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Improving Supports for Diverse Women Entering Executive Roles

Karen E. Pennesi

University of Western Ontario, pennesi@uwo.ca

Ibtesum Afrin

Western University

Fattimah Hamam

Western University

Badarinarayan Maharaj

Western University

Raisa Masud

Western University

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Karen E. Pennesi, Ibtesum Afrin, Fattimah Hamam, Badarinarayan Maharaj, Raisa Masud, Luis Meléndez, Natalia Parra, and Ashley Piskor

IMPROVING SUPPORTS FOR DIVERSE WOMEN ENTERING EXECUTIVE ROLES

– Final Report –

Principal Investigator

Karen Pennesi

Research Team

Ibtesum Afrin

Fattimah Hamam

Badarinarayan Maharaj

Raisa Masud

Luis Meléndez

Natalia Parra

Ashley Piskor

Community Partner

Women's Executive Network of Canada (WXN)

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1. Introduction

Women have been acquiring a more significant presence in the labour sector in recent decades; the female workforce in Canada was 47.4% in 2019 (Catalyst, 2019). The Canadian Board Diversity Council emphasizes the importance of having three or more women on a board in order to maintain or ignite profit, growth, and innovation, a female representation they term “critical mass” (WXN, 2018). However, according to the WXN 2018 Annual Report Card, only 43% of FP500 organizations (the highest ranked Canadian companies according to revenue) have achieved critical mass, 41.9% only have one to two women on their boards, and 15% do not have female representation on their boards. The low number of women on FP500 boards is troubling because there are “board-ready” or qualified women employed at these companies. The statistics show that 91.3% of board members surveyed could identify between two and six qualified women for C-suite positions. Further, 46.7% of directors could personally identify six or more qualified women and 44.6% of directors could identify between two and five women (WXN, 2018). It is clear that despite significant progress, women still experience constraints in accessing high-level positions. This is a situation that could be aggravated by the pandemic. Just between February and March 2020, more than 1 million Canadians have lost their jobs; of that total, 63% were women (CWF et. al., 2020).

The question of why board-ready women are not entering higher-level C-suite roles, despite being qualified, is a complex one that merits investigation. This report describes findings of a research project that used a qualitative approach to explore the extent to which social categories (such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, and age) and the context of the pandemic intersect to affect women's ability and opportunities to advance into executive positions in Canada's top companies. Consideration of external and

structural factors that affect women's attainment of executive positions is beyond the scope of this project, but is an important area for future research.

We first describe the methodology and the social context in which the problem is framed. Then, the results section is developed based on three axes: (1) intersectionality, (2) family support and social networking, and (3) COVID-19 context as threat and opportunity. Finally, the research conclusions and the recommendations for our community partner (WXN) are presented. The summary of findings that are developed throughout the report are indicated below:

- **Intersectionality** explains how different social categories –such as gender, age, and ethnoracial identity– are interrelated and affect the professional lives of women. Young women are perceived as inexperienced, while older women are considered unattractive in the workplace because they are close to retirement. Further, some ethnoracial characteristics link to certain stereotypes that can be counterproductive for many women's professional development and their access to executive positions.
- **Family support** is vital for women's professional development because they function as emotional and advisory support in women's most important decisions. The figure of the parents and the partner stands out. A partner who understands a woman's professional expectations and helps with household responsibilities is seen as critical to many women's career success.
- **Networking** with other women and people, inside and outside the workplace, is considered an essential factor that can determine women's professional success and their chances of reaching new positions. The role of sponsors and mentors is

considered fundamental in this network because they generate new spaces and job opportunities for women.

- **The pandemic** is perceived as a threat and an opportunity for women. It is a threat because it sometimes produces a level of anxiety due to difficulties in maintaining a balance between house and work responsibilities. It is also an opportunity because time management is more flexible, and women can dedicate their free time to other activities of interest, placing men and women on more equal terms.

The Women's Executive Network (WXN) has proposed the use of this report as a tool to better understand the position of women within the network and what is facilitating or limiting their advancement into C-suite positions. This will allow the WXN the opportunity to be able to work with their partners and stakeholders in a manner that can allow for a changing of attitudes toward women in executive positions and encourage a generation of more diverse and women-inclusive boards.

The research team that created this report comprises seven graduate students from the Research Methods in Sociocultural Anthropology course at Western University, Garry Atkinson, an employee of the WXN, and Erin Crerar, a member of the WXN. Assistance and guidance were offered throughout the process by Dr. Karen Pennesi, the course instructor. The project was approved by Western University's Research Ethics Board. It should be noted that the participants filled out a written and oral consent prior to participating in the research and their identifying information was kept confidential, following the Western University Ethics Review Board protocols.

2. Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative approach, using interviews, a focus group discussion, and photo-voice as the main research methods. These were chosen with the intention of generating a holistic qualitative response geared towards personal experiences and narratives. The recruitment of the women who participated took place between the last week of October and the first week of November 2020. This process began with a virtual invitation from the WXN organization and included the project's contact email. Once potential participants asserted their interest, the team sent an email with a survey, which collected personal information such as age range, professional sector, and current job position. This information helped the research team to select the participants in terms of its diversity and to be as representative of the Canadian women demographics as possible.

Once participant recruitment was completed, there was a quick turnaround to the onset of the data collection process which began in early November and consisted of two phases. First, the team conducted 7 semi-structured interviews via Zoom, the questions that were used to guide the interview in a broad sense were created in a collaborative effort between the research team and Erin, a consultant provided by the WXN. Second, the team led one three-hour focus group discussion to explore the feelings and in-depth perspectives of five corporate women. A photo voice discussion was included as part of the focus group discussion (FGD). To prepare for this, the researchers asked the women to send pictures of their work environment or related imagery that they found pertinent to working from home during the ongoing pandemic. As per photo voice protocol, these images were used as a catalyst to begin a conversation intended to deconstruct the feelings and opinions about working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic and attempting to create a work-life balance.

