Surveying women leaders' career trajectories: Implications for leadership development in New Zealand organisations

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This study relied on senior women leaders' retrospective accounts to identify the factors that shaped their career progression, and tested the relationships between executive coaching, mentorship, and sponsorship, and career satisfaction and leadership efficacy perceptions. Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered from an online survey of 159 women in senior leadership positions in New Zealand. The findings show that organisational culture and perceived work-family tensions were the factors that most hindered leadership advancement among women. In addition, women leaders ascribed personal attributes such as drive and hard work, along with social resources such as sponsors and managerial support, to their leadership advancement. Based on the results, we offer practical suggestions to improve career management, leadership development, and organisational outcomes for women leaders.

Keywords: *Women leaders, career satisfaction, leadership efficacy, coaching, mentoring, sponsorship*

Introduction

Me aro koe ki te hā o Hine-ahu-one.
Pay heed to the dignity of women

At the turn of the 21st century, and despite recent calls for greater gender parity in the workplace, leadership teams are still largely male-dominated (Hillman, 2015). A recently published Westpac Diversity Dividend Report suggests that gender balance in the c-suite makes a substantive positive contribution to the New Zealand economy (Deloitte, 2017). Along with financial returns, organisations that ensure gender parity at the senior leadership level show significantly better social responsibility, innovation, and customer service outcomes (Deloitte, 2017, Glass & Cook, 2018; Glass et al., 2016).

Despite the evident merits of gender parity at work, and although women hold about 60% of all university degrees in New Zealand (Statistics, New Zealand, 2015) and account for nearly 50% of the general workforce (Ministry for Women, 2016), current figures show that among New Zealand's Top 100 NZX companies less than one in four board members are women, and only four chief executive positions were held by women (McLennan et al., 2018). Moreover, though New Zealand has traditionally ranked within the top ten countries for women in leadership, in 2018 New Zealand's place in the ranking fell to 33 out of 35 countries, just ahead of Australia and Japan (Grant Thornton, 2018). The same report underscores another concerning statistic: the proportion of women in senior leadership positions within New Zealand has declined from 31% in 2004 to 19% in 2018.

While these statistics are difficult to explain in light of growing awareness of the need to effectively manage diversity in organisations, the leadership literature offers ample evidence of some of the main challenges faced by women leaders. For instance, accounts of glass ceiling effect suggest that women are at a significant disadvantage with regards to upward mobility in an organisation, and their ascent often stalls at the middle management level (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Weyer, 2007). The leadership labyrinth is another common metaphor that illustrates the myriad obstacles aspiring women leaders face, including gender stereotyping, family responsibilities, lack of role models, and exclusion from informal networking (Eagly & Carli, 2007, 2012; Koenig et al., 2011). To be clear, many of the factors that purportedly hinder women leaders' progression, such as the leadership labyrinth phenomenon described, have been either anecdotally or only theoretically discussed, but seldom validated with evidence. Scholars have long called for empirical research that identifies not only the factors that deter women leaders' careers, but also the factors that positively contribute to their success (Allen et al., 2004; Helms et al., 2016; Hopkins et al., 2008). Such evidence would go a long way to provide robust guidelines around how to best support aspiring women leaders.

The objectives of this study are twofold. Based on an online survey of current senior women leaders in New Zealand organisations, we first examine some of the theoretically advanced factors believed to enhance leaders' competence beliefs (i.e., leadership efficacy) and career satisfaction, namely satisfaction with mentorship, sponsorship, and executive coaching, to determine whether and how these formal leadership development initiatives impact women's leadership experiences. Second, the study relies on qualitative data extracted from the online survey to offer preliminary insights into additional factors that women leaders attribute to their career advancement and satisfaction, and the factors that women leaders view as having posed obstacles throughout their career. This information is aimed at identifying general themes to guide further empirical enquiry.

Literature Review

Women leaders in organisations

Studies examining the impact of gender parity on organisational outcomes highlight the positive financial results associated with having women in executive teams (Cook & Glass, 2014; Nguyen & Faff, 2007), along with supplier and customer loyalty, increased accountability, socially responsible practices, and positive organisational climate (Glass & Cook, 2018; Glass et al., 2016; Setó-Pamies, 2015). Yet, these effects are largely contingent on whether and how organisations manage the contextual factors that influence women's ability to develop a leadership career, and to thrive as leaders (Miller & del Carmen Triana, 2009). Failure to provide a supportive leadership development environment for women has resulted in their underrepresentation in senior management roles, and, notably, it has also perpetuated misconceptions around leadership capability in this gender group. For instance, while New Zealand businesses have recently ascribed the shortage of women leaders to a lack of available female talent (Deloitte, 2017), scholars suggest that ineffectual diversity management driven by unconscious biases and archaic beliefs about women's competence in a leadership role are largely responsible for sustained gender imbalance in the c-suite (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2003).

