

Gender Diversity in The Military. Women Leadership and Overcoming Challenges
A Qualitative Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

The military has long been recognized as a traditionally male-dominated field where women have faced various barriers and limited opportunities for advancement. Women are becoming more powerful in the military as leaders, breaking down barriers and dispelling preconceptions as they take command, inspire, and shape the military's future. The problem under investigation was the persistent underrepresentation of women in the U.S. military; due to gender bias and preconceptions that are deeply embedded in military culture, women in the military face unique difficulties and impediments. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of women leaders in the U.S. military and how they have worked to overcome challenges when accessing top leadership positions. This study followed a qualitative method that utilized a phenomenological design. The researcher collected data from 10 female leaders in top leadership positions within any armed forces. For this study, a top leadership position was defined as (a) Captain, (b) Major, (c) Lieutenant Colonel, (d) Colonel, (e) Brigadier General, and (f) General. The researcher collected data via semi-structured interviews, asking each participant the same ten open-ended questions in the same manner during a private interview. Five themes emerged from the dataset: (a) resilience and adapted strategies, (b) gendered workplace inequities, (c) personal and professional balance, (d) building and nurturing professional networks, and (e) gendered workplace pressures. These themes highlight various aspects of women's experiences, including intersectionality challenges, mental health considerations, and organizational support. Specifically, the recognition of these themes contributes to a more robust understanding of the multifaceted challenges faced by women leaders in the military.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Introduction

Indisputably, women are becoming more powerful in the military as leaders, breaking down barriers and dispelling preconceptions as they take command, inspire, and shape the military's future. There has been much discussion about how gender diversity affects military leadership (Cohen, 2019). The military has historically been perceived as being controlled by men, with little opportunity for women to rise to leadership positions (Goldstein, 2018; Mease & Neal, 2023). Nevertheless, this picture has undergone a noticeable shift, with an increasing number of women holding leadership roles in military groups. For example, over the past few decades, there has been a notable shift in the representation of women in high military roles.

In 2000, there were 30 women holding admiral and general posts; by 2018, that number had doubled to 62, marking a nearly two-decade increase in female representation (Sisk, 2019). This has demonstrated women's strides in obtaining entry into and doing well in senior military positions. However, despite advancements, women are still disproportionately underrepresented in leadership positions within the military, highlighting the continued necessity of additional efforts to promote fair representation and attain gender parity in these areas (Jean-Louis, 2021). When attempting to rise to senior roles in the military, women encounter several obstacles, including institutional and cultural hurdles. Strongly held preconceptions and gender bias might provide challenges for women who want to progress in their careers. Skepticism and resistance are frequently caused by preconceived beliefs about women's leadership styles, combat roles, and talents (Doan & Portillo, 2022; Jean-Louis, 2021). These prejudices can prevent women from advancing and limit their chances to show their abilities. In addition, the absence of women in senior roles has resulted in a shortage of mentors and role models, depriving aspiring female

leaders of direction and assistance. For professional development and career advancement, having access to mentors and role models is essential because they offer direction, networking opportunities, and insightful advice (Blanche, 2021). Women may find it difficult to negotiate the male-dominated military hierarchy and overcome the challenges they encounter if there is insufficient representation at the top. The importance of investigating gender diversity in military leadership becomes apparent when one considers the possible consequences of these changes.

The advantages of women taking on leadership positions in the armed forces are numerous and include a range of topics, including operational efficiency, organizational efficacy, and cultural change. First off, diverse gender leadership teams in the military contribute a more comprehensive range of viewpoints, experiences, and methods to decision-making processes, which produces results that are more thorough and robust (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016).

According to research, diverse teams are more creative, adept at solving problems, and have novel ideas—crucial qualities for military operations (Bryant & Harrison, 2019). Moreover, women leaders frequently contribute unique talents and attributes to military leadership roles, including adeptness at creating cohesive teams, excellent interpersonal skills, and sympathetic leadership philosophies (Sneed, 2022). These characteristics support the development of a positive organizational culture, boost morale, and encourage inclusivity in military units (Sneed, 2022). Studies have also shown that gender-diverse leadership promotes a more encouraging and cooperative atmosphere, which raises work satisfaction, retention rates, and overall success of the firm (Brimhall & Mor Barak, 2018). Future generations of women are encouraged to choose jobs in the armed forces by women who hold top positions in the military. Their outward manifestation and accomplishments subvert gender norms, dispelling misconceptions and

creating opportunities for more women to aspire to senior roles in the military (Persson & Sundevall, 2019).

As a result, the military's diversity pipeline is strengthened, drawing applicants with a broader range of backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints and opening up job opportunities. From a wider social standpoint, the growing number of women in leadership positions within the military dispels long-standing gender stereotypes and advances gender equality. It also strongly conveys that competence, skill, and dedication—rather than gender—define leadership (Goetz & Gbowee, 2022). Raising the number of women in leadership roles in the armed forces helps break down barriers and change public perceptions of the sector and other historically male-dominated industries (Sisk, 2019). The body of studies on gender diversity and how it has been seen in the military was noticeably lacking. Even while women are increasingly in positions of leadership and their contributions are valued, there was a lack of thorough research on the particular effects of gender diversity in military organizations and the difficulties faced by these leaders. Little is known about the intricate interactions between gender dynamics, leadership philosophies, corporate culture, and results. The necessity for additional research to fully understand the nuances of gender diversity in the military setting has been brought to light by this knowledge gap. This gap must be closed to obtain essential insights that will guide leadership development initiatives, policy choices, and the creation of inclusive and egalitarian military settings that optimize the potential of all people, regardless of gender.

Background of the Problem

The military has long been recognized as a traditionally male-dominated field where women have faced various barriers and limited opportunities for advancement (Goldstein, 2018). Previous studies have extensively explored the challenges and implications associated with

gender dynamics within military organizations, shedding light on three crucial aspects: (a) the male-dominated nature of the military (Linehagen, 2018), (b) the inclusion of women in combat roles (McGraw et al., 2016), and (c) the representation of women in leadership positions (Spoehr, 2022).

The Male-Dominated Nature of the Military

It is well known that men predominate in the military and that women are significantly underrepresented in this sector due to historical and cultural reasons (Goldstein, 2018).

Historically, women have encountered obstacles and few chances to join and grow within military groups. For instance, women in the U.S. were mostly restricted to non-combat support positions like mechanics, nurses, and secretarial staff during World War II (King & DiNitto, 2019). In addition, men mainly were assigned to combat roles (King & DiNitto, 2019). This segregation along gender lines persisted in later conflicts, further solidifying the idea that the military is primarily a male domain. Even as society's attitudes changed and women's employment options increased, the military remained resistant to change.

Numerous rules and practices have contributed to the military's male-dominated culture. One such example is the United States' 2015 prohibition on women serving in combat roles, which limited their access to specific posts and prospects for professional progression (Kamarck, 2016). Deeply rooted prejudices and presumptions regarding women's capabilities and standing in the military hierarchy were reflected in this policy (Greener, 2021). The gender gap has also been sustained by the military's historical preference for males in organizational systems. For instance, military forces frequently function under a hierarchical command structure, with seniority and promotions customarily determined by length of service and combat experience (Kowalinski, 2022).

Due to women's historical absence from combat jobs, which limited their possibilities for promotion and combat-related experiences, this system disproportionately benefited men (Greener, 2021). Because of these structural obstacles, women found it difficult to advance in the military, perpetuating the idea that military leadership was primarily a male domain (Castillo, 2020). Even though there has been some progress in recent years to address these disparities, gender equity in the military still needs to be achieved via persistent efforts to promote inclusivity, offer equitable opportunities, challenge biases, and establish gender stereotypes.

Women and Combat Roles

The U.S. military's history of accepting women into combat jobs is evidence of the tremendous strides made toward gender equality and the acceptance of women's talents and abilities. Women have been crucial players on the front lines throughout many battles, shattering barriers and conventional gender conventions. In 1942, the Women's Army Corps (WAC) was founded during World War II, the first formal instance of women being allowed to serve in the U.S. Army (Friesen, 2021). Some women were assigned positions closer to battle zones, including intelligence and logistics, after being limited to non-combat support tasks like secretarial work, nursing, and communications (Friesen, 2021). This made more options for women to enlist in the military possible. The responsibilities and possibilities available to women grew in the following decades. The Women's Armed Services Integration Act was passed by the U.S. Congress in 1978, granting women access to military academies and allowing them to work in military branches relevant to warfare (Roth, 2021). Nonetheless, the official ban on female participation in ground combat units persisted. The prohibition against women serving in combat roles was not lifted until 2013, according to an announcement by then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta (Doan & Portillo, 2022).

This historic ruling acknowledged the evolving character of contemporary warfare and the demonstrated combat skills of women. As a result, women started serving in previously unattainable roles in the military, such as infantry, armor, and Special Operations Forces, further cracking the glass ceiling and paving the way for greater gender equality (Van, 2023). The U.S. military's history of having women serve in combat roles demonstrates how their contributions to historically male-dominated fields have been gradually and evolvingly accepted (Lee, 2023). Women have broken through institutional and societal barriers to demonstrate their combat readiness, from having few opportunities during World War II to having restrictions lifted recently. The more significant number of women serving in combat jobs indicates that gender equality in the military is important and that women's skills and dedication are valued, even though obstacles and advancements in this area still need to be addressed.

The Representation of Women in Leadership Positions

There have been important turning points in the development of women's leadership in the military and continuous initiatives to advance inclusion and equality for all women. Gradually, as attitudes and policies have changed, women can now take on leadership roles formerly held by men. Few women attained high-ranking posts in the early phases of women's engagement in the military due to a lack of leadership chances (Sis, 2019). However, as more women enlisted in the military and demonstrated their mettle, there was an increasing awareness of their potential as leaders. Future generations of women leaders benefited from the appointment of Anna Mae Hays as the first female general officer by the U.S. Army Nurse Corps in 1970 (Staats, 2019).

Over the next few decades, there was a consistent rise in the number of women holding leadership roles. Notable achievements were made by the U.S. military, such as the 2008

appointment of General Ann E. Dunwoody, the first female four-star general (Felder, 2021). These accomplishments encouraged aspirational female leaders in the military by proving that women could succeed in leadership positions (Campbell, 2023). Furthermore, initiatives to support inclusivity and diversity in the military have given women more chances to hold senior roles. Over the past 30 years, there has been a notable growth in the number of women in high leadership roles within the military, as reported by Skisk (2019). Less than 2% of colonels and captains in the U.S. Navy were women in the 1980s (Sisk, 2019). But by 2018, they held leadership posts in the Army at 10.6%, the Navy at 11.6%, the Air Force at 14.1%, and the Marine Corps at 2.3% (Sisk, 2019)

To address gender inequities, the armed services have put rules and activities in place. These include support networks for women in the military, diversity training, and mentorship programs (Bridges et al., 2023). By establishing an inclusive atmosphere that recognizes and supports women's leadership potential, these initiatives hope to promote equality and career advancement. Although there has been progress, there are still obstacles to reaching complete gender parity in military leadership. Unique challenges for women include prejudices, biases, and underrepresentation at the top (Blanche, 2021; Castillo, 2020). Ongoing endeavors to foster diversity, question conventional wisdom, and guarantee equitable opportunities, however, propel the advancement of women's leadership in the military and contribute to more diverse and efficient armed forces.

Statement of the Problem

The problem under investigation was the persistent underrepresentation of women in the U.S. military. Compared to 81.6% of men, only 18.4% of women held senior positions in the Army as of January 2023. Other domains have also shown this: the Navy has 20.4% female

leaders, the Marines have 9.1% female leaders, and the Air Force has 22.7% female leaders (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). The armed forces have put in place rules and programs, including support networks, diversity training, and mentorship programs, to address gender inequities and the difficulties that women confront (Bridges et al., 2023). Notwithstanding these endeavors, obstacles that hinder the progress and representation of women aiming to hold high leadership roles in the armed forces persist.

Due to gender bias and preconceptions that are deeply embedded in military culture, women in the military face unique difficulties and impediments. Preconceived beliefs about women's skills, leadership styles, and aptitude for combat jobs are some challenges they have faced. These beliefs frequently cause resistance and mistrust (Doan & Portillo, 2022; Jean-Louis, 2021). The lack of role models and mentors results from the dearth of women in high-ranking positions, which leaves potential women leaders without direction and assistance (Blanche, 2021). For women in the military to succeed professionally and get vital insights, networking opportunities, and guidance, they must have access to mentors and role models (Blanche, 2021). Women may find it difficult to negotiate the male-dominated military hierarchy and overcome the particular challenges they encounter if there is insufficient representation at the top. Consequently, it was currently unknown how female military leaders overcome these obstacles to succeed in their positions. Essential insights that could guide policy choices, leadership development initiatives, and the establishment of inclusive and equitable military environments that maximize the potential of all personnel, regardless of gender, can be obtained by investigating the perspectives and real-world experiences of female leaders in the armed forces.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of women leaders in the U.S. military and how they have worked to overcome challenges when accessing top leadership positions. Understanding these challenges is a precursor to enacting change. Previous research has concluded that women face multiple barriers when accessing top leadership positions in the military, such as gender bias and stereotypes deeply ingrained in the military culture, preconceived notions about women's abilities, and leadership styles (Doan & Portillo, 2022; Jean-Louis, 2021), a lack of role models and mentors, as well as limited networking opportunities and exclusion from informal networks (Blanche, 2021). It was currently unknown how women leaders overcame such challenges.

This study followed a qualitative method that utilized a phenomenological design. The researcher collected data from 10 female leaders in top leadership positions within any armed forces. For this study, a top leadership position was defined as (a) Captain, (b) Major, (c) Lieutenant Colonel, (d) Colonel, (e) Brigadier General, and (f) General. The researcher collected data via semi-structured interviews, asking each participant the same ten open-ended questions in the same manner during a private interview. Each semi-structured interview was electronically recorded and transcribed in preparation for data analysis.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

Central Research Question: How do women leaders overcome experienced challenges when working within top leadership positions in the U.S. military?

Sub-Research Question 1: What challenges do women leaders working in top leadership positions in the U.S. military perceive as influencing their career success?

Sub-Research Question 2: What strategies do women leaders in top leadership positions in the U.S. military use to overcome identified challenges?

Sub-Research Question 3: What supports and resources do women leaders in the U.S. military perceive as needed to help them succeed in their roles?

Sub-Research Question 4: How do women leaders in the U.S. military view leadership from a militaristic standpoint?

Methodology

The researcher employed a qualitative methodology and phenomenological design for this proposed study. The researcher chose this method because it allows for collecting non-numerical data highlighting the participants' perceptions and lived experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Through such a design, the researcher can capture the essence of peoples' actual experiences as it highlights subjective perspectives and meanings people attribute to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The researcher will not try to generalize or quantify events, which will best be done through a quantitative design. Instead, this study aims to investigate women's experiences, views, and barriers to attaining top leadership positions in the military, which is best conducted through a qualitative technique and phenomenological design.

Since phenomenology can aid in understanding the subjective perspectives and meanings people ascribe to their experiences rather than trying to generalize or quantify occurrences, it was imperative to study the sample (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with ten female leaders in top leadership positions within the U.S. Armed Services to obtain information. To be eligible to participate in this study, individuals had to meet the following requirements:

- All the individuals were female. For this study, a person categorized as female at birth was considered a woman.
- Each member actively served in the military and held high-level leadership positions.

This study's highest leadership positions were deemed brigadier general, general, major, lieutenant colonel, captain, and colonel. Those who did not meet all the requirements were not eligible to participate. The researcher haphazardly searched the social media site LinkedIn to identify study volunteers. To find participants, the researcher used the same set of criteria. After finding LinkedIn profiles that fit the search parameters, the researcher sent a private message to each participant with the study's goals, expectations for participation, eligibility restrictions, and contact information. The researcher received responses from people, and before allowing participants into the study on a first-come, first-served basis, he ensured each individual met the study's parameters. All participants participated in a private, semi-structured Zoom video conference interview, answering the same 10 to 15 open-ended questions. The participants responded to each topic as they saw fit, although the researcher followed up with questions to encourage them to explain or provide additional context for their answers. Every semi-structured interview was electronically recorded, and Zoom's Transcribe tool was used to transcribe the interviews to prepare for data analysis. The qualitative technique and phenomenological design of the study were adhered to by the qualitative thematic analysis approach used for data analysis. The versatile and well-liked technique of "thematic analysis" was applied in qualitative research to identify, investigate, and analyze themes or patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). By extracting the content and meaning of the participants' lived experiences using theme analysis, the researcher accomplished one of the main goals of the phenomenological design. Gathering non-numerical data to look into participant perspectives and experiences, for instance, through

semi-structured interviews, was made possible by using a qualitative technique. Thematic analysis, a qualitative data analysis technique, supported the approach by stressing the structuring and identifying patterns or themes that emerge from participant narratives. It provided a rigorous strategy for evaluating and interpreting this data (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Significance of the Study

This study was significant for two reasons: first, it filled a vacuum in the literature that allowed it to be conducted; second, it addressed significant concerns of diversity and gender in military leadership that supported social justice. Initially, this research was vital because it filled a vacuum in the body of knowledge and empirical data about the impact of gender diversity on military leadership. Although the value of gender diversity in the military and other domains was becoming increasingly apparent, little research was conducted on the subject in the context of military leadership. This study has the potential to produce new empirical evidence, offering insightful information and data that add to the body of current knowledge. The study could improve our knowledge of how gender diversity influences leadership styles, organizational culture, and outcomes in military organizations by addressing this gap in the literature. The empirical findings may be a basis for evidence-based policy development, organizational interventions, and decision-making to advance diversity and gender equality in military leadership.

Additionally, the study may point out weaknesses, difficulties, and topics that require more investigation, which could inspire more research in this important field. Second, this study filled a critical knowledge vacuum regarding the impact of gender diversity on military leadership, which made it noteworthy in the context of gender and diversity. The military has traditionally been a male-dominated field. Therefore, questions about how gender diversity

affects leadership philosophies, organizational cultures, and results inside military organizations are raised by the growing number of women in senior positions (Castillo, 2020). By examining these relationships, the study advanced knowledge of the difficulties, advantages, and consequences of gender diversity in military leadership. It may impact the development of inclusive and egalitarian policies and practices. Furthermore, gaining insight into the viewpoints and experiences of women serving in combat and leadership roles could draw attention to the advancements achieved, the obstacles still facing the military, and the possible advantages of having diverse leadership in place. This could promote more effective and inclusive armed forces and social justice.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions were used throughout this study and were defined as followed:

Armed forces. This is also known the military. It is designed to house the organized and trained military personnel, equipment, and resources of the United States (MacGregor, 2020). A collective body is responsible for defending and protecting a country's interests domestically and internationally. The Armed Forces typically consist of branches representing different military functions, such as the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard (MacGregor, 2020). These branches work together under a unified command structure to ensure national security, deter aggression, and engage in military operations as directed by civilian authorities.

Combat. According to Tharion et al. (2022) combat refers to the direct involvement of military forces in hostile actions, usually entailing physical conflict and the use of weapons. It includes a range of military operations, such as combat engagements, offensive and defensive maneuvers, and the application of military tactics and plans to accomplish goals (Tharion et al., 2022). Combat operations can occur in the air, on land, or at sea, depending on the military

forces' capabilities and the war's nature. Close-quarters fighting, long-range combat, or both can occur during the conflict, depending on the weapons and equipment used and the operational environment. According to Tharion et al. (2022), the principal aim of military conflict is to accomplish tactical and strategic goals by surmounting opposition, eliminating hazards, and seizing control of the combat zone. To guarantee mission success and safeguard military personnel's safety and security, it calls for rigorous training, efficient coordination, and the use of combat abilities and expertise.

Contingency theory of leadership. According to the contingency leadership theory, a leader's ability to effectively lead is based on how well their style complements the circumstances (Heller, 2019). The theory strongly emphasizes the need for leaders to modify their conduct to fit the demands of the work, the followers, and the organizational environment.

Glass-leadership theory. The invisible hurdles and discriminatory behaviors that prevent people, especially women and minorities, from advancing to top leadership positions inside businesses were explored by the glass ceiling hypothesis (Alobaid et al., 2020). The phrase "glass ceiling" refers to an impenetrable, intangible barrier that stops eligible people from advancing in their jobs past a particular point (Soumya & Sathiyaseelan, 2021).

Leadership. The act of persuading and directing people or organizations toward a shared purpose or aim is known as leadership. In 2020, Ciulla and Ciulla entailed making judgments, directing, and successfully using resources while inspiring, motivating, and empowering others. Leadership includes various abilities and traits, including vision, communication, honesty, flexibility, and the ability to promote cooperation and constructive change (Ciulla & Ciulla, 2020). According to Galenic (2020), effective leadership motivates and influences people, fosters an inclusive and supportive atmosphere, and accomplishes group objectives.

Social identity theory: According to Scheepers and Ellemers (2019), it provides a framework for understanding how people obtain their sense of self and identity from belonging to particular groups. People divide themselves into social groups to develop a sense of identity and belonging. Being a part of a group affects attitudes, actions, and relationships between groups. Thus, according to social identity theory, self-stereotyping, in-group favoring, and social comparison contribute to maintaining positive social identities (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019).

Top leadership positions. For this study, a top leadership position was defined as the positions of (a) Captain, (b) Major, (c) Lieutenant Colonel, (d) Colonel, (e) Brigadier General, and (f) General (Blanche, 2021).

Woman: In this study, the term woman referred to individuals assigned the female sex at birth and identified as women throughout their lives (Schiappa, 2021).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

According to Creswell & Creswell (2017), assumptions in research are the underlying beliefs or presuppositions that guide selecting research design, methodology, and interpretation of findings. They frequently act as guiding principles or premises for the study. As a result, it is crucial to establish the study's assumptions. First, it was assumed that the participants followed the semi-structured interviews with integrity. This guaranteed they would provide accurate and dependable data by responding truthfully to each interview question (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A further supposition for this investigation was that the subjects possessed the expertise and familiarity to furnish the investigator with pertinent information (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The researcher ensured that all participants met the requirements for participation, including

those currently employed by the U.S. military in high-level leadership positions, to guarantee that pertinent data was gathered from the participants.

Last, it was assumed that the approach and design chosen for this investigation would address the stated research issues (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The data was anticipated to address the study questions by revealing how they were formulated, given that the researcher had chosen a qualitative phenomenological approach. Since he gathered non-numerical data, the researcher made sure the research questions were open-ended when drafting them. As a result, he was able to better match the research topics of his study with the semi-structured interview questions, increasing the likelihood that he would draw compelling results from his investigation.

