



An Examination of Women in Leadership Roles in Finnish Event Organizations

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Abstract

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<p>Today, women and men do not equally share leadership in organizational contexts. Although this problem is being talked about and has gotten better, there is still work to be done. This thesis aims to investigate the professional journeys and leadership experiences of women in the Finnish event industry, identify the barriers and facilitators that influence their career progression, and propose actionable insights to promote gender equality in leadership.</p> <p>The theoretical framework explores the event industry, its historical development, and its significance. Furthermore, themes such as leadership, female leadership, and inequality are treated. The findings from the interviews reveal that despite a high representation of women in the event industry, traditional gender biases and structural inequalities persist, hindering true gender equality in leadership roles.</p> <p>The methodological approach of the study is qualitative. The study utilizes semi-structured interviews with seven female leaders to gain insights into their career paths, challenges faced, and motivations. This thesis will not only add to the academic discourse on gender disparities in leadership but also provides practical recommendations for industry leaders to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment. These recommendations include dismantling stereotypes, implementing comprehensive equality plans, and supporting women's career development through mentorship. This thesis underscores the need for a multifaceted approach to address these issues, thereby enhancing both the industry's diversity in leadership and its overall success. Further research is recommended to explore effective interventions across different sectors to broaden the understanding of these dynamics.</p>
Key words Women, Leadership, Event Industry

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1 Introduction

The quest for gender equality in professional spheres, particularly in leadership positions, is a global issue with disparities persisting in various sectors, including the event industry. The event industry, like many other industries, exhibits a pronounced gender gap in leadership roles, not just in terms of social justice but also impacting business efficacy and innovation.

Globally, a Mercer analysis in 2020 revealed that women occupied only 23% of executive roles, 29% of senior manager roles, and 37% of manager roles across over 1,100 organizations, indicating a 'leaky pipeline' for women in leadership as they ascend the corporate ladder. (Mercer 2020)

This study aims to delve into the gender gap in leadership positions within Finnish event organizations, specifically focusing on women's experiences in management roles. The objectives are to explore the professional journeys and experiences of women leaders in the Finnish event industry, identify barriers and facilitators affecting their career progress, and offer actionable insights for enhancing gender equality in leadership. The goal is to provide a comprehensive understanding of women leaders' experiences in the Finnish event industry, contributing both to academic knowledge and practical strategies for promoting gender equality in leadership roles.

The relevance and significance of this study on women in leadership positions within Finnish event organizations are justified by recent research and developments. Finland is often considered a role model in gender equality, yet leadership positions remain predominantly male-dominated. A study highlighted the challenges and attitudes experienced by female leaders in various industries in Finland, including the technology sector, which is highly male-dominated, and the social and healthcare industry, which is female-dominated. The study revealed that women in both sectors faced similar challenges, such as difficulties in being taken seriously and accepted, despite mostly experiencing equal treatment. (Herrgård 2021)

The findings emphasize the necessity to delve deeper into the experiences of women holding leadership positions. This thesis seeks to contribute significantly to the understanding of this subject, particularly within the event industry. It aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the unique challenges and opportunities that women leaders face in this sector. This in-depth exploration is intended to shed light on potential areas for policy improvement and personal development strategies for women in leadership roles.

1.1 Research objectives

This chapter outlines the research goals and questions that support the gender gap in leadership positions of Finnish event organizations, with a focus on women's management positions. This research is guided by the following objectives:

- To explore the professional journeys and experiences of women who have attained leadership positions in the Finnish event industry. This exploration aims to understand the paths they have navigated, the nature of their leadership roles, and their perceptions of these roles.
- To identify and analyze the barriers and facilitators that have influenced their career trajectories. This includes examining personal, organizational, and societal factors that have either impeded or aided their progress in the industry.
- To provide actionable insights and recommendations for industry leaders and policymakers aimed at promoting gender equality in leadership positions within the Finnish event sector.

The study will employ semi-structured interviews with seven women occupying various leadership roles in Finnish event organizations. These interviews are structured around the following themes:

1. Career Path and Experience
2. Personal Leadership Experience
3. Challenges and Barriers
4. Women as Leaders
5. Motivation

Through these themes, the study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences, challenges, and successes of women leaders in the Finnish event industry. This will not only contribute to academic knowledge but also provide practical insights for enhancing gender equality in leadership.

1.2 Integrity

The Finnish event industry, despite its substantial economic contributions and employment opportunities, faces a notable challenge due to its lack of formal recognition as an independent sector by the Finnish state. According to a report published by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment on January 27, 2023, this absence of recognition is seen as a barrier to the industry's growth. The report underscores the event industry's role as a multifaceted service business, characterized by labor intensity, temporariness, fragmentation, and interdisciplinarity, operating

within complex business networks. This context of underrecognition is particularly significant when considering the leadership landscape within the event industry, where female leaders navigate these unique challenges. My thesis aims to shed light on the experiences and contributions of female leaders in event organizations, a subject that gains additional relevance against the backdrop of the industry's ambiguous status in Finland's economic framework. The investigation into female leadership within this underrecognized yet pivotal sector not only highlights the resilience and ingenuity of these leaders but also contributes to the broader discourse on the need for formal acknowledgment and support of the event industry by governmental bodies. Such recognition could pave the way for more targeted policies and support mechanisms, fostering growth and sustainability in the sector and potentially altering the landscape in which these female leaders operate. (Valtioneuvosto 2023)

1.3 Structure of the thesis

The introduction frames the study's purpose and its broader context. The theoretical framework critically examines existing literature and key factors relevant to leadership, emphasizing the nuances of female leadership. In the empirical findings, the focus shifts to data gathered from interviews with female leaders in event organizations, offering direct insights. The results present these findings, while the discussion connects them to the theoretical underpinnings. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the study's key insights and implications.