3. Social Context

Ezzedeen and colleagues (2015) present various explanations for the exclusion of women from the top executive tiers in Canada, including the idea that women may be less assertive in requesting promotions or taking career risks. A common theme amongst the theories is gender stereotypes and ideas of masculinity and femininity as the underlining factors for women's limited participation in executive roles. *Role congruity theory* suggests that the traits typically assigned to executives are masculine and having women in leadership roles challenges ideas of femininity and masculinity (Ezzedeen et. al., 2015). Further, the authors identify perceived "deep-seated incongruities between agency and femininity and executive work and family" (Ezzedeen et. al. 2015, 380). Essentially, the authors are stating that perceptions about what it means to be a leader or an executive conflict with perceptions about what it means to be a woman, as such it contributes to the idea that executive and management roles are a masculine domain for which women must be compromised in order to fulfill responsibilities.

Moreover, the study recognizes peoples' perceptions about family and work-life balance also being incompatible in higher positions. Many people believe that the time constraints associated with being an executive, for example, will not allow adequate time for family responsibilities (Ezzedeen et.al., 2015). This is reflected in the corporate world as senior-level women are less likely to be married or to have children (Ezzedeen et.al., 2015). Furthermore, their study emphasizes that young women perceive a "glass ceiling" which may affect their decision to apply for or accept advancement. The "**glass ceiling**" is an important concept that encompasses sociocultural barriers that reflect discrimination, based on attitudes or organizational limitations that impede the development of qualified women in the organization or business sector (Bertrand et. al., 2017; Ezzedeen et. al., 2015). Therefore, the "glass ceiling" establishes an affinity with

the perspective of intersectionality, which examines how gender, together with other identities or social categories –such as race, ethnicity, class or age– shapes the experiences of female exclusion (Association for Women’s Rights in Development 2004, 1-2).

New research about women and the workforce has become important in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. During February and March 2020, employment in Canada dropped by more than 1 million jobs. Sixty-three percent of all losses were women (about 300,000), 144,000 of which were women in low income or part-time work often in the service and care sectors (CWF et.al., 2020). Women tend to be seen as natural caregivers compared to men which is reflected in the job sectors women typically dominate, such as service and care work. As a result, many women have been at the front line of the pandemic or have left work to care for children, sick family, or have lost their job or received reduced hours (CWF et.al., 2020). In addition, there are a significantly higher number of single mothers than fathers (70%) leading to more women needing to stay home with their children when childcare options were shut down (Ho and Dunham, 2020). However, there is a gap in current literature on how the pandemic is affecting women in corporate, higher-wage positions.

In the next section, we present the main findings of the research, examining to what extent social categories (such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, etc.) and the context of the pandemic intersect to affect the women's willingness, ability and opportunities to advance in higher-level executive roles in Canada's top companies.

4. Results

The report divides the main findings into three sections: (1) intersectionality, (2) family support and social networking, and (3) COVID-19 context as threat and opportunity.

4.1. Intersectionality

Intersectionality provides a scope through which a person's social and cultural background can be examined as to the impact it has on their life, and for the specifics of this research project, their professional life. We will examine ideas related to age, gender, ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation and how these intersect to play a role in the professional development of the participants in their pursuit of C-suite positions in Canada. The most effective way to consider these intersections is to first look at them through case studies, upon which other intersections as gathered through the research process will be presented. Each factor of a person's background and situation intersects with others to create a condition in which the person must adapt and align themselves in order to be able to prosper.

The first case that will be presented is that of Tara, a participant in the age range of 30-39, who works at a high-level position in the telecommunications industry. She is of South East Asian background and identifies as Muslim. She indicates her name is a traditional Muslim one which allows her religious background to be easily identified. The elements that intersect here are age, gender, race, ethnicity and religion, all of which play a significant role in her professional life. First, Tara notes that due to her age she has begun a transition in terms of what is important to her as a motivation for promotion. Her career goal is no longer simply about attaining prestige and acknowledgement, instead her focus has shifted to one of securing adequate financial compensation. She mentioned,

“It is becoming about I'm getting closer to retirement. When I look at my retirement calculator, numbers aren't working the way we need them. So as much as I may be happy and comfortable. The conversation is what's going to drive the next decisions” (Tara, interview).

Her career path was also influenced by the intersection with her religious background through her name, as she mentioned that while she is motivated to be a continuous learner and transition between roles in under a two-year span, she has to factor in the location of opportunities. She stated that places like Toronto are much more diverse and welcoming as compared to places like Vancouver and as such she believes opportunities for her will be much different.

Tara went on to say, “So I, a year and a half ago I got a promotion. I now have a title that I am proud of external validation, especially as a brown person that's the reality. It's like, what does my dad think that's what's important.” In this statement the role of her race is highlighted using ‘brown’ which is indicative of the intersectionality of her race and ethnicity known as her ethnoracial identity. This identity: a brown person from south east Asian descent, highly values familial and kinship feedback as a sense of self-worth and evaluation. It lends itself to being a yardstick of measurement and approval for success. The three factors that have been mentioned all intersect with one overarching factor and that is her identity as a female. Tara mentioned that her identity, and specifically the intersectionality of her minority identity in terms of race, ethnicity and religion, makes her part of a potentially marginalized group, disadvantaged from the onset as opposed to a young, white man. This specific concept refers to the idea of the ‘Old Boys’ Club’ wherein there is a consensus that men tend to favor younger, white men who they have taken under their wings. This idea will be discussed and highlighted further in the report but presents a supposition point of value during Tara’s reflection on her **intersectionality**. It is important to understand that all these factors intersect in a way that creates a unique set of circumstances through which Tara is able to prosper, and as she mentioned, finding the right balance did not come easily. If any of these factors were different, it would impact the net effect of her intersectionality.

Another case that presents unique characteristics warranting in depth consideration is that of Australia, who is in the age range of 20-29 and is currently a Director of Strategy and Innovation in the finance field. Additional aspects that make her situation worth analyzing are that she spent most of her younger years living with family in Europe, her first language is not English, and she identifies as part of **LGBTQ2+** community. One of the main factors that has shaped her career is her age. She notes that she has been in a senior management position since an early age and it posed many challenges which she had to overcome in order to succeed but would serve to be vital building blocks for her. She explained,

“I was 24, 25 years old... and I had worked for the organization for three years before I hit a senior leadership role. People who are at that table had been in their positions longer than I had worked in any capacity professionally. And so the perspective and perception that they had of me...stopped me from even feeling comfortable speaking up because I was like a kid in their eyes. I had nothing to offer” (Australia, interview).