Limitations

Although this study aimed to investigate the experiences of female military leaders and better understand the obstacles they faced, it was crucial to identify any restrictions that would have affected how broadly the results might be applied. First, this study's phenomenological design and dependence on qualitative methodologies may make it more challenging to extrapolate the results to a broader population (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Although the sample size of this study was diverse, it might not have fully represented the range of women leaders in the military; as such, care should be taken when extrapolating the findings to larger groups or circumstances. The conclusions of this study may not be as applicable to other military contexts or nations with different organizational structures, cultural norms, or regulations due to their concentration on the U.S. military. Some unique contextual characteristics that differ from those in other armed services may impact female U.S. military commanders' experiences. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design of this study provides a momentary view of the experiences of women

leaders. Longitudinal or comparative studies would be required to comprehend the dynamics and changes in their experiences over time or compared to other groups.

Delimitations

The study's delimitations clarify its scope and constraints. This study focused solely on female leaders within the U.S. military. Methodologically, it employed qualitative approaches, specifically a phenomenological design, to explore participants' subjective experiences. The cross-sectional research provided a snapshot of women leaders' experiences at a particular moment rather than exploring changes over time. Contextually, it concentrated on factors within the U.S. military, omitting broader societal and geopolitical influences. These delimitations aimed to maintain focus and coherence while providing insights into the challenges faced by women leaders in the U.S. military.

Conclusion

The structure of this dissertation will be conventional, with five chapters. The researcher introduced the methodology, the researcher's function, and the study assumptions in this chapter, along with introducing the research issue, outlining its significance, and identifying the research questions. The second chapter will present a thorough literature assessment, examining previous academic publications to develop the theoretical framework and pinpoint information gaps that enable the feasibility of this investigation. The selected methodology, together with the research design, data collection techniques, and ethical issues, will be covered in the third chapter. The study outcomes will be reported in Chapter 4, where the investigator will provide the conclusions drawn from the data analysis. Ultimately, a thorough analysis of the findings concerning the study topics will be presented in Chapter 5. In closing, the dissertation will include a reflection on the significance of the study and possible directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

The armed forces have implemented policies and initiatives to address gender disparities and challenges that women face, including mentorship programs, diversity training, and support networks (Bridges et al., 2023). However, despite such initiatives, women striving for top leadership positions in the military continued to encounter challenges that impeded their advancement and representation. Therefore, the problem being studied was that women continued to be underrepresented in the U.S. military. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the perceptions and lived experiences of women leaders in the U.S. military and how they had worked to overcome challenges when accessing top leadership positions. Previous research has concluded that women face multiple barriers when accessing top leadership positions in the military, such as gender bias and stereotypes deeply ingrained in the military culture, preconceived notions about women's abilities, and leadership styles (Doan & Portillo, 2022; Jean-Louis, 2021), a lack of role models and mentors, as well as limited networking opportunities and exclusion from informal networks (Blanche, 2021). It was currently unknown how women leaders overcame such challenges.

A thorough analysis of the body of research on female military leaders will be provided in this chapter. It starts by providing the theoretical underpinnings that support the study and summarizing the search method used to find pertinent sources. Women's underrepresentation, organizational factors influencing leadership opportunities, obstacles and challenges women face, coping strategies and tactics employed by women leaders, and the retention and advancement of women in military leadership will all be covered in-depth in a thorough

literature study. The literature synthesis and the gap that justifies this study will be covered in the final section of this chapter.

Peer-reviewed articles published between 2019 and 2023 were the primary focus of a systematic search approach used to find articles for the background study for the literature review. Targeted keywords and search terms about women leaders, gender diversity, and women's presence in the military were used in the search. Women leaders, female military leaders, women in the armed forces, women in military leadership, gender hurdles in the military, women's representation in the military, and inequality in the military were the search phrases the researcher used to find publications. Most publications can be found in databases like JSTOR, PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. Additionally, the researcher incorporated data from pertinent websites. This literature assessment aimed to find historical, contemporary, and pertinent research on women's experiences, difficulties, and contributions to military leadership posts.

Theoretical Frameworks

Three theoretical frameworks guided this study: (a) the glass ceiling theory, (b) social identity theory, and (c) the contingency theory of leadership. This section will discuss the theoretical frameworks of the study by highlighting the tenants of each theory and how they will guide and contribute to the research focused on the military leadership of women.

The Glass-Ceiling Theory

The glass ceiling idea is part of the first theoretical framework that served as the study's direction. According to Alobeid et al. (2020), the glass-ceiling hypothesis looks at the discriminatory behaviors and unseen hurdles that prevent people from advancing to top leadership positions in businesses, especially for women and minorities. The phrase "glass

ceiling" refers to an impenetrable, intangible barrier that stops eligible people from advancing in their jobs past a particular point (Soumya & Sathiyaseelan, 2021). According to the glass-ceiling theory, biases, organizational practices, and institutions impede women from rising to leadership positions. These obstacles might manifest in various ways, such as restricted access to opportunities for personal growth, biases and preconceptions related to gender, a lack of sponsorship and mentorship, exclusion from social networks, and unequal access to resources and assistance (Alobaid et al., 2020). According to the idea, cultural and organizational conventions still perpetuate gender-based stereotypes and prevent women from rising to high leadership positions despite the progress toward gender equality (Grangeiro et al., 2022). Few women hold top positions in organizations that adhere to prevailing societal and organizational conventions that perpetuate gender-based stereotypes, and there is a dearth of female presence in senior jobs. According to Lin et al. (2023), the glass ceiling hypothesis highlights how crucial it is for companies to overcome structural hurdles by implementing practices and policies that support diversity and gender equality. Organizations could incorporate activities like diversity and inclusion programs, mentorship opportunities, and fair pay policies when addressing structural hurdles. By implementing these strategies, organizations can strive to shatter the glass ceiling and foster more inclusive and fair leadership environments.

Previous research (e.g., Castillo, 2020; Markwei et al., 2023; McCristall & Baggaley, 2019) has used the glass-ceiling hypothesis to investigate women's experiences and problems in various organizational contexts, including the military. This theory has been applied by researchers to investigate prejudices and obstacles that prevent women from advancing in their careers, among other reasons for their underrepresentation in leadership roles (Naguib & Madeeha, 2023; Taparua & Lenka, 2022). Previous research using the glass-ceiling theory

examined how organizational practices and policies, such as the availability of flexible work schedules, fair performance reviews, and mentorship programs, affect women's prospects for advancement (Atena & Tiron-Tudor, 2019; Sharma & Kaur, 2019). According to these research findings, overcoming ingrained prejudices and hurdles is critical to fostering more inclusive workplaces where women can flourish in leadership positions.

The glass-ceiling hypothesis served as the basis for this study's investigation of the barriers faced by female leaders seeking to advance to senior leadership roles and how the glass ceiling appears in the U.S. military. The researcher was able to gain insight from this hypothesis regarding the organizational elements that lead to gender differences in military leadership, as well as the tactics employed by female leaders to get past obstacles. It was also helpful in looking into the military's gender equality policies and procedures. Using the glass ceiling theory's observations, the study could suggest policies to foster gender equality and women's advancement in military leadership.

Social Identity Theory

This study was conducted following the social identity theory, which explains how people get their sense of self and identity from belonging to particular groups (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). People classify themselves into social groupings in order to develop a feeling of identity and self-worth. Intergroup connections, behavior, and attitudes are influenced by group membership. According to social identity theory, self-stereotyping, in-group favoring, and social comparison, all contribute to maintaining positive social identities (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). Social identities are shaped by intergroup dynamics, including rivalry and conflict, which lead to prejudiced attitudes and actions to preserve group identity and position.

Social identity theory was a valuable paradigm for comprehending group identity dynamics and how they affect women's experiences and perceptions in leadership roles when researching women leaders in the military (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). It makes it possible to investigate how female leaders identified in the military and the intersections between their social identities as professionals in the military and as women. Furthermore, the idea contributed to understanding how female military commanders formed a sense of identity and community within their gender and military identity groupings. It also emphasized how the social identities of the study participants affected their relationships, attitudes, and behaviors inside the military setting.

Furthermore, social identity theory made the analysis of intergroup dynamics and the interactions between female leaders and other military groups easier. It looked into the interactions between the social identities of female leaders and those of male leaders, subordinates, and other staff members. The thesis identified potential causes of prejudice, discrimination, and intergroup conflict in addition to the tactics used by female leaders to overcome these obstacles.

The Contingency Theory of Leadership

The contingency theory of leadership highlighted the significance of situational elements in defining effective leadership (Shala et al., 2021). Fiedler (2015) asserts that no single, all-purpose leadership approach works in every circumstance. Instead, a leader's efficacy depends on how well their leadership style aligns with the requirements of the circumstances. According to the theory, certain circumstances call for various leadership philosophies, and capable leaders modify their actions and methods of decision-making accordingly (Fiedler, 2015). According to contingency theory, the organizational setting, the nature of the work or aim, and the traits of the

followers are the main situational elements that affect leadership effectiveness (Fiedler, 2015). Leaders must consider their followers' skills, drive, and experience when deciding on the best leadership style. Leadership needs are significantly shaped by task or goal elements, including complexity, organization, and time restrictions (Fiedler, 2015). Ultimately, the efficacy of various leadership philosophies is influenced by the organizational context, which encompasses its culture, structure, and external environment. According to contingency theory, leaders should evaluate the circumstances and select a leadership stance that aligns with the particular situational elements to define the best leadership style (Fiedler, 2015). For instance, a directive leadership style might work better in a task that is extremely routine and regimented. However, a more participative or transformational approach might work better in a creative and complicated task.

When examining the obstacles and difficulties female military leaders face, the contingency theory of leadership was a valuable tool. Understanding the distinct experiences of women in a male-dominated military setting requires taking into account the particular situational aspects that affect leadership effectiveness, which is acknowledged by this theory (Heller, 2019). The researcher was able to more accurately evaluate how various situational elements, such as the traits of followers, the type of tasks or objectives, and the organizational setting, interacted with gender dynamics to influence women's leadership experiences in the military by using the contingency theory. This method made it possible to analyze the obstacles and difficulties that female leaders encountered nuancedly. It gave us a better understanding of these leaders' leadership techniques to overcome difficult situations. For instance, preconceived beliefs about women's aptitude and appropriateness for leadership roles may cause opposition or mistrust for female leaders in the military. By examining various situational elements, the

researcher can investigate how these dynamics influence female leaders' leadership styles and behaviors and how they modify their strategies to surmount gender-based obstacles.

Alternative Perspectives

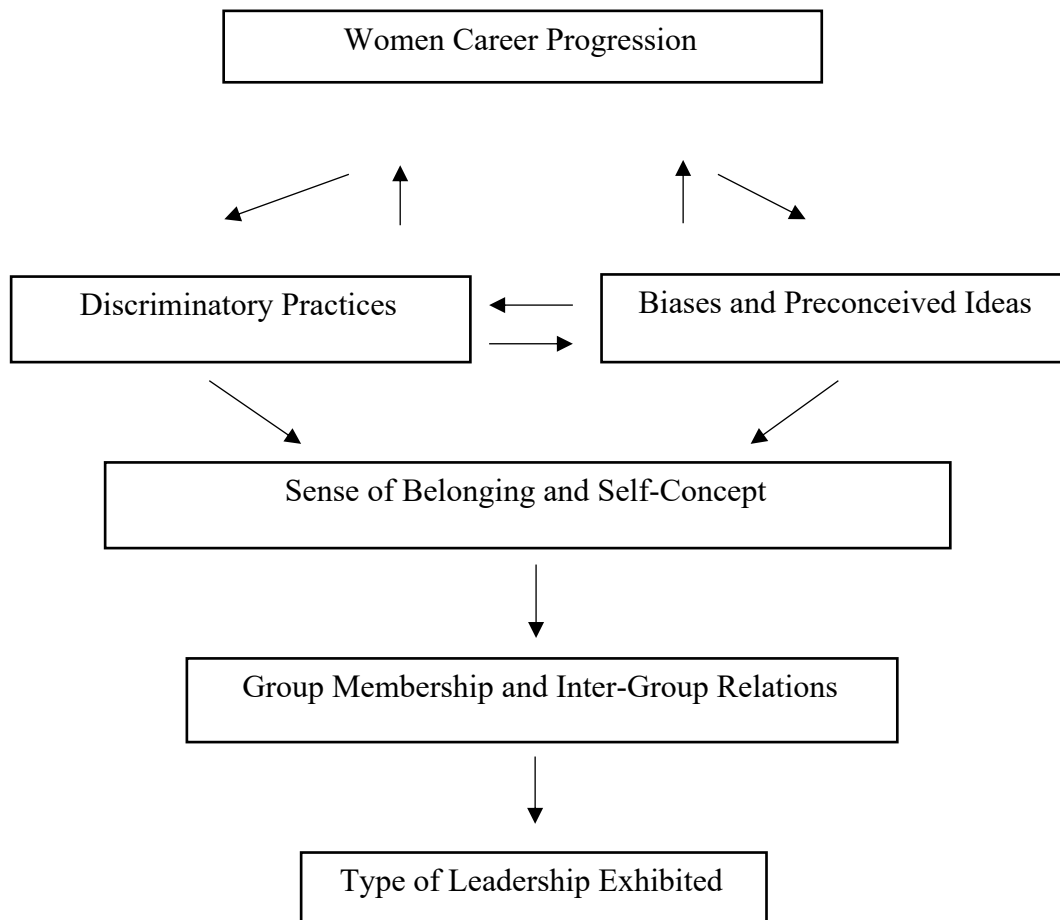
Although the existing framework emphasizes the difficulties and obstacles experienced by female leaders and the significance of gender equality, it is crucial to recognize that there are opposing viewpoints and criticisms. According to Taparia and Lenka (2022), among other scholars, the glass ceiling theory may oversimplify complex processes that contribute to gender inequality in leadership roles. Various points of view emphasize how overlapping identities—like race, class, and sexual orientation—affect prospects for career success. Furthermore, some scholars have contended that the "glass ceiling" metaphor falls short of capturing the subtler and more complex discrimination women experience in workplace settings (e.g., Ryan, 2023). Similarly, social identity theory has drawn criticism despite helping comprehend group dynamics and how social categorization affects leadership. According to some earlier studies (e.g., Hogan & Sherman, 2020), the theory might ignore individual variations within social groups and the impact of personal traits and competencies on leadership outcomes. The significance of considering both human and social elements in leadership studies is emphasized by alternative viewpoints.

Furthermore, there have been criticisms of the contingency theory of leadership. According to earlier studies (e.g., Monehin & Diers-Lawson, 2022), the theory might ignore leadership's dynamic and interactive nature and how it affects contextual circumstances. Various points of view contend that effective leadership entails constant communication and adjustment between leaders and followers and adjusting leadership philosophies to contextual elements. Incorporating these contrasting viewpoints and possible criticisms into the research can improve

the rigor of the academic work and advance a thorough comprehension of the theories being studied. It will motivate scholars to investigate novel study directions, enhance current frameworks, and consider the interaction of various elements that influence gender differences and leadership consequences.

Integrating the Theories

The integration of the glass ceiling theory, social identity theory, and the contingency theory of leadership provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the experiences of women leaders in the military and the barriers they encounter. These theories complement each other in highlighting the different aspects of women's leadership journeys and the interplay between individual, social, and situational factors. By integrating these three theories, the researcher can develop a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of women leaders in the military. The glass ceiling theory highlights structural barriers (Soumya & Sathiyaseelan, 2021); social identity theory explores the impact of gender identity and social dynamics (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019), while the contingency theory considers the situational factors that influence leadership effectiveness (Heller, 2019). This integrative approach will help explain the complex and multifaceted nature of women's leadership experiences, enabling the development of targeted interventions, policies, and practices to address the challenges and promote gender equality in military leadership. The integration of the three theories can be seen in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1*Integration of the Theories*

As highlighted in Figure 1 below, the three frameworks work interchangeably. For example, a woman's career progression depends on specific effects of the glass ceiling that include experienced organizational discriminatory practices, biases, and preconceived ideas, creating barriers to their advancement. Then, because of these experiences, women build a sense of belonging (or lack thereof) and a self-concept based on the social identity theory. These experiences of belonging or lack of belonging create a self-concept that can place them into group membership and inter-group relations, highlighting the type of leadership they will exhibit

in their role. It is important to remember that because of the glass-ceiling effect and male-dominant military structures, discriminatory practices could prohibit women from selecting certain leadership styles that are not typically approved in military environments, such as transformational leadership (Castillo, 2020).

Review of the Research

This section of the study will review the literature concerning the phenomenon being studied. Therefore, this section will begin with an overview of the historical overview of women in the military, then highlight studies that have explored women in leadership, different organizational factors that affect women's leadership opportunities, women's experiences of underrepresentation in the military, and gender-based studies on military leadership. The researcher will then conclude this review with a discussion on barriers and challenges that women have faced when working in the military, what strategies they have used to cope, and how the military has been working to retain and promote women in leadership positions among their ranks.

Politics and the Underrepresentation of Female Leadership in the Military

The participation of women in the U.S. armed forces stands as a political issue due to the interplay of societal norms, policy decisions, and gender equality concerns. The historical association of the military with male dominance and combat roles traditionally reserved for men has engendered a reevaluation of these norms, triggering a broader examination of gender roles across both the military and society (Williamson, 2023). Policy formulations and legislative enactments have wielded substantial influence over the extent of women's involvement in the armed forces. Instances such as alterations to combat exclusion policies, the integration of women into previously male-centric roles, and the pursuit of equitable access to leadership

positions are emblematic of these policy changes (Campuzano, 2019). As such, lawmakers and policymakers have become essential in these deliberations, rendering the issue inherently political.

Moreover, these deliberations can encompass a balance between national security and military preparedness. Concerns have arisen about the potential impacts on unit cohesion, combat effectiveness, and operational readiness as the armed forces continue to diversify (Yarnell et al., 2023). Public sentiment and societal norms further compel politicians and policymakers to navigate shifting attitudes toward women's roles, influenced by the broader cultural values of inclusivity and the imperative for adequate representation within the military (Yarnell et al., 2023). Additionally, allocating resources for gender-specific training, facilities, healthcare, and support services become an arena where political considerations intersect. Finally, combining this discourse with broader civil rights discussions adds another dimension, highlighting questions of equal opportunities, the transformation of traditionally male-dominated fields, and removing institutional barriers (Yarnell et al., 2023). This complex interplay of factors renders the issue of women's roles in the military multifaceted and deeply entrenched within politics, mirroring the evolving stance on gender equality and the readiness of the armed forces.

Historical Overview of Women in the Military

The historical narrative of women's engagement in the military reveals an evolution across various branches of service. Beginning with adopting male identities to participate in combat during the Revolutionary War era, women's involvement expanded to encompass pivotal roles as nurses and support personnel during the Civil War (Darden et al., 2019). A transformative or watershed event occurred because more women started participating in the

workforce in various capacities during the First World War (Ferragamo, 2021). Dedicated women's branches such as the Women's Army Corps (WAC), Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) for the Navy, Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), and the Marine Corps Women's Reserve (MCWR) were established during World War II, continuing this forward momentum (Ferragamo, 2021). During this time, about 350,000 women helped with the military effort. The role of women in the military became more permanent after WWII, as policies were gradually adjusted to increase their participation (Reis & Menezes, 2020). From the 1980s onward, new policies enabled women to serve in combat capacities, breaking down long-standing restrictions and radically altering the conventional roles they held in the military (Blanchard & Rodrik, 2021). The number of women serving in each United States Armed Forces branch varies. The Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps percentages are around 18%, 20%, 22%, and 9%, respectively (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). Despite these advances, women still face obstacles in leadership and specialized roles, as these percentages vary by rank and role.

Women and Leadership

Academics and the public have paid close attention to the gender gap in leadership roles. There has been progress toward gender equality, yet inequality exists in several fields. Thomas (2019) states that women are still underrepresented in senior executive roles in most businesses. For instance, according to a Wade (2021) study, the percentage of female CEOs at Fortune 500 businesses was just 6.4% in 2020. In a similar vein, women still encounter obstacles in positions of political leadership. Women comprised only 22.8% of cabinet members in U.N. member states in 2023 (U.N. Women, 2023). The continuing gender imbalance in leadership representation is still evident in these figures.

Experienced Challenges and Opportunities

Women leaders have many problems and possibilities. Women confront hurdles and opportunities in the workplace while seeking leadership positions. The researcher will next explore women leaders' underrepresentation and how a lack of role models and mentorship drives it. Women endure prejudices, preconceptions, and gender-based discrimination in the workplace, according to Shukla (2019). Women face systemic constraints like the glass ceiling that hinder their leadership opportunities (Srivastava & Nalawade, 2023). According to Patel et al. (2020), women executives may have limited networks, mentorship, and decision-making power.

These experiences can complicate women's leadership, requiring a closer look at their career paths (Diehl et al., 2020). However, despite continued setbacks in recent decades, progress has continued to be made in addressing challenges related to women's representation in leadership roles (Yarram & Adapa, 2021). Laursen and Austin (2020) reported that initiatives promoting gender equality, inclusive policies, and organizational efforts have contributed to advancements. The increased presence of women in leadership has been made possible by putting diversity and inclusion initiatives in place, mentorship and sponsorship opportunities, and gender-balanced recruitment tactics (Salazar & Molinem, 2023). Additionally, knowledge of gender equality has been raised through advocacy campaigns and women's empowerment movements, which have changed public attitudes and expectations.

The Underrepresentation of Women

Numerous variables that continue to contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership posts have been highlighted by prior studies. Stereotypes and gender prejudice, however, constituted the primary obstacle. According to Tabassum and Nayak (2021),

preconceptions and gender biases support the idea that women are less capable or appropriate for leadership roles than men. These prejudices may affect how women's leadership qualities are assessed and viewed, limiting their chances of promotion (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021).

Furthermore, assumptions that link male traits to leadership can make it difficult for women to defy conventional gender norms and expectations (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). According to Mousa et al. (2021), women's restricted access to resources and development opportunities is another critical obstacle. Accessing mentorship, sponsorship, and training programs—all essential for job advancement—may be difficult for women (Rabinowitz et al., 2021). Because these formative experiences frequently aid in the development of skills and the extension of networks, this opportunity difference may make the gender gap in leadership roles worse.

Dashper (2020) and Gumus (2019) discussed the value of mentorship programs and how they help professionals grow by offering direction, support, and insightful advice from seasoned executives. Sadly, women who have difficulty finding mentors cannot obtain pertinent guidance or assistance navigating the complexities of their particular companies or industries.