1.4 Overlay matrix

The overlay matrix table presented in this chapter displays and compares different dimensions of data, enabling a comprehensive visual representation of how different factors interact and influence the leadership experiences of women in the Finnish event industry.

Table 1. Overlay Matrix

Sub Problem	Database (chapter)	Interview Questions (chapter)	Results (chapter)
Investigating the diverse pathways and experiences of women who have achieved leadership positions in the Finnish event industry.	2.2 2.3	4.1 4.2 4.4	4.1 4.2 4.3 5
Identifying the primary obstacles and supportive factors influencing women's career advancement to leadership roles within Finnish event organizations.	2.3 2.4	4.2 4.3	4.2 4.3 5
Generating practical strategies and recommendations to promote gender equality and enhance opportunities for women in	2.5	4.1 4.2 4.3 4.4	6

leadership positions within the Finnish event sector.		4.5	
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2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Event Industry

This section explores in detail the life cycle of events, with particular focus on its significance, historical development, and its role within the industry. The purpose of this is to create a deeper understanding of the environment within event management. This insight is of great importance not only for the content of this chapter but also for enriching and improving understanding throughout the thesis.

Event management can be described as skillful coordination and administration involving the elements of purpose, people and place (Raj, Walters, and Rashid 2017, para. 4).

Raj, Walters, and Rashid further elucidate that event management involves the concept of 'something happening' combined with 'management'. For an event to successfully take place, it requires a confluence of people, a clearly defined purpose, and an appropriate location.

Throughout the ages, events have been essential to human connection, celebration, and storytelling. The industrial revolution and the rise of the internet in the 1990s marked the beginning of a new era in event planning, democratizing the field and changing the way we plan and experience events. (Meetingbox 2023)

In the late 1990s, the digital revolution transformed event planning by introducing new tools and opportunities for organizers. Technological advances such as the Internet paved the way for online registration systems, event websites and email invitations, making it easier for organizers to reach a wider audience and streamline the registration process. Digitization also opened the door to more inclusive event planning, where individuals from all walks of life were given the opportunity to organize their own events. (Meetingbox 2023)

The debate surrounding the existence of a unified event industry is rooted in its diversified nature. People who work in different segments of events – such as exhibitions, live music, or wedding planning – tend to identify with specific sectors such as the exhibition industry, the music industry, or an independent industry. Despite this segmentation, they are united by their dependence on a multitude of suppliers. Suppliers such as ticket printers, sound companies, and hotels are critical to the success of the events sector and play a significant role in its economic footprint. The events industry is a significant economic player, generating significant revenue and employment for many people. It has experienced growth and has contributed to employment in major economic regions in recent years. The event industry often outpaces other sectors in growth rates and its importance

extends beyond its direct economic contributions, particularly in tourism and hospitality. However, quantifying the exact economic value of the event industry is complex, as it is made up of many different sectors and sub-sectors, some of which are more documented than others. Despite these challenges, events play an important role in economic and employment terms. (Raj, Walters & Rashid 2017, para. 8.)

The events industry includes a variety of different types of events, such as religious, cultural, musical, sporting, and personal events. Religious events include not only large gatherings, but also personal ceremonies such as the Bar Mitzvah. Cultural events, such as concerts and carnivals, are often both a celebration of culture and an economic opportunity for cities and communities. They integrate smaller communities and attract tourists from different cultures. Music events, from major festivals to concerts, combine commercial, cultural, and sometimes charitable aspects. They create a sense of community and belonging among the participants. Sporting events range from international championships to local competitions and often have both a competitive and community aspect. They are important for both the economy and social pride. Personal and private events, such as weddings and birthday celebrations, celebrate life's big moments and are often culturally diverse. Each type of event contributes in its own way to the economy, culture, and society, demonstrating the multifaceted nature and importance of the event industry. (Raj, Walters, & Rashid 2017, para. 10.)

The role of the event industry in the Finnish economy ETLA 2021 report reveals that businesses in Finland's event industry are spread across many different sectors. About 60% of these companies belong to fields like arts, entertainment, and recreation. However, an interesting point is that 40% of event-related businesses don't fit neatly into these categories; they're found in a variety of other sectors. This diversity shows that the event industry is quite broad and not limited to just traditional entertainment or cultural activities. It also indicates why tracking the growth and impact of the event industry can be tricky, as it doesn't stick to one specific area or sector. This observation aligns with earlier studies by Wirén and colleagues, highlighting the complex nature of the event industry in Finland. (ETLA 2021)

2.2 Leadership

Leadership is a multifaceted concept that can be challenging to define because different forms of leadership are more suitable for different situations, contexts, and stages. This study focuses on leadership from the perspective of female leaders, an area that is of particular interest today where issues of gender equality and representation are central.

Northouse (2021) defines leadership as a process where an individual (the leader) influences a group of individuals (the followers) to achieve a common goal. This definition emphasizes the dynamic nature of leadership – it is not about static qualities or character traits possessed by an individual, but about the interactions and influence that take place between the leader and the followers. He then also believes that defining leadership as a process means that it is not a property or character trait, but rather an event that occurs in the interaction between the leader and the follower. (Northouse 2021, 6.)

Since leadership has different meanings for different people, the definitions also vary. Gary Yukl (2019) describes leadership as follows: A process of influencing others to understand and agree on what needs to be done and how it should be done. He then argues that leadership is not just a process of influencing others to understand and agree on tasks and goals; it is also an art of inspiring and engaging individuals to jointly work towards these goals with innovation and collaboration. Effective leadership involves creating a vision, communicating it clearly, and fostering an environment where each member feels valued and motivated to contribute to the team's success. This means listening actively, adapting strategies based on feedback and continuously supporting and developing the team's capabilities. (Yukl 2019, 26.)