Australia’s age was equated to a lack of experience, but she also mentioned a quite interesting intersection and that is during her upbringing in Europe with her family, kids were meant to be seen and not heard. She paralleled her younger age at the table to being that of a kid, and that feeling like she was not allowed to have an input, which would have in no small way created a unique set of circumstances that would have had to be surmounted for her to have her continued success in her role. Another intersecting component that plays an important role is her ethnicity. Even though she was born in Canada, she does not identify with an overwhelmingly strong ‘Canadian-ness’ as she spent a considerable amount of time with her family in Europe and her first language is not English. This creates the feeling of being an outsider even though her cause has been championed by her sponsor for whom she is quite grateful and appreciative. **The**

language barrier and inherent cultural differences meant that Australia felt that she needed to perform that much better and stand out more to be deserving of her position. What this manifests is a constant need for challenges and a desire for more. She notes that she needs to have challenges otherwise she will be bored. She wants to manage a larger team of around 800 people and have a higher-ranking position. Her intersectionality here serves also as a source of motivation to continuously strive for more in that the individual contributing characteristics of her identity in terms of culture and belief have motivated her to push herself in a way that others have not quite been able to, and she indicates both explicitly and implicitly that this is due to the meandering nature of her upbringing, cultural and societal education. Also in the case of Australia, she identifies as a member of the **LGBTQ2+** community that does not adhere to the traditional approach of heterosexuality and its conditions. While Canada as a nation is considered open and accepting of diverse expressions of sexuality, it is important to understand that they are still seen as a minority and face inherent discrimination and marginalization. In Australia's case, she identifies as part of the community, embracing her 'individualness' and using it as a tool in her toolbox of charting her own path to success and continuous growth.

In the case of Australia, we saw the intersection with age in one way but the intersection of Sarah, a director in the Insurance industry who is between 50-59 years old creates an interesting juxtaposition. In her case, she thinks that a barrier to her professional growth is her age, as she is eligible for retirement and she believes that her company is not willing to invest in someone who may be on their way out or who is close to retirement. It is a perceived barrier by her own admission, but this will in no small way impact the effort and investment she has in her job if she feels that there is no room for growth given her age.

Monica, a manager in the banking sector, in the age group 40-49, identifies as a visible minority, that of a black woman. Banking has been portrayed in popular media and throughout history as a 'white-man's domain,' as the controller of wealth. This anecdotally refers to the colonial rulers being in control of the resources and manipulating who are given access to what resources and in what amount. The point that Monica was a multi-point minority in an executive position in this field was not lost on the research team. It was evident that her racial identity was something she was aware of and this manifests in the way in which she conducted the interview. To understand how this point was arrived at, it is worth knowing that the interview was conducted by Ashley, a white, Canadian female, who in debriefing the team mentioned how much she thought her 'whiteness' stood out in the interview. Ashley also noted that in the infancy of the interview Monica was very measured and limited with her responses but eventually warmed up and started given more explanatory answers. It was only after the interview was concluded and recording ceased, Monica turned on her camera, revealing her visual identity. To the research team, this was done as a deliberate attempt to not associate her **marginalized, minority identity** with the value of the information she was providing during the interview. In her interview she mentioned that in her workplace she has championed the cause of the minorities and is head of a group specifically tasked with their cultural reinforcement and professional growth. Her race serves as a pillar upon which she finds her strength and motivation to be a leader to other minorities in her profession and champion their cause in much the way that her cause was championed.

This research focuses on the barriers women face in moving into C-suite positions. Across the interviews and the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) there was a shared sentiment that there are stereotypes about women and their **assertiveness** that creates an

unnecessary obstacle that must be navigated. Canada is a participant who works in the utility sector and is between 40-49 years of age. she said,

“(…) for many women, they don't have the guts. And I don't mean that as an insult, I mean, because we've taught them not to, we've taught them to be careful that not to upset anybody. Because that's what culture has said. If we upset people then we will be unsuccessful and I'm not blaming them and I'm saying that we've taught them a lie, what they do then is they don't advocate for themselves, because they're afraid to. Even I was afraid, I was afraid to but I had a mentor ...who encouraged me” (Canada, interview).

In this sentiment there is reference to a societal status quo that exists whereby women are perceived to be inferior in some way to their male counterparts. Canada refers to it as “what culture has said.” She goes on to say that disruption of this status quo tends to create problems for women. Tara also commented on this and mentioned several times throughout her interview that she had to be her own champion and take steps that could have been perceived as aggressive but in its purest sense was well-intended assertiveness. Sophia, the CEO of a Non-Profit Organization who is in the age group of 40-49 had a slightly different view that brought in the intersectionality with the COVID-19 pandemic. She was of the opinion that the stereotypes associated with women such as being caring, sensitive and nurturing were advantageous during the pandemic as many situations required accommodations be made and a more nuanced understanding and approach. She believed that women have been preparing for dealing with situations like this one for their entire lives and that it would be advantageous to them.

This idea was reinforced implicitly by the overall feedback during the interviews and FGD. The participants all agreed that the pandemic has presented a unique set of circumstances, but they would not consider it as a negative. Quite the opposite was true with many calling it a blessing as they were able to be at home, share more time with their families, integrate their home and professional responsibilities in a seamless manner. The

circumstances created an environment in which they were motivated, comfortable and able to be in a position to succeed in their roles. It is important to factor in that all our participants work in fields that are considered as essential so while they may not have had to go into the office, they were required to work from home in a full capacity.

4.2. Family Support and Social Networking

The **family nucleus** is a fundamental support that accompanies women's professional development and their job expectations in executive positions. Most of the participants noted how their parents, siblings, and other family members influence their corporate careers. Women turn to these relatives for **emotional and consulting support** regarding their most important professional decisions. Despite some impediments such as physical distance, family members are usually a reference when making important decisions such as those related to a new job.