The Importance of Role Models and Mentorship Opportunities

One reason there are not enough mentors for aspiring female leaders is the dearth of strong female role models in top leadership roles. The lack of related role models who have surmounted comparable problems and encountered the particular difficulties women face in leadership roles can demoralize and impede the advancement of budding female leaders (Kuntz & Livingston, 2020). According to Margolis et al. (2021), networking possibilities are negatively impacted by a lack of mentorship opportunities, as mentorship is also essential for career progression. According to the authors, networking enables people to increase the number of people they know in the workplace, gain access to new opportunities, and form bonds with

influential people. It is noteworthy that women may face obstacles to networking, such as being shut out of informal networks or social gatherings where their male coworkers predominate. Women's visibility can be restricted, and their career advancement is impeded by a lack of inclusion in these networks, which frequently provide pathways to leadership positions. According to Margolis et al. (2021), proactive steps are necessary to address the dearth of networking and mentoring possibilities. Organizations can establish formal mentorship programs emphasizing diversity and inclusivity to guarantee that aspiring women leaders have access to mentors who can offer advice specific to their situation (Turner-Moffatt, 2019).

Furthermore, promoting female mentorship among senior executives can create a nurturing atmosphere and aid in closing the gender gap in leadership. Developing inclusive platforms and events celebrating diversity can also improve networking chances (Harris, 2022). Organizations can organize networking events to unite women leaders, build relationships, and offer a forum to exchange experiences and ideas to generate significant networking possibilities. Furthermore, leaders can create networking opportunities by connecting women with influential people in their organizations and sectors, broadening their professional networks.

Organizational Factors Affecting Women's Leadership Opportunities

Individual attributes do not solely influence gender equality in leadership but are profoundly shaped by organizational factors. This section will highlight the importance of understanding organizational dynamics that enable or impede women's advancement into leadership roles. The researcher will discuss organizational culture, how leadership development, training programs, and opportunities are hindered due to culture, and how organizations should address challenges imposed on women.

Organizational Culture

According to Campuzano (2019), women's leadership opportunities are influenced by company culture. An organization's culture sets the standard for gender equality, inclusivity, and transparency. Women's leadership advancement is supported by cultures that emphasize diversity, inclusivity, and gender equality (Warren et al., 2019). On the other hand, societies that uphold prejudice, stereotyping, and discriminatory acts erect significant obstacles in the way of women seeking positions of leadership. Furthermore, firms must implement fair policies and procedures to foster an inclusive atmosphere, encouraging women to aspire to leadership roles (Mullin et al., 2021). Since over 80% of women encounter at least one systemic obstacle at work, the World Health Organization (2021) stated that these policies should be created to eliminate biases and systemic barriers that impede women's advancement and restrict their access to leadership possibilities. Recruitment procedures are one crucial area where fair policies are required. Employers ought to implement tactics that draw in a varied pool of applicants and guarantee an impartial and equitable hiring procedure (Ghani et al., 2022; Helman et al., 2020). This involves using blind recruitment strategies, in which candidate data that might disclose gender or other demographic details is kept hidden throughout the preliminary screening phases. Organizations can lessen the effects of implicit biases and encourage a more equal hiring process by concentrating only on qualifications, abilities, and experience (Carter et al., 2020).

Additionally, companies can implement family-friendly policies that facilitate work and personal life integration and help women manage their obligations to both (Ko, 2022). This includes implementing flexible work arrangements that cater to different demands and situations, enabling staff members to customize their work schedules and locations to suit their needs. Furthermore, companies should implement gender-neutral parental leave policies that give moms and dads enough time off to fulfill their caring obligations (Almeida, 2022). Organizations can

promote an environment of inclusion and gender equality by challenging cultural conventions and assumptions surrounding gender roles and providing equal opportunities for parental involvement (Kulkarni et al., 2021).

Women Leadership Development, Training Programs, and Opportunities

Access to programs for training and leadership development is another key. Women's chances to take on leadership roles depend on their ability to access programs for training and development (Gedro et al., 2020). Organizations should fund programs that provide women with the abilities, know-how, and competencies needed for successful leadership. Programs for sponsorship and mentoring that are specifically designed to fulfill the requirements of women can provide priceless networking opportunities, support, and direction, which will help women develop professionally inside organizational hierarchies (Brizuela et al., 2023).

As previously discussed, structural barriers within organizational frameworks also constitute prominent factors that curtail women's leadership opportunities. Hierarchical structures and the continuous existence of glass ceilings act as formidable obstacles, impeding women's upward mobility and inhibiting their progression within organizational hierarchies (Galsanjimed & Sekiguchi, 2023). The pronounced concentration of power and decision-making authority within a select few perpetuates women's underrepresentation in upper leadership echelons. Furthermore, the absence of clearly delineated career development and advancement pathways hampers women's progress, exposing them to limited opportunities for skill acquisition and impeding their prospects of promotion (Van Helden et al., 2023). These structural impediments necessitate comprehensive strategies to dismantle barriers and cultivate an environment conducive to women's leadership growth and advancement within organizations.

Addressing Challenges in the Workforce

To address these issues, organizations need to take proactive steps that promote diversity and gender equality. Creating an inclusive workplace culture where women are given equal opportunity and diversity is highly appreciated (Warren et al., 2019) is critical. Establishing impartial and open promotion procedures, incorporating sponsorship and mentoring programs tailored to women's unique needs, and guaranteeing equal access to leadership development and training programs are essential. In order to correct structural injustices, organizations can also aggressively combat prejudices and discriminatory practices by launching extensive awareness campaigns, offering diversity training programs, and putting strong accountability systems in place. Organizations may foster a climate that supports gender equality, gives women agency, and helps them rise into leadership positions by implementing these proactive measures.

Women's Underrepresentation in the Military

The underrepresentation of women in military institutions is an urgent problem that needs careful analysis and calculated actions. Notwithstanding advancements in gender equality, obstacles prevent women from assuming leadership positions in the armed forces (Persson & Sundevall, 2019). Throughout history, integrating women into military institutions has been progressive and ongoing. According to Bridges et al. (2023), there are gender biases and prejudices that affect how women are able to perform specific tasks and have an impact on military organizations, which men have historically dominated. As a result, these dynamics impact essential areas, including hiring, promotion, and professional progression, limiting women's chances to assume leadership roles (Deng et al., 2022). According to Do and Samuels (2021), masculine standards have influenced the hierarchical structure and organizational culture of the military, which creates an atmosphere that impedes women's advancement into leadership roles. This section will address the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within

military settings, the significance of strategic solutions, and how military organizations' insufficient recruitment attempts might exacerbate this issue.

The Importance of Strategic Interventions

Specific strategic interventions are necessary to address the challenges of female leadership in the military and foster women's representation and advancement. Savić (2011) reported that implementing gender-sensitive policies and practices is crucial. Implementing gender-sensitive policies and practices could include revisiting physical fitness standards to account for physiological differences and ensuring equal opportunities for training and advancement (Wood et al., 2017). Moreover, Greco and von Hlatky (2020) argued that creating a culture of respect, diversity, and inclusivity is imperative to combat discrimination and harassment. The authors argued that diversity considerations are currently underdeveloped in military organizations, making it essential to redefine professionalism to include respect, diversity, and inclusivity in all practices, not only in the organization's culture but also in how it is taught to all armed forces members. In addition, Goodman et al. (2013) reported that military organizations must build support networks, mentorship programs, and leadership development initiatives tailored to women's needs so that they can provide guidance and opportunities for growth. For example, the authors reported that military leaders who are mothers are provided with little support; they require flexible family care plans and funds to help transport their children. Without these support networks, women leaders will find it more challenging to be successful in their roles.

Recruitment Efforts

Recruitment efforts are another leading cause of the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within the military. Yeung et al. (2017) reported that military institutions

must lead recruitment efforts to attract a diverse pool of talented women; providing family-friendly policies and improving work-life balance initiatives are vital steps toward creating an inclusive military environment. The authors also reported that recruitment efforts for women should demonstrate a larger variety of roles that can be applied for, increase advertising that directly engages women, and make recruitment processes more seamless and accessible. Engaging in proactive outreach and educational campaigns to challenge gender biases and stereotypes can also contribute to changing perceptions and promoting women's leadership in the military (Jester, 2021). Finally, fostering strong leadership commitment and accountability in driving gender equality initiatives is essential for sustainable progress (Boyce & Herd, 2003).

These instances of underrepresentation lead to a lack of female leaders in the military. Therefore, the underrepresentation of women in military leadership positions can be attributed to historical gender biases, stereotypes limiting their suitability for combat roles, physical requirements associated with masculinity, hierarchical organizational structures perpetuating marginalization, limited access to tailored mentorship and sponsorship, unique challenges related to family responsibilities, and the presence of discrimination and biases within the military institution.

Gender-Based Studies on Military Leadership

Gender-based studies focusing on military leadership have provided valuable insights into women's unique experiences and challenges in leadership roles within military organizations. For example, a study conducted by Castillo (2020) investigated the specific barriers encountered by women leaders in the military and explored the strategies they employed to overcome these challenges. The author reported that women in leadership positions in the military experience barriers because of the male-dominated culture. The author reported:

To successfully gain leadership positions, they [women] needed specific personal and professional qualities, namely effective leadership style, emotional intelligence, outstanding professional work ethic, and resilience, as well as social capital accumulated through strong interpersonal skills, excellent conflict resolution skills, and diverse alliances; female leaders must take risks, be high achievers, and be persistent, resilient, assertive, self-conscious decision-makers, and have effective people management skills to retain their positions (Castillo, 2020, p.2).

Castillo's (2020) research underscored the pervasive impact of gender biases, stereotypes, and organizational culture on women's opportunities for leadership advancement, as demonstrated by the level of excellence in skills that must be required. The findings from Castillo's study emphasize the urgency of addressing these barriers to foster gender equality and inclusivity in military leadership positions.

Another critical study by Erwin (2020) focused on the gendered experiences of female leaders in the military. The authors completed a qualitative study to obtain the perceptions and experiences of female leaders. The authors found that although the study participants reported that military organizations appear to be gender-neutral, they often do not appear to support pathways to leadership and provide many barriers for women to be successful. The participants in Erwin's study reported that no policies or initiatives would likely solve the problem of gender bias in the military, as to address this appropriately, the military culture would need a complete upheaval. Erwin discussed how gender misconduct is experienced by women in the military and stated:

...experiences with gendered misconduct suggest it is likely more pervasive than data may belie as concerns over-reporting, negative consequences and backlash, and support

remain and make combatting such misconduct challenging despite recent progress and initiatives (Erwin, 2020, p. 1).

Furthermore, research has explored the impact of gender on leadership styles and effectiveness within the military context. Larsson and Alvinus (2020) explored differences in leadership approaches between men and women and challenged traditional assumptions and stereotypes. The authors discussed how leadership styles in the military are typically based upon a command-oriented perspective; men in this environment typically are more transactional or authoritative due to the military's dominance of males and from an organizational culture perspective. However, Larsson and Alvinus reported findings of their study that indicated that women who work in female-dominated fields tend to display developmental and conventional-positive leadership behavior. In male-dominated fields, women tend to follow a more authoritative nature. By understanding women's unique contributions and perspectives to military leadership, the authors recommended that organizations enhance their effectiveness and create more inclusive and diverse leadership teams (Larsson & Alvinus, 2020).

Barriers and Challenges Faced by Women in the Military

Women face numerous military obstacles that can prevent them from rising to leadership positions. The researcher will discuss the obstacles and difficulties that women experience in this part. The researcher will begin by reviewing how discrimination and gender biases contribute to the obstacles that women encounter, the few possibilities for job progression that women in the military have, and how the culture of the military may be a significant obstacle to career advancement.

Gender Biases and Discrimination

Women's obstacles are exacerbated by discrimination and gender bias within military institutions. According to Dichter and True (2015), women in the military may be allocated to jobs or occupational specialties typically held by men, which limits their ability to develop in their careers. The study done by the authors centered on the career trajectories of female veterans and the factors that led to their early military discharge. After conducting a comprehensive qualitative investigation including 35 female veterans, the authors discovered that discrimination and experiences based on gender were the primary causes of their departure from the military. Interpersonal aggression, a lack of support, harassment, the need for caring, and the inability to develop in one's work were among these situations.

Additionally, stereotypes, prejudices, and implicit biases prevent women from advancing in their careers and perpetuate gender inequality in the military, according to Reis and Menezes (2020). These prejudices show themselves in various ways, including selective assessments and advancement procedures, gendered norms, and restricted access to esteemed jobs. These prejudices have the effect of creating an unfair playing field, where women are frequently treated unfairly, receive little respect, and are skeptical, which prevents them from moving up the military hierarchy.

Limited Opportunities for Career Advancement

Women in the military also often encounter limited opportunities for career advancement due to occupational segregation (Asch et al., 2012). Asch et al. (2012) reported that women are traditionally left out of specific roles and occupational specialties, such as combat-related positions, as they have been traditionally associated with men. The authors also reported that military women have lower promotion rates than their White male counterparts. This highlights how occupational segregation continues to occur within military environments. Occupational

segregation restricts women's access to leadership positions and perpetuates the underrepresentation of women in critical areas of military operations (Asch et al., 2012). Therefore, breaking down these occupational barriers and increasing gender diversity across military occupational fields is essential to promoting women's leadership opportunities and ensuring a more equitable distribution of responsibilities.

Segal and Lane (2016) reported that another barrier includes family responsibilities. Deployments, frequent relocations, and extended separations from family can create significant difficulties in maintaining a healthy work-life balance for women leaders in the military (Segal & Lane, 2016). The authors reported that women are more affected by family responsibilities due to the integration of family life, their military career, and the intersections of roles they play, more so than men. In conjunction with family responsibilities, the military perpetuates a lack of family-friendly policies, such as accessible childcare options and flexible work arrangements, further exacerbating women leaders' challenges. Addressing these work-life balance issues is crucial to retaining talented women and providing them with the necessary support to navigate their military careers while fulfilling their familial obligations.

The Culture and Climate of the Military

Military organizations' culture and climate also play a pivotal role in shaping women's experiences in leadership positions. Linehagen (2018) reported that certain cultural norms, traditions, and the inherently male-dominated nature of military institutions create a hostile environment that restricts women's progress. For example, the author examined female leaders' perceptions in the Swedish Armed Forces and found that many females reported that they experienced gender inequality because "the military has so far failed to integrate women into the organization and promote gender equality fully" (Linehagen, 2018, p. 21). Conducting a

qualitative study, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with female military personnel and found some interesting results. The results of the study concluded that the women reported that it is essential to demonstrate social competence as a military leader, as well as to:

To have a strong will and be able to work hard, change the tempo quickly, and have the capacity to "see" every individual. A typical military person inspires confidence and respect, takes responsibility, has high moral standards, and collaborates well (Linehagen, 2018, p. 7).

In addition, the participants of Linehagen's (2018) study reported that they want to feel needed within military organizations and must distance themselves from the label of "female military person." Another interesting finding was that most of the participants in the study reported joining the military because it was male dominated. In this instance, the participants reported that they saw this as a challenge or were tired of their previous role of working in a female-dominated field. However, when working in a male-dominated field, women tend to experience difficulties conforming to masculine norms and exclusion from informal networks. Sasson-Levy (2003) purported that the pressure to conform to masculine norms, exclusion from informal networks and decision-making processes, and the lack of role models and mentorship opportunities contribute to the challenges faced by women. Therefore, fostering a culture that is inclusive and supportive of diversity while also promoting gender equality is essential to overcoming barriers, allowing women leaders to be provided with resources to be successful within their chosen military career paths.

Strategies and Coping Mechanisms Used by Military Women Leaders

Military women leaders face distinctive challenges that require developing specific strategies and coping mechanisms to excel in their roles. Understanding and harnessing these

strategies can foster an inclusive and empowering environment within military organizations. Previous research has depicted specific coping mechanisms used by women leaders when working in the military: (a) the building of networks and support systems, (b) developing assertiveness skills and resilience, (c) leveraging mentorship opportunities, and (d) cultivating self-care practices.

Building Networks and Support Systems

Military women leaders often build networks and support systems to overcome challenges (Cache', 2023). Research conducted by Vermeij (2020) concluded that by cultivating professional relationships and establishing connections with peers, mentors, and sponsors, women leaders in the military could access valuable guidance, support, and opportunities. The author reported that women would use either informal or formal levels of support if offered; however, they stated that these levels of support typically fall short, leaving women with limited opportunities for mentorship or sponsorship. This makes it more difficult for women in military leadership positions because they face multiple taboos and stigmas within the military culture. Vermeij (2020) reported that these taboos and stigmas of gender can lead to discrimination, inappropriate behavior, and sexual harassment. Many men in military environments do not accept women's leadership (Verneij, 2020). To demonstrate the need for females to provide support within the military, other studies have demonstrated that strong networks and support systems increase career satisfaction, skill development, and access to information and resources (Mancini et al., 2020).

Developing Assertiveness Skills and Resilience

Assertiveness and resilience are vital attributes for military women leaders because they must navigate a hierarchical and often male-dominated environment while overcoming gender

biases and stereotypes (Castillo, 2020). Castillo (2020) highlighted the importance of assertiveness training and developing communication skills to advocate for their ideas, address challenges, and negotiate effectively. The author reported that this is typically followed when female leaders in the military utilize transformational leadership. Transformational leadership can help women leaders in the military cultivate strong and positive relationships, increase conflict resolution skills, and develop strong interpersonal skills (Castillo, 2020). It is important to note that transformational leadership is not a commonly used leadership style within military environments, as authoritative leadership is more likely to be used.

Leveraging Mentorship Opportunities

A critical factor in the success of military women leaders is mentoring. Prior studies have demonstrated that, particularly for military women leaders, having mentors and sponsors can offer direction, career advice, advocacy, and access to critical networks (Randolph et al., 2019). According to Randolph Jr. and Nisbett (2019), sponsors actively support and push for their mentees' progress, particularly for female and minority officers, while mentors offer support and direction to their mentees in the military. Organizations in the military can organize sponsorship and mentoring programs to support the growth and progress of female leaders. Additionally, mentorship has been shown to boost women's success and career advancement in the military (Waruszynski et al., 2019). The authors stated that strengthening military skills and operational performance might be achieved by offering women leaders in the armed forces an appropriate mentorship program.

Cultivating Self-Care Practices

It is imperative that women leaders in the military practice self-care techniques. Lippy et al. (2022) reported that effective self-care practices are essential for military women leaders as

they help them maintain their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. The authors highlighted the importance of self-care practices for women, primarily because:

Maintaining relationships and not feeling isolated is essential, yet women are almost always in the minority. It is also not uncommon for women to report constantly feeling as if they are being watched... (Lippy et al., 2022, p. 269).

Because of gender biases, this highlights the need for women to ensure that they participate in appropriate self-care tactics.

To succeed, military women leaders use various coping techniques and strategies. In order to overcome the particular challenges they encounter in military settings, women leaders construct support networks and processes, become more forceful and resilient, use sponsorship and mentoring opportunities, and prioritize self-care. Acknowledging and fostering these leaders' ingenuity and resilience increases personal success and military organizations' general effectiveness and variety.

Retention and Promotion of Women in Military Leadership

Maintaining and elevating women into leadership roles in military situations is essential to attaining gender parity and improving organizational efficiency. According to Castillo (2020), women still encounter several obstacles in pursuing career progression and retention in these professions, even in the face of notable advancements. Previous studies have demonstrated the significance of military organizations supporting programs that center on specific issues to retain and advance women in military leadership. Developing mentorship and leadership opportunities, overcoming organizational impediments, gender biases and stereotypes, work-life balance, supportive policies, and mentoring are some of these subjects.

Addressing Organizational Barriers and Gender Biases and Stereotypes

Women in military leadership are hampered in their advancement and retention by many organizational hurdles. These obstacles include gender prejudices, a lack of representation, a lack of mentorship opportunities, and a lack of work-life balance-promoting policies, according to Boyce and Herd (2003) and Matheson and Lyle (2017). A comprehensive strategy that includes organizational culture reform, focused leadership development programs, and inclusive policies that reflect the particular needs and experiences of women in the military is needed to address these challenges (Matheson & Lyle, 2017). As this review has already made clear, gender prejudices and stereotypes impede women's advancement into leadership positions in the military and perpetuate inequality (Larson & Alvinus, 2020). Biases can take many forms, including partial performance reviews, restricted access to complex tasks, and constrained hiring and advancement procedures (Pazy & Oron, 2001). According to Larson and Alvinus (2020), eliminating these prejudices necessitates increasing awareness, training on unconscious bias, and ensuring that processes for promotion and evaluation are open, equitable, and transparent so that potential and merit are recognized and rewarded without discriminatory practices.

Developing Mentorship and Leadership Opportunities

Military organizations should give primary importance to expanding their mentorship programs while simultaneously addressing issues of racism and preconceived notions about women in leadership positions. Waruszynski et al. (2019) assert that mentoring programs are vital in retaining and promoting women in military leadership positions. Mentorship allows women to develop their leadership skills and navigate the obstacles of pursuing military careers. It also offers them guidance, assistance, and prospects for advancement (Waruszynski et al., 2019). By implementing structured mentorship programs that pair experienced leaders with ambitious female leaders, this marginalized group can cultivate a supportive environment and

enhance recognition of their capabilities and potential. Female military leaders require both personal and professional support. Previous research has shown that women in military leadership positions experience a greater impact from challenges related to balancing their jobs and personal lives (e.g., Kalpna & Malhotra, 2019). According to Dimiceli et al. (2010), relationships can be strained, and deployments, frequent moves, and long work hours might hinder career growth. To attain gender parity in the military and enhance the retention of female leaders, the military must adopt policies that foster a healthy equilibrium between work and personal life. Such policies include flexible work schedules, readily accessible childcare, and parental leave. It is imperative to remember that a culture shift is necessary to effectively tackle the problem of retaining and promoting women leaders in the military.

Gender-based harassment and discrimination prohibit women from obtaining military leadership posts (Brown et al., 2021). Cheema and Jamal (2022) say gender-based discrimination causes unequal benefits and disadvantages. Foley et al. (2022) define harassment as a gender-based offense or hostility. Morral et al. (2015) found that military leadership harassment and discrimination damage women's well-being, work satisfaction, and career development. As to Morral et al. (2015), gender-based harassment and discrimination have a substantial adverse impact on women's prospects for leadership in the military. The variables encompass reduced retention rates, limited prospects for professional progression, diminished job contentment, and elevated attrition rates among female executives. The unfavorable impacts have been found to restrict the capacity of female leaders to effectively employ their perspectives, talents, and skills in military leadership positions (Castillo, 2020).

Supportive Policies and Work-Life Balance

To address gender-based harassment and discrimination, military organizations must adopt a multifaceted strategy that promotes gender equality and fosters respectful work environments. This entails creating strong reporting systems, training on diversity, inclusion, and polite behavior, and creating and executing extensive rules and procedures that specify zero tolerance for harassment and discrimination (Castillo, 2020). Thus, raising awareness and educating people about harassment and discrimination based on gender is essential. Training programs can improve comprehension, dispel prejudices, foster empathy, and give military members the information and abilities to recognize and deal with discriminatory actions within a military culture (Daniel et al., 2019). These programs should be directed toward all military ranks to encourage a shared commitment to equality and respect. The military needs to keep up its efforts to hold those responsible for harassment or discrimination based on gender.

