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Abstract

Examining the career journeys of 31 women solicitors in England and Wales, the research investigates their persistent underrepresentation at the partnership level in law firms. Using the glass ceiling and glass cliff phenomena as analytical lenses, and drawing on qualitative, semi-structured elite interviews, it explores their journeys to partnership positions, circumstances shaping their appointments and their lived experiences in these roles. Reflexive thematic analysis reveals gendered cultural and structural barriers arising not only at the “glass ceiling” level but throughout women’s professional journeys, reflecting the metaphorical “labyrinth” of complex, obstacle-filled, circuitous paths and the “glasshouse” of scrutiny under male-gendered expectations. The barriers were intensified for women with intersecting identities, deepening exclusion. Advancing glass ceiling and glass cliff scholarship, this study makes the first qualitative exploration of the prevalent glass cliff phenomenon in the legal profession. Moving beyond predominantly quantitative, scenario-based research to date, it shifts the focus on women’s lived experiences away from organisational intent. While existing metaphorical frameworks often portray women as passive victims of structural inequality, this research offers a counter-narrative. It introduces the *“leap of faith”* as a conceptual metaphor embodying women’s agency and determination, reflecting their rejection of exclusionary ‘traditional’ firm cultures in favour of values-driven, autonomous models of practice. A further contribution of this study is the articulation of the “3Rs” framework - resilience, refusal to accept the status quo and risk-taking, capturing the strategic ways women navigate, resist, and reimagine dominant systems. Although such leaps of faith highlight women’s ambition, this study calls for collective reform to address gendered cultural and structural inequalities in the legal profession, challenging neoliberal reliance on individual adaptation as the sole path to success. The research concludes with valuable insights for women in the partnership pipeline and practical recommendations to cultivate inclusive cultures that advance gender parity and equality in law firm partnerships.

Title

"Women Solicitors' Journeys to Partnership and Beyond: Navigating the Glass Ceiling and Glass Cliff"

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Nottingham Trent University
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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List of Abbreviations

ABS	Alternative Business Structures
AIM	Alternative Investment Market
AR	Approved Regulator
BD	Business Development
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CPS	Crown Prosecution Service
EDI	Equality Diversity and Inclusion
FTSE	Financial Times Stock Exchange
GP	General Practice / General Practitioner
ILT	Implicit Leadership Theory
KPMG	Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdeler
LDP	Legal Disciplinary Partnerships
LLP	Limited Liability Partnership
LPC	Legal Practice Course
NDA	Non-Disclosure Agreement
NHS	National Health Service
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PwC	Price Waterhouse Coopers
RPI	Retail Price Index
SDT	Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal
SQE	Solicitors Qualifying Examination
SRA	Solicitors Regulation Authority
UK	United Kingdom

List of Statutes and Regulations

Data Protection Act

Employment Act

Equal Pay Act 1970

Equality Act 2010

Equality Act 2010 (Gender Pay Gap Information) Regulations 2017

Legal Services Act 2007

Sex Discrimination Act 1975

Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919

Solicitors Act 1843

The Flexible Working (Amendment) Regulations 2023

Chapter 1- Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the study's conceptual and theoretical framework, which examines the persistent underrepresentation of women solicitors at the partnership level in the legal profession of England and Wales, despite women comprising the majority of entrants for several decades (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019; SRA, 2024). In examining women's progression to and within partnership roles, the study uses metaphors such as *journey*, *pathway*, and *trajectory* to conceptualise women's professional advancement. It also draws on established metaphors such as the *glass ceiling* (Morrison et al., 1987) and the *glass cliff* (Ryan & Haslam, 2005) to interrogate the structural, cultural, and symbolic barriers shaping women's progression. The analysis is further informed by Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and *symbolic violence* (1977, 1991), which illuminate how gendered power relations are reproduced and resisted in law firms. While these frameworks provided the starting point, analysis of the empirical data led to the development of the *leap of faith* metaphor, closely connected to the emergent 3Rs (Resilience, Refusal and Risk-taking), to capture women's intentional agency in navigating uncertainty and systemic constraints. This addition complements existing concepts by balancing the focus on inequality with recognition of women's strategic actions and perseverance. In addition to providing context, this chapter outlines the research aim, objectives, questions, and significance of the study. It also summarises the research design and methodology; discusses the researcher's philosophical stance and positionality; and provides an overview of the thesis structure.

1.2 Research Background and Theoretical Framework

Despite widespread recognition of the moral and social imperative of gender equality globally (World Economic Forum, 2021; United Nations, 2023), women constitute a minority at the upper echelons of organisational hierarchies across diverse industries. Extensive research has highlighted the economic benefits of diversity, with studies demonstrating that companies exhibiting gender diversity in their leadership teams are poised to achieve an anticipated 21% increase in profitability among firms within the top quartile for gender diversity (Hunt et al., 2018). Notwithstanding the legislative measures and organisational initiatives to foster diversity, the persistent underrepresentation of women in positions of authority and influence remains a formidable global challenge (Catalyst, 2020). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated this issue, with women

disproportionately affected by job losses. A McKinsey study revealed that, despite constituting 39% of the global workforce, women accounted for 54% of overall job losses during the pandemic (Madgavkar et al., 2020).

Moreover, women occupying senior roles faced heightened pressures, with a propensity 1.5 times greater than their male counterparts to contemplate decelerating their career progression or exiting the workforce altogether (Kahng, 2021). Over the past few decades, the legal profession of solicitors in England and Wales has seen a significant influx of women at entry level. Although women have constituted the majority of entrants since the 1990s, and currently 62% of entrants being women, their representation diminishes considerably at the partnership level, comprising 37% of partners in law firms (SRA, 2024). This persistent pattern of gendered attrition and prevaricated advancement has attracted significant scholarly attention. Scholars have often described the struggles of women's progression using metaphors. Similarly, to guide this study, the researcher has drawn mainly from the overarching theoretical frameworks of the existing literature on the glass ceiling (Morrison et al., 1987) and the glass cliff (Ryan & Haslam, 2005) phenomena. Literature has focused on gender bias women face within organisations as they climb their career ladder to explain the dearth of women in influential roles. The metaphorical construct of the "glass ceiling" was coined by Morrison et al. (1987), portraying an invisible yet impenetrable barrier that impedes the upward mobility of women within corporate hierarchies. This concept is one of the most pervasive and resonant metaphors from the maze of metaphors (Smith et al., 2012) to emerge in the 20th century, emblematic of the entrenched gendered dynamics prevalent in workplace environments (Kanter, 1977). Scholars and organisations have fervently sought to elucidate the underlying mechanisms perpetuating the glass ceiling phenomenon and other subtler forms of discrimination hindering women's advancement to senior leadership positions (Barreto et al., 2009). Although the topic has received significant attention, Powell and Butterfield (2015) assert that a paucity of scholarly inquiry exists concerning strategies to dismantle the glass ceiling and enhance organisational efficiency. They contend that the glass ceiling, the underlying causes and potential consequences have not been sufficiently explored.

Building on Elacqua et al.'s (2009) model identifying contributors to the glass ceiling, Babic and Hansez (2021), expanding their framework, introduced organisational gender culture, alongside previously recognised interpersonal factors, such as limited access to mentoring and informal networks, and situational factors, including lack of transparent, objective evaluation criteria and structured promotion processes. These intersecting dynamics shape

women's perceptions of unequal treatment and the presence of a glass ceiling, contributing to higher job stress, lower engagement, and reduced retention, especially in male-dominated professions like law. The persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership has been widely theorised through gendered frameworks. Schein's (1973, 1975, 2001) "think-manager-think-male" paradigm suggests that leadership is typically equated with traits traditionally associated with masculinity, confidence, decisiveness, risk-taking, and ambition, while women are often seen as embodying communal attributes such as empathy, warmth, and nurturance (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This mismatch produces role incongruity, in which women in leadership face heightened scrutiny and diminished perceived legitimacy (Brescoll et al., 2010; Hegarty & Bruckmuller, 2013).

Social role theory explains that societal expectations assign men and women distinct roles, shaping behaviour and opportunities (Eagly, 1987), while role congruity theory holds that prejudice toward female leaders arises from perceived incongruity between the female gender role and leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig et al., 2011). Collectively, these theories show how gendered expectations, organisational practices, and social norms restrict women's leadership opportunities, with bias or exclusion more likely when behaviour diverges from stereotypes. This interaction perpetuates inequalities in representation, remuneration, and influence, particularly in traditional, hierarchical professions such as law (Webley & Duff, 2007; Muzio & Tomlinson, 2012). Embedded in organisational culture and broader societal norms, these structural barriers sustain the glass ceiling and continue to limit women's advancement. Women's career progression is often framed by metaphors, including the "labyrinth" of complex, non-linear pathways (Eagly & Carli, 2007), "glasshouse" reflecting the exclusionary norms and scrutiny faced within male-dominated professions (Maclaran et al., 1997), sticky floors (Booth et al., 2003), and glass walls (Lyness & Terrazas, 2006) keeping women in lower-level jobs.

An illustrative example of the intensified scrutiny faced by women who break through the glass ceiling was documented in *The Times* (Judge, 2003), claiming that women had "wreaked havoc" on the organisations under their leadership. Judge (2003:21) concluding that "Britain would be better off without women on the board." In response, Ryan & Haslam's investigation revealed that women were more likely to be appointed to board positions during times of organisational crisis, a phenomenon they termed the "glass cliff" (2005; 2007). This concept encapsulates the loftiness of the high status of such positions and their inherent precariousness. This paradox highlights how women who break the glass ceiling often face a heightened risk of failure (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). The consequences of the glass cliff phenomenon include shorter tenures and higher turnover rates (Pearson &

Clair, 1998), heightened stress, disillusionment, and diminished commitment to the organisation (Ryan et al., 2009). While subsequent research and anecdotal evidence have supported the existence of the glass cliff phenomenon (Ryan et al., 2016), the backing for this concept has not been unequivocal, with some quantitative studies finding no significant evidence (Adams et al., 2009; Esposito, 2021).

Nonetheless, while these metaphors offer valuable tools for describing gendered barriers, they often highlight structural constraints on women's strategic responses. Law firms, despite formal commitments to diversity, are still influenced by deeply embedded cultural and symbolic norms that favour male-defined success (Webley & Duff, 2007; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). In this context, understanding how women solicitors experience, navigate, and challenge such dynamics is both an empirical and theoretical imperative. This study addresses this by critically examining the interaction between structural barriers and women's agency in shaping their career journeys within the legal profession. To deepen the analysis, this study utilises Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and symbolic violence (1977, 1984) to examine how gendered hierarchies are maintained and challenged within professional settings. *Habitus* describes the lasting dispositions individuals develop through socialisation, influencing their perceptions and actions. For women solicitors, this may reveal tensions between internalising legal norms and broader gendered expectations about career and leadership. The legal profession, as a structured social space, controls access to status via symbolic power, which legitimates certain pathways to advancement while sidelining others (Bourdieu, 1990). *Symbolic violence* highlights the subtle ways dominant norms become naturalised, causing individuals to view structural limitations as personal failings. This perspective enables a critical examination of how women may internalise, navigate, and sometimes resist the gendered aspects of the legal profession, which upholds long-standing norms and forms of cultural, social, and symbolic capital that are typically aligned with masculine ideals (Bourdieu, 1984; Sommerlad, 2011).

Grounded in the data analysis, extending the metaphorical frameworks on women's gendered career progression, this study introduces the *leap of faith* metaphor, originally derived from Kierkegaard's (1843) existential theology, it conceptualises women's intentional agency, represented by the 3Rs, anchored in the data analysis, representing their resilience, refusal to accept the inequitable status-quo and strategic risk-taking in navigating uncertain and often unsupported pathways, dimensions frequently overlooked in existing accounts. Positioned within broader structural constraints, this metaphor challenges dominant frameworks that focus on barriers while underplaying women's agency. Although adding value beyond existing metaphors for women's career navigation, it is applied

critically to avoid reinforcing neoliberal individualism that shifts responsibility for change onto women (Rottenberg, 2014; Gill, 2017; Ryan, 2023), rather than structural transformation. Instead, it highlights the interpersonal and perilous nature of agency within the legal profession, shaped by persistent structural inequalities (Webley & Duff, 2007; Aulakh et al., 2017; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019).

1.3 Significance and Contribution of the Research

Despite sustained efforts to promote gender equality, women remain significantly underrepresented in senior positions within the legal profession. While they comprise 62% of new entrants to the solicitor profession in England and Wales, only 37% progress to the partnership level (SRA, 2024), reflecting entrenched structural and cultural barriers (Kanter, 1997; Barreto et al., 2009; Powell & Butterfield, 2015; Taparia & Lenka, 2022). This disparity persists despite formal equality measures, highlighting the continued relevance of metaphors such as the “glass ceiling” (Powell & Butterfield, 2015; Babic & Hansez, 2021) and the “glass cliff” (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Glass & Cook, 2016; Morgenroth et al., 2020), which continue to shape both scholarly discourse and women’s lived professional realities. Yet, most existing research on the glass cliff has focused on organisational decision-making, employing quantitative, scenario-based experiments that offer limited insight into women’s lived experience as position holders (Esposito, 2021; Kulich et al., 2021). Furthermore, Ryan et al. (2016) highlight the lack of research exploring what happens to women after they secure glass cliff positions, as most research focuses on the influences leading up to these appointments.