“I think that they probably would have wanted a different career for me, this wouldn't have been that their choice of career, but they have certainly in their later years rallied around me, and my friends are huge cheerleaders. We're not all in the same place right but you can always find a point of connection” (Sophia, interview).

Another participant, Australia, a young woman who works in the financial sector and belongs to the LGTB2+ community, also pointed out that her mother's advice was critical in directing her professional career. Her mom told her,

“if you have to change your identity to get a job, just leave it, because it means you will have to change all your life, and money does not make a big deal compared to who you are” (Australia, interview).

Coming from an educated background increases the family's importance on women's professional trajectories. Belonging to an educated family establishes a class factor that is perceived as advantageous in a professional career. Three participants of Asian origin who participated in the FGD described themselves as coming from "highly educated families," indicating that this provides them with valuable cultural capital –mainly an optimal formal education– that influences their careers and, therefore, their possibilities of accessing executive positions. Women who receive a **quality education** feel more empowered and have more resources to face the potential problems they may encounter throughout their personal and professional careers. In this sense, belonging to a "highly educated" family or one that offers the possibility of a "quality education" is considered a significant advantage.

It is suggestive that some women highlight the **male figures** of father and husband as crucial in their professional lives. Many participants acknowledge that they grew up in a patriarchal and a male-dominated culture, which implies some stereotypes around the role of women in the family and in society that have been explained in the previous section. In this scenario, these women admit that having male figures supporting them and telling them that they "can do it" and "can achieve anything" has given them the confidence to achieve their professional goals. Participants recognize the importance of having a suitable partner who understands their professional expectations and helps with household responsibilities. They consider that without "a good partner," everything would be more complicated.

"For me, I came, I married into [husband's name] family that was more male dominated, but my husband, again, is a very big supporter of me (...) You know how we always say, behind every successful man, there is a woman? I would say behind every woman there is some man who also has played a role. So it goes both ways. Good or bad. In my case I have seen both my husband, my dad have been big supporters in kind of sport of making the way I look at things" (Jui, FGD).

In addition, **networking** –the strategy of establishing contacts with other women and people– is also considered an essential factor that can determine women's professional success and their chances of reaching executive positions. These networks allow them to partake in a community, learn, and meet new people. Many women try to get involved in working groups within their organizations to build this network of trust that can help them at some point in their careers. LGTor, a woman in her forties who works in the financial sector, indicated the following:

“What I would say is: build, maintain and cultivate your relationships at work and elsewhere; like it's so important because you don't know who you can help and then who can pay it forward and who you could end up getting help from because it has to be a two-way street” (LGTor, FGD).

Women also seek to build a network beyond their workplace and professional sectors. They usually participate in social and charitable organizations to give back to their communities and as a means of **networking** and being recognized for their skills. As LGTor indicated in the FGD:

“Doing some volunteer work for charitable organizations, even within the realm of your company. All of those things are important to broaden your network to get noticed and to show a group of people that you wouldn't normally work with the skills that you bring to the table” (LGTor, FGD).

Due to the social constraints that women face –such as social stereotypes, the existence of an 'Old Boys' Club', the family demand, among others– many participants highlight the vital role of **mentors** and **sponsors** in their career development. While the terms ‘sponsorship’ and ‘mentorship’ can sometimes overlap, some participants note that the mentor is someone who gives personal advice and support whereas a ‘sponsor’ is someone who can intervene directly to generate new spaces and job opportunities for their

sponsored women. However, despite this attempted distinction, the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably by participants.

These sponsors and mentors are usually women or men with experience and/or higher positions –sometimes their bosses– with whom the women have built a relationship of trust and who advise them, provide skill building opportunities, contacts and/or facilitate access to new job offers. The relationship with **sponsors** and **mentors** can be informal, through the daily relationships they build in the spaces they share, or through training programs organized by the company. Many women do not conceive their professional success without the intervention of those individuals.

Some participants indicated that they faced various obstacles in achieving their current position and in obtaining the recognition they deserve for their work. “I forgot how smart you are” was the phrase her boss told Canada, a woman in her forties who works in the utility sector, when she asked why they planned to hire a man with less education, less experience and fewer qualifications than her for the same position. The phrase “I forgot how smart you are” synthesizes the inequality schemes that exist in many workspaces and that relegate women to assuming secondary positions or to their work not being valued enough. The existence of a circle of men—referred to as the **'Old Boys' Club'**—that excludes women from many spaces of power within organizations and the stereotypes that keep them away from leadership roles are aspects that obstruct their professional progress and access to high-level jobs. Thereby, for many participants, one way to overcome these obstacles is through sponsorship and mentorship. Most recognize the importance of these people as models and allies for their professional careers, and so they can build a broad social network and get better jobs. Tara, a woman who is between 30-39 years old, said:

“I work with senior leadership, I'm receiving a lot of informal mentoring and coaching, which helps me continue to grow. So very happy with it” (Tara, interview).

With the same objective of generating greater spaces and opportunities, some participants also recognize the importance of **coaching and leadership development programs**. Some participants even hope at some point to become “mentors” and “sponsors” themselves in order to share their experiences and contribute to the professional development of other valuable women. As Sophia indicated,

“(…) more so than any other thing, I can see myself in this role until I retire and even as I retire. I see myself being a mentor to the person who assumes my role” (Sophia, interview).

Many professional women consider that building a network of contacts and trust with other women and men, inside and outside the workplace, is essential to their progress. This situation suggests the need to form a **‘Girls’ Club’** that creates opportunities for them and serves as a counterweight to the ‘Old Boys’ Club.’ In other words, there needs to be a network that provides women with contacts, advice, experiences and skills to overcome the structural problems that they face in society and their organizations.

