaping the rewards, such as Telstra’s “All Roles Flex” program which has resulted in higher rates of retention than attrition for female employees and more than 90% of women returning from parental leave (Sanders et al., 2015). Additionally, Caltex’s reward of 3% bonus per quarter in order to help with childcare costs for primary caregivers who return from parental leave has seen a 25% increase in retention which covers the cost of the program (Han, 2015).

Unfortunately, recent data shows that many Australian women find it is not worth working more than three days per week because the additional cost of childcare outstrips their earnings, even for higher income-earners (Kitney, 2018).

Early studies found that women who work part time are considered less competent that women who work full time (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). More recent research from Ernst and Young, however, demonstrated that women in flexible roles may be the most productive members of the Australian workforce (Poyton & Rolland, 2013). The researchers found that women in flexible roles waste just 11.1% of time at work, versus the average for all workers of 14.5%, which may translate into an unrecognised productivity benefit to employers.

Some women also face significant bias due an incompatibility between the so called “ideal worker” (Williams, 2000), seen as always available for work, and the ideal
mother, seen as always available for her children (Kobrynowicz & Biernat, 1997). While Travis (2005) says that a true business need for “full-time face-time” may not be justifiable, an ideal still exists that this way of working is necessary for career advancement. In fact Rogier and Padgett (2004) describes this phenomena as the “flexibility stigma”. Attitudes towards flexible workplaces will have to change though, since Sanders et al. (2015) found that what Millennial workers want most is flexibility, and Babani (2015), the ex-head of H.R. at ANZ, claims there are “misconceptions around presenteeism”, such as that “flex employees lack commitment” or that it “is only for junior people”.

However flexible work can come at a cost for women who reduce their office face-time as they may miss out on informal networking opportunities (Kalysh et al., 2016) and since they are less visible within the organisation, they may be less likely to be considered for senior roles (Maruyama & Tietze, 2012; McDonald, Bradley, & Brown, 2008). Also when women transition to part-time work, and that includes 43% of Australian women (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015), they can be excluded from important social networks and may experience a reduction in development and promotion opportunities (Galinsky et al., 2003) which is legitimised by the work norms for professionals of working long hours and being available 24/7 (Dick, 2010), the so-called “conspicuous work” (Graham & Harris, 2015). It seems that managers may even guide women with families into part-time and other flexible work arrangements, which although appearing supportive, may in fact be detrimental to their careers (Hoobler et al., 2014). This type of benevolent sexism may limit women’s career opportunities and progress (Moya et al., 2007). Described as the “mommy track” (Hoobler et al., 2014), this path may be challenging to return from (Hewlett & Luce, 2005) and Tharenou (2005) says that what male managers should instead be doing is providing these women with more encouragement than men to help them attain their career aspirations and reach higher managerial roles.

2.7 A leader looks like a man – the male stereotypes of leadership

The motherhood stereotypes are not the only ones in existence in the workplace. Research by Koenig et al. (2011) confirms that we still associate men and male qualities with leadership and that women are seen as being less qualified in leadership roles. In fact men consider themselves more effective as leaders (Sinar, Wellins, Ray, Abel, & Neal, 2015). The stereotypes and gendered assumptions that women face can be a powerful barrier to women advancing to leadership positions since recruitment and
promotion practices are influenced by these stereotypes, often leading to women being excluded from leadership (Marshall, 1984).

As an Australian society, Piterman (2010) finds we still struggle with the idea of female authority. Women who act in ways that are inconsistent with the female stereotype can generate anger and resentment in others. While selfishness and competitiveness are expected in men, women on the other hand are expected to be selfless and nurturing (Pinto & Williams, 2008). Ambitious women have to choose between being disliked for assuming male attributes or being frustrated by accepting a weaker female stereotype (Catalyst, 2007; Pinto & Williams, 2008).

These attitudes may stem from the societal system of patriarchy and the subordination of women (Hartmann, 1976). Men traditionally controlled the efforts of women and children in the family and developed hierarchical organisation and control skills. This is consistent with Connell’s (1987, 2002, 2005, 2009) work on gender order which also helps explain the reproduction of unequal division of labour in the workplace as in the household. Consequently, in society the division of labour became hierarchical, with men at the top and women at the bottom and led to two phenomena a) the traditional division of labour, and b) hierarchical organisation and control (Hartmann, 1976).

The first phenomenon (division of labour) is likely to be the cause of horizontal segregation (Charles, 2003) where occupations typically associated with nurture, warmth and passivity are seen as feminine occupations (e.g. nurses and teachers), and occupations associated with competence, rationality, and assertiveness are often assumed to be more suited to men (e.g. doctors and lawyers) Shinar (1975). The second phenomenon (hierarchical organisation) enables the congregation of men in senior leadership roles, whether those occupations are traditionally male or traditionally female. This is known as vertical segregation (Charles, 2003).

### 2.7.1 Managers are perceived to be male

Consistent with these theories of patriarchy, early research by Schein (1973) in the United States found that male managers attributed characteristics of successful middle managers to men and found no similarity between women and managers. This belief in the male manager stereotype which led to the phrase “think manager-think male” being coined has continued to hold true, at least for male managers (Brenner, Tomkiewicz, & Schein, 1989; Schein, 1973; Schein et al., 1996). It was also confirmed to be a global
phenomenon by further research in Japan, China, U.K., U.S.A., and Germany (Schein & Mueller, 1992; Schein et al., 1996). This persistent attitude was also demonstrated in Australia (Chesterman et al., 2005). Regardless of the country and its cultural context, there was a similarly strong degree of managerial gender stereotyping by male managers. Female managers held the same views in all countries studied except the United States where men and women were seen (by female managers) to be equally likely to have the necessary management characteristics (Schein et al., 1996). Perhaps affirmative action programs in the U.S. have led to changing beliefs by women, although women’s representation at the executive management and board level is no higher than in other western countries.

These stereotypes were explored further in a study by Prime, Carter, and Welbourne (2009) of the perceptions held by senior managers and C.E.O.s about of women’s and men’s leadership effectiveness. The authors found that women were perceived as more effective at care-taking behaviours and men were perceived as more effective at taking charge and problem-solving. These perceptions may be influenced by societal attitudes which expect men to be confident, assertive and self-promoting; traits that are considered undesirable or inappropriate for women (Enloe, 2004).

Despite the persistent masculine stereotypes of leadership, however, meta-analyses have demonstrated no difference between men and women on either effectiveness (Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995), or the use of optimal styles such as transformational leadership (Eagly et al., 2003). Nevertheless, a meta-analysis of 69 studies on stereotypes in leadership by Koenig et al. (2011) found that leadership stereotypes are distinctly masculine and according to the Financial Times, nothing has changed in more recent years (Petit, 2014). Prime et al. (2009) concluded that these perceptions could undermine the ability of women to advance in organisations.

2.7.2 Women are penalised for taking on masculine leadership qualities

According to a study by Carter and Silva (2011), even when women use the same tactics as their male colleagues to get ahead, they still advance less and have slower pay growth. The stereotyping of women as communal, nurturing beings conflicts with the traditional belief that senior executives display agentic leadership traits such as assertiveness, competitiveness, independence, courage and confidence (Korabik, 1990). Once again, a double disadvantage is faced by women, for if they demonstrate agency, they are penalised for non-conformity to female gender stereotypes. Yet if they
demonstrate communal qualities, they are criticised for not being agentic enough (Carter & Silva, 2011; Catalyst, 2007).

The reason women are penalised is based on role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The apparent incongruity between leadership roles and traditional female social roles leads to women being seen less favourably than men as potential leaders and even if they display behaviour that fulfills the requirements of a leadership role, it is evaluated less favourably when performed by a woman. The consequence of this, according to Eagly and Karau (2002), is that women managers face less positive attitudes than do men, therefore it is more difficult for them to become leaders and maintain leadership positions through achievement and success.

Taking on those “masculine” leadership behaviours not only leads to negative attitudes towards women, it may also make women managers appear inauthentic. Sealy (2010) found that belief in a meritocracy at the start of women’s careers led many of them to take on the behaviours of their male colleagues, assuming that they would then be judged on the same basis of achievement as their counterparts. Later, many felt disillusioned with these choices that they felt challenged their integrity and core values. Additionally, Wittenberg-Cox (2012) suggests that many companies only promote women who adopt male styles that are recognised as “talent”. Unfortunately, she says, younger women often see these female leaders as inauthentic and poor role models, so they are de-motivated and leave. Even when women display greater self-confidence and promote themselves, research clearly demonstrates they suffer backlash for acting against traditional gender stereotypes (Rudman, 1998). Even though the descriptive elements of how women are typically perceived within gender stereotypes have changed over time with the expansion of women’s career opportunities and work roles, the prescriptive element of how women “should” and “should not” behave has remained the same (Diekman & Eagly, 2000; Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Rudman & Phelan, 2008; Spence & Buckner, 2000). This means that women who demonstrate confidence, and therefore competence (Jones & Pittman, 1982), receive a penalty for doing so in the form of social backlash from co-workers as they are not behaving as they “should” (Rudman, 1998).

Fox (2012) believed this can also lead to conflict between women. Women who behave in more feminine ways may find women who behave in more masculine ways disconcerting, and vice versa. Likewise, Fox found that women who do not want to
adapt their behaviour to progress in their careers may feel unsupported by successful women leaders who believe the only way to reach the top is by playing by men’s rules. In reality, women leaders are few and the effort they already have to put in to be perceived as competent simply may not leave them with much energy to be the sole champion of all the ambitious women below (Fox, 2012).

Women in a Western Australian study (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2015) believed that they should be recognised and rewarded for completing these assignments without needing to self-promote, and they viewed men drawing attention to their achievements as “boasting”. They also felt uncomfortable about self-promoting, especially when they believed their success was linked to team efforts. This aligns with the findings by Rosener (1990) that women’s leadership style prioritises relationships over process and transactions and encourages participation and team work, thereby enhancing people’s self-worth and therefore women would be less likely to self-promote at the expense of devaluing the team contribution. Because of these gender stereotypes women can advocate on behalf of others easily and effectively without penalty, but self-advocacy by women incurs costs (Wade, 2001).

2.7.3 Can women lead differently and still succeed?

One proposed solution to the leadership stereotype dilemma is for women managers to develop an androgynous management style that is acceptable and comfortable for both men and women in the workplace (Korabik, 1990; McGregor & Tweed, 2001; Way & Marques, 2013). Of particular interest in Schein’s early work, was the finding of certain managerial characteristics that were not consistent with the male sex role stereotype, and these areas may in fact have more acceptance for women. They were described as employee-centred behaviours, such as understanding, helpfulness, and intuition (Schein, 1973). Similarly, Rosener (1990) discussed a female “transformational” leadership style which encourages participation, team work and emotional expression, thereby enhancing people’s self-worth. This is achieved by prioritising relationships over process and transactions. Rosener (1990) argued that when organisations start to embrace these different definitions of leadership we will see the glass ceiling disappear. However, Brenner et al. (1989) believe that while we have predominantly male decision-makers at upper levels of organisations, with underlying “think manager -think male” attitudes, we will be unlikely to see women’s chances of advancing into positions of power and influence improving. The answer, they believe, is to extend the affirmative action structure that they consider has been responsible for an increase in women at the
middle management level in the U.S. yet has been unable to impact women at senior levels in organisations.

Certainly women in leadership received more attention during the rise of second-wave feminism and further agitation about equal employment opportunities (Sinclair, 2014). Much of this attention was focused on business studies of leadership (Sinclair, 2014) and the shift from the individualistic heroic model of leadership to relational post-heroic leadership styles, which although it was hoped would be advantageous for female leaders, may not be the case (Fletcher, 2004). Heroic leadership (Burns, 1979), similar to military practice, depends on having inspiring, courageous individuals at the top to make all the decisions on behalf of the rest of the organisation (Cohen, 2010; Dutton, 1996; McCrimmon, 2010). Leadership was seen as a skill that you either had, or did not (Huey & Sookdeo, 1994), and based on persistent “think-manager, think-male” stereotypes, it is likely people believed that women simply did not “have it”. Newer models of transformational leadership (Bass, 1998) in the post-heroic era recognise that in today’s increasingly fast-paced information technology and knowledge-based environments, collaboration, influence and empowerment need to take place of control (Conger, Spreitzer, & Lawler, 1999; Dutton, 1996; Huey & Sookdeo, 1994; Pearce & Conger, 2003).

It is likely that the moving away from individualistic heroic leadership to post-heroic transformational styles may be more conducive to female leadership because of McKinsey’s findings about female leaders’ strengths (Desvaux & Devillard, 2008). Ironically, it may be those same transformational leadership skills that are key to enabling C.E.O.s to engage those around them to embrace gender diversity in leadership (Kelan & Wratil, 2017) as demonstrated by contemporary Australian leaders such as Alan Joyce who is spearheading the Male Champions of Change program (Male Champions of Change, 2017).

2.7.4 Role models

Visible role models can play an important part in the development of women’s careers (Ehrich, 2008; Singh, Vinnicombe, & James, 2006) however the scarcity of positive female role models (Piterman, 2010) can discourage capable women from considering leadership roles and pursuing promotions (Baird et al., 2014; Coffman & Neuenfeldt, 2014; Wheeler & Sojo, 2016), or from accepting international assignments which can be an important pre-requisite for some executive leadership roles (Dunlea, Sojo, Thiel, &
Westbrook, 2015). While some research suggests the comparison with highly successful role models can have a negative impact on women who feel they cannot live up to such expectations (Heilman & Eagly, 2008; Hoyt & Simon, 2011; Parks-Stamm, Heilman, & Hearns, 2008; Rudman & Phelan, 2010), the bulk of research suggests that women are inspired by being exposed to female role models who demonstrate success is attainable (Asgari, Dasgupta, & Gilbert Cote, 2010; Asgari, Dasgupta, & Stout, 2012; Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004; Gibson, 2004; Simon & Hoyt, 2013; Singh, Bains, & Vinnicombe, 2002), and that such role models can help women develop a “positive leader identity” that can increase their motivation to advance to leadership roles (Karelaia & Guillén, 2014).

Unfortunately many mid-career women are unable to identify suitable role models (Liff & Ward, 2001; McCarthy, 2004), particularly those who are working part-time to balance family responsibilities (Blackwell, 2001; Durbin & Tomlinson, 2014) and organisations often fail to highlight examples of leaders who are balancing work and personal responsibilities due to the persistence of the ideal worker norm (Acker, 1990; Reid, 2012). Nevertheless, role modelling of flexible work and openness about family and other commitments has been found to have a positive effect in organisations (Baird, Williamson, & Heron, 2012) and has reduced the bias against those who seek flexible work (Munsch, Ridgeway, Williams, Correll, & Kelly, 2014). It is important therefore, that flexible arrangements are role modeled by both female and male senior managers (Baird et al., 2014).

2.8 The role of gender in today’s society

A distinction needs to be made between the term “sex” which is used to describe the physical and anatomical differences between men and women, and “gender” which is used to describe the socially formed feminine and masculine ways of behaving (Deaux, 1985; Halpern, 2012; Holmes, 2007; Unger, 1989). The society in which we live shapes men’s and women’s lives, and Holmes (2007) describes gender both as something we do and something that is done to us by society. The structures through which gender is “done to us” include culture, the workplace, unpaid work in the home, sexuality, violence, and the state (Walby, 1986, 1990). Similarly, Connell (2002) describes these structures as power, production, emotions and the symbolic, where “production” normally translates to the paid workplace (Martin, 2003). There has been much debate over the years about differences in the genders including in popular tomes such as “Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus” (Gray, 1993). Many neuroscientific investigations over the years have attempted to demonstrate a biological origin for those
differences and with the benefit of hindsight, most have been debunked as attempts to explain gender stereotypes that are not scientifically justified (Fine, 2010). Most recently, the largest single brain-imaging study to date did find some gender-specific variances in structure and functionality of women’s and men’s brains, but overall it found more similarities than differences (Ritchie et al., 2018). While this work is of great scientific interest, given the complex social environment we live in, the question of whether these patterns mean anything in relation to differences in behaviour and intelligence between men and women remain unanswered (Price, 2017). In fact, researchers have recently found there is an unexplained paradoxical effect of personality differences between men and women being greater in more gender equal countries (Mac Giolla & Kajonius, 2018). Perhaps Halpern (2012) is closer to the truth when she says “The role of culture is not zero. The role of biology is not zero” (Goldman, 2017, 2018).

2.8.1 How different are men and women?

While some biological and physical differences between the sexes do exist, these differences do not explain the socially constructed gender differences which have led to the oppression of women. In fact, the arguments used in the past to justify the inferiority of women are not only baseless, they are illogical and irrational.

In Western society, women’s bodies and their reproductive capacities were thought to be closer to nature and women were therefore deemed incapable of reason and unfit to be citizens (Pateman, 1988). Women were long denied the right to education and the right to vote and relegated to an inferior social status, because of this supposed lack of rationality (Bordo, 1986; Pateman, 1988).

Likewise, in the nineteenth century, it was thought that women should not be allowed to attend university because their reproductive systems were not suited to serious intellectual thinking and the mental strain could make them infertile (Delamont, 1996). Scientists of the time also regarded male intellectual superiority as an established fact (Shields, 1982) and scientific findings were invariably interpreted in ways that would confirm what they wanted to believe, that men were more intelligent (Figes, 1986; Schiebinger, 1989).

While there is some biological basis to men’s superior strength, Millett (1970) dismisses the idea that this is what has created male supremacy. She argues that the power relationships between men and women that oppress women are socially constructed and
reinforced by myths about women’s bodily weakness. In any case, as Millett points out, physical strength is no longer relevant within today’s society.

Contrary to Holmes’ assertion about the distinction between biological “sex” and socially constructed “gender”, Freud (1973) believed that gender was firmly determined by the physical characteristics of sex, specifically whether or not a penis was present. Perhaps a product of his time, Freud assumed the penis was obviously better and believed that women would, of course, recognise their sexual organs to be inferior (Holmes, 2007). The absence of a penis meant being feminine and accepting an inferior place in society. Freud believed that women who behaved like men needed therapy to cure their penis envy and form a feminine identity.

While Barrett (1988) asserts that Freud believed in superiority of the actual penis, Lacan (1968) and Mitchell (1975) suggest that it is the ideas about the penis, rather than the penis itself that are important. The phallus is a symbol of the value society places on the male gender, and the power and privilege inherited by those who have one. Therefore, when developing our masculinity or femininity, we learn that identifying as masculine will earn privilege and that being a women requires acceptance of some level of social inferiority (Lacan, 1968; Mitchell, 1975).

Rather than a deviation away from the male normality, (Chodorow, 1999) discussed an alternative view about how children develop their view of gender. Boys realise that being masculine means being different from their mother, while girls realise they are like their mother and that being feminine is associated with their mother’s role as a mother. Chodorow believes that girls learn that most importantly, being feminine means taking care of others. This idea is important when considering the fact that nurturing and caring for others is often unpaid or lowly paid work (Harrington & Jolly).

### 2.8.2 Patriarchy and the gender order

A wide body of research suggests that for women, difference equals disadvantage, and that gender is a form of social inequality (Holmes, 2007). It is not difference in itself that is the problem, but the fact that under patriarchy women’s assumed difference is considered inferior (Holmes, 2007), with society valuing men, their bodies and behaviour more highly than women. This is demonstrated in a pivotal study of the differences between men and women by Mead (1962) who argues that regardless of what ideas a particular culture has about the tasks men and women should do, whatever
the men do is always valued more highly than what the women do. This finding highlights an important incongruity between the physical characteristics of sex and those of society imposed gender. For example, in western society, men may have been more highly valued for doing the heavier, more physical tasks that their stronger physique lends itself to, while in many African cultures, the physical labour and heavy lifting that women do is not considered as important than the less strenuous tasks normally performed by men (Oakley, 1985).

Patriarchy is thought to operate through ideology such as legend and religion; establishments such as family, education and work; and physical force such as domestic violence and rape (Millett, 1970). While the level of women’s oppression may vary depending on factors such as class and race, Millet argues that all women face oppression by men, emphasised by the fact that sex and violence can be used by men to control women of a higher status.

Stoltenberg (1991) adds that while penises exist, the “male sex” does not. Although he uses the term “sex”, Stoltenberg essentially means the socially constructed or political entity, in other words, “gender”. He says that it is through “force and sexual terrorism” (Stoltenberg, 1991, p. 3) that the male gender thrives and he likens the idea of the male gender to the Nazi’s Arayan race whose membership was constructed as superior and all others were considered inferior. Consequently, being a man means subordinating women.

The concept of hegemonic (ruling or dominant in a political or social context) masculinity (Connell, 1987, 2002, 2005, 2009) explains men’s power over women in a patriarchal gender order. Its practice legitimises the asymmetrical position of masculinities and femininities in men’s dominant position and justifies the subordination of women and other gender identities (e.g. gay, transsexual) which society may perceive as “feminine”. This leads to a social hierarchy and a form of social organisation that also influences the workplace (Acker, 1990) where the gender order creates an expectation that women’s role is to “help” men in the workplace, including subtle roles such as “note-taking” in meetings. The pattern of gender relations within an organisation is known as a “gender regime” (Connell, 2006) and involves the gender division of labour; gender power relations; emotion and human relations; and gender culture and symbolism (Connell, 2002). Organisations and leadership are structured to maintain a gender order where masculinities receive privilege including through
administrative processes and “merit-based” principles and practices which, rather than being neutral, are designed to “mobilise masculine bias” (Burton, 1989). Similarly, Acker (1990, 2006) argues that organisational processes, language and symbols contain deeply embedded gender assumptions that devalue women. Additionally, Gherardi and Poggio (2001) find that in accepting that women are deficient in the masculine workplace and focusing on “fix the women” (Bowles et al., 2007, p. 85) strategies reproduces the gender order that maintains masculine hegemony both within the workplace and beyond.

Pocock (2003, p. 241) argues that the gender order in Australian society is “more masculinist than many other industrialised countries, and the Work/Care regime, which is partially shaped by this gender order, reflects the masculinist legacy”. This results in women taking on more of the caring responsibilities within the family, and Australian research by Argyrous et al. (2016) finds that a gender order is established after the birth of a couple’s first child, particularly around worktime decisions.

This gender order may lead to women sacrificing their careers for their male partner’s and becoming a “marginalised carer”. It may also create a barrier for women, particularly as the workplace has been built around the “ideal worker” who is seen as always available for work because [he] has no responsibility for housework and childcare (Williams, 2000). He takes no time off for childbearing or childrearing and not only works full-time but is also available for overtime, a role that many men find unsatisfying as parents. Williams (2000) finds that the workplace design around the male “ideal worker norm” may constitute discrimination against women and proposes that workplaces should be flexible in order to deal with this dilemma. Additionally, Lyonette and Crompton (2015) suggests that women may be contesting the gender order and expecting equal sharing of domestic work with their male partners, and that higher qualified women have higher expectations of equality in this regard.

2.8.3 The politics of gender

In the 1970s, drawing on Marxist ideas, feminists focused on the family as the main structure by which women are oppressed by men (Barrett, 1988; Barrett & MacIntosh, 1982) with capitalism relying on women’s unpaid household labour. Women’s primary task is to create use-value within the home and paid work is thought to be secondary and inconsequential, whereas men’s primary task is to produce goods with exchange-value (Benston, 1969). Because capitalists benefit from women remaining tied to the home,
women will be encouraged to continue doing this unpaid work which Benston says is fundamental to women’s oppression. She also maintains that women face the dual burden of performing two jobs and that freedom from housework is crucial to their ability to perform optimally in the workplace. Subsequent research by Hochschild (1989) highlighted the burden of working women’s dual responsibilities and given that women continue to carry the majority of the burden of child-rearing and housework in our society work (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017b; Baxter, Hewitt, & Western, 2005; Curtis et al., 2012; Weston, Stanton, Qu, & Soriano, 2001), Benston’s view is not unreasonable.

Benston’s conclusion is not inconsistent with the view of the Early Marxists, such as Engels, who claimed that women were not oppressed within the working class (Hartmann, 1981), therefore women’s participation in the labour market, becoming capital producers as opposed to domestic workers, would be a key to their emancipation. This is a perspective that has made its way into second wave Feminism which also considers the view of traditional Western male/female relationships and claims that men have a vested interest in the subjugation of women.

Zaretsky had a slightly different view, believing that women work for the capitalist system rather than for men (Hartmann, 1981). Therefore women became slaves of capitalism and not subjects of male dominated society. The separation of home from the workplace and the privatisation of housework makes it appear like women are working for their male counterparts when in actuality, they are all a part of the capitalist system working for capitalist society. Therefore, the end of capitalism would cause the end of oppression of both men and women. This view, however, completely ignores the inequality between men and women in the workplace and fails to recognise how women are oppressed by the system of inequality compared to the system of capitalism.

As well as providing unrecognised, unpaid domestic labour, women also provide a reserve of cheap labour which can stand in for men at times of shortage (e.g. during World War II). When they are no longer needed, they are expected to return to the family home. But women usually do different jobs from men, not just stand in for them (Beechey, 1978). Jobs that are considered to be women’s work have lower status and command lower average wages (Armstrong, Cummins, Hastings, & Wood, 2005; Charles & Grusky, 2005; Levanon et al., 2009). Holmes (2007) compares two examples of traditional women’s and men’s work (nursing and policing). She argues that the jobs
are very similar in many aspects, including the level of education, skills and training required to deal with people and crises. Both involve unsociable hours, stress and danger. Despite the Equal Pay Acts of the 1960s-70s, however, the primarily male police force continued to be paid higher wages than the female dominated nursing profession, triggering appeals for equal pay for work of equal value (Armstrong et al., 2005; Gunderson, 1994).

While Marxist theory may go some way to explaining women’s oppression, it does not explain why women are the domestic labourers, or why they should be the reserve workforce (Jackson, 1998). For those who view women as a class, society is seen as not simply capitalist but also patriarchal. Delphy (1984) argued that the relationship between husbands and wives is exploitive, that rather than paying their wives a percentage of their income for the domestic labour they perform, men only give them enough “housekeeping” money for essentials. Patriarchy is therefore a system that subordinates women as a class, exploited primarily through the financial basis of domestic labour by men as unpaid housewives. “Within the family in our society, women are dominated in order that their work may be exploited and because their work is exploited” (Delphy & Leonard, 1992, p18).

Rather than seeing women as a class versus the materialist/Marxist view of gender, there have been attempts to connect the two ideas and see patriarchy as existing within capitalism in the labour market (Hartmann, 1981; Walby, 1986). Whichever underlying theory is favoured, it is clear that women remain oppressed within our society and although gender is something that is not only done to us, but is also something we do, the freedom women have and choices available to them are limited and are constrained by the level of privilege their class, ethnicity and age affords them (Holmes, 2007).

2.8.4 Feminist theory

Feminist theory examines and attempts to explain the way in which women are subordinated to men and considered to have less value, and to propose strategies to address the associated gender imbalance of privilege and power and ameliorate the conditions in which women live and work, through activism and action (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2013). While feminist theories differ based on the underlying assumptions that are used to explain and address the gender imbalance, they have in common, the belief that women are discriminated against because of their sex, women have specific needs that are unrecognised and unfulfilled, and that to satisfy these needs would
require radical social, economic and political change (Delmar, 1994). Feminist theory is
diverse and resists neat categorisation (Tong, 2014), however feminist theories can be
loosely arranged into the historical periods that categorise the changes in the women’s
movement and thought (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2013).

2.8.4.1 First-wave feminism

1792 marks the first significant published text that attempts to describe and
comprehensively analyse women’s political and social position of the time,
“Vindication of the Rights of a Woman” (Wollstonecraft, 1792). The first wave of
feminism saw the nineteenth century call for inclusion of women in public life,
demanding the vote, property rights and admission to university and the professions
(Rendall, 1985). New Zealand was the first country to grant all women the right to vote
in 1893, followed by South Australia in 1894. In 1902 Australian women were granted
the right to vote in federal elections and Australia became the first nation to permit
women to stand for parliament. The first wave of feminism can be considered to last
until around 1920 when suffrage was finally achieved in the United States (Kolmar &
Bartkowski, 2013).

2.8.4.2 Second-wave feminism

During the 1920-1960s feminist activity was subdued, however, around 50 years after
most Western women gained the vote, it became apparent that political participation had
not brought women full equality, giving rise to second-wave feminism (Holmes, 2007).
The second wave was inspired by the publication of two important feminist works, “The
Second Sex” by Simone de Beauvoir (1953) followed by “The Feminine Mystique”
(Friedan, 1963), which broadened the debate to a wider range of issues including
sexuality, family, the workplace, reproductive rights and legal inequalities and led to the
activism of the women’s movement. The demands that Western feminist groups had in
common were equal education, equal employment opportunity, equal pay, access to 24-
hour childcare, and access to free contraception and abortion (e.g. Dann, 1985; Tanner,
1971; Wandor, 1990). The contraceptive pill became available in the 1960s and women
also fought for abortion rights. Feminists argued that for equality to be achieved,
women must be able to control their own fertility and indeed have the right to control
their own bodies (Firestone, 1972; Greer, 1970; Millett, 1970). Attention was drawn to
domestic violence and marital rape with the establishment of rape crisis and women’s
shelters, as well as changes in custody and divorce laws. Feminists also insisted on
access to 24-hour free childcare because although fathers were becoming more involved in
caring for children, women usually retain the ultimate responsibility. Men on the
other hand receive considerable benefit in modern-day Western societies from being
relatively free of the expectation and the work of caring (Holmes, 2007).

During this time, theory from academic women’s studies and debate emerged about
whether feminism’s political goal was gender equality (where men and women are
treated equally), or gender equity (where the differences between women and men are
valued and taken into account). Nevertheless, these seemingly contradictory arguments
have been used successfully by feminists to secure advancements for women (Bacchi,
1990). For example, the argument for educational equality has concentrated on how
women and men are the same, to justify women’s right to equal educational
opportunities. However, when it comes pregnancy, feminists have argued that women
must be treated differently from men (who do not get pregnant) in order to achieve
equality (Bacchi, 1985). Finally, feminists have also argued that the differences between
women and men can create diversity of skills and perspectives to enhance political and
business activities (Bacchi, 1990).

Previously, Holmes (2007) says that most men in power had not given much thought to
the benefits of masculine privilege, but there was a backlash against feminism in the
1980s when, according to Faludi (1992), powerful men closed ranks to foster false
information in the media and in politics about the failings of feminism. This may lend
weight to Stoltenberg’s (1991) provocative view of male gender privilege, and support
Connell’s (2005) assertion that the defense of dominant forms of masculinity is
political.

The second-wave feminist era lasted until the early 1980s when opposing views of
feminists on issues such as pornography and sexuality became apparent and ushered in a
third-wave feminism era in the early 1990s.

2.8.4.3 Third-wave feminism

Third-wave feminism can be traced to Anita Hill’s televised sexual harassment
testimony in 1991 to an all-white U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, and the
corresponding article in Ms magazine called “Becoming the Third Wave” (Walker,
1992). Third-wave feminism tried to redefine what it meant to be a feminist (Evans,
2015), embracing individualism and diversity, and expanding feminism to encompass
the views of minorities who had felt excluded, such as women of colour, those with disabilities, older women, lesbians and women in the third world. The term “intersectionality”, which was coined by Crenshaw (1991) in 1989, became prominent during the third wave, describing the concept that women experience layers of oppression caused by gender, class, race and so on.

The focus was more on individual identity rather than political change, with many believing that we live in a post-feminist era where the issues have largely been resolved. This belief implies that in society and the workforce, women’s position is now about individual choices (Fox, 2012).

2.8.4.4 Fourth-wave feminism

Fourth-wave feminism is thought to have begun around 2012, emphasising the importance of feminist discourse in society and focusing on the empowerment of women through the use of the internet (Munro, 2013). As with the third wave, there continues to be an emphasis on intersectionality, but rather than individualism, the use of the internet has facilitated a global community of feminists who use social media for both discussion and activism. The internet has also created a culture in which sexism and misogyny in the media, advertising, film, and television can be “called out” and abusers of power challenged. This is particularly evident in the #MeToo movement (Chuck, 2017) which has seen the recent emergence of solidarity amongst women against sexual harassment and abuse within the workplace, and has led to women once again identifying as “feminists”.

Fourth-wave feminism also advocates for an end to violence against women, equal pay for equal work, and greater representation of traditionally marginalised groups in politics and business, and argues that society would be more equitable if policies incorporated the perspectives of all people (Munro, 2013). It aims to level the playing field and not only provide equal opportunities for girls and young women, but also enable boys and men to have greater opportunities to express themselves emotionally and become engaged as parents (Chamberlain, 2017).

2.9 The knowing-doing gap

Despite the wealth of evidence previously discussed, that demonstrates superior financial performance of companies with greater gender balance, gender diversity is still
not seen by the majority of companies as a strategic priority. There are a number of
global and Australian surveys on this issue which reveal some interesting findings.
While global research shows that belief in the benefit of gender parity in the workplace
is high for both men and women at 79% and 87% respectively (Coffman, Gadiesh, &
Miller, 2010), when it comes to accepting the connection between gender parity and
financial success, men are less likely than women to believe this to be true, at 58% and
85% respectively (Werner et al., 2010). These findings are consistent with 2013
Australian research by Bain and Company which found that 88% of both men and
women believe in the benefit of workplace gender parity, and although 76% of women
believe that it can also provide a financial advantage, only 55% of men agreed (Sanders
et al., 2013). This suggests an important segment of the business community remains
unconvinced of the business case for change and until they are persuaded, gender parity
will likely remain a moral rather than business imperative.

Nevertheless, there is strong belief that gender parity should be a critical business
imperative in Australia. Global research by Bain and Company found that 84% of
women believed that gender parity should be a strategic priority (Coffman et al., 2010).
While only 48% of men in the global survey agreed, comparable Australian research by
Bain and Company demonstrated that Australian men are more likely than their U.S. or
European colleagues to believe that gender diversity should be a strategic priority, at
71% (Sanders et al., 2013). The results for Australian women were similar to the global
research at 86%.

Unfortunately, despite the increasing level of knowledge of, and belief in the
performance benefit of diversity, only 26-28% of global companies had put gender
diversity among their top ten priorities (Coffman et al., 2010; Werner et al., 2010).
Additionally, while the introduction of A.S.X. diversity reporting requirements in 2010
has seen an increasing number of companies with gender diversity policies (KPMG,
2016), but only 23% of companies in the ASX200 linked diversity strategy to
manager’s objectives (Green, Alhadeff, Akhmetova, & Tracey, 2017) and while 85% of
men believe diversity is supported by executive and management, only 59% of women
agree (Green et al., 2017). This strongly demonstrates the existing knowing versus
doing gap for companies in relation to gender diversity.

This lack of action has meant that progress has been extremely slow with women
executives remaining a rarity in Australian corporations. As discussed earlier, this slow
progress remains despite the Financial Services Institute of Australasia finding that 71% of men believe that companies have made considerable progress and that women now have the same opportunities as men. (FINSIA, 2010). It should be pointed out that 72% of women disagreed. Men appear to be viewing this issue through rose-coloured glasses since 66% of men believe that both women and men who are suitably qualified have the same opportunities for promotion to executive positions while only 30% of women agree (Coffman et al., 2010). More recently, Green et al. (2017) found that nearly two thirds of women still feel that recruitment and advancement continue to be barriers to advancement for women, but that companies are putting relatively little effort into those areas. Of particular importance, Coffman et al.’s survey results show that most men and women believe there is equal opportunity for qualified applicants of both sexes to be recruited into roles at the junior level, at 90% and 85% respectively.

### 2.9.1 The public sector’s success

Governments have had long-held commitments to improve gender equity both through the enactment of legislation and also as an employer (Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999 (Cth); Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Amendment Act 2012 (Cth); Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth)) and most recently the Workplace Gender Equality Act (2012). Despite all the barriers to gender equity in the workplace, the Australian public sector has made significant progress. In 1995, the New South Wales Government committed to a target of 50% representation of women in full-time employment in the public sector by 2003 (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2008). By 2006 women employees represented 61% of the NSW public sector, comparing favourably with the overall figure for the state of 45%, and the proportion of senior women doubled from 16% to 33%. The Australian Public Service has reached its goal of parity with women now holding 49% of senior executive roles (Australian Public Service Commission, 2017a, 2017b). Women also hold the highest number of Australian Government board positions since public reporting began in 2011, with women holding 43% as at 30 June 2017 (Australian Government, 2017).

Some of the difference in progress is due to the Australian public sector starting to focus on gender equity earlier. Moreover, the adoption of specific programs to support diversity goals undoubtedly contributed to their success. For example, the NSW government set targets, appointed change agents, promoted learning and development opportunities, provided flexible work initiatives and reported on activities and outcomes (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2008). Nevertheless, the path in the public sector
has not been without bumps and resistance, and several studies have examined gender equity in public institutions along the way, in order to re-think Government’s approach to tackling the issue when gender equity stalled, including the gendered processes of developing policy and the gendered language of legislation (Connell, 2006; Schofield & Goodwin, 2005; Williamson, Colley, Foley, & Cooper, 2018). Importantly, Government continues to review and improve those programs (Baird et al., 2014) and to continually set new targets (Australian Government, 2017).

2.9.2 Why is it important to engage the private sector?

In the last decade, the proportion of women in senior executive and director positions has increased. Indeed, the number of ASX200 companies with no female director has decreased from 42% (EOWA, 2012) to 2.5% with just four companies holding out despite ASCI voting against them (Khadem, 2017). Nevertheless, there are still 68 ASX200 companies (34%) with just one token woman on their boards (Khadem, 2017), and ASCI is planning to review their voting policy to increase the pressure on those organisations.