Unconscious biases and held beliefs about women's fitness for leadership can be partly explained by role congruity theory. The theory underlines perceived discrepancies between traditional gender roles and the requirements of a leadership role (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This perceived incongruity leads to two forms of prejudice: (a) women are viewed less favourably than men as potential leaders because the behaviours women exhibit in leadership roles are inconsistent with the expectations of appropriate female behaviours, and (b) social convention around what constitutes stereotypically female behaviour leads to the perception that women are less likely to meet leadership role requirements than men (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hoyt, 2005). Leadership behaviours fitting with the stereotypically male gender role include assertiveness and dominance. Conversely, women are generally expected to exhibit communal characteristics, and enact nurturing, kind, and sympathetic behaviours (Koenig et al., 2011). In the workplace, the perceived lack of congruence between conventional leadership requirements and women's attributes has been linked to underestimation of competence and even penalisation for enacting leadership behaviours (Heilman, 2012).

The effect of role incongruence perceptions in gendered leadership outcomes has been scarcely examined, but it is reasonable to assume their association with skewed performance appraisals, lack of support for aspiring women leaders' development, and denial of credit for women's contributions and success in the workplace. Beyond their detrimental impact on career advancement, these dynamics likely undermine women's perceptions of competence in a leadership role, and stifle their sense of career fulfilment when they occupy executive level positions. More research is needed to explore and empirically verify the factors that shape women leaders' views of their role and career.

The women in leadership literature focuses mainly on the negative biases described above, along with their connection to widely known phenomena such as the glass ceiling (i.e., invisible institutional barriers that render women disproportionally less likely than men to achieve senior leadership positions) and glass cliff effects (i.e., women are more likely than men to be appointed to leadership positions during times of crisis when the risk and probability of failure in role are higher). Less is known about the factors that hinder and those that support women leaders' careers. This study relies on quantitative and qualitative data to explore senior women leaders' views of their leadership careers. Though limited, the research into formal leadership development practices indicates that networking support, executive coaching, and mentorship might result in positive career outcomes for this gender group (e.g., Fitzsimmons et al., 2014; Harris & Leberman, 2012; Searby et al., 2015; Tolar, 2012). Hence, the quantitative portion of this study will focus on the impact of formal leadership development (i.e., mentoring, executive coaching, and sponsorship) on women leaders' efficacy beliefs and career satisfaction. The qualitative portion of the study is exploratory, and delves into the personal, societal, and organisational factors that positively or negatively shape women leaders' career experiences. In it, we collect written accounts from New Zealand women leaders to answer research questions around the factors perceived as hindering or contributing to their career advancement.

Leadership efficacy and career satisfaction: The role of formal leadership development

Self-efficacy is a motivational construct that influences individuals' activity choices, goal setting, effort expenditure, task persistence, adversity coping, and overall performance (Bandura, 1997; Hoyt, 2005). Leadership efficacy is a "specific form of efficacy associated with the level of confidence in the knowledge, skills and abilities associated to leading others" (Hannah et al., 2008, p.669). Leadership efficacy has been described as directly promoting effective leadership engagement, adaptability, and flexibility across complex and challenging organisational contexts.

When exploring leadership efficacy among women leaders, research suggests two dynamics. On the one hand, women are more often exposed to negative female gender stereotypes around leadership, which may over time undermine their leadership efficacy. Yet, even when faced with these stereotypes, women who exhibit greater leadership efficacy show higher levels of performance and wellbeing levels than those with lower leadership efficacy (Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007). These findings suggest that women are susceptible to efficacy threats in their leadership role, but also highlight how organisations benefit from ensuring women develop leadership efficacy as a personal resource throughout their careers. But how can organisations promote leadership efficacy among women?

Bandura (1977, 1997) outlined several factors that influence self-efficacy appraisals, which can be linked to supportive leadership development practices: role modelling, feedback, verbal persuasion, and vicarious

learning. For instance, vicarious learning in a leadership context occurs when employees have opportunities to either observe or hear about others' leadership trajectories. These learning moments clarify the path to achieving similar career goals, including the experiences and capabilities necessary to succeed in that role. Leadership efficacy can also be developed through verbal persuasion, whereby experienced professionals hold one-on-one discussions meant to enhance an individuals' belief that they can also succeed as leaders.

Formal leadership development agents such as mentors and executive coaches are in a privileged position to engage in these conversations, and to further enhance efficacy perceptions through vicarious learning, role modelling, and performance feedback. However, these causal linkages have seldom been tested among women leaders. Similarly, whether and how mentorship, sponsorship, and executive coaching influence women leaders' views of career satisfaction, defined as the composite positive perception of an individual's working life (Judge et al., 2005; Ngo & Hui, 2018), remains unclear. In what follows, we discuss these formal leadership development practices and ways in which they may uniquely foster leadership efficacy and career satisfaction for women leaders.

Mentorship and leadership outcomes

A mentor is an experienced individual within an organisational support network who can provide career guidance and serve as a role model to less experienced workers (Ensher & Murphy, 2005; Joo et al., 2012). Organisations increasingly rely on formal mentoring programs within leadership development systems, and research into mentorship is steadily developing (Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2007; Moore & Wang, 2017; Ragins & Kram, 2007). Mentoring offers substantial benefits for organisations, mentees, and mentors. For mentees with effective mentors, some of the benefits include greater career mobility, higher perceptions of vocational fit, and greater job satisfaction compared to those with an ineffective mentor or no mentor at all (Allen et al., 2004; Burke & McKeen, 1997).