The importance of competent leadership in the events industry cannot be overemphasized, as it directly affects the success and efficiency of event execution. Abson, Norman and Schofield (2023) emphasize the critical role that leadership plays in the events sector and advocate a shared leadership approach to improve working practices. This point of view coincides with the dynamic and collaborative nature of event management, where effective communication, decision-making and teamwork are of utmost importance. Shared leadership, unlike traditional hierarchical structures, enables a more distributed and participative leadership style, enabling event teams to leverage diverse skills and expertise, foster innovation and respond more nimbly to challenges. Incorporating this approach within the event industry can lead to improved organizational performance, increased employee satisfaction and successful event outcomes. Therefore, it is important for event industry professionals to understand and implement effective leadership strategies, including shared leadership, to achieve excellence in their endeavours. (Abson, Norman and Schofield 2023).

2.3 Female leaders

The landscape of leadership has undergone significant transformation over the decades, evolving to encompass a broader and more inclusive understanding of what effective leadership entails. A crucial aspect of this development is the recognition of gender dynamics in leadership roles. The

historical neglect of gender issues in leadership studies has dramatically changed, paving the way for a rich and nuanced exploration of how gender intersects with leadership effectiveness. This shift in academic focus reflects broader societal changes and has significant implications for our understanding of leadership in the modern era. The following discussion reviews a seminal work in this field, Northouse's 9th Edition on Leadership, which offers an insightful examination of the interplay between leadership and gender.

In reviewing the development of leadership studies, Northouse (2021) highlights a crucial shift within the academic field regarding gender and leadership. Initially, the discourse was limited, with researchers overlooking the gender dimension in leadership studies until the 1970s. However, the subsequent surge of women in leadership positions in various sectors, driven by significant societal changes in the United States, led to extensive academic inquiry into the interaction between leadership and gender. This growing interest led to a reassessment of women's leadership capacity, moving beyond the outdated question 'Can women lead?' to a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics in leadership roles.

Northouse points to the increased visibility and success of women in high-profile leadership positions globally, such as former Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto and Indira Gandhi, along with figures such as Angela Merkel and Sanna Marin, underscoring the growing recognition of women's leadership effectiveness across various spheres. This recognition extends beyond the political arena, with women leaders such as Susan Wojcicki and Mary Barra exemplifying leadership excellence in the corporate sector. (Northouse 2021, 394.)

He believes that the structural and societal barriers that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership, which range from entrenched gender bias to the unequal distribution of household responsibilities. By addressing these core issues and highlighting successful female leaders in various domains, Northouse's work not only illuminates the current landscape of gender and leadership but also advocates strategic approaches to advance gender equality in leadership positions. (Northouse 2021, 394.)

2.4 Gender disparities

In the twentieth century, gender differences in working life were confirmed by the deep-rooted belief that men are better suited as leaders than women. This view was based on beliefs about what qualities and competencies are required for successful leadership in companies, including

unspoken theories, stereotypes linked to gender and specific expectations of gender roles. (Yukl 2019, 382.)

These deep-rooted prejudices and gender stereotypes are also influenced by cultural attitudes towards gender equality. There is a lack of scientific support for the view that men would be better suited as leaders. Current legislation prohibits gender discrimination and is based on the idea that women and men have equal ability to hold management positions. Although gender stereotypes are slowly changing, the belief that men are more suitable for leadership still lives on among certain groups and is particularly prevalent in societies where such ideas are supported by cultural norms. (Yukl 2019, 382.)

A current debate is intensified by claims that women are generally more likely than men to possess the values and skills required for effective leadership in today's organizations. It is believed that this difference stems from childhood experiences, interactions between children and parents, and socialization processes that reflect cultural stereotypes about gender and the occupations considered appropriate for men and women. These experiences tend to promote what are considered "feminine" values such as kindness, empathy, consideration, and cooperation. Proponents of the theory of "female supremacy" in leadership posit that women strive more for consensus, inclusiveness, and strong interpersonal relationships, and they are more likely to develop subordinates and share power. Women are also credited with a higher degree of empathy, intuition, and sensitivity to the quality of relationships. Claims that the nature of leadership has changed in a way that favours the skills and values that women are believed to have more than men reflect similar patterns to previous claims about men's suitability for leadership, and these also tend to be based on weak assumptions and an exaggeration of gender stereotypes. (Yukl 2019, 383.)

Northouse highlights that women not only match men in leadership effectiveness, commitment, and motivation, but they also exhibit a distinct advantage in certain leadership competencies. Despite this, women tend to be less likely to promote themselves, which may contribute to their underrepresentation in leadership positions. In addition, a tendency of women to avoid leadership roles, possibly due to cultural or structural barriers, may further explain the differences in leadership representation between the sexes. (Northouse 2021, 402.)

In line with the insights presented earlier regarding the importance of joint leadership in event management, it becomes evident that women's leadership styles, as explored in Klenke's exploration of Women and Leadership, share remarkable similarities. Like stated earlier, joint

leadership emphasizes collaboration, inclusivity, and shared decision-making among leaders. Similarly, the participative leadership style commonly associated with women promotes a cooperative environment where every team member's input is valued. Klenke sheds light on how men and women differ in their leadership styles. While there is little variation between genders in terms of task-oriented versus interpersonal leadership, women tend to gravitate towards a more participative and democratic leadership approach compared to men. (Klenke 1996, 147.)