4.3. COVID-19 Context as Threat and Opportunity

Most women in our study were ambivalent about the pandemic which has both negative and positive consequences for their professional careers. One of the most emphasized problems is the blurred **separation between work and home** when working remotely. Several participants indicated that they have become very dependent on their devices when they work from home: many continue to check emails, answer messages, or receive calls outside of their scheduled working hours. This situation creates tension in the relationship between work and family, especially for women who have children, and who, as previously indicated, have more housework and family responsibilities than men. Sarah, a participant who works in the finance insurance sector, pointed out that the transition from one school year to another was difficult for her son during the pandemic. As a mother, she also had to face this issue, which generated a lot of anxiety that affected her professional life. In that sense, she revealed:

“I have a grade 12 student at home. Right, and so he was in grade 11 last year and his life kind of came to a standstill and so that created some anxiety and which adds tension to the home right” (Sarah, interview).

As a result of the **COVID-19 pandemic**, the concept of working from home has proposed a new subset of issues for these women. Many of them feel as though they are constantly trying to shift between work and home, and the fluidity of **work/life balance** has been quite difficult to navigate. Canada referred to this problem when she pointed out that,

“(…) what's harder is creating that mental separation. That's the challenge, to create the mental separation” (Canada, interview).

Another issue that participants shared about working from home was highlighted by Tara, who mentioned that she feels less professional because the work environment has become so informal.

“For me the pandemic has represented a lot of feeling less professional in a way because the work environment has become so casual. I used to be in a room before. Now I'm sitting in an open environment with things falling apart (...) I'm in pajamas all day. And that has had an impact for me (...) The plan is to actually just go and buy a bunch of leggings and a bunch of nice sweaters to at least look professional on zoom and all the calls that I take throughout the day” (Tara, FGD).

In this way, the gray border between work and home during the health crisis is often physically and emotionally exhausting. This situation puts women's mental health at risk, which can become a potential limitation for their professional development. Jui, a participant in the FGD, warned that,

“we need to pay attention to people's mental health right now, more than ever, and our own” (Jui, FGD).

These challenges are experienced with greater intensity by women who lead workgroups. Many participants lead groups with people who are also experiencing emotionally difficult times due to the pandemic. For these women, the pandemic requires them to project **compassion, empathy and reassurance** to their team members in the midst of uncertainty and to make use of online resources. Yet, Sophia believes that women are culturally more prepared to deal with these feelings and emotions. These skills would be part of emotional work that is not recognized socially.

“I actually think that my gender is more of an advantage point at this point [managing emotions in the pandemic]. And how we lead and I think for specifically in the pandemic, people are looking for empathy. They're looking for somebody to listen. They're looking for somebody to connect with them. They're looking for someone that's compassionate. They're looking for somebody that they

can trust. It's not to say that it isn't at times a disadvantage, but I think we could say that for the male gender” (Sophia, interview).

Women's opportunities in the context of the pandemic have been affected, especially for those seeking new roles or career changes. For example, Ayah, a young woman who works in the food sector, and who is evaluating new job positions, indicated that she wants to be compensated fairly and in a higher position, but her potential employers tell her that she should be grateful for whatever she gets during the pandemic. She is receiving offers well below her **financial and career aspirations**. She states:

“We can't pay you what you're getting paid or what you want. We're going to pay you, you know, 40, 50 grands less but you should be grateful because it's a pandemic and we really want you” (Ayah, interview).

However, we must warn that this negative impact should not be generalized because some economic sectors have grown during the pandemic (such as construction and manufacturing) and could offer new spaces and alternatives for women who work in these areas.

At the beginning of this section, we said that many women feel ambivalent about the influence of the pandemic on their lives. This is because, along with its negative consequences, the pandemic also offers potential opportunities for some of them. Some participants reported feeling physically healthier since they started working from home. They find they have more time to sleep, cook healthy meals, and to exercise without having to spend so much time getting ready for the office in the morning. The lack of daily trips to the office was another favorable point that gives them more time for family and personal activities. Several participants mentioned that they perceive **their time as being more flexible**, and some even **feel more productive**.

“So being at home now. Working from home. It's done a couple of things. One, it's actually elongated my day because I don't have to worry about train schedules in order for my start and stop times and so on the one hand, that's given me more freedom and flexibility to be able to work on the other hand, it's also kind of stretched into other parts of my day. In that I don't necessarily have the same boundaries that I had before, where when the clock struck a certain hour I had to leave because I had to pick up my son, etc.” (LGTor, FGD).

“I'm much more productive. I'm much more sharp and everything like that. And so I get up at the same time that I always did. And I log in, because there's no commute and when I take my first break at 8am or 9am what I'm finding is my day starts to stretch out (Australia, interview).

Sarah, who in a previous quote pointed out the anxiety generated by family responsibilities during the pandemic, also said that it allows her to have time for activities that she could not do before. This may also be due to an adaptation process. We must remember that this study's data collection was carried out in November, almost eight months after the start of the restrictions due to the pandemic. Although the pandemic was initially very frustrating and suffocating for many women, they likely developed strategies that allowed them to distribute their time and responsibilities in a better way during the following months.

“The other aspect of COVID that's also been healthy is every day, every day at lunch, I walk outside, even if it's just 20 minutes right and so I'm getting that break in the day I had to. I had to put that in place, probably four weeks in, right, because the first four weeks of COVID. I was just working all the time, and even before that like when I was going into office. I was working over my lunch hour like it was nothing for me, to go pick something up and bring it back to my desk” (Sarah, interview).

An interesting point is that some participants consider that the pandemic alters the **corporate game's rules**, allowing men and women to be in similar conditions. For some interviewees, the pandemic is an opportunity because time management is more flexible. Women can dedicate their free time to other interest activities, placing men and women on an equal footing. Besides, the fact that men and women work at home is also an

opportunity for men to collaborate more with household chores, thus weakening gender stereotypes. Sophia indicated:

“I think the pandemic might be a bit of a game changer. Now that we see that we're women and men can work from home, women and men can have flexible schedules,” (Sophia, interview).

Related to that, some indicate that access to certain people remains the same due to restrictions on social encounters. In other words, the conditions for the reproduction of **‘Boys' Club’**, based on very restricted meetings and encounters between privileged men, are weakened and reduced during the pandemic. Tara indicates that the possibilities for in person meetings between men has been reduced: “that's not happening anymore.” This suggests that this novel situation potentially helps women and makes them feel like they have the same opportunities as men.