Though scarce, and seldom examined on the backdrop of gender differences, the research suggests that emerging leaders in trusting mentoring relationships have enhanced levels of leadership efficacy and overall performance (Lester et al., 2011). Moore and Wang (2017) propose that good mentors increase mentees' leadership efficacy beliefs by fostering a sense of psychological safety (i.e., less fear of making mistakes, willingness to openly discuss career concerns), and providing vocational support and positive role modelling. This in turn results in greater mentee willingness to attempt stretch goals, leading to improved performance and innovativeness. The notion that mentorship quality, rather than mere availability, is a stronger predictor of positive workplace attitudes has been empirically tested, with findings showing that satisfaction with mentoring has significantly greater effects on mentee outcomes than mentoring availability or frequency of exchanges with the mentor (Xu & Payne, 2014). We expect that satisfaction with the mentor-mentee alliance may also be a key driver of career satisfaction and leadership efficacy.

H1: Satisfaction with a mentor will be positively associated with a) career satisfaction and b) leadership efficacy among women leaders

Career Sponsor

A sponsor is typically an influential senior executive who is willing to create opportunities and advocate for an individual whose leadership potential has been identified (Hewlett, 2013). The guidelines of a sponsoring relationship are ill-defined in the literature, and have in the past been undifferentiated from those that characterise the role of a mentor. Yet, a sponsor's primary role is not to offer career guidance, but rather to support network development for the emerging leader, and in this way facilitate career advancement. Their role is to actively endorse a protégé and boost their profile by introducing them to other executives, broadening their professional network (Helms et al., 2016; Hewlett, 2013), and nominating or referring the protégé for promotion when opportunities arise (Friday et al., 2004).

Preliminary research indicates the significance of career sponsorship for aspiring women leaders (Helms et al., 2016), especially given that women are more likely to be excluded from informal workplace networks than their male counterparts (Hewlett et al., 2010). Though limited, the evidence suggests that career sponsorship is positively associated with lower likelihood of career plateau, more favourable appraisals for promotion, and overall increased career satisfaction among women (Greenhaus et al., 1990; Ng et al., 2005).

The evidence is fuzzy on whether these positive outcomes can be attributed to having sponsors, or to the actual quality of the sponsorship. Moreover, while there is preliminary data to support the association between sponsorship and career outcomes among women leaders (Ng et al., 2005), no research to date has empirically tested the relationship between women leaders' satisfaction with sponsorship and their perceptions of leadership efficacy.

H2: Satisfaction with a career sponsor will be positively associated with a) career satisfaction and b) leadership efficacy among women leaders

Executive Coaching

Executive coaching is a leadership development intervention designed to help emerging leaders enact positive changes in mindset and behaviour, and it typically relies on the one-on-one formal relationship between an externally hired executive coach and an individual (coachee) (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Grant, 2014). This developmental intervention has strong adaptive, reflective, and goal-focused components that target both leader development and overall organisational performance (Bozer & Jones, 2018). In practice, coaching offers emerging leaders the opportunity and tools to reflect on and independently identify any skill deficits or positive assets they wish to develop, which in turn expands their leadership capability and improves their overall performance (Joo et al., 2012; Moen & Federici, 2012; Moen & Kvalsund, 2008).

The coaching process takes into account the multiple life roles and changing career and personal circumstances of the developing executive. Women, in particular, have unique roles and demands that require special

consideration in a coaching alliance (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Ruderman & Ohlott, 2005). These demands range from achieving work-life balance and ensuring a smooth return to work process following parental leave, to navigating the gender stereotyping that often permeates corporate environments. Given the exceptional challenges faced by aspiring women leaders, an executive coach must rely on a holistic approach to leadership development by attending to personal, occupational, and societal pressures (Hopkins et al., 2008).

The extant literature still has a fair way to go in establishing the factors that contribute to effective executive coaching (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; de Haan et al., 2016), and little is known about coaching outcomes among women leaders. Yet, the evidence indicates that leadership self-efficacy, an intended outcome of executive coaching, is fostered under conditions of perceived autonomy, support, and resource availability. These three conditions feed into the foundations of self-efficacy appraisals, namely guided reflection on past performance, role model observation, and encouraging prompts from credible and legitimate sources, all of which fall within the purview of executive coaching (Paglis, 2010). Hence, satisfaction with executive coaching is expected to positively influence women leaders' self-efficacy through their effect on efficacy appraisals.

Leaders' perceptions of a high quality coaching relationship are also expected to increase career satisfaction. Recent research suggests that this association can be explained by the notion of 'high-quality connections', whereby the positive emotions and sense of connection that arise from a good coaching alliance enhance learning and self-awareness in a leadership context, which subsequently increase the career satisfaction of emerging leaders (Van Oosten, McBride-Walker, & Taylor, 2019).

H3: Satisfaction with an executive coach will be positively associated with a) career satisfaction and b) leadership efficacy among women leaders.

In addition to the associations suggested above, and given the dearth of information about that factors that contribute to or hinder women leaders' careers, we rely on qualitative accounts from women leaders to explore the following questions:

RQ1: What factors negatively affect leadership advancement for women in New Zealand?