2.5 Actions to counteract gender inequality in event organizations

According to EVA's Glass Ceiling Index, the percentage of women in leadership positions in Finland was 36.3% in 2022, which is above the OECD average but shows stagnation. However, Finland is relatively well off compared to other OECD countries. OECD is an international organisation that works on building better policies for better lives. Despite the EU's goal of 40% female representation on boards of major listed companies by 2026, Finland remains at 36.1%. EVA's director Emilia Kullas emphasizes the role of education in equality issues, especially in science and technology where the gender gap is large. EVA's index monitors the position of women in leadership and the labor market and compares childcare costs and parental leave internationally. (Helsinki Times 2023)

To enhance women's leadership opportunities in the event industry and beyond, organizations must prioritize gender equity, implementing it across policies, priorities, and reward structures. Leaders in the event industry, in particular, should set a clear precedent by establishing measurable goals for gender diversity and holding all levels of the organization accountable for achieving these targets. (Rhode 2016, 134.)

Event organizations should scrutinize their hiring and promotion practices to identify and rectify any biases. This could involve reviewing how job descriptions are written, ensuring interview panels are diverse, and analyzing promotion trends within the organization to ensure women have equal opportunities for advancement. (McKinsey 2022)

Furthermore, mentorship and sponsorship are crucial in the event industry, where networking and relationships significantly impact career progression. Establishing programs that pair emerging female leaders with seasoned professionals can provide the guidance, support, and advocacy necessary for career advancement. (Rhode 2016, 134.)

Addressing work-life balance is particularly relevant in the event industry, known for its demanding schedules and significant travel requirements. Organizations should offer flexible working arrangements, telecommuting options, and child-care assistance to accommodate the unique demands of event planning roles. (McKinsey 2022)

On a societal level, advocating for policies that support work-family integration benefits everyone in the workforce, not just women in the event industry. This includes pushing for accessible, affordable childcare and parental leave policies that enable all parents to balance their careers with family life. (Rhode 2016, 134.)

Individually, women in the event industry should be encouraged to seek leadership roles actively, advocate for equitable policies, and engage in continuous learning and networking to enhance their professional development. Women should be encouraged to voice their support for policies that promote fairness and equality, ensuring that these principles are not just espoused but enacted and enforced.

By addressing these strategic areas, the event industry can become a leading example of gender equity in action, paving the way for more women to ascend to leadership roles and enrich the industry with diverse perspectives and leadership styles.

3 Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative methodology, which, as described by Stanford University (2023), emphasizes collecting comprehensive data through interviews, observations, and the analysis of texts and visuals. The essence of qualitative research lies in its ability to unearth the underlying motivations and reasons shaping the mindsets and behaviors of various groups, offering deep insights into the causative factors behind their actions in diverse settings.

Interviews, a core component of qualitative methods, facilitate an in-depth exploration of participants' views, motivations, and experiences through a conversational format that can vary from one-on-one to group settings. This technique is invaluable as it delves deep into the participants' perspectives, uncovering layers of understanding that are not readily observable or accessible through other means, thus enriching the comprehension of the subject matter. (Tracy, 2019, p. 78.)

For my thesis, I employ semi-structured interviews, renowned for their adaptability, aligning seamlessly with the fluid nature of my investigative framework. In this format, while the interviewer has predetermined questions, there is considerable room for flexibility, allowing the conversation to evolve organically. This setup not only fosters a more profound dialogue but also opens up avenues for unexpected insights and extensive exchanges. Such flexibility ensures that the interviewer can adjust to the dynamic nature of the discussion, responding to changes in context or conversation focus on the fly. The semi-structured approach is instrumental in capturing a comprehensive and nuanced portrait of the interviewees' experiences, viewpoints, and attitudes, which is crucial for the depth and breadth of understanding required in my research. (Tracy 2019, 158.)

This choice of method is supported by several important considerations:

First, a qualitative interview allows for in-depth discussions. Women in leadership positions in this industry have unique experiences and challenges, which are often nuanced and complex. By using interviews, I can engage in detailed conversations with each participant, providing the opportunity to explore specific themes and experiences in a way that quantitative methods, such as surveys, cannot. (Miller, Dingwall, & Miller 1997, 13.)

Second, the interviews provide space for stories and personal experiences. This research is not only interested in collecting 'hard' data, but also in understanding the personal stories and

perspectives that shape these women's careers. These stories are critical to understanding the larger context of gender and leadership in the industry.

Third, the choice of method is adapted to the research questions. My research questions aim to explore how women experience leadership, what challenges they face, and how they navigate an industry traditionally dominated by men. Qualitative interviews offer a direct insight into these dynamics in a way that other methods may not.

Finally, this method allows flexibility and adaptation during the research process, which enables a deeper and more meaningful discussion about relevant themes that emerge during the process.

3.1 Data collection

The people who were interviewed were chosen through a theoretical selection. For the qualitative method, a random sample with a larger population is not needed for a statistical sense. However, strategically selected people who are important to my research question were needed. For this research, it was important that the people interviewed were women, worked in a leadership role, within events. I also made sure that interviewed job tasks looked different, they come from different companies, and they are of different ages, but women, leadership and events were the "holy triangle".

This research was conducted using seven people who worked in a leadership role, within Event organizations (Table 2). Interviewee ages shifted from 25 to 59. Table 2 summarizes the interviewees.

Table 2. The interviewees

Participant	Position	Education	Age
Interviewee 1	Founder and CEO	Master of Science	28
Interviewee 2	Team Leader	Bachelor of Business Administration	25
Interviewee 3	Director	Bachelor of Hospitality Management	59
Interviewee 4	Director and Account Manager	Master of Business Administration	39
Interviewee 5	COO	Bachelor of Hospitality Management	36
Interviewee 6	CEO	Master of Science	42
Interviewee 7	PR Manager	Master of Science	31

The interviews for this study were conducted using Microsoft Teams, a virtual platform that facilitated remote communication. Prior to commencing each interview, I initiated the session with a formal introduction of myself to establish rapport and create a comfortable environment for the interviewees. This was followed by an in-depth explanation of the research objectives to ensure participants had a clear understanding of the study's purpose.