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by qualitatively exploring the lived experiences of 31 women law firm partners, shifting focus from organisational intent to their own perceptions, strategies, and decisions (Sabharwal, 2013; Esposito, 2021). The study responds to calls for deeper contextual and experiential research (Sabharwal, 2013; Ryan et al., 2016; Esposito, 2021), particularly within male-dominated fields such as law, where symbolic power regulates access to status and advancement (Bourdieu, 1990; Bolton & Muzio, 2007). In so doing, it highlights how structural inequality is sustained not only at the upper echelons, where the glass ceiling remains intact, but also earlier in women’s career journeys, representing not only vertical but horizontal barriers, reflecting the “glasshouse” metaphor (Maclaran et al., 1997) where judgments against male-gendered expectations constrain women. It also highlights the added barriers faced by women with intersecting identities, including race, class, and caregiving roles (Crenshaw, 1991; Tomlinson et al., 2012).

Moreover, this is the first known qualitative study exploring the glass cliff in the legal profession, addressing the dominance of quantitative, scenario-based research (Ashby et al., 2007; Adams et al., 2009; Cook & Glass, 2014; Ryan et al., 2016). Ashby et al. (2007) conducted the only experimental study on the glass cliff phenomenon in law involving students. However, students lack the experiential insight necessary to analyse workplace dynamics and decision-making concerning high-risk roles. This study offers insight into the interplay of risk, gender bias, organisational culture, and women's agency, in a context where women, despite research suggesting greater risk aversion (Charness & Gneezy, 2012), are paradoxically overrepresented in precarious leadership roles (Darouei & Pluut, 2018).

Conceptually, the study introduces the *leap of faith* as a counter-metaphor to challenge dominant deficit-driven narratives, offering a lens through which to recognise women's intentionality and strategic decision-making as they navigate their careers. Unlike prevailing metaphors that portray women as passive victims of structural barriers (Eagly & Karau, 2002), the *leap of faith* highlights women's strategic courage, purpose, and resilience as they pursue roles that align with their values. Furthermore, the study's novel contribution lies in its articulation of the "3Rs" resilience, refusal, and risk-taking, as the core strategies women employed to navigate exclusionary systems and reimagine leadership. These findings offer valuable insights not only for academia but also for law firms, policymakers, and aspiring women solicitors. By focusing on women's voices, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how gendered pathways to leadership are shaped and contested (Braun et al., 2017; Esposito, 2021). It promotes inclusive practices that transcend surface-level diversity metrics to foster genuine gender equity in leadership (Menkel-Meadow, 1989; Bolton & Muzio, 2007).

1.4 Aim, Objectives and Methodology of the Research

The aim and objectives of this research are as follows:

Aim

This research explores the ongoing underrepresentation of women solicitors at the partnership level within the legal profession in England and Wales.

Objectives

1. To explore the prevalence and persistence of the glass ceiling phenomenon and its influence on the progression of women solicitors to partnership roles.

2. To explore the experiences of women solicitors in partnership positions, using the lens of the glass cliff phenomenon to better understand the ongoing lack of gender parity at the partnership level.

Methodology

The researcher adopted qualitative inquiry (Wilson, 2014) to explore how women solicitors experience, interpret, and navigate pathways to partnership and beyond. This approach enables in-depth examination of complex social phenomena, concentrating on participants' lived experiences, perspectives, and meanings (Creswell, 2013), essential for capturing the nuanced realities of gendered career progression in the legal profession.

The study draws on an interpretivist epistemology, privileging participants' lived experiences and socially constructed meanings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Collis & Hussey, 2014). This stance aligns with the intention to explore how women solicitors navigate complex, gendered pathways to partnership, and the nuanced ways they interpret, make sense of, and respond to their professional realities. By focusing on interpreting women's subjective narratives, the study acknowledges that knowledge is co-constructed and contextually situated, rather than objective or value-free. The research is also underpinned by a pragmatic approach, rooted in the philosophical traditions of Peirce (1934), James (1907), and Dewey (1938), which supports methodological flexibility and practical decision-making to address real-world problems. This combination enables strategies responsive to the complexities of the legal profession and dynamic career trajectories, emphasising meaning while generating actionable insights for practice and policy.

Further, the researcher's subjective ontological beliefs and broader worldview (Saunders et al., 2009; Yin, 2009) informed the research design, enabling a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of women's lived experiences. This influence ensured that participants' voices and interpretations remained central to the analysis, supporting a deeper understanding of the gendered dynamics shaping their journeys. Data analysis employs reflexive thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013), chosen for its theoretical flexibility and suitability for exploring lived experiences in a data-driven manner while supporting rich, context-sensitive interpretation. This approach enabled the researcher to remain attuned to patterns of meaning while reflexively considering her positionality and the broader social context (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher used it as a compass to guide the research journey, employing it as scaffolding around the study's development rather than following a concrete plan (Braun, Clarke & Hayfield, 2019). Chapter 4 discusses the research's

philosophical assumptions and the employed methodology in greater detail. The researcher reflected on and justified the theoretical assumptions, acknowledging their impact on the research process's credibility and the overall approach to investigating the research topic.

1.5 Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are women solicitors' experiences of navigating the pathways to partnership positions through the lens of the glass ceiling phenomenon?

Research Question 2: How do women solicitors experience partnership roles in the context of the glass cliff phenomenon?

The research questions determined the choice of research philosophy, methodology and methods (Wilson, 2014), which explored the slow progression of women solicitors in leadership positions in law firms in England and Wales by examining their experiences of the journeys to and in these posts.

1.6 Introducing the Researcher

As the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), it is essential to acknowledge the assumptions, experiences, and potential biases shaping this study (Greenbank, 2003). Although I hold an active practising certificate, I have not practised as a solicitor since 1999, positioning me more as “etic” (outsider) than “emic” (insider) (Punch, 1998). This enables analytic distance while drawing on insider knowledge of the legal profession. This dual positioning provided contextual insight into participants' narratives while reflexively examining how my standpoint influenced the research process. I position myself as a cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class British Asian woman in my 50s from a minority ethnic group. While I have experienced social privilege, I have also faced marginalisation at the intersection of gender and ethnicity. This research is, in part, a curative endeavour tracing my own journey as a working woman. I qualified in 1993, practised as a solicitor for several years, then managed NHS General Practices as a managing partner for almost 18 years. By 1999, I was a mother of four, experiences that inform my understanding of women's professional trajectories.

I identify as a female leader with experience in team management, interviews, performance reviews, training, business development (BD), and board advisory roles. Although a qualified solicitor, I do not meet the inclusion criteria for leadership roles in law firms and have therefore reflected critically on my evolving role throughout the research process. Born

to South Asian parents as the middle of three daughters, with an army officer father and a homemaker mother, my earliest experience of gender inequality was from societal preference for sons. Encouraged by my father to challenge gender norms, I developed a strong commitment to equality. Excelling in sports, academics, and debating fostered my passion for advocacy long before considering law. Although I aspired to study medicine and met the requirements, my plans changed after marrying my husband, a GP in training. Possibly influenced by gender norms, I chose a path I believed was more compatible with family life, discovering a passion for law. I had my first daughter at 21 during my second year of law school and returned just three days after giving birth, driven by pressure not to fall behind and perceived doubts about my commitment. Though this led to illness, I secured training contracts from three reputable firms, one commending my swift return, reinforcing the notion that I was expected to prioritise work over family.

During an interview at a fourth firm, the senior partner asked about my daughter and remarked, “Your husband might want an heir?” In retrospect, this was a Ricoeurian “poetic moment” (Ricoeur, 1991), interwoven with past experiences and future realisation, prompting a deep re-evaluation of my identity, values, and aspirations. I had decided against joining the firm before the interview ended. I completed my final year of law school exams, 36 weeks pregnant, achieving a distinction, the highest in my cohort. As a trainee solicitor in a Midlands firm, I faced behaviours from senior male colleagues that were hard to reconcile. A client specifically requested my attendance at a hearing, to which a senior male lawyer said, “Do whatever you did, hold her hand.” Another, impressed by my success in securing emergency legal aid by phone, told me to do the same for his client: “Grovel, get down on your knees.” These remarks, though seemingly light-hearted, undermined my confidence as a 23-year-old mother of two under-five-year-olds, challenging my sense of belonging in the profession (Butcher, 2013). With my husband establishing his GP practice, I managed most of the childcare, while navigating the pressures of professional performance and home life, determined not to let anyone down.

After qualifying as a solicitor and having my third child, I took a part-time role in a female-led firm, unusual at the time. I combined legal work, including the firm’s Legal Aid Board registration, with managing GP practices, whilst expecting my fourth child. Leading a team of 25–30, I coordinated multidisciplinary services and introduced innovations such as community-based hospital services, diabetic retinopathy, MRI scans, welfare benefits, private chiropody clinics, and on-site pharmacy and dental practice. I later focused on managing the practices and raising my four children. These experiences reinforced my view

that legal careers and family life were often mutually exclusive, although I excelled in my NHS leadership role, which offered greater flexibility.

I led my immediate team to Investors in People accreditation, earned clinical excellence awards, and was management lead for 18 GP practices serving 110,000 patients. While working in the NHS and balancing family life, I pursued master's degrees in Public Services Management, Health Law and Ethics, and an Executive MBA, culminating in this PhD. In both legal and NHS settings, I observed persistent gendered dynamics, contributions often acknowledged only when repeated by male colleagues, and women seemed excluded from decision-making spaces. Remarks like "*Carry on... it's just the wife*" in board meetings reflected the implicit devaluation of women's roles. Seeking work-life balance, I founded a management consultancy in 2014 and delivered a TEDx talk on women's leadership based on my MBA research. As a mother of four, I have reflected on the constraints shaping my legal trajectory, sparking interest in how gendered dynamics in law have evolved since the 1990s. In line with Cunliffe (2017), this research stems from a deep sense of identity and commitment to preventing future generations, including my own children, from facing similar challenges. Progress for working mothers in law remains slow, with COVID-19 further increasing the likelihood of women in leadership stepping back or leaving roles (Kahng, 2021).

Sharing my story is a meaningful way to contribute to change and support my self-development. This research is deeply personal, shaped by my experiences (Reason & Marshall, 1987), and speaks to three audiences: scholars who say, "That's interesting!" (Davis, 1964, in Reason & Marshall, 1987:112); practitioners who say, "That works"; and myself, evoking the response, "That's exciting!" as the process affirms my place in the world. My experiences informed both my interest in and the methodology of this study. I interviewed women solicitors to examine whether and how the male-dominated legal environment has evolved. My legal background offers insights, not always visible to outsiders, yet my diverse career enables me to remain an open-minded, reflexive observer. This perspective allows me to critically assess how far the profession has met women's needs and whether the playing field has been levelled. The research contributes to ongoing discourse on women's challenges in progressing to senior positions and identifies steps toward a more equitable professional environment.

Finally, this section outlines my connection to the research. In line with qualitative traditions, my lived experience shapes my positionality and epistemological stance (Braun & Clarke,

2019). As a female leader committed to gender equality, I approached interviews with reflexive awareness and emotional sensitivity, which sometimes created tension but also deepened critical reflection. As the sole researcher, I maintained self-awareness, interrogated my assumptions, kept analytic distance, and avoided direct references to the glass ceiling or cliff to minimise bias. I also sought to understand differing perspectives from my own. While reflexivity enriched the analysis and grounded it in context, complete objectivity remains unattainable, representing a limitation of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

1.7 Research Scope

It is crucial to establish the boundaries of this research to clarify its scope and focus. This research examines the career trajectories of women solicitors in England and Wales, with a particular focus on their experiences in progressing to partnership roles within private law firms. All 31 participants had held partnership positions. One was currently a director in a firm structured as a company rather than a partnership but had previously held a partnership in another firm. Another who did not specify her current role had been a partner in multiple firms. While the research inevitably touches on broader topics such as culture and leadership, it is essential to note that delving deeply into these areas was not the study's primary focus. Instead, the research explores specific aspects of women solicitors' experiences in partnership positions, examining the structural, cultural, and symbolic barriers, conceptualised through metaphors such as the glass ceiling and glass cliff and how participants navigated, internalised, or challenged these within a male-dominated profession.

Further, this study focuses on the solicitor branch of the legal profession to enable a targeted analysis of organisational culture and progression pathways within law firms. Rather than attempting to prove or disprove the existence of the glass ceiling or glass cliff, it explores the narratives of women solicitors as they progressed into senior roles. These narrated reflections, shaped by individual experience, are analysed within the context of existing literature to understand the challenges and opportunities women encounter on their journeys to and within partnership and how they respond to them. This study draws on qualitative interviews with women partners across England and Wales, offering a rich account of their lived experiences within a stratified profession. While focused primarily on gendered career encounters, the analysis also considers the influence of intersecting factors such as ethnicity and class as they arose. However, in-depth exploration of these identities is acknowledged as an area for future research.

1.8 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis includes seven chapters, and a brief overview of each is provided below.

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter outlines the research background and theoretical framework, aim, objectives, research questions, scope, significance and contribution. It also introduces the researcher, and clarifies her role in the research process, and explains the rationale for the topic. Additionally, it provides an overview of the methodology and the structure of the thesis.

Chapter Two: Literature Review: Glass Ceilings and Glass Cliffs

This chapter reviews key literature on gendered career progression, focusing on the glass ceiling (Morrison et al., 1987) and glass cliff (Ryan & Haslam, 2005) as dominant metaphors for explaining women's underrepresentation in senior roles. The glass ceiling describes the invisible yet persistent barrier that obstructs women's advancement to leadership positions. In comparison, the glass cliff, highlights the precarious, high-risk circumstances under which women are often appointed to leadership roles. While these concepts shed light on important structural and symbolic barriers, they tend to emphasise constraint over agency. To address this gap, the chapter introduces the leap of faith metaphor (Kierkegaard, 1843), drawing on Bourdieu's (1977, 1984) notions of habitus and symbolic violence to explore how women navigate and resist career constraints. In line with Morgan's (1986) work on metaphors as tools for framing and shaping organisational understanding, this metaphor seeks to reflect women's psychological resilience, intentional agency, and risk-taking within structurally constrained environments.