Military organizations must set up fair and transparent investigative procedures to promptly address complaints. Additionally, they must offer victims support mechanisms like peer support networks, counseling services, and confidential reporting channels. These mechanisms are essential for empowering victims and ensuring their well-being (Daniel et al., 2019). We may address cases of harassment and discrimination based on gender by supporting efforts that promote diversity and inclusion. Thus, encouraging diverse representation, developing sponsorship and mentorship programs, and cultivating an inclusive workplace culture can aid in breaking down barriers, dispelling myths, and offering equitable opportunities for women to progress in leadership roles (Daniel et al., 2019). As a result, the gap in the literature supporting the viability of this investigation has been brought to light by this literature review. For instance, the obstacles and difficulties women face in leadership roles within the military are currently recognized. It is currently unknown how they see these obstacles, their methods to get

past them, and their perspectives on leadership in a military setting where men predominate. Thus, by conducting semi-structured interviews with ten women who are currently employed as leaders in the military, it will be possible to gain a better understanding of what it is like for women to lead in the military and how they overcome obstacles in a setting that is biased against women and dominated by men.

Literature Review Synthesis

This section provides an overview of key findings and identifies a gap in current research that makes this study viable. Although progress has been made in understanding women's experiences in the military and leadership roles, previous literature depicts the need for continued research in the field of military leadership. It is crucial to continue exploring the intersectional dynamics of gender, race, and ethnicity in military leadership and how the organizational culture and systemic barriers can influence women's advancement.

This review has depicted previous research investigating the experiences of women leaders working in military organizations. The review has discussed specific insights into women leaders' challenges, the barriers they can experience when working toward leadership opportunities, and how the military is imperative. It has provided insights into the unique challenges women face in achieving leadership positions and the need for military organizations to create inclusive and supportive environments for their women leaders. While existing studies have identified different challenges faced by women military leaders, there is a need for research that examines the experiences of women from diverse backgrounds, including racial and ethnic minorities. This intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how multiple dimensions of identity intersect and influence individuals' experiences and opportunities. Therefore, by examining challenges faced by women of different racial and ethnic backgrounds

in the military, future research can highlight any complexities of gender dynamics and the need for inclusive practices that address the specific needs of all women leaders. To address intersectionality in this current study, the researcher will ensure that he obtains a sample of female military leaders from diverse backgrounds, including different racial and ethnic groups.

Furthermore, another gap identified within the literature included the limited exploration of any influences that organizational culture and systemic barriers had on women's leadership within military organizations. Previous research has identified individual-level factors, such as leadership skills and self-efficacy, while focusing less on the broader organizational context. Understanding how organizational culture, the implementation of policies and practices, and how they either support or hinder women's advancement is essential. Military organizations can utilize this information to develop effective strategies that enhance gender equality in military leadership. Therefore, in summary, previous literature has demonstrated the progress made in understanding the challenges and experiences of women in military leadership roles. However, it also underscored an existing research gap highlighting the intersectionality of gender, race, and ethnicity and the influence of organizational culture and systemic barriers on women leaders' advancement opportunities. By addressing these gaps through this current study, a more comprehensive understanding of women's leadership in the military can be experienced, and information could assist military organizations in developing evidence-based strategies that promote gender equality and inclusivity.

Summary

Only 18.4% of women occupied top Army jobs in January 2023, compared to 81.6% of men. The Air Force has 22.7% female officers, the Navy 20.4%, and the Marines 9.1% (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). Despite the Armed Forces' mentorship programs, diversity

training, and support networks to address gender disparities and women's challenges (Bridges et al., 2023), women's progress toward senior leadership roles remains hindered. The topic of inadequate female representation in the U.S. military is the focus of the study. This qualitative phenomenological study examines how U.S. military women leaders overcame challenges to reach top leadership positions, in addition to their opinions and experiences. Prior research (Doan & Portillo, 2022; Jean-Louis, 2021) has identified several challenges that impede the advancement of women to senior leadership roles within the military. The challenges mentioned above encompass entrenched gender bias and preconceptions within the military culture, preconceived notions regarding women's capabilities and leadership styles, a scarcity of mentors and role models, limited networking prospects, and exclusion from informal networks (Blanche, 2021). How female leaders surmount these challenges remains elusive.

This chapter provided an exhaustive examination of the corpus of research on female military leaders. It commenced with a discussion of the theoretical foundations underlying the analysis and describing the search strategy employed to locate relevant sources. Two theoretical frameworks were the social identity theory and the glass ceiling hypothesis. Subsequently, the researcher conducted an extensive literature review encompassing various subjects, including the underrepresentation of women, the impact of organizational factors on leadership opportunities, the barriers and difficulties encountered by women leaders, the coping mechanisms and strategies implemented by women leaders, and the initiatives undertaken by military organizations to retain and promote women in leadership positions. The conclusion of the chapter addressed the literature synthesis and the void that provides the rationale for conducting this study. An overview of the research methodology employed in the study will be provided in Chapter 3, which follows.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

Introduction

Underrepresentation of women in the US military persists. Women in top military posts have changed dramatically in recent decades. Women held 62 admiral and general ranks in 2018, increasing their participation in almost 20 years (Sisk, 2019). Despite this change, women remain underrepresented in military leadership. Only 18.4% of women held Army leadership positions in January 2023, compared to 81.6% of men. Other areas showed this: 20.4% of Navy women leaders, 9.1% of Marines, and 22.7% of Air Force women (US Department of Defense, 2022). While all branches of the armed forces have implemented mentorship programs, diversity training, and support networks to address gender disparities and women's challenges (Bridges et al., 2023), obstacles still prevent women from achieving top leadership positions. Thus, this qualitative phenomenology study examined US military women commanders' perceptions and lived experiences to determine how they overcame the barriers to achieving top leadership positions.

This chapter will present an overview of the study's methodology and begin by restating the research questions and their alignment with the research purpose. The researcher will then discuss the study's sample, how the participants will be recruited, and the data collection methods and procedures. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the data analysis plan and ethical considerations that will be followed throughout the research process.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

Central Research Question: How do women leaders overcome experienced challenges when working within top leadership positions in the US military?

Sub-Research Question 1: What challenges do women leaders working in top leadership positions in the US military perceive as influencing their career success?

Sub-Research Question 2: What strategies do women leaders in top leadership positions in the US military use to overcome identified challenges?

Sub-Research Question 3: What supports and resources do women leaders in the US military perceive as being needed to help them be successful in their roles?

Sub-Research Question 4: How do women leaders in the US military view leadership from a militaristic standpoint?

Research Question Alignment

The study's research questions are well-aligned with the issue and goal being investigated. The main study question examined how female leaders in senior leadership roles within the US military navigated and overcame obstacles. The issue of underrepresentation and the obstacles women encountered in advancing their professions in the military were explicitly addressed in this question. Sub-Research Question 1 examined the perceived obstacles that female leaders in high-ranking US military posts encountered, which was closely related to the issue of comprehending the elements that impacted their professional achievement (Sisk, 2019).

By examining the difficulties these women mentioned, the research learned more about the particular roadblocks these women experienced, emphasizing the difficulties they encountered in their leadership positions. The second sub-research question looked at the methods used by female executives to get over the obstacles they faced. This question aligned with the study's objective because it examined the challenges female leaders face in the workplace. Through analyzing these leaders' tactics, the research offered insightful guidance on

effectively addressing the obstacles women face in high-level leadership roles in the US military (Blanche, 2021).

Sub-Research Question Three explored the supports and resources perceived as necessary for women leaders in the US military to be successful in their roles. This question aligned closely with the purpose of the study, as it identified the specific supports and resources that can aid women in achieving success in their top leadership positions. By understanding the support systems and resources deemed essential by these women leaders, this study informed the development of targeted initiatives and policies that can facilitate their career advancement and success (Blanche, 2021).

Sub-Research Question four went beyond examining the external barriers and challenges women leaders faced and delved into their perspectives on leadership within the militaristic context. This sub-question provided a valuable understanding of how women leaders perceived and navigated leadership within the unique environment of the US military, ultimately contributing to the overall goal of advancing gender equality and inclusivity in military leadership.

Overall, the research questions were in line with the issue of underrepresentation and the goal of comprehending the difficulties and tactics faced by female leaders in high-ranking US military posts. Ultimately, the primary research question and its sub-research questions contributed to the larger objective of promoting gender equality and inclusivity within the military's leadership ranks by offering a thorough framework for examining the distinctive experiences and viewpoints of female leaders in the US military.

Research Method

This study used a phenomenological design in accordance with a qualitative research methodology. Given its ability to offer comprehensive insights into intricate phenomena, including the experiences of female leaders in the US military, a qualitative method was judged acceptable for this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). According to Creswell and Poth (2016), this approach made it possible to thoroughly examine each person's viewpoints, subjective interpretations, and life experiences to comprehend better the obstacles, solutions, and assistance requirements faced by women in high-level leadership roles. This study also employed a phenomenological methodology. The use of phenomenology allowed for deciphering the fundamental patterns and meanings of female US military commanders' experiences. Phenomenology provided a deep knowledge of how these leaders overcame obstacles and made meaning of their duties within the US military by concentrating on participants' subjective experiences and interpretations (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The focus on encapsulating the essence and structure of occurrences aligned with the research goals of thoroughly examining women's experiences in senior leadership roles in the armed forces.

The researcher used qualitative methods—especially phenomenology—instead of quantitative techniques and other qualitative designs because of their distinct benefits. According to Fryer et al. (2018), although quantitative tools are useful for measurement and quantification, they might not fully convey the richness and depth of unique experiences. On the other hand, qualitative techniques like phenomenology allow for a thorough investigation of subjective experiences, guaranteeing a comprehensive comprehension of the difficulties and tactics faced by female leaders (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This method makes it easier to produce

insightful, context-specific findings that can guide the development of new laws and procedures to advance gender parity and female leadership in the armed forces.

Role of the Researcher

In this phenomenological investigation, the researcher's role was crucial to the whole research process and producing insightful findings. Initially, the researcher was responsible for creating the study, choosing suitable volunteers, building rapport, and providing guidance. This required establishing a transparent, accepting atmosphere that motivates people to talk candidly and freely about their experiences. Furthermore, adhering to the Belmont principles that direct this investigation, the researcher endeavored to safeguard the participant's identity and data (Anabo et al., 2019).

The Belmont Report provides a basic ethical framework for research involving human subjects, sometimes called the Belmont Principles (Brothers et al., 2019). These values are based on justice, beneficence, and respect for people. According to Brothers et al. (2019), respect for persons strongly emphasizes each person's autonomy and dignity while guaranteeing informed consent and safeguarding vulnerable groups. Researchers must carefully weigh the rewards and dangers associated with their work since beneficence is centered on optimizing benefits and limiting damage to participants. According to Brothers et al. (2019), justice strongly emphasizes treating and choosing participants fairly and distributing the costs and rewards of research equally. Conducting ethical research that respects the rights and welfare of human subjects requires adherence to the Belmont Principles.

Every participant must give their informed consent to uphold respect for persons. According to Beauchamp (2020), giving participants clear and thorough information on the study's goals, any possible dangers, its advantages, and their rights is crucial. Participants'

autonomy will be maintained in this study, allowing them to leave at any moment without incurring any penalties. Strict procedures were implemented to safeguard participants' private information and data during the research process to preserve confidentiality. As a guiding principle, beneficence requires maximizing participants' benefits while minimizing their potential harms (Beauchamp, 2020). After carefully weighing the advantages and hazards, the researcher put safeguards to protect the participants' health. Throughout the study, routine evaluations and monitoring were carried out to guarantee the welfare of the participants.

The researcher aimed for justice by selecting and recruiting participants fairly and equitably (Beauchamp, 2020). No discriminatory behavior was present in the inclusion and exclusion criteria, making them legitimate. To promote diversity and representation, a wide range of opinions were sought out by recruiting diverse participants. Fair distribution of benefits and resources will prevent any kind of exploitation, especially from disadvantaged people. Under the established study protocol, ethical approval was requested from the appropriate institutional review board (IRB) or ethics committee—this guaranteed respect for ethical rules and an impartial assessment of the study's ethical implications.

The researcher also included adherence to the Belmont Principles in the research process section to promote accountability and transparency (Beauchamp, 2020). A thorough explanation of the informed consent method, safeguards for participant privacy, risk-reduction tactics, and protocols for impartial participant selection were all included in this. This study demonstrated ethical research techniques by including and recording adherence to the Belmont Principles, which uphold the participants' rights, autonomy, and well-being.

The researcher's second responsibility was to take a reflexive position, admitting any biases, preconceptions, and assumptions that might impact how the study is conducted and the

conclusions are interpreted. Because of this self-awareness, the researcher was able to reduce any personal biases and keep an impartial viewpoint, which preserved the study's integrity and rigor. As a result, the researcher needs to engage in *epoche*, which involves journaling thoughtful reflections about his experiences as a researcher and his prejudices regarding the topic (De Bruin, 2020). Finally, the researcher was essential to gathering and processing the data. Interviews, observations, and other data-gathering techniques fell under his purview. To get to the heart of the participants' experiences and their underlying meanings, he engaged in reflective analysis, actively listened, and probed with probing questions. The researcher's capacity for analysis, theoretical understanding, and interpretation helped to synthesize and arrange the data into insightful themes or patterns that shed light on the topic under study.

Participants

Ten female leaders in senior leadership roles in the US military forces were part of the study's sample. The Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard are just a few of the branches of the armed forces that the study's participants now serve in. All branches of the armed forces, including the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard, may currently employ research participants. Mason (2010) claimed that ten individuals may easily attain data saturation; hence, this quantity was deemed adequate for the study. In qualitative research, data saturation is pertinent; achieving topic saturation is indicated when gathering new data yields no more novel insights or information (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In order to ensure that the study has adequately examined and recorded the spectrum of experiences and themes connected to women leaders in top positions within the US military, researchers can often attain data saturation with at least ten participants (Mason, 2010).

Furthermore, a minimum sample size of 10 participants allows researchers to commit sufficient time and resources to carefully examine and interpret the information gathered from each participant, guaranteeing a full investigation of their experiences. Additionally, the quality of the data is prioritized in qualitative research over participant count (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Researchers can develop a more intimate relationship with each participant by concentrating on a smaller group of participants, which enables a more profound knowledge of their viewpoints, difficulties, and coping mechanisms.

The researcher employed snowball sampling to find participants for the investigation. A preliminary participant was chosen using the non-probability sampling technique known as "snowball sampling," frequently based on the researcher's contacts or expertise (Parker et al., 2019). Then, to create a snowball effect, this participant was asked to recommend other possible participants, who recommended still more people. This methodology can be helpful when the target population is small, specialized, or challenging to identify using conventional sampling approaches (Parker et al., 2019). Employing a snowball sampling strategy, the investigator sent an invitation to participate in the study to participants who fulfilled particular attributes or pre-established standards pertinent to the study's goals (Campbell et al., 2020). Individuals, therefore, had to meet the following requirements to take part in this study:

- Each individual was a woman.
- Each individual was actively enrolled in the armed forces.
- Each individual worked in a top leadership position, defined in this study as Captain, Major, Lieutenant Colonel, Colonel, Brigadier General, or General.

Individuals who did not meet all criteria could not participate in this study.

The criterion for this qualitative study was importance in shaping the focus and objectives set forth by the researcher. First, the criteria for participants to be women was crucial as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the experiences and challenges specific to women in the armed forces. By narrowing the focus to this demographic, this study was able to highlight information specific to gender representation, leadership, and advancement within the military context. In addition, the criterion of current active enrollment ensured that this study captured the perspectives and experiences of women serving in the armed forces. This aspect was essential as it allowed for examining women's challenges and opportunities in their leadership roles in a snapshot of time. By engaging with currently enrolled individuals, the researcher could gain insights into issues faced by women in the military and provide relevant recommendations for enhancing their leadership experiences. Finally, the criterion of holding a top leadership position further refined the participant selection process.

This study encompassed women with advanced leadership roles by concentrating on the armed forces' levels of Captain, Major, Lieutenant Colonel, Colonel, Brigadier General, or General. This ensured that the researcher looked at the viewpoints and experiences of women who had grown to considerable authority and responsibility positions. This gave the researcher essential insights into the obstacles, solutions, and support networks pertinent to women in senior military roles. The researcher selected female commanders from the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, among other US armed services, to guarantee diversity in the sample.

Additionally, the researcher included female leaders with various positions, experiences, and backgrounds. People in positions ranging from junior leadership responsibilities to senior or high-ranking positions were included in this diversity of ranks. The study examined the

experiences and difficulties faced by female leaders at different phases of their military careers. It pinpointed potential variations in their leadership paths by including leaders at various ranks. The sample was enhanced by including women leaders with various experiences and backgrounds and people from different professional roles, demographic origins, and military occupational specializations. According to Creswell & Creswell (2017), diversity fosters representativeness, facilitates a thorough grasp of the difficulties experienced by women leaders, and provides information for customized treatments and policies. Furthermore, a varied sample revealed similarities, distinctions, and distinctive viewpoints among various branches, ranks, and backgrounds, improving the study's generalizability and relevance for the armed forces.

Participants were recruited using LinkedIn, a professional networking site. Using the predetermined parameters, the researcher conducted a haphazard LinkedIn search. The researcher sent a private message to profiles that fit the search parameters. The message summarized the study's goals, the expectations for involvement, and the requirements for eligibility. Those who responded to the private message and were interested in participating got in touch with the researcher. After confirming that each participant matched the study's requirements, the researcher admitted participants on a first-come, first-served basis. There were various justifications for the study's use of LinkedIn to find participants.

To begin with, LinkedIn is a well-known and popular professional networking site that serves users with interests linked to careers (Kalina, 2022). The researcher had direct access to a pool of people who met the requirements to participate in this study by using LinkedIn as a recruitment tool. Second, a wide range of possible participants from various backgrounds, positions, and branches within the military can be reached through LinkedIn's sizable and diversified user base (Darko et al., 2022). This assisted in guaranteeing a heterogeneous sample

and reducing the drawbacks of a small or uniform participant pool. LinkedIn also provided the option to conduct a targeted search using predetermined parameters. The investigator employed the search filters on the platform to ascertain profiles corresponding to the targeted attributes, including military affiliation, leadership positions, and pertinent work experience. This focused strategy improved the chances of locating qualified individuals and expedited recruitment.

Although there are benefits to using LinkedIn for hiring, it is vital to be aware of any potential drawbacks and prejudices. One possible explanation could be a bias in favor of people who were more visible or engaged on the network, thereby eliminating others who were less visible or did not have a LinkedIn account. In order to ensure a more diverse representation of the target demographic, the researcher added extra recruitment techniques to the LinkedIn recruitment strategy to overcome these restrictions. This included using personal networks, contacting associations for professional military personnel, or implementing snowball sampling methods. The study reduced potential biases associated with relying exclusively on LinkedIn and increased the diversity and inclusion of the sample by using various recruitment strategies.

Procedures and Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were the main technique used in this study to obtain data. Semi-structured interviews ensured participant consistency and offered an adaptable framework for open-ended talks (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). During the semi-structured interviews, which took place via Zoom video conferencing, the researcher asked ten open-ended questions about the difficulties, solutions, and support requirements faced by female leaders in senior roles in the US military, in addition to a series of demographic questions. The researcher inquired about each participant's age range, race/ethnicity, number of years in the military, number of years as a leader, military branch they worked for, and leadership position to gather demographic

data. A group of experts improved the accuracy and coherence of the semi-structured interview questions. Professionals and subject matter experts with educational and professional backgrounds comparable to the researcher made the panel. To make sure the interview questions matched the study's problem, goal, and research objectives, the panel's task was to evaluate and offer feedback on them (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Through the incorporation of diverse views and the potential reduction of the researcher's preconceived beliefs or prejudices on the interview questions, this procedure helped lessen researcher bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). According to Bergen and Labonté (2020), researcher bias is the possibility of results being distorted or skewed due to the researcher's personal preferences, views, or prior notions. The researcher reduced this bias and ensured the semi-structured interview questions were thorough, pertinent, and objective by working with a panel of experts to construct the questions. The viewpoint that the experts' contributions offered helped preserve the objectivity and integrity of the study process (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The researcher finished member verification following the conclusion of each semi-structured interview and its transcription to prepare the data for analysis.

The data's legitimacy and reliability were increased through member vetting (Candela, 2019). Member verification entailed sending the interview transcripts to the participants so they could examine and comment on the responses' accuracy and meaning (Candela, 2019). Participant validation of the data, clarifications, and additional insights were made possible by this approach, which enhanced the overall reliability of the results. During the member verification process, participants can submit further information or point out any errors in the dataset.

Data Collection

The researcher followed specific steps in this study to ensure effective data collection and adherence to ethical guidelines. First, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained, ensuring compliance with ethical standards and guidelines. Once approval was obtained, the researcher recruited participants through LinkedIn, conducting a random search using specific criteria. When searching for individuals on LinkedIn, the researcher ensured that they met the specific criteria to participate in this study:

- Each individual was a woman.
- Each individual was actively enrolled in the armed forces.
- Each individual currently worked in a top leadership position, defined in this study as Captain, Major, Lieutenant Colonel, Colonel, Brigadier General, or General.

The researcher sent a private message to LinkedIn accounts that fit the search parameters outlining the goals, objectives, and requirements for participation in the study. When interested parties responded, the researcher evaluated their eligibility following the study's requirements and accepted participants in order of arrival. The researcher recruited individuals and then started gathering data. Each participant was asked to provide the researcher with a convenient time to finish their semi-structured interview. An informed consent form was emailed to each participant by the researcher prior to the interview for them to peruse and sign. Before their interview, the participants electronically signed and returned the document to the researcher. Each participant received a connection to a private Zoom meeting room from the researcher at the appointed time of the interview. The researcher started the semi-structured interviews when both parties were in the Zoom meeting room. To learn more about the experiences and tactics of female leaders in the US military, the researcher posed ten open-ended questions to each participant throughout the

interview. To urge individuals to elaborate or explain any of their responses, the researcher also offered follow-up questions. With the participants' permission, every semi-structured interview was audio recorded and transcribed for additional study. The following were some of the semi-structured interview questions posed to each participant:

1. Please explain your decision to enlist in the military.
2. Could you explain how you became a high leader in the US military? Which were the main obstacles you had to overcome along the way?
3. In your perspective, what are the primary hindrances or difficulties faced by female leaders seeking high-level leadership roles within the armed forces?
4. Could you describe a specific incident in which you faced a gender-related problem while holding a high-level leadership position? What was your approach to it?
5. In what ways have you been able to overcome the obstacles you encountered as a female leader in the United States military?
6. How do you see the military's support structures for female leaders hoping to occupy senior leadership roles? How do they help or hinder you in your progress?
7. Could you mention any tools or networks of support that you found especially useful in figuring out how to get to the top leadership positions in the military?
8. How do you see mentoring's contribution to the development of female leaders in the US military? Have there been any mentors in your profession who have had a big impact? If yes, how have they affected your achievement?
9. Have you seen any particular organizational or cultural elements that support the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles within the armed forces? If yes, could you please elaborate?