Table 3. Interview schedules

Participant	Date	Interview duration
Interviewee 1	8.1.2024	27,58 min
Interviewee 2	8.1.2024	29,17 min
Interviewee 3	10.1.2024	28,32 min
Interviewee 4	10.1.2024	28,22 min
Interviewee 5	10.1.2024	26,20 min
Interviewee 6	12.1.2024	32,30 min
Interviewee 7	12.1.2024	30,36 min

I also addressed important practical considerations at the beginning of each interview. This included a discussion on ensuring confidentiality and anonymity for all participants, thereby addressing any potential concerns about privacy and data security. Furthermore, I informed the interviewees about the process of recording the interviews for accuracy and transparency in data collection.

Additionally, each interviewee was required to fill out a 'Consent Form' (Appendix 1). This form outlined the participant's rights, including the purpose of the study, how their data would be used, and their right to withdraw from the study at any point.

As the person who conducted the interviews in this study, I am convinced that the results reflect reality, despite the limited number of interviews conducted. All my conclusions are based on what the participants have said, and I have taken great care to correctly interpret their answers. The purpose of the study was to explore female leadership in the field of event organization by gathering and analysing the opinions and personal viewpoints of the interviewees. The study was based on the premise that the interviewees had no reason to give untrue or misleading information.

3.2 Interview Framework

The interviews were structured around five key areas: Career Path and Experience, Personal Leadership Experience, Challenges and Barriers, Women in Leadership Positions, and

Motivations. Each of these themes was supported by pre-planned questions. However, the dynamic nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility, with questions sometimes being phrased differently or emerging naturally during the course of the discussions.

Themes and Associated Questions (Appendix 2):

1. Career Path and Experience: What has been your career trajectory leading to your current leadership role in the event industry?
2. Personal Leadership Experience: How would you describe the qualities of a good leader? How do you perceive your personal experience as a leader in this industry?
3. Challenges and Barriers: As a woman in a leadership position, what are the primary challenges you have faced within this industry?
4. Women as leaders: What do you personally think about women and leadership in general? Do you think women have certain qualities in leading a team or a company?
5. Motivation: What motivates you to do this work?

4 Findings

This chapter explores the findings of the qualitative research on women's professional experiences in leadership in the Finnish event industry. This thematic analysis reveals the intricacies of their career paths, leadership experiences, the challenges they face, their perspectives on women in leadership roles and their motivation. Each part is dedicated to dissecting these themes, providing insights into the unique and collective experiences that shape their professional landscape. This analysis not only highlights the development and obstacles within their careers, but also provides a deeper reflection on the emerging role of women in leadership positions within the industry.

4.1 Career Path

The interviewees were asked about their career path. These journeys, despite their variety, share common themes of adaptability, resilience and growth. For some, the transition to the events industry came from completely different backgrounds, such as sports or the restaurant sector, leading to roles ranging from marketing to management. Others found their start within the industry itself, climbing the career ladder from initial roles in coordination or sales to leading positions in companies or as directors.

“My journey began in the restaurant industry, initially as a shift supervisor, and later as a manager of an event organization. Over the years, my role evolved through hands-on experience. I've been with this company for 13 years, where my job scope has continuously changed.” Interviewee 5

“My journey in the event industry has been quite dynamic. I started as an event coordinator right after completing my postgraduate degree. Through dedication and seizing opportunities, I gradually climbed the ladder to my current leadership role as the CEO of a big event company. Each step taught me invaluable lessons and honed my skills.” Interviewee 6

These stories highlight not only the diversity of career trajectories, but also the dynamic nature of the events industry. Challenges such as internal communication problems or corporate setbacks led to the creation of new businesses or a transition to more influential roles. Likewise, the stories reflect the continuous evolution of roles and responsibilities, with individuals taking on different positions within companies, sometimes even expanding into teaching or strategic communications.

“Coming from an athletic background, I shifted gears a few years ago to marketing for a nightclub. That company struggled with poor internal communication, which complicated the

work. This challenge led me and another colleague, whose values aligned with mine despite our different strengths, to establish our own company. We embarked on creating our own events, leveraging our unique skills and shared vision.’’ Interviewee 1

‘‘My career path began during my studies when we were tasked with organizing a two-day festival for a client at school. I eventually joined this company for an internship and later worked there full-time. The company went bankrupt, after which I started my own business, working under a trade name. Since then, I’ve been involved in various companies, managing events, overseeing teams, and working in roles like project manager and client relations manager, among other things. I’ve also worked as a teacher. Currently, I am serving as a director and account manager.’’ Interviewee 4

What emerges is a picture of an industry where career paths are rarely linear. Instead, they are characterized by opportunities for continuous learning, adaptability to changing circumstances, and the potential for rapid progression and varied experiences. The journeys of these individuals highlight the multifaceted nature of the events industry and reveal that success often lies in the ability to navigate and embrace the unexpected twists and turns in one's career.

4.2 Personal Leadership Experience

Leadership, as seen through the eyes of the interviewees, is a developmental journey characterized by continuous learning and self-reflection. It is fundamentally rooted in empathy, where leaders prioritize understanding and treating others as they themselves would like to be treated. This empathic approach guides their leadership styles, ensuring they are fair and aligned with the company's values.