Chapter Three: The Legal Profession as the Context

This chapter provides a historical overview of women in the legal profession in England and Wales, setting the context for examining participants' gendered career progression. It explores the influence of patriarchy on professionalisation, the feminisation of the legal field, and questions the sufficiency of gender mainstreaming. The chapter examines how, despite women's increasing entry into the profession, partnership roles remain male-dominated. It highlights how law firms continue to reproduce hierarchical and masculine norms through long working hours, leadership and gender stereotypes, gender pay gap, sexual harassment, and presenteeism, which contribute to the glass ceiling phenomenon. These cultural and structural dynamics create specific barriers for women, particularly in relation to leadership and work-life integration. The chapter also considers the relevance of the glass cliff

phenomenon in legal contexts and provides the conceptual foundation for exploring how women solicitors engage with, resist, and negotiate these dynamics throughout their careers.

Chapter Four: Methodology

This chapter outlines the research philosophy, design, and methodology. This qualitative study adopts an interpretivist–pragmatic approach to explore how women solicitors navigate career progression, drawing on their lived experiences of the glass ceiling, glass cliff, and broader professional inequalities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 women partners from law firms across England and Wales. The analysis is guided by reflexive thematic analysis, offering a nuanced interpretation of participants’ experiences. The chapter also discusses sampling, recruitment, data collection and management, and addresses issues of credibility, trustworthiness, ethics, and the researcher’s positionality.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Findings - Pathways to Partnership

This chapter critically examines the journeys of women solicitors to partnership, addressing **Research Question 1** through the lens of the glass ceiling. Despite the increased entry of women into the profession, the findings reveal persistent structural and symbolic barriers to advancement. The discussion is organised around four key themes: **Theme 1:** The persistence of male-dominated culture and exclusion; **Theme 2:** Conflict between gender and leadership stereotypes; **Theme 3:** Structural barriers impacting progression; and **Theme 5:** Women’s responses and strategies in navigating these challenges. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and symbolic violence, the chapter explores how a male-dominated professional culture shapes women’s career trajectories. It highlights the tension between conformity and resistance, heightening their stress levels. Yet, participants demonstrated intentional agency and strategic risk-taking, conceptualised in this research as a leap of faith, to challenge the encountered entrenched norms. The analysis further demonstrates how social and symbolic capital influence perceptions of competence, leadership and legitimacy, highlighting a disparity between formal diversity initiatives and informal practices. These findings call for a re-evaluation of the male-centric benchmarks to better accommodate women’s often non-linear career paths.

Chapter Six: Discussion and Findings: Ascension to Partnership

This chapter addresses **Research Question 2** by exploring women’s experiences beyond the glass ceiling related to their progress to and experiences within partnerships. It does so through discussion of **Theme 4**, which focuses on the circumstances surrounding appointments and the decision-making processes that preceded them, as well as their

experiences within the partnership role, using the glass cliff phenomenon as an analytical lens. The chapter also considers participants' experiences after attaining partnership roles. The analysis highlights how organisational crises often position women as preferable candidates valued for traits such as empathy and collegiality, while exposing them to precarious, high-risk roles. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, the chapter demonstrates how such appointments reinforced gendered hierarchies and professional vulnerability. **Theme 5** reveals how participants persisted despite heightened stress and responded with resilience and strategic risk-taking, rejecting the status quo through intentional acts of agency. Using the emergent framework of 3Rs – Resilience, Refusal and Risk-taking, their 'leaps of faith' reflect efforts to reshape their professional journeys despite uncertainty and constraints.

Chapter Seven: Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter concludes the study by synthesising the key findings from the exploration of 31 women solicitors' journeys to partnership and beyond, using the glass ceiling and glass cliff frameworks. It highlights how the research questions engage with the persistent gender imbalance at the partnership level, despite women comprising the majority of newly qualified solicitors in England and Wales for decades. The chapter considers the study's theoretical and practical implications, offering insights and practical recommendations for women solicitors, law firms, regulators, and policymakers. Finally, it acknowledges the study's limitations and proposes directions for future research.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the research background, aim, objectives, research questions, significance, and contributions of the study. It has also introduced the theoretical framing, methodology, and philosophical underpinnings and addressed the researcher's positionality, scope, and the structure of the thesis. In examining women's progression to and within partnership roles, the study draws on metaphors such as *journey*, *pathway*, and *trajectory* to conceptualise career advancement and acknowledges the interplay between systemic structures and individual agency. The chapter has also signposted the *leap of faith*, a key finding based on the 3Rs (Resilience, Refusal to accept inequality, Risk-taking), anchored in the data analysis, capturing women's intentional agency in navigating uncertainty. The next chapter builds on this foundation by critically reviewing the literature on gendered career barriers, captured most notably by the glass ceiling and glass cliff, the metaphorical representations of inequality, underpinning the study's conceptual and theoretical framework.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review: Glass Ceiling and Glass Cliff

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the study's background, aim, objectives, research questions, significance, methodology, philosophical stance, scope, and structure. Building on that foundation, this chapter examines the persistent underrepresentation of women in senior positions and the structural and cultural barriers that impede their progression (Eagly & Carli, 2007). To contextualise these barriers, it briefly traces the historical trajectory of women's participation in the workforce and professions, showing how entrenched norms and institutional structures continue to shape contemporary workplace dynamics. Two central metaphors frame much of the literature on gendered career barriers. The *glass ceiling* (Morrison et al., 1987) denotes the invisible yet pervasive structural barrier that prevents women from reaching top leadership roles. The *glass cliff* (Ryan & Haslam, 2005) describes women's disproportionate appointment to precarious senior roles during periods of crisis, where the risk of failure is heightened. Complementary metaphors, such as the labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007), capture the non-linear and complex nature of women's career journeys. These metaphors offer valuable insights but also attract criticism for underemphasising women's agency and strategic responses (Bell et al., 2024).

This chapter critically engages with these debates, employing *journeys* metaphor (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) to describe women's career progression, drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus*, the ingrained dispositions shaped by social structures and past experiences (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984), and *symbolic violence*, the subtle, often invisible imposition of dominant norms and values that legitimise inequality and reproduce power relations (Bourdieu, 1991). These perspectives elucidate how gendered hierarchies are maintained and resisted within professional contexts, including law. By critically engaging with these frameworks, the chapter interrogates how systemic constraints and gendered power relations intersect with women's agency in navigating their career journeys, providing the conceptual and theoretical foundation for analysing the partnership pathways explored in this study.

2.2 Historical Overview of Women in the Workplace

To understand the enduring enigma of workplace gender inequality, despite rising female participation, higher educational attainment, and decades of socio-legal and institutional reforms (Eagly & Carli, 2007), this study considers it essential to outline the historical

trajectory of women's participation in the workforce, particularly in professional domains, where the progress has been far from linear (Acker, 2006). Instead, it reflects on the ongoing struggle against deeply embedded gender norms, institutionalised patriarchy, and resilient mechanisms of exclusion (Acker, 1990; Walby, 2011a), making women's participation in the workplace a contested and uneven process. By critically analysing these historical patterns, the research offers insight into the enduring dynamics that continue to shape gendered professional trajectories. While education and legal reforms are often viewed as progress, they must be situated within the backdrop of broader patriarchal structures. For example, Hartmann (1979) highlights how occupational segregation reflects the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy, which has long positioned women in subordinate economic roles. Similarly, Tilly and Scott (1987) demonstrate how women's labour, often confined to the domestic sphere, has remained undervalued and economically invisible.

Even when women entered paid work, they were often channelled into feminised, low-status roles, reinforcing the gendered division of labour. This pattern persists, as Hartmann (1979) and Walby (1990) argue, with patriarchy adapting rather than disappearing, embedding gendered assumptions within workplace structures. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women's entry into professions was largely confined to caregiving roles such as teaching and nursing (Goldin, 1990; Gordon, 1994). Although wartime labour shortages expanded access to male-dominated roles, post-war policies reinstated domestic roles and male dominance (Milkman, 1987). Later, economic growth, shifting norms, and rising labour demand enabled more women to work (Goldin et al., 2006), yet their participation remained shaped by assumptions of secondary earning, driven more by economic need than by efforts to redress gendered power dynamics. The feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s spurred key UK legal reforms, including the Equal Pay Act 1970, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, and the Employment Protection Act 1975, later consolidated into the Equality Act 2010 (Legislation.gov.uk, 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2022a). These measures granted women rights against unequal pay, workplace discrimination, and maternity-related dismissal. However, without challenging structural power and gendered organisational cultures (MacKinnon, 1987), transformative change has remained elusive, enabling workplace gender inequality to persist. Understanding these dynamics is essential for examining how historical legacies sustain systemic barriers in contemporary legal careers, shaping the gendered career pathways explored in this study.

Gendered workplaces

Despite the noted advancements, the workplace remains a deeply gendered space, shaped by enduring norms, power hierarchies, and structural inequalities that continue to disadvantage women (Acker, 1990). Despite rising educational attainment and increased participation in traditionally male-dominated professions such as law (Goldin et al., 2006; Blau & Kahn, 2013), women continue to navigate workplaces structured around male-centric norms. As Juhn and Potter (2006) observe, economic necessity, not progressive intent, has often driven women's participation, making dual-income households the norm. Consequently, women's perspectives are frequently marginalised within professional settings (Acker, 1990; Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Although policy reforms have promoted gender equality as both an economic and moral imperative (OECD, 2012), persistent structural and cultural barriers, indicated by the inequality in leadership, stress the need to explore how women experience and navigate leadership within the male-dominated sectors.

Notwithstanding the efforts, workplace gender parity, particularly in pay, occupational segregation, and daily experiences (Blau & Kahn, 2017), remains elusive. Acker's theory of gendered organisations highlights how workplace norms favour an ideal worker unencumbered by caregiving (1990) and has been widely applied to address the often-invisible barriers shaped by gendered assumptions (Acker, 1990, 1992, 2006; Jacobs, 1999; Heilman, 2012; Williams et al., 2012; Rodriguez & Guenther, 2022). A key challenge of the double burden of work and care persists, with women more likely to take career breaks (Budig & England, 2001), slowing their progression in workplace structures that assume that work takes precedence over personal life (Acker, 1992a). This burden is further compounded by the 'motherhood penalty', where competence is questioned once women become mothers (Cuddy et al., 2004). These norms reward alignment with masculine-coded ideals of total availability, disadvantaging those with caregiving roles (Acker, 2006; Williams et al., 2012). In professions like law, such expectations reinforce patriarchal control by limiting women's advancement, maintaining their status as 'other', and restricting their presence in senior roles. Building on Acker's work, Lewis (1992) argues that gender must be central to organisational analysis, as exclusionary dynamics are embedded in professional structures and processes as well as policies. Without this lens, equality efforts risk addressing symptoms rather than root causes. This is particularly evident in the professionalisation of law, where patriarchal control and exclusionary tactics have historically shaped entry, advancement, and definitions of professional legitimacy.

Professionalisation: Patriarchal control or exclusionary tactics?

Professionalisation in the legal field is neither neutral nor purely meritocratic but shaped by historical and institutional forces that privilege male-dominated norms (Abel, 1989; Hanlon, 1999; Watson, 2002). As Parkin (1974) and Larson (1977) describe, exclusionary control restricts access to professional knowledge and recognition, preserving male authority within elite occupational groups (Dingwall & Lewis, 1983). Witz (1992) identifies three patriarchal strategies: exclusionary, inclusionary, and segregationary that operate across both domestic and professional spheres, reinforcing gendered hierarchies and sustaining structural inequality (Kanter, 2008; Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015). Consequently, credentials and formal qualifications alone do not ensure advancement; instead, informal cultural expectations around presenteeism, competitiveness, and detachment from caregiving responsibilities operate as exclusionary mechanisms, privileging the ideal worker norm, unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, subtly marginalising women (Acker, 1990), especially mothers (Budig & England, 2001; Cuddy et al., 2004).

Accordingly, patriarchal power is maintained not only through explicit policies but also through implicit organisational cultures that reward conformity to masculine-coded ideals and penalise deviation (Walby, 1989). Although legal reforms may advocate formal equality, they often fail to confront the underlying gendered logic embedded in the structure of professional work, aligning with Witz's (1992) contention that professionalisation can operate as a gendered project, sustaining exclusion through ostensibly neutral standards. Such processes help explain the persistence of gender inequality in the legal profession, despite the increased participation of women. Rather than disrupting patriarchal control, professionalisation can legitimise and reproduce it, reinforcing the very barriers it purports to remove. This critique informs the study's exploration of how exclusionary dynamics manifest in the progression of women solicitors and are sustained through the concepts of habitus and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990), which explain how gendered power dynamics operate subtly through internalised norms. These ideas are explored in greater depth in the next section.

Habitus and symbolic violence

To move beyond surface-level accounts of exclusion, this study draws selectively on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and symbolic violence to examine how gendered inequalities persist even after formal barriers are removed. Habitus captures how socially shaped dispositions, influenced by one's position in the field, shape behaviours and expectations. In

professional contexts, these dispositions often align men with dominant norms of success, while women internalise competing expectations, such as professional success and caregiving roles (Eagly, 1987). In the knowledge-driven legal profession, where meritocracy and expertise are highly valued, male-gendered networking norms continue to shape advancement pathways (Walby, 2011b). While Bourdieu's framework was not explicitly gender focused, feminist scholars (Skeggs, 1997; McNay, 1999) highlight how it can expose the gendered undercurrents of professional life. As Ashley and Empson (2012) argue, elite firms uphold exclusion by privileging dominant cultural capital, masking inequality behind the rhetoric of meritocracy.

Symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991, 1992) explains how dominance is maintained through internalised norms that seem natural rather than coercive. In professional environments, this manifests as the privileging of assertiveness and the devaluation of collaborative or relational traits often associated with women, especially those managing domestic responsibilities. Additionally, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue that education reproduces social hierarchies by favouring the cultural capital of the dominant class, thereby reinforcing inequality across generations. Since advancement is linked to social capital embedded in male-dominated networks, women's connections are often undervalued, perpetuating symbolic violence that normalises their sidelining and obscures structural inequality.

Although Bourdieu's framework offers valuable insights into how inequality is subtly reproduced through symbolic violence, it has been critiqued for its conceptual vagueness (Jenkins, 1992) and the difficulty of capturing its everyday manifestations (Wacquant, 1992; Calhoun, 1995). Critics also argue it downplays individual agency and the potential for resistance (Swartz, 1997; Lovell, 2000), limiting its capacity to explain social change (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; King, 2000; Lizardo, 2004). This study applies Bourdieu's lens critically to examine how gendered power operates within the legal profession, while also highlighting how women navigate, adapt to, and at times resist dominant norms. In doing so, it exposes the often invisible strategic emotional labour involved that can lead to gender fatigue (Kelan, 2009) under the persistent pressure to assimilate or face marginalisation, raising a key question: must women conform or differentiate themselves to succeed in male-dominated fields?

Same or different?

Success within professional workplace dynamics, as noted, is frequently tied to male-centric traits, making the ideal of meritocracy gendered, favouring masculine norms around competence, authority, and leadership (Acker, 1990; Keelan, 2009). The sameness–difference dilemma reduces gender to an individual concern, obscuring structural inequalities (Fogarty et al., 1981). Hence, scholars caution against framing gender as secondary, emphasising its centrality to organisational analysis (Beechey, 1978; Garnsey, 1978). Given that meritocracy often reflects male-centric norms, positioning women as outsiders (Acker, 1983; Hakim, 1995), linear career paths are upheld as the gold standard, marginalising those with non-traditional trajectories, viewing career breaks and part-time work as lacking commitment, and reinforcing systemic bias. Gender differences, though socially constructed rather than inherent, shape biased workplace expectations and norms, creating unrealistic demands for women and perpetuating male-favoured power imbalances (Allen & Winton, 2023). Strategies focusing on either assimilation or essentialising difference risk reinforcing the very inequalities they seek to address (Crompton & Le Feuvre, 1996; Williams, 2018). Strategies that treat women differently risk entrenching inequality (Williams, 2018), while the sameness model pressures women to adopt masculine traits for advancement (Hakim, 1991, 1995; Crompton & Le Feuvre, 1996). As Pateman (1988) argues, genuine equality requires acknowledging, rather than erasing, differences.

In contrast, and building on the debate around gendered career trajectories, Hakim's (1998, 2000) preference theory classifies women into three groups: home-centred (20%), adaptive (60%), or work-centred (20%). She emphasises individual choice but overlooks structural barriers such as childcare and workplace bias. This omission reinforces neoliberal ideals of personal responsibility (Gill, 2017), aligning with narratives that prioritise fitting in over changing the structures and system (Gill, 2007; Rottenberg, 2014). While McKinsey's research establishes the business case for diverse leadership teams (Hunt et al., 2018), it also raises concerns about whether this drives genuine structural transformation or merely rebrands sameness as inclusion; against this backdrop, this study explores how women navigate the nuanced realities and tensions of pursuing success in a male-dominated legal profession, illuminating the challenges they face and the strategies that shape their career journeys.

Is the business case for diversity enough?

Despite the prominence of diversity initiatives, women remain underrepresented in senior roles, indicating limited structural change. Robust evidence links gender diversity to improved organisational performance: firms in the top quartile for gender diversity report 21% higher profitability (Hunt et al., 2018), and boards with more women achieve stronger outcomes across multiple metrics (Carter et al., 2003; Triano, 2013; Ellemers, 2014). The gap between rhetoric and reality highlights that, despite widespread recognition of gender equality as both a moral and business imperative, invisible barriers persist, shaping women's access to and experiences in leadership roles and keeping parity out of reach (Singh et al., 2023).

To better understand these invisible barriers, this study uses a metaphor-informed framework to explore how social, structural, and cultural forces shape women's career journeys (Patterson et al., 2013). It describes women's career progression as journeys, given the detours, dead ends, and crossroads that reflect structural limitations, as well as the adaptive strategies employed by them (Patterson et al., 2013). Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) use the *journey* metaphor to depict women's careers as non-linear and dynamic, marked by shifts in pace, direction, and priorities in response to personal values, life stages, and external circumstances, thereby capturing the complexity of navigating gendered organisational landscapes over time. Building on the brief introduction of the glass ceiling and glass cliff representing the gendered challenges, in the previous chapter, this section examines their origins, meanings, and relevance to the structural and situational barriers to women's advancement, with Chapter 3 focusing on their application in the legal profession.

2.3 The Glass Ceiling

The "glass ceiling" metaphor refers to an invisible barrier that prevents women from reaching top corporate positions despite their qualifications and achievements. Morrison et al. (1987:13) define it as "a transparent barrier that keeps women from rising above a certain level in corporations." Although not explicitly addressing the glass ceiling, Morgan's (2006) work on metaphors offers valuable insight into how the glass ceiling operates within organisational discourse. He argues that metaphors shape our understanding of organisations, and through his lens, the glass ceiling is framed as systemic, invisible, and structurally embedded, echoing his metaphor of organisations as systems of domination. While the glass ceiling metaphor reveals hidden barriers to women's advancement, aligned with Morgan's contention that metaphors offer only partial truths, it may obscure intersectionality, lateral exclusion, and women's emotional and strategic agency.

Nonetheless, it serves as a powerful tool to critique dominant narratives of neutrality and meritocracy within the legal profession.

This literature review examines the origins, manifestations, and implications of this phenomenon across various sectors, drawing from numerous studies and empirical evidence. Research indicates that there is no significant difference in aspirations for senior management roles between men and women (Powell & Butterfield, 2013), yet the glass ceiling persists. Marilyn Loden first used the term in 1978, based on personal experiences of sexism, stressing cultural barriers over personal ones as key to women's stunted career progression (BBC News, 2017). Popular media also traced the term's origin (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986, in Powell & Butterfield, 2015), which quickly gained traction in gender management literature. Its usage is noted as early as 1977 (Kanter) to describe gender inequality in upper management metaphorically (Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009). Subtle yet effective, it hinders women's advancement based solely on gender (Bass & Avolio, 1992; Shackleton, 1995; Li & Leung, 2001).

In addition to the diverse definitions, the absence of fixed independent criteria to ascertain the presence of the glass ceiling in an organisation presents a significant challenge. However, numerous studies describe the glass ceiling as an elusive, yet persistent barrier supported by conscious and unconscious discriminatory practices and approaches that obstruct qualified women from reaching senior roles (Bendl & Schmidt, 2010; Zeng, 2011). Crucially, evaluating women's career progression, rather than the number of women in senior roles at any given time, reveals that the glass ceiling effect intensifies as women approach the top of the hierarchy (Cotter et al., 2001).

Further, the nuanced manner in which the glass ceiling manifests and is perceived was explored by Wrigley (2002) in a qualitative study in public relations management. The findings revealed a range of attitudes, with some women acknowledging the presence of the glass ceiling and detailing specific barriers to advancement. In contrast, others questioned its existence or extent, an attitude termed as "negotiated resignation" (Wrigley, 2002:37), reflecting how women internalise structural limits and recalibrate their ambitions. The study identified several contributors to the glass ceiling, including denial, gender-role socialisation, men's clubs, women turning against women, and corporate culture. However, its small snowball sample may have skewed responses due to social desirability bias (Fisher, 1993). In contrast to the glass ceiling metaphor, which implies a static barrier at the top of the organisational hierarchy, Eagly and Carli (2007) propose the metaphor of the "labyrinth", which describes a more dynamic and complex organisational image, suggesting a convoluted

path often with hidden challenges and strategies, detours and dead ends women face as they advance in their careers. They argue that the “glass ceiling” metaphor oversimplifies women’s barriers, as a single barrier at the top, overlooking the complex, ongoing challenges women encounter throughout their careers. Aligned with Morgan’s view that metaphors reveal partial truths, the labyrinth metaphor highlights women’s resilience and navigation. Yet, it arguably obscures the structural power dynamics by shifting focus to the journey rather than the barriers. Nonetheless, it alludes to the ongoing challenges women face at all career stages, necessitating continuous effort and adaptability.

Regardless, the glass ceiling metaphor remains a persistent lens for articulating barriers to women’s advancement (Cotter et al., 2001). Elacqua et al. (2009) link the glass ceiling to interpersonal dynamics, such as informal networks and mentoring and situational factors like objective neutral criteria and male-dominated managerial structures, which mask systemic bias. Ambiguous promotion criteria, limited development opportunities, and biased evaluations disadvantage women, perpetuating the glass ceiling. These interwoven barriers align with the labyrinth metaphor, highlighting how cumulative rather than isolated barriers hinder women’s progression. While both men and women noted differential treatment, it was more acute for women. Without senior male leaders in decision-making positions, acknowledging these disparities, meaningful change remains unlikely. While Elacqua et al. (2009) identify barriers to women’s careers, their quantitative approach sidelines women’s voices, highlighting the need to explore how women interpret and navigate the nuances of these barriers, often lost in reductive, structural accounts that oversimplify women’s complex lived realities.

Further, Broadbridge and Hearn (2008) emphasised the need for a more nuanced approach to understanding the complexities of the dynamics between gender and management to address the disparities and enable meaningful change. Echoing this, Powell and Butterfield (2015) argue that the glass ceiling remains largely unchanged over the past two decades, despite global awareness and interdisciplinary research. Their 1994 study found that transparent, standardised promotion processes in a US federal government department benefited women's advantage. While linking gender equality to organisational efficiency, the authors call for further scholarly exploration into its origins and consequences, reinforcing the need to explore women’s experiences of navigating these processes. This research extends that inquiry by critically examining women’s experiences and responses to the glass ceiling, but also the glass cliff phenomenon, when they break through the metaphorical glass ceiling and attain senior roles.

More recently, Babic and Hansez (2021) examined how organisational gender culture, alongside interpersonal and situational factors (Elacqua et al., 2009), shapes perceptions of the glass ceiling among women managers. Their findings reveal that these factors collectively undermine women's well-being and disrupt work–family balance. Their research highlights the strain women face from conflicting gender norms and leadership expectations, a key aspect of the glass ceiling. Building on Babic and Hansez's work, this study examines how women solicitors employ strategic agency and emotional resilience to navigate structural and cultural constraints, providing insight into career dynamics that are often overlooked in quantitative research.

2.4 Consequences of the Glass Ceiling

Despite the vast literature on the glass ceiling, most studies focus on the barriers, only a few have investigated its impact. Notably, Babic and Hansez's study, shifting the lens, examines its effects on women's organisational engagement and their well-being. Crucially, the literature reveals that these impacts are not isolated to women but also trigger organisational consequences, which are explored below.

Consequences for women

The perception of the glass ceiling significantly affects women's emotional responses and behaviours. Perceptions of prejudice and the glass ceiling lead to workplace stress, dissatisfaction, low engagement, and higher turnover intentions (Babic & Hansez, 2021). Furthermore, Taparia and Lenka's (2022) systematic review highlights how the glass ceiling contributes to diminished job satisfaction, increased stress, and constrained career aspirations among women, thereby reinforcing both structural and psychological barriers to advancement. Women experience social exclusion, low self-esteem, and negative expectations of future interactions with the source of the prejudice and the entire out-group (Branscombe et al., 1999; Tropp, 2003). These dynamics contribute to burnout, depression, and low organisational commitment (Kim et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2016; Tiwari et al., 2019; Lekchiri et al., 2019), often prompting women to leave hostile environments and start their ventures (Carnes & Radojevich-Kelley, 2011). Female managers facing the glass ceiling may stop seeking advancement, perpetuating underrepresentation in executive roles (Stroh et al., 1996). Alternatively, they can raise the issue with HR, seek mentors, build networks, explore higher-level positions elsewhere, or consider pursuing legal action (Elacqua et al., 2009).

Furthermore, resilience, frequently cited in the literature as key to overcoming structural barriers like gender bias and limited networks (Ely et al., 2011), often emerges as an outcome of navigating the glass ceiling, reflecting women's capacity to adapt, persist, and assert agency amid systemic exclusion. Defined as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress" (Southwick et al., 2014:2), resilience is a dynamic, context-dependent capacity that develops over time (Pietrzak & Southwick, 2011; Kim-Cohen & Turkewitz, 2012). Supportive networks and mentoring are key in fostering it (Ragins & Kram, 2014), as women draw on emotional intelligence and strategic adaptation to navigate exclusion (Kanter, 1977; Hopkins et al., 2008). For women of diverse backgrounds, resilience is shaped by intersecting oppressions, intensifying emotional labour and self-positioning demands (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins et al., 2009). Resilience implies that those who persevere and push through will ultimately succeed. While resilience can empower, it is notable that framing it as a prerequisite for success risks individualising responsibility and masking systemic barriers, rather than a neutral trait, resilience becomes a gendered survival strategy within unreformed professional cultures (Rottenberg, 2014; Gill, 2017; Bell et al., 2024).