RQ2: What factors positively contribute to leadership advancement for women in New Zealand?

METHODS

Participants and Procedure

The participants for this study consisted of women leaders working in New Zealand organisations. The main inclusion criterion for this study, which was communicated with prospective participants in the information sheet, was that they had to occupy senior leadership roles (e.g., CEO, CFO, COO, board member, head of division). The participants were recruited using a number of methods. A total of 145 senior women leaders were directly contacted after an extensive online search for women leaders in New Zealand, using an email address obtained from websites or online social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Twitter. Participants were also asked to forward the details of the study onto other female leaders they had within their networks. Additionally, leadership professional groups were approached and some agreed to pass on the details of the study to their mailing lists or advertise on their websites and social media platforms. As a result, the exact number of invitations sent cannot be established.

The quantitative and qualitative data used in this study were collected from participants via an online survey administered at a single time point. To ensure adequate time to recruit, the survey was open for 12 weeks. After screening for eligibility and eliminating incomplete surveys, the total number of participants was 159. Out of the 159 participants 15% identified as Māori, 79% identified as Pakeha/New Zealand European 3% identified as Pasifika, 2% identified as Asian and 6% identified as another ethnic group. The length of tenure in a leadership position averaged 13.5 years.

Measures

Participants' views on leadership efficacy, career satisfaction, and satisfaction with mentoring, career sponsorship, and executive coaching were rated on 5-point Likert scales. Demographic and occupational information including current job title, sector, industry, financial investment in company, total length in leadership positions, and ethnicity were collected. Ahead of the questions pertaining to sponsoring, mentoring, and executive coaching, the respondents were presented with the following descriptions:

"A ***career sponsor*** is usually a senior level staff member invested in your career progression, who advocates for your success on the corporate ladder. By making you visible to top people both within and outside of your organization, your sponsor may support you to secure high profile assignments, promotions, and pay rises. A person sponsored may be referred to as a protégé."

"***Mentors*** offer advice and guidance, and support you in achieving your desired career goals. Ideally, they are removed from your day-to-day functions and usually don't provide coaching on your job tasks. The person being mentored is usually referred to as a mentee."

"***Executive coaching*** is designed to help facilitate professional and personal development to enable individual growth and improved performance. It is an organisation-funded developmental initiative that centres on the relationship between coach and client (you)."

Leadership Efficacy

Leadership self-efficacy was measured using 13 items covering two dimensions of the Leadership Efficacy Questionnaire (LEQ) developed by Hannah and Avolio (2013). The leader action self-efficacy (LASE) dimension consisted of 7 items that measured the leaders' perceived ability to effectively perform leadership functions such as motivating, coaching and inspiring, as well as getting followers to identify with the organisation's vision and goals (Hannah & Avolio, 2013). A sample item is *"As a leader, I am able to get staff to meet the requirements that have been set for their work".* Coefficient alphas range from .90 to .93 (Hannah & Avolio, 2013; Hannah et al., 2012).

The leader self-regulation efficacy (LSRE) dimension consisted of 6 items that measured the leaders' perceived capability to think through complex leadership situations, interpret their followers and context, generate unique and effective solutions to problems that arise, and the ability to motivate themselves to enact those solutions (Hannah & Avolio, 2013). A sample item is *"As a leader, I can think up innovative solutions to challenging leadership problems"*. Coefficient alphas range from .83 to .85 (Hannah et al., 2012). Participants rated each item on a scale from 1=not confident at all to 5=extremely confident.

Career Satisfaction

Career satisfaction was measured using the 5-item Greenhaus et al. (1990) Career Satisfaction Scale (CSS). Participants were asked to rate their experience of career satisfaction. A sample item is *"I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career so far"*. Participants rated each item on a 5-point scale from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Coefficient alphas for the CSS range from .83 to .88 (Greenhaus et al., 1990; Spurk et al., 2011).

Mentoring satisfaction

Mentoring satisfaction perceptions were assessed using the 7-item Mentoring Relationship Effectiveness Scale developed by Berk et al. (2005). A sample item included *"My mentor challenged me to extend my capabilities"*. Participants rated each item on a scale from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. The scale's coefficient alpha is .94 (Berk et al., 2005).

Sponsor satisfaction

Given the lack of a sponsorship effectiveness scales available, seven items were developed for this study based on the role of the sponsor. A sample item is *"My sponsor gave me assignments that increased personal contact with important clients and key leaders"*. Participants rated each item on a scale from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

Executive Coaching satisfaction

An adaptation of de Haan et al. (2016) coaching effectiveness scale was used for this executive coaching component of the survey. The 7 items focused on the participant's relationship with an externally hired executive coach. An example of an item included was *"My coach and I collaborated on setting goals during my coaching sessions"*. Responses were provided on a scale from 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree. De Hann et al.'s (2016) reported Cronbach alpha was .86.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Exploratory factor analyses (EFA) using principal axis factoring with oblique rotation (direct oblimin) were conducted to assess the dimensionality of the scales used in this study. The inclusion criteria were eigenvalues greater than one, and item factor loadings greater than .40 (DeVillis, 2016; Shultz et al., 2013). The EFA conducted for Leadership Efficacy showed that, after two double loading items being deleted, the remaining items loaded on their two corresponding factors 'leadership action self-efficacy' (LASE) and 'leadership self-regulation efficacy' (LSRE). The remainder of the items loaded onto single factors, consistent with the career satisfaction and formal leadership development unidimensional scales utilised.