The representation in senior executive positions has increased slowly with women now making up 21% of senior executive positions in the ASX200 (Chief Executive Women, 2017). Much of this gain, however, has been in functional roles such as Human Resources, Corporate Affairs and Legal, with women still holding just under 10% of C-suite positions (Chief Executive Women, 2017).

2.10 What are the solutions?

Given the level of sex discrimination and unconscious bias that still exists in the workplace, despite decades of legislation, proactive steps must be taken to ensure that change occurs. Examples of successful initiatives, such as the NSW Government’s approach for making the public sector a preferred employer for women, can provide strategies that may be applicable across other organisations. Since the fastest rates of change have happened in Europe (Curtis et al., 2012), those countries such as Norway (Storvik & Teigen, 2010) may also provide valuable ideas that could also be implemented in the Australian business environment.

2.10.1 Starting at the top

Because senior leaders play a lead role in setting organisational culture (Konrad & Linnehan, 1995; Schein, 2010), they are key to the success of any change initiative
(Gill, 2002; Graetz, 2000; Mattis, 2001) including diversity and gender equality (Dobbin & Kalev, 2007; Hitt & Keats, 1984; Jayne & Dipboye, 2004; Konrad & Linnehan, 1995; Lyness, 2002; Thomas, 2004). C.E.O.s and those at the top have a particularly crucial role to play in improving gender diversity at senior levels (Kelan & Wratil, 2017; Morrison, 1992). An increasing number of European companies have gender diversity high on the C.E.O.’s list of strategic priorities (Devillard, Graven, Lawson, Paradise, & Sancier-Sultan, 2012) and this is reflected in Australia with the growth of the “male champions of change” program (Male Champions of Change, 2017).

Leaders may be guided by change leadership frameworks (Kotter, 1996) when implementing gender diversity initiatives (Mercer, 2016; ORC Worldwide, 2008; Prime & Moss-Racusin, 2009) and linking remuneration to the success of these initiatives can have an important impact (Dobbin & Kalev, 2007; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002; Kilian, Hukai, & McCarty, 2005; Mattis, 2001; ORC Worldwide, 2008). This may be particularly important since research has found that executives are not rewarded for diversity-valuing behaviour, and women and non-white executives may in fact be punished (Johnson & Hekman, 2016). Recent research found that Fortune 500 companies with female C.E.O.s were more likely to have stronger diversity practices (Glass & Cook, 2018), however it is possible that the existence of such practices led to a female C.E.O. appointment and not the other way around. Additionally executives were judged harshly for hiring someone who looked like them except if they were a white male (Johnson & Hekman, 2016) which probably reflects stereotypes about what a leader looks like and the fact that white men are a high status group, this makes them the default for what makes someone the “best” candidate (Heilman, 1983). Therefore, in order to gain support for diversity initiatives, C.E.O.s must be able to articulate the business case as well as the commitment to fairness (Davidson, 2008; Kilian et al., 2005; Mattis, 2001; Morrison, 1992) and to be able to share personal narratives and stories (Denning, 2004; Kelan & Wratil, 2014) about why change is needed, in order to increase the emotional commitment of middle managers (Balogun, 2003; Huy, 2002; Rouleau, 2005).

2.10.2 Reporting, targets and quotas

In order for goals to be achieved, they must be measurable (Locke & Latham, 1990), and therefore a level of reporting and monitoring must take place. A key success factor of the NSW Government’s gender initiative “Making the Public Sector Work Better for
Women” was the reporting, monitoring and evaluation of progress towards the set targets at the sector and agency level. Annual reports were monitored at the highest levels by the Department of the Premier and Cabinet that in turn provided regular reports on how the initiative was being implemented to the Chief Executives Committee and published annual reports on NSW government websites (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2008; NSW Public Service Commission, 2017).

The benefits of reporting cannot be underestimated, as evidenced in the progress of women on boards in Australia since the A.S.X. introduced new reporting guidelines on progress to gender diversity policies and targets in 2011, shown in Figure 10. Closer scrutiny of the reports, however, showed that 40% of companies had no such policies or targets in place, demonstrating they have yet to consider the basic gender diversity issues and despite 60% of organisations having taken a range of actions to address gender diversity (KPMG, 2016). Nevertheless, there are signs that the impact of reporting may be starting to stall (Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2017; Heidrick & Struggles International Inc, 2016). This could be due to a supply and demand issue as unfortunately, like the Swedish example, mandatory board reporting is having less impact on women’s representation at the senior executive level (Chief Executive Women, 2017; Gould, Kulik, & Sardeshmukh, 2018), and the same gain has not been seen in the ASX300+ (KPMG Enterprise, 2017). The former Director of Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace, Helen Conway identified a significant decline in gender equality as company size decreases (EOWA, 2012).

![% women on ASX 200 boards](image_url)

The chart shows the percentage of women on ASX 200 boards from 2004 to 2018. Key milestones include:
- *1 January regulatory, in effect* (2005)
- *22 November legislation, passed* (2010)
- *AICD 30% target by 2018* (2014)
- *ASCI voting policy* (2016)

80
“What gets measured gets managed” is an important business principle, commonly attributed to Drucker (1954). This is not only standard business practice, but also applies to gender diversity initiatives (Giovannini, 2004; Priestly, 2013). The Workplace Gender Equality Agency provides toolkits to help companies set their own realistic targets (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2013) and just like other operational targets, this ensures organisations develop and resource the necessary supporting strategies and programs to enable them to achieve them (Everett, 2013). It is hardly surprising then that mandatory reporting of board diversity for Fortune 500 companies in the U.S. led to increased female representation (Sojo, Wood, Wood, & Wheeler, 2016) and in Australia, the requirement for A.S.X. listed companies to report on diversity has produced a similar outcome (KPMG, 2016). Nevertheless, the Australian Institute of Company Directors have reported that their target of 30% women by 2018 is unlikely to be achieved (Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2017) and this may also prove to be the case for Women on Boards’ target of 40% of Australian board and leadership roles to be held by women by 2025 (Women on Boards, 2018b).

Not surprisingly, KPMG Enterprise (2017) found that those companies that set measurable targets were more likely to achieve success and this was demonstrated by Westpac, reporting recently that it had met its target of 50% female representation across managerial positions (Dent, 2017a). In the public sector, the NSW government has had ambitious targets regarding gender equality for many years. In 2003 they met the target set in 1995 for women to represent 50% of full-time positions. In 2008, very specific target benchmarks were set for the public sector to achieve by 2012, in order to make further progress across target groups (women building their careers, women in senior positions, women in non-traditional occupations and all women in the public sector), in addition to reducing the gender pay gap. Additionally, each agency was asked to determine their own specific performance measures based on their size and responsibilities across recruitment (increasing the number of women applicants), development (increasing the number of women in development programs and acting in higher duties), retention (reducing turnover rates, offering flexible work arrangements
and improving return to work after maternity leave) and organisational health (improving staff survey feedback).

Importantly, the benchmark targets were underpinned by high-level, strategic 3-5 year Equal Employment Opportunity Management Plans including specific agency priorities, recommended actions and programs. For example, senior women were supported by an e-mentoring program, leadership development through coaching and executive training programs, quarterly senior women’s networking events and provision of C.E.O. Kits. Nevertheless, by 2014, the representation of women in senior leadership in NSW government had plateaued at 32%, with only modest improvement being seen in the prior five years (Baird et al., 2014). Therefore initiatives were explored to identify further improvement opportunities (Baird et al., 2014), and in 2015 the Premier’s Priority of driving public sector diversity was introduced, aiming to increase the proportion of women in senior leadership to 50% by 2025 (NSW Public Service Commission, 2017). By 2017, 37.4% of all senior leaders in the NSW Government sector were female (NSW Government, 2018).

While the NSW government has been able to improve the number of women in senior leadership through the use of targets, in Norway, the representation of women on boards was increased substantially by the introduction of legislated quotas after voluntary targets had not worked. In February 2002, the Norwegian government set a deadline of July 2005 for private listed companies to increase the proportion of women on their boards to 40% (Curtis et al., 2012). In 2003 just 9% of listed company board members in Norway were women (Wang & Kelan, 2013) and by July 2005, only 24% was achieved. Therefore, legislation was introduced in January 2006 giving companies until January 2008 to meet the quota or face fines or even closure (Storvik & Teigen, 2010). Full compliance was achieved by 2009 (Curtis et al., 2012) and the percentage of women on company boards had risen to 42% by 2012 (Korporaal, 2012). More recently, other European countries including France, Spain, Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands also introduced mandatory quotas to improve gender diversity at the board level (Bertrand, Black, Jensen, & Lleras-Muney, 2014; Boffey, 2017).

Some critics argue that quotas violate the merit principle by forcing organisations to employ women who may not be the best person for the job (Braud, 2010; Son Hing et al., 2002; Whelan & Wood, 2012), or even that quotas discriminate against men (Devine, 2017), but this ignores the significant bias that already exists in the workplace.
that prejudices the assessment of merit. Far from quotas forcing companies to take on unqualified and inexperienced female directors, Benja Stig Fagerland, who was a leading force behind the legislation passed in Norway stated that “Boards have been able to rid themselves of their weakest male directors and introduce well qualified, motivated women” (West, 2012, p. 5), and women who have joined Norwegian boards since the reform have a higher level of education than their male counterparts (Storvik, 2011). This was confirmed by recent research that found that quotas force mediocre male leaders out, increasing overall competence (Besley, Folke, Persson, & Rickne, 2017). Certainly attitudes in Norway have shifted and there is now widespread support for board quotas (Sorsa, 2016). Attitudes have also shifted in Australia over the last decade from the majority of women (58%) against quotas (Rindfleish & Sheridan, 2003), to the majority (62%) now in favour (Trinca, 2016).

The Norwegian quotas, however, have not had the same profound effect on women in senior leadership positions (Storvik & Gulbrandsen, 2016), and it may also be necessary to set targets for women in senior leadership as well as boards (Fox, 2012). While Dawson et al. (2016) agree that quotas do not address the pipeline concerns in organisations, the European debate about quotas has likely been influential in impacting the gender diversity of boardrooms globally. Nevertheless, Wang and Kelan (2013) found that Norway’s mandatory quotas can also bring a top-down change to gender diversity in organisations as demonstrated by an increase in the number of female C.E.O.s. Matsa and Miller (2011) found evidence of a correlation between higher female board representation and female executive representation which may be because women in senior roles advocate for other women (Kanter, 1977b; Srivastava & Sherman, 2015) or because it indicates to the labour market that the organisation values women (Hillman & Shropshire, 2007; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2004). However it appears that this trickle-down effect lags board representation over time (Gould et al., 2018), and in the proportion of female representation (Matsa & Miller, 2011). This may reflect the fact that moderately qualified men are seen as less risky and more likely to be selected to senior leadership than women (Van Esch, Hopkins, O'Neil, & Bilimoria, 2018) so it is more difficult for women to fill the pipeline to the top roles. Additionally, the effect is exponential, such that more significant increases in female executive representation require a greater proportion of the board to be women (Gould et al., 2018; Matsa & Miller, 2011) which may support the need for a critical mass to exert influence (Carter & Wagner, 2011; Desvaux et al., 2007; Joy et al., 2007).
In arguing for a mandated quota system, Wang and Kelan (2013) claim that a voluntary approach may not be as effective due to an enduring lack of women leaders in the employment market. Certainly, the United Kingdom’s voluntary target of 25% by 2015 (Davies, 2011, 2012) has not brought about the same pace of change as mandated quotas in countries like Norway. Indeed, Women on Boards has stated that quotas will sometimes be necessary to achieve Australian targets of 40% by 2025 (Women on Boards, 2018b).

While KPMG (2016) found that clear quantifiable targets led to better gender diversity, Sojo et al. (2016) concluded that targets need to come with accountability and some form of enforcement. The Male Champions of Change have encouraged organisations to implement “targets with teeth” (Male Champions of Change, 2017, p. 6) and when it comes to setting corporate goals, it may be useful to remember that “what gets rewarded gets done” (LeBoeuf, 1985) and ensure that the targets are tied to the remuneration of the executives.

Additionally, in order to avoid backlash from men who think that quotas that support women are “anti-men” (Riordan, 2017), or backlash from women who feel that assistance is not required and undermines confidence in women’s capabilities (Foges, 2018), programs may be framed around “inclusion” rather than “diversity” (Oswick & Noon, 2012) to ensure both men and women are equally represented. This may resonate better with current discourses of social fairness (Kirton, Greene, & Dean, 2007) at a time in history when Australia’s parliament has legislated for marriage equality (Karp, 2017).

2.10.3 Human Resource processes for selection, development and promotion

There is clear evidence of gender bias in recruitment, development and promotion decisions, with both male and female managers continuing to favour men over equally qualified women (Koch et al 2015). Female students have also been evaluated as less competent and less hirable than male students with identical applications (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). Evidence in many different contexts shows that bias in the recruitment process starts with the first assessment of resumes (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2003; Booth & Leigh, 2010; Oreopoulos, 2009).

There are a number of strategies that have been shown to reduce bias including anonymising resumes, comparing resumes in pairs or groups and attempting to conduct
blinded recruitment processes (Behaghel, Crépon, & Le Barbanchon, 2011; Bohnet, van Geen, & Bazerman, 2012; Garner, 2014; Goldin & Rouse, 2000; Linos & Reinhard, 2015; Smith, 2016; Towell, 2016). It is also recommended that those involved in the recruitment process be trained on unconscious bias (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2013; Linos & Reinhard, 2015; Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2014a). Although gender-related anti-bias training has shown positive outcomes in some research (Carnes et al., 2015; Devine et al., 2017), other studies suggest that there may be unconscious resistance to such training (Kawakami, Dovidio, & van Kamp, 2005; Linos & Reinhard, 2015) and that it can even have the opposite effect unless conducted carefully (Duguid & Thomas-Hunt, 2015). The same dilemma can result from reviewers deliberately hunting for gender clues in anonymised resumes (Foley & Williamson, 2018).

A number of organisations are providing toolkits to assist companies to reduce unconscious bias in the selection process (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2013; Institute of Leadership & Management, 2011; VIC Government, 2017; Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2014a) and find that one of the best ways is to standardise the recruitment process as much as possible to focus solely on merit. This includes the use of structured interviews (Huffcutt, Conway, Roth, & Klehe, 2004; Schmidt & Zimmerman, 2004), limiting rapport building (Levashina, Hartwell, Morgeson, & Campion, 2014), and making decisions based on assessment scores rather than who the manager likes better (Kahneman, 2012). Not only are gender balanced selection panels important in reducing unconscious bias, (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2013; Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2014a), ensuring there is a gender balanced candidate pool is also critical and there are a number of ways to improve job advertisements to appeal to women and not just men (Gaucher, Friesen, & Kay, 2011; Gee, 2014; Uhlmann & Cohen, 2005).

While it has been common for organisations to provide programs to support women’s development, the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2014a) cautions against this as it could unintentionally imply that women are not as capable as men and need extra help to reach senior positions. Their competence could even be called into question if they are promoted after being part of a women’s development program (Kulich, Ryan, & Haslam, 2007). Additionally it could be seen as unfair if it is not available to all employees (Kravitz, 2008). More recently, therefore, programs have been designed to be inclusive with an equal mix of men and women.
Another element of the H.R. processes is ensuring pay equity. One of the most challenging aspects of pay equity can be the pay bands which tend to reward longevity and continuity, and companies may find a gender divide within the pay band for a given role (Fox, 2017). The Workplace Gender Equality Agency recommends conducting pay audits, and found that of those companies that conducted an audit, 51% subsequently took action to reduce the gap that was highlighted as a result (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2015). It seems that what gets measured does get done.

2.10.4 Mentoring

Mentoring is considered an essential career-enhancing activity for any ambitious manager (Friday, Friday, & Green, 2004) and can have an important impact on career progression for both men and women (Carter & Silva, 2010). However it has been reported that men are more likely to advance irrespective of mentoring support (Bahniuk, Dobos, & Kogler Hill, 1989; Burt, 1998; Hill, Bahniuk, Dobos, & Rouner, 1989; Schor, 1997; Tharenou, 2005) whereas women need mentoring more than men to progress (Metz & Tharenou, 2001; Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002) because they face more barriers to advancement (McKeen & Bujaki, 2007; Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989; Tharenou, 1997, 1999; Wallace, 2001). Therefore mentoring was promoted early on as an essential tool for women’s career development (Burke & McKeen, 1990b; Collins, 1983; Dodgson, 1986; Missirian, 1982; Ragins, 1999b; Ragins & Cotton, 1999), and has been the subject of considerable research since (Carter & Silva, 2010; McKeen & Bujaki, 2007; Neal, Boatman, & Miller, 2013).

The lack of availability of mentoring for women has also been identified as an obstacle for women aspiring to senior leadership (Foust-Cummings, Dinolfo, & Kohler, 2011) and research findings demonstrate that it is more challenging for women to find informal mentors than it is for their male counterparts (Carter & Silva, 2010; Neal et al., 2013). In fact women were traditionally socially excluded from such relationships (Hill et al., 1989; Marshall, 1985; Missirian, 1982). Kanter (1977a) found that male managers were likely to sponsor and mentor other men and not women, and used the term “homosocial reproduction” to describe the practice of men in powerful positions choosing protégés in their own likeness to preserve the status quo (Missirian, 1982). This means powerful men at the top of organisations sponsor other men which reinforces a gendered reproduction of white male leadership (Colley, 2002). Indeed in modern Australia, there are more Chief executives and chairs of ASX200 companies called Peter, David or Michael than there are women (Wahlquist, 2015) and despite this
group of straight, white, able-bodied 40-69 year old men making up only 8.4% of our population, they represent the majority of Australian leadership (Liveris, 2017).

While there are some male leaders who sponsor women (Valerio & Sawyer, 2016), for most women being denied access to this type of patronage means that they fail to receive the considerable benefits their male colleagues enjoy, including better career outcomes (Ehrich, 2008) and women have more limited opportunities to acquire sponsors who can assist their career development (Anderson, 2005). Also it seems that men have a tendency to seek mentoring out more often, and indeed offer to be mentors more readily, whereas women typically require more encouragement (Laff, 2009). Therefore, Neal et al. (2013) advocate formal mentoring programs to enable women to find mentors more easily.

Female mentors were found to have the biggest impact, but unfortunately due to the low numbers of women at the top, there is a lack of female mentors and role models. While criticism is sometimes leveled at senior women for not mentoring other women in organisations, according to Fox (2012), there is no evidence that women are less likely than men to help others. Although stereotypes of women competing with each other have emerged over the years, contrary to the “Queen Bee syndrome” (Drexler, 2013; Staines, Tavris, & Jayaratne, 1974), rather than viewing other women in the organisation as rivals, women are in fact more likely to sponsor each other and assist other women to progress (Neal et al., 2013). According to Neal et al. (2013), the majority of women (74%) do this because they have experienced benefits from receiving mentoring themselves. Indeed Dinolfo, Silva, and Carter (2012) found that 65% of women who received support for their own career development support the development of other talent in turn, whereas only 56% of men do so. Of those women mentors, 73% are developing women compared to just 30% of men (Dinolfo et al., 2012).

While it is considered essential for development, evidence has failed to demonstrate compelling evidence that mentoring can have a strong influence on increasing the numbers of women in senior leadership roles (Carter & Silva, 2010; Foust-Cummings et al., 2011; Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). The reasons for this may be two-fold: firstly, due to gender stereotypes, women are more likely to be offered psychosocial mentoring rather than career-related sponsorship, and secondly they are more likely to be paired with a less senior mentor whereas for men it is the other way around (Downing, Crosby,
Another important factor to consider is that due to family responsibilities, women may have less time available to commit to networking activities (Linehan & Scullion, 2008). Certainly a 2010 Insync survey found that to be successful, mentoring needs to focus on career pathways and finding opportunities, rather than mentoring as a sounding board which holds women back (Morley, 2010).

Kram (1983, 1985) described mentoring as having two key facets: psychosocial and career development and this model is widely recognised and confirmed by further research (Noe, 1988; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). The psychosocial or emotional support function of mentoring helps to enhance self-confidence (Burke & McKeen, 1990a, 1996; Kram & Bragar, 1992), which may be a key benefit for women both inside and outside the workplace (Anderson, 2005), especially given the lack of self-confidence previously discussed. Kram (1983, p. 614) described the psychosocial functions provided by mentors as “those aspects of the relationship that primarily enhance sense of competence, clarity of identity, and effectiveness in the managerial role”. Kram (1983) defined four aspects of psychosocial support: role modelling; acceptance and confirmation; counseling; and friendship. It is maintained that this type of support primarily helps mentees’ emotional well-being and personal growth, with improvements in career advancement being secondary (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Kram, 1985; Ragins, 1997; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Wanberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003). Therefore, whilst psychosocial support may lead to enhanced self-confidence, it is not strictly for the purpose of career progression (Anderson, 2005). Indeed (Tharenou, 2005) claims that the provision of psychosocial support by a mentor may be an inappropriate focus for women wanting to progress within their organisation and that it is more important to focus on external factors. Her research of 3,220 Australians showed that psychosocial support did not help women’s advancement and may even have a detrimental effect because it is focused inwardly on women’s emotions, rather than on the external barriers to advancement. (Tharenou, 2005) says this may explain some of the negative perceptions of mentoring for women in the past (Lyness & Thompson, 2000; Metz & Tharenou, 2001).

On the other hand, Tharenou (2005) found that career support from mentors increased women’s career advancement. This confirms a number of other studies which found that mentor career support was related to career advancement while psychosocial support was not usually related (Allen et al., 2004; Ensher, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001; Orpen,
1995; Scandura, 1992; Waters, McCabe, Kiellerup, & Kiellerup, 2002). Tharenou (2005) concludes that if career support rather than psychosocial support from mentors is most beneficial to women’s advancement, then more emphasis should be placed on career support to improve women’s ability to attain more senior roles and this is also reinforced by recent research (Dashper, 2018; Foust-Cummings et al., 2011; Hewlett, Peraino, Sherbin, & Sumberg, 2011). Chrisler and McCreary (2010) found that mentorship is particularly important for women because of the challenges of building sufficient social capital, especially when there are relatively fewer women in the workplace. Research by Egon Zehnder (2017) suggested that having a senior leader advocating on women’s behalf was important to the success of women in the C-suite and Werner et al. (2010) found that organisations with the highest proportion of women at the C-level encourage or even require senior executives to mentor women, demonstrating the importance of mentoring as a strategy to increase the numbers of women in senior leadership. The primary goal of mentor career support is career advancement within the organisational hierarchy (Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, & Wilbanks, 2011; Kram, 1983, 1985). Kram (1983) defined five aspects of this career support: sponsorship; exposure and visibility; coaching; protection; and providing challenging assignments.

Over time, the two key aspects of mentoring (psychosocial and career support) have been redefined to recognise two distinct types of relationship: mentoring and sponsorship (Allen, Eby, O’Brien, & Lentz, 2008) whereby a mentor provides emotional and psychosocial support, and a sponsor provides active, practical help to advance a person’s career (Allen et al., 2008; Kammeyer-Mueller & Judge, 2008). Friday et al. (2004, p. 637) aimed to provide a universal definition for the terms mentor and sponsor, describing a mentor as “a wise and trusted counselor or teacher” and a sponsor as “a person who nominates or supports another person’s promotion”.

Because women can face backlash for advocating for their own careers in the workplace (Rudman & Glick, 2001; Wade, 2001), having an influential sponsor speak up on their behalf can enable women to become more visible and gain credibility (Rusaw, 1996). The provision of challenging assignments by a sponsor can also enhance a woman’s visibility and credibility as well as preparing her for the next level (Mainiero, 1994; Tharenou, 1997, 1999). Borrowing social capital (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001) can also be an effective strategy, enabling women to access their sponsor’s networks, connect with powerful people who can assist their career progression, and to receive
usually private information about career opportunities at executive levels (Abernethy, 1996; Burt, 1998; Kammeyer-Mueller & Judge, 2008).

The most powerful predictor of career success is mentoring by a powerful mentor (Blickle, Witzki, & Schneider, 2009), with a mentor at the C.E.O. or senior executive level leading to the fastest rate of career progression (Carter & Silva, 2010).

Importantly, women and men were promoted at the same rate when they had mentors at the top, and the mentor’s gender played no role, the only thing that mattered was the seniority of the mentor. However since people typically choose to associate with people who are like them (McPherson et al., 2001), men are more likely to choose male mentors and women are more likely to choose female mentors. Having a female-female mentoring relationship translates into better career progression Tharenou (2005), perhaps because women learn more career advancement strategies from a female mentor who has also incurred the particular difficulties that women face (Noe et al., 2002; O’Neill, 2002; Ragins, 1999a). However because there are few women in senior executive positions (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2018a), women probably need to seek out a strategic relationship with a key senior male sponsor if they are to realise their ambitions (Piterman, 2010).

2.11 Theoretical framework

While it is clear that the pipeline (Nancherla, 2010) has been delivering suitably qualified, trained and experienced women for the past several decades, it appears that women continue to face a “glass ceiling” (Cotter et al., 2001) that reduces their ability to reach the top levels of leadership in Australian organisations, particularly those profit and loss decision-making line executive roles from which C.E.O.s are typically drawn (Chief Executive Women, 2018). The “glass ceiling” is an extremely complex picture of discrimination that has its foundations in both cultural and structural constructs, and its enduring effect may have a negative effect on women’s aspirations as they continue to be exposed to it throughout their careers.

In framing the discussion to address the research question, a range of theoretical perspectives critiqued in the preceding literature review may provide valuable context for these complex aspects of discrimination highlighted by the research participants. The key theories are summarised in Appendix A and discussed below.
Even though times are changing as more household become dual income rather than traditional breadwinner models, the patriarchal gender order (Connell, 1987, 2002, 2005, 2009), where men have a dominant position over women, remains an important cultural thread in Australian society. In the home, Australian women retain the bulk of household known as the “second shift”, that is the work performed at home on housework and caring responsibilities in addition to women’s paid work (Hochschild, 1989). In Australia, the gender division of household labour intensifies after the birth of the first child (Argyrous et al., 2016), in contrast to countries like Sweden where the gender division of labour is unaffected after having children (Dribe & Stanfors, 2009). This means that many women face a “balancing act” of juggling competing demands of career and family and since this is a reality for many Australian women, may require structural solutions such as workplace flexibility to assist women deal with this through the “years of disruption” (Fox, 2017, p. 39) while their children are young.

The gender order also significantly influences the workplace (Acker, 1990) and the pattern of gender relations within organisations is known as a “gender regime” (Connell, 2006) which determines the structure within organisations such as the gender division of labour, as well as the culture such as gender power relations, emotion and human relations, and gender culture and symbolism (Connell, 2002). Consequentially, organisations and leadership are structured to maintain the gender order where men receive privilege including through administrative processes and so called “merit-based” principles and practices (Burton, 1989), and robust H.R. processes for recruitment, selection and promotion are necessary to break this cycle.

The gender order in the workplace also gives rise to the “ideal worker norm” where the “ideal worker” is seen as always available for work because [he] has no responsibility for housework and childcare, takes no time off for childbearing, and not only works full-time but is also available for overtime (Williams, 2000). This results in a dichotomy between the public (“ideal worker”) and private (“marginalised carer”) spheres and Williams (2000) finds that the workplace design around the male “ideal worker norm” may constitute discrimination against women and proposes that workplaces should be flexible in order to deal with this dilemma.

Unconscious bias by both men and women against women is evident in “gender evaluation bias”, where exactly the same outcome is evaluated better if believed to be produced by a man rather than by a woman (Goldberg, 1968). Similarly, “role congruity
theory” (Eagly & Karau, 2002) leads to women being evaluated less favourably than men, even when displaying behaviour that is typically ascribed to leadership. This is due to the perceived mismatch or incongruity between traditional male roles and attributes (assertiveness and agency), and stereotypical female social roles and characteristics (nurturing, teamwork). The "think manager – think male" phenomenon (Schein, 1973) is probably also a reflection of “role congruity” as a result of gender stereotypes about leadership. However it also reflects status beliefs that associate greater status, worthiness and competence for leadership with men than women. Indeed, “expectation states theory” can explain the unequal status of men and women that leads to hierarchy and inequality based on gender due to gender stereotypes and status beliefs (Ridgeway, 2001) that associate greater status and competence with men than women (Berger et al., 1977).

Expectation states theory also helps explains the reason for the significant bias faced by women who are mothers, since motherhood appears to reduce women’s status (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004), leading to mothers being viewed as less competent (Correll et al., 2007). The intersection between these status beliefs, deviation of mothers from the “ideal worker norm”, together with gender bias results in the “maternal wall” (Crosby et al., 2004), which has been described as the most powerful form of sex discrimination. Unfortunately motherhood and family responsibilities only serve to widen the gap for women seeking sponsorship to progress their careers.

Women are excluded from the “boys’ club”, which results from the desire for “male bonding” (Tiger, 1969), part of the human default system which involves the formation of close personal relationships and cooperation between men. Similarly, homosociality (Lipman-Blumen, 1976), or the preference for the company of the same sex in a social (not sexual) context motivates men in particular, to innately seek identification and communication with other men. It is a process that is noticeable in early childhood and is channeled and encouraged by the entire range of social institutions within which males live. In the workplace both homosociality and affinity bias, the natural human tendency to gravitate towards people who are like us (McPherson et al., 2001) leads men to hire other men in their own likeness in order to share the occupational space and privilege with other men. This results in a phenomenon known as “homosocial reproduction” (Kanter, 1977a) which enables male leaders to reproduce their dominant power relations and perpetuate the cycle of men outnumbering women in senior leadership. Often, however, these preferences are described in the workplace as
identifying people who are a “good fit”, or the “best person” for the organisation and role (Linos & Reinhard, 2015; Turnbull, 2016). In order to overcome these biases, as discussed earlier, robust H.R. processes for recruitment, selection and promotion are vital, and additionally, formal programs are needed to provide women with access to the same sponsorship that men enjoy through membership of the “boys’ club”. Career sponsorship from those at the top is crucial to women’s career success as borrowing “social capital” can enable women to access their sponsor’s networks, connect with powerful people who can assist their career progression, and to receive usually private information about career opportunities at executive levels (Seibert et al., 2001).

2.12 Therefore, in the context of this complex picture of a multitude of intersecting biases that create a barrier to women in senior leadership, if progress is to be made, then attention must be paid to the fact that in any business “what gets measured gets managed” (Drucker, 1954). This is because regular measurement and reporting of Key Performance Indicators (K.P.I.s) keeps leaders focused, and they are able to use the information to make decisions to improve results. Additionally, “what gets rewarded gets done” (LeBoeuf, 1985), which means that positive reinforcement through reward will result in desired outcomes being achieved. Therefore, executive incentives should be tied to K.P.I.s for gender balance in senior leadership. Additionally, if organisations make gender balance in senior leadership a key strategic priority that is tied to remuneration, as opposed to just paying lip service to it, they will avoid the potential for “tokenism” (Kanter, 1977b). For when women to reach a critical mass in senior leadership, they are able to have more influence and effect change in an organisation and businesses can reap the rewards of better financial performance as a result. Conclusion

While the proportion of women in senior positions is growing, at the current rate, parity in senior leadership is unlikely to be reached for many decades (Rodgers, 2015; Tharenou, 2016).

Improving the representation of women in senior leadership is important not just because of the moral imperative (Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986 (Cth)), but because of the positive impact it can have on the financial success of Australian businesses. Much research has focused on the reasons behind the lack of women in senior leadership (Nancherla, 2010), which indicates that the pipeline has been delivering suitable women for decades, but unfortunately there appears to be a “glass ceiling” (The Economist, 2017) preventing women from advancing to the most senior levels. While some research points to a lack of confidence in women (Baird et al., 2014; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2015; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003) and popular theory encourages women to “lean in” (Sandberg, 2013), this may be a simplistic view (Faludi,
2013; Vinnicombe, 2013) and focusing on “fixing women” (Bowles et al., 2007; Fox, 2017) ignores the systemic gender bias in organisations and the social context from which this behaviour develops (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Kolb, 2009).

While Federal and state-based anti-discrimination and Equal Employment Opportunity policies (Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986 (Cth); Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999 (Cth); Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Amendment Act 2012 (Cth); Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth)) (Anti-Discrimination Act 1977 (NSW)) have provided significant advances for women in Australia, they are not a panacea and though the numbers of women in middle management have increased, this has not translated into equivalent numbers at the executive level (Chief Executive Women, 2017; Lyness & Heilman, 2006), reflecting the fact that significant bias continues to exist in the assessment of merit in our corporate workplaces (Fox, 2017; Howard & Wellins, 2009; Sealy, 2010).

In contrast, Governments have had long-held commitments to reducing bias and improving gender equity not just through enacting legislation, but also as an employer. Despite all the barriers to gender equity in the workplace, the Australian public sector has made significant progress with women holding 43% of Australian Government board positions (Australian Government, 2017) and 49% of senior executive roles in the Australian Public Service (Australian Public Service Commission, 2017b).

The Public Service success demonstrates that gender balance in senior leadership is possible and reflects the initiatives that may be necessary to achieve the same in the Australian corporate sector. This may need support and sponsorship from the very top of the organisation, to implement objective H.R. processes for selection, development and promotion that reduce the unintended biases. Additionally, targets and reporting may be necessary since “what gets measured gets managed” (Drucker, 1954; Giovannini, 2004) and there has been a significant improvement in female board representation in Australia since reporting was introduced in 2010, with representation on ASX200 boards increasing from a fairly static 8% in the preceding years to 26% in 2018 (Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2018). It may be that this trajectory is unsustainable without further action (Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2017) and in fact Governments have had to continually engage on the issue when progress has stalled and reset targets (Baird et al., 2014; NSW Government, 2017).
Therefore, this study will now examine “the state of gender diversity in senior leadership in Australian corporations and what factors may be preventing them from making gender diversity in senior leadership a key strategic priority.” The following chapter will describe the research method used.
3  Methodology

3.1  Introduction

The research problem is explored through a qualitative methodology underpinned by interpretive and critical theory paradigms. The method employed in this research is convergent interviewing which will be covered in detail in this chapter, including participant selection; the interview method; initial interview analysis and probes; and final issues analysis. This chapter will also cover limitations, reliability and validity issues, and ethical considerations, as shown in Figure 11 above.

3.2  Justification for the paradigm and methodology

The feminist nature of this study was an important factor in the determination of methodology (Bryman, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Sarantakos, 2013), however
a broad review of the literature (see chapter 2) provided a more important basis for the methodology choice. This review encompassed broad feminist theory, in addition to historical and contemporary literature on women in management, which provided a theoretical foundation for this research, as well as a context for deeper exploration of the issues.

The extant literature suggests that unconscious bias continues to be an important barrier to women’s career progression and supports the need for Australian corporations to do more to make gender diversity a key strategic goal in order to increase the representation of women in senior leadership. Therefore this research aimed to explore why the knowledge is at odds with business policy and practice and sought to identify some of the experiences of senior women which may elucidate the reasons behind this phenomenon and what can be done about it. The aims of this research played an important part in the methodological selection, as did some of the practical considerations relating to the relatively small population of high status, time-constrained participants.

Sarantakos (2013) regards feminist research as an established type of research which has the specific purpose of examining women and their position in society. In simple terms, it can be described as “research on women, by women, for women” (Sarantakos, 2013, p. 66), the underlying aim of which is to illuminate women’s issues and focus on social and political change. Plummer (2013) goes further to discuss how feminist research may intersect with issues of race, sexuality and disability. Furthermore Dillard and Okpaloaoka (2013) extend the discussion about research on black women, raising the issue that research epistemologies may be racially biased and therefore new paradigms may be needed to engage in research where there is intersection between race and feminism. However, when researching the “glass ceiling” effect, Cotter et al. (2001) found that racial differences did not have a glass ceiling effect in men, that it was a distinctly gender-based effect. For this reason, selection of a research paradigm considered only gender issues, and not intersecting concerns such as race.

There is debate about whether feminist research is a separate paradigm, however while there are a few methods that are employed solely by feminist researchers (Reinharz, 1992), in reality there is no single feminist methodology (Sarantakos, 2013). It is more likely that feminist research employs criteria and principles from other methodologies, particularly qualitative, and adjusts them to meet the requirements of the feminist
perspective. Sarantakos (2013) finds that feminist research typically operates within an interpretivist-constructionist paradigm, however it is likely that it also utilises critical theory framework since feminist research often critiques the status quo and aims to facilitate social change.

Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey (2011) described the interpretive paradigm as a qualitative approach that seeks to understand the experience of people’s everyday lives from their perspective, using observation and interpretation to understand the social world. People's perceptions of reality are subjective; therefore the ontology is one of multiple realities. Alternatively, Sarantakos (2013) illustrates this ontology as one where an objective reality exists but is seen differently by different people, for example, at the scene of an accident the interviewer did not witness, when interviewing witnesses to the accident, each has a different perspective of that reality, depending on what they experienced and how they perceived what actually happened. The epistemology is subjective and research recognises the importance of social, cultural, historical and personal contexts (Hennink et al., 2011). The methodology is qualitative and dialectic (conversational and questioning) therefore interviews are a commonly used method.

The interpretive paradigm is appropriate for the research question in this study, because it seeks to understand the objective reality of the reasons few Australian corporations are making gender diversity a strategic priority, interpreted through multiple perspectives of women respondents in senior leadership roles. It also seeks to observe and interpret common themes within the social context of contemporary Australian business.

