Female Career Progression: Gender Influences of Public Sector Management and Leadership

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By

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Abstract

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Master of Public Administration, Public Sector Management and Leadership

Throughout history, women around the world have struggled and have long fought for equal footing with their male counterparts. Society claims to have achieved gender equality with equal opportunities in voting, employment, and education. Still, men continue to dominate and outnumber women in elected and top-level management and leadership positions where visibility, responsibility, productivity, and profitability are high. For the first time in history, the County of Los Angeles has elected an all-female Board of Supervisors with over 50% of the department heads also women. However, this is not the case for other counties in California or States in America, where the underrepresentation of women in public sector management and leadership positions prevails. This graduate thesis will use a qualitative exploratory case study method to research the facilitators and barriers to female career progression in public sector management and leadership positions long after the civil rights and women’s suffrage movements, where laws protecting equal opportunity and discrimination have been enacted. This research will provide a greater understanding of why women in the County of Los Angeles, California, have achieved great success in public sector representation at the top management levels.
Introduction

For the first time in history, the County of Los Angeles has an all-female Board of Supervisors with over 50% of the department heads also women. However, this is not the case for other counties in California or within other counties across the United States, where the underrepresentation of women in public sector management and leadership positions prevails. Therefore, the County of Los Angeles provides a critical case study to understand the facilitators of female leadership in public service and enablers for gender equity in public sector management.

Women around the world have struggled throughout history and have long fought for equal footing with their male counterparts. In the United States, women have fought for the right and access to education and for the opportunity to participate and contribute to society in the same ways men do. There is no denying that women have made great strides in the fight to achieve gender equality and equal access in voting opportunities, employment, and education, but men have continued to dominate and outnumber women in elected and top-level positions where visibility, responsibility, productivity, and profitability are high.

Based on the 2020 Census of Population and Housing, updated every ten years, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, women in the United States represent 50.8% of the population and hold just shy of half the workforce positions at 46.7% (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.c; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Although women appear to be closely represented horizontally across the overall labor force, there is still significant underrepresentation of women in the top executive levels of management and elected positions. Women face a glass ceiling barrier, which can be visible or invisible, preventing them from moving past middle management (Sabharwal, 2013; Cheung & Halpern, 2010).
As of May 2021, women serving in the 117th U.S. Congress hold 27.2% of the total membership, with 147 of the 541 member seats (Manning, 2021). According to the 2019 American Community Survey, of the total 1,268,017 chief executives, 335,274 were women, representing 26.4% women (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019a). Based on the S&P 500 list of women CEOs as of January 2021, only 30 of the 500 companies were women (Catalyst, 2021).

Different levels of government have taken on the responsibility to push for societal changes and systemic reform through legislation, advocacy, and public education. With the support of the highest level of government, the federal government, passing the Equal Pay Act of 1963, Civil Rights Act of 1964, Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972, and the Women's Educational Equity Act of 1974, women to this day still face obstacles and barriers. On September 30, 2018, Governor Jerry Brown signed Senate Bill Number 826, Chapter 945, addressing the need for female representation and the effort to enhance diversity, to require publicly held corporations, whose principal executive offices are located in California, to have a minimum number of female directors on the corporate board of directors and reported to the Secretary of State by the end of 2021 (Jackson et al., 2018). Despite all the progress made for women to have equal participation rights and opportunities, women today still face social, cultural, and institutional barriers in achieving representation in top-level leadership and management positions.

This graduate thesis will include a literature review on the facilitators and barriers to female career progression in executive management positions long after the civil rights and women’s suffrage movements, where laws protecting equal opportunity and discrimination have been enacted. The journal topics for facilitators and barriers to female career progression will include the limited executive management opportunities, balancing ambition and family
responsibilities, mentorship, the Queen Bee phenomenon, education, perceptions of self, and support structure. This thesis will use a qualitative exploratory case study method to understand why women in California, specifically the County of Los Angeles, have successfully achieved public sector representation at the top management levels.
Literature Review

This review of literature will provide an overview of the underrepresentation of females in elected and top-level executive management positions. The literature will look at the facilitators and barriers to female career progression. The topics explored will include the limited vacant elected and executive management opportunities, the individual ambition and balancing of family responsibilities, the impact of mentorship, the Queen Bee phenomenon, education, perceptions of self, and having a structure of support.