Interviewee 2 believes in being a role model, setting an example for her team. Be held to the standards she expects from others, openly discuss own failures to cultivate a culture where mistakes are seen as part of the learning process, and offer constructive criticism to aid the growth of their team members.

‘‘A good leader should be equitable, someone who strives to make decisions in line with the company's values. This is what I aim for. I want to set a good example for my subordinates; I don't feel right asking others to act or be a certain way if I don't follow the same lines myself. The strongest supervisor is a role model for others. I also like to talk openly about my own

failures so that others feel that we are all human, failures are okay and a part of the process. This also makes it easier to give constructive criticism to employees.’’ Interviewee 2

At the heart of effective leadership, especially in the dynamic of events, person-to-person interaction is key. Showing appreciation, being present and establishing clear performance metrics is important.

’’In my view, a good leader is all about person-to-person interaction. It is crucial to show appreciation, be present, and have clear metrics for assessment. A leader should connect on a human level.’’ Interviewee 3

Interviewee 4 strives to connect on a human level, understanding that this connection is the essence of true leadership. Embracing the concept of servant leadership, focus on serving the people they work with to ensure they feel valued and perform at their best. This point of view is based on the belief that leadership is not just a position but a responsibility that one must deeply desire and actively pursue.

’’I feel that leadership has evolved; it's much more about human leadership now. A leader's role is to 'serve' the people they work with. A leader must understand that their employees are at their best when they feel good. You don't just become a leader or advance to leadership; you have to want it.’’ Interviewee 4

For Interviewee 5, leadership also means holding everything together and being the ultimate point of responsibility.

’’Leadership to me means keeping everything together and being the last one responsible. A good leader can understand and relate to the grassroots level of operations. I believe in the approach of 'I know and have experienced what my employees do.' Despite the hierarchy, it's important to remain approachable and at the same level with the team. Leadership requires personality. While you can learn many aspects, managing people and navigating interpersonal dynamics often come down to one's character.’’ Interviewee 5

Understanding and ensuring that, despite hierarchical structures, they remain accessible and relatable to their teams. This accessibility is especially crucial in the events industry, where it is important to foster creativity and collaboration. Effective communication, adaptability, and empathy are critical to navigating this fast-paced environment, and a good leader in this area inspires trust, encourages innovation, and fosters a supportive team culture. Furthermore, these leaders see their

role as setting direction and inspiring others to follow. Leading by example, fostering enthusiasm and showing humility are seen as essential qualities. Interviewee 7 believes in acknowledging that no one knows everything and being open to learning from their teams, especially from those who have more expertise in their specific roles.

“For me, leadership is about setting direction and inspiring others to follow. I strongly believe that leading by example and fostering enthusiasm are essential qualities of a good leader. Additionally, humility plays a significant role in effective leadership. Acknowledging that no one knows everything and being open to learning from others, especially from my team members who likely possess more expertise in their specific roles, is crucial.” Interviewee 7

Interviewees paint a picture of leadership that is characterized by a mixture of empathy, responsibility and accessibility, coupled with a strong commitment to continuous learning and exemplary behaviour. Their leadership styles are characterized by a desire to serve, an ability to connect on a human level, and a focus on fostering a creative, collaborative, and supportive team culture. They inspire confidence, embrace humility and are adaptable in a fast-moving and ever-evolving environment.

4.3 Challenges and Barriers

When asking about the challenges faced due to gender disparities in the event industry, the experiences of all seven professionals reveal a spectrum of obstacles, biases, and societal expectations. One interviewee recounted numerous challenges, attributing them to gender and youth. They experienced unfair deals, belittlement, and their professional communications were often ignored. They noted that male intervention seemed to facilitate respect and response, highlighting a perceived need for women to prove their capabilities more than their male counterparts.

“I’ve encountered numerous challenges, likely due to my gender and youth. We’ve faced ridiculous deals, essentially scams, been belittled and condescended to, with invoices unpaid and communications ignored. Often, we’ve had to rely on male friends to intervene. After their contact, invoices get settled, and responses come through. It seems women need to provide more proof of their capabilities before being taken seriously. That’s been my experience.”

Interviewee 1

Another interviewee did not attribute their challenges directly to gender but rather to age. They faced difficulty in gaining authority and respect, particularly from older male subordinates, and

reported that appearance played a part in hiring decisions in their workplace. This suggests that biases in the industry extend beyond just gender.

“I haven't experienced much discrimination due to my gender, but rather because of my age. I think my older subordinates are irked by my age. In one company, my male boss admitted that he partly hires people based on their appearance. Let's just say that with older, male employees, I have had to work twice as hard to convince them of my competence. Authority has been a problem in their case.” Interviewee 2

The third interviewee pointed out the significant presence of female workers in the field but acknowledged the lack of women in higher leadership roles. This gap suggests an underlying issue of gender representation at higher levels of management.

“This field has a significant number of female workers, which might be why we don't see much discrimination here. However, there is certainly a need for more women in leadership roles, to further enhance our industry's dynamics.” Interviewee 3

Interviewee 4 brought a different perspective, highlighting self-trust and self-promotion as key challenges for women. According to them, the biggest barrier women face is often their own hesitation to put themselves forward.

“I believe that the biggest problem for us women is ourselves; that is, if we don't trust ourselves, if we don't put ourselves in the forefront, it becomes our challenge and a barrier to ourselves.” Interviewee 4

Another respondent mentioned facing discrimination and not being taken seriously due to being a young woman. This 'girlification,' as they termed it, indicates a prejudicial attitude towards younger female professionals.