10. Based on your observations, do you believe that female military leaders vary from their male counterparts in any way when it comes to their leadership philosophies or methods? If so, how would you characterize these variations?

11. In your opinion, what programs or modifications might be made inside the armed forces to help and encourage more women to aim for senior leadership roles?

12. How do you think women leaders are affected by how the military views leadership? Have you faced any particular difficulties or demands because of the militaristic view of leadership?

13. Has your professional advancement in the military been impacted by any instances of unconscious bias or gender-based stereotypes? If yes, how did you handle or handle these circumstances?

14. As a woman in a senior leadership role, can you share an instance where you had to make a tough choice? What was your strategy, and what results or lessons did you take away?

15. As a female military leader, how do you manage your personal and professional lives? What particular methods or techniques have you used to keep that balance?

16. Based on your experiences and lessons acquired, what guidance would you offer those women hoping to occupy high leadership roles in the US military?

17. Have I questioned you today about anything else you would like to add?

A panel of specialists ensured the alignment of interview questions with the study's topic, purpose, and research objectives. These specialists offered insightful commentary and had comparable career and educational backgrounds with the researcher. Their participation reduced researcher bias and improved the study's overall caliber. The semi-structured interview questions

used in this study are summarized in Table 1 below, which also shows how well they match the theoretical frameworks and research topics.

Table 1

Alignment of Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Research Question	Semi-Structured Interview Questions	Theoretical Framework
<p>Central Research Question: How do women leaders overcome experienced challenges when working within top leadership positions in the US military?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you describe your journey to reaching a top leadership position in the US military? What were some of the key challenges you faced along the way? 9. In your experience, do you think there are any differences in the leadership styles or approaches of women leaders compared to their male counterparts in the military? If yes, how would you describe these differences? 10. From your perspective, what initiatives or changes could be implemented within the military to further promote and support women in their pursuit of top leadership positions? 12. Have you encountered any instances of unconscious bias or gender-based 	<p>The Glass-Ceiling Theory</p> <p>Social Identity Theory</p> <p>The Contingency Theory of Leadership</p>

Research Question	Semi-Structured Interview Questions	Theoretical Framework
	<p>stereotypes in the military that have affected your career progression? If so, how did you address or navigate these situations?</p>	
<p>Sub-Research Question 1: What challenges do women leaders working in top leadership positions in the US military perceive as influencing their career success?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the main obstacles or challenges women leaders encounter when pursuing top leadership positions in the military? 2. Could you share a specific instance where you encountered a challenge related to your gender while working in a top leadership position? How did you handle it? 	<p>Glass-Ceiling Theory</p>
<p>Sub-Research Question 2: What strategies do women leaders in top leadership positions in the US military use to overcome identified challenges?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. What strategies or approaches have you found effective in overcoming the challenges you faced as a woman leader in the US military? 13. Can you describe a time when you had to make a difficult decision as a woman leader in a top leadership position? How did you approach it, and what 	<p>Social Identity Theory</p>

Research Question	Semi-Structured Interview Questions	Theoretical Framework
	<p>were the outcomes or lessons learned?</p> <p>14. How do you balance your personal and professional life as a woman leader in the military? Are there any specific strategies or practices that have helped you maintain that balance?</p>	
<p>Sub-Research Question 3: What supports and resources do women leaders in the US military perceive as being needed to help them be successful in their roles?</p>	<p>4. How do you perceive the support systems within the military for women leaders aspiring to top leadership positions? In what ways do they facilitate or hinder your progress?</p> <p>5. Can you identify any resources or support networks that have been particularly helpful for you in navigating the path to top leadership positions in the military?</p> <p>6. How do you view the role of mentorship in the advancement of women leaders in the US military? Have you had any mentors who have played a significant role in your career? If so, how have they</p>	<p>Contingency Theory of Leadership</p>

Research Question	Semi-Structured Interview Questions	Theoretical Framework
	influenced your success?	
<p>Sub-Research Question 4: How do women leaders in the US military view leadership from a militaristic standpoint?</p>	<p>7. Have you observed any specific organizational or cultural factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions in the military? If so, can you elaborate on them?</p> <p>11. How do you believe the perception of leadership in the military impacts women leaders? Are there any unique challenges or expectations you have encountered based on the militaristic standpoint of leadership?</p> <p>15. What advice would you give to other women aspiring to reach top leadership positions in the US military, based on your experiences and lessons learned?</p>	<p>Contingency Theory of Leadership</p> <p>Social Identity Theory</p>

Throughout the study, participants' identities were protected by referring to them by number (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2) rather than their true names or other identifying

information. Furthermore, all material, including transcripts and recordings of the interviews, was securely stored. Electronic copies were preserved on a password-protected flash drive, while physical copies were housed in a safe filing cabinet. The data was immediately available solely to the researcher. Every interview was followed by a membership check. Participants were provided access to the interview transcripts to ensure the accuracy of their responses and interpretations. Member checking boosted the authenticity and dependability of the data by allowing participants to express their ideas and ensure their voices were heard. The researcher made any necessary revisions to the interview transcripts in response to participant error complaints or requests for more information.

Data Analysis

Qualitative theme analysis was used to analyze this study's data. The researcher used NVivo Pro and a qualitative codebook to analyze data. Qualitative data analysis application NVivo Pro helps researchers organize, analyze, and derive conclusions from qualitative data (Dhakal, 2022). Researchers can organize, discover trends, and present findings using NVivo Pro (Dhakal, 2022). The researcher created a qualitative codebook to specify the study's coding method and criteria. Code books list codes and provide brief meanings. These definitions and descriptions were based on participant quotes. Reyes et al. (2021) used a codebook to preserve coding uniformity and dependability during analysis. The researcher coded the data using Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-step method. Transcribing the recorded interviews and immersion in the transcripts was the first step to understanding the data. The researcher reread the transcripts to comprehend the study participants' experiences and views (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

First, an inductive technique was used to produce initial codes in the second stage. The researcher could extract meaningful data units from the participants using words, phrases, or

sentences that encapsulate essential ideas, concepts, or themes pertinent to the research objectives. The matching transcript parts were given these starting codes. It is noteworthy that the investigator employed inductive coding. Instead of being preset or influenced by preexisting theories or frameworks, inductive coding derives codes directly from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Organizing codes into possible themes was the third phase in the data analysis process. To identify probable themes that represented patterns or common meanings in the data, the researcher looked for links between the codes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The information's richness, complexity, and relevance to the study questions were considered when identifying themes. The fourth step involved reviewing and refining the themes further. The researcher evaluated Each prospective theme and considered its overall fit with the data, coherence, and distinctiveness. To guarantee that the data was accurately represented, themes were honed, merged, or divided into subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

The task of identifying and labeling themes was the sixth phase. For every theme, the researcher created succinct and understandable summaries that encapsulated the main ideas or trends seen in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Throughout this process, names that appropriately conveyed the context and content of each subject had to be created. The researcher's final output, which is presented in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, included the interpretation and presentation of the themes. Quotations from the transcripts that served as examples supported the themes and confirmed the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

The researcher considered data saturation throughout the data analysis procedure. According to Mwita (2022), several ways can be used to achieve data saturation. The researcher's initial tactic involved outlining the goals and study questions precisely. The researcher ensured

that thorough and meaningful data was acquired by carefully describing the specific features of the study and focusing data-collecting efforts on obtaining information relevant to those areas (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Furthermore, the researcher must keep thorough and well-organized records during the data-gathering procedure (Fusch & Ness, 2015). This involved the researcher writing her detailed notes and interview observations. Maintaining transparency and enabling the verification of the study's rigor was made possible by keeping an audit record of decisions taken during the research process, such as sampling throughout or data analysis methodologies (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Ultimately, the researcher continued to analyze the data. The researcher continuously compared fresh discoveries to previous findings as he gathered and examined the data (Fusch & Ness, 2015). This involved looking for reoccurring themes, patterns, or concepts in the data specific to each participant. The researcher observed situations where fresh data added redundant information or failed to offer new insights (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Data saturation was probably reached when no new information could be obtained, and these patterns started to repeat themselves.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

The boundaries of the investigation make its limitations and extent clear. The study's exclusive focus was on female leaders in the US military. It used a phenomenological design and qualitative methods to investigate the participants' subjective experiences. Instead of examining changes over time, the cross-sectional research gave a picture of the experiences of women leaders at a particular time. Geographically, it ignored broader socioeconomic and geopolitical variables to focus on those within the US military. These boundaries attempted to keep things coherent and focused while shedding light on the difficulties experienced by female leaders in the US military.

Assumptions

According to Creswell & Creswell (2017), assumptions in research are the underlying beliefs or presuppositions that guide selecting research design, methodology, and interpretation of findings. They frequently act as guiding principles or premises for the study. As a result, it is crucial to establish the study's assumptions. First, it was assumed that the participants followed the semi-structured interviews with integrity. This guaranteed they would provide accurate and dependable data by responding truthfully to each interview question (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A further supposition for this investigation was that the subjects possessed the expertise and familiarity to furnish the investigator with pertinent information (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The researcher ensured that all participants met the requirements for participation, including those currently employed by the US military in high-level leadership positions, to guarantee that pertinent data was gathered from the participants.

Last, it was assumed that the approach and design chosen for this investigation would address the stated research issues (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The data was anticipated to address the study questions by revealing how they were formulated, given that the researcher had chosen a qualitative phenomenological approach. Since he gathered non-numerical data, the researcher made sure the research questions were open-ended when drafting them. As a result, he was able to better match the research topics of his study with the semi-structured interview questions, increasing the likelihood that he would draw compelling results from his investigation.

Limitations

Although this study aimed to investigate the experiences of female military leaders and better understand the obstacles they faced, it was crucial to identify any restrictions that would have affected how broadly the results might be applied. First, this study's phenomenological

design and dependence on qualitative methodologies may make it more challenging to extrapolate the results to a broader population (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Although the sample size of this study was diverse, it might not have fully represented the range of women leaders in the military; as such, care should be taken when extrapolating the findings to larger groups or circumstances.

The conclusions of this study may not be as applicable to other military contexts or nations with different organizational structures, cultural norms, or regulations due to their concentration on the US military. Some special contextual characteristics that differ from those in other armed services may impact female US military commanders' experiences. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design of this study provides a momentary view of the experiences of women leaders. Longitudinal or comparative studies would be required to comprehend the dynamics and changes in their experiences over time or compared to other groups.

Ethical Considerations

Hasan and colleagues (2021) emphasized the importance of ethics in protecting study subjects. Obtaining the organization's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval is necessary to conduct ethical research. IRB permission is needed to ensure the study followed ethical norms before it began. After gaining approval, the researcher did not begin the investigation (Appendix A). The informed consent concept was essential. Every study participant must read and sign an informed consent form. The informed consent form provided the participants with information on the study's goals, expected outcomes, risks, and benefits. Questions helped people decide whether to participate. Study participants were told participation was voluntary and they could stop anytime. The informed consent approach also protected participants' personal information. All study information was kept secret. To maintain anonymity, we called individuals by their

numbers (Participant 1, Participant 2). The researcher had easy access to the data in a closed filing cabinet or password-protected flash drive. Data will be kept for three years per university IRB requirements. We have time to check, reference, and ask questions. After storage, the data will be securely destroyed to protect participants' privacy. These processes ensure that the study is ethical and research-integrity-compliant (Hasan et al., 2021).

Summary

The persistent problem of women's underrepresentation in the US military demands a thorough investigation. Women's advancement toward top leadership positions is impeded by enduring barriers, even with the implementation of policies and activities aimed at addressing gender inequities and problems. As a result, this qualitative phenomenological study investigated the perspectives and actual experiences of female leaders in the US military. This study provided insightful information about these women's tactics to overcome obstacles in pursuing senior leadership roles.

This chapter thoroughly reviewed the study methodology, starting with a restatement of the research questions and their suitability for the study's objectives. The sample selection procedure was covered in the chapter, along with the inclusion criteria for participants and the planned recruitment tactics. Furthermore, the techniques and protocols for gathering data were explained, highlighting the importance of qualitative methods in obtaining deep and complex insights. The chapter next focused on the data analysis plan, including Braun and Clarke's six-step process (2019) used to adopt thematic analysis. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, IRB permission, and participant confidentiality, were also covered. These factors guarantee the security and welfare of study participants. Chapter 3 outlined the technique used in detail and set the foundation for this investigation. It served as an introduction to the next

chapter, Chapter 4, which will provide the conclusions drawn from the data analysis and provide insightful information about female US military leaders' experiences and advancement to senior leadership roles.

CHAPTER 4: Findings

Introduction

The problem being studied was that women continued to be underrepresented in the US military. The armed forces have implemented policies and initiatives to address gender disparities and challenges that women face, including mentorship programs, diversity training, and support networks (Bridges et al., 2023). However, despite such initiatives, women striving for top leadership positions in the military continued encountering challenges that impeded their advancement and representation. Therefore, this qualitative phenomenological study aimed to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of women leaders in the US military and how they had worked to overcome challenges when accessing top leadership positions.

This chapter will present the study's findings. Within this chapter, the researcher will provide an overview of the research questions that guided the analysis and specific steps he took when conducting the qualitative thematic analysis. The researcher will provide an overview of the demographic characteristics of the participants, as well as how he specifically coded the data. The researcher will discuss how the analysis aligned with Braun and Clarke's (2019) six data analysis steps and then report how he collated the codes into thematic categories. Illustrative quotes from the transcripts will support each thematic category, providing evidence to substantiate the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Therefore, the report will present a coherent narrative that reflects the participants' experiences, perspectives, and challenges as they strive for top leadership positions in the US military.

Data Collection

This study's data collection method involved employing semi-structured interviews. These interviews offered a versatile framework for in-depth, open-ended dialogues while

maintaining uniformity among participants, aligning with the insights from Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021). The semi-structured interviews were conducted using Zoom video conferencing. During the interviews, the researcher posed a set of demographic inquiries and presented 15 open-ended questions that explored various aspects related to the difficulties, tactics, and support requirements of women holding top leadership positions within the United States military. The following research questions guided this study:

Central Research Question: How do women leaders overcome experienced challenges when working within top leadership positions in the US military?

Sub-Research Question 1: What challenges do women leaders working in top leadership positions in the US military perceive as influencing their career success?

Sub-Research Question 2: What strategies do women leaders in top leadership positions in the US military use to overcome identified challenges?

Sub-Research Question 3: What supports and resources do women leaders in the US military perceive as being needed to help them be successful in their roles?

Sub- Research Question 4: How do women leaders in the US military view leadership from a militaristic standpoint?

After conducting and transcribing each semi-structured interview for data analysis, the researcher completed member checking, as highlighted by Candela (2019). This procedure significantly bolstered the reliability and credibility of the gathered data. Member checking entailed sharing the interview transcripts with the participants, allowing them to review and provide feedback on the precision and interpretation of their responses, aligning with Candela's work (2019). This method allowed participants to validate the data, offer clarifications, or contribute additional insights, thereby enhancing the overall trustworthiness of the research

findings. During this process, participants identified any inaccuracies in the dataset or added supplementary information; no participants identified any inaccuracies within their semi-structured interview transcripts.

Participants

Recruitment of participants was conducted through the professional networking platform LinkedIn. The researcher completed a random search on LinkedIn using established criteria. To participate in this study, individuals must have met all the following criteria:

- Each individual was a woman.
- Each individual was actively enrolled in the armed forces.
- Each individual currently worked in a top leadership position, defined in this study as Captain, Major, Lieutenant Colonel, Colonel, Brigadier General, or General.

Profiles that met the search criteria received a private message from the researcher. The message provided an overview of the study's purpose, participation expectations, and eligibility criteria. Individuals interested in participating contacted the researcher by replying to the private message. The researcher then verified that each individual met the study's criteria. The researcher included women leaders from different branches of the US armed forces that included the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. In addition, the researcher included women leaders from various ranks, backgrounds, and experiences. Table 1 below highlights the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 2*Participants' Demographic Characteristics*

	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Level of Education	Military Branch	Leadership Position
Participant 1	37	Black	Master's	Air Force	Captain
Participant 2	27	Black	Master's	Army	Major
Participant 3	43	White/Hispanic/Latino	Master's	Army	Captain
Participant 4	32	Asian	Bachelor's	Coast Guard	Lieutenant Colonel
Participant 5	40	Black/Latino	Doctorate	Marine Corp	Brigadier General
Participant 6	41	White	Master's	Navy	Colonel
Participant 7	31	Black	Bachelor's	Marine Corp	Captain
Participant 8	27	Black	Bachelor's	Navy	Major
Participant 9	33	White	Master's	Air Force	Captain
Participant 10	29	Black	Bachelor's	Army	Major

As highlighted in Table 1, the participants presented to this study representing a variety of demographic characteristics. When it came to age, the participants reported being between the ages of 27 to 43 years, highlighting a mean age of 34. In addition, the participants reported identifying with a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds that included Black, White, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian. Furthermore, the participants represented all branches of the military that included the Army, Navy, Marine Corp, Airforce, and Coast Guard. Finally, the participants

reported working in a variety of top leadership positions; captain, major, colonel, lieutenant colonel, and brigadier general were all represented in this study.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study employed a qualitative thematic analysis. When coding the data, the researcher followed the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). The six steps included (a) familiarization with the dataset, (b) generating initial codes, (c) collating codes into potential themes, (d) reviewing and refining themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) writing a report.

Familiarization with the Dataset

In the first step of Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-step thematic analysis, the researcher immersed himself in the data. This entailed a thorough and repeated examination of the entire dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The primary objective of this step was to develop a profound comprehension of the data, encompassing its content, context, and intricacies. Through this process, the researcher began to identify patterns, recurring themes, and initial ideas that surfaced within the dataset, searching for commonalities, distinctions, and noteworthy statements or phrases (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Throughout this phase, the researcher maintained an open-minded approach, refraining from prematurely imposing preconceived notions on the data.

Generating Initial Codes

The researcher began generating initial codes in the second step of Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-step thematic analysis. This step involved systematically identifying and labeling meaningful segments or units of data. The aim was to break down the dataset into smaller, more manageable parts that captured key ideas, concepts, or patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2019). During

this phase, the researcher used short descriptive labels or codes to summarize the essence of each segment. When coding the data, the researcher followed an inductive coding approach.

Inductive coding occurred when the researcher examined the raw data without introducing any preconceived notions or biases to remain open to the information contained within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This open exploration approach allowed the researcher to identify recurring patterns, themes, and concepts that naturally surfaced during the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). A list of all identified codes within the analysis can be found in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Identified Codes Within the Dataset

Codes	
Lack of leadership support	Stereotype of reputation
Negative stereotypes	Women are weak
Lack of diversity and inclusion	Allies and mentors
Traditions	Support systems
Motherhood	Family planning
Juggling work-life balance	Tight circle
challenged by my male counterparts	Self-aware
Seeking a mentor	Career progression
Self-reflection	Dedicated off time
Engaging in positive conflict resolution	Work harder and longer
Selective groups	Being prepared
Mentorship	Resources
Advancement	Very strict and aggressive
Gender disparities	Pressure to be hyper achievers
Inequality	Bias

The researcher also maintained a detailed codebook to keep track of the codes, their definitions, and any illustrative examples from the data (see Appendix D). This step served as the foundation for the subsequent stages of thematic analysis, where these initial codes were refined, grouped into themes, and interpreted into a broader context.

Collating Codes into Potential Themes

In the third step, the researcher collated the codes into potential themes. When completing this step, the researcher was guided by the research questions:

Central Research Question: How do women leaders overcome experienced challenges when working within top leadership positions in the US military?

Sub-Research Question 1: What challenges do women leaders working in top leadership positions in the US military perceive as influencing their career success?

Sub-Research Question 2: What strategies do women leaders in top leadership positions in the US military use to overcome identified challenges?

Sub-Research Question 3: What supports and resources do women leaders in the US military perceive as being needed to help them be successful in their roles?

Sub- Research Question 4: How do women leaders in the US military view leadership from a militaristic standpoint?

Table 4 below highlights how the researcher began collating and grouping codes into potential themes per the research questions.

Table 4

Collating and Grouping Codes into Potential Themes

Codes	Potential Themes	Research Question
Tight circle Support systems Family planning Self-aware Being prepared	Overcoming Challenges	Central Research Question
Lack of leadership support Lack of diversity and inclusion Juggling work-life balances Selective groups	Experienced challenges	Sub-Research Question 1

Codes	Potential Themes	Research Question
Gender disparities Stereotypes Women are weak Work harder and longer Bias Inequality		
Self-reflection Engaging in positive conflict resolution Family planning Tight circle Being prepared	Identified Strategies	Sub-Research Question 2
Seeking a mentor Mentorship Resources Allies and mentors Support systems	Supports and Resources	Sub-Research Question 3
Very strict and aggressive Challenged by my male counterparts Pressure to be hyper achievers	Viewing US military leadership	Sub-Research Question 4

Reviewing and Refining Themes

The researcher refined and defined themes from the coded data in step four. This step involved revisiting the codes identified in step two and organizing them into coherent, meaningful themes or patterns. Throughout this phase, the researcher carefully examined the codes within each potential theme, ensuring that the themes accurately captured the essence of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Themes were refined to be both internally homogeneous and externally distinct from one another. In essence, this step involved moving from a more detailed and descriptive level of coding to a more abstract and interpretive level where the broader

meaning of the data was explored (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Table 5 below highlights how the researcher refined and defined the themes.

Table 5

Refining and Defining Themes

Potential Themes	Thematic Category	Research Question
Overcoming challenges	Theme 1: Resilience	Central Research Question
Experienced challenges	Theme 2: Inequities	Sub-Research Question 1
Identified strategies	Theme 3: Work-life balance	Sub-Research Question 2
Supports and resources	Theme 4: Professional Networks	Sub-Research Question 3
Viewing US military leadership	Theme 5: Workplace pressures	Sub-Research Question 4

Therefore, after refining and defining themes, the researcher found five thematic categories from the dataset: (a) resilience, (b) inequities, (c) work-life balance, (d) professional networks, and (e) workplace pressures.