Consequences for organisations

The glass ceiling negatively affects not only women but also organisations by reducing the talent pipeline and overall productivity. Organisations perceived to have a glass ceiling suffer reputational damage, further diminishing their ability to attract and retain talent, adversely affecting both the organisational brand and employee satisfaction (Davies et al., 2018). Furthermore, the glass ceiling carries significant organisational consequences, undermining innovation, effectiveness, and the retention of diverse talent (Cotter et al., 2001; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Systematically excluding women from leadership roles perpetuates homogeneity and groupthink (Torchia et al., 2011), weakening diverse perspectives, decision-making processes and strategic agility. Over time, these patterns entrench gendered hierarchies and reproduce structural inequality within organisational cultures (Acker, 1990; Babic & Hansez, 2021). Recent scholarship has shifted its focus towards identifying the systemic factors underlying its persistence. This study, therefore, examines not only how such dynamics persist within the legal profession but also how women navigate them.

2.5 Contributing Factors of the Glass Ceiling

In their systematic literature review, Taparia and Lenka (2022) shaped a framework highlighting the complex interplay of factors contributing to the glass ceiling, calling for

comprehensive strategies to address it. They identify organisational, structural, and policy barriers such as limited mentorship and biased promotion criteria alongside cultural norms that shape perceptions of women's leadership. Individual factors, including confidence, negotiation skills, and caregiving responsibilities, were also identified as hindrances to progression. This study considers the contributing factors grouped under cultural, individual and organisational factors, which also reflect classifications by other scholars (Oakley, 2000; Gabaldon et al., 2016; Syed et al., 2018) as well as policy and other contextual factors that maintain the glass ceiling.

Societal and cultural factors

Research shows there are no intrinsic brain differences linking behaviours to gender (Fine, 2011). Yet McKinsey's study found that for every 100 men promoted from entry-level to manager, only 87 women achieve the same (Krivkovich et al., 2022). This gender bias stems from conflicting stereotypes around traditional gender roles and leadership expectations (Schein, 1975; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women are viewed as nurturing, sensitive, and responsible for child and parent caregiving (Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018), while men are seen as assertive and aggressive and primary breadwinners (Schein, 1973, 1975; Eagly & Karau, 2002), characteristics coded as masculine and most aligned with leadership traits (Schein, 1973, 1975). This can disadvantage women whose leadership styles may prioritise collaboration, empathy, or adaptability qualities often undervalued in male-dominated hierarchies. Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory suggests that those defying these norms face negative judgments. Eagly's (1987) social role theory explains how societal expectations shape gendered behaviour, suggesting that men and women are socialised into different roles from an early age, which in turn shapes both self-perception and external evaluations (Fitzsimmons et al., 2014). Leadership traits are often viewed as incompatible with traditional femininity (Weyer, 2007), leading to working women's ambition and assertiveness being perceived as deviant rather than desirable (Fazal et al., 2019).

Women, therefore, face dual prejudice due to role incongruity (Heilman et al., 1995; Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Johnson et al., 2008) being stereotypically viewed as less suited for leadership and when they attain senior roles, they are judged more harshly. Erfani et al. (2023) found that women leaders experience the likeability versus competency dilemma more intensely than men. Heilman (2001) adds that gender stereotypes create both descriptive biases, shaping expectations of women's traits, and prescriptive biases, dictating how women "should" behave. As a result, organisations devalue women's performance, often overlooking or misattributing their successes. Competent women, therefore, do not advance to the same level as an equally qualified male colleague. Accordingly, women are

often required to significantly outperform their male counterparts to be regarded as equally competent (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997). These disparities stem not merely from interpersonal dynamics but from entrenched social norms, cultural values, and beliefs that uphold structural inequality in the workplace (Syed et al., 2018).

The underrepresentation of women in senior roles is partly rooted in gendered expectations that cast women as ideal followers, communal and deferential rather than as assertive leaders (Braun et al., 2017). Ingroup bias further reinforces this by favouring those who reflect dominant norms, disadvantaging women in male-dominated environments (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Haslam & Platow, 2001; Ellemers, 2014). Women face a double bind in leadership where assertiveness earns them criticism as “unfeminine,” while conformity to traditional roles undermines perceptions of their leadership suitability (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; McDowell, 2015). Gendered stereotypes portray female leaders as “moody” or “dramatic,” in contrast to emotionally neutral male bosses (Elsesser & Lever, 2011:1573). Although actual leadership experience reduces bias (Eagly et al., 1995; Fiske, 1998), cultural norms and caregiving expectations continue to constrain women’s mobility, particularly in certain regions, including East and South Asia, where traditional gender roles remain deeply embedded (Liu, 2013; Batara et al., 2018; Sarwar & Imran, 2019), sustaining structural barriers to advancement. Ultimately, societal expectations and cultural norms continue to reinforce gendered assumptions about leadership, competence, and caregiving, subtly but powerfully sustaining the structural barriers that underpin the glass ceiling.

Individual factors

Gendered expectations often overshadow women’s professional capabilities, shaping perceptions that impede their advancement (Fiske, 1998). Person-centric obstacles, such as balancing work and home life, lead many women to reduce or abandon leadership aspirations (Cross & Linehan, 2006). Family responsibilities frequently limit participation in informal networking, a key avenue for career progression and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Cross, 2010; Navarro-Astor et al., 2017; Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2019). Working mothers also face conflicting role stereotypes, being seen as competent but lacking warmth (Fiske et al., 2002), which exposes them to ambivalent sexism, hostile towards non-traditional women and benevolent in restricting autonomy through ‘protective’ behaviours (Glick et al., 1997; Glick & Fiske, 1999; King et al., 2012). Additionally, subtle forms of modern sexism continue to reinforce inequalities in less visible yet damaging ways (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1986). The

motherhood penalty compounds these effects, with mothers viewed as less competent than childless women or even their pre-motherhood selves (Cuddy et al., 2004).

Moreover, O'Connor (2001) suggests that while men often view hierarchical advancement as a symbol of success, many women seek broader life fulfilment beyond the workplace. Eagly and Carli (2007) similarly argue that women frequently leave senior management roles for caregiving responsibilities, a view echoed in Hakim's (1998) preference theory, which posits that only a small minority of women prioritise career over family and that most prefer flexible roles or remain childfree to advance. However, such perspectives risk reinforcing gendered assumptions about ambition and availability, overlooking that preferences for flexibility are not exclusive to women. These narratives obscure the structural and cultural barriers shaping women's career paths. Supporting social role theory, recent evidence suggests that men, too, face penalties when they deviate from traditional gender norms (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Allen & Winton, 2023).

Social role expectations and gendered socialisation result in girls being conditioned to be risk-averse and modest, shaping internalised beliefs that undermine women's confidence and self-perception (Crompton & Harris, 1998; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). This has been linked to a reluctance to self-promote, which reduces women's visibility and access to development opportunities (Terjesen & Singh, 2008). This, in turn, constrains the leadership experience required for senior roles (Ragins et al., 1998). While studies suggest women may show lower motivation for high-power roles (Schuh et al., 2014), and modesty can negatively influence performance evaluations (Budworth & Mann, 2010), such findings risk reinforcing deficit-based narratives. These interpretations often overlook the structural and cultural contexts that shape women's behaviours, framing gendered outcomes as individual shortcomings rather than responses to exclusionary organisational norms. In summary, while individual choices shape careers, they occur within structural and cultural constraints that continue to limit women's progression and sustain the glass ceiling.

Organisational factors

Additionally, organisational or structural factors, such as male-centric workplace cultures, inflexible policies, and gendered assumptions, consistently hinder women's career progression (Elacqua et al., 2009; Taparia & Lenka, 2022). Although flexible work options are available, women who utilise them are often penalised through perceptions of lower commitment and exclusion from high-profile assignments that could lead to promotion (Cross & Linehan, 2006; Lupu, 2012). Organisational norms frequently remain shaped around a male ideal worker (Acker, 1990), placing primary carers, often women, at a

structural disadvantage (Hurn, 2012). Furthermore, recruitment and promotion practices are affected by gender-role incongruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and ‘Think-Manager-Think-Male’ biases (Schein, 2007), reinforcing both descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes. This misalignment between femininity and leadership contributes to ongoing underrepresentation by sustaining biased evaluations, which restrict women’s access to leadership roles (Heilman, 2001; Ridgeway, 2001).

Notably, while Taparia and Lenka’s (2022) review provides a comprehensive framework, it overlooks the impact of sex-role spillover, which blurs gender and work roles to women’s disadvantage (Gutek & Morasch, 1982). Women, as numerical minorities in male-dominated settings, often trigger status-based doubts about their competence and credentials (Gutek & Cohen, 1987; Cikara et al., 2009). This dynamic can manifest in sexualised propositions, harassment, and hostile responses, especially when attractiveness is misattributed to their professional success (Muehlenhard & MacNaughton, 1988). Perceptions of submissiveness may further enable exploitation (Richards et al., 1991), while the tension between being seen as competent and sexual undermines confidence, performance, and professional identity (Gutek, 1989, in Baugh, 1997; Fredrickson et al., 1998). These dynamics highlight the enduring impact of gendered stereotypes in shaping women’s workplace experiences, where these external biases intersect with the internalised barriers, which, with limited access to mentoring and career planning, compound their gender-based disadvantage (Boone et al., 2013). Despite equality rhetoric, many organisations remain governed by opaque promotion routes, exclusionary networks, and subtle gendered assumptions that relegate women to ‘glass wall,’ usually supportive roles, limiting their lateral mobility (Lyness & Terrazas, 2006; Powell & Butterfield, 2015), as well as their vertical mobility blocked by the glass ceiling, thereby entrenching their underrepresentation in leadership.

Organisational culture

“Glass ceilings and perceptions of it are especially likely to be found in cultures that encourage differential views of and treatment of men and women”

(Elacqua et al., 2009:293).

Since their research, other studies have corroborated the above relationship between cultures with pronounced gender differential views and the prevalence of the glass ceiling phenomenon (Liu, 2013; Batara et al., 2018; Sarwar & Imran, 2019). The organisational factors mentioned above contribute to a masculine culture, often manifested through

informal “old boys’ networks” that isolate women (Oakley, 2000). Carvalho et al. (2019) emphasise that male culture excludes women from informal networks, limiting their access to social capital, the value and advantages gained from social networks in terms of power, opportunity, and access (Bourdieu, 1986), and mentors, which are crucial for career advancement (McDonald, 2011). In professional contexts, this means that without the “right” connections or networks, women often face invisible barriers to advancement. They also miss training opportunities due to domestic responsibilities, further hindering their progress. Babic and Hansez (2021) attribute the perceived glass ceiling to organisational gender culture, along with situational and interpersonal factors. Policies that fail to accommodate women during and after maternity leave further impede their career progression.

Moreover, women’s fear of reprisals can stifle their career progression, creating a culture that discourages seeking advancement opportunities. This concern over potential backlash for asserting their rights or seeking accommodations, like flexible working conditions or family leave, perpetuates gender inequalities. This culture of fear prevents women from advocating for themselves and fully engaging in career development, hindering gender parity in senior management. Additionally, research shows significant gender disparities in feedback, as text analyses of anonymous feedback reveal that women receive feedback focused on operational issues rather than visionary leadership. This feedback is often less actionable than that given to men (Doldor, Wyatt, & Sylvester, 2021). Women are frequently advised to cope with politics, whereas men are encouraged to leverage it. Men are advised to claim their space, whereas women are advised to be more cooperative with existing leadership. These inconsistencies (Table 2.1) highlight deep-seated gender biases that limit women’s leadership potential.

	Men are encouraged to	Women are encouraged to
Vision	Set the vision Focus on being visionary and think about the “big picture.”	Focus on delivery Focus on operational tasks; execute other people’s vision and develop expertise in narrow specializations.
Political Skills	Leverage politics Anticipate political considerations and proactively leverage politics to influence and network upward.	Cope with politics “Toughen up, reduce tensions, and “cope” with office politics, network horizontally.
Asserting Leadership	Claim their space Be assertive in pursuing leadership ambitions.	Get along Be cooperative and deferential in exerting leadership.
Confidence	Display more confidence Develop confidence in specific skill sets and ‘display’ it - confidence is framed as fixable.	Be more confident Female leaders’ lack of confidence is described as an inherent, general flaw, without actionable advice.

Table 2.1: Employee feedback comparison by gender, adapted from Doldor, Wyatt and Sylvester (2021)

Edmondson's (2019) four stages of psychological safety provide a valuable lens for examining how gendered organisational norms may contribute to limiting women's participation, voice, and progression. The framework, consisting of inclusion, learner, contributor, and challenger safety, shows how a lack of psychological safety in male-dominated environments can suppress risk-taking, innovation, and advocacy, all of which are vital for leadership visibility. Although it encourages inclusive practices, the model has been criticised for oversimplifying complex dynamics and lacking empirical robustness (Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017). Nonetheless, it is a useful tool for assessing how women experience safety when navigating hierarchical and exclusionary workplace cultures.

The role played by the lack of Edmondson's psychological safety markers is highlighted by Alvesson's (2002) contention that organisational culture is shaped through meaning-making and lived experiences. In male-dominated environments, this can reinforce dominant gender norms, often fostering "queen bee" behaviour, where senior women conform to masculine norms to gain acceptance, distancing themselves from junior women and perpetuating gendered hierarchical structures (Staines et al., 1974; Ellemers et al., 2004; Derks et al., 2011). This self-group distancing (Faniko et al., 2020) reflects not internalised misogyny, but a strategic response to exclusionary cultures (Bryans & Mavin, 2003). Such behaviour deprives younger women of mentorship and sustains the barriers it aims to negate. The metaphor of the "glasshouse" (Maclaran et al., 1997) aptly illustrates the toll women must pay to feel accepted whilst being judged by male-gendered standards, threatening their authenticity. Ultimately, culture can act as a conduit that helps reproduce inequality through these mechanisms, reinforcing the glass ceiling as both a structural and cultural barrier (Acker, 1990; Alvesson, 2002).