“The challenges I've faced include discrimination, sometimes not being taken seriously due to my youth. There is 'girlification,' where being a young woman can lead to not being taken seriously, unfortunately.” Interviewee 5

From the perspective of a woman in a leadership position, the sixth interviewee described a range of challenges, from subtle biases to overt discrimination. They emphasized the difficulty of balancing professional responsibilities with societal expectations and noted restricted access to networks and opportunities. Their response reflects a commitment to confronting these challenges and advocating for equality.

“As a woman in a leadership position, I've encountered various challenges, from subtle biases to overt discrimination. Balancing professional responsibilities with societal expectations can be demanding. Access to networks and opportunities has sometimes been limited. However, I believe in confronting these challenges head-on, advocating for equality, and paving the way for future generations of female leaders.” Interviewee 6

Finally, the seventh interviewee discussed the unique challenges associated with returning from maternity leave. They highlighted the complexities women face in balancing career advancement with family responsibilities, a challenge not typically encountered by their male counterparts. Their experience underlines the need for greater support for working mothers in the workplace.

“One of the significant challenges I've faced, particularly as a woman, is the difficulty of returning from maternity leave. Unlike men, women often have to navigate the complexities of balancing career advancement with family responsibilities. This transition period can be challenging, both professionally and personally. However, overcoming these challenges has made me more resilient and determined to advocate for greater support for working mothers in the workplace.” Interviewee 7

These stories, while highlighting the challenges, underscore the resilience and determination of women in the event industry. Their experiences and the obstacles they have overcome serve as a powerful call to action for greater support, recognition, and empowerment of women in the workplace. As the industry evolves, it is imperative that these gender disparities are addressed head-on, paving the way for a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable field.

4.4 Women as leaders

The question posed was: What do you personally think about women and leadership in general? Do you think women have certain qualities in leading a team or a company? The interviewees unanimously agreed that female leadership often embodies greater empathy and a closer connection to human relations. Beyond this, they noted that there are no significant differences between male and female leadership.

“I believe that women leaders often bring a more empathetic approach to both life and work, which translates into better relationships with colleagues and a deeper understanding of their needs. However, apart from this empathetic aspect, I don't see significant differences between men and women in leadership qualities. Leadership effectiveness is more about individual characteristics and skills rather than gender.” Interviewee 7

“I feel that women bring a slightly more humane perspective to leadership, and partly a more people-oriented approach as leaders. I wouldn't want to generalize, but I think it's somewhat true. I believe that women's leadership will continue to grow increasingly. Success is all about people.” Interviewee 4

“I believe that gender does not determine leadership ability. Women bring unique perspectives, empathy, and resilience to leadership roles. The qualities traditionally associated with femininity, intuition, and collaboration, can be powerful assets in leading teams and driving organizational success. Diversity in leadership not only promotes inclusivity but also enhances decision-making and innovation.” Interviewee 6

4.5 Motivation

When exploring the motivations driving the interviewees in the event industry, a common thread of passion, ambition, and the pursuit of success weaves through their experiences. These individuals, each with their unique approach, find their drive in various aspects of their work, creating a pattern of what fuels their dedication and enthusiasm in this dynamic field.

For some, the primary motivator is the tangible sense of success and the joy it brings to others. The exhilaration of creating enjoyable experiences and the visible happiness of clients and attendees, this direct impact on others' enjoyment is not just a measure of success but a continuous source of inspiration.

“The feeling of success is incredibly motivating. I derive immense joy from knowing others are having fun. It's this sense of achievement and the happiness it brings to others that fuels my passion and dedication in what I do.” Interviewee 1

Others draw motivation from a blend of personal ambition and the recognition of industry challenges, such as the proverbial glass ceiling. The desire to prove oneself, to break barriers and push beyond traditional limits, ignites a strong drive within these professionals. This determination to excel in the face of challenges speaks to a deeper sense of purpose and commitment to personal and professional growth.

“My motivation stems from a blend of personal traits: ambition, a strong desire to prove myself, and the awareness of a glass ceiling in our industry. These factors drive me to strive for more and break barriers.” Interviewee 3

The immediacy of seeing results in the event industry also stands out as a significant motivator. The clear, tangible outcomes of their efforts provide a gratifying sense of accomplishment.

Whether it is the successful execution of an event or positive feedback from clients and colleagues, these concrete results reinforce their passion and drive for their work.

Additionally, the thrill of innovation and the development of new ideas is a powerful motivator for some, particularly in areas like PR and marketing. The evolving nature of these fields offers endless opportunities to explore creative strategies and connect with audiences in novel ways. The excitement of crafting new narratives and the satisfaction of seeing these ideas materialize fuels their ongoing engagement and eagerness to push creative boundaries.

“What drives me in my work is the opportunity to innovate and develop new ideas. The ever-evolving nature of the PR and marketing landscape excites me, and I find great satisfaction in exploring creative strategies to connect with audiences and achieve organizational goals. The prospect of shaping new narratives and seeing ideas come to fruition motivates me to continually push the boundaries of what's possible in my field.” Interviewee 7

Overall, the motivation for these professionals in the event industry emerges from a deep-seated passion for their work, whether it is through creating memorable experiences, overcoming industry challenges, achieving tangible successes, or innovating in a constantly changing landscape. Their drive is multifaceted, reflecting the diverse and dynamic nature of the industry itself.

5 Discussion

The study of women in leadership positions in the Finnish event industry has highlighted an intricate paradox. Despite most women in this sector, it is striking that discrimination still exists, reflecting larger societal challenges that women face in leadership positions across industries. This situation raises sharp questions about the nature and persistence of gender discrimination even in sectors where women are strongly represented.