Limited Vacant Opportunities

Over the past forty years, women have progressed in their representation in the overall workforce and visible public sector government positions, for example, in the U.S. Congress. Women currently make up approximately 24% of the elected seats in the Senate and the House of Representatives (Rutgers Eagleton Institute of Politics, 2021). Being relatively new to the political realm, women have a disadvantage in terms of representation in pursuing a traditionally male-dominated career path which requires acquiring additional credentials and waiting for an open position to declare candidacy (Fox & Lawless, 2014). Electoral opportunities are limited as the majority of positions require an existing representative to vacate the position for that position to be filled by either the winner of an election or a governor-appointed official, depending on the state. The election process to fill a vacant electoral position is already challenging for male candidates or changing the political party who held the seat previously; women now entering the pool of eligible candidates are faced with an additional layer to the barrier of entry (Krook & Norris, 2014). Women not only have to wait for these limited electoral positions vacancies, but they also have to compete against men for positions historically held by males.
The opportunity for a vacant electoral position varies significantly based on the type of position and the rules and regulations of each respective position. For example, the presidential term of the United States is four years, the term for a Senator is held for six years, the House of Representatives is two years, and the Supreme Court Justice can remain in their position for as long as the individual chooses unless otherwise impeached. Fox and Lawless (2010) found that the reelection rate for legislative positions was above 90% and contributed to the continued underrepresentation of women since existing male position holders were often reelected. Women not only have to wait for the vacancies, but their chances are drastically reduced if the incumbent decides to run for reelection, adding yet another barrier to entry.

On top of the limited number of vacant opportunities, females also face structural and organizational impediments of having glass ceilings, glass walls, and sticky floors (French & Eskridge, 2021). These impediments prevent and limit career advancement and access into executive-level positions and even agencies and positions with strong historical masculine culture (French & Eskridge, 2021). Women are generally associated and employed in positions that require nurturing and compassion, for example, education, social services, public assistance, whereas men are typically attributed to roles that require no emotion and require visible authoritative and directive behaviors, such as public safety or maintenance (French & Eskridge, 2021; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). The cultural gender barriers limiting women from entering specific industries or occupations play a hindering role in their professional lives and lives at home.

**Balancing Ambition and Family Responsibilities**

When women started entering the workforce and were relieved of the nurturing, family care, and household responsibilities during the regular working hours, the opportunities were
limited as the remaining half of the population were now looking for employment. Despite the
great effort with women achieving these equal opportunities, studies have shown that the cultural
gender barriers, work-life balance, and internal outlooks play tremendous parts in women
seeking leadership opportunities (Donlan & Hansen, 2018). Women want to work and
contribute, but cultural gender roles cause setbacks to their desire to advance.

Women in the United States hold approximately 51.8% of all management and
professional positions, outnumbering the men in fields of finance, education, health services, and
many others (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). The numbers show that women have
representation and are capable of achieving management positions. Despite reaching
management-level positions, the majority of women would remain at the middle-management
level and would not continue to pursue the highest levels of management (Cheung & Halpern,
2010). The choice to pursue the advancement into executive management or electoral positions is
left for the individual female.

A case study done on the Internal Revenue Services department found with both females
and males holding high-level positions that women reported to have more household
responsibilities and viewed their career secondary to their family obligations than compared with
men (French & Eskridge, 2021). Females in the lower assistant-level positions were asked
whether they had a desire and goal to advance into an executive management position and their
reasons for not desiring to promote were family obligations and not wanting excessive stress,
countless work hours, and the need to deal with the public or other elected officials (French &
Eskridge, 2021).

Cheng and Halpern (2010) found that half of the women who surpassed the middle-
management level and successfully reached the top executive levels had no children. The
opportunities and pay for women with children were considerably lower than their male counterparts, which led to the coined term “motherhood wage penalty,” whereas for men with families added more money and a “marriage premium” (Hersh & Stratton, 2000). Hersh and Stratton (2000) argued that for male candidates, the presence of children was deemed as signs of stability and responsibility, which aided in the interview process, however for females, there is a glass ceiling, where children were seen to limit the female potential of advancement in positions at the highest level. Although women, in concept, can strive to attain top-level management, executive, and elected positions, they are faced with biases, discrimination, and other obstacles which hinder most women leading them to opt-out of the race and remain stagnant in their professions (Ballakrishnen et al., 2018).

Cheung and Halpern (2010) found that women were faced with a clear choice when deciding to strive for top-executive management roles: choose between having a family or a career with a high-ranking position. Due to traditional family values and societal roles, women now have to work a second shift, which means coming home to a disproportionate amount of household duties and dependent care responsibilities. The responsibilities of the second shift limit their time at work and their opportunities to be viewed as viable candidates (Dolan & Hansen, 2018). Both women and men feel conflicted when forced to decide between chasing their career ambitions or caring for their children. However, more women expressed concern about their ability to rearrange their family life and would instead be more willing to delay their entrance into the political sphere or executive management until their family responsibilities subside (Fox & Lawless, 2014). Fox and Lawless (2014) argued that while the traditional gender roles regarding household responsibilities are not equal and often make the lives of women more
challenging, women are capable and eligible to pursue top-executive management or elected positions.