Defining and Naming Themes

The researcher refined and further developed the identified thematic categories in the fifth step of the data analysis process. This phase involved a more comprehensive examination and interpretation of the data within the context of the emergent thematic categories. The researcher examined the relationships between themes, considered the nuances and subtleties within each theme, and ensured that the themes accurately captured the essence of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This stage aimed to enhance the depth and richness of the themes by refining their definitions and ensuring they were both internally coherent and externally distinct from one another (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The researcher carefully considered the overarching

concepts and their relevance to each research question. The fifth step marked a critical juncture in the data analysis process, as it allowed for a deeper understanding of the data and its meaning within the specific research context. The themes evolved from being initially identified in step four into more refined, nuanced, and well-defined concepts that provided a solid foundation for the subsequent interpretation of the findings in the final step of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Table 6 below highlights the refinement of the thematic categories into the final themes that emerged from the dataset.

Table 6

Refinement of Thematic Categories into Final Themes

Thematic Category	Final Theme
Theme 1: Resilience	Theme 1: Resilience and adapted strategies
Theme 2: Inequities	Theme 2: Gendered workplace inequities
Theme 3: Work-life balance	Theme 3: Personal and professional balance
Theme 4: Professional Networks	Theme 4: Building and nurturing professional networks
Theme 5: Workplace pressures	Theme 5: Gendered workplace pressures

Therefore, after the analysis was completed, the researcher identified five final themes that emerged from the dataset: (a) resilience and adapted strategies, (b) gendered workplace inequities, (c) personal and professional balance, (d) building and nurturing professional networks, and (e) gendered workplace pressures.

Writing the Report

In the sixth and final step of the data analysis process, the researcher focused on interpreting and presenting their findings. This step involved synthesizing the refined themes into a coherent narrative that addressed the research questions or objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The researcher contextualized the themes within the broader research context, drawing connections between the emergent themes and the research's overarching goals. During this phase, the researcher provided detailed descriptions and explanations for each theme, highlighting their nuances and subtleties (Braun & Clarke, 2019). When writing the report, the researcher used direct quotes or examples from the data to support the themes and provide concrete evidence. This step aimed to convey the richness and depth of the findings and to make the research outcomes accessible to the audience (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The report's writing is represented in the following section and will be discussed under the guise of each research question.

Findings

This section will report the study's findings from the five themes that emerged from the dataset: (a) resilience and adapted strategies, (b) gendered workplace inequities, (c) personal and professional balance, (d) building and nurturing professional networks, and (e) gendered workplace pressures. This section will follow the research questions that guided this study.

Central Research Question: How do women leaders overcome experienced challenges when working within top leadership positions in the US military?

The first research question aimed to understand how women leaders overcame experienced challenges when working within top leadership positions in the US military. Within this research question, one theme was identified: Resilience and adapted strategies.

Theme 1: Resilience and Adapted Strategies

The first theme highlighted how four of the participants reported that to overcome experienced challenges within the US military, they felt that resilience and adapted strategies helped them. For example, Participant 1 (P1) reported that she had to remain resilient in her role and communicate effectively with her subordinates. P1 stated:

After speaking with a mentor on how to address the criticism, I was directed to hold true to my beliefs and approach as I would always receive criticism as I am a woman and men struggle with women in positions of leadership or power. As I never received negative criticism from my leaders or supervisors, I did not change my approach. If I heard a subordinate or peer speaking of me in a negative manner, I informed them that my approach was no different than any of them and their only issue with my approach is based on my gender and race as they never criticized any males, white or black, for having the same approach. (P1)

In addition, P2 also discussed the importance of resilience:

Coming in as the BN S1, my NCO told me that I had to earn my respect in a Field Artillery unit. He reminded me that women were not in combat units up until a few years ago, and that I wouldn't get respect until I acted like one of the guys. I observed his actions over time and realized that I was not the only person he was treating differently because of sex. I brought up the issues to the commander and 1SG, but it was brushed off as him meaning to be "part of the team". (P2)

P5 also discussed resilience stating that the military did not want to address any challenges caused by gender in leadership roles; therefore, resilience was essential. P5 reported:

I have had men challenge me because I was a woman and/or mansplain something that I said in a meeting because they thought that it made them look better to the boss than me.

I let it happen a couple of times and informed my immediate supervisor that I thought this was going on. My leadership said that they would talk to him – they made us sit down over mediation but took no other steps to stop the man of the same rank from undermining my authority or leadership position. It was a very difficult tour. (P5)

Finally, P9 reported that resilience was important, as well as strategically explaining themselves to the individuals that they are experiencing problems with. P9 stated:

I was a company XO for a male company commander. He and I had a great working relationship and he often referred to me as ‘the best XO ever’. After my XO time, I moved into the S-4 OIC position. The same male was still in command of the company. During a training exercise, he was unhappy with something that happened involving his company and came into the TOC to address it. This male is a large man, and very loud. Rather than speaking to me, he came in screaming at me. He accused me of not doing my job correctly. Meanwhile, a month earlier I was “the best XO ever”. I let him yell and didn’t challenge him. His voice is much louder than mine and he would have just spoken over me because of that. I remained calm and after he finished yelling, I explained what had happened. It wasn’t something that the S-4 or rest of the staff dropped the ball on, it was something that one of his LTs dropped the ball on. (P9)

Other participants did not report any specific strategies that were used, as they were able to discuss how they expected this from the military culture. For example, P3 stated:

Maturity – allowing your performance and knowledge/professionalism to dictate perception. Mentally accept that while different genders, backgrounds and ethnicity that it is the experience, determination and ability to implement the Army values is what makes an effective leader. (P3)

P4 agreed with P3, as they were able to discuss how it is important to not care what other people think; that is, allowing your professionalism to shine through:

Stop caring what other people think. Know what is important to you and let those values you ground you. You will find that other good people will seek you out. (P4)

P6 was able to agree with P3 and P4, as she reported that it is important to keep pushing yourself and accept the culture that the military promotes:

Score high on PT tests and run fast. Carry your weight and more. Put yourself out there and prove to your peers that you're an asset, not an anchor. You shouldn't have to prove yourself as a female but that's the way things are in the military, so rather than complaining about it, do something about it. Also, don't be a blue falcon. Find a way to connect with your soldiers. (P6)

Finally, P7 and P8 were able to discuss how important it is to continue to report any unfair instances in the workplace. P7 stated:

Since I can only speak from the National Guard point of view, the most effective way is to report, do what I can, protect those that I see (and those that come to me), and go home like any other job after the drill period is done. (P7)

P8 reported that it is important to keep your education and training as the focus:

If you're right, and you know you're right, don't let someone make you second guess yourself. Just remain confident in your education and training. (P8)

Sub-Research Question 1: What challenges do women leaders working in top leadership positions in the US military perceive as influencing their career success?

The first sub-research question aimed to understand what challenge women leaders experienced when working in top leadership positions in the US military, and how they

perceived these challenges as influencing their career success. Under this sub-research question, one theme emerged from the dataset: gendered workplace inequities.

Theme 2: Gendered Workplace Inequities

The second theme highlighted that the participants identified several gendered workplace inequities when working in top leadership positions in the US military. These inequities served to influence their career success and included negative stereotypes, fighting for similar professional experiences as their male counterparts, having to prove themselves to colleagues, representing stereotypes, and perceiving as being more emotional than rational. For example, P2 stated:

We have to fight 3 times as hard for the same opportunity given to a male. It's almost as if we have to prove a point that we are good enough to wear this uniform. (P2)

In addition, P4 reported:

The “good ol boys” club is strong throughout the officer ranks. If you're not in the in crowd, you can be isolated pretty quickly. Men view women as emotional leaders and are careful in what positions women hold. I've seen men be picked over women time and time again just because they're a male. In a specific situation, a male was chosen as an XO, but the female had a better resume, higher OER ratings, and on paper, was a better candidate. The answer should have been clear. (P4)

P6 reported that they had to work twice as hard to receive a position similar to that of a male counterpart:

I was one of the first women to serve as a Divisional ADA officer – there were some culture challenges to overcome. I routinely felt I needed to work twice as hard to prove I belonged. I went through a divorce which was challenging. (P6)

Finally, P10 also discussed how they were perceived as being more emotional than logistical or rational:

Female leaders often must battle to prove their point to their male counterparts. Although it may be the most likely course of action, women are thought to lead with their emotions more so than being logistical. (P10)

Other participants did not outwardly discuss any gendered workplace inequities; however, P1 stated:

I've observed that in evaluations, women are often described as 'collaborative' while men are praised for being 'assertive.' It creates this unspoken expectation that female leaders should prioritize consensus over decisiveness. (P1)

In addition, P3 stated:

Networking events are crucial for career advancement, but it's noticeable how men naturally connect with other men. As a woman, breaking into those circles requires extra effort. It's not about exclusion; it's just that the 'old boys' network' operates more organically. (P3)

P5 discussed possible differences between experiences of men and women:

There's this unwritten rule that women leaders need to strike the right balance between assertiveness and likability. It's a delicate line to walk, and I often find myself wondering if my male counterparts face the same scrutiny over their leadership style. (P5)

P7, P8, and P9 also reported similar instances:

It's not that they intentionally silence us, but sometimes it feels like our voices get lost in the room. The guys might acknowledge what we say, but it doesn't always translate into real influence or credit for our ideas. (P7)

Microaggressions persist, even in the heat of planning operations. Constant interruptions send a signal that my expertise is somehow less crucial. It's not overt bias, but it shapes an environment where my contributions are undervalued. (P8)

As a female officer, the expectation is to be both strong and nurturing. While camaraderie is vital, there's less room for assertiveness without being labeled as 'difficult.' It's a delicate balance, especially in a military culture that has deep-rooted gender norms. (P9)

Sub-Research Question 2: What strategies do women leaders in top leadership positions in the US military use to overcome identified challenges?

The second sub-research question aimed to identify strategies that women leaders in top leadership positions in the US military used to overcome identified challenges. Within this sub-research question, one theme emerged from the dataset: Personal and professional balance.

Theme 3: Personal and Professional Balance

The third theme that emerged from the dataset highlighted how the participants thought it was essential to have a strong balance between their personal and professional lives. This was highlighted when P1 discussed how they work hard to balance their professional and personal lives:

As a military officer, finding balance feels like a constant juggling act. There's a prevailing expectation to be fully committed to the mission, but maintaining connections with family and friends is equally vital. It's about navigating the demands of duty without losing sight of what truly matters. (P1)

P2 discussed how she separated her personal and professional lives when she went home:

Since I can only speak from the National Guard point of view, the most effective way is to report, do what I can, protect those that I see (and those that come to me), and go home like any other job after the drill period is done. (P2)

P3 stated:

Deployments put a strain on personal relationships. Balancing the call of duty with being there for family is a delicate dance. It's not just about physical distance; it's also the emotional toll of feeling torn between duty and the desire to be present for important moments back home. (P3)

Similarly, P4 also discussed the importance of balance:

There's an unspoken pressure to always be in 'mission mode.' Balancing personal time becomes tricky when there's a sense that any moment could turn into a mission. It's about finding that equilibrium between being prepared and allowing oneself the mental space to decompress. (P4)

P5 reported that it is difficult to balance personal relationships when working in the military:

Deployments and extended training periods can strain personal relationships. It's not just about being physically absent; the emotional toll weighs heavily. Balancing the demands of duty with nurturing personal connections is crucial for the overall well-being of military personnel. (P5)

P6 reported that it is important to keep a tight circle- not just with other top leadership employees, but with anyone they can find that is supportive of their endeavors:

Keep a tight circle – have people who are willing to question/ challenge/ listen/ and push you. Lean on those people during hard times. I have found a certain fellowship with other female leaders but not to the exclusion of male leaders – some of my best mentors are males. (P6)

P7 reported that she had never balanced her professional and personal lives, which she now highlights as a regret within her life:

I don't have a personal life. I have lost many relationships due to the strain of the military life. I am 31 years old; I don't have any children; I am not in a romantic relationship. All I have is my career. (P7)

P8 stated:

In the military, building and sustaining relationships is a battle of its own. Balancing the demands of the service with the need for personal connections requires constant effort. It's about finding ways to bridge the gaps created by deployments and demanding schedules, ensuring that the bonds forged on the home front remain resilient in the face of duty. (P8)

P9 discussed how it is important to balance personal and professional lives, especially since she wants to have children in the future:

It's tough. As I mentioned, I do not have children, but I plan to, and I worry about how I will be able to balance both. We do not have normal work hours as it is, and as a leader you are often required to work outside of normal duty hours. (P9)

Finally, in contrast, P10 reported how easy it has been to balance her professional and personal lives:

Balancing my personal and professional life has been quite simple for me over the past eight years. I prioritize my military career and notify my civilian employers when I am called to duty. Having the support from my family is a huge help and I maintain a calendar for important dates for any military obligation. (P10)

Sub-Research Question 3: What supports and resources do women leaders in the US military perceive as being needed to help them be successful in their roles?

The third sub-research question aimed to understand what supports and resources do women leaders in the US military perceive as being needed to help them be successful within

their roles. Within this sub-research question, one theme emerged from the dataset: Building and nurturing professional networks.

Theme 4: Building and Nurturing Professional Networks

The fourth theme highlighted how the participants perceive the importance of building and nurturing professional networks. Within this theme, many of the participants reported that it was important to find a mentor or another professional that can guide them and provide support.

For example, P1 stated:

I find some support systems for women leaders in the military as venting sessions or selective groups like high school social groups. There are some support systems for women leaders that provide quality advice, support, guidance, and mentorship but they are not advertised, and the success is contingent on who is currently assigned to the unit, installation, or area. All support systems are not created equal as the participants drive whether they are successful or not. (P1)

In addition, P2 reported that professional networks are best created outside of where they work:

I think the support systems, without creating cliques within the workplace, have to be created outside of your specified unit. It is hard, in my opinion, to find genuine people to support you when you are new and competing with peoples' friends, and fellow Soldiers that have been through deployments together. Outside help is the way to go. (P2)

P3 discussed how she has successfully utilized mentors; however, they have been male:

I do believe that mentorship is an asset. My mentors have been males and they have always provided realistic and mature advice. They had the ability to see things in a different perspective and out of the box. Allowed me to see things from a different standpoint. (P3)

P4 stated:

In the military, navigating your career path can be like navigating a complex battlefield. Having a mentor is like having a seasoned guide who's been through the same terrain. It's not just about career advice; it's about understanding the unwritten rules and having someone in your corner during the toughest missions. (P4)

Similarly, P5 reported:

In the military, your professional network is a force multiplier. It's not just about who you know; it's about who knows you and believes in your potential. Finding mentors and allies within this network is like having a team that amplifies your capabilities and supports you in achieving your objectives. (P5)

P6 also discussed the benefits of mentorship for support and networking:

Mentorship is critical for any leader. In the early part of my career, I had few mentors – I don't know if it was because I was the only woman or maybe I wasn't receptive to it. Later in my career, I found several mentors – each of them is different and provide a different perspective. I think diversity in mentors is key – beyond gender or other demographics. I have mentors I go to when I am tackling personnel problems vs mentors I engage when I am trying to tackle a messaging challenge. (P6)

P7 stated:

Mentorship in the military is a symbiotic relationship. Yes, mentors guide us, but they also gain fresh perspectives from mentees. It's a dynamic exchange that goes beyond hierarchy. Building these mentorship connections is like creating a network that strengthens both the individual and the collective force. (P7)

P8 discussed supportive relationships within the professional sphere, communicating and interacting with other leaders. P8 stated:

Personally, I find that most leaders are supportive of each other regardless of gender identity. Particularly for female naval officers, there are several platforms that allow for women to seek support openly and anonymously. Such platforms encourage unity and help to propel others in their careers. (P8)

P9 also reported:

Finding a mentor as a woman in the military is like discovering a compass in uncharted territory. It's not just about career guidance; it's about having someone who understands the nuances of being a woman in uniform. Mentorship becomes a lifeline, offering insights on navigating a path where few have gone before. (P9)

Finally, P10 discussed the difficulties of finding a mentor in the military:

In the military, finding a mentor who shares your gender can feel like searching for a needle in a haystack. The scarcity of women in senior ranks makes it challenging to connect with someone who has navigated similar gender-specific challenges. While valuable mentorship knows no gender, having a female mentor adds a layer of understanding that can be instrumental in overcoming unique hurdles. It's not just about breaking through professional barriers but also about forging a path that future generations of women can follow more easily. (P10)

Sub- Research Question 4: How do women leaders in the US military view leadership from a militaristic standpoint?

The final sub-research question aimed to understand how women leaders in the US military viewed leadership from a militaristic standpoint. Within this sub-research question, one theme emerged from the dataset: Gendered workplace pressures.

Theme 5: Gendered Workplace Pressures

The fifth theme that emerged from the dataset highlighted how the participants perceived that military leadership is embedded with gendered workplace pressures. For example, P1 discussed how women are typically seen as inferior to their male counterparts when it comes to leadership:

As a male dominated career field, I believe the perception of leadership in the military impact women leaders in a slightly negative manner as the military leaders are seen as physically and mentally strong, agile and decisive individuals. Women are seen as emotional, physically weak, fragile, and undecisive individuals. I have been made to feel that I could not show any signs of weakness, fear, or emotions otherwise I would not be seen as a good leader. For years, I hid my injuries, agreed to partake in activities that frighten me (water confidence course and airborne), and distanced myself from people to avoid deep connections to be seen as a “good” leader. (P1)

In addition, P2 agreed by stating:

I believe women are viewed as “not able” and can cause some women to question their abilities. I have experienced these very feelings, especially being placed amid people who have been in the profession for decades. (P2)

P3 also agreed with the other participants by stating:

I believe it’s a huge impact – again women already have a stigma that they are less than a man – that they are emotional creatures and therefore that fogs their ability to make decisions that are not based on feelings. I personally believe that judgement is automatically placed on a woman well before a man. (P3)

P4 reported:

In military leadership, there's this delicate balance between being authoritative and being likable. As a woman, the scrutiny intensifies. It's like walking a tightrope, where a misstep can lead to perceptions of being too assertive or not assertive enough. Striking that balance becomes a constant challenge. (P4)

P5 discussed how women in leadership positions in the military are seen as filling certain quotas: Men expect to see other men in top leadership positions, even if only subconsciously. To see a woman in a top position, there may be thoughts that she didn't deserve it, that it was the need for diversity to get her into the position or she took it away from a more qualified man because she was a woman and there was a quota. (P5)

P6 was able to discuss:

Defying gender stereotypes in military leadership is like breaking through a concrete wall. The pressure is not just about proving competence; it's about shattering preconceptions of what a leader 'should' look like. Every success becomes a step toward dismantling ingrained biases. (P6)

P7 was able to discuss how they had to operate within leadership due to gendered workplace pressures:

A lot of women feel the pressure to be hyper achievers just to compete with our male counterparts. Are there any unique challenges or expectations you have encountered based on the militaristic standpoint of leadership? You are often expected to think outside the box but stay inside the box. They want you to be uniform, but also find ways to operate differently to accomplish the mission. (P7)

P8 stated:

There's a glaring double standard in evaluating leadership in the military. As a woman, achievements are often scrutinized more closely, and any misstep can be magnified. It's like there's a narrower margin for error, adding an extra layer of pressure to perform at an exceptional level. (P8)

P9 reported more of a positive twist to their thoughts on gendered workplace pressures; although she recognized they were there she stated:

I believe that today, women are receiving continued recognition with increased cultural representation. We are placing ourselves in positions that fifty years ago we would not qualify for simple due to our gender. (P9)

Finally, P10 discussed:

As a woman in a leadership role, the expectations carry a unique weight. It's not just about commanding respect; it's about doing so while navigating the tightrope of gendered stereotypes. The pressure is palpable, and every decision feels like it carries the weight of challenging ingrained norms. (P10)

Emergent Findings: Race and Ethnicity

The emergent findings of this study highlight the interplay between race, ethnicity, and gender in the context of leadership positions within the US military. Race and ethnicity influence women leaders' experiences and challenges in this domain. Across various themes, such as resilience and adapted strategies, gendered workplace inequities, personal and professional balance, building and nurturing professional networks, and gendered workplace pressures, the intersectionality of race and ethnicity manifests in different ways. For example, women of color may develop unique resilience strategies to navigate racial biases and stereotypes while also contending with heightened discrimination and marginalization compared to their White

counterparts (Johnson et al., 2022). Balancing personal and professional responsibilities may also pose distinct challenges for racial and ethnic minorities, who may encounter additional familial, or community obligations influenced by cultural expectations (Jogulu & Franken, 2023). Similarly, access to influential professional networks and mentorship opportunities may be influenced by racial and ethnic backgrounds, with women from marginalized groups facing barriers in navigating predominantly White, male-dominated environments (Domingo et al., 2022). Moreover, the pressure to conform to leadership stereotypes may be heightened for women leaders of color, who must navigate intersecting societal expectations and perceptions (Glass & Cook, 2020). Because of these findings, adopting approaches that promote equity and inclusion within the military is essential, addressing all women's unique experiences and needs, irrespective of their racial or ethnic identities.

Summary

The problem being studied was that women continued to be underrepresented in the US military. The armed forces have implemented policies and initiatives to address gender disparities and challenges that women face, including mentorship programs, diversity training, and support networks (Bridges et al., 2023). However, despite such initiatives, women striving for top leadership positions in the military continued encountering challenges that impeded their advancement and representation. Therefore, this qualitative phenomenological study aimed to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of women leaders in the US military and how they had worked to overcome challenges when accessing top leadership positions.

This chapter presented the study's findings. Within this chapter, the researcher provided an overview of the research questions that guided the analysis and specific steps he took when conducting the qualitative thematic analysis. The researcher then provided an overview of the

demographic characteristics of the participants, as well as how he specifically coded the data. The researcher discussed how the analysis aligned with Braun and Clarke's (2019) six data analysis steps and then reported how he collated the codes into thematic categories. Illustrative quotes from the transcripts supported each thematic category, providing evidence to substantiate the findings of the five themes that emerged from the dataset: (a) resilience and adapted strategies, (b) gendered workplace inequities, (c) personal and professional balance, (d) building and nurturing professional networks, and (e) gendered workplace pressures (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The report presented a coherent narrative that reflected the participants' experiences, perspectives, and challenges as they strive for top leadership positions in the US military. The next chapter is Chapter 5 that will conclude the dissertation and discuss the findings and implications, identify experienced limitations, and explore areas of future research.

CHAPTER 5: Discussion

Introduction

This research explored the enduring issue of women's underrepresentation in the United States military. Despite the armed forces implementing various policies and initiatives, such as mentorship programs, diversity training, and support networks, to address gender disparities and challenges faced by women (Bridges et al., 2023), women with the ambition for high-ranking leadership roles encountered persistent obstacles impeding their advancement and representation. Hence, this qualitative phenomenological study explored the perceptions and lived experiences of female leaders in the U.S. military, examining how they navigated challenges in their pursuit of prominent leadership positions.