The strengths of interpretivism and associated qualitative methods are the ability to gather data in a more natural way, understand people’s meanings and perspectives, investigate the changing social environment, adjust to emerging issues and ideas and contribute to new theory development (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2012). These strengths lend themselves to both the research topic, and the type of participants who were interviewed because as members of the minority of women in senior leadership, the participants will be able to interpret their lived experience of career progression in the Australian corporate sector throughout their working lives, and identify the challenges they have observed that may illuminate the reasons that more women are not progressing to more senior levels in organisations.
Some of the pitfalls of interpretivism can be the overemphasis on subjective impressions, and the inability to ensure accuracy of the researcher’s interpretations (Sarantakos, 2013). Because of this, it was important for the researcher to avoid over-identification with the participants, and look for common factors that may have influenced the participants’ perspectives. While it is acknowledged that data collection can be time consuming and data analysis and interpretation challenging (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012), the selection of an efficient and process driven qualitative method assisted the researcher to manage these challenges. Easterby-Smith et al. (2012) argued that policymakers may not give credibility to subjective studies however it is anticipated that this research adds deep meaning to some of the previously published quantitative work, and the particular method chosen reduces some of the subjectivity inherent in qualitative data.

Critical Theory reflects and critiques society and culture and seeks to emancipate people from the circumstances that subjugate them (Horkheimer, 1982). Consistent with this paradigm, the research seeks to critique and influence the gender values in Australian business within the current social, political, and economic climate. As with the interpretive paradigm, critical theory methodology is typically qualitative, so these two paradigms sit well within the context of this research and selected methodology. Critical theory informs and is continually informed by previous work, in the case of this research, theories of Western patriarchy (Pateman, 1994; Walby, 1986). The ontology is historical realism (Guba & Lincoln, 1998), where reality is virtual, and is over time shaped and refined by social, political, economic, racial and gender values. Critical theory epistemology is transactional and subjectivist, requiring a dialogue between the investigator and the subject which is why Guba and Lincoln (1998) find that there is a blurring of the separation between epistemology and methodology in this paradigm – the investigator is assumed to be linked interactively with the subject of the investigation and findings are heavily influenced by the investigator’s values. Because the researcher in this case is also a woman in senior leadership in Australia, there was identification with the respondents, and the researcher’s values may influence the research. However, feminist researchers believe it is not necessary to remain objective and removed from their interview subjects in order to produce valid results (Cook & Fonow, 1990) even though this conflicts with other theories that recommend the researcher remains impartial. Rather, Cook and Fonow (1990) encourage identification between the researcher, the interviewee, and the subject matter which overcomes the
notion that the subjugation of women is reinforced by the traditional interviewer-interviewee relationship.

Feminist researchers often study a phenomenon that concerns them in their personal life (McCormack, 1981), and by doing so, they merge the “public” and “private” (Reinharz, 1992). In a positivist framework this would be seen as bias, but in a feminist framework, this is rather seen as an explanation of the researcher’s standpoint (Reinharz, 1992). Frequently, claims Reinharz (1992), the connection between the research and the researcher starts from one’s own experience (see p 13), and this provided the researcher with many advantages – it helped to define the research questions, directed the researcher to sources of useful data, gained the trust of participants, helped the researcher to interpret what was heard, and enabled partial testing of findings (Reinharz, 1992). Indeed, for the researcher, the research problem was “a blend of an intellectual question and a personal trouble” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 260) and being an “insider” may have enabled the researcher to understand what the participants had to “say in a way that no ‘outsider’ could” (Evans, 1979, p. x). This epistemology of “insiderness” sees life and work very much intertwined and Reinharz (1992) claims that feminist research in a particular country (in this case, Australia) should be done by women of that country. Therefore, it is not only a matter of convenience that the researcher resides in Australia where the study was conducted, it also means that the researcher is an authority because she is also the subject about which she writes. In this way, it supports Bordo’s (1986) contention about the concept of objectivity. Indeed, Reinharz (1992) concedes that “starting from one’s own experience” infringes the traditional expectation for researchers to remain detached, objective, and value neutral, however feminist researchers argue that research cannot be considered “value neutral” in the context of existing patriarchy (Oakley, 1974) and that what passes for “objective” may actually be the position of privileged white males (Hubbard, 1979).

Nevertheless, there are limitations of “starting from one’s own experience”, including the potential for projection or solipsism (Reinharz, 1992, p. 261), therefore the researcher was careful not to speak much or offer opinions and personal experiences in the interviews, in order to differentiate her own experience from the experiences of other women, to re-read the transcripts after time in order to reflect on initial impressions, and to question her own perspective. On the other hand, this may be seen as a reflexive research approach (Etherington, 2004), which provides an opportunity to revise questions and re-frame the research topic as the research project unfolds.
Feminist researchers employ both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, and while most feminist researchers take a qualitative approach, this should not be seen as a lack of interest in objectivity, validity and reliability (Sarantakos, 2013). Harding (1987) made the point that feminist research places emphasis on women’s experiences, which may be why qualitative research is a popular method in feminist research. Nevertheless, women’s experiences are seen as a legitimate indicator of reality and this research lends itself to the choice of a qualitative approach which allowed the researcher to examine in detail the experiences of senior women leaders, identify issues from the perspectives of the participants, understand the meanings and interpretations they give to events and identify how their experiences are shaped by the social, economic and cultural context they live in (Hennink et al., 2011).

### 3.3 Pilot interviews

Prior to commencing the interviews, a pilot study was undertaken to further understand the key issues and to assist with the creation of the semi-structured interview questions. This informal study was conducted by interviewing five women who research, commentate, or consult on gender diversity in senior leadership. This preliminary research explored some of the issues that are preventing organisations from making gender diversity a key strategic goal. The ongoing gender bias in contemporary Australian business was highlighted, particularly in the recruitment and promotions process where participants strongly identified a need to implement more transparent and rigorous processes. Whilst participants remain hopeful that change in the gender balance statistics is still possible, the majority believed that it will not happen unless tools such as quotas together with appropriate penalties and incentives are put in place. At this time Australia’s patriarchal business landscape and ongoing gender bias remains a significant barrier to women advancing into senior leadership. These initial findings informed the preparation of questions for the formal interviews.

During the analysis of the pilot study the researcher became aware that a number of questions were leading and asked for opinion rather than the experience of the participants. Therefore, the questions were adjusted for the formal research. In addition, the researcher sent the questions to the participants beforehand, to allow them to reflect and prepare. This also meant that during the interviews, the researcher was able to talk less, be less leading and listen more intently to the participants.
3.4 Research method (convergent interviewing)

A qualitative research method known as convergent interviewing was used, which enables the collection, analysis and interpretation of information about people’s experiences, knowledge, opinions and beliefs that converge on important research issues (Riege & Nair, 2004). Also termed convergent and divergent in-depth interviewing (Carson, Gilmore, Perry, & Gronhaug, 2001), the technique was developed by Dick (1990), through his work in organisational change and development interventions. Convergent interviewing is an in-depth interview technique that uses a structured process to collect and analyse initially unstructured content where the analysis overlaps with the collection of interview data. Dick (1990) describes a number of areas in which convergent interviewing can be used, and while later researchers found convergent interviewing to be a helpful technique to develop and refine a research problem or theory in a new area of research (Jepsen & Rodwell, 2008; Rao & Perry, 2003; Riege & Nair, 2004), Dick never intended its application to be limited to pilot interviews, and discusses the value of using this technique in the broad area of qualitative research (Dick, 1990, 2017, 2018; Sankaran & Dick, 2015). Indeed, a search of google scholar for “convergent interviewing” AND “thesis” yields over 500 results which confirms it has been used a good deal since first published by Dick in 1990, and on balance researchers report that the strengths of convergent interviewing outweigh the limitations of the technique (Perry, 2013; Riege & Nair, 2004).

Convergent interviewing offers a number of benefits (Perry, 2013; Riege & Nair, 2004; Williams & Lewis, 2005) including the use of a structured process to handle messy qualitative content, which can narrow down the focus of the research problem, particularly in an unknown research area. The quick cyclic nature of the process can save time and there is flexibility in both the process and sample size. The subjectivity of the method allows immediate probing of both established and emerging issues. The benefits to researchers are the development of networks of experts for future research (although it could be argued that this is in fact achieved through the use of snowball recruitment which is described further below), and it can also help less experienced researchers to develop early confidence (Perry, 2013; Riege & Nair, 2004).

An important strength of convergent interviewing, and a reason for choosing this method, is in the way it can overcome the inherent subjectivity of qualitative data by the researcher trying to explain issues of agreement and disagreement after each interview or “disprove the emerging explanation of the data” (Dick, 1990, p. 11) and subjective
data is refined using an “objective” method of convergence and divergence (Dick, 1990; Perry, 2013).

Individual interviews were more suited to this particular research project than focus group interviews or case studies because the objective of the research was to explore the individual work-life experiences of senior women in detail. The research question concerns individual experiences, choices and range of attitudes; and the participants are typically time-pressured and difficult to recruit high-status individuals with limited availability (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000; Cooper & Schindler, 2014), therefore the researcher was able to conduct individual interviews at a time and place (usually their office) that suited the participants’ busy schedules. Compared with traditional in-depth interviews, convergent interviewing processes and analyses data in a more structured way (Perry, 2013; Rao & Perry, 2003). The progressive nature of the technique allows continuous refinement of the interview content and process to narrow broad research issues down into more focused ones (Dick, 1990; Perry, 2013; Rao & Perry, 2003).

Since Dick’s original work (1990) on convergent interviewing, a number of researchers have continued to develop this method (Carson et al., 2001; Perry, 2013; Riege & Nair, 2004). However Dick (2017) suggests that to be most effective, convergent interviewing should be tailored to the purpose and specific requirements of the study. The method, as used in this research, will be described below in the context of a range of literature regarding qualitative research principles, and divided into the four major elements of convergent interviewing: the process for selecting participants, the interview method, the analysis of each round of interviews and the final issues analysis.

### 3.4.1 Selection of participants

Bauer and Gaskell (2000) prefer the use of the term “selecting” rather than “sampling” in qualitative research, because the purpose is to interview different members of the social setting to explore the full range of opinions and understand the underlying attitudes that justify these different viewpoints. Indeed, it is particularly important in convergent interviewing to carefully “select” participants to ensure a wide range of views can be quickly captured and analysed to facilitate the process.

This research employed a non-probability method known as purposeful sampling, which strategically and purposefully selected information rich participants for their individual characteristics that facilitate in-depth understanding of issues central to the research.
purpose (Patton, 2002). The specific type and number of participants depends on the study objectives and available resources (Marshall, 1996; Patton, 2002) but because numbers are smaller than with quantitative research, (Marshall, 1996), careful selection is vital to ensuring a range of views are covered and may initially require some imagination on the part of the researcher (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000).

In the case of convergent interviewing, the initial selection is very important and there are three key considerations for selecting the first participant(s) – subject matter expertise, maximum diversity, and ability to direct the interviewer to other knowledgeable people (Carson et al., 2001; Dick, 1990, 2017; Jepsen & Rodwell, 2008). Riege and Nair (2004) suggest selecting a key industry figure as the first participant – someone who is very familiar with the topic, research problem and possible implications, while Carson et al. (2001) recommend the first interviewee should be a person who is active in professional bodies or an academic with strong links with government policy makers, who can direct the researcher to other experts in the field.

Recruitment for this research therefore, involved an initial careful selection of a small but varied sample of knowledgeable people. Initial approaches were made to relevant industry bodies, government agency representatives, and specialist recruitment agencies that are leading the contemporary discussion and debate on gender leadership issues, such as the Workplace Gender Equality Agency, Women on Boards, The Australian Institute of Company Directors, and the 100% project which yielded two initial participants who were known to the researcher and who did in fact help refer the researcher to additional experts in the field.

The researcher ensured the interview sample was as heterogeneous as possible using the purposive sampling principle of maximum variation (Patton, 2002) in order to explore a wide range of views. Dick (2017) recommends that at each group of interviews, the best possible maximum variation sample should be selected to generate more initial disagreement leading to deeper and richer understanding. Each participant should be as different as possible to the previous one, while still being representative (Dick, 2017). Thus further approaches were made to C.E.O.s and C-1 executives from a wide variety of industries, and subsequent recruitment was to then rely on snowball sampling (Patton, 2002).
Snowball sampling, also described as a “convenience sample” (Bryman, 2012), is when the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of relevant people then asks them to refer to others with similar or different characteristics, experiences or attitudes (Bryman, 2012; Cooper & Schindler, 2014; Patton, 2002). (Dick, 1990, 2017) focuses on maximizing the range of views by asking each interviewee to refer someone whose views differ from theirs, but are still representative of at least some others in the area. Not only is snowballing an important component of convergent interviewing (Dick, 2014, 2017; Perry, 2013; Riege & Nair, 2004), it is also very important to this research given the specific characteristics of this small population (women currently in executive line roles), and the relative rarity of women in the most senior positions in Australian corporations. This research followed Dick’s (2017) recommendation to compile half a sample and supplement it with snowball sampling (Bryman, 2012; Cooper & Schindler, 2014; Patton, 2002). Unfortunately asking for further referrals from subsequent participants proved relatively unsuccessful, perhaps due to the time-poor nature of these very senior women and the fact that the researcher was unknown to most of them or their networks. Nevertheless, two of the C-1 participants were referred by C.E.O.s who were approached but were unavailable to participate, demonstrating their interest in the research project.

The reason that men were excluded from the sample was that they may not have the necessary insight to elucidate this issue, since research has demonstrated that male managers may be biased in their perceptions of women’s competing work-family priorities and leadership aspirations (Hoobler et al., 2014).

Sample sizes for qualitative research vary by technique but are usually smaller than with quantitative research (Cooper & Schindler, 2014). There are no rules to determine sample size, rather “it depends”, for example on how accurate the sample needs to be for the purpose, the population characteristics, the type of data analysis planned, issues of credibility, and the realities of time and resources (Bryman, 2012; Neuman, 2006; Patton, 2002). The researcher must also make trade-offs between breadth and depth, and Patton (2002) recommends setting minimum samples based on expected reasonable coverage. Nevertheless, the usually accepted number of interviews is 12-25 (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000; Charmaz, 2006; Crawford & Di Benedetto, 2011; Green & Thorogood, 2009; Perry, 2013). For a single researcher, Perry (2013) states that it is a trade-off between the number that it is necessary to collect, while still being possible to analyse (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000), and relies on competent interviewing, appropriate question
development and thorough data analysis (Perry, 2013). However, it is still important to reach saturation when considering how many interviews to stop at (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000; Driedger, 2008).

There are a limited number of versions and interpretations of reality, so while the first few interviews may provide many new insights, eventually common themes emerge and the interviewer becomes progressively more confident in the understanding of the issues (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000). Therefore, in qualitative research, where the purpose is to maximize information, the general principle is to keep sampling until the breadth and depth of knowledge stops expanding and no new insights are gained (Cooper & Schindler, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Perry, 1998). In other words, sampling “to the point of redundancy” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This principle of sampling to the point of redundancy is a key feature of convergent interviewing and the methodology allows the identification of saturation and corroboration of agreements and disagreements at an earlier stage. Indeed although Dick (1990, 2014, 2017) suggests the sample should contain at least 12 interviewees, other researchers using this technique have found a stable pattern of agreements and explainable disagreements between participants can occur after as little as six or seven (Carson et al., 2001; Dick, 2014, 2017; Perry, 2013; Riege & Nair, 2004), although several more interviews may be conducted to confirm stability. Typically stability is achieved after six to ten in-depth interviews (Rao & Perry, 2003). Beyond this number, increases in understanding will be small and may not justify the time spent doing further interviews (Carson et al., 2001).

This research commenced with the aim of conducting Dick’s (1990, 2014, 2017) recommended minimum of 12 interviews but rather than being predetermined, the sample was expected to increase or decrease as the interviews proceeded, with the final sample size being data-driven. Invitation letters were sent to 24 female C.E.O.s, board chairs and C-suite executives selected from Chief Executive Women listings, ASX200 information, and industry knowledge, and the researcher was able to recruit and interview two C.E.O.s from quite different industries. Two invitees referred the researcher to other executives in their teams, resulting in two further interviews, three rejections were received, and the remainder did not respond.

A further participant recruitment list was constructed from searching company websites for female C-1 executives and using the researcher’s own networks to source referrals.
The researcher aimed to recruit women in line management roles, rather than functional roles such as human resources which have a relatively higher proportion of women (Chief Executive Women, 2017), and approached women from varied industries including energy, property, financial services, construction, travel, facilities management, and retail. Two participants were recruited by e-mail, after asking for referrals from the researcher’s own networks. Additionally, a list of 109 executives was constructed by researching ASX100 company websites, reviewing the information on the organisations’ executive teams and a 32 further invitation letters were sent. Of those, two rejections and seven acceptances were received, five of whom were interviewed and two were unable to find a suitable schedule. The remainder did not respond. The schematic below shows the recruitment of participants.

Figure 12. Recruitment of participants

A total of 15 participants were recruited for the study who were industry experts (4/15), women in senior leadership at C.E.O. level (2/15) and C -1 level executives reporting directly to the C.E.O. (9/15). The participants came from a range of different industry sectors, including a number of male dominated industries, however given the small number of women in executive leadership positions in the ASX200, current industry details were deliberately excluded from the research analysis since this information could potentially identify some participants, particularly C.E.O.s. While specific questions on age, marital status and family situations were not asked, the participants spoke openly about their family commitments and through the discussions, it was revealed that 10 of the participants had children, including eight with dependents.
In summary, the criteria for inclusion were female C.E.O.s and female executives reporting directly to the C.E.O., from top Australian companies in the A.S.X. 200, in addition to women who are considered authorities on contemporary gender leadership issues. Men were specifically excluded from this research for reasons previously discussed, and since this research was focused on Australian corporations, it excluded women executives from the public service, not-for-profit sector or Australian entities of multi-national corporations.

Those women who agreed to participate felt it was an important topic and were very generous with their time and willingness to share very personal examples and insights.

3.4.2 Interviews

At the heart of convergent interviewing is the in-depth interview. These were conducted face-to-face because of the benefit of being able to observe body language (Cooper & Schindler, 2014). Because the majority of interviews were conducted in the participants’ own office environments, it was easy to observe them in a professional environment that they were comfortable in. Dick (1990, 2017) describes the interview process in significant detail and reassures researchers wanting to use this technique that interview skills can be readily learned and practiced.

The structure of the convergent interview is essentially the same as any in-depth interview: introduction and rapport building, opening question and response, probe questions and responses, summary and close. What differs, however, is that the opening question is of paramount importance, indeed in the earliest interviews, there may be few other questions, and the probe questions are developed as the series of interviews progress, to ascertain agreement or disagreement (and uncover explanations for such), of emerging issues. An opening question “Please tell me the story of your experience of …” (Riege & Nair, 2004) was used within the context of a set of framework questions (topic guide) which was designed to capture the aims and objectives and prepare the interviewer (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000). Consistent with traditional in-depth interviewing, as the research progressed, the emerging issues were explored with different questioning, including general and more specific probes (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000; Dick, 2017). The interview structure is shown in Figure 13 below.
The interviews were conducted in a cycle with the opening question designed to gather information from the participation, and the probe questions arising from previous interviews aiming to clarify common issues and resolve ambiguities and differences. The initial opening question was broad and was designed to keep the participant talking (Driedger, 2008), in order to gather as much information as possible (Dick, 1990), and this remained the same throughout the series of interviews. Between interviews, the researcher continued to refine the emerging interpretation to take account of previous probes and develop more specific probes for subsequent interviews so that both the interview process and the content were data driven. This cycle is illustrated below.
Although Dick (1990) did not use tape recorders for convergent interviewing, preferring to use his mnemonic memory system so that he could maintain eye contact and strengthen rapport, it is generally recommended that in-depth interviews are recorded and transcribed to provide the researcher with the rich detail intended (Cooper & Schindler, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Patton, 2002). Riege and Nair (2004) recommended the use of audio recording for convergent interviewing to allow single interviewers to listen more attentively, maintain eye contact and show interest in what is being said, in contrast the same reasons Dick (1990) chose not to use recordings. While the use of audio recording did not eliminate the need for traditional note-taking Patton (2002), using this hybrid approach did allow the interviewer to take more focused notes that were used to help formulate questions, stimulate early insights before transcriptions were completed, facilitate later analysis including locating important verbatim quotes, and the notes provided a back-up in case of failure of the audio recording which happened in the case of one interview. The benefits of using audio recordings to supplement written notes were that the researcher could triangulate data by replaying recordings in order to correct and expand interview notes (Patton, 2002), and the researcher did not lose direct quotes (Riege & Nair, 2004). Additionally, because of limited resources, this convergent research was not conducted using pairs of interviewers or a steering committee to assist with feedback on interpretation of the data, so this was further reason for recording interviews (Riege & Nair, 2004). Therefore, with the permission of the participants, interviews were recorded using the
researcher’s iPhone equipped with a Rhode lapel mic and recording app. The wav files were saved and transcribed to supplement interview notes, assist with analysis and provide direct quotations that added to the richness of understanding in the research report. The first two interviews were transcribed by the researcher which aided in the initial review of themes, drafting of an issues’ matrix, and refinement of the probe questions. After that, the researcher outsourced this to a transcription service to improve timeliness and accuracy of transcriptions. The recording and transcription files were stored on the researcher’s secure laptop computer which is automatically backed-up in real-time to a secure server and records were stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home office.

Participants responded to invitations by e-mail either directly or more typically through their executive assistants and were offered interviews at a time and location that was convenient to them. The majority were interviewed in their office (10) and the remainder (2) were interviewed in a coffee shop near to their office due to the fact that one was in between jobs, seeking a C.E.O. role, and the other was not able to secure a suitable meeting room. In the case of the coffee shop interviews, the use of the lapel mic became very important to capture clear audio recordings. Only the first two participants were known to the researcher prior to the study.

All invitation letters (Appendix B) were accompanied by a participant information sheet (Appendix C), interview questions (Appendix D) and a consent form (Appendix E). These documents were agreed by the university’s Ethics Committee as part of the ethics approval obtained prior to commencement of the research (see ethical considerations below). Participants were advised both verbally and in writing that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time, that the recordings and transcripts would be stored securely by the researcher, and that their anonymity would be protected in the research report. Permission to record the interviews was freely given by participants and prior to commencement of the interview all participants signed a consent form (see Appendix E).

The interviews ranged in length from 35 to 55 minutes, with an average of 48 minutes, reflecting both the busy schedules of the participants, and the fact that most had prepared for the interview ahead of time by reading the questions and thinking about their responses, making comments such as “yes, when I read that question….”. Indeed, a couple of participants had even made brief notes. These interviews were semi-
structured with an opening question of “please tell me the story of your experience of becoming and being a woman in senior leadership” consistent with the method for convergent interviewing (Riege & Nair, 2004). The researcher explained that the interview would be conversational in nature and would not take more than an hour, and many expressed appreciation of the researcher’s understanding of their time pressure, although they welcomed the opportunity to be involved in what many felt was very important research. Although all but two participants were unknown to the researcher, they appeared to be very open and spoke quite freely with the researcher, offering sometimes very personal insights and at times speaking about proprietary information or program names that could identify the participant or her organisation, which the researcher promised to keep confidential. This may relate to the participants accepting the researcher as a fellow woman in senior leadership position, since the researcher introduced herself in her professional capacity as well as her research position. All participants expressed an interest in receiving a copy of the final report when available.

### 3.4.3 Analysis of each round of interviews

The method of analysis followed the technique recommended by Dick (1990) and further described by Carson et al. (2001) and Perry (2013). The results are discussed in chapter 4, however it is important to note that with convergent interviewing, the interview process and analysis are fundamentally linked and (Dick, 1990, 2017) and (Rao & Perry, 2003) believe this contributes to increased rigour and efficiency of the technique compared to traditional in-depth interviewing.

Similar to grounded theory approaches (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), convergent interviewing is an inductive process whereby the issues emerge and are refined throughout the course of the research, rather than seeking to use research to prove or disprove an existing theory. Consistent with the convergent interview method, the researcher produced field notes during (and immediately after) each interview, in addition to making audio recordings for later transcription. These notes provided a summary of the key issues raised, including their priority and some words of the participant. Following Dick’s (1990, 2017) recommendations for a single interviewer, the issues highlighted in the early interviews were compared to the previous interview(s) and then in later stages, the information from each subsequent one or two interviews was compared to the emergent issues that arose from the earlier interview data collection. The issues highlighted in the notes were assessed for their agreement or disagreement with previous interviews and while Dick (1990) initially recommended...
only including issues about which there is agreement, other researchers recommend that disagreements should not be discarded as they may be relevant in the refining process of the research problem (Carson et al., 2001; Riege & Nair, 2004) and therefore both agreements and disagreements were incorporated into probe questions for later interviews.

As previously described, the initial broad opening question remained the same throughout, however, the probe questions were refined based on the continual comparisons, in order to further explore and deepen understanding of the issues found in the overlapping themes, and also seeking to explain any unresolved differences. In this way, the interpretation of the data develops throughout the research (Dick, 1990; Williams & Lewis, 2005).

Dick (2017) recommends seeking out exceptions when there is agreement with the emerging issues, and seeking explanations when there is disagreement, using two different types of probe questions. The first can be used when participants agree on a key issue and the probe is designed to determine whether there is general agreement or whether it is coincidental and therefore the probe looks for exceptions (Jepsen & Rodwell, 2008). For example, in the research, probes such as “was there ever a time when family responsibilities did not matter” were used to test agreement on the challenges of childcare responsibilities. If an exception was found then it constituted disagreement for which an explanation was sought, using the second type of probe used to explain disagreement on issues, for example “other participants have said that bias does not exist in the workplace, that women get there by merit… what do you think?”. These steps formed a key part of the data analysis, allowing continuous increased understanding of the issues as the interviews progress. They also allowed the researcher to claim that the conclusions are valid as they had been judiciously derived from the data (Dick, 2017).

The process, illustrated in Figure 15 below is analogous to constant comparison in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) whereby each new interpretation and finding was compared with existing findings that emerged from the data analysis. In convergent interviewing, the overlap in the interview data, and subsequent overlap with the emerging issues, yielded the probe questions which helped to further refine the issues. Finally, the interpretation converged to the final form which is covered in the researcher’s final report (see chapter 4).
Additionally, the review of the interview notes allowed the researcher to review the process, including how well the opening question was working, whether appropriate time had been allowed for the interview, whether the sample appeared to be appropriate, and whether there were any issues that the researcher needed to understand better. This was consistent with the convergent interview method that asserts both the process and the content should be data-driven (Dick, 2017). The steps outlined above (interview, notes and comparison) were repeated until the point of saturation, when it appeared that further interviews would add insufficient new data to warrant continuing.

3.4.4 Final issues analysis

The interpretation of the issues developed throughout the series of interviews (Dick, 1990, 2017; Jepsen & Rodwell, 2008) and coding is not typically used in convergent interviewing (Dick, 1990, 2018). Dick (2018) explains that convergent interviewing is designed to reduce or eliminate the need for coding. Because the probe questions for later interviews were derived from the data in earlier interviews, coding would slow the process down substantially because interpretation has to wait for the coding, which in
turn has to wait for transcription. Dick (2018) also believes that because the interpretations come from the respondents rather than the coding, then the researcher is better protected from his or her own biases.

Since coding was not used, consistent with the convergent interviewing method, progressive content analyses of the interviews were formatted into a characteristic matrix table of issues and subsequently grouped under a number of themes or research issues (Carson et al., 2001; Perry, 2013), as opposed to presenting a traditional qualitative analysis structure of first order codes, theoretical categories and aggregated theoretical dimensions (Saldaña, 2016). An example of a convergent interview table format is shown in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>1</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Disagree</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Agree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Example matrix of agreements and disagreements about issues (Carson et al., 2001)

The table as a list of issues is only the starting point for the analysis as importantly, the reasons and deep meaning behind the issues are included in a report (Carson et al., 2001; Perry, 2013), together with direct quotes from the participants. Once the interviews were finalised, the converged key issues were grouped into categories or themes with similar issues.

Whilst not a specific feature of convergent interviewing, the issues are analysed in further detail in chapter 4, including direct quotes from the participants that highlight the perspectives of women in senior leadership in Australia, and discussed in the context of the published literature in chapter 5 in order to shed light on the reasons Australian business are not making gender diversity in senior leadership a strategic priority.

### 3.5 Validity and Reliability

It is important to consider validity and reliability issues in qualitative research (Silverman, 2011) and convergent interviewing should be no different (Williams &
Qualitative research is sometimes criticised as being too anecdotal 
(Silverman, 2011) and conducted in a casual or unstructured manner (Mason, 2002). 
Errors of anectodalism occur when the researcher believes something is true that is not, 
or when the researcher rejects something even though it is true (Kirk & Miller, 1986). 
There are three types of validity measures that Rao and Perry (2003) describe as being 
applicable to research using the convergent interviewing method.

Firstly, construct validity refers to how well the results fit the underlying constructs or 
theories around which the test is designed (Cooper & Schindler, 2014; Sekaran, 2003). 
Convergent interviewing achieves construct validity through the attempts to disprove 
emerging explanations in the data (Dick, 1990), and progressive redesign of the 
interview content and process which establishes content validity.

Secondly, internal validity concerns the ability to infer cause and effect relationships of 
one variable on the other variables (Sekaran, 2003). In this research internal validity 
was achieved through the use of purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002).

Thirdly, external validity relates to the ability to generalise the research findings beyond 
the study (Cooper & Schindler, 2014; Sekaran, 2003). Some external validity was 
achieved in this research by selection of a cross-section of interviewees to provide a 
wide range of opinions that are representative of the views held by others in the community.

Kirk and Miller (1986, p. 10) identify that reliability can be achieved through 
consistency in procedure. It is here that convergent interviewing proves its worth as a 
method that offers the strategic management researcher a clear and established 
procedural basis with which to address potential problems of reliability.

Reliability refers to the degree to which a measure provides consistent results, so that 
other researchers could repeat the study and reach similar findings (Cooper & Schindler, 
2014; Sekaran, 2003; Zikmund, Babin, Carr, & Griffin, 2013). Reliability can be 
achieved through the use of consistent procedures (Kirk & Miller, 1986) and this is 
where convergent interviewing has an advantage according to Williams and Lewis 
(2005). Reliability was achieved in this research, through the structured process of 
convergent interviews; using a structured process for recording, writing and interpreting 
data; and by comparing the research findings with others in the literature. While Dick 
(1990) recommends also improving reliability by using a steering committee to assist in
designing and managing the interview program, this was not possible in a single researcher setting, however the researcher did consult with several industry experts in the pilot interview stage regarding the target population and its attitudes.

### 3.6 Ethical considerations

The goal for research, according to Steane (2004) is to contribute to the advancement of knowledge or professional practice, with the researcher and university remaining in good standing with the participants and in order to do this, a number of key principles of research ethics must be followed. Bell and Bryman (2007) identified ten principles of ethical practice that were used by professional associations in the social sciences, which are summarised in Figure 16 below. The first seven concern protecting the interests of the research participants, and the last three are designed to ensure accuracy and lack of bias in the results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Principle</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ensuring that <strong>no harm</strong> comes to participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Respecting the <strong>dignity</strong> of research participants.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ensuring a fully <strong>informed consent</strong> of research participants.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Protecting the <strong>privacy</strong> of research subjects.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ensuring the <strong>confidentiality</strong> of research data.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Protecting the <strong>anonymity</strong> of individuals or organisations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><strong>Avoiding deception</strong> about the nature or aims of the research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Declaration of affiliations, funding sources and conflicts of <strong>interest</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><strong>Honesty and transparency</strong> in communicating about the research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Avoidance of any <strong>misleading</strong> or false reporting of research findings.</td>
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</table>

Figure 16. Key principles in research ethics. (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012)

Research ethics approval was obtained from Charles Sturt University prior to commencing the research (see Appendix F).

#### 3.6.1 Informed consent

Informed consent is an ethical requirement for research involving people (Carson et al., 2001), therefore participants in this research received full information about the study, including why and how they were chosen to participate (see Appendix C participant information sheet). Consent was given freely (Steane, 2004) and contained the relevant
key elements of informed consent (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2000; Rudestam & Newton, 2007).

1. Participants were informed of the general nature of the research, as well as the expectations of their time and effort. (Appendix C).
2. Participants were informed of the careful procedures that would be used to protect their anonymity but that it cannot be guaranteed.
3. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent document (Appendix E).
4. The researcher explained the benefits of being in the study.
5. Participants were informed that they may withdraw their consent and cease participating at any time.
6. Participants were provided with the name of person responsible for the study to whom they could direct questions about their role and participation.
7. The researcher offered participants the opportunity to receive feedback about the results of the study.

3.6.2 Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity

In addition to the ethical considerations, participants are likely to be more open in interviews if they are assured at the start that the report will disguise their identity (Carson et al., 2001). Most literature discusses the importance of personal confidentiality but commercial confidentiality may also be involved (Le Voi, 2006). This was certainly the case with the senior women in Australian corporations who participated in the study because there are so few of them and it is important that the privacy and dignity of these individuals is respected, and that disclosure of any sensitive information shared does not harm the participants. The participants were informed that they may choose for information to remain confidential and the researcher would anonymise data and take care to safeguard the identity of the participants and any people and institutions mentioned in the interviews. Audio recordings, transcripts and participant contact details were stored in a secure environment.

3.6.3 Honesty and trust

It was important to build a relationship of honesty and trust with the participants and the ability of the researcher to identify with the participants was central to this. The nature and aims of the research were disclosed openly and transparently, including the ownership of the data and conclusions and intended methods of reporting and dissemination of the information.
It was also important to consider what the participants might get out of the research and the issue of reciprocity was considered within the ethical framework (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Patton, 2002). In feminist research such as this, the participants are often invested in seeing changes to the status quo and were therefore keen to be involved in this initiative. All participants expressed interest in receiving a copy of the research thesis upon publication.

### 3.6.4 Research integrity and quality

Affiliations, funding sources and potential conflicts of interest of the researcher have been declared and the research results will be communicated honestly and transparently. Researchers have an obligation to help their findings be used appropriately and not to be misused (Miles et al., 2014). In this case, the research is attempting to “change the system” but this was made clear to participants at the outset. Nevertheless, the interviewer through careful use of the convergent interview techniques, used open-ended questions to fully understand the participants’ perspectives, and avoided the temptation to debate the issue rather than listening when participants shared opinions that did not align with the researcher’s own.

While it is an accepted feature of feminist research for the researcher to be an “insider” who identifies with the participants, it was also important for the researcher to avoid sharing her own experiences to ensure that the research revealed more about the subject than about the researcher (Mehra, 2002). The researcher was able to use the cyclic nature of convergent interviewing for constant reflection, including after transcription which provided another opportunity to ensure that the multiple perspectives of the participants were reflected in the results. Additionally, the researcher viewed herself as a “learner” (Mehra, 2002), since the participants all came from very different industry backgrounds from the researcher’s own. Mehra (2002) encourages this approach as a way to move beyond the researcher’s personal bias and focus on the knowledge that can be gained from the participants. Finally, the researcher also tried to minimise researcher bias in presentation of results by providing a summary of the results (Mays & Pope, 1995), in the form of a convergent interviewing issues table (see Table 2, p 124).

### 3.7 Limitations

There are three main limitations of convergent interviews (Riege & Nair, 2004). Firstly, as with other face-to-face interviews, researcher bias can occur. Riege and Nair (2004) recommend the interviewer gains adequate prior knowledge through reviewing the
relevant literature, and that interviewers be trained in the appropriate skills for planning and conducting interviews and maintaining data quality during analysis. This was achieved by conducting a thorough literature review and the researcher already possessed interview and data handling skills gained through her professional experience. Secondly, in order to contribute meaningfully to the process, researchers should be somewhat familiar with the research field. This was achieved through discussions with experts in the field, a series of pilot interviews, and the researcher’s past experience. Thirdly, due to the small sample size, validity and reliability issues must be overcome as discussed earlier in this chapter. While the sample size is small, it is consistent with recommendations for finding a stable pattern of issues in convergent interviewing (Carson et al., 2001; Dick, 2014, 2017; Perry, 2013; Rao & Perry, 2003; Riege & Nair, 2004) and it adequately answers the research question (Marshall, 1996). Progressive redesign of the interview content attempted to improve construct validity, purposeful sampling was used to improve internal validity, and some external validity was achieved by selecting a cross-section of participants from different industries to provide a wide range of opinions. Nevertheless, there may have been some bias in the participant selection since recruitment relied on time-poor participants having an interest in participating.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the paradigms, research methodology and method that provided the framework for this study within a feminist context. It also presents the rationale as to why this particular research question (which is an exploration of gender diversity in Australian corporations and the reasons they are not doing more to increase the representation of women in senior positions) lends itself to a qualitative approach which captures the rich information necessary to explore the issues.

While it is argued that there is probably not a separate feminist paradigm, the interpretivist and critical theory paradigms that underpin this research approach are described as being consistent with feminist perspectives. The qualitative methodology chosen is also consistent with a feminist framework and while the convergent interviewing method does not appear to have been used in feminist research previously, the features and benefits it offers are described in some detail.