While women are capable and eligible to pursue high-level positions, the catch-22 of successful career-oriented women is that they are perceived to neglect their families and personal lives (Fox & Lawless, 2014). Women who have failed in advancement will receive criticism that they should have never campaigned to begin with (Fox & Lawless, 2014). The act of balancing family life and professional responsibilities have just become a regular part of a woman’s professional life.

**Education and Perceptions of Self**

Women with career ambitions who are interested in running for elected positions or applying for executive management positions start at an inherent disadvantage as males traditionally dominated, and competitive credentials would be required for candidacy (Fox & Lawless, 2014). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), of the population of all individuals 18 years and older who attained a bachelor’s degree or higher, females comprised 52.6% of that total. The Current Population Survey showed that 44% of working women, ages 25 to 64, had a bachelor’s degree or higher, four times more than in 1970 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019b). Fox and Lawless (2014) argued that the underrepresentation of women in elected and executive management positions is not caused by a lack of women without educational qualifications for candidacy and that women are equally qualified compared to their male counterparts. However, women who achieved their doctorate degrees were twice as likely to remain single compared to their male counterparts, which may play a deciding role when it comes to pursuing higher education, higher positions, or running for elected positions (Cheung & Halpern, 2010). There is
an apparent decision all women need to make whether to have a family or pursue professional success and fight against the cultural norms.

When women successfully win their elected or executive management positions, they face cultural expectations to embrace the masculine role, leadership styles, attitudes, and personality traits traditionally seen in those positions (Cheung & Halpern, 2010; Eagly, 2016). Women are expected to speak with authority, assertiveness, and self-promote to achieve leadership roles (Chiao et al., 2018). However, when women carry out these stronger, societally masculine behaviors of dominance, women are faced with a no-win, double-bind situation and labeled as “control freaks” or “bitches” which can lead to workplace conflicts (Ballakrishnen et al., 2018).

Gender roles play a significant part in the fairness and equality of women in higher-paying and higher levels of government. Riccucci (2009) stated that if both lower and higher levels are dominated by one gender, then the ability to influence decisions made by the government is undermined. Women who were unable to carry the burdens of societal constraints and unable to adopt or identify with the expected masculine personality traits and leadership styles resulted in having intentional invisibility (Ballakrishnen et al., 2018; Cheung & Halpern, 2010). Intentional invisibility enabled women to avoid conflict, reconcile with their roles in their families, and quietly pursue their own defined career goals and ambitions (Ballakrishnen et al., 2018).

Society has made significant progress when it comes to equality of women’s rights, opportunities, and the cultural expectations for a woman to prioritize her family and childcare above all else. Cheung and Halpern (2010) found that women who advanced past middle-management or pursued an electoral position have internally reconciled family care
responsibilities and refused to let gender roles hinder their ambitions. The underrepresentation of women is based on individual decisions of women, their self-perceived qualifications, and their political aspirations to achieve elected and executive management positions (Fox & Lawless, 2014; Krook & Norris, 2014). The cultural perception that women do not belong in politics or top-level executive management positions needs to be broken. Awareness-raising campaigns, organizational programs, and having role models and mentors are critical to the future representation of women to pursue, achieve, and empower and recruit other women to pursue candidacy (Fox & Lawless, 2014; Krook & Norris, 2014; Bozeman & Feeney, 2007; French & Eskridge, 2021). Although culturally, women have been told they do not belong at the top, mentors and role models can bring perspectives and insight to show success is possible and how to achieve it.

**Impact of Mentorship**

In a study of female chief administrative officers, encouragement and support from others were indicated as a need for them to realize that they were ready to advance and pursue the top executive position (French & Eskridge, 2021). When examining the career lag of females against their counterparts, mentorship appeared to be an effective tool that allowed females to break through the glass barriers, glass walls, and sticky floors to advance in their careers (French & Eskridge, 2021). Mentorship can be defined as an intentional, committed relationship between two or more individuals. A mentor is usually a person who has more experience, knowledge, and holds a higher-ranking, more senior position, provides advice, direction, guidance, feedback, and counseling for both career development and personal support to a protégé, a person less experienced (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007).
There are two general types of mentoring: formal mentoring programs, which are generally run by organizations that assign mentors to protégés, and informal mentoring, in which individuals develop genuine non-forced relationships (Blake-Beard, 2001). When discussing career development support and the inequalities women are faced with, organizations use formal mentoring programs as a mechanism to address and mitigate the gender inequalities within the organization (Blake-Beard, 2001). Blake-Beard (2001) concluded that formal mentorship programs are associated with more positive organizational outcomes, including greater career satisfaction, increased promotion, higher incomes, and reduced turnovers.