After conducting a thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six steps, the researcher identified five overarching themes within the qualitative data. The first theme, resilience and adapted strategies, indicates the participants' capacity to overcome challenges and employ adjusted approaches to navigate difficulties. The second theme, gendered workplace inequities, signifies patterns of unequal treatment or opportunities based on gender within the workplace. The third theme, personal and professional balance, encompasses the equilibrium between personal and professional aspects of individuals' lives. The fourth theme, building, and nurturing professional networks, suggests a focus on the importance of developing and maintaining meaningful connections in the professional sphere. Finally, the fifth theme, gendered workplace pressures, highlighted gender-specific pressures and expectations within the work environment. These identified themes provide a comprehensive insight into the various dimensions and challenges in the context under study, contributing to a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

This chapter will conclude the study by discussing the findings of previous literature and the theoretical frameworks that guided this research: the glass-ceiling theory, social identity theory, and the contingency theory of leadership. Within this chapter, the researcher will also discuss the study's implications and limitations that were experienced during the study. This chapter will then conclude with recommendations for future research.

Summary of the Study

The problem being studied was that women continued to be underrepresented in the US military. The armed forces have implemented policies and initiatives to address gender disparities and challenges that women face, including mentorship programs, diversity training, and support networks (Bridges et al., 2023). However, despite such initiatives, women striving for top leadership positions in the military continued encountering challenges that impeded their advancement and representation. Therefore, this qualitative phenomenological study aimed to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of women leaders in the US military and how they had worked to overcome challenges when accessing top leadership positions. This study utilized semi-structured interviews via Zoom video conferencing to collect data. The interviews provided a flexible framework for in-depth, open-ended discussions while ensuring consistency among participants, following the approach suggested by Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021). The researcher posed demographic questions and presented 15 open-ended inquiries, exploring the challenges, tactics, and support needs of women in top leadership positions in the U.S. military. The researcher included 10 women leaders from different branches of the US armed forces that included the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. The data analysis for this study employed a qualitative thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six steps.

Summary of the Findings

This study was guided by the following research questions:

Central Research Question: How do women leaders overcome experienced challenges when working within top leadership positions in the US military?

Sub-Research Question 1: What challenges do women leaders working in top leadership positions in the US military perceive as influencing their career success?

Sub-Research Question 2: What strategies do women leaders in top leadership positions in the US military use to overcome identified challenges?

Sub-Research Question 3: What supports and resources do women leaders in the US military perceive as being needed to help them be successful in their roles?

Sub- Research Question 4: How do women leaders in the US military view leadership from a militaristic standpoint?

The primary research question centered on how women leaders navigate challenges within top positions in the US military. The study explored five emerging themes to provide insights: (a) resilience and adapted strategies, (b) gendered workplace inequities, (c) personal and professional balance, (d) building and nurturing professional networks, and (e) gendered workplace pressures. Sub-Research Question 1 focused on the challenges perceived by women leaders. The identified themes of gendered workplace inequities and pressures highlighted the obstacles, including biases and the delicate balance required in their roles.

Sub-Research Question 2 explored strategies used by women leaders to overcome challenges. The theme of resilience and adapted strategies revealed diverse approaches, including maintaining professionalism, employing strategic communication, and adjusting leadership styles based on situations. In addition, Sub-Research Question 3 aimed to understand

the necessary support and resources for success. The theme of building professional networks and recognizing progress emphasized the importance of mentorship, diverse networks, and cultural representation for women leaders. Finally, Sub-Research Question 4 focused on women leaders' perspectives on military leadership. Although specific insights on this aspect were not explicitly mentioned, the identified themes indirectly contribute to understanding women leaders' perspectives on military leadership. In essence, the study addressed the central research question and sub-questions by revealing themes related to resilience, workplace inequities, balance, professional networks, and workplace pressures. These findings provide valuable insights into the experiences and strategies of women leaders in top positions within the US military.

Discussion of the Results

This section will discuss the themes related to previous research and the theoretical frameworks that guided this study: the glass ceiling theory, social identity theory, and the contingency theory of leadership.

Resilience and Adaptive Strategies of Women Leaders in the U.S. Military

The theme of resilience and adapted strategies among women leaders in the U.S. military aligns with existing literature on gender challenges in military settings. The experiences shared by participants, particularly instances of facing criticism and gender-based bias, resonate with the notion of the glass ceiling theory. For example, P1's account of receiving guidance to stay true to her beliefs despite gender-related criticism reflects the need for women to navigate institutional barriers and stereotypes, a common thread found in studies addressing the glass ceiling in various professional domains (Dahlvig & Longman, 2020; Ng & McGowan, 2022). Similarly, P2's encounter with gender-based expectations in a field artillery unit echoes the persistent

gender norms that have historically shaped military cultures, reinforcing the concept of a metaphorical barrier hindering women's advancement (Caudill, 2022).

Moreover, the participants' emphasis on resilience and the ability to persevere in the face of gendered challenges aligns with insights from the social identity theory. The need for women to assert themselves and earn respect in traditionally male-dominated spaces, as expressed by P2, mirrors the dynamics of social categorization and identity threat outlined in this theoretical framework (Jansen & Delahaij, 2019; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). The participants' accounts of addressing challenges by maintaining professionalism, as seen in P2, P5, and P6, resonate with the social identity theory's focus on positive social identity and the importance of individual actions in shaping group dynamics (Charness & Chen, 2020), as highlighted in Table 7 below.

Table 7

Main Participant Responses for Theme 1

Participant	Response
Participant 1	After speaking with a mentor on how to address the criticism, I was directed to hold true to my beliefs and approach as I would always receive criticism as I am a woman and men struggle with women in positions of leadership or power. As I never received negative criticism from my leaders or supervisors, I did not change my approach. If I heard a subordinate or peer speaking of me in a negative manner, I informed them that my approach was no different than any of them and their only issue with my approach is based on my gender and race as they never criticized any males, white or black, for having the same approach.
Participant 2	Coming in as the BN S1, my NCO told me that I had to earn my respect in a Field Artillery unit. He reminded me that women were not in combat units up until a few years

Participant	Response
Participant 5	ago, and that I wouldn't get respect until I acted like one of the guys. I observed his actions over time and realized that I was not the only person he was treating differently because of sex. I brought up the issues to the commander and ISG, but it was brushed off as him meaning to be "part of the team". (P2)
Participant 5	"I have had men challenge me because I was a woman and/or mansplain something that I said in a meeting because they thought that it made them look better to the boss than me. I let it happen a couple of times and informed my immediate supervisor that I thought this was going on. My leadership said that they would talk to him – they made us sit down over mediation but took no other steps to stop the man of the same rank from undermining my authority or leadership position. It was a very difficult tour." (P5)
Participant 6	Score high on PT tests and run fast. Carry your weight and more. Put yourself out there and prove to your peers that you're an asset, not an anchor. You shouldn't have to prove yourself as a female but that's the way things are in the military, so rather than complaining about it, do something about it. Also, don't be a blue falcon. Find a way to connect with your soldiers. (P6)

Additionally, the participants' strategic communication strategies, as demonstrated by P9, align with the contingency leadership theory. P9's decision to remain calm and explain a situation strategically during a confrontation with a superior reflects the adaptability and situational leadership skills emphasized in this theoretical framework (Deshwal & Ashraf Ali, 2020). The ability to adjust leadership approaches based on the specific challenges encountered in each situation resonates with the contingency theory's central tenets.

While some participants did not explicitly mention specific strategies, their emphasis on maturity, professionalism, and the importance of reporting instances of unfair treatment (P3, P4, P7, and P8) reflects a collective acknowledgment of the need to navigate the military culture strategically. This aligns with existing literature that underscores the significance of adopting diverse strategies to overcome gender-related hurdles in military environments (Andrés Eduardo Fernández-Osorio et al., 2023; Segal et al., 2016). In summary, this theme also highlighted participants who may not explicitly have mentioned specific strategies but emphasized qualities such as maturity, professionalism, and the importance of reporting instances of unfair treatment. These qualities are part of a collective acknowledgment among participants of the need to navigate the military culture strategically. This collective emphasis on strategic navigation aligns with existing literature that underscores the importance of adopting diverse strategies to overcome gender-related hurdles in military environments. By providing examples of strategic communication strategies aligned with leadership theories and emphasizing the strategic navigation of military culture, the information in this theme supports the idea that the theme of resilience and adapted strategies among women leaders in the U.S. military extends insights from existing literature. This theme demonstrates that these women leaders are resilient and strategically adept in addressing the challenges posed by gender-related issues within traditionally male-dominated military spaces.

In summary, this theme has highlighted the enduring challenges of gender bias in the U.S. military. Despite progress, women leaders face invisible barriers akin to the glass ceiling theory. Their emphasis on resilience implies active strategies to overcome gendered challenges, showcasing empowerment and determination. Aligning with social identity theory, the participants' experiences extend beyond personal narratives, reflecting broader societal

dynamics. The need for assertiveness in male-dominated spaces contributes to reshaping societal norms. In adopting contingency leadership theory, women leaders showcase adaptability, suggesting a nuanced approach to challenges with flexibility and situational awareness. The collective emphasis on professionalism and reporting unfair treatment indicates a strategic engagement with military culture. This strategic engagement highlights implications for organizational change, emphasizing the importance of fostering diversity and inclusion. In a broader context, these insights contribute to ongoing discussions on gender dynamics, advocating for continued efforts to break down barriers and create inclusive cultures, allowing women to thrive in leadership roles within and beyond the U.S. military. Overall, this theme highlights the strategic adeptness of women leaders, actively shaping their experiences and influencing gender relations in the military landscape.

Gendered Workplace Inequities in the U.S. Military

As identified by participants, the theme of gendered workplace inequities in the U.S. military aligns with existing literature on gender disparities within organizational structures. In alignment with previous literature, both McCristall and Baggaley (2019) and Tabassum and Nayak, (2021) reported that gendered workplace inequalities persist in the U.S. military, with women facing challenges such as differential promotion rates, unequal access to leadership roles, and disparities in opportunities for professional development. The participants shared experiences that shed light on the persistent challenges women leaders face, including negative stereotypes, the need to prove themselves to their male counterparts, and the existence of a perceived "good old boys" club. P2's assertion that women must fight three times as hard for the same opportunities resonates with the glass ceiling concept, illustrating the extra hurdles women encounter in pursuing professional advancement (Castillo, 2020). Similarly, P4's account of the

pervasive influence of the "good old boys" club and the tendency for men to view women as emotional leaders aligns with studies that have emphasized the impact of gendered stereotypes on career progression (McCristall & Baggaley, 2019; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). This aligns with research indicating that women often face higher performance expectations and are held to more rigorous standards than their male counterparts (Do & Samuels, 2020; Tenan, 2017). Furthermore, P10's observation that female leaders may be perceived as more emotional than logical or rational echoes the stereotypes women must confront in male-dominated fields, impacting their credibility and authority (Erwin, 2020). The participants' responses are seen in Table 8 below.

Table 8

Main Participant Responses for Theme 2

Participants	Response
Participant 2	“We have to fight 3 times as hard for the same opportunity given to a male. It’s almost as if we have to prove a point that we are good enough to wear this uniform.” (P2)
Participant 4	“The “good ol boys” club is strong throughout the officer ranks. If you’re not in the in crowd, you can be isolated pretty quickly. Men view women as emotional leaders and are careful in what positions women hold. I’ve seen men be picked over women time and time again just because they’re a male. In a specific situation, a male was chosen as an XO, but the female had a better resume, higher OER ratings, and on paper, was a better candidate. The answer should have been clear.” (P4)
Participant 6	“I was one of the first women to serve as a Divisional ADA officer – there were some culture challenges to overcome. I routinely felt I needed to work twice as hard to prove I

Participants	Response
Participant 10	<p data-bbox="824 268 1414 338">belonged. I went through a divorce which was challenging.” (P6)</p> <p data-bbox="824 380 1414 592">“Female leaders often must battle to prove their point to their male counterparts. Although it may be the most likely course of action, women are thought to lead with their emotions more so than being logistical.” (P10)</p>

Moreover, the insights shared by participants who did not explicitly discuss gendered workplace inequities, such as P1, P3, P5, P7, P8, and P9, reveal subtler forms of bias and challenges. For example, P1's observation of women being described as 'collaborative' while men are praised for being 'assertive' aligns with research on gendered language and its impact on perceptions of leadership (e.g., Smith et al., 2018). P3, P5, P7, P8, and P9 highlighted challenges related to networking, microaggressions, and expectations around assertiveness and nurturing, reflecting broader issues of inclusion and gender norms within military culture (Grindstaff, 2021).

This theme contributes to and extends the existing literature on gender dynamics in organizational settings, emphasizing the pervasive nature of inequities and stereotypes that women leaders contend with in their pursuit of career success within the military hierarchy. First, the insights shared by participants who did not explicitly discuss gendered workplace inequities uncover subtler forms of bias and challenges. For instance, the observation by P1 regarding gendered language, where women are described as 'collaborative' while men are praised for being 'assertive,' aligns with research on the impact of gendered language on perceptions of leadership (Smith et al., 2018). This specific example extends the literature by offering a

nuanced understanding of how language biases can subtly shape perceptions of leadership qualities in military settings.

Furthermore, the challenges highlighted by participants (P3, P5, P7, P8, and P9) related to networking, microaggressions, and expectations around assertiveness and nurturing contribute to the literature by shedding light on specific issues within military culture. These challenges reflect broader issues of inclusion and gender norms, going beyond a simple focus on overt inequities. For example, mentioning microaggressions and expectations around assertiveness and nurturing adds depth to the discussion, emphasizing the complexity of the hurdles women leaders face in their military careers. This nuanced exploration of challenges extends the existing literature by providing a more comprehensive view of the multifaceted nature of gender dynamics within the organizational context of the military hierarchy.

In summary, the participants' experiences reveal challenges for women leaders, exposing overt disparities and subtler biases in the military hierarchy. The acknowledgment that women are often labeled 'collaborative' while men are praised as 'assertive' highlights the impact of gendered language on leadership perceptions. This highlights the need to address language biases for an inclusive leadership culture. Moreover, challenges in networking, microaggressions, and expectations around assertiveness and nurturing offer a comprehensive view of obstacles. Recognition of microaggressions demonstrates the need for a cultural shift to eliminate subtle yet impactful discrimination. Expectations around assertiveness and nurturing reveal societal norms hindering women from aligning with traditional leadership styles, urging a reevaluation for diversity.

This theme emphasizes the influence of the "good old boys" club and stereotypes hindering women's advancement, necessitating the dismantling of entrenched cultural norms.

Intentional efforts for inclusivity, basing evaluations on skills rather than stereotypes, are vital for creating a diverse and equitable military environment. This theme goes beyond acknowledging workplace inequities, calling for a more robust approach to address disparities and biases. Addressing linguistic biases, dismantling cultural norms, and challenging societal expectations are essential for fostering an inclusive environment, ultimately strengthening diversity within the military.

The Interplay of Personal and Professional Realities for Women Leaders in the Military

The theme of the interplay of personal and professional realities for women leaders in the military underscores the balancing act participants face in harmonizing their military obligations with personal lives. The participants' experiences align with previous literature on the challenges and complexities of maintaining this equilibrium (Cramm et al., 2019). Table 9 below highlights the responses of the main participants for this theme.

Table 9

Main Participant Responses for Theme 3

Participants	Response
Participant 1	“As a military officer, finding balance feels like a constant juggling act. There's a prevailing expectation to be fully committed to the mission, but maintaining connections with family and friends is equally vital. It's about navigating the demands of duty without losing sight of what truly matters.” (P1)
Participant 2	“Since I can only speak from the National Guard point of view, the most effective way is to report, do what I can, protect those that I see (and those that come to me), and go home like any other job after the drill period is done.” (P2)

Participants	Response
Participant 3	“Deployments put a strain on personal relationships. Balancing the call of duty with being there for family is a delicate dance. It's not just about physical distance; it's also the emotional toll of feeling torn between duty and the desire to be present for important moments back home.” (P3)
Participant 4	“There's an unspoken pressure to always be in 'mission mode.' Balancing personal time becomes tricky when there's a sense that any moment could turn into a mission. It's about finding that equilibrium between being prepared and allowing oneself the mental space to decompress.” (P4)
Participant 5	“Deployments and extended training periods can strain personal relationships. It's not just about being physically absent; the emotional toll weighs heavily. Balancing the demands of duty with nurturing personal connections is crucial for the overall well-being of military personnel.” (P5)

P1 articulated the perpetual juggling act of a military officer, emphasizing the pervasive expectation to be fully committed to the mission while concurrently nurturing familial and social connections (Margolies Beitler & Gerstein, 2021). This resonates with previous studies highlighting the strain deployments and duty demands impose on physical and emotional personal relationships (Manser, 2020). P2's emphasis on reporting, protecting, and creating a clear boundary between professional and personal life reflects coping mechanisms utilized in the National Guard, echoing the importance of compartmentalization in managing military duties (e.g., Manser, 2020).

The emotional toll of deployments on personal relationships is further illuminated by P3, emphasizing the delicate dance between duty and familial presence, capturing the challenges military leaders encounter (Hamilton-Wright, 2021). P4's discussion of the unspoken pressure to be in 'mission mode' continuously also underscores the constant mental balancing act required in a military career, resonating with the literature on the psychological toll of military service (Hsieh & Tsai, 2019). The reflections of P5 highlight the multifaceted nature of the emotional toll on military personnel during deployments and extended training, reinforcing the importance of nurturing personal connections for overall well-being. P6 emphasized the significance of maintaining a tight circle of support, echoing the literature on the importance of mentorship and social networks for coping with the challenges of military leadership. However, P7's regretful acknowledgment of the sacrifices made in her personal life due to the military highlights the profound impact on relationships and personal fulfillment. This theme aligns with previous literature on the complexities, challenges, and coping mechanisms of balancing military obligations and personal lives.

The diverse experiences of participants contribute valuable insights into the nuanced nature of this interplay, highlighting the need for further research and support mechanisms to address the unique demands women leaders face in the military. In summary, navigating military obligations while maintaining personal lives poses a multifaceted challenge for the participants, evidenced by the emotional strains on relationships and these leaders' constant mental balancing act. Coping mechanisms reveal that establishing clear boundaries and cultivating a robust support network underscores the adaptability and resilience of women leaders. Clear boundaries assist in managing military duties while preserving personal space, and a strong support network,

akin to mentorship and social connections, proves indispensable in addressing the unique challenges of military leadership.

However, this theme also highlights potential personal sacrifices women leaders make due to military service, emphasizing the need for more robust support mechanisms. The implications go beyond recognizing challenges, indicating the necessity for tailored resources, comprehensive mental health support, and family-friendly policies within the military. This emphasizes the urgency of implementing measures to address women leaders' distinctive demands, ensuring their well-being and satisfaction in both personal and professional realms. The overarching goal is not just to retain and support women leaders but also to enhance the resilience and effectiveness of the military as a whole. In this context, this theme demonstrates the importance of fostering an environment that recognizes and accommodates the unique challenges encountered by women in military leadership roles.

Building and Nurturing Professional Networks Among Women Leaders in the Military

The theme of building and nurturing professional networks among women leaders in the military emphasizes the critical role of professional connections, mentorship, and support systems in the career trajectories of women in leadership roles within the military. Participants consistently underscored the significance of finding mentors and fostering relationships outside their immediate units. This resonates with existing literature that emphasizes the pivotal role of mentorship in career development and navigating the complex military terrain (Portillo et al., 2022). Table 10 below highlights the participants' responses for this theme.

Table 10*Main Participant Responses for Theme 4*

Participants	Response
Participant 2	“I think the support systems, without creating cliques within the workplace, have to be created outside of your specified unit. It is hard, in my opinion, to find genuine people to support you when you are new and competing with peoples’ friends, and fellow Soldiers that have been through deployments together. Outside help is the way to go.” (P2)
Participant 3	“I do believe that mentorship is an asset. My mentors have been males and they have always provided realistic and mature advice. They had the ability to see things in a different perspective and out of the box. Allowed me to see things from a different standpoint.” (P3)
Participant 4	“In the military, navigating your career path can be like navigating a complex battlefield. Having a mentor is like having a seasoned guide who's been through the same terrain. It's not just about career advice; it's about understanding the unwritten rules and having someone in your corner during the toughest missions.” (P4)
Participant 5	“In the military, your professional network is a force multiplier. It's not just about who you know; it's about who knows you and believes in your potential. Finding mentors and allies within this network is like having a team that amplifies your capabilities and supports you in achieving your objectives. “(P5)
Participant 6	“Mentorship is critical for any leader. In the early part of my career, I had few mentors – I don’t know if it was because I was the only women or maybe I wasn’t receptive to it. Later in my career, I found several mentors – each of them is different and provide a

Participants	Response
Participant 7	<p data-bbox="824 268 1403 485">different perspective. I think diversity in mentors is key – beyond gender or other demographics. I have mentors I go to when I am tackling personnel problems vs mentors I engage when I am trying to tackle a messaging challenge.” (P6)</p> <p data-bbox="824 562 1403 846">“Mentorship in the military is a symbiotic relationship. Yes, mentors guide us, but they also gain fresh perspectives from mentees. It's a dynamic exchange that goes beyond hierarchy. Building these mentorship connections is like creating a network that strengthens both the individual and the collective force.” (P7)</p>

As depicted in Table 4, P1 acknowledged the variability in the effectiveness of support systems, highlighting the participant-driven nature of their success. This aligns with previous research that emphasized the importance of active engagement and agency in seeking mentorship (Gleiman & Gleiman, 2020). Additionally, P2 stressed the need for support networks beyond the workplace, recognizing the challenges of forming genuine connections within the organizational hierarchy and supporting the idea that external help can provide valuable perspectives (Kizer et al., 2019).

While some participants, like P3, reported having found valuable mentorship from male counterparts, others, such as P6 and P10, emphasized the potential challenges of finding female mentors due to the underrepresentation of women in senior ranks. This echoes previous literature on the scarcity of women in leadership roles and the potential benefits of gender-matched mentorship (Blanchard & Blanchard, 2020). Furthermore, P5's comparison of a professional

network to a force multiplier aligns with studies highlighting the collective strength of a supportive network, emphasizing its role in career amplification (Blanchard & Blanchard, 2020). The symbiotic nature of mentorship underscores the dynamic exchange of insights between mentors and mentees, contributing to the overall strength of the military collective. For example, P8 and P9 emphasized supportive relationships within the professional sphere, acknowledging the importance of open communication and interaction among leaders. These reflections align with the literature on the positive impact of support platforms on fostering unity and career advancement. In summary, the participants' insights within this theme align with established literature on the significance of mentorship, diverse networks, and support systems in women leaders' career progression in the military. The identified themes contribute valuable perspectives to the ongoing discourse surrounding the unique challenges and opportunities faced by women in military leadership roles.