Regulatory and policy influences

While regulatory frameworks and policy interventions aim to reduce gender inequality in the workplace, their effectiveness in dismantling the glass ceiling remains a matter of debate. Despite progressive legislation such as the Equality Act 2010 (Legislation.gov.uk., 2022a) and initiatives such as board quotas (30% Club, 2022) aimed at creating equitable workplaces for women, the glass ceiling remains firmly in place (Babic & Hansez, 2021). Poor implementation of this act and other gender equality laws, such as the Gender Pay Gap Information Regulations 2017 (Legislation.gov.uk., 2022b), perpetuate the glass ceiling. As Yukongdi (2005) notes, without robust sanctions, such initiatives risk becoming symbolic, lacking meaningful impact. Accordingly, as of April 2023, full-time female employees in the UK earned 7.7% less than their male counterparts, highlighting that despite facing greater

challenges, women receive significantly lower compensation (White, 2023). Hickey et al. (2022) further highlight that women often have to change jobs to climb the corporate ladder, whereas men typically advance within the same organisation. Despite good intentions, such policies often lead to surface-level compliance rather than structural change (Kalev et al., 2006). By focusing on formal equality, reforms overlook informal practices and entrenched norms that sustain exclusion. As a result, the glass ceiling persists, driven by organisational inertia and weak enforcement of gender equity measures (Dickens, 2006).

Contextual influences

Beyond individual, organisational, and policy-driven explanations, broader contextual influences also shape how the glass ceiling is perceived and sustained. Taparia and Lenka (2022) identify several contextual factors shaping perceptions of the glass ceiling, including education, marital status, motherhood, age, and social class. Higher education is associated with increased confidence and leadership potential (Hutchings et al., 2016). In contrast, marriage and motherhood often constrain career advancement due to competing responsibilities and employer biases (Ansari, 2016; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Deschacht, 2017). Age interacts with these barriers; women under 45 experience heightened sexism (Worrall et al., 2010), and those aged 36 to 45 struggle most with inflexible work conditions due to childcare demands. However, social capital appears to increase with age, slightly offsetting exclusion from male-dominated networks (Subramaniam et al., 2014). Moreover, women from higher social classes navigate workplace structures with greater ease and self-assurance (Syed et al., 2018; Sarwar & Imran, 2019). These factors are interconnected, reinforcing the glass ceiling and emphasising the importance of addressing not only structural barriers but also intersectional disadvantages (Crenshaw, 1991).

Beyond individual and organisational factors, broader contextual influences shaped by Bourdieu's notions of symbolic violence and habitus contribute to the persistence of the glass ceiling. These forces normalise exclusion and obscure systemic inequalities. Socio-economic conditions, media portrayals (Shor et al., 2022), and intersecting inequalities cultivate a gendered habitus that frames women's aspirations as personal choices rather than structural responses (Gill, 2007). Neoliberal ideals of meritocracy and individualism further legitimise these dynamics, masking inequality. Collectively, these intersecting forces sustain the glass ceiling and also underpin the glass cliff, positioning women who break through the glass ceiling in precarious leadership roles (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

This analysis shows that despite years of attention, the glass ceiling remains firmly in place. In addition to disparity at the partnership level for women solicitors (SRA, 2024), only 11%

of FTSE 100 and 4% of FTSE 250 CEOs are women (Clark, 2024), highlighting the persistence of structural barriers. The literature spans disciplines to demonstrate how individual, organisational, and systemic factors intersect to hinder women's progress. Increasingly, as women gain confidence and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986, 1997, 2001), they are choosing to opt out of traditional corporate paths, not due to a lack of ambition, but to reclaim autonomy, flexibility, and meaningful advancement on their own terms (Harding, 2007; Patterson & Mavin, 2009), signalling a rejection of cultures that still resist inclusion at the top rather than complete career abandonment (Gill, 2017; Bell et al., 2024).

2.6 The Glass Cliff

Despite the persistence of the glass ceiling (Morrison et al., 1987; Barreto et al., 2009), women increasingly break through and secure leadership roles (Dreher, 2003; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Metaphors such as the glass ceiling, glass cliff (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), sticky floors (Booth et al, 2003) and glass walls (Lyness & Terrazas, 2006), holding women to lower jobs, and labyrinth have lent a visual portrayal to explain women's experiences during their career trajectories (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Furthermore, the "glass cliff" phenomenon refers to women being frequently chosen for precarious, high-risk leadership roles (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). Viewed through Morgan's (2006) lens of organisational metaphors, the glass cliff illustrates how women's advancement can symbolise progress while masking more profound systemic inequalities. Appointing them to leadership roles during crises increases their risk of failure. Although the metaphor captures precarity, it can obscure women's resilience (Southwick et al., 2014) and agency (Skeggs, 1997; McNay, 1999). This study explores these lesser-known responses to such conditions in their career progression.

To enlighten how the findings may compare with the extant literature, this section critically assesses key research on the glass cliff phenomenon, focusing on the conditions under which women are appointed to senior roles and their experiences in them, which remain underexplored due to their confidential nature and the complexity of the influencing factors (Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan, & Haslam, 2006; Esposito, 2021). Despite the established advantages of women's typically inclusive leadership style (Eagly & Carli, 2003) and emotional intelligence to overcome challenges faced (Druskat et al., 2013), women experience disadvantages through prejudicial judgments of their competence to lead, particularly in male-dominated organisations. As discussed, social psychologists explain the scarcity of women in management roles by linking leadership qualities predominantly with male traits such as risk-taking, decisiveness, and assertiveness (Croson & Gneezy, 2009; Vinkenburg et al., 2011). Theories such as the "think-manager-think-male" (Schein, 1975,

2001; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig et al., 2011), social role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly et al., 2000), and role incongruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig et al., 2011), discussed in the glass ceiling section, also underpin the glass cliff phenomenon. They reveal how leadership is aligned with masculine traits, positioning women's attributes as misaligned with prevailing norms, reinforcing leadership as a male domain. Furthering this trend, an article published in The Times (Judge, 2003), "Women on the Board: Help or Hindrance?", rather interestingly, written by a woman, purported:

'So much for smashing the glass ceiling and using their unique skills to enhance the performance of Britain's biggest companies. The triumphant march of women into the country's boardrooms has instead wreaked havoc on companies' performance and share prices.'

(Judge, 2003:21)

Singh and Vinnicombe's ranked data on FTSE 100 companies, by the proportion of women directors (2003, in Ryan & Haslam, 2005), underpinned these initial claims about gender and performance. However, Ryan and Haslam (2005) critiqued the absence of statistical analysis and the lack of consideration for companies with poor performance and low female representation. Reframing the causal link, they suggested that women were more likely to be appointed during times of crisis, rather than their appointments causing poor performance (Haslam & McGarty, 2004). They found men were typically appointed to stable boards, while women were placed on underperforming ones. Ryan and Haslam coined the term "glass cliff" to capture the high visibility yet precariousness of such roles, extending the glass ceiling metaphor to highlight the continued risks women face in leadership (2005).

Furthermore, Ryan et al. (2007) emphasise that these roles become precarious because of challenges such as a lack of recognition, inadequate support, and insufficient resources and time to complete tasks. Although these appointments may represent progress, they can also perpetuate inequality, leading to increased stress and women's disaffection within the organisation. This disengagement can be interpreted as a lack of commitment and ambition, prompting some women to leave the organisation, exit the workforce, or pursue entrepreneurship as a strategic move. Conversely, successfully navigating these roles can lead to women being headhunted for similar positions, perpetuating a cycle of risky roles (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). They suggest examining the glass cliff phenomenon across different sectors, particularly comparing traditionally male-dominated fields with more

gender-balanced ones, as the phenomenon may manifest differently, thereby emphasising the importance of context. Similarly, Bruckmüller et al. (2014) emphasise the importance of understanding workplace experiences rather than merely focusing on gender diversity as a numbers game to elucidate the relationship between risky leadership positions and the appointment of women.

Although the glass cliff phenomenon has been substantiated by both empirical research and anecdotal evidence (Ryan et al., 2016), the support for the phenomenon has not been absolute. Some studies indicate a small, context-dependent effect consistent with the glass cliff, underscoring its complexity (Morgenroth et al., 2020). Mulcahy and Linehan (2013) sampled UK-listed companies that reported losses from 2004 to 2006 and found a positive correlation between significant losses and increased gender diversity on boards, reinforcing the glass cliff effect. They cautioned against celebrating gender diversity on boards without considering the company's stability. Conversely, other quantitative studies (Adams et al., 2009) in the U.S., (Santen & Donker, 2009) in the Amsterdam Stock Exchange, and Canadian company boards (Hennessey et al., 2013) found no evidence of a glass cliff, noting no significant differences in company performance pre- and post-appointment of male and female CEOs. These studies suggest that companies' stronger performance provided a solid ledge (Hennessey et al., 2013) rather than a glass cliff for newly appointed women. However, Ryan and Haslam (2009) argue that assessing the glass cliff solely through fiscal outcomes is inadequate, as the phenomenon is neither universal nor inevitable. They emphasise the importance of considering contextual and psychological factors, including the lived experiences of women in leadership (Haslam et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2016). As more women advance past the glass ceiling, scholars (Sabharwal, 2013; Sabharwal et al., 2016; D'Agostino et al., 2020; Esposito, 2021) call for research that explores leadership experiences to inform more effective policy responses to both glass ceiling and glass cliff barriers.

Moreover, Esposito's (2021) research did not find support for the glass cliff effect, aligning with traditional leadership theories (Schein, 1973; 1975), revealing that men are placed more frequently in higher-risk roles. Nevertheless, Esposito recommends interviewing senior and middle management women to examine the factors shaping their career decisions, including opportunities, workplace experiences, acceptance or rejection of senior roles and reasons for exit, to better elucidate the phenomenon. This approach could reveal barriers that prevent women from advancing to senior positions. If a glass cliff is prevalent, it might dissuade middle management women from pursuing higher

roles, impacting the female leadership pipeline (Esposito, 2021). This study adopts the suggested approach to expose barriers that hinder women from progressing to senior positions, their decision-making in accepting or rejecting them, along with their experiences in these roles.

Despite being recognised as another form of gender discrimination in organisations (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Sabharwal, 2013; Glass & Cook, 2016), the glass cliff phenomenon remains elusive from the perspectives of those who experience it. This limitation may stem from the predominantly quantitative nature of glass cliff research, which relies on archival and experimental methods (Cook & Glass, 2014; Ryan et al., 2016; Esposito, 2021). Ryan and Haslam (2005) highlight that such methods present constraints in scope, data collection, and analysis. Moreover, statistical data about companies is not gathered explicitly for research purposes and lacks insights into potential crises beyond financial ones, which are not publicly disclosed. Therefore, information about the appointment processes and the nuanced internal decision-making of organisations is often private, making it difficult to access.

Consequently, the subjective intentions of selectors and the perceptions of position holders remain indeterminate. Additionally, the glass cliff research has primarily focused on appointment outcomes rather than pre- and post-appointment processes. Literature highlights the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon, which could be the outcome of the interplay of multiple influences, such as organisational culture, internal politics, and individual human and social capital. Moreover, methodological challenges include accessing participants who have fallen off or been pushed off the metaphorical glass cliff appointments. Additionally, the lack of concrete indicators to measure glass cliff scenarios has led to studies using different proxies, such as intention to leave (Sabharwal, 2013), managing with reduced resources or assessing risk and turbulence (Smith & Monaghan, 2013; Groeneveld et al., 2020), contributing to varied interpretations.

Notably, the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon also lacks a definitive definition of crisis, influenced by contextual and cultural nuances across various industries. Furthermore, much of the existing research has primarily focused on gender alone, often overlooking the impact of intersectionality and the diverse experiences of women based on race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and other social identity (Crenshaw, 1989; Cook & Glass, 2014a). Interestingly, Cook and Glass (2014a) in their longitudinal analysis of Fortune 500 companies over a 15-year period found that the glass cliff phenomenon

disproportionately affects not just women but also individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds. Their findings highlight how the glass cliff phenomenon intersects with both gender and racial inequalities, compounding the challenges faced by minority ethnic group women in leadership.

Building on this, Morgenroth et al. (2020) in a meta-analysis of 74 studies conducted across the U.S., highlight the higher prevalence of the glass cliff effect in countries with higher gender inequality, confirming that the glass cliff effect varies by organisational context. This finding highlights the phenomenon's fragility and nuanced nature owed the influence of multiple factors (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). While not all women encounter the glass cliff, research suggests that organisations are more likely to position women in precarious leadership roles during times of crisis, reinforcing patterns of unequal opportunity and risk compared to their male counterparts (Oakes, 2022).