Qualitative Data Analysis

In addition to the quantitative responses provided, women leaders were given the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences with mentoring, sponsorship and executive coaching, and in that way allow for a greater understanding of their impact on women leaders' trajectories. In addition, women leaders were asked to answer the following questions: *"Describe the top three factors that have hindered your leadership career"* and *"Describe the top three factors that have directly contributed to your leadership success"*. To analyse the open-ended responses, a thematic analysis was conducted. In the present study, we followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps: 1) Data familiarisation – the responses provided were read and re-read to gain an insight of the content as a whole; 2) Initial codes were generated – the dataset was systematically processed by manually coding it, and a number of key patterns and themes were identified; 3) Search for themes along specific research questions and identification of overarching themes to nest the data; 4) Theme review – themes were refined and reviewed to ensure all themes were accurately captured; 5) Naming themes; and 6) Reporting – examples of participants' comments that illustrated the themes and addressed the research questions were selected for reporting.

RESULTS

Quantitative Results

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to test for significant differences in leadership efficacy and career satisfaction perceptions between Māori and non-Māori women leaders. While there were no statistically

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Measure	N	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Mentor satisfaction	73	4.05	.81	*(.90)*					
2. Sponsor satisfaction	66	3.93	.85	.41**	*(.89)*				
3. Coach satisfaction	42	3.78	.93	-.34†	.23	*(.93)*			
4. Leader action efficacy		3.90	.59	-.04	.27*	.18	*(.85)*		
5. Leader regulation efficacy		4.03	.57	.04	.22†	.15	.67**	*(.86)*	
6. Career satisfaction		4.07	.68	.12	.37**	.29†	.25**	.26**	*(.88)*
7. Leadership tenure		13.42	8.03	-.29*	.00	.23	.31**	.21**	.08

Note: N=159; **p < .01, *p < .05, †p <.10 (2-tailed)

significant differences in levels of leadership efficacy and career satisfaction between Māori and non-Māori women leaders in this study, this demographic variable was further examined by attending to the participants' qualitative statements, and the findings are explored in the Discussion section.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics, coefficient alphas for the scales, and intercorrelations among the variables of interest. The results indicate positive and significant associations between satisfaction with the sponsor and the outcomes leadership action efficacy and career satisfaction (r=.27, p<.05 and r=.37, p<.01, respectively), and, at a less stringent p-value, between satisfaction with the executive coach and career satisfaction (r=.29, p=.06), and satisfaction with the sponsor and leadership action efficacy (r=.27, p<.05) and regulation efficacy (r=.22, p=.07). These findings suggest that, in the sample of top women leaders surveyed, good sponsorship may be the most effective formal leadership development approach in ensuring leadership efficacy and career satisfaction. Through their networking capabilities, sponsors may be in the best position to enhance women leaders' organisational and strategic awareness, along with context-responsiveness (i.e., regulation efficacy), and their ability to rely on networks and support to align the team to a common purpose (i.e., action efficacy). Due to the very small subset of women leaders (N=15) with experience of all three forms of career support (mentorship, executive coaching, and sponsorship), it was not possible to conduct meaningful linear regression analyses to further explore the hypothesized effects. Overall, we found support for H2, which postulated positive and significant associations between satisfaction with career sponsor, for the subset of women leaders who experienced this form of developmental support, and leader efficacy and career satisfaction outcomes.

Qualitative Results

In the qualitative component of the survey, participants were asked to 'Describe the top three factors that have hindered your leadership career' and 'Describe the top three factors that have directly contributed to your leadership success' (See Table 2 and Table 3). Of the 159 participants, 150 provided comments to the open ended sections. Answers ranged from listed examples to several sentences. Participants identified *organisational culture, work-life conflict, and lack of confidence or self-doubt* as the main hindrances to their leadership career. Conversely, individual-level variables such as *drive, hard work, and personal values*, and social variables such as *networks, sponsorship, and managerial support* were identified as the factors that positively contributed to leadership success.

Factors that negatively affect leadership advancement among women leaders

Organisational culture was the most commonly cited hindrance factor, with 38% of respondents describing its negative effect on leadership advancement. Women leaders remarked on the set of organisational values, assumptions, and gender role beliefs that influenced how leadership advancement decisions were made. Comments in this section identified the detrimental impact of "unconscious biases", "old boys' networks", and "internal politics", and remarked that women are "not being taken as seriously as male counterparts". Sexual harassment, in particular "refusal to accept sexual advances", were mentioned by two of the women leaders as reasons for being overlooked for career promotion. About 20% of the respondents connected gender stereotypes in the organisation or occupational culture as a source of hindrance, stating that "being a woman in a male dominated field" posed a significant obstacle to their advancement. Respondents discussed organisational stereotypes about women in leadership roles such as being seen as "too aggressive" or "outspoken for a woman" or "the [negative] perception of women in leadership roles". Women leaders also reported being overlooked for roles in favour of males: "I genuinely believe that if I had been a male, I would have been considered for promotion to partnership sooner".