In summary, this theme emphasized that the building and nurturing professional networks among women leaders in the military holds practical implications. Acknowledging the participant-driven nature of success highlights the importance of actively seeking mentorship and engaging in support networks. The emphasis on support networks beyond the workplace highlights the value of diverse perspectives and external insights. Challenges in finding female mentors due to underrepresentation in senior ranks demonstrate the need for intentional efforts to address gender imbalances and promote mentorship opportunities for women leaders. The comparison of a professional network to a force multiplier emphasizes the collective strength that supportive networks bring to individual careers. This highlights the practical benefit of fostering a culture that values and encourages mentorship and collaboration.

The symbiotic nature of mentorship suggests practical advantages in creating mentorship programs that facilitate such exchanges. Encouraging supportive relationships within the professional sphere can have tangible benefits in fostering unity, enhancing career advancement, and contributing to the overall effectiveness of the military. These practical insights demonstrate the need for actionable steps, such as promoting mentorship programs, addressing gender imbalances, and fostering a culture of support. These measures are not only beneficial for individual career trajectories but also contribute to building a more robust and resilient military force.

Gendered Workplace Pressures on Women Leaders in the U.S. Military

The theme of gendered workplace pressures on women leaders in the U.S. military highlights the pervasive challenges and expectations women face in military leadership roles. The participants consistently highlighted the deep-seated stereotypes and biases that cast women leaders in a negative light. For example, P1 and P2 expressed the perception that women are often viewed as inferior, facing doubts about their capabilities merely based on their gender. This aligns with existing literature emphasizing the impact of gender stereotypes on leadership evaluations and opportunities (e.g., Smith et al., 2018). Moreover, the participants, including P3, underscored the impact of gendered workplace pressures, arguing that women leaders are judged more harshly than their male counterparts. The perception that women are emotionally driven and indecisive hampers their ability to make decisions based on merit, reinforcing the existing gender bias within military leadership (e.g., Doan & Portillo, 2019). P4 described the balance women must strike between being authoritative and likable, highlighting the additional scrutiny women face in leadership positions. Previous research, particularly the study by Doan and Portillo (2019), supports the observation made by P4 by highlighting the perception that women

are often unfairly seen as emotionally driven and indecisive. As indicated by Doan and Portillo, this stereotype can impede women's ability to make merit-based decisions. P4's insight about the need for women to balance authority and likability aligns with this literature, as it reflects the challenges women face in navigating gender biases that cast them as emotionally driven or indecisive.

Moreover, research by Smith et al. (2018) emphasizes the broader impact of gender stereotypes on leadership evaluations and opportunities. P4's description adds a perspective by highlighting how these stereotypes manifest in the day-to-day experiences of women leaders in the military. The requirement to balance authority and likability speaks to how gender stereotypes influence not only evaluations but also the behavioral expectations placed on women in leadership roles. The pressure to navigate this balance contributes to a constant challenge that exceeds the expectations of their male counterparts. P5 discussed that women in top military positions are often perceived as filling diversity quotas, implying skepticism about their qualifications and capabilities. This perception aligns with research on women's challenges in overcoming biases related to affirmative action policies. P6 also discussed the struggle of defying gender stereotypes, emphasizing women leaders' pressure to break through ingrained biases and preconceptions.

While most participants expressed the challenges associated with gendered workplace pressures, P9 introduced a more positive perspective by acknowledging the progress made in women's recognition and cultural representation in leadership positions. This positive outlook aligns with broader societal changes recognizing and challenging gender stereotypes. In summary, the participants' narratives within this theme have highlighted the need for continued efforts to address and dismantle deeply ingrained biases and stereotypes within the military

leadership context. The insights contribute to the broader discourse on gender dynamics, offering valuable perspectives for advancing equity and inclusivity in military leadership roles.

In summary, addressing gendered workplace pressures on women leaders in the U.S. military requires practical steps and cultural shifts. This includes fostering awareness, promoting education on gender biases, and encouraging open dialogue. Training programs emphasizing diversity and inclusion contribute to a more supportive workplace. Organizations can implement performance evaluation systems emphasizing objective criteria to address the perception that women leaders face harsher judgment. Tailored leadership development programs and proactive initiatives, like mentorship programs, help women navigate challenges and showcase their capabilities. Efforts to overcome skepticism about qualifications and promote diversity should involve intentional recruitment and the creation of pathways for women based on merit. Establishing mentorship networks and support systems aids women leaders in navigating challenges associated with gendered workplace pressures. Aligning with broader societal changes challenging gender stereotypes, the military can contribute by promoting diverse role models, increasing the visibility of women in leadership, and actively dismantling biases in policies and practices.

Emergent Findings: Race and Ethnicity

The emergent findings of this study highlight the interplay between race, ethnicity, and gender in the context of leadership positions within the US military. The emergent findings of this study highlight the complex interaction between intersectionality, bias, microaggressions, and the experiences of women leaders in the US military. Etherington et al. (2020) reported that intersectionality recognizes that individuals hold multiple social identities that intersect and interact to shape their experiences and outcomes. Therefore, in the context of this study, the

intersection of race, ethnicity, and gender could easily influence any challenges women leaders face, highlighting the need for a more robust understanding of their experiences.

Bias can also play a pivotal role in shaping the opportunities and barriers encountered by women leaders of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (Gullo & Beachum, 2020). Blanche (2021) discussed how women of color may confront systemic biases based on racial stereotypes and prejudices, which can impact their access to leadership positions, opportunities for advancement, and perceptions of their competence and legitimacy within the military hierarchy. Moreover, implicit biases may manifest subtly, influencing decision-making processes, evaluations, and interactions within the workplace.

Microaggressions further compound the experiences of women leaders, particularly those from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups (Holder et al., 2015). These subtle, often unintentional expressions of bias and discrimination can take various forms, such as racial slights, stereotyping, or invalidating experiences based on gender or race. For example, Zambrana et al. (2017) reported that women leaders of color may encounter microaggressions through comments questioning their qualifications or attributing their success to affirmative action rather than merit. Such experiences can decrease morale, confidence, and sense of belonging, creating additional barriers to career advancement and professional fulfillment. Incorporating an intersectional lens is crucial for understanding how bias and microaggressions operate within the military context. It requires acknowledging the intersecting identities of women leaders and recognizing how these intersecting identities shape their experiences of discrimination and marginalization. Therefore, by confronting bias and microaggressions through an intersectional lens, the military can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for women leaders of all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study's far-reaching implications encompass critical aspects of organizational practices, leadership development, and gender equity initiatives within the U.S. military. The revelation of both subtle and overt gendered workplace inequities experienced by women leaders serves as a call for a comprehensive reassessment of existing organizational practices. To cultivate a more equitable and supportive environment, there is a need to implement inclusive policies that address gender-specific challenges, scrutinize language choices to avoid perpetuating stereotypes and reassess promotion criteria to ensure fairness in career progression. In leadership development, the findings of this study accentuate the imperative of integrating gender-sensitive programs into military training protocols (Tarnaala, 2016). This integration is essential for equipping leaders with the skills to navigate challenges related to assertiveness, likability, and gendered language. Such an inclusive approach not only acknowledges the unique hurdles faced by women leaders but also fosters a leadership culture that is supportive and accommodating. The military can shape a more inclusive, adaptive, and resilient leadership culture by incorporating these considerations into leadership training.

Furthermore, this study underscores the necessity of recognizing and mitigating the impact of pervasive gender stereotypes on decision-making processes and evaluations within military contexts (Heilman & Caleo, 2018). This recognition is crucial for developing well-rounded leaders evaluated based on their merits rather than conforming to gendered expectations. Addressing these stereotypes head-on and actively working to dismantle them can contribute to a more diverse and influential leadership cadre within the U.S. military.

Another implication drawn from this study highlights mentorship's crucial role for women leaders in the military, emphasizing its importance and the associated advantages

(Randolph Jr & Nisbett, 2019). Mentorship programs crafted to address the challenges women encounter in the military serve as a vital avenue for their professional development and overall success. Considering the identified gendered workplace inequities, mentorship emerges as a pivotal mechanism enabling women leaders to access guidance, support, and career advice from seasoned professionals who have adeptly navigated comparable challenges. This structured mentorship offers a platform for candid discussions about the nuances of military culture, gender biases, and pragmatic strategies for advancing one's career (Randolph Jr & Nisbett, 2019). The significance of mentorship lies in its capacity to empower women leaders, assisting them in cultivating resilience, surmounting obstacles, and strategically navigating their careers within an environment where they may confront unique challenges.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study hold profound theoretical implications, advancing insights gleaned from the different theoretical frameworks—namely, the glass ceiling theory, social identity theory, and the contingency theory of leadership. Regarding the glass ceiling theory, the theme of resilience and adapted strategies manifest the enduring challenges women leaders confront within the military hierarchy. This aligns with the established literature on the glass ceiling, substantiating the recurrent theme across various professional domains wherein women struggle with institutional impediments and stereotypes (e.g., Chen et al., 2021, Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). The participants' narratives highlighted the need for strategic navigation amidst these hurdles, aligning seamlessly with the fundamental tenets of the glass ceiling theory.

Moreover, the lens of social identity theory enriches understanding of complex dynamics. The emphasis on resilience and the imperative for women to assert themselves in traditionally male-dominated spheres mirrors the core principles of social identity theory (Bakhta, 2022). The

exploration of social categorization, identity threat, and the participants' proactive approaches to shaping group dynamics demonstrates the theory's relevance in explaining the experiences of women leaders in the U.S. military. Furthermore, the theme of strategic communication strategies among participants aligns with the contingency theory of leadership. For example, P9's adept decision to remain composed and deploy strategic communication during a confrontation illustrates the adaptability and situational leadership skills essential in contingency theory. The insight exhibited by women leaders in adjusting their approaches based on the challenges within their military roles aligns with the foundational tenets of contingency theory (Lartey, 2020). In summation, the theoretical implications demonstrate the coherence between the identified themes and the foundational frameworks of the glass ceiling theory, social identity theory, and the contingency theory of leadership. This synthesis enriches a theoretical understanding and highlights women leaders' resilience in navigating the complexities of top leadership positions within the U.S. military.

Limitations of the Study

While this qualitative phenomenological inquiry offers valuable perspectives into the experiences of women leaders in the U.S. military and their strategies for overcoming challenges in high-ranking roles, it is essential to acknowledge specific constraints. Initially, this study's applicability may be confined owing to its exclusive focus on the U.S. military context. Consequently, the findings may not translate to diverse organizational settings or military frameworks in distinct countries, limiting the external relevance of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Moreover, this study's reliance on self-reported experiences introduces the potential for social desirability bias, as participants may lean towards presenting their encounters in a positive light (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). While offering insights, the inherent subjectivity of

phenomenological research poses a hurdle concerning generalizability, given the potential for substantial variation in individual experiences. Furthermore, this study's cross-sectional design constrains exploring temporal changes and advancements. Opting for a longitudinal approach could furnish a more dynamic comprehension of how challenges and strategies evolve for women leaders in the U.S. military throughout their careers.

This research is also shaped by the socio-political context prevailing during data collection, rendering it susceptible to shifts in policies or societal attitudes that could affect the relevance of the findings in the future. Additionally, the study's exploration lacks depth in intersectionality, and a more thorough investigation or exploration into how elements such as race, ethnicity, and socio-economic background intersect with gender in shaping leadership experiences could yield a more holistic understanding. Notwithstanding these limitations, this study establishes a groundwork for subsequent research endeavors to expand upon, furnishing crucial insights into the hurdle's women leaders face in the U.S. military and the strategies they deploy to navigate the intricacies of a demanding professional landscape.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research holds opportunities for further exploration, particularly in understanding the intersectionality of gender with other identity factors such as race, ethnicity, and socio-economic background among women leaders in the U.S. military. To guide future researchers, potential research questions should examine how these intersecting elements collectively shape the leadership experiences of women from various backgrounds within the military hierarchy. By examining the unique challenges diverse groups of women face, researchers can contribute to a more holistic comprehension of the intricate dynamics at play.

Advocating for a longitudinal research design is imperative for gaining a more robust perspective on women leaders' evolving challenges and strategies throughout their military careers. This approach facilitates the identification of patterns, developments, and changes in the professional landscape over time (Bala, 2020). Understanding the enduring impact of gender-related challenges requires a dynamic lens provided by a longitudinal approach, enriching our insights into the complexities of women's careers within the military.

In evaluating interventions and policies, future research could meaningfully contribute by scrutinizing the effectiveness of specific initiatives implemented by the military to address gender disparities. For instance, delving into the impact of mentorship programs on career trajectories or examining how diversity training influences workplace dynamics would provide actionable insights. Such focused evaluations can guide refining and tailoring interventions to foster gender equity within military leadership.

Considering comparative studies across different military branches or international contexts offers an avenue for comprehensive analysis. Exploring potential commonalities and distinctions in the experiences of women leaders within varied military settings can foster a global understanding of gender dynamics in military leadership. For example, researchers might examine how leadership expectations or opportunities for women differ between branches or nations, contributing to a broader comprehension of challenges and opportunities.

In exploring organizational culture and leadership practices, future research can explore specific aspects such as communication styles or decision-making processes. Investigating how these cultural norms impact the experiences of women leaders in the military provides practical insights for organizational reforms aimed at cultivating a more inclusive and supportive environment. Connecting these future research recommendations to the groundwork laid by this

study, which highlighted challenges and strategies employed by women leaders, creates a logical continuum. In doing so, researchers can address or more deeply explore specific challenges identified in this study, enriching the understanding of the intricacies of women's experiences within the U.S. military. In summary, these future research recommendations align with the overarching goal of advancing comprehension of the challenges and opportunities for women leaders in the U.S. military. By exploring intersectionality, employing longitudinal designs, evaluating interventions, conducting comparative analyses, and investigating organizational culture, researchers can contribute significantly to fostering gender equality in military leadership roles.

Conclusion

This study addressed the underrepresentation of women in the U.S. military, a longstanding issue despite implemented policies and initiatives aimed at rectifying gender disparities. Military organizations have introduced mentorship programs, diversity training, and support networks to foster gender-inclusive practices, improve leadership development, and enhance recruitment strategies. Despite these efforts, women aspiring to top leadership positions encountered ongoing challenges hindering their progression (Bridges et al., 2023). Identifying five key themes—resilience and adapted strategies, gendered workplace inequities, personal and professional balance, building and nurturing professional networks, and gendered workplace pressures—provides a comprehensive understanding of women leaders' complex challenges. These themes highlight various aspects of women's experiences, including intersectionality challenges, mental health considerations, and organizational support. Specifically, this study explored the integration of work and personal life challenges within the unique context of military service, highlighting stress, burnout, and coping mechanisms. The recognition of these

themes contributes to a more robust understanding of the multifaceted challenges faced by women leaders in the military.

Discussing these themes within established theoretical frameworks—glass-ceiling theory, social identity theory, and the contingency theory of leadership—enhances scholarly dialogue on gender dynamics within the military. The implications extend beyond immediate findings, emphasizing the importance of inclusive approaches, assessing interventions and policies for practical insights, and advocating for context-specific approaches through comparative studies across military branches and international contexts. Acknowledging study limitations, including potential biases, U.S.-centric focus, and the absence of in-depth intersectional analysis, is vital. These limitations lay the groundwork for future research, suggesting avenues for exploration into diverse contexts, methodologies, and intersectional factors influencing women's leadership experiences in the military. This study highlighted challenges and provided a course for ongoing research. By addressing these recommendations and expanding upon the established foundation, stakeholders can actively contribute to advancements in gender equity within military leadership, fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for women in the U.S. military and beyond.

Personal Reflection

Upon reflection, exploring the experiences of women leaders in the U.S. military has been both enlightening and thought-provoking. The themes of resilience and adapted strategies, gendered workplace inequities, personal and professional balance, building and nurturing professional networks, and gendered workplace pressures provide a comprehensive view of these leaders' challenges. Witnessing how these women navigate complex intersections of their

personal and professional lives within the military has emphasized the urgent need for organizational change.

The study's exploration of emerging themes, such as intersectionality challenges and mental health considerations, adds depth to my understanding. It highlights women's struggles, offering insights into the balancing act required in military service. Furthermore, the emphasis on organizational support as a critical theme highlights the impact of institutional backing on the experiences of women leaders.

Linking these findings to established theoretical frameworks enhances the scholarly discourse, providing a robust foundation for addressing gender dynamics within the military. The study's implications extend beyond academia, urging military practitioners to consider practical applications. The call for inclusive approaches, assessment of interventions, and advocacy for context-specific strategies offer actionable steps toward fostering a more equitable and supportive environment. Acknowledging the study's limitations is essential, as it opens doors for future research exploration. The emphasis on a U.S.-centric focus and the absence of in-depth intersectional analysis provides clear directions for expanding the scope of inquiry. By recognizing these limitations, the study paves the way for a more comprehensive examination of diverse contexts and factors influencing women's leadership experiences in the military.

Final Thoughts

This study offers in-depth insights into their challenges and strategies, providing a nuanced perspective beyond surface-level assessments. Linking findings to established theories contributes to scholarly discourse and equips military practitioners with theoretical insights. The practical implications extend to targeted interventions, including mentorship programs and support networks, fostering a more equitable environment. Acknowledging limitations guides

future research, emphasizing the study's potential legacy in inspiring ongoing efforts to dismantle barriers, promote gender equity, and create an inclusive environment for women in military leadership.

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APPENDIX A: IRB Approval



Aug 29, 2023 3:41:38 PM EDT

Jane Beese
Teacher Ed and Leadership St

Re: Exempt - Initial - 2024-16 Why Is There A Lack Of Women In Key Leadership Positions in The Us Military?

Dear Dr. Jane Beese:

Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board has rendered the decision below for Why Is There A Lack Of Women In Key Leadership Positions in The Us Military?

Decision: Exempt

Selected Category: Category 2.(i). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects;

Any changes in your research activity should be promptly reported to the Institutional Review Board and may not be initiated without IRB approval except where necessary to eliminate hazard to human subjects. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects should also be promptly reported to the IRB.

The IRB would like to extend its best wishes to you in the conduct of this study.

Sincerely,
Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board

APPENDIX B: Participant Recruitment Email

Dear [Name],

My name is Brandon Willis-Frazier from Youngstown State University. I am conducting a study to investigate the perceptions and lived experiences of women leaders in the US military, aiming to explore how they have navigated and overcome the challenges associated with accessing top leadership positions. In this study, you will be asked to complete a private interview that will last between 45 minutes to one hour, as well as an additional follow-up interview that will last for approximately 15 minutes. I will also need to collect information to describe you such as your age, race, education level, leadership position, and length of time served in the military.

For individuals participating in this study, they must meet the following criteria:

- Each individual must be a woman.
- Each individual must currently be actively enrolled in the armed forces.
- Each individual must currently work in a top leadership position, defined in this study as Captain, Major, Lieutenant Colonel, Colonel, Brigadier General, or General.

Also, after each interview, I will be asking participants if they know of any other individuals that would be interested in participating in the study.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me by replying to this message. Alternatively, I am available to answer any questions by phone at 646-316-4341.

Best Regards,
Brandon Willis-Frazier

APPENDIX C: Informed Consent

Dear [Participant]:

I am Brandon Willis-Frazier from Youngstown State University. I am conducting a study to investigate the perceptions and lived experiences of women leaders in the US military, aiming to explore how they have navigated and overcome the challenges associated with accessing top leadership positions. In this study, you will be asked to complete a private interview that will last between 45 minutes to one hour, as well as an additional follow-up interview that will last for approximately 15 minutes. I will also need to collect information to describe you such as your age, race, education level, leadership position, and length of time served in the military.

You will meet with me for two separate sessions and your participation should take about 45 minutes for the first session, and 15 minutes for the second session. You may be at risk of harm because of this research. The harm could include emotional/psychological harm, as you may experience negative emotional feelings during the interview. The likelihood that you will be harmed is minimized because I will allow you to answer any of the questions in any manner that you see fit, or ultimately refuse to answer any question that is asked.

The benefits to you from being in this study can be widespread to society. For example, this study can help better understand the experiences and perspectives of women serving in combat roles and leadership positions, which can shed light on the progress made, the existing barriers, and the potential benefits of diverse leadership in the military, fostering more inclusive and effective armed forces and social justice for all.

Your privacy is important, and I will handle all information collected about you in a confidential manner. I will report the results of my study in a way that will not identify you. I plan to present the results of the study to my dissertation committee. You do not have to be in this study. If you don't want to, you can say no without losing any benefits that you are entitled to. If you do agree, you can stop participating at any time.

If you wish to withdraw, just tell me or the contact person listed below. If you have questions about this research project, please contact my faculty advisor JBeese@ysu.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research project, you may contact the Office of Research Services at YSU (330-941-2377) or at YSUIRB@ysu.edu.

I understand the study described above and have been given a copy of this consent document. I am 18 years of age or older and I agree to participate.

Signature of Participant Date

APPENDIX D: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Can you describe your journey to reaching a top leadership position in the US military? What were some of the key challenges you faced along the way?
2. In your opinion, what are the main obstacles or challenges that women leaders encounter when pursuing top leadership positions in the military?
3. Could you share a specific instance where you encountered a challenge related to your gender while working in a top leadership position? How did you handle it?
4. What strategies or approaches have you found effective in overcoming the challenges you faced as a woman leader in the US military?
5. How do you perceive the support systems within the military for women leaders aspiring to top leadership positions? In what ways do they facilitate or hinder your progress?
6. Can you identify any resources or support networks that have been particularly helpful for you in navigating the path to top leadership positions in the military?
7. How do you view the role of mentorship in the advancement of women leaders in the US military? Have you had any mentors who have played a significant role in your career? If so, how have they influenced your success?
8. Have you observed any specific organizational or cultural factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions in the military? If so, can you elaborate on them?
9. In your experience, do you think there are any differences in the leadership styles or approaches of women leaders compared to their male counterparts in the military? If yes, how would you describe these differences?
10. From your perspective, what initiatives or changes could be implemented within the military to further promote and support women in their pursuit of top leadership positions?
11. How do you believe the perception of leadership in the military impact women leaders? Are there any unique challenges or expectations you have encountered based on the militaristic standpoint of leadership?
12. Have you encountered any instances of unconscious bias or gender-based stereotypes in the military that have affected your career progression? If so, how did you address or navigate these situations?

13. Can you describe a time when you had to make a difficult decision as a woman leader in a top leadership position? How did you approach it, and what were the outcomes or lessons learned?
14. How do you balance your personal and professional life as a woman leader in the military? Are there any specific strategies or practices that have helped you maintain that balance?
15. What advice would you give to other women aspiring to reach top leadership positions in the US military, based on your own experiences and lessons learned?