Scholars have recognized mentorship as a method to help nurture and solidify the next generation of leaders to develop the leadership skills necessary for managing a workforce and developing a broader strategic big-picture perspective to address both internal organizational and external concerns (French & Eskridge, 2020). Mentorship with a junior female or any individual early in their career helps with setting a model or a career path to follow and later solidifying their credentials for advancement through the guidance and direction provided in career experiences, challenging assignments, and provided opportunities (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007; French & Eskridge, 2020). French and Eskridge (2020) found that the underrepresented aspiring female leaders who participate in mentorship can reap the rewards of receiving crucial career advancement support by attaining challenging assignments and access to the often male-dominated networking opportunities. With the help of counseling, the female proteges can accomplish the challenging assignments and have an increased social network, visibility, credibility, and legitimacy can be utilized to display the aspiring female ability to perform at the required top-level executive management position (French & Eskridge, 2020). This display of
ability, skill, and confidence by the aspiring female protégé is where the glass breaks and is transitioning from middle management to executive management.

A study done by French and Eskridge (2020) of top female city managers employed in cities in the United States with a population of 5,000 or more, identified by the International City Management Association, found that mentoring relationships can be important for empowering female city managers to navigate their professional and personal commitments successfully. A significant value-add from females receiving adequate mentorship was increased self-confidence, navigating politics, having an effective management style, and successfully balancing career, family, and other responsibilities (French & Eskridge, 2020).

Women aspiring to be leaders, working in organizations that do not have formal mentorship programs, and looking for a mentor often look to other women at the top. Informal mentoring relationships are initiated based on a foundation of perceived similarity, in which women are looking for role models that are like them (Blake-Beard, 2001). The significance of having a mentor and sponsor to advocate on behalf of you can be essential in a women’s upward mobility, the caveat for a female looking for a female mentor at the top is the rarity in females holding elected or executive management positions (Yu & Lee, 2021). This rarity can lessen the opportunities, network, and chances of advancement. Formal mentorship programs and venture out on their own in search of finding their informal mentor. Cross-gender mentorship is a possibility due to the rarity of females in top leadership roles; however, these relationships are faced with different factors of setting boundaries to avoid issues that involve sexual harassment by setting a clear structure and goals that focus only on career development and advancement (Yu & Lee, 2021). Whether informal or formal cross-gender mentoring relationship, boundaries
of a mentor relationship must not cross the line of perceived intimacy to avoid ramifications of a rumored workplace sexual situation (Blake-Beard, 2001).

**Queen Bee Phenomenon**

It is often perceived that the presence of successful women in leadership roles will undoubtedly lead to an increase in gender equality as women climb the organizational ladder and create a safe climate for other women by breaking through the glass barriers (Sterk et al., 2018). However, while successful women helping other junior women would be ideal, not all successful leaders want to assist in developing other women because they still face biases and gender stereotypes. The Queen Bee phenomenon was coined for female leaders who were reluctant to support fellow junior women colleagues by purposefully distancing themselves from the junior women (Faniko et al., 2017). The distancing of female leaders characterized the masculine self-presentation to underline dissimilarities to other women, deny gender inequality, and remain status quo (Sterk et al., 2018). Faniko et al. (2017) stated that one reason that successful women leaders felt that junior women had not encountered the challenging experiences of having to make difficult choices and sacrifices to earn their support, mentorship, and promotional opportunities. Queen Bees are not concerned with the overall representation of women in top executive roles. They can be a hindrance towards the ambitious junior women seeking to advance in her career.

The Queen Bee behavior is likely to have negative impacts as those who have been successful are likely to be more critical of those juniors and are still struggling to find direction in their career paths (Sterk et al., 2018; Faniko et al., 2017). The notion that the Queen Bee women had was that junior women did not understand the struggle and time it took to overcome the gender biases (Derks et al., 2016). The Queen Bee behavior is characterized by the denial
that gender discrimination and gender inequality exist and can negatively affect the threatened organizational climate (Sterk et al., 2018). Women who were successful in their careers invested more time and mental energy in their jobs than men, and it was also important to note that due to the lack of support, it was crucial to find alternative sources of social support to attribute towards their success (Faniko et al., 2017).

**Structure of Support**

Family responsibilities and family arrangements can significantly impact a female’s career progression or ambition. Women have delayed their entry into the political arena due to their family responsibilities as a result of the cultural expectation for women to shoulder more of the burden than men (Fox & Lawless, 2014). Fox and Lawless (2014) found when examining female state legislators that they continued to primarily be responsible for household and childcare responsibilities even after winning the elected position. Although the women have learned to balance the dual roles of family and career, the supportive family cannot be discounted. Blake-Beard (2001) notably mentioned that rather than looking at having a family from a negative perspective, family relationships should be considered a contribution to a women’s development.