2.7 Impact of The Glass Cliff Positions

The impact of glass cliff positions includes consequences for women and organisations, which can be both immediate and long-term, often reinforcing gender inequalities in leadership and affecting the talent pipeline. Apart from the heightened risk of failure due to being appointed in times of crises, Ryan and Haslam (2007), in their seminal work, predict significant impact on women's motivation and career choices. They anticipate that failure in these precarious roles could lead to disillusionment and demotivation among women, causing them to avoid future leadership challenges or leave their organisations or the workforce altogether. Alternatively, these women might consider changing careers or starting their own businesses. If women succeed in these roles, they can gain reputations as effective "trouble-shooters," reinforcing the think crisis–think female association (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). Consequently, finding themselves progressing from one glass cliff position to another. Glass cliff positions often result in shorter tenures (Glass & Cook, 2016), potential reputational damage, and high levels of stress and burnout, leading to disenchantment and reduced commitment to their organisations (Ryan & Haslam 2007; Ryan et al., 2009). Women may also blame themselves for poor outcomes in glass cliff roles, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978) even when failure stems from systemic issues (Bell et al., 2024).

Consequently, companies experience higher turnover rates (Pearson & Clair, 1998). Glass cliff appointments, though symbolically progressive, risk failing if crisis support is

lacking, discouraging women in the pipeline from aspiring to leadership. Also, such roles can reinforce biased views of women's leadership competence, reducing future appointments (Haslam & Ryan, 2008). Further, organisations may overlook the structural reforms needed for diverse leadership to thrive, instead attributing failure to individual women. Building on these consequences, further research has sought to understand how such precarious appointments affect women's engagement with the workplace itself. Ryan et al. (2009) employed a gender-stress-misidentification model, which attributed women's increasing workplace disaffection to gender differences in workplace experiences, a significant source of the glass cliff effect. Further, in addition to Ryan and Haslam (2007) suggesting that women's career paths in glass cliff situations be investigated, Ryan et al. (2016) highlight the lack of research examining what happens to women after they secure glass cliff positions, noting that most studies focus on the factors leading to these appointments. Furthermore, research has also found that leaders from occupational minorities are more likely to be replaced by white male colleagues (Cook & Glass, 2014a), viewed as a return to normality, a phenomenon known as the "saviour effect" (Cook & Glass, 2014b).

Further, large-scale corporate outcomes in a longitudinal research into the world's 2,500 largest public companies over a decade (Davidson & Brest, 2014, in Ryan et al., 2016) found that female CEOs are more prone to be pushed out than their male counterparts (27% of men versus 38% of women). This likelihood provides tangible evidence that the precariousness of glass cliff positions leads to actual rather than potential career trauma. McKinsey's research reported (De Smet et al., 2021) that women leaders demand more flexibility from their companies and are increasingly willing to switch jobs to achieve their goals. Three primary factors drive their decisions to leave: first is the barriers they face compared to men; secondly, they are often overworked and under-recognised, which can hinder their advancement; and finally, spending time on unrecognised work, including advocating for flexibility and improving culture, which can slow down their advancement. Moreover, while research shows that women are highly ambitious and benefit from workplace flexibility, their representation in leadership roles has not increased proportionately (Field et al., 2023). Addressing the issues raised here will help improve women's representation respectively to match their ambition, and the increasing availability of workplace flexibility since COVID-19, supported by professional guidance such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's (CIPD, 2024) hybrid working framework, which highlights the potential for enhanced productivity and engagement in well-designed hybrid models, has further normalised flexible working

practices. Changes in regulations will make it possible, from April 2024, to request flexible working from the first day of employment under The Flexible Working (Amendment) Regulations 2023 (Gov.uk. n.d).

Drawing on Bourdieu's idea of symbolic violence, how women's leadership is portrayed, especially through gendered metaphors like the glass cliff, can subtly reinforce gendered power structures (Bell et al., 2024). The symbolic violence lies in how these appointments appear to empower women, under the guise of progressiveness or diversity, whilst in reality, they are being set up to fail. Moreover, the media's portrayal of women as passive subjects at risk of failure perpetuates gender inequalities (Ashcraft & Muhr, 2018). This portrayal reinforces cultural biases against female leadership in male-dominated fields, suggesting that existing power structures or individuals may set women up for failure (Bell & Sinclair, 2016a, in Bell et al., 2024). While the "glass cliff" metaphor initially highlighted systemic barriers, its media prominence risks delineating women's leadership precariousness as inevitable, shifting blame for failure onto women within a neoliberal framework (Adamson, 2017; Orgad & Gill, 2022, in Bell et al., 2024). Bell et al. contend that women leaders can actively challenge and transform the status quo rather than accept the inevitability of failure within a masculine-dominated mandate. They suggest that women by refusing to conform to the male-centred expectations embedded in the habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), instead acting in agentic and embodied ways to reshape dynamics, disrupts symbolic violence and enables more transformative forms of career navigation.

Given that the extant literature highlights the glass cliff as a widespread and significant feature in the organisational landscape for women (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Sabharwal, 2013), and the noted consequences of glass cliff appointments, it is imperative to explore its theoretical foundations. The Glass Cliff's complex nature, influenced by various contextual factors (Morgenroth et al., 2022), contributes to inconsistent findings in studies (Adams et al., 2009; Hennessey et al., 2014; Esposito, 2021). This complexity further highlights the need for a broader perspective to understand its foundations.

2.8 Theoretical Foundations of the Glass Cliff Phenomenon

Research has sought to address whether women are specifically and disproportionately nominated to lead during times of organisational crisis (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Ashby, Ryan, & Haslam, 2007; Haslam & Ryan, 2008). While studies suggest that gender bias contributes to the glass cliff phenomenon, its multifaceted nature resists being reduced to a single theoretical explanation. Therefore, scholars have drawn on multiple theories to

examine its origins, perpetuation, and implications (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Cook & Glass, 2014; Ryan et al., 2016).

Stereotypes: Think Manager-Think Male

The enduring stereotype “Think-Manager, Think-Male” persists in organisational cultures, suggesting that effective managerial traits are primarily masculine, linking successful managers with traditionally male attributes such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and competitiveness (Schein, 1973, 1975). These associations are reinforced by both men and women, entrenching gender bias and contributing to women’s underrepresentation in leadership roles. To unpack this bias, the following theories examine how stereotypes are formed, sustained, and reproduced in organisations.

Role Congruity Theory explains the “Think Manager, Think Male” stereotype by highlighting the mismatch between female gender roles and leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). It argues that prejudice against female leaders arises from the belief that leadership requires traditionally male traits like assertiveness, while people expect women to display communal characteristics, like warmth. This mismatch makes people see men as better suited for leadership while subjecting women to harsher judgment and recognition challenges (Heilman, 2001; Rudman & Glick, 2001; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ryan et al., 2011). Social Role Theory complements Role Congruity Theory by showing how the traditional division of labour shapes gender stereotypes. Society often portrays men in assertive leadership roles and women in caregiving roles, reinforcing the belief that leadership is a male realm. This theory (Eagly, 1987) is reinforced by individuals’ tendency to conform to gendered roles and the associated expectations.

Further, Implicit Leadership Theories (ILTs) suggest that people’s mental frameworks, shaped by cultural stereotypes and personal experiences, associate leadership traits with masculinity, thereby reinforcing the pervasive “Think Manager, Think Male” stereotype (Offermann et al., 1994). Empirical work by Gipson et al. (2017) substantiates this claim, revealing that women are often viewed as less qualified, experienced, competent, and committed, which worsens implicit gender bias. Further, Stereotype Threat Theory elucidates the internalised impact of these stereotypes, showing how the fear of confirming negative stereotypes about one’s group can undermine performance. In the context of “Think Manager, Think Male,” women in leadership may face anxiety and performance pressure due to fears of confirming stereotypes of incompetence, which can

impair effectiveness (Steele & Aronson, 1995). This self-fulfilling cycle reinforces the very biases it stems from, creating a double bind.

Stereotypes: Think Crisis-Think Female

Gender discrimination underpins the glass cliff phenomenon, where women are chosen for leadership during organisational crises. Eagly and Carli (2003) argue that societal stereotypes portraying women as communal, empathetic and nurturing make them better choices for crisis management. This aligns with Ryan et al. (2011), who found that women are preferred to lead during crises due to societal expectations of their superior crisis management abilities. Similarly, scholars like Book (2000), Helgesen (1990), and Rosener (1995) link successful leadership with interactive, collaborative styles, traits culturally associated with women. Kanter (1997) also notes that as managerial expectations evolve to favour more cooperation, women increasingly fit this leadership mould. Empirical studies by Ryan and Haslam (2005, 2007) reinforce this, demonstrating a preference for appointing female leaders in struggling companies, while successful ones exhibit a reversal of this trend (Ryan et al., 2011, Study 1). Moreover, Study 3 revealed that failing organisations shift toward traits associated with femininity, suggesting the glass cliff is highly context-dependent. Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) similarly found a preference for female-typical leadership attributes during organisational crises. More recently, Bonner et al. (2022) suggest that women were often appointed in lead roles during strategic change and resource scarcity. Collectively, this body of research highlights the influence of gender stereotypes and organisational structural inequalities which continue to shape leadership opportunities and experiences for women. These risk-laden opportunities are not determined through meritocratic processes and undermine women's long-term success, thereby perpetuating the glass cliff phenomenon. Supporting this perspective, Bell et al. (2024) contend that the glass cliff metaphor individualises women's responsibility for failure, framing it as poor risk navigation and overlooking structural factors.

Building on this critique, research suggests rethinking of leadership norms as the link between male traits and effective leadership weakens during crises, making room for change and challenging existing leadership norms (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Pillai, 1996; Boin & Hart, 2003). Moreover, Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) highlight a double irony underpinning the glass cliff: when women assume leadership roles, it's not because they are deemed deserving but because men are seen as undeserving or unsuitable for high-risk roles; besides, these symbolic opportunities typically arise during

diminished rewards and increased reputational risk. Aligned with the glass cliff effect, Cook and Glass (2013) find that in addition to women, other occupational minorities, are also likelier than white men to be promoted to CEO of firms performing weakly. From a Bourdieusian perspective, a crisis momentarily disrupts the dominant doxa, enabling a reframing of leadership, but only within constrained, precarious terms that do little to dismantle the deeper structures of symbolic violence. Post et al. (2019) also highlight that women's superior interpersonal skills, like empathy and communication, are particularly valued during organisational crises. This bias of selecting women in crises could be termed "think crisis - think not male" (Pillai, 1996; Haslam & Ryan, 2008). Consequently, though crises may open doors to leadership for women, they do so on unstable ground, revealing apparent progress but perpetuation of deeply embedded structural inequities.

Organisations strategically signalling a change

Another rationale for the glass cliff phenomenon is that organisations often appoint female leaders during poor performance to signal a break from the status quo and to show change to stakeholders. Since the prototypical leader is typically male and white (Schein, 1973, 1975; Rosette et al., 2008), deviation from this norm signals a company's intent to change during the crisis. Seemingly progressive, such moves rarely lead to more profound structural transformation. Instead, gendered assumptions are often used to stabilise crises, jeopardising women's long-term prospects and reinforcing the glass cliff (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Post et al., 2019). Interestingly, Bruckmüller et al. (2014) found the effect was absent in organisations with a history of female leadership, suggesting that precedent plays a mitigating role. In contrast, firms with male leadership legacies were significantly more likely to appoint women in crisis, not as a reflection of competence, but as a symbolic gesture of change. The precedent argument aligns with Lee and James's (2007) finding that the first woman in a senior role faces more prejudice, which lessens for subsequent women. However, this depends on how women collaborate to combat discrimination and promote social change (Fajak & Haslam, 1998; Ellemers et al., 2004; Barreto et al., 2009; Hersby, Ryan, & Jetten, 2009).

Leadership failure during a crisis often attracts heightened scrutiny, especially for women (Schaller & Maass, 1989; Boin et al., 2010), with blame frequently individualised and gendered, reinforcing stereotypes of female leadership inadequacy (Meindl, 1995; Bell et al., 2024). These appointments also constitute symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991), where women are elevated not for their abilities but to mask organisational inertia. Such roles rarely challenge entrenched power imbalances, which underpin the glass cliff

phenomenon (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). Crises prompt organisations to question traditional leadership, take risks (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), and turn to women, who are seen as agents of change (Boin & Hart, 2003; Brown et al., 2011), reinforcing the “think crisis–think female” bias (Haslam & Ryan, 2008). Yet, this shift is often superficial, driven by status quo bias, preserving something that has previously worked (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988), resulting in tokenistic rather than transformative appointments (Kanter, 1977).

Choices exercised by women

Research indicates that women often face challenges with self-promotion and showcasing their skills, unlike men (Bowles & McGinn, 2005). This pattern, also seen among ethnic minorities (Simon et al., 2013), affects their professional achievements and the leadership opportunities they encounter (Rudman & Glick, 2001). Moreover, a LinkedIn study (Altenburger et al., 2017) confirmed that profiles with detailed information and higher ratings are preferred by HR managers. Although women are considered generally more risk-averse than men (Charness & Gneezy, 2012), they paradoxically end up in riskier glass cliff roles. Darouei & Pluut (2018) contend that women with lower self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 2001; Bandura & Locke, 2003) are more likely to perceive riskier positions as opportunities, which can hinder their career progression (Ellemers, 2014). Studies which show that men are generally more attracted to precarious positions (Rink, Ryan, & Stoker, 2012), and women are usually more risk-averse (Eckel & Grossman, 2008; Charness & Gneezy, 2012), require careful interpretation of women’s decisions to accept high-risk leadership roles not simply as an indication of risk aversion or preference, but as choices constrained by structural barriers, scarcity of opportunities and sociocultural conditioning.