This chapter also outlines the selection criteria for participants in the study and the ethical issues that may arise. Because of the relative rarity of women in the most senior
roles in Australian companies, it was anticipated that the snowballing technique could be employed, something which is also advocated by proponents of the convergent interviewing method. However, this proved difficult in the context of women in senior leadership and participant selection was achieved through systematic research of the top ASX companies, supplemented by referrals.

Finally, the process that was used for the interview analysis has been described as following the recommended procedures for convergent interviewing. The benefits of integrating the analysis with the interview process were discussed, in terms of developing the emerging issues and theory at the same time as refining the interview process to probe for further agreement and disagreement, as well as determining when to stop interviewing at the point of redundancy. Chapter 4 will present the research report that has been developed as a result of these analyses.
4 Analysis of data

![Diagram of Chapter 4 outline]

Figure 17. Outline of Chapter 4.

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 will present the research report that was developed as a result of the final analysis of the convergent interviewing process described in chapter 3. As previously described, the interview process and analysis are fundamentally linked in convergent interviewing, and the research issues that emerged through the convergent interview process are shown in Table 2. Issues that emerged in early interviews were refined
throughout the course of the research by comparing the information obtained from later interviews using probe questions to assess agreement and disagreement while exploring the underlying explanations and attitudes of the participants to deepen the researcher’s understanding of the issues previously identified. For example, 9 issues were identified from the initial interview with participant A as shown in Table 2 and these were compared with participant B’s interview, resulting in a total of 11 issues arising from this first pair of interviews. During following interviews, further probe questions were developed to ascertain agreement or disagreement with those 11 issues, and further new issues that emerged were added to the issues matrix such as issue 12 identified during participant E’s interview and so on. By the time 15 interviews were conducted, as can be seen in Table 2, a total of 16 issues had been identified and since no further new issues had arisen, this appeared to be the point of saturation.

The issues in Table 2 were grouped into four key themes as shown in Table 3 and will be described in further detail below, using direct quotes from the participants to highlight the salient points. The research found there is overwhelming evidence that women face significant bias in the workplace, especially those with children, and that exclusion from the networks men benefit from may leave women who aspire to senior leadership at a distinct disadvantage. Caring responsibilities continue to be a balancing act for many women especially during the peak career development years, and workplace flexibility may be extremely important, particularly during those development years before women are senior enough to be able to manage their own diaries. Self-confidence, especially the confidence to reach for senior roles when women may not meet 100% of the stated job requirements, can improve women’s success rates. However, targets and reporting, and H.R. processes that support recruitment, development and promotion of women into senior roles are crucial, while quotas may sometimes be necessary to improve the gender balance in senior leadership since there was unanimous agreement that it should be a strategic priority for Australian companies.
### 4.2 Research issues

Consistent with the convergent interviewing method described in Chapter 3, the research issues were identified through progressive content analysis of the interviews. For reasons discussed previously, coding is not typically used in convergent interviewing (Dick, 1990, 2018), rather the issues identified after each interview was conducted, were formatted into a matrix table (Carson et al., 2001; Perry, 2013), as shown in Table 2 below.

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**Issues that emerged from interviews**

1. Unconscious bias
2. Boys’ club
3. Flexibility
4. Board/CEO support
5. HR processes
6. Targets & reporting
7. Quotas
8. Priority
9. Caring responsibilities
10. Role models
11. Mentors/sponsors
12. Confidence
13. Maternity leave
14. Partner support
15. Motherhood bias
16. Job requirements

Table 2. Matrix of issues
Although coding is not typically used with convergent interviewing (Dick, 1990, 2018), structure for the analysis is presented in the characteristic matrix of issues (Carson et al., 2001; Perry, 2013), shown in Table 2 above, which replaces traditional qualitative first order codes, theoretical categories and aggregated theoretical dimensions (Saldaña, 2016). Nevertheless, once the interviews were finalised, the converged key issues shown in Table 2, that were identified progressively throughout the interviews, were grouped into four categories of key themes of similar issues and are shown in Table 3 below. The issues were then analysed in further detail below, under these four main themes, using direct quotes from the participants to highlight the salient points.

### Issues that emerged from interviews

**Barriers to women in senior leadership**
1. Unconscious bias affects women in the workplace
15. The motherhood bias negatively impacts women’s careers
2. Affinity bias leads to the Boys’ club and/or “jobs for the boys”
10. Lack of positive role models

**The challenge of balancing family and work**
13. Time out of the workforce to have children
9. Caring responsibilities and the “second shift”
14. The importance of having a supportive partner
3. Flexibility supports women’s careers

**Success factors for women aspiring to senior leadership**
9. Confidence and the need to “lean in”
11. Women need mentors and sponsors
12. Confidence regarding job requirements

**Gender balance in senior leadership as a strategic priority**
11. Gender balance as a strategic priority
4. Board sponsorship and C.E.O. support – it starts at the top
5. HR processes for recruitment, development and promotion are critical
6. Reporting and targets are key to success
7. Will quotas be necessary?

Table 3. Main themes from research issues

#### 4.3 Unintended bias is a barrier to women in senior leadership

The barriers to women in senior leadership identified in this research mainly relate to the effects of a number of interrelated biases that continue to exist in Australian workplaces, including the effects of unconscious bias against women that result from persistent stereotypes about gender roles and the desired qualities of leaders; the additional workplace bias against women who are also mothers; and the effects of affinity bias and the associated workplace “boys’ club” culture. Additionally, the ongoing scarcity of positive female role models was identified as another important barrier for women aspiring to senior leadership.
4.3.1 Unconscious bias affects women in the workplace

Most of us would like to believe that we are unbiased and that we can make rational and fair decisions in the workplace that are in the best interests of our organisations, resulting in many people still denying that bias exists, blaming other general factors for women not making it to leadership positions, such as lack of a pipeline of qualified women, women leaving the workforce to care for children, or even skill requirements that are not adhered to, for example:

(interview A) “there aren’t enough women in the talent pool that can actually take on this job”,

(interview M) “I think unconscious bias can feel a bit threatening because people don’t like to believe that they’re biased... I’ve had this discussion with many men of my age who have young families, very similar careers and career paths, and they don’t believe the bias exists. They believe women drop out of the workforce to have families... and then if you mention that it’s [unconscious bias] … “no, it’s not unconscious bias””,

(interview N) “the bias is there, and as soon as they realise that it might be gender, they turn it around – there’s always another reason. I’ve gone for jobs where I’ve been recommended by senior people, and the headhunters have given all sorts of reasons, “no, they want an existing C.E.O. in an ASX top 50 company, they want this, they want this.” …and in the end, they don’t put you on the list, and the person they did appoint, wasn’t even a C.F.O., and I thought, “that flies in the face”, but it was a bloke”.

Because of these experiences, unconscious bias was identified in this research as a key obstacle for women advancing to senior levels. Unconscious bias may stem from deep-seated societal attitudes and stereotypes about men and women that remain entrenched despite the significant gains that have been made in women’s educational achievement and participation in non-traditional careers:

(interview F) “Now men can do the same things that women can do, and women can do the same things that men can do, but society still hangs onto a lot of these stigmas from way back in time, and a lot of that’s been unwound gently over time to create a more level playing field, but the final steps I think are the unintended bias issues”.

These deep societal biases may also result in disillusionment for women who start off believing they can achieve anything and over time they start to experience bias in the workplace and start to realise that merit is not the only factor important to advancement, for example:

(interview N) “our kids, we’re training them to not even think about gender. You can be whatever you want. But, when they get in that workforce – and I thought, “my God, they’re treating me differently because I’m a woman?””.

(interview C) “I spent a few years in organisations and it became really clear to me that having been told all my life if I worked hard, and did well, academically and with my work, that I could get ahead, but that was not the case, and it became very clear to me. So, I thought, “oh I see, this is the way the world operates””.

The research also identified how these societal stereotypes and attitudes about women are not just held by men, but also by women:
“it’s so prevalent... and I see it from both men and women”,

“having women in positions of authority and leadership is deeply disturbing still for a lot of men. It’s also disturbing to some women, and I think we need to realise that as well” and “even if we think we’re very progressive, we still have that deep conditioning that then will stick with us in our recruitment and promotion as we run teams or go for jobs” (interview D).

In addition to societal stereotypes about women, this research also demonstrated that men and women in our society continue to perceive leaders as men, with a female C.E.O. describing her experience of travelling on a flight with a male colleague who was treated with deference, whereas it was assumed she was just an accompanying partner:

“I couldn’t possibly be travelling as a senior executive woman. I see it all the time, every day of the week. It’s very embedded and it’s going to take some pretty major change”.

Indeed, even women working in the senior leadership area admit to their own biases:

“it’s a wider societal problem that we condition our kids from young about the roles and what’s expected from men and women, and even when they’re coming out of university, and everybody thinks they can rule the world, the fact is they’ve been deeply conditioned around what roles women and men can play and we’re all deeply biased. I still find it really hard when I’m talking about C.E.Os to say he or she or they – it’s very, very easy to say “he”.

Nevertheless, the participants perceived an obvious bias towards white middle-aged men as the perceived leaders in the workplace, for example:

“a very obvious bias towards white over 50-year-old men as the leaders in Australian business”.

These attitudes may lead to a reduction in women’s opportunities because those doing the recruitment, and the men themselves believe that men are better suited to senior leadership roles, for example,

“there is a perception within the head-hunters, that it’s such a tough job that a man could probably do it better”,

“I think they genuinely believe they are better suited to those jobs” and “women’s skills are not valued in the same way as their male peers”.

These stereotypes of leadership may also be used as an excuse for not appointing more senior women:

“we’d love to have more women, unfortunately they’re just not leadership material. Their voices are a bit high, etcetera, so we go back again onto a whole lot of stereotypes. We’ve all been told that – we’ve been told we lack confidence. We’ve been told we’re not good at negotiating. These are massively inaccurate stereotypes”.

Importantly it was identified that this bias can also come from the top of organisations, for example:
(interview O) “I suspect our C.E.O., along with some of our senior team has a deep-seated belief that women can’t really make the grade”,

(interview D) “it took that whole experience for me to actually see that there was what he called unconscious bias, but I think he got that it was very, very overt bias. Most people don’t like to admit when something has been so obvious but certainly, he was the M.D. at the time.

(interview A) “a lot of these men [at the top] think that they actually truly support this whole issue, but in reality, they have an unconscious bias where they’re not really doing that”.

Nevertheless, there are some male leaders who are making progress in trying to address the issue, such as:

(interview D) “when I started, the chairman said to me “you need to ask yourself, why we don’t have a female head of operations or a female area manager?” I can see why, and I saw the bias when I joined, because I was the first female to run the business in 25 years”,

(interview B) I’ve got one client in Australia, a small company, but all he does, he actually is gender biased the other way, he hires nothing but strong women because he thinks they get everything done” (laughs).

Yet another participant perceived that her C.E.O. had made an effort to overcome his bias:

(interview L) “I’ve had to work very hard in convincing that I’m the right person for the role. The easy option by far would be for him to have just gone with one of those guys. So I think “good on him for recognising his bias and choosing to be persuaded that actually it was okay to choose a female, but I think in his mind, that was a really big risk. He could’ve picked up the phone, somebody he knew who could’ve come and done the job and that would’ve been so easy, so for him as C.E.O., trying to fight his bias and say “no, actually let’s go with a female”, I think he found it quite difficult and I have no doubt that it was a really tough call for him because I don’t look like all the other C.F.O.’s he’s hired, because I’m not a male, in my mid-40’s, I just don’t tick those boxes”.

The participants discussed the ways in which unconscious bias affects women in the workplace, such as the use of sexist language, for example,

(interview M) “I’ve picked someone up for it today again, referring to women as “girls” constantly in the workplace. “Oh, let the girls do that, let the girls do this”. So the language I think is very, a very prominent form of bias in the workplace – unconscious, completely unconscious”.

It may also mean that women have to work harder than their male colleagues to prove themselves:

(interview F) “I think it does impact how hiring decisions get made unfortunately. And I actually believe that women probably have to work a little bit harder and have to prove themselves a little bit more than the men do” (interview L), and it is more difficult for them to progress at the rate they would like to: “I got slowed down maybe a year getting to partner and then it was much more difficult as I got more senior... I think it just gets more difficult because of the unintended biases.

Unconscious bias can also affect the way in which feedback is delivered to women in a negative way, even if the feedback itself is valid, such as,
“when people get told the reasons why they can’t go the next level or the reasons why they’re not getting the promotion, there’s always a nub of something in it which is fair and reasonable, but the way it’s packaged because of unintended bias is really demeaning and can be a real deflator as it relates to your ambition and it gets more difficult the higher up in the tree you want to go”.

This research also identified that unconscious bias can lead to gender backlash when women behave contrary to gender stereotypes, as one participant shared that from her experience,

(interview K) “women go out of their way to compete and sabotage other women”.

4.3.2 The motherhood bias negatively impacts women’s careers

This research highlighted the additional unconscious bias that women experience when they become mothers, for example:

(interview N) “there is a stigma around women of child-rearing age”,
(interview M) “I do think it’s interesting that for women in their reproductive years, how much bias there is while they’re having babies, but also following”,
(interview C) “if we put her in a leadership job, she might go and have a baby”.

This motherhood bias results from societal norms about women’s roles as carers and nurturers, such as:

(interview A) “I think there is still that social stigma about men being the providers and women are the nurturers – there is still a lot of that out there”,
(interview J) “I get comments in my job like “I couldn’t be married to someone like you”, “I wouldn’t want my wife working””.

Like other unconscious biases, it can be both men and women who sometimes share biases against mothers, for example:

(interview J) “there’s really strong bias and likewise from the female side”
(interview H) “I think “God, how often does she have to go home?”.

This may reflect the bias that affirms motherhood stereotypes, for example that women will prioritise childminding over work commitments, for example,

(interview G) “there’s a perception you’ll be off minding the kids and you won’t be doing any work”.

Although one senior woman discussed the fact that senior male colleagues are very open about their family responsibilities, she was extremely reluctant to do the same because it may be perceived negatively:

(interview M) “I’ve come across many examples where men do have family responsibilities and they will actually make a much bigger deal to their boss about it and say, “on Thursdays I need to pick up the children so there’s no travel for me on Thursdays.” I heard this just a
few weeks ago and I was shocked. I was thinking, “I’ve never said that to my boss” and I think it’s fantastic that they’re being quite open about the family responsibilities they have, whereas obviously there’s a reason why women aren’t as open with their family commitments when they’re in a senior corporate role. I know I’m not. I hardly ever let it impact… I still haven’t done it because I’m scared for some reason… I believe it will be viewed negatively, and it might be completely unfounded but it’s probably just years of having that perception”.

Even the participants who did not have childcare responsibilities because they were childless or their children had grown up were affected to some extent by this bias, for example:

(interview G) “I didn’t go and have children, and I think that’s the unconscious bias, because people look at women, and assume “you’re of childbearing age,” and childbearing age these days can be anything from 20 to 45... I think that there’s an unconscious bias there, absolutely.

(interview C) “look if we put her in a leadership job, she might go and have a baby, and well after childbearing years they’re still saying stupid things like that, and you point out that “actually I’m in menopause, I think it’s unlikely”, but there’s these generic images around women”.

(interview D) “at the moment the discussion is often about working women are mothers..., not all women have children. I don’t have children myself... at least 50% of women who are either working fulltime, working part-time or not working are not caring for young children, and so all these companies are talking about working women as mothers and it’s all about maternity leave, but they’re only fixing the problem for potentially a quarter of their [female] workforce.

Because of the negative perceptions about mothers and their competing priorities, many of the women experienced pressure to prove themselves, for example,

(interview O) “when I came back, there was so much pressure on me to not feel like I was working less than the boys because I had children. I had to work harder, just to show that I was working hard” (interview N), and “for the women with kids… I just see them having to work so, so much harder”.

4.3.3 Affinity bias and the Boys’ club

Another specific type of unconscious bias identified by all but one of participants, was affinity bias (see chapter 2, p 53) which is a natural human tendency that leads us to favour people who are like us, and we are comfortable with, for example:

(interview C) “we’re comfortable with people who look like us, who behave like us”,

(interview B) “I think people like working with people that are easy and if they’ve got something in common… It’s literally we went to school, we played rugby, we played golf”.

Because the majority of the most senior people in Australian companies are men however (see chapter 2, p 24), this means people doing the hiring at those levels are also men, so it is more likely that they will continue to hire other men in their likeness, creating a significant barrier to women advancing to senior ranks, as several participants observed:
(interview D) “I think there is unconscious bias. I see that manifest in women only getting to middle management roles, in boards being male dominated, and so when boards are male dominated, who’s selecting the C.E.O. for companies? It’s the board… Too many boards are male dominated so that is why women are not there… they are absolutely there; they’re just not getting past the selection process”.

(interview O) “if you have men doing the interviewing, then you are only ever going to get the same pull-through because the men were more naturally drawn to the male candidates and people who are like them”

(interview O) “I think most noticeable when there’s fewer chairs around the table and the music’s stopping, the people who are managing the music are managing the music to stop when blokes are sitting near the chairs. Not for any other reason other than that’s what feels natural, normal and right because they can relate to those people”.

This may mean that they get someone who will also think the same way because they feel more comfortable and it is easier working with people who are like them, for example,

(interview N) “they want someone who’s more like them, with a view more like them, which is fine. The guy they’ve appointed, you know, he’s nearly sixty, he’s risk-averse, whereas I’m seen as “she isn’t risk-averse, and she’s going to want to do things, and, stir things up a little bit””.

(interview B) “what I’ve seen is that people move companies and then they just suck their teams across… when the C.E.O.s are hiring people in, they just want people they feel will work with them and are easy, and so I think that’s where the jobs for the boys comes from. They want to employ people who are like them and they’ve known before and it’s easier and they don’t necessarily want people to challenge them”.

At least half of the women interviewed had spent their careers working in male dominated industries such as engineering, technology, banking, and property. They talked about often being the only woman in meetings or being the only woman in a room of 200 apart from the P.A.s. While they commented that they became accustomed to it, they also felt they had to put up with a lot including bad language and sexist behaviour.

(interviews I, K) “you get used to it”,

(interview J) “I probably felt comfortable sort of being in that male dominated space, having done engineering for five years”,

(interview K) “you get used to the environment… you need to be a certain type to work in a male-dominated industry… you have to put up with a lot”.

(interview I) “the culture in organisations in the top companies is still fairly toxic as relates to women. It’s a harsh culture, and a lot of women just don’t want to put themselves through it”.

One woman said there had been three instances when she had been asked if she would like to make a complaint but she declined, citing the example of the David Jones sexual harassment case in which a junior female employee, Kirsty Fraser-Kirk alleged unwanted sexual attention from the
C.E.O., Mark McInnes (Australasian Legal Information Institute, 2011). The participant commented that litigation may not harm a man’s career but is more likely to derail a woman’s career.

Interestingly, over time even those participants who initially believed they were “one of the boys” seemed to eventually sense the bias towards a male dominated work environment, as one participant described,

(interview L) “the way that guys have those relationships is very different to the relationships that the women in the workforce tend to have… it’s not deliberate but those things happen a lot”.

Several women described this environment as a boys’ club that is exclusive to men, and the participants recognised that they missed out on the same opportunities, for example:

(interview G) “I think there is a boys’ club. I think that’s undeniable”.

(interview L) “it’s true, that there is this other network that happens, that as a woman I wasn’t part of and so I think, if I look back in my career I could’ve got to where I am now quicker, had I been male and had I been in some of those circles”.

Women in the study noticed their male colleagues’ tendency to spend considerable leisure time together outside work and women tend to be excluded from these activities, for example:

(interview L) “the guys at the work will be having a drink with their friends or playing a game of golf and it’s not deliberate but those things happen a lot”

(interview L) “there’s a guy here who’s head of I.T., who I know very well. He’s a very good friend of mine and he said to me he’s catching up with one of the other senior people who’s one of my peers. I’m like “oh great, what are you going to do?” “Oh, we’re going to play golf.” That other senior person has never asked me for a game of golf, has never suggested that. Why is that? And that’s the two guys getting together, “oh what should we do?” He hasn’t come to me and said “oh, let’s go get a spa together, let’s go have a massage together, let’s go shopping together.” It just doesn’t happen”.

Unfortunately, the privacy and exclusivity of the “boys’ club” appeared by the women to manifest itself in that men do not want women around, for example:

(interview K) “men don’t want women in their inner circle”, because “today’s litigious workplaces mean men don’t want the risk of saying or doing the wrong thing”.

It also was perceived to lend itself to “jobs for the boys” when senior men tap others on the shoulder, such as:

(interview N) “So you know, classic case here, C.E.O…. to fill the C.F.O. role, could’ve picked up the phone to five other men that he knows that would’ve walked in and done the job”.

(interview B) “she said that the regional guy didn’t even interview the M.D.s properly, he didn’t go out to the market, because he just literally went and tapped on the shoulder of people and referrals”.

132
Despite the fact that these men are unaware of the bias, it was perceived to result in a significant and persistent disadvantage for the women:

(interview B) “I don’t know if it’s even that the men are consciously discriminating against women, I think they are just more comfortable when they get into those senior roles, having people that they’ve worked with before who aren’t going to give them too much grief. I don’t think it’s any more complex than that – they know them from rugby, school, whatever”.

(interview I) “hard to believe this still happens in 2018 but it is more prevalent than ever”.

One participant was even told that, despite having performed exceptionally well in her role, she would not be promoted because she lacked those affiliations, which she interpreted to mean that she was not a man:

(interview F) “well you didn’t grow up here, you’re not connected into any of the private schools, you didn’t captain any of the big sports teams, so you don’t have a natural network that a senior partner needs to have”.

The one participant who disagreed that affinity bias towards men existed felt that appointments were made on merit, but this might reflect the fact that her organisation had achieved a greater level of gender balance with 50% women board members including a female chairperson, and 25% of the executive team were women. Additionally, she had mentioned that her organisation was specifically targeting women for some senior roles.

(interview H) “there are a couple of roles where I know that the senior executives have said, “we’re targeting a female for that role””.

4.4 The challenge of balancing family and work

One of the most challenging issues for the participants aspiring to senior leadership appears to be balancing the demands of family responsibilities with their career aspirations. At least one aspect of this issue was mentioned by each of the participants in the study. The group of women interviewed was fairly reflective of the Australian population with 79% having children, including adoptive and stepchildren. Although elder care was not a current issue for any of the women in this cohort, many highlighted family responsibilities as a “big obstacle” for women advancing to leadership roles. There exist many facets to this obstacle which were identified in the research as detailed further below.

4.4.1 Time out of the workforce to have children

An obvious challenge identified by the women in this study was the need for women to take time off work to have children and that no matter what there would be some period of disruption as a result, for example:
“no matter how it transpires, there will be a period of time where you are out of the office”

“there is the fact of women taking time out to go have families, that’s just reality”.

Often this coincides with the peak time for career development in women’s thirties, which may mean that their career trajectory suffers as a result, for example:

“most women between 30 to 40, which is in the most prime time of developing a career, are having babies and having time off work”.

“women do suffer, because they go out of the workforce for a period of time”.

Those in the research group who discussed their maternity leave had taken 5-6 months which was slightly below the average of 7.5 months for Australian women (see chapter 2, p 56), for example:

“I didn’t take extended periods off while having kids… with my first one I took 5 months maternity leave, and with [second child] I took 6 months maternity leave”,

“six months was on maternity leave with my third child”.

This is in contrast to another participant who maintained that it was not unusual for women to have three children, and if they are in the fortunate financial position where they do not have to work, they may choose to stay out of the workforce for ten years. For women who choose to take extended periods out of the workforce, she felt that they should not expect their careers to remain intact. Nevertheless, she may not have been referring to highly ambitious or more senior women who are more likely to stay connected to the workforce:

“they can’t necessarily expect to walk back in at the same level that they were before”.

Whilst the need for many women to take maternity leave is a reality, it appears that many organisations still struggle with the concept, for example,

“of course women do have babies and while this is hardly an insurmountable problem, there’s still a lot of hullabaloo about how do we cope with it”

“I don’t think organisations even now know how to deal with it and embrace it”.

This may lead to some women leaving the workforce at that time and raises the question of how organisations can support women to stay in the workforce rather than feeling they have to choose between family and a career, for example:

“they made the decision, and gave it up for family… how do you design roles and careers that actually support women to stay in, and not have to make that choice?”

In contrast, some of the participants felt there was more companies could do to enable women to remain connected to the workplace during maternity leave.
(interview L) “I think there are more things companies can probably do – keeping in touch with women who are on maternity leave”.
(interview C) “it’s a family issue, and it’s about attachment to the workplace”.

This may result in benefits for organisations, such as increased retention:
(interview D) “quite high retention rates in companies after maternity leave”

One senior woman was even promoted despite having taken maternity leave:
(interview M) “I’ve worked here for nearly eighteen months, but six months of that was on maternity leave with my third child and recently I’ve been promoted into the general manager”.

4.4.2 Caring responsibilities and the “second shift”

Even the women in very senior roles described the challenge of the “second shift” where they also have significant responsibilities at home, for example:
(interview L) “women still typically bear the load of the housework and caring responsibilities, so I think it still remains pretty difficult”.

The participants also discussed the dilemma women typically face of wanting to do and be all things to all kinds of people in their family, personal and working life, given that women do not usually give up their roles at home when they take on senior positions as they juggle work and caring responsibilities, for example:
(interview O) “For the women with kids, you just see them trying to do so much on all fronts, and it’s difficult. It’s probably us as women wanting to do and be all things to all kind of stakeholders, and our family, and personal and working life”,
(interview I) “women as a whole have more to deal with”

This is something which men in senior roles may not have to consider, for example,
(interview O) “all the men [in the executive group] have fairly traditional partnerships where their partner is really focused on being at home in general, and looking after kids, and supporting the partner, whereas for the women in those roles, it’s not like that at all”,
(interview L) “they still go down to the pub together and the women are going home to cook dinner”,
(interview O) “I look at the difference between the men executives and the women, and I just see the women having to work so, so much harder”.

Additionally, it emerged in the analysis that men may benefit from being free of caring responsibilities, for example,
(interview J) “a lot of men have the advantage of being able to leave the house, and their partner’s at home and they know things are being looked after, and they can just walk out… I’m jealous in a way”.
These persistent gender roles could be due to the persistent gendered stereotypes about men’s and women’s roles in our society, such as:

(interview A) “there is still that social stigma about men being the providers and women are the nurturers”,
(interview F) “a lot of this goes back centuries to the way the world worked when you had hunters and gatherers and women had a particular role and men had a particular role… society still hangs onto a lot of these stigmas”,
(interview E) “if you think about history it’s pretty much always been like that”.

Indeed, this was highlighted by the senior woman with young children who found that there was an expectation that they would be carry the caring responsibility during holidays and illnesses, for example:

(interview M) “the responsibility is very much placed on the female partner and… my husband never gets asked, “what are you doing with the kids these holidays, or who’s looking after the kids?” He never gets that question”
(interview J) “automatically it’s like “my husband can’t take time off work”.

It is not just childcare that women need to juggle, but they might also have responsibilities to care for elderly relatives:

(interview I) “caring of all sorts, it’s not just children – you’ll find women looking after elderly parents in some respect, but usually the women rather than guys brunting that responsibility”,
(interview G)”one of my staffer’s mother just fell over and broke something, and she’s going to be in a wheelchair for eight weeks and can’t do anything, so, I said, “work from home.””.

An important way for senior women to manage the “second shift” may be to outsource those responsibilities, for example:

(interview J) “I outsource my cleaning and my childminding and so it’s partly I think I can financially afford it”,

However, it may be important to also look at the corporate culture and consider whether there is sufficient allowance and acceptance of women’s responsibilities outside the workplace.

(interview O) “there has to be more allowance and acceptance of the fact of multiple roles that women are generally trying to play”.

Nevertheless, caring responsibilities emerged to take their toll on some of the participants’ families, for instance it emerged that some of the women’s careers were put on hold while their children were young, for example

(interview A) “I took the career sacrifice to enable my husband to do a job and look after his kids”.

136
Additionally, caring responsibilities were identified as a hindrance to networking and building relationships with those colleagues who can support career development, and because women with caring responsibilities may miss out on incidental networking opportunities, they may have to put more effort in, for example:

(interview L) “I think it slowed me down. All those things that go along with that caring responsibility – it means you’re not networking in the same way, you’re not going to the same functions... Nine times out of ten it’s going to be me that goes and picks up the kids... and the guys at work will be having a drink … or playing a game of golf…I can’t go to the pub at the drop of a hat…I have to book it three weeks in advance”.

(interview L) “have to be so much more deliberate about the networks because there’s so much of that that happens around you without you even noticing”.

4.4.3 The importance of having a supportive partner

Several participants expressed the view that if you have children, you cannot have both partners working in professional roles at 100% capacity, that women need a flexible husband perhaps with his own business, one who doesn’t work, or has a lesser role, for example:

(interview L) “How does that work if you both trying to have a senior career?... Unless you’re both super heroes, you can’t maintain a full-on career, maintain a house, have children, go on holiday – it becomes very, very stressful… so I do think that many senior women either have no family, or have a husband who doesn’t work or has a lesser role or choose to do something different because it’s so impossible”.

This family pressure may result in women sacrificing their own careers for a period of time, for example:

(interview A) “I knew that if I continued to move forward in a corporate role, the pressure in our family would be too much”.

However, many senior women interviewed acknowledged that partner support is very important to supporting women’s career goals, particularly for those with young children, for example:

(interview J) “having that support from your husband is very important to allowing you to have the career that you want”.

Indeed, in the case of three participants, the husband is the primary carer. One participant who had married late and became a mother to stepchildren explained that her husband had flexibility to care for the children because he had his own business. She felt that it would be impossible for her to manage her senior position otherwise, as her global responsibilities require her to be available for non-stop calls from 6am to 11pm. Two other participants’ husbands took time out from work to look after the children when they were young, for example:

(Interview J) “he took 12 months off for both my children”

(interview M) “he stayed at home full-time for a year and a half”
These women’s husbands now work part-time while the women describe themselves as the primary bread winners. Nevertheless, one such husband faced considerable backlash from family members and his workplace for such a choice which is at odds with the stereotypical role of men in Australian society:

(interview J) “it was really hard for him to take 12 months long service leave and work four days a week, and it wasn’t accepted. We talk about the biases towards women yet but for him it was really hard because it wasn’t acceptable for him to take leave because it was one of the boys”.

Two other participants described shared 50:50 caring arrangements although they felt that this type of arrangement comes at a compromise because neither one has the freedom from family responsibilities to focus solely on work, to just walk out of the house in the morning without a care about childcare arrangements, for example,

(interview M) “my husband’s fabulous, he does a lot of that but when you’re both working full time, he doesn’t have that support from me, and I don’t have that support from him. So that damages both of our careers in some way”.

The answer for one participant was viewing it as being about what works best for their family and tailoring their own arrangements accordingly, rather than their roles within the family being determined by gender stereotypes:

(interview J) “no longer about male or female but it’s what works best for the family and that’s the approach we take in our household”.

### 4.4.4 Flexibility supports women’s careers

Many participants mentioned the importance of flexibility in being able to manage multiple responsibilities, for example,

(interview F) “we’re doing all the right things including flexibility”,

(interview G) “every job in this organisation is flex… organisations need to accept that people have different calls on their lives”,

(interview I) “driven by day to day demands with children, work travel, study, commute times”,

(interview A) enable women to be able to work as well as have a family”.

This enables employees to work the hours they want to work, as long as they put the hours in, while managing multiple responsibilities, and in one participants’ opinion people work harder under this arrangement. In this case the focus necessarily shifts from hours to outcomes, for example,

(interview A) “why do we always have to think of a job as nine to five… the way we look at work itself has to be challenged and look at the outcomes that you want to achieve”,

(interview G) “manage your own time, just do what you need to do”.

138
However, one participant felt that more than just slogans about work-life balance were needed and that firms must implement flexible workplace programs of substance, for example:

(interview F) “if companies are serious about women in leadership, they will continue to work on strategies to improve flexibility in the workplace”.

Nevertheless, even when their organisations have flexible work policies for all employees, some participants mentioned the negative perceptions that can occur when women take advantage of flexible arrangements such as working from home as discussed previously. They reported that not all women can take up flexible working arrangements because of the negative perception or because they fear it will damage their careers, for example:

(interview M) “I believe it will be viewed negatively”
(interview A) “fear for their promotional opportunities, the way they are going to be perceived amongst their work colleagues, because they feel they’re going to be penalised for it”.

Two participants claimed that the burden for some women may be lifted once they reach senior roles, when they have more autonomy and control of their diaries, for example,

(interview L) “if you can get senior enough, I can then manage. I’m in control of my diary. I’m in control of when I come to work. I’m in control of when I can work from home”,
(interview J) “I’m a believer that the more senior you get, the more autonomy you have. I control my diary and I think it’s easier for me to say, you know what, it’s three o’clock, I can do school pick-up. I don’t have to ask anyone’s permission, I can just leave, and tell my E.A. not to put anything in my diary”.

While the flexibility and autonomy that often accompanies seniority was identified as an important success factor for senior women in this study, unfortunately this appeared to rely on reaching a certain level when they can be in control. If flexible workplace policies were not available to assist women as they climb through the ranks, it was reported that they may look for other options during the peak career development years when they have young children to care for, for example:

(interview L) “danger zone when you’re early thirties, you maybe haven’t quite got the seniority and the crunch comes because you have a young family or aging parents at the time in your career when you’re being asked to work very long hours and prove yourself… and if you can’t get through that bit you would say ‘what’s the other option for me?… How else can I earn a living? I’m going to go and do my own business because… that gives me back control”
(interview B) “I think the issue is lower down the ranks we lose women when they take that option, sometimes for that flexibility and work part-time”.

Additionally, some participants talked about wanting to establish flexibility prior to having children, when they start setting up their careers in readiness, for example by reducing travel commitments and operational responsibilities, or by trying to increase their flexibility, such as:
“They start planning themselves out of roles before they even get there, because they think, “I’ll want a job that sets me up to be a little bit more flexible when I do have children... I was doing that in my late twenties, thinking I would be pregnant by thirty... and we adopted our first child at thirty-five... So, I essentially lost seven years. If I had have known then... I might have looked at it differently, rather than starting to set myself up so far in advance”.

Nevertheless, flexibility emerged to be of value by both men and women, as described by one participant:

“in all our surveys over the last [number of years], we’ve had nearly 1800 people [surveyed], and flexibility in the workplace comes out number one for women and men. Flexibility is in the top three every time and women and men, it’s just as important for men as well to balance their lives... We’ve got one client who gives no flexibility, zero... and I actually believe they’re not getting the best people”.

4.5 Success factors for women aspiring to senior leadership

Many of the common success factors identified by the research participants, such as education, curiosity and work ethic, are not gender specific. Nevertheless, there were several key success factors identified in this study that have been the subject of much gender debate and are demonstrated below.

4.5.1 Confidence and the need to lean in

This research highlighted the importance of confidence as a success factor in reaching senior positions, with comments such as:

“I think a success factor has been my confidence and self-promoting, but in a positive way, not in an overconfident way or an arrogant way, but the confidence to say I want to be there, I want that role”,

“For me it’s been about just believing that I could and not letting people take the wind out of my sails, having a clear view about what I wanted to do and backing myself to go do it”.

Some women may already have a strong sense of confidence when they joined the workforce, such as:

“I suppose I classify myself as a fairly confident woman in the corporate world”,

“I grew up in an environment that encouraged me to push myself to be the very best that I could be, and to think big, and when I reflect on it, all along the way there were people who would say, you won’t be able to do that or you won’t be able to do this, and I kind of ignored, I had my own ideas on what I wanted to do and how I wanted to do it, and I just went after it”.

Nevertheless, it was felt that women may need to speak up for themselves more, for example,

“men are good self-promoters. We’re not good self-promoters... as women we know that”,

140
(interview J) “I think if women can be stronger about speaking about the good”.

Other opinions expressed that it may be necessary for women to adjust the way they self-promote to avoid negative gender stereotypes, such as:

(interview E) “we’ve got to be better at self-promoting in a positive way, so it doesn’t need to be in a bullish way or a manly way, it’s just being really confident to promote self and say, “I’m going to go after that””,

(interview J) “and we don’t have to justify everything, because sometimes we justify ourselves so much that it weakens the position – we don’t need to say sorry”.

One participant in an executive position in the financial sector felt that she didn’t need to self-promote, that her cultural background of being understated and letting her work speak for itself had been a key success factor in her career progression, saying

(interview O) “we’re very much about doing stuff, getting it done, and not making a song and dance around what we do…So I think in a way that has helped me survive in the corporate environment, because my work has spoken for itself”.

However, others did not find that to be the case:

(interview N) “women say, “if I put my head down, and work really, really hard, and do this piece of work, I’ll be noticed”, but no, it doesn’t work that way. It took me a while to work that out”.

Additionally, it seemed that for some, while self-confidence may have been important, it was insufficient on its own, with greater emphasis placed on having the belief and support of mentors or sponsors, which will be discussed further below.

(interview H) “more about having supportive people who had confidence in me, rather than my own level of confidence being a key factor in advancement”

(interview J) “it’s a combination – you need to have that confidence, but you need to have people believing in you through that sponsorship”.

4.5.2 Women need mentors and sponsors

While confidence was found to be important to women in senior careers, many also gained confidence from others

(interview E) “you do need people that believe in you, and we do as women need that a little more than men”.