5. Conclusion

In this concluding section, we hope to briefly review the results of our qualitative findings and provide some recommendations that emerged from the research study. Some of the emerging themes coming out from the research are **Intersectionality, Family Support, Networking, and the Pandemic**. While the pandemic has created a **state of perpetual pause** across the globe, the women we interviewed were quite happy with some of the implications that the circumstances have presented them. It allowed them to spend more time with their families, recharge, adapt new work schedules and fulfill household responsibilities. Working from home has allowed many of the participants to reinforce their roles on their respective professional teams, level the playing field in various workplaces, as well as facilitate networking in a way that would not have been otherwise possible.

Whilst many positive points emerged from the discussions, some discussion points also displayed sites of concern that threatened the mental health of these women. It can be **stifling and emotionally draining**, especially for women who have children and family responsibilities to navigate their professional and family life. In this context, it is difficult to imagine a woman having more possibilities for reaching executive positions, since those entail additional responsibilities.

With respect to the idea of **intersectionality**, these women are not one-dimensional individuals, and it would be a disservice to try to view them as such. Our investigation showed that social and cultural characteristics intersect in shaping these women's individuality and identity. The intersections serve as a form of **motivation and positivity** for the participants and allow them to champion causes for themselves by identifying for e.g., as a woman, as Black or as Muslim. They tend to use a **logos approach**, which is a persuasive appeal, heavily reliant upon the use of logic and rationale in order to show why any singular characteristic is an inherent positive and can be used to further their position both professionally and in society. However, it is important to understand that our participants were all women in pursuit of, or already in management and C-suite positions and the conditions faced by women who have not reached such levels of professional success may be different and worthy of further consideration.

It was well noted that family plays an essential role in women's professional careers because it provides **emotional and advisory support** for many of their decisions. This was seen in cases like Tara and Sophia, both of whom explicitly stated the importance of their familial support networks. Also, it must be noted that reassurance presents itself as support and **positive reinforcement** for these women as they are trendsetters, and reaffirmation plays an important role in their professional directionality. However, we must also consider the family as a source of received cultural capital which

is defined as the individual's initial learnings that affects the future of their work and profession. It is easy to suppose that a woman who comes from a low-income family will not have access to the same educational advantages that would influence her chances of reaching high professional and executive positions.

The participants stressed the importance of having a group of people that share their professional ambitions in a concerted and beneficial way, allowing them to formulate networks. **Networking**, which includes **mentors, champions and sponsors**, is also considered an essential factor for women's professional success and their access to executive positions. These networks allow them to build a community where they learn and meet new people, even beyond their workplace and professional sectors. At times, it seems that many women are networking and creating communities that are akin to the formation of a '**Girls' Club**' to serve as a counterweight to the '**Boys' Club**' in a scenario of inequality.

This research project presents an interesting avenue through which the circumstances facing professional women in Canada can be examined. It is worth noting that there is no short answer in correcting the inadequacies that currently exist at the **C-suite level**, however based on our research findings, we offer some recommendations for further consideration that are directly informed from interactions with the participants. We hope these recommendations can be considered in making positive change towards supporting diverse Canadian women in reaching their professional goals.

6. Recommendations

- ✓ The WXN is a space to weave networks for many women. Thereby, the WXN should continue to encourage activities that explicitly promote this function so that new members who join the organization and can expand their network.

- ✓ Many women wish to become mentors and sponsors to others in the near future. The WXN can support this interest by identifying these women and promoting more spaces for the exchange of ideas and experiences that empower women and facilitate their access to executive positions.

- ✓ The WXN might also consider a matching program for executive coaching. Some of the women we interviewed shared that an executive coach could help them in pursuing a higher-level position. Meanwhile, other participants were executive coaches themselves. A program which matches women across different sectors to build each other up by sharing their knowledge and skills, would be beneficial.

- ✓ Many women appreciate the advantages of working from home. This includes the flexibility of time as well as experiencing fewer instances of being overshadowed by their male colleagues. To promote an environment of greater inclusion for women, the WXN should analyze the relevance of encouraging policies that ensure the possibility and flexibility of working from home in the future, beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

- ✓ Family remains a cornerstone in the lives of many women and can play a key part in their success. It would be important to host events and workshops that amplify this fact and begin to erase the division often made between professional and familial life.

- ✓ The final recommendation would be to consider the role that men play in the workplace and at home in championing women. Having programs informed by women involving men and how they can do better to support women's career growth and advancement across sectors would be an invaluable support.

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Appendix A: Female Participants Table

Pseudonym	Age	Sector	Method	Date
Anilda	40-49	Industrial Distribution	FGD	November 14
Australia	20-29	Financial Services	Interview	November 4
Ayah	30-39	Food Services & Facilities	Interview	November 4
Canada	40-49	Utility Sector	Interview	November 7
Jui	not specified	not specified	FGD	November 14
LGTor	40-49	Financial Services	FGD	November 14
Lynn	30-39	Transportation	FGD	November 14
Monica	40-49	Banking	Interview	November 6
Sarah	50-59	Insurance Finance	Interview	November 3
Sophia	40-49	NGO	Interview	November 4
Tara	30-39	Public Utilities	Interview/FGD	November 6-14

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Questionnaire

Section 1- Preliminary Questions

Guiding Questions: What do you do? What did you do before?

1. Pseudonym (filled out by the researcher)
2. Which sector do you work in?
3. What is your current position in the company? How many years are you working in this company?
4. What did you do before your current job? Why did you change your job? How was that process of change?

Section 2- Reflection on Work Satisfaction

Guiding Questions: What are your expectations in your career? What limitations or problems do you find to achieve these expectations?

5. What are your expectations in your career?
6. How would you describe your level of satisfaction with your current position?
7. Do you think this position has helped you to achieve your goals?
8. What difficulties do you find in achieving your professional expectations? Do you think that your gender identity (or other factors) plays any role to achieve those expectations?