French and Eskridge (2021) found through their study of empowering females through mentorship that those senior executives in public organizations were more willing to relocate for their career advancement and have learned to balance their obligations and find greater career satisfaction successfully. Hill et al. (2016) concluded that many organizations had implemented family-friendly policies and programs to help find a balance between family responsibilities and work. Family supportive organizations demonstrated positive outcomes of less work-family conflict, less turnover, less burnout, increased job satisfaction and commitment (Hill et al.,
Female empowerment is where women find a sense of belonging, receive recognition for meaningful contributions, and are encouraged to be involved in decision-making and innovation (Sabharwal, 2015). Successful organizations are those where women executives are valued for their skills and their full potential is realized (Sabharwal, 2015). Organizations can support their staff by developing leadership training programs, promoting work-life balance, and a culture of diversity and inclusion.
Background

Women have been struggling for centuries for equal access to education, employment, and political participation. Women have struggled for equality and fought for the right to participate in society in the same manner as men do. Even after government intervention with passed legislation, women are still unable to attain equal representation in top positions of authority and power.

Women consist of 50.8% of the United States population, 46.7% of the workforce, but hold less than a third of the seats in the U.S. Congress, around a quarter of all the chief executive positions, of which women only hold 6% of the S&P 500 companies (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.c; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021; Catalyst, 2021). Country-wide, women generally are more educated than their male counterparts (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019) and just as qualified for top positions, yet there is still a gender gap.

The County of Los Angeles spans 4,057.1 square miles, home to an estimated population of 10,039,107, of which 50.7% are women, and 49.3% are men (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.a). 79.1% of the population have a high school diploma or higher, with 32.5% possessing a bachelor’s degree or higher. The employment rate of the County of Los Angeles is 60.7%, which is close in comparison to the employment rate of the United States at 59.6%.

The County of Los Angeles organizational structure consists of five elected Board of Supervisors at the top, three elected County Officials, 33 departments, 11 related agencies, and approximately 200 committees and commissions (County of Los Angeles, n.d.). Table 1 displays the percentage breakdown based on gender for both the population from country-wide to county-wide, and then the filled positions of the United States Congress, County of Los Angeles, and County-related agencies management positions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Description</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>% Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>% Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population Estimates - 2019 American Community Survey Estimates</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States (1-year Estimate)</td>
<td>328,239,523</td>
<td>166,650,550</td>
<td>50.8%</td>
<td>161,588,973</td>
<td>49.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California (1-year Estimate)</td>
<td>39,512,223</td>
<td>19,871,429</td>
<td>50.3%</td>
<td>19,640,794</td>
<td>49.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County of Los Angeles (5-year Estimate)</td>
<td>10,039,107</td>
<td>5,089,282</td>
<td>50.7%</td>
<td>4,949,825</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>117th United States Congress Filled Positions – May 2021</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Congress Members</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>72.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senators</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>76.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House of Representatives *</td>
<td>435</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>71.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>County of Los Angeles Filled Positions – 2020 Quarter 4</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Employees</td>
<td>95,372</td>
<td>56,876</td>
<td>59.6%</td>
<td>38,496</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Management</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>50.6%</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>49.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board of Supervisors</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected County Officials</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department Heads</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>48.5%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>51.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Executives</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>50.4%</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>49.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>County-Related Agencies Filled Positions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department Heads</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * Includes Delegates & the Resident Commissioner

Sources: County of Los Angeles, 2021; County of Los Angeles, n.d.; Manning, 2021; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.b
Research Methodology

This research will explore the extent to which gender influences female leadership and management within the public service sector. While males have historically occupied the majority of high-level management positions within the County of Los Angeles, a shift in the balance of female leadership has been observed over the past few years. Understanding the pathways for this positive change will be essential to inform future policies and interventions to promote gender equity in public sector leadership.

Research Question

What are the influences of gender on career progression, perspectives of leadership, and personal experiences of work-life balance on formally designated leaders and managers within the County of Los Angeles?

Research Design

The research method will be a qualitative exploratory case study design utilizing semi-structured interviews. A qualitative case study approach to research will be utilized given its applicability to exploring complex social phenomena such as leadership, social norms, and gender (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Rashid et al., 2019). Through the semi-structured interviews, participant experiences can be described, transcribed, and interpreted within the context and setting in which they occurred. This research approach allows the ability to gain a deeper understanding, perspective, and insights into the experiences of female leaders in the County of Los Angeles. The narrative data gathered from the interviews can be transcribed, coded, and categorized into the career progression framework themes related to the research question (Bui, 2020; Wichert & Steele, 2013).
The experience and impact of gender on their career pathways, perception of leadership, and personal experiences of work-life balance will be examined in-depth and in the context of the County of Los Angeles. This is particularly important given the limited amount of literature and research about gender and female leadership in California’s local government. The data gathered in this study will provide initial and descriptive information and serve as a basis for further generating additional relevant research questions. A vital limitation of the case study method is its limited generalizability to all other contexts.