This research therefore found that mentors played an important role in helping women develop self-confidence, for example,

(interview J) “it’s a combination – you need to have that confidence, but you need to have people believing in you through that sponsorship to say you can go and do this as well”,

(interview F) “you’ve got to have somebody who believes in you”.
Additionally, many of the participants had mentors who not only gave them confidence, but who also provided specific action-oriented career support, such as

(interview E) “I said, “why have you given it to me” and he said “because I know you’ll deliver. It’ll be tough but I know you’ll deliver”, so you do need people that believe in you”
(interview M) “I had a number of really great mentors, one who I’m still in touch with now, and brought me over here to [company] in a growth role”.

Therefore, confidence and mentoring may go hand in hand, as highlighted in this comment:
(interview G) “confidence was absolutely a factor but not the only factor. I have also had great mentors throughout my career”.

Certainly, the participants spoke candidly about one or more sponsors who had a significant impact on their careers. In one participant’s words:
(interview O) “I’ve had a variety of sponsors throughout my career. Some who have been male, others have been female, and without them, there’s no way I’d be where I am today… I couldn’t underemphasise the importance of those relationships in terms of just steering me in the right direction, exposing me to other opportunities that were kind of staring me in the face probably, but I wasn’t conscious that was something I could do”.

It emerged that women can be excluded from informal networks in the workplace and one participant said that
(interview L) “It would’ve been lovely to have had sponsors. I don’t know that I really necessarily had people in the organisations that I’ve been working at, who have been sponsors of mine. I think I could’ve been helped a lot more frankly and probably got further earlier in my career, if I had had those sponsors”.

Evidence suggest that because of the absence of women at senior levels the participants’ sponsors have often been male, for example:
(interview E) “I would say that I have been promoted by men, and I don’t mean from a job sense, I mean sponsored, coached, promoted by senior men. So that’s absolutely one of my success factors”,
(interview J) “I had really strong sponsorship from my managers (all male managers), in developing”,
(interview M) “and another male mentor as well, who really was fabulous in shaping the next stage in my career”.

Additionally, they have often had to seek them out, for example,
(interview E) “there aren’t enough females there to be sponsors so you better understand that pretty quickly… I do quite a bit of mentoring with young executive women… I say “I’m happy to be your mentor, but you’re going to need more than me. You are absolutely, in your organisation, going to need a male sponsor, go find that male””.

142
Nevertheless, evidence implies that it may be the seniority not the gender of the mentor or sponsor that matters most, meaning that in order to get ahead, people need sponsorship from the top, for example:

(interview F) “I do think it matters a lot if you don’t find good sponsorship along the way then I think it just gets more difficult because of the unintended biases. Because you’ve got to have somebody who believes in you who sits as part of the inner circle”,

(interview B) “whether you’re a man or a woman, everybody needs mentors who support in the organisation. Everyone needs someone above them who’s pulling them with them. I think it’s that simple”,

Having powerful sponsors also emerged to help protect one participant in a male-dominated environment, for example:

(interview G) “I had an amazing mentor, who was a director, and he really supported me. I can remember I used to get attacked a lot by members of the executive team… he protected me from a lot of that”.

4.5.3 Confidence regarding job requirements

Despite confidence emerging to be a success factor, participants believed that women may have less confidence when it comes to applying for roles or promotions, explaining that women need to fulfil 100% of the stated job requirements whilst men have the confidence to apply even if they do not, for example:

(interview K) “women need to fill 10 out of 10 job requirements whereas men will apply with only 6 ticked”.

This may highlight the different way that men and women view job requirements, for example,

(interview N) “the job specs are also a barrier for women, and it’s quite common that men will have 50% of our skill set and will say, “I can do it”, whereas, women will say, “I don’t have these aspects of the role””,

(interview N) “women always look at what they can’t do in a role versus everything they can bring to a role”,

(interview M) “I don’t know if it’s a theory or if its proven, but women will always look at what they can’t do in a role versus everything that they can bring to a role”.

One participant proposed that this could be addressed by encouraging more women to put themselves forward for roles:

(interview L) “we need to get better at being sponsors of women who won’t sell themselves. If men see a job description, if they tick half the boxes they say “oh yes, I can do it” whereas women will need to tick every box before they put their hand up. We need to just go and say, “put your hand up for this role, come and talk to us, come and interview for the role”. So a bit more deliberate sponsorship and talent moves for women I think has to happen”.
4.5.4 Positive female role models

It emerged in the research that having female role models was very important, and three of the participants mentioned Gail Kelly (ex-C.E.O. of Westpac) as an example. However, it is also important that women see female role models within their own organisations. Unfortunately, due to the lack of women in the most senior roles (see chapter 2, p 24), there are fewer women at the top who can act as role models:

(interview D) “not having those role models of women at the top means that if you’re sitting in a company and you’re struggling to get ahead, and you look up at the senior management team, and there are no women there, you’re being sent a really clear message that this is not a company that I can have a future with”.

Nevertheless, some of the participants were fortunate enough to work in organisations that have positive role models, such as:

(interview M) “we’ve got a female chairperson and two other very strong women on the board and I must say, I did find that very motivating”, and “I went to my first board meeting last week and I found that quite inspiring – we’ve got a female chairperson, and two other very strong women on the board and I did find that very motivating”.

Additionally, it was reported to be an important factor for women entering a new organisation:

(interview G) “a woman, who’d been there three weeks, and she’d had a pretty senior role at one of the big banks, and she’s got a really senior G.M. role in this company, and she said, “I just hope that [company] is really supportive of women”, and I said to her, “Have a look around you, more than 50% of the people in here are women, and they’re the senior leaders of the company” and she said, “yes, you’re right”.

The importance of role models appeared to extend beyond women just being seen in the most senior positions, some see it also as a responsibility, for example,

(interview J) “I was lucky to step up and do it myself and what I now do is – I think we need more women encouraging other women as well through that period to say you will get through it, and you can get promoted”,

(interview E) “I think that we senior female executives, once we are in positions of influence, we should be doing something about it and start with our own organisations”,

(interview L) “I certainly do try to do that with my team – tell them “hey I’m not going to be here tomorrow morning because I’ve got xyz to do”, or “I’m leaving early because…”, I think it gives other people permission to do the same”.

Nevertheless, being seen as a role model was perceived as coming at a cost as the women in senior roles were under scrutiny, held to higher standards and have additional expectations placed on them, for example,

(interview E) “Gail Kelly’s been a wonderful example. The interesting thing with Gail Kelly though, is she surrounded herself with the blokes. She had some good females at senior executive, and she never promoted them, so I think that’s quite telling”,
(interview B) “what I have seen is that men may go out to their network and refer friends in. I don’t necessarily think that a lot of senior women always make the same effort. I’ve talked to some friends and they’ve actually said that some of the very senior women like being in that very male dominated [environment], and they don’t actually give [other women] any favours to help them up... So there’s some negativity there”.

(interview C) “there are different standards for women who step into leadership roles and often the people who can become particularly nasty about that are other women too. It’s not because women are all evil and nasty, but they do have all the flaws that other human beings have, and I think we hold them to higher standards”.

Therefore, it seems that senior women are in a precarious position – if they appoint on merit, they are criticised by women for not showing preference for other women.

(interview B) “Women work on merit – so they will appoint the best person”.

It may also be important for senior women to demonstrate that they can juggle family and work responsibilities successfully, for example:

(interview M) “I very much see myself, that I need to be role modelling what I’ve spoken to you about today”

(interview F) “[company] was a really forward-thinking place... and there were lots of examples of women who were having kids and going on mat leave and coming back, and flexibility”.

(interview L) “if senior leaders are shown to be juggling responsibilities and doing it in a way where they can still achieve outcomes at work but also equally spend time with their families or whatever it is they’re juggling, I do think that that’s important”.

Equally, it was thought to be important for male leaders to role model managing work and family priorities at senior leadership level, for example,

(interview F) “role models are very important, but they can come from men consciously acting as role models for women on issues that are important to them (like work live balance) as well as women”.

### 4.6 Gender balance in senior leadership as a strategic priority

The participants in this research were generally very engaged on the issue of gender balance in senior leadership and felt that improving gender diversity in senior leadership should be a strategic priority for Australian organisations in spite of the fact that it is a challenging topic:

(interview A) “it’s a very complex issue”.

All but one of the research participants felt that organisations should be making gender diversity in senior leadership a strategic priority, yet they also felt that many organisations do not accept that there is an issue, as one participant commented,

(interview E) “you’ve got to have the will, and you absolutely have to acknowledge that there is an issue. I don’t think organisations are actually prepared to acknowledge this as an issue”.
This could imply that organisations lack the impetus to address it, as another commented:

(interview J) “I honestly just think people don’t recognise there’s an issue. I think there’s no consequences… and I think it’s not a priority because if you really want something and you make it a priority, you make it happen, and for corporations I think a lot of it is lip service and it’s not necessarily a priority”.

The participants also felt that many organisations are just paying it lip service, for example:

(interview J) “no one talks about it in their annual report. No-one reports on it”,
(interview O) “a lip service approach, ticking a box”,
(interview A) “I will write it into a business plan, and I will write we’re doing these things from HR perspective but it’s just not all working” because they are just “giving it lip service”,
(interview D) “it really is still rhetoric and it’s not core strategy”.

It was highlighted that companies may feel compelled to be seen to be addressing the issue for the sake of their reputation, for example,

(interview A) I think organisations are embracing it much more from the PR point of view because they have to be seen to be doing it, otherwise they’re not being seen to be a good corporate citizen and their reputation is damaged somewhat”.

However, it was perceived by the participants that most companies are doing little more and the fact that they are not allocating any resources means that it is not seen as a strategic priority:

(interview D) “you’d be hard pressed to find a listed company now that wouldn’t be able to demonstrate a piece of paper somewhere whether it’s in their annual report that says this is a strategic priority for us now, what you need to look at is investment and budget… because they have no budget for it”.

In addition to the lack of acknowledgement of the issue, another reason given by one participant was that companies are not investing in addressing it because there are no penalties, for example:

(interview J) “there’s actually no consequences”,
(interview A) “I think on the surface a lot of the top 500 Australian companies would say that they are making it a strategic priority if you asked them. If you went in there and actually spoke to their C.E.O. or spoke to their board, they would give you the rhetoric, that yes, we are seriously doing something in this area, however, I think that the reality is that we don’t have the teeth, in terms of the Workplace Gender Equality Act, there’s not much punishment for organisations that don’t do it”.

It was also perceived that some organisations are influencing the statistics to portray a more positive message than reality, for example,

(interview D) “they talk about the number of women in their senior management and they have a lovely brochure which says they’re on track to meet those targets that they’ve put in place, but if you look at the fine print on the back, they have included their retail branches and said if you’re a bank manager, no matter how small your bank is, you’re a senior manager. So, of course if we start to do it that way, you can realise that it’s quite farcical to
start to say that a branch manager in Gordon is part of the senior management team of [major bank]."

The participants were also very clear on why they felt their organisations should be making gender balance in senior leadership a strategic priority. These reasons include better decision-making, and diversity of thinking, for example,

(interview M) “I think the diversity argument for better decision making in business is a main reason”

(interview L) “having diversity of thought and having different voices at the table… that I bring just a different perspective and that’s okay and that’s actually great, and actually we can do bigger and better things because of that”

(interview N) “I think, strategically, it’ll bring a new dimension of thinking”.

However, the participants also identified that organisations need to have more than one token woman in order to achieve diversity of thought, for example:

(interview L) “having one is always a problem, you never want to be the only one. When you start to get more than two women in a room, you can actually start to change the conversation”

(interview I) “all too often what appears to be support is just having the token female position”.

Another reason identified was to provide organisations with a better understanding of the customers who in many cases are predominantly women, for example,

(interview E) “this was always a male dominated retail business, they never thought about it as a woman shopper. They thought about it as a manufacturing retail business and what I’m trying to really bring to the business is our customer. So thinking about who our customer really is, the customer that we have for life – she, it’s not he!”

(interview J) “their board is full of men, and I said half of your clients are females… They honestly did not think there were any issues. Half of your members who come to your club to wine, dine and eat are females. Do you not think that you should have a female [on your board]?”

Additionally, it was felt that Australia is wasting its talent and investment in education for women, for example,

(interview C) “this country has wasted a lot of its talent. It doesn’t get an R.O.I. on its educational investment because we’re ranked number one in the world for education of young women, but we’re not getting a return on that”

(interview A) “50% of the talent pool is actually not being used effectively and we are actually underutilising a very important part of the talent pool and we’re not retaining, keeping, nurturing or developing 50% of our employees”.

Only one of the participants did not agree that gender diversity in senior leadership should be a strategic priority, citing merit as the reason, for example:
(interview I) “I think it’s up to every individual. If you want to progress through a company, it’s up to you... I’d rather people get there on their own merit”.

This opinion may have been influenced by the fact that her organisation had a female C.E.O., female chairperson and other female board members so there did not appear to be a need for change. However, despite the view that it is up to the individual, she did recognise an issue with the new corporate leadership of her organisation:

(interview I) “we were recently acquired by a U.S. company, but if you go to their website and see the leadership team, you’ll see the white old guys and the one female H.R. You just look at this and roll your eyes”.

### 4.6.1 Board sponsorship and C.E.O. support – it starts at the top

Most of the research participants felt that in order to improve gender diversity in senior leadership, it needs to start at the top, for example,

(interview G) “it’s got to come from the top”,
(interview E) “it’s in the board goals. It started with the chairman. The Chairman has made it a priority to get more women on the board, and they are on there now, and that’s just happened in 12 months”
(interview L) “board sponsorship is really important cause you know, C.E.O.’s do listen to boards”
(interview F) “having a strong C.E.O. who wants to make a difference, who is passionate about it and is prepared to stand up and hold themselves to account, who ensures that their executive team is also committed and lined up and prepared to stand to account”.
(interview A) “having that senior (both board and senior executive) accountability and buy-in right through from the strategic objectives of the organisations, to the performance plans and K.P.I.s of your senior execs and board to actually embracing it at that level and then working it through, because to create the change that was needed, it actually needed to happen from the top”.

Another participant mentioned the success of the “male champions of change” program.

(interview A) “they’ve made a personal commitment, these C.E.O.s, of top Australian organisations to generate change, both at an organisational level and a personal level”.

Yet participants identified that there are still those at the top who need convincing, even if they do not want to admit to it, for example:

(interview O) “I think our C.E.O. himself probably struggles a bit with the concept of diversity, and just what his role should be in relation to diversity”
(interview A) “you talk to most men and they won’t want to tell you that they don’t see this as being something that they support, but I think in reality, the level of support from the men in what they’re truly willing to do and the changes they’re truly willing to make is questionable”.
Therefore they felt it was important that organisation leaders are convinced about the business benefits of gender diversity:

(interview L) “I think having the senior leadership team really believe that diversity is good for business performance is critical. People still don’t really believe that statistic that having more women makes your performance better… I think a lot of C.E.O.s at the moment are doing it because it’s the right thing to be into diversity… But if C.E.O. knows it’s going to make his company perform better, of course he’s going to do it”.

The research identified that if the belief in the business benefit is there, then the participants believe it will become an actionable priority:

(interview F) “it’s pretty simple, the C.E.O. has to be passionate about it and believe that it’s going to make a fundamental difference to shareholders, and then the executive team has to back it up, and then they have to be prepared to do the things that create a different pipeline of talent”.

Indeed, it was felt that organisation heads have a crucial but simple role to play and there are some men who are very supportive, such as:

(interview C) “I remember hearing [male] who was the C.E.O. of [major bank] at the time saying, “I’ll tell you what you need to do, promote more women”, and it’s a very simple”
(interview E) “there ARE some men that I think don’t have an unconscious bias at all, I think they actually are very big promoters of women – there’s just not a lot of them”.

Additionally, the participants felt that it was important for gender diversity goals to be visible and linked to remuneration:

(interview O) “it’s got to be scorecards, because the bonus is attached to it”,
(interview D) “because if you’re a C.E.O. of a big company, they still don’t have K.P.I.s that affect their bonuses, that affect their bottom line around gender balance. So why would they do anything about it, other than talk about it? At the moment there’s no penalties for not doing it, and there is no shame”.

Some participants felt it might be possible to appeal to male C.E.O.s’ sense of fairness, for example,

(interview J) “men have got daughters and I ask them “do you want your two daughters growing up in this world where they get paid less, they don’t get as many opportunities, their careers are hamstrung?”, and once you can relate it to something that’s close to them and they can engage with, it’s funny to see the change in their behaviour”.

However while they might relate to the values, it might still not move them to take action within their own organisations:

(interview A) “you look at the amount of C.E.O.s who have daughters, and you ask them, “would you want your daughter to be a leader of tomorrow if she wants to?” “Absolutely!” “So you would drive, put in place the systems and structures to enable that?” “Absolutely!” “But look at your business structure, that’s not enabling that to happen.” “Oh well it’s different here”. So they don’t seem to be able to separate their own personal experience and views on this to what they apply to their business place”.
4.6.2 H.R. processes for selection, development and promotion are critical

The participants identified that if organisations want to improve gender diversity in senior leadership then they need to have looked at their H.R. processes for selection, development and promotion, for example:

(interview F) “taken apart the key processes that drive appointment, promotion, and selection for development programs”

(interview E) “you’ve got to be prepared to get women to the table, to select the right person for the role” and the same participant also believes “it takes time as you need to have higher yielding promotion for women then over time there will be more balance. Eventually it will be self-sustaining as ‘like attracts like’”.

The participants felt that organisations often make excuses for not appointing more senior women, for example,

(interview M) “the guy who headed up all of the operations … he was recruiting for senior roles … and he said to me, [name], not one woman has applied”

(interview O) “you still hear from very senior people, “Oh, we don’t have women with the competence to do x role. We had to appoint a bloke because we didn’t have any satisfactory female candidates”.

Some of the participants were willing to challenge the recruitment process, for example:

(interview M) “I said, well, have you gone and tapped any women on the shoulder? I think that men have to not just rely on the typical processes of recruitment, i.e. waiting for C.V.s to come in”,

(interview O) “and what’s your narrow tunnel vision that you couldn’t see a woman who could fit or be developed into a particular role?”.

The participants also felt that recruitment and executive search consultants needed to be challenged to broaden their search criteria to identify an equal number of male and female candidates, for example:

(interview F) “every time you go talk to a headhunter about filling a new role that you are insisting that they bring a candidate pool that is men and women, and when you look at candidates for internal promotion that you insist that there is a list that is men and women, it’s 50:50 and that appointments on balance are made from the standpoint of it’s 50:50 and there’s an ‘if not then why not’ dynamic at play in the way discussions are taken”.

Another participant recommended that boards should demand a diverse candidate pool when making senior appointments:

(interview N) “I certainly think having a board that is asking those questions about when senior appointments come, why aren’t there any women? Let’s see some diversity, let’s have some other people on the short list. Why are we going for the same guy that looks exactly like the guy that we had before?”
As well as the need to include women in the candidate pool, another participant discussed specifically targeting certain roles to women to try and address the imbalance:

(interview H) “making sure that the short list includes the diverse group, so that there’s at least consideration, and then, looking at specific roles – which ones can we target senior women in?”.

This may also be relevant when developing women in the organisation, as another participant mentioned:

(interview L) “targeting the women who are up and coming and making sure that they know that they’re valued and supported and there’s a career path”.

Another point that was discussed was the need to ensure that recruiting teams are gender balanced, as one of the participants highlighted:

(interview F) “that means that the panels for selection in roles are balanced so there’s men and women in the panels”

Also it was felt to be important that those on the panel are be trained to recognise unconscious bias, for example,

(interview H) “we’ve really tried hard to get equal representation from a gender perspective. And a lot of training around the unconscious bias”.

(interview F) “you have to ensure you have no unconscious bias in the selection… you have to make it OK for people to say, “why not her, why him and not her and why not both””.

Additionally, participants discussed the need to make H.R. processes more objective, and structured interview processes were mentioned as an important way to reduce unconscious bias, for example,

(interview C) “stop using highly subjective measures around recruitment and promotion, which is what they are. Again we kid ourselves they’re highly objective, they’re quite the reverse”

(interview D) “I’ll recruit into a professional services role and the partner will say, “I’ll just start off having a coffee with her on my own” which is just the worst thing that can happen from a bias point of view. Whereas in government you’ve got the opposite, there’s a very clear structure, it’s very visible, there’s a lot of accountability, there’s a lot of paperwork, and that’s why we’ve had reduced pay inequality and the numbers have been better because we know that’s what works”.

One participant recounted her experience of the public sector working to address bias in performance assessment:

(interview C) “also the public sector, at a state level but also in federal public service, there was a real effort to have a look at the way the people were assessed, their performance appraisal systems, the actual meaning of merit”.

Indeed, one participant felt that structured approaches may also avoid the situations where appointments are made through existing “boys’ club” networks that were discussed earlier, such as:
(interview B) “a lot of board appointments never go public and you know who does the searches, who does the interviewing?”

However it was felt that even if the recruitment intake numbers are improved through these measures, it will take time to improve the gender balance in senior leadership, for example,

(interview E) “we’re still only at the point of a graduate program that is balanced, and we make sure that we promote both male and female into that program”.

It was also felt that working on the pipeline might be too slow and so some affirmative action may need to be taken to address the imbalance, for example:

(interview F) “the promotion mechanisms need to all be higher yielding for women than men, then all the intakes need to be higher yielding for women than men, and then in time you’ll get the balance back where it should be”.

(interview F) “create that much faster pathway through for talented young women to get to very senior positions”,

(interview G) “courses in this organisation that are specifically aimed at women, and promoting women for leadership potential”

(interview N) “we’ve got a program for 12 women, and it’s been a huge success. We get an outsider facilitator to manage it, but it’s all about leadership qualities”.

Other organisations seem to be trying to design inclusive programs rather than just for women, for example:

(interview J) “we’ve actually got a leadership program happening at the moment and one of the things were really conscious of was making sure we have equal amounts of male and female representation”,

(interview H) “it’s a group of young managers…starting to set a vision and contributing to the board …he’s formed this group with 50% females and 50% men, because he wants it to be the workforce of the future as well”.

4.6.3 Reporting and targets are key to success

The majority (13/15) of the participants were in favour of targets and reporting because measuring and reporting on business objectives fosters more focus resulting in improved outcomes, for example:

(interview H) “I think this helps to improve outcomes. Anything being measured and reported on, gets more focus”.

Nevertheless, only one of the research participants worked for an organisation with specific targets and while they have been making progress, it is not without its challenges:

(interview F) “The pace is too slow. I look at our experience – I’ve been at [company] for five years and for five years we’ve been focused on it, but we’re nowhere near the targets that we’ve set for ourselves. We want to be at 40% minimum but that’ll take us another three to five years to get to that from 35% now”.

152
There was no consensus from the research participants on what the right target should be. Some favoured aiming for 50:50, while others had more modest ideals of 30%, but all agreed it would take time, for example:

(interview L) “clearly we should be aiming for 50/50. I don’t think that’s realistic but in the next ten to fifteen years”,
(interview N) “if the organisations took any of this seriously, I don’t see any reason why within 10 years we can’t get to 50%”.
(interview G) “I would have thought within 15 years, max, that you’d have to be up around the 30%”.

Another view expressed was that targets need to be achievable and may need to be adjusted according to where the organisation is currently at, for example:

(interview J) “I think an aspirational target which can equally be damaging if you set those targets and you don’t reach them and then everyone gives up. It’s also relative so for an organisation who’s already progressive maybe it’s about maintaining or not growing as quickly or some organisations like mining where they’ve got bigger leaps and boundaries to jump”.

The participants highlighted the difficulty in achieving targets because there are no penalties attached, and that incentives might be needed to motivate organisations to achieve targets, for example:

(interview M) “what are the consequences if companies don’t do it… I think people have tried enough stuff behaviorally… I do wonder though, are those targets tied to their remuneration because if they are, they would be self-motivated to make that happen”… if you put down that this people’s you know, bonus is not going to be paid unless they have X percent of women. They’ll work to that in the same way as they’re working towards their [other K.P.I.s]”.

Despite not having formal targets, one participant’s organisation appeared to be actively trying to increase the numbers of women in senior leadership:

(interview H) “even though we don’t set targets as such, there are a couple of roles where I know that the senior executives have said, “we’re targeting a female for that role.” So, they’re going all around the world to try to find somebody. Not the most senior line role, but a senior line role that we may find a female to fill. We’re trying to do a bit more of that”.

4.6.4 Will quotas be necessary?

The issue of quotas was an interesting one, with all participants expressing strong opinions, however the cohort was divided in its support for quotas. The research found that in general, women in the most senior roles who had made it to the top of their organisations did not support the idea of quotas, stating
(interview E) “I hate the whole idea of quotas and all of that, I hate it because I think anything forced is actually not going to help sustainable change. I don’t think it will be sustainable change”

(interview F) “I would like to think that they will not be necessary – there are as many or more downsides as benefits from affirmative action quotas. I don’t know any women who are actually running companies or big business units that think this is a good idea”.

The main argument against quotas given by the participants was that women would not be appointed on merit and organisations would not be able to employ the best person for the job. Participants believed that quotas would lead to under-qualified women being appointed, for example:

(interview I) “a situation where women are getting into the roles just because they’re women, and they actually don’t have the level of experience needed or the skills needed”

(interview N) “I have a problem with the quota because of that. There aren’t that many women to draw upon, that’s why the few that are there are given ten different board seats”

(interview B) “what you’re going to have is the same bunch of women getting rotated, rather than increasing the pool which I think everybody’s intention is… because you actually need that skillset. You can’t suddenly put 50% of women on all these boards who’ve never been on them irrespective of their management skills”.

(interview G) “once you start being prescriptive, people do it because it’s legislated, and then it will just cause issues… the women then have to fight to get the respect, because people look at them as if to say, “you’re only there because you have to be””

(interview I) “how would you know whether you got there on your own merit and they actually chose you or invited you because of your level of experience and what you could offer, versus we needed to fill that quota for the women and you were the closest thing we could find... I’d rather people get there on their own merit.

Nevertheless, others counter the merit argument by pointing to the fact that there are men in leadership positions who may not deserve to be there, for example,

(interview L) “when we get as many bad women in leadership positions as bad men, then we’ll maybe hit the jackpot… Most of the women who are in leadership positions are fantastic because we’ve had to be, to get there”.

Many participants went on to discuss their dilemma about rejecting quotas because of the slow pace of change, for example,

(interview G) “it’s a dichotomy really, by the same token, it doesn’t seem to be happening by itself. It’s a huge challenge”

(interview E) “I think without having quotas there is a problem though, so it’s a bit of a dichotomy too”.

A number of those who expressed their dislike of quotas were starting to see they may be necessary or inevitable, for example:

(interview L) “I’m not a big fan of quotas but if it’s going to take that to get us where we need to get to, then let’s do it... because the pace has been so slow, and it feels like we’re going backwards”
(interview L) “everybody wants to get there on merit…but we need to be more deliberate”,

Even those who feel quotas are not necessary because their organisations have achieved balance without them, may still support them in some cases:

(interview H) “quotas are not absolutely necessary. We have achieved gender balance at our Board level without quotas. But it may be helpful in some areas”.

Indeed a number of the women interviewed have warmed to the idea of quotas over time because of the slow pace of change they have seen in Australia, for example:

(interview J) “I’m not a big fan of quotas but if it’s going to take that to get us where we need to get to, then let’s do it because we can’t. The pace is laughable, it’s crazy”

(interview M) “I’m a big proponent of affirmative action and quotas. I never used to be. I went to a dinner and the topic was quotas, and this woman in her 60’s stood up and she said “I’ve been coming to these events for forty years now and I just think we’ve got to try something else because this is the only thing that I’ve ever seen to have any evidence in actually moving the dial.” I think we’ve tried all this other stuff. I don’t think that anything else from a behavioral perspective is going to move the dial”.

Another woman became convinced about the need for quotas because of the bias she has seen in the workplace:

(interview J) “I was against quotas and targets and now I’ve totally changed my mind as I get older and the more cynical and skeptical you get because you see things happen and you see people actively being discriminated or not given the same opportunities”.

However another participant highlighted that many men do not support quotas because they do not believe that bias exists:

(interview M) “I’ve had this discussion with many men of my age who have very similar careers and career paths, and they’re so anti-quotas. They don’t believe the bias exists”.

Despite the perception of quotas being quite negative, some see it as a necessary tool to effect change, for example:

(interview A) “if you used that word quotas two or three years ago, people would have absolutely chopped your head off, you would have been on the front pages of Sydney Morning Herald… it’s got this terrible stigma on it where in fact all it is, is a business tool… because you can’t expect the system to change itself, I think there needs to be something that helps to drive the cultural change, and it needs penalties definitely”.

Several participants felt that government legislation would be necessary, for example,

(interview M) “I think it needs to be done through the government essentially, I do. Actually, I think it needs to be done through the government. I don’t think it should be done by companies”

(interview C) “there has been a lot of discussion about whether we need legislated quotas, and I, like a lot of other people, probably think that yes, we do need to do something like that because I can’t see the change happening otherwise”.

155
Even if legislated quotas are not favoured, there may be other incentives that can be implemented, for example,

(interview B) “I think if you look at the U.S., they give tax incentives for women and minorities and I think that is probably the only way you’d change Australia, is to affect their bottom line. It’s not going to happen unless there’s a financial benefit and the shareholders are then saying why aren’t we taking advantage of this? It’s a big plus in America and they take it very seriously and global procurement directors are driving all that at suppliers and I’m sure it would be the same for board appointments”.

Other participants spoke about the missed opportunity for the Government to implement similar change through the Gender Workplace Equality Act:

(interview C) “when the legislation was reviewed and revamped and relaunched in fact late last year, unfortunately a couple of things that had been in the original framework were watered down and one of them was the government procurement measures, where you had to reach a certain level with your gender figures to get both government work and government grants. We need to be much more straightforward and say if you don’t reach this, then you’re not eligible for a government contract or a government grant”.

For those participants who strongly support quotas, their rationale was about forcing change and they discussed examples of where quotas have worked, such as:

(interview A) “I think that unless we do something, force some change in some way, like quotas as a tool to do that, I just think that we’re going to keep going on as we are… Norway obviously did it with their boards, and that was the Finance Minister who actually did that, it was coming from a financial point of view, and it’s 40% women on boards, 40% men on boards and 20% other. They did that almost 10 years ago and they’re seeing now in studies, that organisations that have got more women on their boards have got a better bottom line, better organisational culture, all those kinds of things, so obviously the evidence is there”.

(interview D) “if you look politically in government, they’ve had quotas in the Labor party, and every time you have quotas and affirmative action, the numbers jump, and it just becomes normal”.

Nevertheless, several participants discussed their concern about the inability of quotas to effect change at the executive level and below, for example,

(interview L) “it’s one thing to have lots of women on boards but for me the important thing is in the executive leadership, that’s where we need the women”.

(interview E) “there’ve been so many promoters of particularly with top A.S.X. companies to say they need balance on their boards, they need balance in their management teams, and I think they thought that starting with balance on boards or quotas on boards would get there but at the executive level nothing changes”.

(interview N) “everyone is focused on the quotas on boards… the focus needs to be more on getting women into the executive roles… So, the problem comes back to getting them pushing through their careers, get them into C.E.O. seats, and we won’t have a problem with the merit side of it”.

Therefore several mentioned that quotas need to be implemented at the executive level,
(interview A) “I think you can’t just do it at a board level, you absolutely have to do it at a senior exec level and then it needs to be rolled out through the rest of the organisation. We can’t just do our boards and think that will fix it”

(interview D) “I really think we need quotas in senior management with a clearly defined definition of what that is, not boards, I think boards are a big red herring that everyone talks about. I think that line management in the ASX200, would have a huge impact. Because the women are there, and this is one of the problems that often comes out – they say, “we tried really hard and there are no women”. Well it’s a complete myth, there are lots of women but they’re all sitting neglected at that C.E.O. minus 3 level struggling to get ahead. Having quotas at a board level makes very little impact on the company”.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the themes and subthemes that were identified through the convergent interviewing process and are explored through the words of the research participants. It discussed the barriers that senior women face in attaining leadership roles, the challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities, the factors they identified as important to their success, and the approaches organisations may be taking to make gender balance in senior leadership a strategic priority.

All but one of the participants described the unconscious bias that remains evident in Australian workplaces, particularly against mothers, and the biases that conversely assist their male counterparts to reach senior levels more easily. Additionally there is a lack of senior women role models, particularly those who are visibly managing the balancing act between family responsibilities and careers. Recognition of the existence of such biases appears to remain a challenge in Australian workplaces and organisations may need to take proactive steps to address them as many of these biases are deeply entrenched in Australian society.

Another key issue discussed by senior women was the balancing act that many women face in managing family responsibilities alongside career demands. This reflected a number of issues, including the challenge of taking time out of the workforce to give birth, the fact that many Australian women continue to bear the greater burden of household and caring responsibilities outside of work compared to men, the importance of having a supportive partner, and the benefits that flexible workplaces can have for women to address those family demands. Nevertheless, the research participants identified missed networking opportunities that result from those demands, and that their male counterparts often do not face.

Several success factors were identified and explored, including the contemporary debate about the importance of women demonstrating confidence and “leaning in”, the need for women to not just engage with mentors, but more importantly very senior sponsors who can support women’s career
aspirations, and the importance of women having the confidence to seek senior leadership roles regardless of whether they fulfil 100% of the advertised role requirements.

Finally, the issues relating to gender balance in senior leadership as a strategic priority were explored, including the importance of board and C.E.O. sponsorship and support, the H.R. processes for selection, recruitment and development that address the inherent biased assessment of merit, the effectiveness of setting targets and reporting on them, and the more controversial area of mandatory quotas. Chapter 5 will present the discussion of these issues in the context of the published literature, in order to answer the research question: a) “what is the state of gender diversity in senior leadership in Australian corporations?” and b) “what factors may be preventing them from making gender diversity in senior leadership a key strategic priority? Chapter 5 focuses particularly on the key areas of inherent bias and how it can be reduced, and the need to support women’s career development through flexibility and the availability of career sponsors.
5 Discussion of study results

Figure 18. Outline of Chapter 5.

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 will discuss the findings described in the previous chapter in order to answer the research question: a) “what is the state of gender diversity in senior leadership in Australian corporations?” and b) “what factors may be preventing them from making gender diversity in senior leadership a key strategic priority?” Regarding the first part of the research question, the insights from the research participants in this study suggest that few Australian corporations are making gender diversity in senior leadership a key strategic priority and with respect to the second part of the question, the underlying factors identified in the research will be examined and explored further in this chapter. This chapter will also discuss the limitations and key assumptions in the research.

The research found overwhelming evidence that the main barrier to women in senior leadership is unconscious bias and three important factors emerged: 1) “unconscious gender bias” that perpetuates the dominance of males in leadership, 2) the “motherhood bias” that results from the intersection of gender bias in the workplace with women’s roles as mothers, and 3) “affinity bias” that gives rise to a boys’ club culture that provides men with sponsorship opportunities that women are excluded from.
It was also identified that balancing career with family responsibilities creates a challenge for women relating to 1) disruption to careers due to “time out of the workforce” during maternity leave periods, 2) “caring responsibilities” that result in a significant burden for women that retain the bulk of these responsibilities in our society, and 3) the importance of workplace “flexibility”, particularly during career development years before women are senior enough to be able to manage their own diaries.

It emerged that there were several important success factors for women aspiring to senior leadership: 1) “confidence” to aim for senior roles even if women do not meet 100% of the stated job requirements, 2) “mentors and sponsors” who can boost women’s confidence and provide them with career-specific support that may help to overcome the unintended biases discussed earlier and 3) the importance of “positive female role models” who demonstrate career success, especially when balancing family responsibilities, is achievable.

In addition to these factors, there is unanimous agreement from the research participants that gender balance in senior leadership should be a strategic priority for companies because it is in the best interests of Australian businesses. The research identified that gender balance in senior leadership as a strategic priority should be underpinned by 1) support from the top in the form of “board sponsorship and C.E.O. support”, 2) objective and structured “H.R. processes” that support recruitment, development and promotion of women into senior roles, 3) “reporting and targets” so that “what gets measured gets done”, and 4) while not a favoured approach of all participants, “quotas” may sometimes be necessary to improve the gender balance in senior leadership.

These key findings and participants’ perceived strategic priorities will now be explored in more detail under four headings: “unintended bias is a barrier to women in senior leadership”; “the challenges of balancing family and work”; “success factors for women aspiring to senior leadership” and “gender balance in senior leadership as a strategic priority.”
5.2 Unintended bias is a barrier to women in senior leadership

The biggest obstacle identified in this research to women reaching senior leadership in corporate Australia in more balanced numbers was found to be “unconscious bias”. The model below illustrates the key biases that this research identified: 1) gender bias that was perceived to exist because of incongruity between women and male stereotypical leadership attributes, meaning that women’s leadership skills may be devalued compared to their male colleagues and may even result in penalties against women who display the same leadership characteristics as men; 2) the intersection with bias against mothers, termed the “maternal wall” that results from societal stereotypes about mothers that reduce women’s status; and 3) affinity bias that fosters the “boys’ club” culture, which provides men with important career sponsorship, whereas women are excluded from the “club” and miss out on important networking opportunities, not only because they are not part of the “inner circle”, but also because these activities may also conflict with their family responsibilities as depicted in Figure 19. These important research findings will now be explored in more depth below.