Work-life conflict, defined as the set of incompatible demands between family and work roles, was mentioned by 26% of the respondents as having hindered their leadership advancement. Sources of work-life conflict included unwillingness to relocate due to family demands, and family commitments during business hours. Unwillingness or inability to relocate due to family demands were mentioned as factors that directly and negatively impacted on leadership promotion or advancement decisions.

About 25% of the women leaders surveyed remarked on self-doubt and lack of confidence as factors that negatively impacted their leadership advancement. Leaders' responses varied in length, from short labels (e.g., "self-doubt", "imposter syndrome") to lengthier statements (e.g., "lack of confidence to put myself forward for other roles"). Relatedly, a small proportion of women leaders (9%) justified "not putting themselves forward" or a "lack of self-promotion" with sense of modesty, with one respondent stating that she lacked "a here I am mana/impact". Women who described modesty as a hindering factor also commented on "focusing too much on the work and expecting hard efforts to be acknowledged".

Other themes that emerged in relation to leadership career hindrances were lack of management support (15%), described as lack of support from either the organisation or the managers at the women's early career stages (e.g., "previous organisations not providing the opportunity for me to advance" and "poor support and lack of guidance from leaders"), and lack of support for career planning (13%) (e.g., "no clarity of career goals", "a lack of goals around advancement").

Factors that contributed to leadership success

Nearly 35% of the participants attributed their leadership career success to personal drive. This was drawn from labels such as "personal determination", "drive", "commitment", "self-belief", "a willingness", and "own motivation and ambition". Hard work and results was another factor women leaders associated with their leadership career success (33%). This overarching theme was derived from labels and statements such as the ascription of success to "hard work and delivering results," "proven results", "track record of achieving

Table 2. Summary of key factors that negatively affected leadership advancement

Theme	Sub themes	% experienced
Organisational Culture	Old boys networks Unconscious bias Organisational Stereotypes Sexual harassment	37.5%
Work / Life Conflict	Family commitments Geographical locations Work hours required	26.3%
Self-Doubt / Lack of confidence	Lacking faith in abilities Not believing in oneself Imposter syndrome	25.6%
Gender		18.8%
Lack of management support	Not supported by leader to progress Held back for promotion	15%
Lack of development plan	No career progression plans No training opportunities	13.1%
Social and Occupational Stereotypes	Gender stereotypes Leader stereotypes	11.3%
Age and Ethnicity	Age too old or young Being an ethnic minority	8.8%
Modesty		8.8%
No qualifications	Lack of adequate leadership training Lack of university degree	7.5%
Avoidance	Fear of speaking up Not wanting to cause trouble Expecting to be acknowledged for work	5.6%
Organisational Size		4.4%
Lack of suitable Mentor		2.5%
Women hindering other women's progress		1.3%

results and hard work", "experience and achievements", "going above and beyond", "meeting organisational standards", and "strong performance".

Personal values and personality were identified as leadership success factors by just over 30% of the respondents. Women described their "work ethic", "integrity", "positive attitudes", and "values" as factors that positively contributed to their leadership success. One leader described her "[positive] personal attributes and wanting to get things done, to make a difference". In addition, 30% of women leaders also identified competencies as critical success factors, namely "experience and skill set", "technical aptitude", "ability to get new clients", and "the ability to collaborate with diverse personalities in complex environments" when listing competencies that contribute to leadership success. Descriptions for competencies were also described in ways such as "demonstrating good leadership practice" and "people skills to get things done". Finally, 28% of women leaders mentioned confidence as a key factor in contributing to their leadership success. "Belief in my abilities and skills" and "having confidence in my ability to outperform my colleagues" were some of the ways leaders described this enabling factor.

Sponsorship, Mentoring and Executive Coaching

The participants had the opportunity to leave comments regarding their experiences with sponsors, mentors, and executive coaching in open-ended response fields. These comments were collated and thematically analysed to aid with the interpretation of the quantitative results. Over 40% of women leaders had experienced a sponsorship relationship during their career, and a third of these women stated that having a sponsor positively contributed to their leadership career. One of the participants stated "My sponsor definitely put me on my leadership path and supported and believed in me and what I could achieve. They were instrumental in my journey and helped build my confidence in what was possible". Others commented "I was very lucky early in my career with two senior (male) staff members who created opportunities for me and helped me to grow my

Table 3. Summary of key factors that contributed to leadership advancement

Theme	Subthemes	% experienced
Drive	Commitment Motivation Determination	33.8%
Hard work / Results / Experience	Delivering results Achievement Best person for job	33.1%
Personality / Personal Values	Strong work ethic Positive attitude Understanding people Making a difference	33.1%
Competencies	Strong skill set Technical ability	29.4%
Confidence		28.1%
Relationships / Networks	Support from colleagues and other in the industry Support from partner / friends	16.3%
Career Sponsorship	Advocate Belief in abilities	12.5%
Leadership / Manager Support		10.6%
Peer support		8.8%
Qualifications	MBA Further leadership training	8.8%
Luck / Timing		7.5%
Mentors		5.6%
Coaching	Equipping with right tools Developed a plan	2.4%

skills", and "Having a sponsor is something I encourage wāhine I work with to seek". Some women sought career sponsors independently from their organisation (e.g., "I sought out the sponsorship with the opportunity to work in a collaborative team - which opened the door"), while others were assigned one.