This qualitative case study will use the framework of women’s career progression, developed by Kenexa High-Performance Institute, to guide the proposed research and focuses on three domains: the individual, the immediate work environment, and the organizational context (Wichert & Steele, 2013). Below is the description of Kenexa’s career progression framework.

The individual domain looks at the career management behaviors of women in the workplace. There are four variables within the individual domain: career planning, politically skilled networking, risk-embracing opportunity-seeking, and self-promotion. Career planning is crucial for women due to the increase in hurdles that women face compared to men with career satisfaction in pay and promotional prospects. Politically skilled networking assists with the advantages of how women can both secure their roles and share their successes. Risk-embracing opportunity-seeking emphasizes the importance of being open to trying new roles that require developing new skills, having new experiences, and meeting new people who will help with the progression of their careers. Self-promotion focuses on the ability of women to embrace their achievements, be confident in their competence, overcoming the prejudices of women, and their ability to talk about themselves to achieve sponsorship from their senior managers.
The second domain is the immediate work environment, which focuses on access to essential career resources. The variables include critical job assignments, supportive supervisors, and mentors and sponsors. In critical job assignments, women can have on-the-job training, which is crucial and most effective in developing future leaders. Supportive supervisors allow women to have constructive and developmental feedback and allow for personal encouragement and validation, which is crucial from supervisors for their direct reports. Mentors and sponsors, the last variable of the immediate work environment, provide a sense of sponsorship and allows individuals to be a champion of them and provide advice and guidance.

The final domain is the organizational context which looks at the influence of four organizational factors on a woman’s career advancement towards leadership positions. These four factors include flexible working arrangements and work-life balance, supportive corporate work-life culture, objective human resources processes, and bias and gender stereotypes. The majority of women take on the nurturing and care-taking family responsibilities of children and elderly relatives. Having flexible work options and life balance plays an important role. A supportive work-life culture of an organization has a manager who is supportive and responsive to the needs of their staff and does not impose negative career consequences for utilizing the flexible work options and discourages staff from coming into work under poor health or other non-functional conditions to be physically present at work. Objective human resources processes in filling senior management roles allow women, generally outside the organizational network, an equitable chance of filling these positions, which often have candidates endorsed and filled by individuals known by the decision-makers. Bias and gender stereotypes negatively impact women and provide notions of how women are perceived as passive and nurturing versus with attributes described of men, action-oriented and decisive.
Research Sample

This setting of this semi-structured interview will take place in the County of Los Angeles, California. The County of Los Angeles is the largest county in the United States and home to an estimated population size of 10,039,107 people (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.a). The research sample and unit of analysis in this case study will be the top females holding executive management positions within the County of Los Angeles local government and the County-related agencies. There are five Board of Supervisors positions, three elected county official positions, and 44 department heads. Females holding these positions are five Board of Supervisors positions and 23 department heads (County of Los Angeles, n.d.). The three criteria used to select these participants are gender, location, and a top-level executive management position. The key event sparking interest is due to the historical event of all elected Board of Supervisors positions being held by a 100% female board. Table 2 displays the list of the highest executive management positions in the County of Los Angeles and related County agencies, consisting of the five Board of Supervisors, three elected County Officials, and 44 department heads (County of Los Angeles, n.d.).
Table 2: Executive Management for County of Los Angeles & Related Agencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Department Name</th>
<th>Job Type</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Board of Supervisors - District 1</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Supervisor *</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Board of Supervisors - District 2</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Supervisor *</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Board of Supervisors - District 3</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Supervisor *</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Board of Supervisors - District 4</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Supervisor *</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Board of Supervisors - District 5</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Supervisor *</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Assessor</td>
<td>County Official</td>
<td>Assessor *</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>District Attorney</td>
<td>County Official</td>
<td>District Attorney *</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
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<td>County Official</td>
<td>Sheriff *</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Agricultural Commissioner/Weights &amp; Measures</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Commissioner/Director</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
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<td>10</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Alternate Public Defender</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Alternate Public Defender/Director</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
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<td>11</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Animal Care &amp; Control</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Arts and Culture</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Auditor-Controller</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Auditor-Controller</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Beaches &amp; Harbors</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Board of Supervisors Executive Office</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Executive Officer</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Chief Executive Office</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Child Support Services</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Children &amp; Family Services</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Consumer &amp; Business Affairs</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>County Counsel</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>County Counsel</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Development Authority</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Fire Department</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Fire Chief</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Health Services</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
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<td>Human Resources</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
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<td>Internal Services</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
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<td>Medical Examiner-Coroner</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Chief Medical Examiner/Coroner</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Military &amp; Veterans Affairs</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Museum of Art</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer/Director</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Natural History Museum</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>President/Director</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
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<td>Parks &amp; Recreation</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Probation</td>
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<td>Chief Probation Officer</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Public Defender</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
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<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>34</td>
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<td>Public Health</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>35</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Public Library</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Library Director</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Public Social Services</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Public Works</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Regional Planning</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Treasurer &amp; Tax Collector</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Treasurer &amp; Tax Collector</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Workforce Development, Aging &amp; Community Services</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Acting Director</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>County-Related Agencies</td>
<td>Film L.A., Inc</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>County-Related Agencies</td>
<td>First 5</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>County-Related Agencies</td>
<td>Grand Park</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Interim Director</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>County-Related Agencies</td>
<td>LA County Employees Retirement Association</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>County-Related Agencies</td>
<td>LA County Law Library</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>County-Related Agencies</td>
<td>Local Agency Formation Commission</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Executive Officer</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>County-Related Agencies</td>
<td>Metropolitan Transportation Authority</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>County-Related Agencies</td>
<td>Office of Education</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Superintendent/General Manager</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>County-Related Agencies</td>
<td>Sanitation Districts</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>Executive Officer/Clerk of the Court</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>County-Related Agencies</td>
<td>Superior Court of California, County of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>President/Chief Executive Officer</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total # of: Females 28
Males 24