Figure 19. Biases that affect women aspiring to senior leadership (Source: researcher’s own model).
5.2.1 Unconscious gender bias

While this research found that overt bias exists, for example, in the use of blatant sexist language, it was identified that unconscious bias may be a key obstacle to women advancing to the most senior levels in Australian companies. Yet the participants found that male co-workers deny it exists, instead blaming other factors for women not making it to leadership positions. These findings are consistent with Banaji’s (2013) research that suggests while most of us believe we are unbiased and we can make rational and fair decisions in the workplace in the best interests of our organisations, in fact we mostly fall short. Interestingly, some women in the study also admitted to their own biases. The impact of the unconscious gender bias identified in this research, as shown in Figure 19, is supported by the literature that demonstrates it can have a profound effect on the number of women who can reach the top of their organisations (Martell et al., 1996).

The women in this study were reflective of the significant gains that have been made in women’s educational achievement and participation in non-traditional careers. Yet despite these advancements, it was found that women still have to overcome perceptions by C.E.O.s and recruiters that men are more suited to leadership roles. This is supported by the findings of a recent meta-analysis by Genat et al. (2012), that unconscious bias leads to women being consistently devalued in the workplace compared to men, that they are less likeable, less competent, less hirable, less desirable as leaders, and less likely to succeed in their careers, consistent with Goldberg’s (1968) seminal work on gender evaluation bias.

As discussed in chapter 2 (p 62), the extant literature attempts to explain this phenomenon by examining the role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). For example, the perceived mismatch or incongruity between traditional male leadership roles and attributes, and stereotypical female social roles and characteristics, is argued by scholars to lead to women being seen less favourably regardless of whether they display stereotypical leadership behaviour. As identified by the participants in this research study, these societal stereotypes and attitudes about women are held by both men and women and while “think manager-think male” attitudes may have decreased over time (Koenig et al., 2011), the effect is still found by to be greater for men than women. A bias by men at the top of organisations was identified in this research study and was perceived by the participants to include men who may think they are supporting gender balance in leadership but in reality, they have unconscious bias. Many of the research participants who held senior roles in male-dominated industries continue to experience these attitudes, despite the fact that Genat et al. (2012) hypothesised that as more women take on traditionally masculine roles, the evaluation bias should decrease. Consistent with the experiences of the research participants who believe that men at the top of their organisations have an underlying perception that women are not competent to
reach senior leadership, Koenig et al. (2011) found the “think manager-think male” attitudes are greater for high-status leadership roles. Therefore this perceived “lack of fit” (Heilman, 1983) between women and senior leadership tends to be perpetuated. The participants found that it not only impacted hiring decisions, it also meant that they have had to work harder than their male counterparts to prove themselves worthy. These experiences may lead to the disillusionment described by the participants when they found that merit is not the only factor important to advancement and concurs with the findings in the literature (Fox, 2017; Sealy, 2010). Nevertheless the research also identified that some C.E.O.s are making a conscious effort to overcome their biases as with programs such as the Male Champions of Change (Male Champions of Change, 2017).

The perceived mismatch with leadership also resulted in participants facing sabotage from others in the workplace, which is aligned with the findings of Rudman and Fairchild (2004). This also supports that women who behave in a more masculine way that is more consistent with stereotypical leadership traits such as ambition, assertiveness, decisiveness and self-reliance, may face backlash in the form of negative social or financial penalties (Heilman et al., 2004; Rudman, 1998).

It was also identified in this research that unconscious bias can affect the way in which feedback is delivered to women which could hamper their development, reflecting research that women receive less feedback on business outcomes than men but much more criticism of communication styles and “tone”, which also supports the findings in the literature (Correll & Simard, 2016; Snyder, 2014).

5.2.2 The motherhood bias

This research highlighted the stigma for women around child-bearing age, as well as the additional unconscious bias that women experience when they become mothers, described by Crosby et al. (2004) as the “maternal wall” (as shown in Figure 19). The concern from employers that women might want to take maternity leave was highlighted, but this bias also affected participants without children and even women who admitted to being post-menopausal. Even though the meta-analysis by Genat et al. (2012) failed to take the motherhood bias into account, research by Correll et al. (2007) used the same paradigm as Goldberg’s (1968) work on gender evaluation bias, but with the variable of parenthood instead of gender and found that mothers face multiple simultaneous penalties in the workplace with mothers being held to stricter standards, considered to be less competent and offered lower starting salaries. They were also viewed as less committed and less suitable for management training and promotions. This may be explained by expectation states theory which explains inequality based on status characteristics, and is likely a result of motherhood
reducing women’s status (Berger et al., 1977; Berger et al., 1980; Fiske et al., 2002), leading to the perception that mothers are less competent (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

The research participants also discussed the assumptions about how women will behave because they are mothers supporting the theory on maternal wall descriptive bias (Bornstein et al., 2012), such that women’s actions that affirm motherhood stereotypes (e.g. absences from the workplace, mistakes) tend to be noticed, remembered, and used to draw conclusions, for example, that they are minding children instead of working. Like other unconscious biases, both men and women sometimes share biases against mothers with one of the senior women interviewed expressing her frustration with the amount of time that her female managers with young children needed to take time off to care for them when they were sick. Additionally the participants faced prescriptive bias (Bornstein et al., 2012) about how they should behave because they are mothers when they were asked about who is looking after the children in the holidays, something that is never asked of their husbands.

On the other hand, behaviour that is inconsistent with those stereotypes tends to be overlooked or forgotten (working late, successes). This is reflective of expectation states theory (Berger et al., 1977), which leads to men’s successes being attributed to talent and their errors to external circumstances beyond their control, while the reverse is true for women (Foschi, 2000; Ridgeway, 2001; Williams, 2003). Expectation states theory could explain why one of the research participants was reluctant to be open about her family responsibilities and take advantage of flexible working arrangements that male colleagues were using, because of the negative perception that she would be off looking after the children instead of working. Conversely, participants mentioned that these negative perceptions are never a consideration for their husbands. Expectation states theory may also help explain why some of the participants reported that they have had to work that much harder in order to succeed.

5.2.3 Affinity bias and the "boys' club"

Another type of unconscious bias identified by the participants that was not specifically addressed by Genat et al. (2012) is affinity bias, a natural human tendency that leads us to prefer people who are like us. For example, affinity bias dictates that we will have preferences for people who grew up in the same place, or attended the same school, or remind us of someone we know and like (Jenkin, 2016; Turnbull, 2016). This type of unconscious bias has a significant impact on the corporate talent pipeline and is often couched as finding people who are a “good fit” for the role and organisation (Turnbull, 2016). Since men are often responsible for the hiring at the most senior levels, it means that they are apt to hire other men in their likeness. This tendency that was noticed
by the research participants and serves to perpetuate Kanter’s (1977a) “homosocial reproduction” theory, which may help to explain the significant barriers to women advancing to senior ranks. Additionally, while the participants recognised that male leaders may feel more comfortable working with people who are like them, and it is easier working with people who will also think the same way, they also pointed out that this may mean they are not challenged in their decision-making.

Initial perceptions of whether a person will be a good fit are determined by visual, cultural, demographic and situational factors (Linos & Reinhard, 2015) and lead to what Jenkin (2016) terms the hiring of “mini-mes”, that is, people who have similar experiences, hobbies and even the way they dress for an interview. When one considers that the hiring managers for the most senior corporate levels are predominantly men (Chief Executive Women, 2017), who may unconsciously apply affinity bias, it is not surprising that more men than women were perceived by the participants to be hired and promoted, especially those men who share the same background with current managers. Linos and Reinhard (2015) recently found that the emphasis on “fit” in this context will most certainly undermine diversity, which aligns with the sentiments of the majority of participants.

Many of the women interviewed (10/15) had spent their careers working in male dominated industries such as engineering, technology, banking, and property, but even where that was not the case, the participants were all in the minority in the executive ranks [based on research of company annual reports and their feedback]. These male dominated work environments were argued by the participants to foster strong networks through relationships and the opportunity to “play with the boys.” Many of the participants discussed the relationships and networks between their male colleagues from which they were excluded. Fisher and Kinsey (2014), found that this situation naturally fosters men’s careers and not women’s. Over time, even those participants in the study who initially believed they were one of the boys seemed to notice the bias more as the relationships and networks developed and the opportunity to play with the boys diminished, which concurs with the literature (e.g. Bird, 1996; Fisher & Kinsey, 2014). While they felt it was not deliberate, they also recognised that those relationships are important and that their careers might have progressed more quickly if they had the same opportunities.

The participants discussed the old boys’ network of school and university alumni, and the culture of male homosocial behaviour (Bird, 1996) which creates shared experiences through spending significant amounts of leisure time together pursuing sporting interests and after-work drinks. While these may seem like harmless social interactions and are on the most part unintentional and
invisible, they were believed by the participants to create a deep emotional bond between men that affords members of the club significant career sponsorship, from which women are excluded (Fisher & Kinsey, 2014). The study participants recognised the opportunity cost of being left out of these circles and not receiving this support, as shown in Figure 19. According to Dent (2017c), those circles are often the private boys school networks, and that leaders who were brought up in that system “have never had to sit at the table with a woman as an equal”. She also observes that men know how to play the game to their benefit, using their wide networks developed through their schooling and sporting affiliations (Dent, 2017c).

So what does it really mean to be part of a “boys’ club”? A “boys’ club” is not simply a male dominated organisation or hierarchy, although it is more likely to exist in such environments, since it probably originates from a time when organisations’ executive teams were literally exclusive “clubs” reserved for men only (Dent, 2017c). Rather, it is an entrenched behaviour or workplace culture that might be more aptly termed “boys’ club culture” (Maxwell, 2017). Men in the “club” spend sometimes considerable leisure time together outside of work – playing golf, mountain biking, attending sporting events and going for drinks after work, activities that typically exclude women, especially if they have caring responsibilities (see Figure 19). Indeed the participants identified strongly with this type of behaviour from their male colleagues. These clubs are usually gender skewed and what they all have in common is that they create outsiders who feel like they do not belong. They may have shared stories or a shortcut language that excludes others who may be left to wonder what information was shared, or decisions made when they were not around. The participants noted that the privacy and exclusivity of the “boys’ club” manifests itself in that men don’t want women in the inner circles, especially in today’s litigious society. While the participants also recognised that the formation of these “boys’ clubs” is unintentional and that there is no deliberate attempt to exclude other workmates, they do drive culture and the consequences for those outside the “club” are real. In fact, participants perceived that they would have had career advantages if they were male and able to be part of the “inner circle”. One participant discussed her experience of male leaders bringing entire teams across from previous workplaces and according to the study participants, the practice of “jobs for the boys” with senior men “tapping other men on the shoulder” seems to still be prevalent today.

Because of the unintentional nature of boys’ clubs, Maxwell (2017) says that leaders are often dismissive and disbelieving of their existence and may even discourage attempts to address the problem. Therefore, he argues leaders must take feedback seriously and actively stomp out the “locker room banter”, guiding conversation to more inclusive topics. Leaders must also learn to tell
stories about both male and female “organisational heroes” that encourage inclusion and avoid talking about the boys’ club activities they may participate in (Maxwell, 2017).

Research by Tiger (1969) finds that women do not share the same natural tendency to form exclusive groups that men do and that this human-specific pattern of male bonding is a fundamental part of male behaviour. The author describes that men in groups “operate without and even despite and against women” (Tiger, 2017, p. vii), and while Greer (2010) held hope that organisations would change as more women entered the ranks, this has not been the case in this study. Instead the participants appeared to be changed by the culture, getting used to being in male-dominated environments and choosing not to speak out against the bad behaviour encouraged by male bonding. Greer (2010) states that for other women, apparently the cost is considered too high and so they have chosen instead to opt out, as one participant described that some women find they do not want to work in the harsh male-dominated environment. Some of the participants appeared to rejoice in the fact that there is no expectation to join all-night drinking sessions that some of their male colleagues feel compelled to join. Nevertheless, even though not all men feel comfortable joining these male bonding sessions, the participants reported that they do not usually openly reject or challenge them, making them complicit and allowing them to continue receiving the benefits of being part of the inner circle, as long as they remain quiet about their discomfort.

While one participant disagreed that the “men’s club” existed and felt that it was more about the right person for the job, this view may have reflected the fact that her organisation had 50% women board members including a female chairperson, while 25% of the executive team were women and the organisation was specifically targeting women for certain senior roles.

In summary, this research finds that unconscious bias in the form of unconscious gender bias, the maternal wall and the “boys’ club” creates a barrier for women aspiring to senior leadership and that even a small degree of unconscious bias can have a significant impact on the proportion of women reaching the most senior positions in Australian organisations. The next section will discuss another key challenge identified by the research participants which is the effort of balancing family responsibilities with work and career aspirations.

5.3 The challenge of balancing family and work

One of the most challenging issues identified in this study for women aspiring to senior leadership appears to be balancing the demands of family responsibilities with their career aspirations, described by (Blair-Loy, 2006) as “competing devotions”. In fact, it was highlighted in the research as a “big obstacle” to advancement and encompasses a number of factors including time out of the
workforce to have children, the “second shift” (Hochschild, 1989; Schulte, 2014) of household duties, and the opportunities that many women miss out on due to their domestic responsibilities. These demands highlighted the importance of flexible work arrangements, particularly in the peak career development years when work and family collide and women may not yet have reached the level of seniority that gives them control over their diaries, as well as the importance of having positive role models that demonstrate that some sort of balance is achievable. Figure 20 below describes the balancing act that the research identified as an important issue for women seeking to progress to senior roles. On the one hand, the research identified that time out of the workforce to have children which is closely followed by ongoing caring responsibilities, creates a burden, particularly as domestic duties often fall on women’s shoulders. On the other hand, it was identified that these responsibilities often intersect with women’s peak career development years, and women have to find a way to balance these competing demands. While the burden can be lessened by having a supportive partner which was highlighted as important to allowing women to have the career they want, flexible working arrangements were also identified as an important initiative to support women balancing work and career aspirations with their responsibilities. However flexible arrangements can sometimes be detrimental to the rate of career progression due to reduced facetime and networking opportunities. These findings are discussed in further detail in the following section.

Figure 20. The challenge of balancing family and work
(Source: researcher’s own model).

5.3.1 Time out of the workforce to have children

The majority of the research participants were mothers (12/15) which is reflective of the Australian average (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010). The most obvious challenge identified by the participants, therefore, was the need for women to take time off work for childbirth, and they highlighted that maternity leave often occurs in women’s thirties, which was considered the peak time for career development. Australian data confirms the highest fertility rate is in women aged 30-34 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016) and at the current fertility rate of 1.8 (ABS, 2016), most women will need to take more than one period of maternity leave from the workplace. This may mean, as the participants described, that women’s careers suffer (as shown in Figure 20) because they leave the workforce for a period of time which agrees with Watson (2010). The findings in this study imply that senior women may choose to take slightly less time out of the workforce to have children, with two participants in the research group describing maternity leave periods of 5-6 months compared to the average of 7.5 months for Australian women (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

Whilst the need for many women to take maternity leave was described by the participants as a biological reality, they perceived that many corporate organisations still struggle with how to deal with it. They felt that this can lead to some women leaving the workforce at that time and giving up career for family. One of the childless participants maintained that it was not unusual for women to have three children, and if they are in the fortunate financial position where they do not have to work, they may choose to stay out of the workforce for ten years. This phenomenon has been described in mainstream media as the “opt-out revolution” (Belkin, 2003), where women leave work voluntarily to spend time with their children. This particular participant’s view was that women who choose to take extended periods out of the workforce should not expect to pick up their careers where they left off. While she may not have been referring to highly ambitious senior women who do not take extended periods of leave, the concern is supported by research by Hewlett and Luce (2005) which concluded that it is easy for women to take off-ramps from their careers but once having taken one, it is difficult and costly for women to find an on-ramp to get their career back on track. Hewlett and Luce (2005) found that even the relatively short periods that highly qualified women in business sectors typically interrupt or “off-ramp” from their careers can have heavy career penalties, such as the loss of earning power, which increase the longer the time spent out.
In contrast, one participant raised the question of how organisations can design roles to support women staying in the workforce rather than feeling like they have to make a choice. Another recommended that companies that embrace and support women having babies may see benefits such as high retention rates after maternity leave. Yet another participant suggested that companies can do more to improve women’s attachment to the workplace such as keeping in touch with women on maternity leave. This is supported by Vencat (2006) who proposed that organisations should enable women to maintain close contact with their workplace while they are “off-ramped”, including sharing ideas and making proposals when possible. This might involve women who are on leave being invited to monthly meetings and important company events. As was the case for one participant who was promoted despite having taken maternity leave, this may also include organisations continuing to offer development opportunities and promotions to women throughout the period of their maternity leave and when they return to work after children.

5.3.2 **Caring responsibilities, the “second shift” and partner support**

Of course, responsibilities for children do not stop once women return from maternity leave and the participants discussed the dilemma women face of wanting to do and be all things to all kinds of people in their family, personal and working life, given that women do not give up their roles at home when they take on senior positions, as shown in Figure 20. Since the majority of women seek to balance family and work (Hakim, 2000), this “second shift” (Hochschild, 1989; Schulte, 2014) becomes a juggling act. Indeed family responsibilities were identified by the research participants as a juggling act for senior women who are often trying to manage competing demands of work and home life, and in contrast to research from Sweden where the gender division of labour is unaffected after having children (Dribe & Stanfors, 2009), for Australian women it intensifies (Craig, 2007). One participant commented that the responsibility for caring for sick children typically falls to women, while another felt that it is not just childcare responsibilities, but also eldercare, and that it is usually women who take on this responsibility, which very much aligns with the extant Australian literature (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017b; Craig et al., 2016).

These persistent gender roles may be due to stereotypes of expected social roles and were even described as a “stigma” by the participants. This was highlighted by one participant with young children who said she is often asked about who would be looking after her children during the holidays, whereas she said her husband never receives this question. In fact the research participants perceived that the “second shift” (Hochschild, 1989) was not a consideration for the majority of their male colleagues who typically have supportive wives or partners at home. Certainly the men in our society receive considerable benefit from having fewer caring responsibilities (Holmes, 2007) and women’s unpaid domestic labour has been relied on by men since the industrial revolution to
enable them in the workplace (Delphy & Leonard, 1992; Pateman, 1994). Indeed, one participant mentioned that women have to work so much harder and that while the men go out for drinks, the women go home to cook dinner. Two of the research participants identified the missed opportunities for incidental networking opportunities that many men benefit from, that were largely impossible because of their caring responsibilities at home. Because these women are unable to participate in impromptu drinks after work for example, they may miss out on opportunities to network and build relationships with those colleagues who can support career development, as shown in Figure 20.

It is no surprise then that the value of having a supportive partner was identified by half of those participants with young children and they acknowledged that having that support was important to allowing them to have the career they wanted (see Figure 20). However they also suggested that if you have children, you cannot have both partners working in professional roles at 100% capacity, that women need a flexible husband perhaps with his own business, one who doesn’t work, or has a lesser role. Four of the participants with young children managed the demands of senior leadership by switching the traditional roles, where their partners have taken time out from work to care for the children or taken a lesser or more flexible role. The husband is, or has been, the primary carer in the case of three of the participants. One of these participants had married late and became a mother to stepchildren, she explained that her husband had flexibility to care for the children because he had his own business. She felt that it would be impossible for her to manage her senior position otherwise, as her global responsibilities required her to be available for non-stop calls from 6am to 11pm. The two other participants’ husbands took time out from work to look after the children when they were young, and their husbands now work part-time. These women describe themselves as the primary bread winners and research from the U.K. (Lyonette & Crompton, 2015) suggests that men whose partners earn more than them shoulder a greater share of housework because the women “breadwinners” tend to challenge their male partners to share more of the domestic load.

Nevertheless, one such husband faced considerable backlash from family members and his workplace for such a choice which is at odds with the stereotypical role of men in Australian society and may also reflect penalties for not meeting expectations of “the ideal worker norm” (Williams, 2000). In such instances, it is not just bias against women that impacts families, and while government parental leave can theoretically be taken by either partner, it is far less acceptable for men to make this choice. For the participant in question, her husband used long service leave and has worked part-time ever since but ended up leaving his organisation because of the lack of acceptance of those non-traditional arrangements.
On the other hand, two participants described shared 50:50 caring arrangements and this is supported by Meers and Strober (2013) who claimed that sharing the load 50:50 is the only way for both parents to “have it all”. However, one of the participants felt that this type of arrangement comes at a compromise when both parents are working full-time without support from a partner at home. In fact, she perceived that it can hinder both careers because neither party has the freedom from family responsibilities to focus solely on work, to just walk out of the house in the morning without a care about childcare arrangements. Both careers are damaged in some way as her husband doesn’t have that “housewife” support from her and she does not have that support from him. This is supported by Crabb (2014) who suggests that “women need wives and men need lives”.

Nevertheless, three of the research participants discussed that their arrangements are about what works best for the family and indeed research by Carlson and Hans (2017) found that dual-income couples start by negotiating what works for the couple. When disputes arise over household responsibilities, Carlson and Hans (2017) found that couples first make decisions on allocation of household chores on preference or proficiency, and then by choosing to alternate or barter responsibilities. If none of these options allow couples to divide the responsibilities, they turn to outsourcing (Carlson & Hans, 2017). Indeed two of the research participants discussed the importance of outsourcing cleaning and childminding to help manage the “second shift” (Hochschild, 1989), and Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2009) found that outsourcing activities such as child-minding, cleaning and cooking helped increase a woman’s amount of free time, while also helping to avoid conflict with their husband over the chores at home. Importantly, Craig et al. (2016) showed that domestic outsourcing narrows the gender gap. It may also be a more pragmatic alternative to the 50:50 approach if both partners wish to pursue careers.

However one of the participants felt that organisations need to provide more allowance and acceptance of women’s multiple roles and therefore it may be important to also look at the corporate culture and consider whether initiatives such as flexible working arrangements are necessary to support women’s careers.

5.3.3 Flexibility supports women’s careers

While stereotypes about women’s caring roles may be difficult to overcome, flexibility was identified by all of the research participants as an important factor in helping senior women to manage their multiple responsibilities (see Figure 20). This is supported by Argyrous et al. (2016) found that workplace flexibility is key to Australian women remaining attached to the workforce after the birth of their first child. Indeed 86% of Australian mothers returning to work after the birth of their child availed themselves of flexible work arrangements including flexible hours, part-time
work and working from home (ABS, 2013). Acceptance of the multiple roles that women play, however, remains a challenge for a number of the research participants and they questioned whether organisations understand how to best continue supporting women’s career development after they have children and ensure that women remain in the workforce continuously while their families are young.

Three of the research participants commented that the burden of the balancing act was lifted, and the problem largely solved when they reached senior ranks and gained more autonomy and control of their own diaries and schedules. Nevertheless, they identified that this relies on reaching a certain level when they can be in control, and if flexible workplace policies are not available to assist women as they climb through the ranks flexible workplace policies may be needed to assist women as they move through the ranks, they may look for other options to manage their priorities during what one participant described as the danger zone in women’s early thirties, such as starting their own businesses to take back control of their time. Certainly there has been a significant increase in the number of women previously employed in middle to upper management who have started their own businesses in the last decade (Butcher, 2017; Fox, 2012; Mitchell & King, 2013). According to Butcher (2017), one of the major reasons that women start their own businesses is to gain more control and flexibility. The other option discussed by two of the participants was to sacrifice their careers to not work or to work part-time for a period of time while the children were young, but they recognised this came at the cost of slowed career trajectories.

Three of the research participants also described the reluctance of some women to use flexible working arrangements because of the negative perceptions and assumptions that they will be taking care of children instead of working. This reflects the “descriptive bias” described by Bornstein et al. (2012), which concerns assumptions about how women will behave because they are mothers. It means that women’s actions that affirm motherhood stereotypes, such as absences from the workplace because they are minding the children rather than working from home. Conversely behaviour that is inconsistent with the stereotypes, such as working late, tends to be overlooked and forgotten.

Of course women are not the only ones who can benefit from flexible arrangements and one participant described a senior male executive in her organisation being very open about the fact that he does not travel on Thursdays because he needs to pick up the children. While she thought it was great that he could do that, she also felt scared to be as open about her family responsibilities because she believed it would be viewed negatively by her peers, particularly in light of the fact that
she often gets asked about her childcare responsibilities whereas her husband never gets asked these questions.

As well as the negative perception from colleagues, one of the participants discussed the fear that working flexibly might reduce women’s opportunities for development and promotion. Another felt strongly that working in a part-time capacity for seven years while her children were young had set her career prospects back while another felt that caring responsibilities can take their toll on families and it is often women whose careers are put on hold while children are young, as she had done. In fact, Hewlett and Luce (2005) found that 93% of off-ramped highly qualified business women fully intend to return to work but only 74% of those wishing to return to work manage to do so, and of those, only 40% return to full-time professions with the remainder working part-time (24%) or becoming self-employed (9%). Indeed a large proportion of Australian women returning to work after the birth of their child do so in a part-time capacity (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013) which is sometimes encouraged by male managers whereby benevolent sexism persuades women to take on less responsibility which limits their opportunities (Moya et al., 2007). This is supported by Australian research that found that the majority of men feel that women’s lack of career progress is due to having competing work and family priorities whereas very few women agree (Sanders et al., 2011).

This may be even more so the case for the women who use flexible work arrangements that reduce their office face-time, meaning that they miss out on informal networking opportunities (Kalysh et al., 2016) and one participant who worked part-time for a number of years while her children were young felt it had taken her five years longer to reach her career goals. This may also reflect that reduced face-time can disadvantage women who become “out of sight and out of mind” and less likely to be considered for promotion into senior roles (Maruyama & Tietze, 2012; McDonald et al., 2008). So it seems that while flexible workplaces can be of great assistance to women trying to balance their careers and family responsibilities, those arrangements can come at a cost. Indeed the work norms for professionals of working long hours and being available 24/7 act to legitimise the reduction in development opportunities that often happens when women transition to part-time work (Dick, 2010).

Additionally, one participant talked about wanting to establish more flexibility and less responsibility prior to having children, when she started setting up her careers in readiness by reducing travel commitments and operational responsibilities. This can potentially derail career prospects and was identified as something that delayed her career progression particularly when her family aspirations did not go to plan. As stated in her popular book “Lean In”, Sandberg (2013)
believes that women do this too far in advance of family life and she recommends to women planning a family: “don’t leave before you leave” (Sandberg, 2013, p. 92). Indeed, Hewlett and Luce (2005) found that 38% of highly qualified women have deliberately chosen a job with less responsibility than they were qualified for, and 16% have declined promotions because of responsibilities at home. Additionally, in a report for the NSW Public Service (Baird et al., 2014), it was found that women in their thirties, with peak child-rearing responsibilities are reluctant to apply for promotions. This is because they do not want to risk moving out of a current role that provides career-family balance and into a job where they perceive that a workable balance may be harder to achieve. Therefore, women who are making pragmatic choices to trade-off career for family may need more convincing and coaching to apply for more senior roles instead of putting off career advancement until later.

However, one of the participants discussed the fact that she wanted to be a role model to the women in her team by using flexible arrangements and two participants discussed the importance of senior men being seen to use flexible working arrangements. This is supported by Baird et al. (2014) who found women had a reluctance to risk work-life balance which was also reinforced by a lack of role models in senior leadership roles who show that it can be done and recommended that more senior executives (both men and women) should model flexible working arrangements. Indeed making flexible work arrangements available for vacant and existing roles was identified as a key strategy to reaching parity in senior leadership in the public sector (Baird et al., 2014; Stewman et al., 2000).

Another participant discussed her organisation’s employment surveys that indicated flexibility is highly valued by both men and women in today’s workplaces and another participant shared that every job in her organisation is officially flex. It was felt that this enables employees to work the hours they want to work, as long as they put the hours in, and in her opinion, people work harder under this arrangement. Certainly this is borne out in data from Ernst & Young (2012) which found that women with a high degree of flexibility are more productive and have much clearer career direction compared to those who have a low level of flexibility. Yet another participant felt the focus needs to shift from working hours to performance outcomes while another commented that organisations need to recognise that employees have other responsibilities in their lives. Additionally one participant felt strongly that flexibility programs must be more than just slogans about work-life balance, organisations must implement flexible workplace programs of substance, especially if they are serious about supporting greater gender balance in leadership. Indeed those that fail to do so may lose women with significant skills and experience when they need to start balancing work and family responsibilities. Another participant without children commented that
flexibility is important and that organisations need to accept that as well as childcare responsibilities, people have other demands such as travel, study or long commuting times.

In summary, this research finds that balancing career and family responsibilities remains a major challenge for women, particularly during the peak career development years when they are often having and raising young children, as shown in Figure 20. While having a supportive partner can assist women to have the career that they want, organisations may need to implement initiatives to keep women connected to the workplace during this time and that flexible working arrangements are very important to help all employees manage their multiple responsibilities. The next section will discuss other success factors identified by the research participants.

5.4 Success factors for women aspiring to senior leadership

Many of the common success factors identified by the research participants, such as education, curiosity and work ethic, are not gender specific. Indeed if education were a specific success factor for senior leadership then women should be represented in higher numbers since they have outstripped men in their education attainment for decades (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017a). Nevertheless, there were several key success factors identified in this study that have been the subject of much gender debate. These issues will be explored in further depth in the section below.

The model below shows the research finding that women’s confidence was a very important success factor in being able to achieve senior leadership roles. The research indicated that confidence may also be conferred by having a mentor who “believes in you”. This may also extend to women having confidence to apply for senior roles when they may not fulfil 100% of the stated job requirements, and the research identified that career sponsors can play an important role in giving women the confidence to aim for such positions regardless. While having positive female role models to look up to was identified as highly important in enabling women to that senior leadership is attainable (particularly when balancing family demands), unfortunately there are few women at
the top to look up to. These issues will be explored in further depth in the section below.

Figure 21. Success factors for women in senior leadership.
(Source: researcher’s own model).

5.4.1 Confidence and the need to “lean in”

The research identified that self-confidence had been a key success factor for the participants in reaching their positions in senior leadership as shown in Figure 21. Some of the participants already had a strong sense of confidence when they joined the workforce, and three participants talked about growing up in environments where they were brought up believing they could do anything they wanted which led them to have strong belief in their ability to do the job. Another participant shared that her success also relied on not letting others discourage or dissuade her. For two others confidence was more about having other people believe in them rather than their own self-confidence and the important role that mentors can play will be discussed further below.

While none of the participants in this research acknowledged a lack of self-confidence, Australian research found the most significant gender difference in the workplace was found to be self-confidence and self-promotion and that almost every woman interviewed felt that a lack of self-confidence had held them back at some point and they had struggled with self-doubt throughout their careers (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2015). This meant they were less likely to apply for more
senior positions, or even to actively opt-out of selection processes. Certainly one of the participants discussed the fact that she actively reduced her responsibilities and did not seek further career progression at one point, although this was not due to a lack of confidence, but the need to have a role that was more family friendly. This finding aligns with research undertaken in the Australian public sector that found women were reluctant to seek promotion to senior executive roles not just due to lack of confidence, but also due to a perceived lack of flexible working arrangements (Baird et al., 2014). Therefore it may be that women’s need for career-family balance also had an important role to play in their career goals and their confidence to seek more responsibility.

Only one participant who was an executive in the financial sector disagreed that confidence had been important to her career progression. In fact she felt that her cultural background of being understated and letting her work speak for itself had been a key success factor. Nevertheless, the strategy of letting your work speak for itself could be considered risky, and another participant did not find that to be the case, stating that working really hard to get noticed does not work. This is supported by Australian research that reported while most women believed that they should be recognised and rewarded for completing these assignments without needing to self-promote, they also realised that technical proficiency was insufficient on its own and that people needed to seek out and compete for key assignments to affirm their ability to take on more senior positions (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2015).

Unfortunately three of the participants recognised that women are not generally good self-promoters compared to their male colleagues. This could be explained by research that shows women view men drawing attention to their achievements as “boasting” and that women feel uncomfortable about self-promoting, especially when they believed their success was linked to team efforts (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2015). This aligns with the findings by Rosener (1990) that women’s leadership style prioritises relationships over process and transactions and encourages participation and team work, thereby enhancing people’s self-worth and therefore women would be less likely to self-promote at the expense of devaluing the team contribution. Indeed one of the participants discussed the coaching that she provides to her female team members to speak up about achievements, and that they do not need to justify themselves or apologise as it weakens their position.

Nevertheless, one participant suggested that women have to be better at self-promoting in a positive way that is not bullish or manly and subject to criticism and research shows that because of gender stereotypes, women may be penalised for promoting themselves (Wade, 2001) and leaning in may not be the answer. This is because when women display greater self-confidence and promote
themselves, they suffer backlash for acting against traditional gender stereotypes and even though the descriptive elements of how women are typically perceived within gender stereotypes have changed over time with the expansion of women’s career opportunities and work roles, the prescriptive element of how women “should” and “should not” behave has remained the same (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). This means that women who demonstrate confidence, and therefore competence (Jones & Pittman, 1982), receive an agentic penalty for doing so in the form of social backlash from co-workers as they are not behaving as they “should” (Rudman, 1998).

This poses the question of how exactly women should effectively advocate for themselves? In fact one of the research participants discussed that she had advocated successfully on behalf of one of her female managers. This is supported by research that found that because of gender stereotypes, women can advocate on behalf of others easily and effectively without penalty, but self-advocacy by women incurs costs (Wade, 2001). Therefore women do not often make requests for themselves because they have learned that in the end, they may lose more than they gain. The importance of having others advocate on behalf of women is discussed further below.

Despite confidence being a success factor, two of the participants believed that women may have less confidence when it comes to applying for roles or promotions and mirrors findings by Fitzsimmons and Callan (2015) that found that women would not apply for positions if they did not meet 100% of the selection criteria, whereas women felt that their male colleagues had the confidence to apply even if they had only half of the qualifications required (see Figure 21). However Mohr (2011) found that the most common reason for men and women not applying for jobs for which they did not meet 100% of the qualifications was not because of a lack of confidence, but rather because they believed the criteria were prerequisites and that they would not be considered if they did not meet all of them. Mohr (2011) goes on to say, that women need to be better informed about how the hiring process works. She states that when women realise that men are not “playing the game that way” (Mohr, 2011, p. 32), they feel more comfortable to apply for jobs even when they do not meet all the stated criteria. Along these lines, one of the participants proposed that more women to need to be encouraged to put themselves forward for roles even if they do not meet all the requirements through deliberate sponsorship and promotions based on potential. The importance of sponsorship for women will be discussed further below.

5.4.2 Women need a Mentor/Sponsor

As discussed in the previous section, while confidence was found to be important to women in senior careers, many also gained confidence from others and this research therefore found that mentors played an important role in helping women develop self-confidence and belief in
themselves, as shown in Figure 21. One participant felt that while we all need people to believe in us, women need it a little more than men. Perhaps that reflects the research that shows women managers traditionally lack self-confidence (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003). This is supported by Australian research that shows women find that mentors play an important part in giving them confidence in their capabilities (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2015). Similarly, Kram and Bragar (1992) and (Burke & McKeen, 1990a, 1996) found that developing self-confidence was one of the key benefits of mentoring programs. Mentoring is considered an important career-enhancing activity that is essential for any ambitious manager (Friday et al., 2004) and research by Catalyst (Carter & Silva, 2010) found that mentors had an important impact on career progression of M.B.A. graduates, with men and women being equally likely to have a mentor. It is perhaps unsurprising then, that all but one of the participants had a mentor, however one participant expressed that while mentors can help women build confidence in their capabilities, they also need sponsors who can support their careers.

As described by one of the participants, it has been suggested that women need interventions like mentoring more than men, because they have more barriers to advancement which supports the finding by Tharenou (2005). A lack of mentoring has been identified by organisations over many years as an obstacle to women advancing to senior leadership (Foust-Cummings et al., 2011). Indeed, empirical evidence by Tharenou (1997, 1999) shows that along with gender discrimination, one of the major barriers for women advancing in organisations is the existence of male hierarchies and informal male networks that support career advancement for men more than for women, as described in the previous discussion on the “boys’ club”. Therefore, it has been proposed that mentoring may enhance women’s career outcomes more than men’s (Noe, Greenberger & Wang 2002) and mentoring initiatives have been used by organisations for many years to support the development of high potential women (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2014b).

While mentoring may be essential for development, evidence has failed to demonstrate that mentoring can have a strong influence on increasing the numbers of women in senior leadership roles (Foust-Cummings et al., 2011; Kalev et al., 2006). This may be because women need more than mentors who support women’s confidence, they also need specific action-oriented career support, and the participants spoke candidly about one or more sponsors who had a significant impact on their careers, steering them in right direction and exposing them to opportunities and challenges. Friday et al. (2004, p. 637) described a mentor as “a wise and trusted counselor or teacher” and a sponsor as “a person who nominates or supports another person’s promotion”. As highlighted by the participants while there may be some overlap between mentor and sponsor functions, it is important to ensure that women receive sponsorship and not just emotional support.
to help them overcome the issues they face with enduring male-domination of organisational hierarchies and informal networks (Tharenou, 1997, 1999). Indeed, while it has been found that mentoring can predict career satisfaction, networking has been found to be the most robust predictor of career success (Blickle et al., 2009).