Mentoring satisfaction received a mix response. It was the most commonly experienced form of support by the women leaders surveyed (46%). Yet, only 6% directly attributed it to their leadership advancement. These qualitative findings are in line with the non-significant relationships between mentoring and leadership outcomes shown in the quantitative results section. Nevertheless, some mentors were viewed as vital psychosocial resources for women leaders. One participant stated: "A mentor is critical in executive roles as they become your peer support for challenges and times when these roles feel quite isolated." A crucial element described was having "a genuine connection" and the "right fit" if the relationship was going to be successful. The mentors were described as both formal and informal in nature, with one leader describing that "informal mentor relationships have been the most valuable (where we have identified each other through working experiences) as opposed to mentor 'set ups' where there is an obligation as opposed to a genuine connection."

Lastly, only 26% of all women leaders had experienced executive coaching during their career, with 3% directly attributing it to positive leadership outcomes. The main theme that emerged in the discussion field was around personal fit and relationship quality with the coach. Some women reported the benefits of having executive coaches (e.g., "throughout different phases of my career - they have been invaluable for assisting to make sense of certain situations, reflection, planning and testing out of ideas"). Several women remarked on the gains of seeking out an executive coach, instead of relying on a coach appointed by the organisation (e.g., "I used someone who was outside the corporate executive coach model - but this person was fantastic in challenging me to grow", and "The [internal] coach had a conflict of interest as was coaching other members of the same team"). The women leaders who were dissatisfied with executive coaching ascribed this negative experience to executive coaches not understanding their role, or not being relatable (e.g., "the coaches I had in the past I couldn't relate to").

DISCUSSION

Despite the methodological limitations associated with the small sample obtained, the quantitative results offer clear indication that satisfaction with sponsors had the strongest relationship with career satisfaction and leadership efficacy among women leaders, followed to a modest extent by executive coaching. These results are consistent with previous research signalling an association between sponsorship and career satisfaction across sectors (e.g., Cameron & Blackburn, 2016). Importantly, the findings signpost good sponsorship as an investment-worthy resource, as it may counteract some of the obstacles to women's leadership progression identified in the literature and in our study: organisational culture, and family demands limiting networking opportunities.

Our analysis of the qualitative data revealed that New Zealand women leaders identified organisational culture as the primary hindrance to their leadership career, particularly in organisations that reinforced traditional gender stereotypes through their practices and values. Organisations with value systems aligned with typically masculine features such as individualism, authority, and competitiveness were flagged by the respondents as generating contextual conditions that slowed their leadership career progress by creating systemic underestimation of women leader capabilities, and deflating their efficacy in a leadership role. These findings are consistent with the extant research suggesting that organisational cultures characterised by salient, undermining stereotypical attributions of women in the workplace negatively impact their careers (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012; Walker & Artiz, 2015). Coupled with the respondents' identification of sponsorship and networking as important social factors that contributed to their leadership success, our results also lend credence to the postulation that sponsors act as advocates for aspiring women leaders, facilitate their access to influential organisational members, and equalise access to professional networks and milestones that are otherwise more easily attainable by men, especially those unencumbered by family demands.

The results from our study did not echo previous evidence of a positive relationship between mentoring and leadership outcomes (Lester et al., 2011). A possible explanation for this may be that mentoring offers psychosocial rather than career support. Several scholars have described mentors as fundamental sources of social support at work, helping women through work-life conflict and gender bias challenges they commonly face (Dawson et al., 2015; Underhill, 2006). In the present study, women leaders alluded to the social support provided by their mentors, discussing the importance of mentors in "assisting with personal challenges" and alleviating "feelings of isolation" during their career.

Finally, most of the women leaders surveyed listed drive, effort, and sustained performance as key factors that facilitated their leadership progression. These findings are consistent with extant leadership research, which suggests that the combination of personal characteristics such as motivation to lead and self-belief, along with sustained evidence of high performance, draw positive career outcomes for women leaders (Antonakis & Day, 2017; Zaccaro,et al. 2013).

Limitations and directions for future research

The main limitation of this study is sample size, particularly the small number of women leaders who reported having had experience with sponsors, mentors and executive coaches. As a result of the small sample sizes for these variables, we are unable to draw robust conclusions from the data, and rely primarily on qualitative findings to explore the phenomena of interest. Nevertheless, this study was intended as exploratory given the scarcity of empirical research available on the factors that facilitate or hinder women leaders' career experiences and success, and the qualitative data has enabled us to delve into, and identify, leadership dynamics specific to women, and report findings that can be further explored or replicated (Haig, 2013; Kline, 2004).

Secondly, this study relied on women leaders' recall of their experiences with sponsors, mentors and executive coaches, and a retrospective appraisal of the enabling and hindering factors that influenced their leadership trajectory. Retrieval biases may have influenced their responses, as recall questions are more difficult to answer due to the relative distance of the information in memory, especially considering the long tenure in leadership positions reported by some of the women. One way to help overcome recall biases, is to ensure all concepts are clearly defined (Podaskoff et al., 2012), a recommendation that was followed during the development of the survey. Future research could also consider objective measures of career success to verify participants' accounts.