Note: * Elected Positions

Source: County of Los Angeles, n.d.
Data Collection

The research sample of 28 total females, consisting of the Board of Supervisors members and department heads, will be mailed a letter to their respective offices requesting their participation in a 90-minute semi-structured interview for a research study on the influences of gender on career progression. In the request letter, participants will be made aware that they have been hand-selected to participate because the topic of research is tied to factors of why females in the County of Los Angeles see a more equitable representation of high-level public sector management positions. The mailing address of each participant can be found on the County of Los Angeles website, Los Angeles County Departments (County of Los Angeles, n.d.). If the participants are willing to participate, they should respond via telephone or email with a few available 90-minute interview time slots to assist with scheduling. Interviews will be conducted face-to-face over two months, but interviews will be held on a virtual video conferencing platform where it is not possible.

To trained interviewers will conduct each 90-minute, semi-structured, scheduled interview. The two trained interviewers will be provided with an interview guide, including step-by-step interview procedure instructions, informed consent, and confidentiality form, and a list of structured interview questions. The purpose of the Interview Guide is to ensure procedures are followed, consent is provided, and that there is consistency with topics and questions asked during the interview. The interview guide will include a list of approximately 11 guided questions formulated using Kenexa’s Career Progression Framework, which will cover the three domains: individual, immediate work environment, and organizational context (Wichert & Steele, 2013). An example of the interview guide is provided in Appendix A.
Provided with the interview guide will be instructions for the interviewers to obtain written consent from the participants before beginning the interview. The informed consent and confidentiality form are provided in Appendix B. As the interviewer reads through the form, participants will be notified that the audio of the interview will be recorded, responses will be kept confidential, and recordings will not be directly tied or identified to the interviewee. Audio recordings and notes taken will only be shared within the research team and will not be tied to specific participants. Audio recordings will only be used to ensure that all key points have been captured and transcribed. Once the audio recording and notes have been reviewed, the audio recording of the interview will be deleted. If the interviewee has consented, interviewers may conduct the interview.

**Data Analysis**

Immediately following the interview’s completion, the interviewers are to summarize key data points and reoccurring themes. Audio recordings should then be transcribed and reviewed to verify that all the provided information from the interview has been accounted for. All interview forms, notes, and documents shall be scanned and saved into a secure, shared folder, accessible to only the research team.