Two of the participants discussed the need to seek out sponsors because women are often excluded from informal networks in male-dominated hierarchies. Thus, women often miss out on the considerable benefits their male counterparts receive from access to relationships with senior men through informal networks (Ehrich, 2008), limiting their opportunities to acquire sponsors who can assist their career advancement (Anderson, 2005). Indeed one participant said that it would have been nice to have sponsors that could have helped her to get further earlier in career. Of course this situation is not helped by the absence of women at senior levels so for the women who had sponsors, they have typically been male. However early research by Kanter (1977a), found that male managers sponsored or mentored other men, but not women. Kanter called this situation “homosocial reproduction” to describe the male strategy of patronage in which men choose other men in their own likeness (see earlier section on affinity bias). Whether deliberate or not, this preserves the status quo because the powerful men at the top of organisations sponsor other men which reinforces a gendered reproduction of white male leadership (Colley, 2002).

Access to male networks remains one of the most significant obstacles for female managers seeking sponsorship, the other being that they have less time available to commit to networking activities due to their family responsibilities (Linehan & Scullion, 2008), which was discussed earlier. This disadvantage was discussed by three of the research participants and was also reflected in the fact that they had to seek sponsors out. Additionally, those sponsors were generally male, reflecting Australian research in which 75% of executive women had mentors but nearly all of them were male (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2015). One participant pointed out, given the gender balance of the powerful leaders, women need to seek out a strategic relationship with a key senior male sponsor if they are to realise their ambitions (Piterman, 2010). If sponsors are important for the success of men in the organisation, perhaps women need them even more (Kanter, 1977a) an assertion that is supported by Seibert et al’s (2001) social capital theory of career success.

As discussed by one of the research participants, sponsorship from someone in the “inner circle”, meaning someone at the top of the organisation, matters a lot. This is supported by findings that mentoring by a powerful mentor was the most powerful predictor of career success (Blickle et al., 2009). Correspondingly, (Carter & Silva, 2010) found that having a mentor at the C.E.O. or senior executive level led to the fastest rate of career progression. Interestingly, in their study, they found
that women who had mentors at the top got promoted at the same rate as men who had mentors at the top, and the mentor’s gender had no impact – what mattered was the seniority of the mentor. Nevertheless, more men than women had a mentor at the chief executive or senior executive level and the authors concluded it was “who you know” that matters. This may have been a factor in two of the research participants’ ability to reach senior leadership with support they described from very senior sponsors. However since people typically choose to associate with people who are like them (McPherson et al., 2001), it stands to reason that men are more likely to choose male mentors and women are more likely to choose female mentors. Tharenou (2005) found that having a female-female mentoring relationship translates into better career progression, and evidence suggests that women learn more career advancement strategies from a female mentor who has also incurred the particular difficulties that women face (Noe et al., 2002; O'Neill, 2002; Ragins, 1999a). Because there are few women in senior executive positions (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2018a), however, there is only a very small pool of female mentors which most likely indicates that men more often receive a benefit from mentoring to help them to get to senior level positions than women, which aligns with Carter and Silva’s (2010) findings.

Another participant found that having a powerful sponsor helped protect her in a male-dominated environment and as discussed earlier, while women can face backlash for advocating for themselves in the workplace (Rudman & Glick, 2001; Wade, 2001), having an influential sponsor speak up on their behalf can provide a better outcome.

5.4.3 Positive female role models

It emerged in the research that having female role models in their organisations was very important to women in this study (see Figure 21), and the literature demonstrates the importance that visible role models play in the development of women’s careers (Ehrich, 2008; Singh et al., 2006). The most obvious role models for women with ambition are those women who have successfully made it to the top, however such positive female role models are scarce (Piterman, 2010). This can discourage experienced women from considering careers in leadership (Coffman & Neuenfeldt, 2014; Wheeler & Sojo, 2016), from pursuing opportunities for promotion (Baird et al., 2014), and from accepting international assignments, often seen as a pre-requisite for executive leadership roles (Dunlea et al., 2015). Together with their perceived inability to meet the norm of the ideal worker, and lack of supervisor support, this has been argued to form a significant and persistent psychological barrier that can deter women from seeking leadership roles (Coffman & Neuenfeldt, 2014). Three of the research participants mentioned the importance for them of seeing female role models at the board and executive levels in their organisations. They also felt this created a positive perception for other women managers joining the company and made them more willing to
recommend their companies. Conversely Coffman and Neuenfeldt (2014) found that women may not recommend their companies to others if there are very few women at the executive level to serve as role models.

The issue of some women being perceived as negative role models was also mentioned by three participants in the research study. However, it also emerged that being seen as a role model may come at a cost because women in senior roles are under scrutiny, held to higher standards and have additional expectations placed on them, consistent with the biases discussed earlier in this chapter. One of the participants felt there are certain types of women who like working in a very male-dominated environment and who adopt similar traits. Indeed Wittenberg-Cox (2012) suggests that many companies only promote women who adopt male styles that are recognised as “talent” and claims these female leaders may be seen as inauthentic and poor role models which can de-motivate others. Nevertheless, the bulk of existing research finds that women are in fact inspired by being exposed to female role models, including those in non-stereotypical roles, who demonstrate that success is attainable. This can lead to positive outcomes such as stronger self-identification with leadership and increased career ambitions (Asgari et al., 2010; Asgari et al., 2012; Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004) as well as reducing negative self-perceptions and increasing leadership aspirations (Simon & Hoyt, 2013). Another underlying reason for this benefit may be that women desire to be more like those female leaders they admire and seek to increase the similarities by emulating traits of those role models (Gibson, 2004). Certainly, three of the participants specifically mentioned Gail Kelly, the former C.E.O. of Westpac as someone they admired.

The importance of role models extends beyond women just being seen in the most senior positions, some of the research participants also described it as their responsibility. Unfortunately, mentoring does not come naturally to all successful women (Piterman, 2010), and Coffman and Neuenfeldt (2014) found that many senior women may feel unfair pressure to try to be all things to all people, thereby distracting them from being able to focus on their own careers. Likewise, Fox (2012) found that, women leaders are few and the effort they already have to put in to be perceived as competent simply may not leave them with much energy to be the sole champion of all the ambitious women below.

As mentioned previously, one of the participants felt it was important for her to role model flexible working practices to her female managers to demonstrate work-life balance is possible. This may be important as other researchers have found that many mid-career women are unable to identify suitable role models (Liff & Ward, 2001; McCarthy, 2004) and this is particularly true of mid-career women working part-time to balance family responsibilities (Blackwell, 2001; Durbin &
Tomlinson, 2014). Indeed Baird et al. (2014) found that many women are reluctant to seek promotions and risk their work-life balance because of a lack of role models in senior positions that show balance is possible and acceptable. Unfortunately, Coffman and Neuenfeldt (2014) claim that even though many executives at large companies have used flexible work arrangements (64% of women and 47% of men), organisations fail to highlight these examples of how leaders can balance work and personal responsibilities as they advance their careers. This is probably due to the persistent perception of the “ideal worker norm” (Acker, 1990; Reid, 2012; Williams, 2000) and indeed as described by one of the research participants, employees are often reluctant to be open about family and other commitments outside of work (Coffman & Neuenfeldt, 2014).

Several participants described the initiatives their organisations are employing in an attempt to change these perceptions, for example at one large organisation, executive and senior women were encouraged to bring their children into the office, or work from home during school holidays, and while this would have been unheard of less than ten years ago, it is now considered normal (Baird et al., 2014). While one might argue that this could cause disruption to the workplace and some office spaces are not set up to cater to children, Baird et al. (2012) found that this type of role modelling has had a positive effect throughout management. In fact Munsch et al. (2014) found that role modelling of flexible work by high status leaders reduced the bias against those who seek flexible work and Baird et al. (2014) cited the importance of flexible working arrangements being role modelled not just by female senior managers, but also senior men as evidenced at organisations such as Telstra where visibility of very senior men taking advantage of the company’s “All Roles Flex” approach has made the program more acceptable for other staff. The need for senior women to demonstrate that they can juggle family and work responsibilities successfully was also discussed by the research participants but given the lack of female role models, they felt it may also be necessary for men to act as role models for issues that are important to women, such as flexibility.

In summary, confidence was found to be an important success factor for the women in this study and additionally, having mentors who believed in them boosted women’s confidence. However, career sponsorship was found to be more important than psychosocial mentoring support in supporting women’s career advancement and helped to overcome the advantage that male colleagues receive from being part of the boys’ club discussed earlier. Seeking out sponsors at the top of organisations from whom women can borrow social capital was found to be most important in advancing women’s careers. While very senior female sponsors can offer the best career support, perhaps because they understand the barriers other women face and how to best overcome them, unfortunately there are very few of them. This is also true of female role models who can have a positive influence on women’s career aspirations. Nevertheless this poses a dilemma until more
women are able to reach the most senior positions in Australian companies and the initiatives that might be needed to support gender balance in senior leadership is discussed in the next section.

5.5 Gender balance in senior leadership as a strategic priority

All but one of the research participants felt that Australian organisations should be making gender diversity in senior leadership a strategic priority and they were very clear about the reasons to do this. Firstly it brings better decision-making and improves business performance which is supported by Australian research showing better business outcomes for A.S.X. companies with female C.E.O.s and female board members (KPMG Enterprise, 2017; The Reibey Institute, 2011). Another reason is that gender diversity in leadership brings diversity of thought and different perspectives, however the participants also identified that organisations need to have more than one token woman in order to achieve this and it is only when there are more than two women in the room that the conversation will change. A further reason emphasised by two of the participants was to increase the understanding of a company’s customers, of which women make up at least 50% and in some cases are the predominant purchase decision-makers. This is underpinned by research that demonstrates the significant purchasing power of women in today’s society (Neilsen, 2011). Also it was perceived by two other participants that Australia is underutilising 50% of its talent pool and that Australia’s huge investment in education for women is not providing a return on investment. Indeed as discussed in chapter 2 (p 37), Australian women have had better educational outcomes than men for over 30 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017a), yet they still make up a small proportion of Australia’s most senior leaders.

However the participants also felt that because many organisations do not acknowledge that there is an issue, they lack the impetus to make gender diversity in senior leadership a priority and one participant highlighted that company annual reports fail to mention diversity outcomes. Another participant commented that while many companies today may feel an obligation as a good corporate citizen to be seen to be addressing the issue, in fact it is just rhetoric. While another claimed that if companies were truly serious about gender diversity in senior leadership, they would be allocating resources to initiatives as they would any other key strategic priority. It was also perceived that some organisations are influencing the statistics to portray a more positive message than reality, for example, a bank manager in the suburb of Gordon is part of the senior management team when in reality it would be considered a low to middle management position. In addition to the lack of acknowledgement of the issue, another reason the participants perceived that companies are not investing in addressing it may be that there are no consequences and two participants asserted that the Workplace Gender Equality Act (2012) lacks any real power.
Figure 22 below shows the key activities that the research identified as vital to supporting the aim of gender balance in senior leadership as a strategic priority. The most important factor is having board sponsorship and a C.E.O. who will champion gender diversity throughout the organisation. Support from the top then needs to be underpinned by objective H.R. processes for selection, development and promotion that remove the inherent unconscious biases that currently lead to a disproportionate number of men reaching the most senior positions. Then, as with any key strategic priority for businesses, having measurable targets and reporting on them is important to success. While it was hoped by many of the research participants that legislated quotas will not be necessary, it remains to be seen whether gender balance in senior leadership can be achieved without them. The issues highlighted in this model will be discussed in detail in the following section.

5.5.1 Board sponsorship and C.E.O. support – it starts at the top

The research participants believed that starting at the top would be essential to improving gender diversity, as shown in Figure 22. They perceived the board to be very important and one described the experience in her organisation when gender diversity in senior leadership was included in the board goals, and became a priority for the chairman, gender balance was achieved within 12 months. Another participant proposed that C.E.O.s listen to boards, and these goals will flow
through the organisation. Two of the participants also reflected on the growth and success of Australia’s “male champions of change” program (Male Champions of Change, 2017). Indeed commitment from the top has been described as the most important factor determining success of improving diversity at senior levels (Morrison, 1992), with senior leaders’ attitudes being an important predictor of the effectiveness of equal employment opportunity initiatives (Konrad & Linnehan, 1995). C.E.O.s in particular, are in an important position to inspire their organisations to seek gender equality (Kelan & Wratil, 2017). However, as described by one participant, even with strong leadership support, gender diversity programs still require many years of sustained effort because the barriers are systemic and unconscious (Lyness, 2002).

Yet several participants identified that there are still those at the top who do not even acknowledge the issue and may still need convincing about the business benefits described in the previous section. One participant felt that a lot of C.E.O.s are paying lip service to gender diversity because it is important that they be seen to be doing the right thing but they do not really believe that it will improve performance otherwise they would take it more seriously. Similarly, another participant believed that some leaders actually do not support gender diversity but will not admit it because they realise that this kind of attitude would not be accepted in today’s business environment. Yet another participant shared her perception that her C.E.O. struggles with the concept of diversity and what his role in that should be. In light of these findings, the participants therefore felt it was important that organisation leaders are convinced about the business benefits of gender diversity because they trust that if the C.E.O. believes it will result in better business outcomes for shareholders then it will become an actionable priority.

One participant also discussed the need for the C.E.O. to be passionate about it and share this attitude throughout the organisation. This means that C.E.O.s need to be able to articulate the business case for diversity (Davidson, 2008; Mattis, 2001; Morrison, 1992), as well as the ethical commitment to social fairness (Davidson, 2008; Kilian et al., 2005) in order to obtain support for initiatives. In order for this to be effective, (Kelan & Wratil, 2014) recommends that instead of just focusing on the business and the social justification for change, C.E.O.s should share their personal motivations, or other emotionally moving stories about why change is needed (Denning, 2004). Sharing not only the statistics, but also authentic personal narratives, helps to increase the emotional commitment of middle managers to be change agents (Balogun, 2003; Huy, 2002; Rouleau, 2005). Indeed senior leaders play a lead role in setting organisational culture (Schein, 2010) and are therefore key to the success of change (Gill, 2002). Gender equality, diversity and inclusion change initiatives are no different and research highlights the importance of leadership support to effect diversity change initiatives (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004; Thomas, 2004).
One participant felt that organisation heads have a crucial but simple role to play, which is to promote more women. Therefore, not only do C.E.O.s need to be vocal about their support for gender diversity initiatives, but they must also “walk the talk” and lead by example, by sponsoring women for leadership roles (Mattis, 2001) and supporting initiatives such as including diversity metrics in succession planning for top talent (ORC Worldwide, 2008) and embedding cultural change in the organisation which will outlast the C.E.O.s tenure (Mattis, 2001). While it was identified by three of the participants that there are some men without unconscious bias who promote women, there are not many of them and therefore having senior accountability and buy-in through strategic objectives, performance plans and senior executive and board K.P.I.s is critical. Such change leadership may be guided by frameworks such as Kotter (1996) to define how leaders might implement gender diversity initiatives (Mercer, 2016; Prime & Moss-Racusin, 2009), using six key practices of accountability, building ownership, communicating, leading by example, initiating and driving culture change. As discussed by the participants, it is important that gender goals are visible with public accountability of C.E.O.s and their direct reports for diversity outcomes and metrics, especially if they are linked to remuneration as they felt that there needs to be incentives or penalties to ensure success (Dobbin & Kalev, 2007; Kilian et al., 2005).

Two of the participants felt it might be possible to appeal to male C.E.O.s’ sense of fairness, since many have daughters who are affected by this issue if they have the same career aspirations. However while C.E.O.s might relate to these values the participants have found that it does not necessarily motivate them to take action within their own organisations. Nevertheless, for those organisations whose top leaders are committed to making gender balance in senior leadership a strategic priority to drive business success, they must also be committed to guaranteeing the right H.R. processes are in place to overcome unintended biases and ensure women are selected, developed and promoted into the most senior positions in higher numbers.

5.5.2 Human Resource processes for selection, development and promotion

All but one of the participants discussed the importance of putting in place the right processes to drive recruitment, development and promotion (see Figure 22). One participant disagreed and felt that it was up to each individual to get there on merit but this might be reflective of the fact that her organisation had gender balance at the board and senior executive level so she may not have identified a need. In contrast, she did make a negative comment about being recently taken over by a U.S. parent company whose leadership team was almost entirely made up of “old white guys” with one female H.R. director. Nevertheless, Fox (2013) states that ensuring that more women are considered for hiring or promotions actually supports, rather than compromises, the merit principle. But as one participant commented, it relies on getting women into the candidate pool for selection.
She also believes that organisations might need to have higher yielding promotions for women to address the current imbalance but that eventually it will become self-sustaining because “like attracts like”. This reflects the affinity bias phenomenon discussed earlier, that normally replicates male-dominated leadership, but in this case may provide an opportunity to build more women in senior positions. Two participants discussed examples of organisations targeting specific leadership roles for female appointments and affirmative action such as this will gain more support from those who believe in the merit principle if they understand the significant unconscious bias that already exists in the process (Sealy, 2010).

When discussing the reasons for not improving gender balance, two participants reflected that their male colleagues blame the lack of female candidates. In order to improve gender balance, particularly in male-dominated industries, it may be necessary, however, to review the recruitment process, to find suitable women who meet the requirements or can be developed into the role. In that regard, another participant discussed the importance of challenging recruitment and executive search consultants to broaden their search criteria to identify an equal number of male and female candidates, and senior leaders may need to take more risks and recruit for talent and potential in favour of experience. Several of the participants mentioned the importance of organisations considering balanced candidate pools as well as ensuring recruiting teams are gender balanced and these recommendations are supported by the Australian Human Rights Commission (2013) toolkit for recruiting more women into male dominated industries, and the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2014a) framework.

Many of the participants discussed the importance of recognising unconscious bias that exists in the recruitment and promotion process and trying to remove it. A review of the literature shows that both male and female managers tend to favour men over women who are equally qualified in decisions when hiring, determining compensation, evaluating performance and determining promotions (Koch, D’mello, & Sackett, 2015; Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). Bias can be seen as early in the recruitment process as the first assessment of resumes, with research showing that identical resumes get selected more often based on whether the name of the applicant is assumed to be white compared to African-American (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2003), with similar results seen with bias against immigrant applicants (Oreopoulos, 2009), and even against men in female-dominated entry level positions (Booth & Leigh, 2010). While there is no magic formula to eliminate bias in the selection process, some interventions have shown positive results. Joint evaluation of candidates, comparing resumes side by side decreased gender biases and increased the likelihood of assessing candidates on their performance and potential rather than on gender stereotypes (Bohnet et al., 2012). Anonymising resumes has been shown to increase the call-back rate for women (Behaghel et
al., 2011), confirming previous research by Goldin and Rouse (2000) where “blind” orchestra auditions were found to increase the number of women advancing to the next round of auditions by 11% and the likelihood of female musicians being selected in the final round by 30%. It is recommended that wherever possible, names and other identifiable information should be taken out, and applications and resumes compared in groups, rather than scoring each resume individually (Linos & Reinhard, 2015). Nevertheless, recent research by Foley and Williamson (2018) found that anonymising resumes may not be fool-proof since reviewers having been told the reason for removing names, may hunt for implicit gender cues in the resumes, resulting in enhanced stereotype bias.

Another participant mentioned taking a “50:50 – if not, then why not” approach to choosing women for the role and others mentioned the importance of training those involved in the recruitment process to recognise unconscious bias. These recommendations are also supported by Australian Human Rights Commission (2013) and Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2014a). Unfortunately discussing bias has the potential to backfire as research found that simply informing professional employees that stereotyping is common and that they should avoid this practice actually had the opposite effect (Duguid & Thomas-Hunt, 2015). In contrast by educating professionals that the “vast majority of people try to overcome their stereotypical preconceptions” (Duguid & Thomas-Hunt, 2015, p. 236) can motivate them to overcome their stereotyping behaviours by leveraging the power of social norms.

Additionally, participants discussed the need to make H.R. processes more objective, and to stop using highly subjective measures including organisational “fit”. Structured interview processes were proposed by the participants as an important way to reduce unconscious bias, and avoiding, for example, casual coffee meetings as part of the interview process. Historically the weight of evidence consistently suggests that structured interviews are preferable to unstructured interviews because they are more reliable and valid (Huffcutt et al., 2004; Schmidt & Zimmerman, 2004). In addition to the use of structured interview processes, Levashina et al. (2014) also recommended limiting rapport building such as the coffee catch-ups mentioned by the participants which presumably would reduce the impact of affinity bias as described earlier. Indeed it is important that the final decision should be based on the assessment scores rather than a gut feeling and hiring managers should “firmly resolve that you will hire the candidate whose final score is the highest, even if there is another one whom you like better” (Kahneman, 2012, p. 226). It is also recommended that hiring managers make a conscious effort not to make a decision while conducting the interview, and to involve others in the review of assessment data in order to make
the final decision, thereby reducing the impact of gut feeling from the personal interactions (Linos & Reinhard, 2015).

Indeed two participants discussed the way that clear structured processes used by the public service have been able to improve female representation in senior leadership and reduce the gender pay gap because there is a lot of accountability, visibility and documented processes. This also involved reviewing the meaning of merit within performance appraisal systems. Certainly the Australian Human Rights Commission (2013) recommends that organisations adhere to a standard recruitment process that is documented and transparent and focuses on merit (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2013). Research also suggests that gender discrimination can be reduced by committing to the hiring criteria before starting recruitment (Uhlmann & Cohen, 2005), so it is important to determine in advance the type of candidate that is right for the job, and which qualifications are necessary, then testing the job advertisements to ensure sufficient candidates are being captured (Linos & Reinhard, 2015). This is important for two reasons – firstly, if research demonstrates that women tend to only apply for roles if they meet 100% of the advertised required qualifications whereas men will apply even if they only meet 60%, then it is important that the list of essential requirements is accurate so as not to deter women from applying (Mohr, 2011). Secondly, the use of more stereotypically masculine wording in the advertisement may lead to women being less attracted to the job compared with the same job advertisement that contains more stereotypically feminine words (Gaucher et al., 2011). In addition, more female applicants can be attracted to apply, especially in the case of male-dominated role, simply by showing data on how many other people have applied to the advertisement (Gee, 2014). One participant mentioned the fact that many very senior vacancies are not advertised, and the searches and interviews are being done by men at the top whose unintended biases lean towards recruiting other men from the “boys’ club” as discussed earlier.

Three of the participants discussed the implementation of specific programs to foster female talent in their organisations. However, the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2014a) finds that providing programs for women only could unintentionally imply that women are not as capable as men, that they need extra help to reach senior positions, and their competence may even be called into question if they are promoted after being part of a women’s development program (Kulich et al., 2007). Additionally it could be seen as unfair if it is not available to all employees (Kravitz, 2008). More recently, therefore, programs have been designed to be inclusive, and one of the participants mentioned her organisation has a leadership program for which they are consciously ensuring they have equal numbers of men and women represented and the board chairman views
this as the workforce of the future. Such programs can not only assist women to overcome the barriers to senior leadership but may also be seen as good for all employees.

5.5.3 Reporting and targets

Only one of the participants worked for a company that set specific targets for women in senior leadership, however all but one of the participants were in favour of targets and reporting because they feel that any business initiative that is measured and reported on gets more focus, thereby improving outcomes. The same participant who was highlighted earlier disagreed because she felt the assessment of individual merit was adequate but she may have felt more optimistic because her organisation already had a gender balance at senior leadership levels so there was no apparent need to implement gender initiatives. Nevertheless it is standard business practice to measure and report on business objectives to ensure that they are achieved and the same applies when it comes to tackling gender balance (Giovannini, 2004), as shown in Figure 22. Reporting requirements have been implemented in a number of countries to increase the proportion of women in senior leadership. Sojo et al. (2016) found that mandatory reporting of board diversity for Fortune 500 companies in the U.S. led to an increase in female representation and reporting on diversity became a requirement for A.S.X. listed companies in 2011. The periodic reports commissioned by the A.S.X. continue to find that the size of the organisation is the best predictor of how likely companies are to set measurable targets (KPMG, 2016) and while ASX200 companies are making significant progress at 23% female board representation in 2016, another report on mid-size Australian companies found that board representation was only 9% (KPMG Enterprise, 2017). While an increased number of companies have a diversity policy, very few actually set quantitative targets for representation of women (KPMG, 2016). Most of the measurable objectives related to implementing programs such as pay gap reviews, unconscious bias programs or employee surveys and there are also many organisations who only reported vague aspirational objectives such as “achieve a culture of inclusion” which are unlikely to have any measurable effect (KPMG, 2016). This may be why one participant complained that companies do not report gender diversity in their annual reports, however those companies that did set quantitative targets had better gender diversity than those that did not (KPMG, 2016), confirming the adage that what gets measured and managed gets done.

There was no consensus from the research participants on what the right target should be. Two felt it we should be aiming for 50:50 within a 10 to 15-year timeframe, while others discussed more modest ideals of 30% over that timeframe. Women on Boards, an organisation that supports Australian women to leverage their professional skills and experience into non-executive-director and other board level roles, has set a target for women to hold 40% of Australian board and
leadership roles by 2025 (Women on Boards, 2018b). Another view expressed was that targets need to be achievable and may need to be adjusted according to where the organisation is currently at to ensure they stay motivated to get there, particularly for some of the very male-dominated industries such as mining that have further to go. This is supported by Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2013) toolkits that provide guidance to enable organisations to set realistic targets from their own baseline data and workforce dynamics (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2013). Just like other operational or financial business targets, setting gender targets ensures that organisations develop the necessary supporting strategies and programs with resources allocated to enable them to achieve them (Everett, 2013). Importantly though, it should be noted that Sojo et al. (2016) found that setting higher targets was associated with higher representation of women so it would be important for companies not to set the bar too low.

The one participant whose organisation had specific targets described that they have been making progress, however it is not without its challenges. She felt the pace was too slow and they had not yet reached the targets they had set for themselves. This reflects the experience of the Australian Institute of Company Directors who put in place a target of 30% women by 2018. Unfortunately, at the end of 2017 they reported that while progress has been made, this target is unlikely to be achieved. Nevertheless, the continued pressure has seen the number of ASX200 boards with no women decline to just eight companies (Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2017). As discussed, companies that set measurable targets are more likely to achieve success (KPMG, 2016), and in 2017, Westpac reported that they had achieved their target of 50% female representation across management occupations (Dent, 2017a). This was the result of a concerted effort by Westpac after the then-C.E.O. Gail Kelly publicly committed in 2010 to a target of 40% women in leadership by 2014. This target was met in 2012 and a new target of 50% by 2017 was set and achieved (Dent, 2017a).

Several participants highlighted the inability to enforce targets because there are no consequences for companies that do not implement them. They therefore suggested that the success of voluntary targets may be increased by tying executive incentives to them, in the same way that a company’s leaders are incentivised for achieving other business objectives (KPMG, 2016). This reflects the belief that “what gets rewarded gets done” (LeBoeuf, 1985). To improve the success of targets, therefore, the Male Champions of Change have encouraged “targets with teeth” whereby organisational leaders’ incentives are dependent on achieving quantifiable gender diversity targets (KPMG, 2016). While two participants claimed that the possibility of missing bonuses related to achieving gender-related K.P.I.s would motivate senior leaders, there are no penalties for organisations who miss their targets and therefore Women on Boards has stated that quotas will
sometimes be necessary to achieve their goal of 40% female representation by 2025, presumably if companies do not voluntarily act (Women on Boards, 2018b). It may be that organisations need to ensure the success of voluntary targets because Priestly (2013) suggests that setting targets may be the last chance for organisations to regulate themselves before having regulations imposed in the form of quotas.

5.5.4 Quotas

All of the participants expressed strong opinions about quotas but while there was almost unanimous support for targets and reporting, the research group was divided in their support for quotas. Quotas, like targets, set specific, measurable, time-bound goals for gender representation. Unlike targets, however, quotas are mandated, imposed typically by legislation, and there are penalties for non-compliance. Quotas can have rapid and significant effect as demonstrated in Norway, the first country to introduce gender board quotas. The proportion of women before legislation was introduced in 2003, requiring listed companies to have a minimum of 40% women on boards, was only 6% (Storvik & Teigen, 2010). By 2005 this had risen to 17% of board members but because many companies had not voluntarily complied, sanctions were legislated in 2005 to enforce the quota, leading to the 40% target being reached in 2008 (Storvik & Teigen, 2010). Sojo et al. (2016) found that enforcement led to higher representation of women and more recently other countries in Europe such as Belgium, France, Germany, Iceland, India, Israel, Italy, and Spain have also implemented mandatory quotas (Bertrand et al., 2014) although the targets and sanctions may vary. The European parliament voted in 2013 to introduce 40% quotas for listed companies throughout the European Union by 2020, but at the end of 2017, the debate continued with no agreement being reached (Boffey, 2017).

The main argument against quotas found in this research was that quotas violate the merit principle and prevent organisations from being able to employ the best person for the job. This concern is also supported by findings in the literature (Son Hing et al., 2002; Whelan & Wood, 2012). However if significant unconscious bias against women in the workplace exists, as discussed earlier, then the assessment of merit is already prejudiced. Indeed, another participant countered the merit argument by pointing to the fact that there are men in leadership positions who may not deserve to be there, whereas most women in leadership are highly competent because they have to be to get there. In fact such fears in Norway that quotas would lead to women being appointed who lacked competence for the role were unfounded as women joining boards since the reform have a higher level of education than male board members (Storvik, 2011), and attitudes have subsequently changed with wide support now for quotas in Norway (Sorsa, 2016). In Australia, Sam Mostyn was very proud to be a quota appointment on the A.F.L. commission in 2005, and strongly countered
claims that somehow she was not the best for the job (Dent, 2017b). The chairman at the time recognised that half of the A.F.L. fan base is women and set out to appoint Mostyn as the first woman to the commission through a rigorous and competitive process designed to demonstrate that she is more than qualified (Dent, 2017b).

Many participants discussed their dilemma about rejecting quotas because of the slow pace of change and two described it as a “dichotomy”. Indeed a number of those who expressed their dislike of quotas were starting to see they may be necessary or inevitable and even those who feel quotas are not necessary because their organisations have achieved balance without them, may still support them in some cases. One participant expressed that because the system cannot be expected to change itself, we need to drive cultural change including through the use of quotas and corresponding penalties. The rationale of those participants who strongly support quotas was about forcing change and several participants discussed examples of where quotas have worked, for example in the Australian Labor party and in Norway as discussed earlier. The literature supports the change in attitudes towards quotas expressed by the participants. In 2003, (Rindfleish & Sheridan) found that 58% of senior women managers opposed quotas, however a more recent survey by The Australian found that 62% of Australian women are now in favour of quotas (Trinca, 2016).

One woman became convinced about the need for quotas because of the bias and discrimination she had witnessed in the workplace. However another participant highlighted that many men are very anti-quotas because they do not believe that bias exists and while it could be argued that quotas result in discrimination against men (Devine, 2017), the whole point of such affirmative action measures is to compensate for the discrimination that already exists against women and even those who believe in the merit principle do not oppose preferential treatment for women if they perceive there is significant workplace discrimination (Sealy, 2010). Certainly as pointed out by one participant, there are plenty of men who do not deserve to hold the positions they are in. In fact recent research found that quotas force mediocre male leaders out, increasing overall competence (Besley et al., 2017). Additionally, it could be argued that well designed quota systems protect men from discrimination because those implemented in Norway and other European countries stipulate the minimum proportions of both men and women to be represented, thus ensuring gender balance.

One participant commented that the perception about quotas in the past was quite negative, but really quotas are just a business tool that may be necessary to effect change. Three of the participants maintained that government legislation would be necessary to be effective. However, even if legislated quotas are not favoured, two participants discussed other measures that can be
implemented, for example, in the U.S., tax incentives are provided for organisations with gender balance which drives suppliers to implement change. Two others commented on the missed opportunity for the Australian Government to implement similar mechanisms through the Workplace Gender Equality Act (2012), for example eligibility for government contracts.

Despite quotas being a very effective and rapid way to increase female representation at board level, three of the participants discussed their concern about the inability of quotas to effect change at the executive level and below and therefore they felt that quotas may need to be implemented at the executive and C.E.O. level and not just for boards. Storvik and Teigen (2010) reported of the Norway experience that even though 40% board representation had been achieved, only about 10% of top-level roles in the largest companies were held by women. The authors felt it was probably too early to predict how the quota reform might impact other management levels. Storvik and Gulbrandsen (2016) found that from 2008 to 2013 female C.E.O.s had increased from 5% to just 6%. Nevertheless, recent Australian research found that a trickle-down effect between board and executive levels existed, suggesting that appointing multiple women board members should result in improved female executive representation (Gould et al., 2018).

In summary, the women in this study supported the need for Australian organisations to make gender balance in senior leadership a strategic priority. There was unanimous agreement that these initiatives need to be led from the top with board sponsorship and strong C.E.O. support. The research found that the implementation of objective structured H.R. processes for selection, development and promotion is critical to overcome the inherent unconscious biases discussed at the beginning of this chapter but that organisations also need to set targets for women in senior leadership and report on their progress. Like other business objectives, the participants felt that if organisations measured their progress, and incentivised leaders to achieve K.P.I.s around gender balance in senior leadership, the issue would receive more focus and companies would achieve better outcomes. While support for legislated quotas and penalties was divided, many of the participants recognised the slow pace of change and that the system is unlikely to fix itself so some form of intervention may be necessary.

Several theories have been used throughout this discussion and they are shown in Appendix A. They have helped to explain, predict, and understand certain phenomena found in the study and have served as a structure and support for the study. The implications for policy and practice and a proposed model for success will be discussed in chapter 6.
5.6 Limitations and key assumptions

It was assumed in this study, that women in the top roles were able to provide insight into the reasons that Australian corporations are not making gender diversity in senior leadership a strategic priority. The limitation of this may be that these exceptional women who have made it to the top may not be representative of the experience of the majority of women in the workplace who are stuck in entry-level roles or middle-management and unable to progress. Nevertheless, it was anticipated by the researcher that the participants would have many years of not just their own experiences, but also those of other women in their networks that they were able to draw on for understanding.

The study was conducted in a single country, focusing on large Australian corporations, and was not designed to capture insights from other countries, although the literature review describes some similarities and contrasting features of other Western countries compared with Australia. Nor did the research include Australian subsidiaries of multi-national companies which may differ in their approaches to gender diversity based on their country of origin. Nevertheless, the recommendations for policy and practice may have implications not only for Australian businesses, but also for Australian subsidiary organisations. Also, the aim of the research was not to consider the issues for Small Businesses which are recognised in workplace legislation and A.T.O. rulings to have different considerations. This is also dealt with in the implications for policy and practice.

This research did not seek to include the views of men because it was felt that they may not have the necessary insight to elucidate this issue, since research has demonstrated that male managers may be biased in their perceptions of women’s competing work-family priorities (Sanders et al., 2013) and leadership aspirations (Hoobler et al., 2014). Nevertheless, their views may be important in understanding why as leaders many of them do not see gender diversity in senior leadership as a strategic priority and could be the subject of future research directions.

Some of the pitfalls of interpretivism can be the overemphasis on subjective impressions, and the inability to ensure accuracy of the researcher’s interpretations (Sarantakos, 2013). Because of this, the researcher endeavoured to avoid over-identification with the participants, and looked for common factors that influenced the participants’ perspectives. Easterby-Smith et al. (2012) also argue that policymakers may not give credibility to subjective studies however it is anticipated that this research adds deep meaning to some of the previously published quantitative work, and the convergent interviewing method chosen reduced some of the subjectivity inherent in qualitative data.
Three main limitations of convergent interviews (Riege & Nair, 2004) were discussed in chapter 3. Firstly, as with other face-to-face interviews, researcher bias can occur. This bias was addressed by conducting a thorough literature review to gain adequate prior knowledge, and while appropriate researcher training is usually recommended (Riege & Nair, 2004), in this case the researcher already possessed interview and data handling skills gained through her professional experience. Secondly, in order to contribute meaningfully to the process, researchers should be somewhat familiar with the research field and in this case the researcher achieved this through discussions with experts in the field, and a series of pilot interviews. Thirdly, due to the small sample size, there may be limitations with regard to validity and reliability.

During the convergent interviewing process, construct validity (how well the results fit the underlying constructs or theories around which the test is designed) was addressed by attempting to disprove emerging explanations in the data (Dick, 1990), and progressive redesign of the interview content and process to establish content validity. Internal validity (the ability to infer cause and effect relationships of one variable on the other variables) was addressed through the use of purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). Some external validity (the ability to generalise the research findings beyond the study) was achieved in this research by selection of a cross-section of interviewees to provide a wide range of opinions that are representative of the views held by others in the community. Finally reliability (the degree to which a measure provides consistent results, so that other researchers could repeat the study and reach similar findings) was addressed through the use of consistent procedures (Kirk & Miller, 1986), including through the structured process of convergent interviews and the use of a structured process for recording, writing and interpreting data, and through comparison of the research findings with others in the literature.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the findings previously described in chapter 4, in order to answer the research question: a) “what is the state of gender diversity in senior leadership in Australian corporations?” and b) “what factors may be preventing them from making gender diversity in senior leadership a key strategic priority?” The insights from the research participants suggest that few Australian corporations are making gender diversity in senior leadership a key strategic priority and the underlying reasons were examined. There was overwhelming evidence that the main barrier to women in senior leadership is unconscious bias in the form of gender bias, the motherhood bias, and affinity bias or the “boys’ club”. The challenge of these biases is compounded by women’s need to balance career with family responsibilities that can disrupt women’s careers and force women to juggle multiple responsibilities, and it was identified that workplace flexibility has an important role to play in supporting women’s careers. Other success factors identified for women in
senior leadership were confidence, the availability of mentors and career sponsors, as well as positive female role models.