Fundamental attribution error and individual differences such as locus of control, whereby personal success is tendentiously ascribed to competence, personal attributes, and effort, while failure is attributed to contextual factors and bad luck (e.g., Miller, 1984), may also partly explain why the success factors outlined by the respondents were primarily linked to motivation, personality, and competence.

Finally, this study relied on qualitative data to explore women leaders' views of their leadership career. While we strived to employ a rigorous analytical approach (see Braun & Clarke, 2006), future research could attempt to validate the themes that emerged from the analysis by relying on alternative data sources, having multiple subject matter experts code the data to ensure that there is consistency of interpretation, and ensure that the conclusions drawn from the study were minimally influenced by researcher bias that inevitably occurs in qualitative research (Cresswell, 2012).

Practical Implications

Despite the limitations outlined above, the present study offers several theoretical and practical directions. It is one of few studies that compiles women leaders' perspectives on the factors that contributed to or hindered their leadership career trajectory, and the first to empirically test the associations between these leaders' experiences with sponsors, mentors, and executive coaches, and their sense of leadership efficacy and career satisfaction.

The integrated uantitative and qualitative findings suggest that sponsors may be essential to women leaders'

career progression and experiences, as they are in a stronger position to offset the main obstacles to women's advancement than mentors or executive coaches. More research is needed to verify and further examine the role of sponsors in improving gender parity in the c-suite and supporting women's careers. As the results from our study elucidate some of the key challenges and opportunities unique to this demographic group, they can be used by aspiring women leaders as points of reflection about their own circumstances against career goals, inform their self-directed leadership development, and guide them toward the appropriate social resources (e.g., sponsors).

The results from our qualitative analysis provide further insights into the personal and contextual factors that influence women leaders' careers in New Zealand, and suggest ways in which organisations can implement practices and developmental programs that capitalise on enabling factors, while removing or mitigating barriers. Two related ideas are worth discussing in this regard. First, despite the growing number of New Zealand organisations allocating resources to improve diversity management, and the mounting evidence suggesting that diversity-friendly environments are associated with higher perceptions of leadership efficacy and career potential (Gündemir, Dovidio, Homan, & De Dreu, 2017), our findings reveal that stereotypical conceptions of female leaders are still pervasive, and negatively impact women's careers and leadership advancement. These results underscore the need for organisations to invest in devising, implementing, and evaluating initiatives that support aspiring women leaders, including policies and practices that undercut systemic hurdles.

Second, the initiatives and diversity management practices mentioned above should be part of a strategy that accomplishes a merit-based increase of women representation in senior executive roles by removing the extraneous barriers and developing their leadership capability. This contrasts with blindly subscribing to the notion that all organisations with more women on the board will perform better (Adams, 2016). Given the current social and business agendas for the promotion of women in leadership and gender parity on boards, and the New Zealand Government's recent assurance of gender parity across sectors by 2021 (Harris, 2018), organisations must, in the first instance, educate employees about unconscious biases linked to gender stereotypes, and how they adversely impact individuals and organisational functioning (Burke & Major, 2014; Friday & Friday, 2003), and follow that educational approach with formal leadership development support (e.g., sponsorship, coaching) to develop women leaders' social resources and competencies.

Another insight from this study that is relevant to the New Zealand context pertains to the examination of leadership experiences and outcomes among Māori and non-Māori women leaders. While no statistically significant differences were found with respect to leadership outcomes between these groups, the qualitative data suggest that Māori women reported distinctive experiences of their leadership trajectories. The Māori women leaders surveyed noted added pressure throughout their leadership career progression, as they felt they had to "prove their worth even more, not only as a woman, but as a Māori woman". This finding this is consistent with previous research highlighting differences between individuals within majority and minority groups in the way they develop leadership careers, namely the added demand experienced by minority groups to put in more effort and time into work in order to receive equal credit (Wyatt & Silvester, 2015). Our findings are in line with Fitzgerald's (2003) call for the need to refine indigenous theories of leadership that account for and explain what it means to be a Māori women in leadership, and the unique support systems and obstacles they experience. This also presents an opportunity to ensure that career satisfaction assessment among indigenous peoples shows appropriate domain coverage, including workplace cultural wellbeing (Greenhauss, 1990; Haar & Brougham, 2013).

As a final remark, the fact that women leaders ascribed their leadership success primarily to personal attributes, and identified external variables outside of their control as career hindering factors is noteworthy. Whilst the attribution of success to internal factors and of failure to external variables represent well-researched attribution biases mentioned earlier (McLeod, 2010), in this context they highlight the need for leadership development programs to emphasise self-awareness and balancing perceptions of resources and barriers.

Overall, the results of the current study indicate women leaders in New Zealand are confident in their ability to lead once appointed and satisfied with their careers, but more can be done across industries and sectors to ensure gender parity, reduce hurdles unique to female leadership, and capitalise on existing talent among women to improve organisational outcomes.

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