Section 3- Understanding the Challenges of Entering Higher-level C-suite Roles Despite Being Qualified

Guiding Questions: What is your opinion on women's access to c-suite roles? What is your experience? What challenges have you encountered along the way?

9. What are your thoughts on women's access to c-suite roles? The presence of women in these executive positions is significant?
10. Do you think that your career advancement is different than other colleagues (male colleagues, for example)? Why and how? Do you know of other similar female experiences?
11. How do you see the current ratio of working women in corporate sectors? Do you think they are getting equal opportunities as your colleagues?
12. How long did it take for you to pursue the executive role? What are the barriers you faced in that process? What are the barriers you face as a current executive worker?

Section 4- Covid-19 Pandemic and Women's Work

Guiding questions: How has the pandemic affected your work life? Does the same happen with your male colleagues?

13. How has the pandemic affected your work life? Do you feel your work more or do you work less?
14. How would you explain the work at home experience? Can you mention some of the positive or negative aspects of it? Do you see it as a problem for working effectively?
15. How do you handle your work and family issues during the pandemic? Do you consider that your male colleagues present the same challenges?
16. According to you, what could be the challenges of women in executive roles due to COVID-19? Do you think COVID 19 has increased your ongoing challenges at your workspace? How? Or it remained the same? Can you explain it?

Section 5- Intersectionality and Women Career Advancement

Guiding Questions: How do you evaluate the recruitment process in your workplace? Does your workplace offer equal opportunities for all its workers? Finally, what is a professional success for you?

17. How do you evaluate the recruitment process in your workplace? What aspects are taken into account? Do you think it is a fair process?
18. Have you ever experienced anything that you think in the recruitment process? Can you share your experience?
19. Do you think workplace facilities affect your performance?
20. Does your organization provide equal opportunities to its employees? How?
21. Do you think you are receiving additional benefits as opposed to your colleagues? Or do you think your colleagues receiving advantages than you at the office? Why/ Why not?
22. What motivates you to keep working as an executive worker?
23. How do you see family or other network support in pursuing an executive career?
24. What is a professional success for you?
25. How will you achieve professional success?
26. What do you keep in mind to succeed professionally? (Kindly list at least three)

Closing section- Career Aspirations

27. How do you plan to accomplish higher-level C-suite roles?
28. How will you resolve the possible challenges regarding entering the C-suite roles?

Appendix C: Focus Group Discussion Questions

Cluster 1- Intersectionality, and Challenges of Women's Entering Higher-level C-suite Roles

1. What is it like working in your corporate sector? Can you explain what it is like working as executives?
2. What are the challenges for women in executive positions in Canada for career advancement?
3. Why are there so few women in executive positions in Canada? Is this a problem?
 - a. If so, what are the solution to change this?
 - b. To what extent women are receiving equal opportunities in the corporate workspace?
4. What are the supports that a woman might need to advance her career?
5. How do you think gender and age affect achieving executive roles?
6. How do you think ethnicity and race affect achieving executive roles?
7. How can the above mentioned/discussed factors affect professional life?

Cluster 2- Covid-19 pandemic and women's work

1. How does COVID-19 affect career advancement?
2. Has COVID-19 increased the challenges that you were already experiencing?
3. Has (work from home) improved anything? Can we discuss how?
4. What is it like to work from home? Has it hindered work life? How?
5. What are the differences between working at the office vs. working at home?

Questions for both clusters: Conclusion

1. Considering today's discussion, what are your final reflections on improving support for diverse women entering executive roles.
2. Do you want to add anything else to today's discussion?

Appendix D: Photovoice Questions

As part of the focus group, the researchers asked the women to send pictures of their work environment or related imagery that they found pertinent to working from home during the ongoing pandemic. These images supported the photo-voice research method that was done as part of the focus group.

1. Can you describe this picture?
2. What made you choose this picture?
3. How do you feel when you look at this picture?
4. How does this picture signify your work role?
5. Are there any changes in your work environment because of COVID-19?

Appendix E: Letter of Information and Verbal Consent

Project Title: Improving Supports for Diverse Women Entering Executive Roles (during COVID and beyond)

Principal Investigator:

Dr. Karen Pennesi, Associate Professor, Western University

Email: pennesi@uwo.ca

Co-Investigators:

Ibtesum Afrin, Fattimah Hamam, Badarinarayan Maharaj, Raisa Masud, Luis Meléndez, Natalia Parra, and Ashley Piskor

Email: wxnresearch20@outlook.com

Invitation to Participate

You are being invited to participate in a research study investigating why qualified women are not entering higher-level executive roles in Canada's top companies. In answering this question, we will examine how the COVID-19 pandemic interacts with other factors, such as age, family life, race, geographical location, and sector, as influences on women's advancement into executive positions.

This letter is designed to provide you with the information you need to decide if you wish to be a research participant.

Why is this study being done?

This study serves two purposes: (1) it is a course requirement for the student researchers to apply what they are learning about research methods, and (2) it is a collaborative project with the Women's Executive Network (WXN) seeking insights that will help WXN better support women in pursuit of executive positions.

What are the study procedures?

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in one or more of the following activities:

- an interview
- a focus group discussion
- a photovoice activity

Interviews will last about one hour, depending on the length of your responses. We may ask about your career history and any challenges or barriers you faced as well as supports you received. We may also ask about how the COVID-19 pandemic and other factors, such as race, ethnicity, class, disability, family life, geographic location and corporate sector have influenced your career advancement. Interviews will take place via Zoom (E2E encrypted and password protected from Western university) at a time that is convenient for you. Interviews will be recorded using the Zoom functions and the researchers will take notes. Audio-recordings and the automatically generated transcripts produced by Zoom will be used as data for the analysis. The Zoom recording function also produces a video-recording but the video file will be deleted immediately following the session as it is not necessary for analysis. You may choose to have your video camera on or off during the interview. You may ask for a copy of your interview

audio-recording and transcript if you wish. You may refuse to answer any questions and you may ask to stop the recording at any moment.