In this qualitative research, where data is collected from interview narratives, data analysis can be done by applying a thematic analysis to all conducted interviews. The review of the substantive themes and topics gathered from the interview should then be categorized. Categorizing and coding allow data to be grouped into themes and sorted into meaningful information to be utilized for interpretation (Bui, 2020). Further research and analysis of the discovered thematic similarities that emerge from the interviews.
Research Limitations

This graduate thesis was written as a proposal with no actual qualitative data collected from research sample interviews. The design of this research contains several limitations. The proposed sampling is restricted to only the females executive management is employed by the County of Los Angeles and its county-related agencies. Therefore, results may not be able to be applied to other public agencies or populations. The generalizability of the collected data and themes collected would require a large population sample to provide sound generalization. The limited sample size of 28 females might be too small if the respondents declined to participate in the structured interviews. Although the structured interview questions aim to understand the influences of gender on career progression through the Kenexa Career Progression Framework, the narrative responses may be too few to produce valid and reliable themes to be analyzed. Due to the limited resources and 90-minute interview time constraints, participants may not have enough time to answer the questions fully. Interviewers may also not have the right follow-up questions to capture the intended response fully. The time constraint also limits the number of questions being asked, which leads to missed data and possible missing critical themes.
Conclusion

The data and information gathered from the County of Los Angeles female Supervisors and the department heads will be limited to just Los Angeles. They may not be generalized to the rest of the country. Nonetheless, the impact of the research and insights from these women can help other counties and states address and improve women’s representation in public sector management and leadership roles. A larger sample size with varying county population sizes can provide more accurate results. After categorizing and coding themes, further research can be done to use a mixed-method approach to switch to utilize a quantitative survey to mid-level female managers to determine what factors and barriers they face. Understanding the facilitators and barriers of female career progression can help promote, support, and encourage women to strive and reach the top leadership positions.
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https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017309

https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0003666


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https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/data/occupations


https://www.bls.gov/cps/earnings.htm#earn


https://doi.org/10.1108/14754391311324471

Appendix A

Interview Guide

The following are step-by-step instructions for the interviewer to follow to ensure consistency between interviews and increase the reliability of the findings. Interviews are not to exceed the scheduled 90-minute time frame to respect the participant’s time.

1. Informed Consent & Confidentiality Form
   a. Write your name (Interviewer) on the first line.
   b. Read the form out loud to the interviewee and provide the form to the interviewee. If the interviewee agrees and signs, collect the consent form and continue the interview. If the interviewee does not agree to participate, thank them for their time and do not continue the interview.

2. Begin the audio recording of the interview.

3. The interview will be based on Kenexa’s Career Progression Framework, which covering three themes: the individual, immediate work environment, and the organizational context (Wichert & Steele, 2013).
   a. Individual:
      i. Is your current career path what you had in mind when completing your education? How did you go about planning and setting your career goals to where you are today?
      ii. “It’s not what you know, but who you know” is a quote that gets used a lot to emphasize that networking and having connections is more important than knowledge or technical skills. How have you been able to utilize your political network to help you progress in your career?
iii. In your career, how have you been a risk-embracing, opportunity-seeking individual?

iv. Are you able to self-promote and talk about your achievements with ease? If not, how have you overcome this?

b. Immediate Work Environment:
   i. What was a critical job assignment that you had that helped you develop most effectively and what did you learn from it?
   ii. Have you had a lot of supportive supervisors that pushed you and gave you feedback in your career?
   iii. Have you had any mentors or sponsors that championed you? How did that impact your career progression?

c. Organizational Context:
   i. In your career, did you have a flexible working arrangement? How were you able to keep a good work-life balance?
   ii. If you did need to arrange to have a flexible working arrangement, would your current organization be supportive of you without any negative consequences?
   iii. How does your organization fill its senior executive roles? Do those positions have to go through the standard objective human resource processes or is it mainly based on endorsements? How did you successfully achieve your current position?
   iv. Have you felt disadvantaged as a woman based on biases and gender stereotypes even with HR policies and processes in place?
4. Thank the interviewee for their time:

   a. This concludes our interview. Thank you so much for taking the time to participate. Your participation in this interview will help provide insight and increase our knowledge of the gender-influenced factors that helped shift the balance of female leadership in executive management in the County of Los Angeles. Rest assured that your responses will remain confidential. We appreciate your time. Thank you.
Appendix B

Informed Consent & Confidentiality Form

Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. My name is ________________ and this is my interview partner, ________________. We are conducting a research study on the influences of gender on career progression and gain a better understanding of what factors helped in the shift in the balance of female leadership with historically male occupied high-level positions. We would like to ask you a few questions and talk with you about your experiences, specifically as a female, in achieving your executive management role at the County of Los Angeles.

This interview should take approximately 90 minutes or less. We have a list of structured questions to follow, however, we may ask some follow-up questions based on your responses. The audio of this interview session will be recorded not to miss any important key points; however, I will be taking notes during this session. All responses will be kept confidential and will only be shared with the research team. All information we include from our findings will not be directly identified to you as a respondent. If there are any questions that you do not feel comfortable with or do not want to answer, please let us know. Please let us know if you wish to end the interview at any time.

Are there any questions or concerns regarding this interview?

Are you willing to participate in this interview?

________________________________________  ______________________________
Interviewee                  Date

________________________________________  ______________________________
Interviewer                   Second Interviewer                  Date