In addition to these factors, the research participants were united in their belief that gender balance in senior leadership should be a strategic priority for Australian organisations because it will lead to greater business success. Several theories have been used throughout this discussion (see Appendix A) which have helped to explain, predict, and understand certain phenomena found in the study and have served as a structure and support for the study. This discussion leads to a number of implications for practice within a recommended framework that may help overcome the current inertia and will be described in the next chapter.
6  Implications for policy and practice

The implications for policy and practice focus on the irrefutable continued low numbers of women in senior leadership in Australian businesses (Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2018; KPMG Enterprise, 2017). The research provides some insights on the debate about the reasons behind these statistics, and what, if anything, should be done about it. Initially it was thought that it would just take time for women with the right qualifications and experience to reach the top and that the pipeline would eventually deliver (Nancherla, 2010). However women have been outstripping men in their educational achievements for over 30 years, and it appears clear that the problem will not self-resolve. More recently, research has turned to issues of women’s confidence, ambitions, family choices and motivation to explain the slow progress and the focus has turned to “fixing women” (Fox, 2017). However, programs aimed at getting women to “lean in” (Sandberg, 2013) do not seem to be having a dramatic effect on women’s ability to advance their careers (Bowles & McGinn, 2008; Institute of Leadership & Management, 2011). Therefore, this research aimed to answer the question: “what is the state of gender diversity in senior leadership in Australian corporations, and what factors may be preventing them from making gender diversity in senior leadership a key strategic priority?”

6.1.1  Acknowledging and accepting that women face barriers

As highlighted in this research, women face a number of structural and cultural barriers to achieving parity in senior leadership and the fundamental problem lies not with women themselves, but with a system that allows discrimination and bias to continue. This is a key reason why knowledge of the
business benefits of inclusion (Carter & Wagner, 2011; Curtis et al., 2012; KPMG Enterprise, 2017; The Reibey Institute, 2011; Wood, 2013) is at odds with business policy and practice in corporate Australia. The findings of this research imply that until this is acknowledged, and the structural issues are addressed, gender balance in the most senior ranks is unlikely to be realised.

Firstly, family responsibilities remain a fact of life for most Australian women during the “years of disruption” (Fox, 2017, p. 39) while children are young, given that the Australian norms of organising work and domesticity in the patriarchal gender order (Connell, 1987, 2002, 2005, 2009) mean that women still carry the bulk of the caring burden (Craig, 2007), sometimes referred to as the “second shift” (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). It was identified that the balancing act that many women face in trying to manage multiple competing priorities is a challenge that organisations need to accept and address proactively if they are to reap the economic benefits of keeping the best and brightest of half of the workforce engaged and contributing to their success. Indeed the World Economic Forum claims that female talent remains one of the most under-utilised business resources, either untapped from the outset, or wasted through lack of progression (Schwab et al., 2017). Additionally, Australia has one of the lowest rates of female full-time employment in the O.E.C.D. (PwC, 2017), despite women outperforming men in their educational achievements for over 30 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017a). As highlighted in this research, organisations therefore need to find ways to stay engaged with their female talent through the childbearing and rearing season. However, it must also be recognised that 79% of women aged 25-54 and working full-time have no children under 12 and family-friendly policies are not the only answer (Optimiss Consulting, 2013).

This leads to the critical issue of unconscious bias, which was the most significant issue identified in this research and is faced by most women at some point in their careers. It intersects with women’s family responsibilities that were described above, leading to a form of bias against mothers called the “maternal wall” (Crosby et al., 2004), which has been described as the most powerful form of sex discrimination. In addition to women with caring responsibilities deviating from the “ideal worker norm” (Williams, 2000), “expectation states” theory (Berger et al., 1977) leads them to be evaluated as less competent and less likely to be perceived as leaders (Ridgeway, 2001; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Unconscious bias also results in the exclusion of women from the “boys’ club” of the senior ranks, a type of “affinity bias” (Turnbull, 2016) where leaders recruit, sponsor and promote others like them, and career advancement decisions are made over drinks, golf and other shared interests. Even those “enlightened” male managers who think they are doing their female employees a favour by relieving them of challenging assignments or encouraging them to take part-time work to alleviate the pressures of family responsibilities, can inadvertently derail
women’s career advancement (Hoobler et al., 2014). Importantly, for those who think that their organisations are not biased and that everyone is chosen on merit alone, it should be pointed out that as little as 1% bias in favour of men, can result lead to a skewed proportion of 65% of men reaching the top versus 35% of women from a starting point of 50:50 (Martell et al., 1996). Conversely, if 35% representation of women in top jobs is a goal worth achieving, then unconscious bias needs to be reduced to less than 1% – a potentially daunting task. As identified in the research, this will involve recognising, accepting and tackling unconscious bias through implementation of appropriate policies to ensure adequate representation of women at all levels of the organisation. Nevertheless, these policy initiatives will not be implemented by businesses until there is an understanding that they are crucial to addressing the underlying bias that exists, and that better business outcomes will result.

6.1.2 Implementing policy initiatives to remove barriers

The Australian Government has made great strides in recognising the unique challenges women in the workplace face by implementing paid parental leave and childcare support. Nevertheless, Australian businesses will need to do their part to support more women to stay connected to the workforce and maintain their career progress during the time when they are juggling work and family priorities. As identified in the research, enabling women to maintain close contact with their organisation and continue to share ideas while they are “off-ramped” (Vencat, 2006) can be very beneficial. This could include simple measures such as giving women the choice to keep their company e-mail active during periods of leave and/or allowing them to join key strategic meetings and events so they can continue to contribute and feel they are a valued part of the organisation. Support when returning to work after having children is important to avoid the impact of occupational downgrading that often results from career gaps (Ghayad & Dickens, 2012; PwC, 2017) and organisations need to ensure their recruitment practices allow highly-skilled women to return to work in roles that are commensurate with their experience and skills, and that they can be considered for promotion even when they are on maternity leave.

This means managers will need to actively support women’s continued career progression rather than thinking they are doing the right thing by putting them on the “mommy track” (Moya et al., 2007). The research highlighted that workplace flexibility is the key to Australian women remaining attached to the workforce after the birth of their first child as suggested by Argyrous et al. (2016). In some cases this may mean empowering high potential women to work when and where they choose, with a focus on measuring outcomes rather than hours spent in the office. If the key focus is on business deliverables, then providing greater autonomy for women to determine their own patterns for when and where they choose to work can be a win-win for organisations and their employees.
As identified in the research, it is also recommended that flexible work be made available for all employees, encouraging men to take up flexibility to break down gender stereotyping (Dunlea et al., 2015), and for flexibility to be role modeled by senior leaders of both genders to demonstrate to aspiring women that it can be done (Baird et al., 2014; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2015). Since this may be challenging and potentially unrealistic for very small business, thresholds for such requirements could be set so that small businesses with less than 100 employees are not disadvantaged. This will be discussed in further detail below.

As well as flexibility policies, this research highlighted that H.R. practices for recruitment, development and promotion need to be structured to ensure equal opportunities for women to reach the top. This includes practices such as anonymising and comparing resumes in pairs or groups, following a very structured interview and decision-making process that reduces the affinity bias caused by over-emphasis on rapport-building, but is often framed as “cultural fit” (Turnbull, 2016), ensuring gender balance in both the candidate pool and interview panel, and adopting a “50:50: if not why not” approach to every decision (Baird et al., 2014; Fox, 2017).

Additionally, the research emphasised that when women have the opportunity to be mentored by leaders at the very top, their career advancement equals that of men and since this type of sponsorship is less likely to occur naturally for women, organisations will need to put formal programs in place. In order to avoid backlash from men who think that programs that support women are “anti-men” (Riordan, 2017), or backlash from women who feel that assistance is not needed and undermines confidence in women’s capabilities (Foges, 2018), it may be more palatable to frame programs around “inclusion” as opposed to “diversity” (Oswick & Noon, 2012) and ensure both men and women are represented in equal numbers which can only be seen as good for all employees.

Finally, the research highlighted that as with all strategic business objectives, “what gets measured gets managed. And what gets managed ultimately gets done” (Priestly, 2013), which means that organisations will need to be held accountable to set targets and report on gender inclusion in senior leadership. Only then will business leaders put effort and resources into changing the policies within their organisations to ensure women are provided with the same opportunities as men to aspire to the top jobs, as well as linking C.E.O. and senior executive remuneration to achieving those targets because “what gets rewarded gets done” (LeBoeuf, 1985). While A.S.X. reporting requirements introduced in 2011 have had a significant effect on the proportion of women board directors on the ASX200, increasing from just 8% in 2010 to 26% in 2018, more will need to be done to achieve the same gains in other large to mid-size Australian organisations, as well as
improving the gender balance at the C.E.O. and executive level across all businesses. As acknowledged in the research, the public service has demonstrated that it is achievable (Australian Public Service Commission, 2017a; NSW Government, 2018), and now it is time for the Australian Commonwealth Government to lead by example, setting targets for women in politics, and requiring Australian companies to do the same.

Importantly, it is a complex issue that will require more than one single answer. Indeed the European Institute for Gender Equality (Villosio et al., 2017) finds that addressing policies for all of the gender inequalities collectively is likely to have a much more positive impact, rather than tackling each one in isolation. Australia’s progress on the policy areas that have been found to provide the most compelling economic case (Villosio et al., 2017) are shown in Table 4 below, and it is important that all of these are tackled concurrently as will be discussed further in the next section.

As shown in Table 4, Australia has achieved gender equality in education. However there are a number of areas in which gender equality has not been achieved, and there are no current policies in place to address them: labour market participation, the sustained gender pay gap, and women’s political empowerment. Conversely there is a National Plan in place to end violence against women (Australian Government Department of Social Services, 2017), and significant Government resources ($100M) have been committed to this aim from 2010 to 2022. Furthermore, while the public service has had successful policies to target gender equality in senior leadership, in the corporate sector A.S.X. reporting has had limited success and more needs to be done.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy area</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Current policy</th>
<th>Supporting evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender equality in education</td>
<td>🟢</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>(Schwab et al., 2017), (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender equality in labour market</td>
<td>🔴</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>(OECD, 2018)</td>
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<td>market participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reducing the gender pay gap</td>
<td>🔴</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>(PwC, 2017)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women’s leadership in organisations</td>
<td>🟠</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>(Chief Executive Women, 2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women in politics</td>
<td>🔴</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>(OECD, 2018; Schwab et al., 2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ending violence against women</td>
<td>🟠</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>(Australian Government Department of Social Services, 2017)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Australian performance on key gender policy areas
At a time in Australia’s history when equality is resonating with discourses of social fairness (Kirton et al., 2007) and parliament has legislated for marriage equality, surely the time for “inclusion” of the best and brightest of 50% of Australia’s people has arrived. This will require a comprehensive national approach to bring all of the policy areas in Table 4 together in order to effectively address the ongoing inequality.

6.1.3 A National Plan for a fairer workplace

Since women make up half of Australia’s population, there is a strong moral argument that they deserve equal access to health, education, economic participation, earning potential, and political decision-making power (Schwab et al., 2017). Importantly, gender parity also has a vast bearing on the growth of economies and businesses, with World Economic Forum data showing that it clearly correlates with G.D.P. per capita, and economic competitiveness (Schwab et al., 2017). While Australia essentially has perfect scores for gender parity for both health and education (with 1 being parity), the economic empowerment and opportunity score drops to 0.72, and political empowerment stagnates at just 0.23 (Schwab et al., 2017). As previously discussed, the body of evidence also demonstrates that gender inclusion is good for business (Carter & Wagner, 2011; Curtis et al., 2012; KPMG Enterprise, 2017; The Reibey Institute, 2011; Wood, 2013).

Additionally, the World Economic Forum recommends that for countries to remain competitive, they need to make gender equality an important part of their development, and that public-private cooperation will be critical (Schwab et al., 2016). Evidence suggests that women’s political decision-making power and wider economic participation are correlated (Schwab et al., 2017). Therefore, not only should the Australian Government invest in gender equality promotion as a means of increasing G.D.P., it should also set itself targets to achieve gender balance in political leadership, thereby contributing to the country’s success and acting as a role model for Australian business leaders to do the same. In order to do this, it will be important to engage powerful men in the debate and initiatives for change (Fox, 2017; Male Champions of Change, 2017).

Economic performance indicators will need to be regularly reported and shared broadly and publicly by Government and private industry partners, in order to bring pressure on more companies to incorporate gender balance in senior leadership as an important driver of financial success. Consequently the Australian Government has an important role to play in educating the community about the economic benefits of equality and inclusion. Indeed, targeted public investment into gender equality promotion has been found to create a particularly strong impact on
G.D.P. compared to investment into education and general labour market programs (Villosio et al., 2017). If the Australian Government were to invest similarly to the $100 million support for a national plan to tackle violence against women (Australian Government Department of Social Services, 2017), this could have a major impact on moving Australia’s gender parity rank of 35th out of 144 countries, towards neighbouring New Zealand in the top 10, while at the same time contributing to G.D.P. and associated government tax revenue. Thus the implementation of a National Plan for workplace gender equality could provide a significant return on investment for the Commonwealth Government.

The “Women’s Safety Package” (Australian Government Department of Social Services, 2017) aims to educate Australians that violence against women starts with disrespect for women in the home and in our society, in order to change societal attitudes and behaviour. Similarly, as this research demonstrated, the lack of women in senior leadership starts with societal attitudes about women’s roles in the workplace and the associated biases against women that drive behaviour and decision-making in Australian organisations. As with the “Women’s Safety Package” (Australian Government Department of Social Services, 2017), this would involve commitments to key performance indicators under a National Plan, including specific programs to support advocacy, research and education. Importantly, while the Australian Government as an employer has a good track record in the public service, Australia fails dismally in the area of political empowerment (Schwab et al., 2017). This means that the Government would need to consider targets and quotas to significantly improve the representation of women in Government and since women’s political empowerment has been shown to improve other factors such as women’s labour market participation and the gender pay gap, such an initiative could have a very important effect on Australia’s G.D.P. This takes the debate from the individual company level “business case” to the national level “economic case” to build a stronger and more sustainable future for Australia and all of its people.

As shown in the model below, a National Plan would enable the Australian Government to implement policy in those areas which are not currently being addressed (as described earlier in Table 4). A National Plan would also encompass metrics to track progress, detail areas for ongoing research, and describe the types of public-private partnerships that would be needed for success, in the way that the V.I.C. Government is partnering with industry in its “Recruit Smarter” program (VIC Government, 2017).

There are approximately 850,000 employing businesses in Australia, however 94% of those are small businesses employing less than 20 people while only 0.5% (3,800) are considered large
businesses employing over 200 people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018a). Therefore in order to ensure a National Plan for gender equity is appropriately targeted at medium to large entities, whilst ensuring small businesses are not disadvantaged, it is recommended that the definition of “relevant employer” (Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Amendment Act 2012 (Cth)) be used. This would encompass approximately 38,000 Australian businesses with 100 or more employees who are currently required to report to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2018c).

Currently the Act requires businesses to report on gender equality metrics but does not require them to implement any policy measures to address identified inequalities, nor are businesses required to meet any key performance indicators. As shown in Figure 24, a National Plan would encompass research to continue to identify and highlight the barriers for women in senior leadership, and implement policies to embed those programs that will lead to success factors for women in senior leadership being realised.
Only when Australia as a nation commits to gender equality in the workplace will Australia reach its true economic potential and deliver a stronger and more sustainable future for Australia and all of its people.
6.1.4 Recommendations for further research

As highlighted in this research, the study of women in senior leadership reveals a complex picture. Significant equality gains that have been made by women throughout Australia’s history, however, societal attitudes have been slow to catch up and progress is happening at a variable pace. The gains made in recent years for women in senior leadership are encouraging and perhaps not as “glacial” as they once were, but ongoing review and reflection is required to ensure progress does not stall.

In this regard, it is important that research continues to track the outcomes of the A.S.X. gender diversity reporting, in order to develop and implement new initiatives to engage the laggards and learn from the successes of those companies who have managed to achieve gender parity. There are still a significant number of companies with no visible gender diversity policies in place (KPMG, 2016) and the next step could be to mandate that companies not only report their metrics, but also demonstrate they are actively working to improve them, and further research may be needed to look at how the pipeline for women board members can be strengthened further.

While research finds that 30% is the threshold for business benefits to be realised (Carter & Silva, 2011; Desvaux et al., 2007; Joy et al., 2007), it is not clear what a realistic target should be for Australia. The target of 40:40:20 (that is 40% women, 40% men with the remaining 20% made up of either men or women) sounds like a fair and reasonable solution (Boffey, 2017; Women on Boards, 2018b), however it is unclear whether this is optimal in all situations. For female-dominated workplaces for example, should the proportion at the senior leadership level be more reflective of the workplace in general? Is it possible that organisations with majority women (rather than men) in senior leadership might perform better? Or is it a matter of getting the balance right?

Since this research did not seek to include the views of men for reasons previously discussed, their views may be important in understanding why as leaders many of them do not see gender diversity in senior leadership as a strategic priority and could be the subject of future research. Unlike the Male Champions of Change, this research highlighted that many male C.E.O.s pay lip service to gender diversity and do not have any quantifiable targets to increase the number of women in their executive leadership teams (KPMG, 2016). Therefore further research may help to uncover whether this is due to resistance or apathy, and the reasons underlying these attitudes, so that we can better target the additional regulations or education that might be needed to effect further change.

The recent success of the marriage equality bill in Australia may also provide useful learnings that could be applied to the gender equality (Murphy, Karp, Greenwich, & Brown, 2017). The first learning could be the importance of having L.G.B.T.I. representatives in parliament and it may be
useful to explore the potential impact that women in parliament might similarly have on implementing policies to improve gender diversity in Australian businesses, particularly since they meet the critical mass threshold with 32% of the lower house and 39% of senate positions being held by women in the 45th parliament (Hough, 2016), although for the Government, that figure is just 22% (Norman, 2018). The marriage equality campaigners also knew the importance of having a disciplined and positive message about values and people (Murphy et al., 2017), and research into the messages around gender equity in senior leadership that resonate with the Australian public and business leaders would be important to build into a national plan. There may certainly be other learnings that would be worth exploring to see if they could be replicated since the marriage equality campaign was able to achieve a significant turnaround from the 38% support levels in 2004, to the resounding majority plebiscite vote of 61.6% in favour of marriage equality in 2017 (Murphy et al., 2017).

Despite making up over 30% of parliamentarians, The World Economic Forum’s global gender gap report (2017), reveals a large discrepancy between New Zealand and Australia, ranking number 9 and number 35 respectively, a difference that is mainly reflected in the political empowerment score with New Zealand’s score increasing to 0.43 (1.0 being parity) while Australia remains at 0.23. While New Zealand does have a higher number of female politicians, much of this difference may be driven by the low number of women in Government (22% Liberals vs 45% Labor) (Norman, 2018), as well as the fact that New Zealand is currently being led by its third female Prime Minister, while Australia has only ever had one female Prime Minister for a relatively short period. Given that evidence from the World Economic Forum suggests that women’s political decision-making power and wider economic participation are correlated, this could provide some insight into why New Zealand also ranks better than Australia on female workplace participation and the gender pay gap (PwC, 2017), and warrants further research attention. Australia’s position is also affected by the low rates of female full-time employment (the third lowest in the O.E.C.D.), a phenomenon which also deserves further investigation given that increasing female workplace participation has the potential to dramatically improve G.D.P. (Schwab et al., 2017).

Since Australian women outperform men in their educational achievements, and yet the enduring gender pay gap starts from the time of graduation (Department of Education and Training, 2017) with women never catching up, further research is necessary to understand the reasons behind this phenomenon, and to explore whether specific interventions could address this inequity. Such research may also inform the need to provide specific education to female students in order to counter negative societal reactions, and to educate them that it is possible to make salary requests without fear of retribution.
Nonetheless, for too long research and popular theory has focused on the deficits of women – their lack of confidence (Sandberg, 2013; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003), their leadership style (Fletcher, 2004; Sinar et al., 2015), or their competing family choices (Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Schulte, 2014). The focus for further research should be not on the deficits of women, and the need to “fix” them, but on the systemic and structural changes that can support gender inclusion. Ongoing research into the economic benefits for Australia and Australian businesses of improving the gender balance in our top jobs, and widespread promotion of such research through political campaigns and dissemination to business leaders is needed to ensure it is highlighted as an important priority for our society. Furthermore, research to track successful strategies that have been implemented in some of our leading organisations such as Westpac (Dent, 2017a) could encourage others to do the same.
Conclusion: a time for action

The insights from the research participants help us to understand what is preventing Australian corporations from making gender diversity in senior leadership a key strategic priority. It lies in the structural and cultural make-up of our society and workplaces, where women retain the majority of the responsibility to balance work and family commitments, where women face significant unconscious bias that often intersects with their roles as mothers, and where there remains a lack of will for the male leaders of Australia’s corporations, to give up their power, even if it is in the best interests of their own businesses’ successes.

The achievements of Anti-discrimination and Equal Employment Opportunity legislation seem to be firmly in the past with none of the women in this study having been affected by marriage bars or restricted employment options. Nevertheless, it is also evident that the promise of equal opportunity appears to be failing women once they leave the education system and enter the workforce. This research highlighted that social discrimination, sexism and unconscious bias continue to affect women’s employment opportunities, evidenced by the enduring gender pay gap of 16% (PwC, 2017) which remains largely unchanged since the equal pay act of 1969 (The Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union v. Meat and Allied Trades Federation of Australia (Equal Pay case), 1969), the fact that women retire with just half of the superannuation of their male counterparts (Diversity Council Australia & Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2016), and that women represent only one in eight Australian C.E.O.s (Diversity Council Australia & Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2016). Put another way, you only need to look around you to realise that straight, white, able-bodied 40-69 year-old men who make up just 8.4% of our population represent the majority of Australian leadership (Liveris, 2017) in business and in Government, and it is vital that they are engaged in the impetus for change.

This research has highlighted that the problem will not be self-resolving, nor will barriers simply disappear because of “fix the women” advice such as women needing to “lean in” and just “ask”. Therefore it is clear that intervention will be necessary to achieve satisfactory and widespread change in Australia. Currently, outside the public service, the onus is on individual C.E.O.s and boards to make progress in their own organisations, but they are still few and far between, particularly as the size of the organisation decreases. Mandatory A.S.X. reporting of board gender diversity affects just over 2,000 (KPMG, 2016) of Australia’s ~850,000 employing businesses (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018a), but the reports are not made public and no research has been conducted on the effects of this policy since 2015 (KPMG, 2016). In the 2017-18 year, the Workplace Gender Equality Agency collected data on over 38,000 “relevant employers” of Australian businesses with 100+ employees, but there is no requirement for these organisations to
set targets or implement policies in relation to gender diversity in leadership or gender pay equality. Ahmed Fahour, former head of Australia Post, who was able to reach a target of nearly 40 per cent of women on the executive committee by 2016, up from zero in 2010, calls for all Australian companies to be forced to release annual reports on their gender targets and gaps in workplace diversity (Greenblat, 2016). Says Fahour, “If we can’t get something as plainly obvious as gender equality right then what hope does anybody else have who is slightly different? What does it mean for minorities? What does it mean for indigenous people? And it’s depressing if you are at that end of the room, and we can’t as a society get gender equality right” (Greenblat, 2016).

With the marriage equality law now firmly embedded in Australia’s history, we are perhaps entering a new phase of feminism. It is not acceptable that many young Australian women believe that their gender is, or will be, a barrier to their careers and future leadership opportunities, or that 33% believe that it would be “easier to get my dream job if I were a male” (IPSOS Australia, 2016). For too long, privilege has remained in the hands of a small minority of men who still carry a sense of entitlement that comes from the outdated male breadwinner model and the invisible privilege (Kimmel, 2015) that they have carried all their lives. It is time to engage those men, our country’s political and business leaders, in the debate that gender parity is good for our businesses, and good for our nation. That only when we seek to balance the gender mix in the senior leadership of our country and our businesses, and make it a strategic priority, will Australia truly reach its full potential. It is not only the “right thing”, but also the “bright thing” (Brown et al., 2002) to hold our leaders accountable to making it happen. The arguments are clear, and now is the time to “just do it”.


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Appendices

Appendix A. Theories referred to in the discussion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theories used in the discussion</th>
<th>Origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Affinity bias (homophily)</strong></td>
<td>(McPherson et al., 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A natural human tendency to prefer people who are like us which results in a preference to network and socialise with others who are similar to us (McPherson et al., 2001). This type of bias manifests in the workplace as identifying people who are a “good fit” for the organisation and role (Linos &amp; Reinhard, 2015; Turnbull, 2016) based on visual, cultural and demographic factors, and since the majority of hiring managers at senior levels are men.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expectation states theory</strong></td>
<td>(Berger et al., 1977) (Ridgeway, 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explains the unequal status of members within a task-oriented group that leads to hierarchy and inequality based on status characteristics. Most commonly used to examine and explain gender inequality within groups due to gender stereotypes and status beliefs that associate greater status and competence with men than women.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender evaluation bias</strong></td>
<td>(Goldberg, 1968)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When men and women evaluated exactly the same article, it was rated higher if believed to be written by a man rather than by a woman, demonstrating the prejudice of both men and women against women.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The patriarchal gender order in which men have a dominant position over women in a political and social context, leading to a social hierarchy and social organisation which justifies the subordination of women. This order also influences the workplace.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender regime</strong></td>
<td>(Connell, 2002, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The pattern of gender relations within an organisation which involves the gender division of labour; gender power relations; emotion and human relations; and gender culture and symbolism. Organisations and leadership are structured to maintain a gender order where men receive privilege through administrative processes and “merit-based” principles and practices.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Glass ceiling effect</strong></td>
<td>(Cotter et al., 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A distinctly gender-based effect that reduces the ability of women to advance to higher levels, that increases over the course of a career and is not explained by any other job-based factors.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Homosociality</strong></td>
<td>(Lipman-Blumen, 1976)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The preference for the company of the same sex in a social rather than sexual context. The basic premise of this homosocial view of sex roles suggests that men innately seek identification and communication with other men. It is a process that is noticeable in early childhood and is</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenon</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Homosocial reproduction</strong></td>
<td>Homosocial preference leads men to hire other men in their own likeness in order to share the occupational space and privilege with other men. This enables male leaders to reproduce their dominant power relations and perpetuate the cycle of men outnumbering women in senior leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideal worker norm</strong></td>
<td>The “ideal worker” is seen as always available for work because [he] has no responsibility for housework and childcare, takes no time off for childbearing, and not only works full-time but is also available for overtime.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male bonding</strong></td>
<td>The formation of close personal relationships and cooperation between males which is part of the human default system and operates “without and even despite and against women” (Tiger, 2017, p. vii) (see also homosociality).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maternal wall</strong></td>
<td>The intersection of gender bias with bias against mothers, which results from societal stereotypes about mothers that reduce women’s status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role congruity theory</strong></td>
<td>The perceived mismatch or incongruity between traditional male roles and attributes, and stereotypical female social roles and characteristics, leads to women being seen less favourably regardless of whether they display stereotypical leadership behaviour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The second shift</strong></td>
<td>The work performed at home on housework and caring responsibilities in addition to women’s paid work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social capital theory of career success</strong></td>
<td>Borrowing social capital enables women to access their sponsor’s networks, connect with powerful people who can assist their career progression, and to receive usually private information about career opportunities at executive levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Think manager – think male</strong></td>
<td>The &quot;think manager – think male&quot; phenomenon reflects gender stereotypes and status beliefs that associate greater status, worthiness and competence for leadership with men than women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tokenism</strong></td>
<td>In response to their status as token members of a group, women may try to blend in, whereas once women reach a critical mass, they are able to have more influence and effect change in an organisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What gets measured gets managed</strong></td>
<td>Regular measurement and reporting keep people focused, and they are able to use the information to make decisions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to improve results. These measurements are sometimes referred to as Key Performance Indicators (K.P.I.s).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>What gets rewarded gets done</strong></th>
<th>Positive reinforcement through reward will result in desired outcomes being achieved. Conversely rewarding unwanted behaviours can result in the opposite.</th>
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<tr>
<td>(LeBoeuf, 1985)</td>
<td>(LeBoeuf, 1985)</td>
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</table>
Appendix B. Invitation letter

Dear [name],

I would like to invite you to participate in research I am doing as part of my Doctor of Business Administration study at Charles Sturt University into the reasons that many Australian corporations are not making gender diversity in senior leadership a strategic priority.

Participation will involve an interview lasting approximately one hour, and a time and location that is convenient for you, perhaps at your office.

Background
Despite decades of equal opportunity legislation, Australia still does not have appreciable numbers of women in senior leadership positions. Furthermore, although women have become better educated, are entering the workplace in greater numbers, and have been able to reach middle management levels, the progress at senior executive and board levels has been “glacial”, and the proportion reaching these positions is very small.

Discrimination remains an important factor not only in the enduring gender pay gap that becomes more pronounced over time from graduation to senior levels, but also in women’s ability to advance their careers, with even small levels of unconscious bias having a profound effect.

Improving gender diversity at senior levels within organisations is not just a social justice issue, there are also sound business reasons for making it a strategic priority in Australian businesses, and awareness of those reasons is growing.

The Australian Public sector has had great success, with women’s representation at senior executive levels reaching 30% in recent years. Unfortunately, this is in stark contrast to the private sector, where women hold less than 10% of both executive managerial positions and directorships of Australia’s top 500 companies. So why is it that Australian businesses are not making the sort of progress that the Public Sector has demonstrated is clearly possible?

My research will explore and identify the reasons why Australian corporations are not making more progress, by interviewing women in key senior positions to gain their insights into what is preventing organisations from making gender diversity a key strategic goal. It will also investigate the gender equity initiatives and structural changes that may be needed to support this goal, whilst exploring the deeper reasons for the on-going gender bias in contemporary Australian business.

Please find enclosed an information sheet and interview questions. I am happy to answer any questions you may have about this research and look forward to speaking with you soon to arrange a suitable interview time.

Kind regards,

Kathryn Evans
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
Ethics protocol number: 200/2015/02

Is sex discrimination alive and well in corporate Australia? Why gender equality is so hard to achieve in senior leadership and what we can do about it.

Researcher
Kathryn Evans (Dip Pharm, MBA)
Student ID: 94074177
Doctor of Business Administration
Charles Sturt University

Project Supervisor
Dr Kerry Tibbuck (PhD)
Lecturer
School of Management and Marketing
Faculty of Business
Charles Sturt University

Invitation
You are invited to participate in a research study on gender diversity in senior leadership in the Australian private sector.

The study is being conducted by Kathryn Evans, a Doctor of Business Administration student from the Charles Sturt University.

Before you decide whether or not you wish to participate in this study, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish.

1. What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this study is to examine the reasons that Australian businesses are not making more progress on increasing the representation of women in senior leadership.

Previous research has demonstrated the benefits that a critical mass of female leadership can have on company performance yet few Australian businesses are making gender diversity a strategic priority and women make up less than 10% of senior executives and directorships in the ASX 500. In contrast women now make up 39% of senior executives in the Australian Public Service, demonstrating that with the right policies, strategic goals and supporting frameworks, gender diversity targets are achievable.

This research will explore why the knowledge is at odds with business policy and practice, and highlight some of the experiences of senior women which may illuminate the reasons behind this trend.

2. Why have I been invited to participate in this study?
We are seeking women in executive leadership positions or with academic or other expertise in this field to participate in this research. You were selected because of your position or expertise.

www.csu.edu.au
Charles Sturt University, Ron Williams Drive, Albury, NSW 2640, Australia. Tel: +61 2 6043 3600. AN004 369 285

281
3. What does this study involve?
If you agree to be involved in this study, you will be asked to participate in a face-to-face interview at a
time and place of your convenience. The length of the interview will be approximately one hour.
Interviews will be audio recorded and information synthesised into a report about collective themes.

4. Are there risks and benefits to me in taking part in this study?
There will be no benefit or risk to you in participating in this research.

5. How is this study being paid for?
The research is being self-funded by the investigator.

6. Will taking part in this study (or travelling to) cost me anything, and will I be paid?
There will be no costs involved in participating in this study, nor will there be any payments made to
participants for their involvement.

7. What if I don’t want to take part in this study?
Participation in this research is entirely your choice. Only those people who give their informed
consent will be included in the project. Whether or not you decide to participate, is your decision and
will not disadvantage you.

If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw from the project at any time without giving a reason
and have the option of withdrawing any data which identifies you.

8. What if I participate and want to withdraw later?
I understand I can withdraw from the project at any time and do not have to give any reason for
withdrawing.

9. How will my confidentiality be protected?
Any information collected by the researcher which might identify you will be stored securely and only
accessed by the researcher unless you consent otherwise, except as required by law.

A copy of data used for analysis will be retained for at least 5 years at the Charles Sturt University.
Confidentiality be ensured by replacing names with numerical codes.
Information which might identify participants will not be disclosed without their prior consent.

10. What will happen to the information that I give you?
The information will be reported in a thesis to be submitted for Kathryn Evans’s Doctorate of Business
Administration degree and in papers in business journals.

Individual participants will not be identified in any reports arising from the project.
A copy of the thesis will be available to participants of the study on request.
11. What should I do if I want to discuss this study further before I decide?
If you would like further information please contact the investigator, Kathryn Evans 0418 666 738, or the Project Supervisor, Kerry Tilbrook (02) 6338 4252

12. Who should I contact if I have concerns about the conduct of this study?
NOTE: Charles Sturt University's Faculty of Business has approved this project. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Faculty of Business Human Research Ethics Committee through the Chair:

Dr Ramudu Bhanugopan
Faculty of Business Human Research Ethics Committee
Tel: (02) 6933 2696
Email: bramudu@csu.edu.au

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.

Thank you for considering this invitation.
This information sheet is for you to keep.
Appendix D. Interview questions

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please tell me the story of your experience of becoming and being a woman in senior leadership.
2. What were the key success factors for your own advancement?
3. What challenges did you face along the way?
4. How have the organisations you have worked for demonstrated their commitment to gender diversity in senior leadership?
5. What obstacles have you seen for those organisations in making it a strategic priority?
6. What gender initiatives have been successful in supporting improved numbers of women in senior leadership in the companies you have worked with?
7. What effects of unconscious bias (if any) have you faced in your career progression?
8. What differences (if any) do you see in the experiences of the young women in your organisation in your organisation today?
Appendix E. Consent form

CONSENT FORM

Ethics protocol number: 2016/02

Is sex discrimination alive and well in corporate Australia? Why gender equality is so hard to achieve in senior leadership and what we can do about it.

Researcher:
Kathryn Evans (Dip Pharm, MBA)
Student ID: 94074177
Doctor of Business Administration
Charles Sturt University

Project Supervisor:
Dr Kerry Tilbrook (PhD)
Lecturer
School of Management and Marketing
Faculty of Business
Charles Sturt University

I agree to participate in the above research project and give my consent freely.

I understand that the project will be conducted as described in the Information Statement, a copy of which I have retained.

I understand I can withdraw from the project at any time and do not have to give any reason for withdrawing.

I consent to:
- participating in an interview and
- having it recorded

I understand that my personal information will remain confidential to the researchers.

I have had the opportunity to have questions answered to my satisfaction.

Print Name: ____________________________

Signature: ____________________________  Date: __________________

NOTE: Charles Sturt University's Faculty of Business has approved this project. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Faculty of Business Human Research Ethics Committee through the Chair:

Dr Ranmudy Bhanugopan
Faculty of Business Human Research Ethics Committee
Tel: (02) 8333 2696
Email: bhanugopan@csu.edu.au

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.

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CRICOS Provider Number for Charles Sturt University are 00005F (NSW), 103473 M(C) and 029668B (ACT). ABN: 83 556 768 551
Appendix F. Ethics approval

12 March 2015

Ms. Kathryn Evans  
School of Management and Marketing  
Charles Sturt University  
Bathurst Campus

Dear Ms. Evans,

Thank you for the additional information forwarded in response to a request from the Business Faculty Human Ethics Committee.

The Business Faculty Human Research Ethics Committee has approved your proposal “Is sex discrimination alive and well in corporate Australia? Why gender equality is so hard to achieve in senior leadership and what we can do about it” for a twelve month period from 12 March 2015.

The protocol number issued with respect to this project is 2015/02. Please be sure to quote this number when responding to any request made by the Committee.

Please note the following conditions of approval:

- all Consent Forms and Information Sheets are to be printed on CSU letterhead. Students should liaise with their Supervisor to arrange to have these documents printed;
- you must notify the Committee immediately in writing should your research differ in any way from that proposed. Forms are available at [http://www.csu.edu.au/research/ethics_safety/humanresearch_managing](http://www.csu.edu.au/research/ethics_safety/humanresearch_managing);
- you must notify the Committee immediately if any serious and/or unexpected adverse events or outcomes occur associated with your research, that might affect the participants and therefore ethical acceptability of the project;
- amendments to the research design must be reviewed and approved by the Faculty Human Ethics Committee or if no longer minimal risk by the University Human Research Ethics Committee before commencement. Forms are available at the website above;
- if an extension of the approval period is required, a request must be submitted to the Faculty Human Ethics Committee or if no longer minimal risk by the University Human Research Ethics Committee before commencement. Forms are available at the website above;
- you are required to complete a Progress Report form, which can be downloaded as above, by 12 March 2015 if your research has not been completed by that date;
- you are required to submit a final report, the form is available from the website above.

You are reminded that an approval letter from the CSU HREC constitutes ethical approval only.

If your research involves the use of radiation, biological materials or chemicals separate approval is required from the appropriate University Committee.

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286