The interview results show that women leaders in the event industry deal with challenges similar to those faced by women in other sectors, including gaining respect and authority, balancing professional and personal commitments, and confronting systemic biases that hinder their career development. Despite a strong presence of women in the events industry, where one would expect a more egalitarian atmosphere, the experiences of those interviewed indicate that mere representation does not automatically lead to an inclusive or fair working environment. This confirms the view that gender differences in leadership are rooted in deeper societal norms and practices, rather than specific industry characteristics. The obstacles these female leaders face, such as being ignored, undervalued or having to prove their competence more than male colleagues, reflect a wider societal issue where women's professional capacity is often questioned or underestimated. That women in the event industry are confronted with these challenges underscores that gender discrimination transcends industry-specific dynamics and is an expression of widespread societal norms and attitudes that continue to limit women's advancement in leadership positions.

This research emphasizes the importance of a deeper understanding of gender discrimination in leadership, which recognizes the interaction between industry-specific characteristics and broader societal biases. Although the event industry in Finland provides opportunities for women to occupy leading positions, the prevailing prejudices and discriminatory practices demonstrate the need for targeted efforts. These should not only focus on increasing female representation in management but also address the underlying biases and structural barriers that maintain inequality.

The personal leadership stories shared by the interviewees highlight empathy and a people-centered approach as central elements, suggesting that effective leadership in this context is intimately connected to interpersonal relationships and emotional intelligence. This view of leadership, which transcends formal authority and focuses on serving and supporting team members, resonates with modern leadership ideals that value servant and transformative leadership styles. Participants' experiences highlight both overt and subtle forms of gender bias,

pointing to a continued need for cultural and structural changes within the industry to address and eliminate these barriers. The reflections on female leadership show an understanding that effective leadership is not gender-bound but rather individual-based, which challenges uniform approaches to leadership and highlights the need to appreciate diversity in leadership styles and methods. The drivers that motivate these female leaders are diverse, including personal satisfaction, ambition and a willingness to overcome industry challenges. The direct impact of their work, either by creating memorable events or by witnessing the success and joy of other individuals, emerges as a strong motivator and highlights the intrinsic rewards of leadership in the events industry.

The insights from this study suggest that, despite some progress, much work remains to achieve true gender equality in leadership within the Finnish events industry. Addressing the challenges identified requires not only individual persistence and self-advocacy, but also collective efforts to foster an inclusive, supportive and fair industry culture. This research underscores the importance of continued efforts to recognize and overcome the barriers women in leadership positions in the events industry face. By combining individual and collective action, the industry can take steps towards a more equal and inclusive future where the quality of leadership is not judged on the basis of gender but on the ability and achievements of the individual.

6 Conclusion

The research conducted provides a clear view into the challenges faced by women in leadership roles within the Finnish event industry, illustrating that these challenges align closely with those encountered by women leaders across various sectors. Despite the expectation that the event industry, with its high female representation, would offer a more egalitarian work environment, the reality, as depicted by the interviewees, tells a different story.

Key findings from the research include that despite the high representation of women in the Finnish event industry, a gender leadership gap persists, underscoring the nuanced nature of gender disparities that transcend mere numerical representation. The qualities that define women's leadership in this context align with shared leadership styles, emphasizing interpersonal skills, empathy, leading by example, a human-centered approach, and emotional intelligence. Women's perception of effective leadership resonates with these leadership styles, emphasizing responsibility, influence, communication, and a strong support for team members' success.

To promote female leadership in the Finnish event industry, the study suggests actionable strategies. Societal initiatives should focus on dismantling stereotypes and fostering an environment that supports women's career aspirations from a young age. Organizations within the industry are encouraged to implement comprehensive equality plans, cultivate a culture that values diversity, and actively support women's career development through mentorship and sponsorship programs. On an individual level, empowering women to pursue leadership roles, fostering self-efficacy, and encouraging a supportive network can play pivotal roles.

By integrating insights from this research, there is an opportunity to not only enhance gender equality in leadership roles but also to enrich the industry with diverse leadership styles and perspectives, ultimately contributing to its innovation and success. Further research is recommended to deepen the understanding of these dynamics and to explore effective interventions across different industry sectors.

6.1 Assessment of own learning

This thesis holds a special significance for me as it connects deeply with my personal passions and values. I have always been profoundly interested in women's leadership and the event industry, and working on this project allowed me to integrate these interests into my professional

development. The process was extremely rewarding, enabling me to apply my skills and knowledge in practical ways.

The writing journey was enlightening and educational for me. It deepened my understanding of women's roles in both the professional sphere and everyday life, topics that are personally very important to me. Through this project, I have learned valuable skills and gained new perspectives that will undoubtedly guide and enrich my career moving forward.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Consent Form

Consent Form

An Examination of Women in Leadership Roles in Finnish Event Organizations

- I've had the chance to ask questions about the Study and received satisfactory answers.
- I acknowledge that participating in the Study is optional.
- I consent to being interviewed and agree to the audio recording of the interview.
- I'm aware that my personal details, like name and employer, will remain confidential outside the project.
- I understand that my statements may be cited in various research outputs, but my data will be anonymized before publication.
- I know I can withdraw from the Study anytime without needing to explain why. If I choose to withdraw, my data will not be used in the Study.

Name of participant: _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name of researcher: _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

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Appendix 2. Interview Structure

Interview structure regarding research on Finnish women leaders in the event industry:

1. Career Path and Experience:
 - What has been your career trajectory leading to your current leadership role in the event industry?

2. Personal Leadership Experience:
 - How would you describe the qualities of a good leader?
 - How do you perceive your personal experience as a leader in this industry?

3. Challenges and Barriers:
 - As a woman in a leadership position, what are the primary challenges you have faced within this industry?

4. Women as leaders:
 - What do you personally think about women and leadership in general?
 - Do you think women have certain qualities in leading a team or a company?

5. Motivation:
 - What motivates you to do this work?