Focus group discussions will last approximately two hours and will take place via Zoom. In this discussion space, 4-6 participants will share their individual and collective experiences and explore how unique individual factors intersect in the context of their work and advancement to higher-level-positions and/or how COVID-19 has impacted this. The discussion will be recorded using the Zoom functions and the researchers will take notes. We will hold two focus group sessions but only one will involve a photovoice activity. You can choose which focus group you want to participate in or you may also choose to do an interview instead of a focus group discussion.

If you are participating in the focus group discussion with a photovoice component, you will be given instructions to capture and submit up to three photo(s) of your workplace. You will submit the photos to a secure cloud drive (Western University's One Drive) to which only you and the research team have access. All participants' photos will be shown as part of a PowerPoint presentation to other focus group members on the day of the discussion. No one else will be able to download your photos and they will not be able to identify which photos you took unless you choose to tell them. Photos will be used to prompt discussion between participants. If you choose to do the photovoice activity, you may spend up to 30 minutes taking photos, selecting up to three of them and uploading the photos to the research cloud drive.

How long will you be in this study?

All study activities will take place in October and November 2020. During this time, your role as a research participant will be limited to one interview and/or one focus group discussion with or without a photovoice component. You can choose which activity to participate in or you may choose to do both an interview and a focus group.

What are the risks and harms of participating in this study?

There are no anticipated risks or harms associated with this research.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?

You will not directly benefit from this research, although you may find it interesting to reflect on barriers that women face in reaching higher-level executive roles and how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted women's work. As well, it is anticipated that the results of this study will contribute to the WXN's goals of propelling the advancement of women at all levels, in all sectors, and of all ages, by identifying some of the limitations they face and the supports that help them. Further, it is hoped that the results of this study will contribute to a greater societal understanding of socio-economic restrictions on the professional development of Canadian women and some possible solutions to this problem.

Can participants choose to leave the study?

If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request the withdrawal of information collected about you. If you wish to have your information removed, please let the researchers know and your information will be deleted from our records. This includes the questionnaire you have already filled out and any audio-recordings, transcripts, photographs and notes that pertain only to you. Since Zoom identifies speaker names in the automatically generated transcripts, we can easily remove your turns at talk from the transcripts. However, due to the nature of group discussions, it may not be possible to entirely remove evidence of your participation in a focus group discussion as your contributions affect those of others. Furthermore, it would be impossible to completely remove your contributions from the audio-

recording. Please note that once the study has been published (around 4 December 2020), we will not be able to withdraw your information.

How will participants' information be kept confidential?

All study documents will be in electronic form and stored on Western University's secure cloud One Drive. A unique folder will be created for each participant to store your signed consent form, audio-recording of your verbal consent statements, and photos (if applicable). Only you and the research team will have access to that folder. In order to correspond with you during this study, the researchers will need to collect your name and contact information (e.g., email address). A pseudonym (i.e., fake name) will be used to identify you in all study records and we will use a pseudonym to identify any organizations you mention working for. A list linking your identifiable information with your pseudonym will be stored on a separate Western One Drive account to which only the researchers will have access. All identifiable information (e.g. decade of birth and other personal information from the questionnaire you already answered) will be stored separately from your study data (i.e. transcripts and photos). All identifiable information and study data will be kept confidentially and secured on the protected Western cloud drive until it is destroyed after seven years. After 31 December 2020, only the principal investigator, Karen Pennesi, will have access to the electronic files because the course will be finished and the student researchers will no longer have access.

Zoom session recordings will be temporarily stored on the Zoom cloud. The audio files, transcript files and video files will be automatically deleted from the Zoom server after seven days. The student research team will keep the audio recordings and the transcripts as well as any other notes from the study on a secure cloud, Western's One Drive, and only the study team will have access to it. The student researchers will download the recordings and transcripts to their password protected personal computers long enough to upload them to the Western One Drive folder. They will then immediately delete data from their personal computers.

While the researchers will make every effort to protect your information, depending on your answers to the interview questions, it may be possible to indirectly identify you from your transcripts or quotes. Your voice on the audio-recordings may identify you to people who already know you but only the research team will have access to the audio-recordings. Other personal information such as your role in your organization, your race, ethnicity, marital status and number of children you have may be collected during interviews or focus group discussions if you choose to reveal it. Please note that this information is being collected for the researchers' knowledge only and will not be shared in any dissemination of the results. If you agree to be directly quoted in the results, your quotes will be attributed to your pseudonym only and we will make every effort to de-identify the statements so that they cannot be traced back to you. You also have the option of choosing a pseudonym or only your first name during the focus group discussion. If you would like this option, please indicate this below and a researcher can direct you how to change your name on Zoom.

The results of this study will be shared outside of WXN but only de-identified information will be included. Some direct quotes may be used in the final report but only de-identified descriptors will be used for direct quotes. Organizations will be described by type but not by specific company names. Positions or roles may also be vaguely described. Location will be described by province but not city. We will summarize ideas from quotes and report on aggregate findings as much as possible.

WXN CEO and employees, as well as WXN member Erin Crerar, will have access to anonymized transcripts of interview and focus group discussions. While they will not know who consented to participate in this study, it is possible that someone from WXN could identify a participant based on the information in the whole transcript, since WXN has a list of all of their members who are the potential participants and may be known to some personnel. WXN

electronic files are stored only on their own corporate server, not on a cloud, and they are hosted and secured by Forvan Technology Services. The data collected for this study may be useful for WXN to analyze for future reports. Therefore, your de-identified data may be used for purposes beyond the research objectives identified in this letter but it will not be retained for longer than seven years. Please note that representatives of Western University's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of this research.

Are participants compensated to be in this study?

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

What are the rights of participants?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose not to participate or to leave the study at any time it will not affect your employment or your membership in the Women's Executive Network. You do not waive any legal right by consenting to this study.

Whom do participants contact for questions?

If you have questions about this research study, please contact:

- Dr. Karen Pennesi (Principal Investigator): pennesi@uwo.ca
- Raisa Masud (Co-Investigator): wxnresearch20@outlook.com

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics (519) 661-3036, 1-844-720-9816, email: ethics@uwo.ca. This office oversees the ethical conduct of research studies and is not part of the study team. Everything that you discuss will be kept confidential.

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.