Research highlights women’s strategic agency in accepting precarious roles, often due to limited options or as opportunities to demonstrate capability and drive change (Ryan et al., 2007; Ashby et al., 2007; Haslam & Ryan, 2008). However, gendered organisational norms, restricted access to career-enhancing opportunities, and societal expectations shape how such risk is perceived and navigated (Eckel & Grossman, 2008; Rink et al., 2012; Charness & Gneezy, 2012). Women may not actively seek high-risk positions, but constrained advancement pathways can compel acceptance, reinforcing a “beggars can’t be choosers” mindset (Ryan et al., 2016). Men, by contrast, often reject such roles, waiting for safer leadership opportunities.

Further, Glass and Cook (2019) describe a “risk tax” that women pay to enter and ascend leadership, trading biases and discrimination for progression, which frequently leads to glass cliff appointments. Building on this, Darouei and Pluut (2018) note that women with lower self-efficacy may view these roles as opportunities, overlooking inherent structural risks. Yet, as Rink et al. (2012) and Gupta et al. (2017) note, such choices often stem from limited support rather than a true preference for risk. Framing these appointments as personal choice or lean-in narratives, which position the responsibility on women, obscures the structural inequalities underpinning women’s precarious advancement (Heilman, 2012; Sandberg, 2013; Ellemers, 2018; Ryan, 2023).

Harsher judgment

The glass cliff scholarship critiques the disproportionately harsh evaluation of women in leadership, particularly in male-dominated environments. Women, seen as exceptions to typical leadership stereotypes, face closer scrutiny and more criticism than men (Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995; Brescoll, Dawson, & Uhlmann, 2010). They are often held to higher performance standards, which can undermine their legitimacy and influence when and how they are appointed. According to Eagly and Karau’s (2002) role incongruity theory, they are penalised when their leadership style deviates from gendered expectations perceived as either too soft or too harsh. This double bind results in attribution of failures to personal shortcomings rather than situational factors (Cappelli, 1991; Meindl, 1993, in Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Haslam et al., 2001), reinforcing stereotypes of women as ineffective leaders, often tarnishing their reputations and hindering future leadership opportunities (Brickley, Linck, & Coles, 1999; Ferris et al., 2003).

The heightened scrutiny women face in leadership reflects structural inequality, not just interpersonal bias, highlighted by the glasshouse metaphor, where women, being in the minority, are very visible and attract increased scrutiny (Maclaran et al., 1997). Stereotype Threat Theory (Steele & Aronson, 1995) suggests that biased expectations can negatively impact their performance, particularly in high-risk roles. Ryan and Haslam (2005; 2007) stressed considering organisational culture, market conditions, and politics in women’s leadership appointments, while factors such as race, age, and socio-economic background add further complexity (Crenshaw, 1989; Eagly & Carli, 2007). This heightened scrutiny, is especially pronounced for ethnic minority women reinforcing barriers to success (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2003; Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan, & Haslam, 2006). Such harsher judgment reflects comparison to a masculine-coded benchmark (Schein,

1975), interpreting women's failures as personal deficits rather than outcome of structural barriers and precarious appointment conditions.

Moreover, recent research by Shor et al. (2022) identified the “paper cut” effect in media coverage, where women in similar professions and seniority levels as men face quicker and harsher scrutiny when they challenge gender norms. Although media coverage may initially favour women, this advantage often diminishes and reverses at higher levels of fame, revealing how stereotypes and prejudice can undermine their success (Eagly et al., 2014). Similarly, Krishnan and Szczepura (2021) found that in the male-dominated field of surgery, language revealed bias: male staff were described as forceful, while female staff were depicted as needing support. These findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of the glass cliff phenomenon.

Notably, women often face blame for adverse outcomes but receive less credit for success (Morgenroth et al., 2022). Women may not inherently avoid risks but do so because the consequences of their risk-taking are disproportionately penalising. Although Haslam & Ryan (2008), show no gender preference in leader evaluations, Hunt-Earle (2012) found that male participants prefer male leaders in successful organisations but had no preference for failing ones. In contrast, female participants favour female leaders in crises, implying women may see themselves as better suited for managing crises. This disparity intensifies the precariousness of women's leadership roles by reinforcing a double standard that increases their vulnerability in leadership roles and hinders their progress.

In summary, despite extensive research, more nuanced, context-sensitive approaches are needed that consider organisational dynamics, sectoral differences, and women's lived experiences in navigating precarious leadership. Although the glass cliff highlights structural inequality, it can obscure the symbolic violence that normalises women's precarity in leadership (Bourdieu, 1991). As Morgan (2006) notes, metaphors shape what is seen and unseen, potentially masking power dynamics. This study examines how such metaphors reflect and reinforce symbolic power in legal culture, revealing overlooked contextual factors that shape the glass cliff through the lived experiences of women solicitors.

2.9 Possible Moderators of Glass Cliff

Having examined the drivers of the glass cliff phenomenon, this analysis explores the structural and cultural factors that might mitigate its impact.

Reduced gender inequality

The emergence and severity of the glass cliff are not constant; instead, they are moderated by factors such as reduced gender inequality. Morgenroth et al. (2020) suggest that reducing gender inequality could help mitigate the glass cliff effect, which is more pronounced in nations with higher inequality, suggesting that greater structural gender equity mitigates the conditions leading to precarious roles. Further, research by Chamorro-Premuzik and Gallop (2020) advocates for gender-equal leadership, arguing that men should adopt skills from women rather than judge women by male standards. While men dominate leadership roles, research shows that it is women who possess effective leadership qualities, aligned with Alvesson's (1991) view of leadership as social integrative action. This analysis proposes that men could benefit from adopting women's leadership qualities, such as transformational leadership, humility, empathy, and prioritising the team, rather than simply "leaning in", as advocated by Sandberg (2013).

Importantly, Ryan (2023) advocates for a comprehensive approach to achieving gender equality in organisations, one that extends beyond merely reporting gender representation numbers. She emphasises implementing policies and practices that address gender disparities, such as diversity training and mentoring programmes. Rather than forcing women to adapt to existing workplace structures, Ryan suggests tackling systemic barriers by revisiting evaluation criteria, promoting flexible work arrangements, and ensuring equitable access to resources. Further, adopting a systemic approach to changing organisational norms and practices is crucial (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Additionally, Ryan highlights the importance of continuously evaluating gender equality initiatives to ensure sustained progress (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012) and stresses the importance of recognising intersecting factors, such as race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality, that shape women's experiences. Inclusive policies can help reduce gender bias and the likelihood of women being assigned to a "glass cliff" position (Crenshaw, 1989).

History of women in senior roles

Literature suggests that the glass cliff effect often appears in organisations with a history of male leadership (Brown et al., 2011). The effect is more likely when organisational performance declines, suggesting that improving stability could help reduce it. Moreover, the glass cliff effect becomes more pronounced when people perceive the crisis as requiring stereotypically feminine attributes such as nurturing, inclusivity, and communication skills, aligning with the "Think crisis—think female" explanation (Ryan

et al., 2011). As female appointments to higher positions become more common, they could shift the perception that these appointments signal a significant change to stakeholders, thereby normalising women's leadership and reducing the need for symbolic or crisis-driven appointments. To mitigate women's appointments in crises, it is essential to increase awareness of the need for effective communication and providing training for all key members of the organisation, both male and female, thereby bridging the skill gaps and helping reduce the magnitude of the glass cliff effect.

Ryan et al. (2011) demonstrate that the “think manager–think male” stereotype is contingent upon the context of the leadership role. They suggest that focusing on desirable qualities in candidates or changing the organisational context can help disassociate this connection. While a history of women in leadership positions such as CEO can help mitigate the tokenism often underpinning glass cliff appointments (Haslam et al., 2010), changing organisational culture remains a slow and challenging process. Although such progress offers some hope for overcoming gender differentiation in management, women's communal, nurturing, and empathetic traits are still disproportionately seen as best suited to organisations in crisis. This affiliation continues to make addressing the gender biases in leadership roles complex, warranting a multifaceted approach to drive systemic cultural shifts to achieve genuine equality in senior roles.

Support for the appointee

According to research by Rink et al. (2013), the glass cliff effect diminishes when organisational stakeholders fully support the new leader, providing necessary social support. Conversely, the effect persists when stakeholders and financial support is lacking. This aligns with the findings of Glass and Cook (2016), who also confirm that women CEOs often lack the support, power, and influence needed post-promotion, partly due to organisations focusing on “diversity numbers” rather than genuine decision-making and authority (Bruckmüller et al., 2014). Women leaders are often expected to handle challenges independently while also prioritising team approval more than men, making them more vulnerable to glass cliff scenarios (Ryan et al., 2016). This moderation of the glass cliff effect by the availability of support is rooted in the belief that men tend to possess agentic leadership qualities, whereas women are associated with communal characteristics and want their team on board (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Furthermore, research into the precise nature of the role itself (Eagly & Karau, 2002), gender ratios within the company (Kanter, 1977, in Ryan et al. 2011), company culture (Lord et al., 1984, in Ryan et al. 2011), and cross-cultural differences (Schein, 2001) may

help reduce the glass cliff effect. Proactive measures addressing these factors may mitigate the glass cliff effect and the overall gender discrimination within organisations. It is essential to recognise that progress in reducing the glass cliff appointments depends not on the appointment itself but also on the actions taken by stakeholders after the appointment, which can shape the equitable or otherwise social landscape within the organisation. Therefore, focusing on these post-appointment efforts is crucial for constructing a more inclusive and equitable workplace, thereby mitigating the impact of glass cliff appointments.

Predisposition of the decision-makers

Individual decision-makers' predisposition to appointing the leader may influence the glass cliff phenomenon through implicit biases and stereotypical beliefs about gender and leadership. Those whose values align with the current social system, emphasising gendered differences, may favour female candidates during crises (Brown et al., 2011) as they will likely be motivated by maintaining the status quo rather than promoting gender equity. Ryan et al. (2016) argue that the glass cliff should not be seen as solely a woman's problem to enable mitigating its effects. They suggest attention be directed also towards the jobs men typically secure due to the stereotypes associating males with agentic qualities. These positions provide easy access to leadership roles for them, which may be the root issue for the generation of glass cliff positions. Addressing this imbalance requires questioning men's access to jobs termed the "glass cushion" positions (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), also referred to as "hot jobs" (Silva, Carter, & Beninger, 2012). Although the term glass cushion does not portray a comfortable vision, it relays the invisible nature of the privileged access to the jobs, the resources and networks that cushion them from negative outcomes.

Furthermore, women's lack of belonging in the workplace arises not from a lack of enthusiasm but from struggling to fit into masculine prototypes in their field (Peters et al., 2012). They encounter cultural and normative barriers that exclude them (Saucerman & Vasquez, 2014). Imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978), which has garnered significant attention, is not a personal failing but rather a result of social and organisational contexts (Feenstra et al., 2020). Addressing this issue requires exploring these contexts rather than trying to fix women (Ryan, 2023; Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024). The organisational context and culture that maintain inequalities and constrain and shape women's ambitions and motivations, as well as how their skills are expressed and interpreted, need to be the focus of interventions (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024).

This literature review highlights that metaphors are conceptually interconnected, each offering a different lens on the gendered obstacles women encounter. The glass ceiling symbolises the invisible structural barriers impeding advancement to senior roles (Morrison et al., 1987), while the glass cliff highlights how women who overcome these barriers are often appointed to precarious leadership positions during times of crisis (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). The labyrinth captures the complex, non-linear routes to leadership, emphasising persistence and strategic navigation (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Other metaphors, such as the glasshouse, glass walls, and glass cushion, depict the heightened scrutiny, lateral segregation, and protective stereotyping that shape women's professional experiences (Maclaran et al., 1997; Lyness & Terrazas, 2006; Powell & Butterfield, 2015). Framing these within the broader metaphor of a career journey (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) integrates these concepts into a dynamic process, one in which women's progression is shaped by both structural impediments and the constant need for their strategic adaptation throughout. Notably, these metaphors depict women as passive, obstructed, diverted, sidelined or lost in convoluted paths. Even alternative routes self-employment (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Carnes & Radojevich-Kelley, 2011) are rarely viewed as intentional or strategic. These portrayals reflect a gendered habitus that positions women as natural followers or crisis leaders, legitimising precarity by normalising risk within professional narratives. Symbolic violence reinforces this inequality by disguising it as meritocratic or inevitable (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, 1990), while metaphors like the glass cliff risk obscuring the deeper organisational rationalities that sustain the inequality (Morgan, 2006).

What is often missing in the literature on gendered career progression, are metaphors that highlight women's agency, self-determination, and the emotional risk of navigating uncertain professional pathways. This study addresses that gap by introducing the metaphor of a *leap of faith* to conceptualise how some women resist institutional constraints and take bold, unsupported steps toward self-defined success. Borrowed from Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843), the metaphor captures the courage to act without guarantees. While Habermas (1991) critiques such acts as lacking public rationality, here they signify resilience and conviction, an existential agency that counters the literature's predominantly structural or deficit-based framing of women's careers. It positions women as strategic actors driven by courage and risk-taking, rather than reactive figures, embodying deliberate navigation of uncertain contexts. Yet, as Rottenberg (2014) and Gill (2017) caution, such agency is vulnerable to opting into neoliberal narratives,

shifting responsibility for success onto individuals. Thus, the *leap of faith* is used critically to expose the complexity, cost, and precariousness of women's professional journeys.

Conclusion

This chapter has critically examined the literature on women's entry into the workplace and the gendered architecture of organisations, shaped by historical processes including professionalisation (Parkin, 1979; Acker, 1992; Witz, 1992). These processes have embedded patriarchal norms within career advancement systems, reinforcing exclusionary practices that continue to raise fundamental questions about whether women must assimilate to or diverge from male-defined standards to achieve success (Pateman, 1988; Walby, 1990; Williams, 2018). Despite the established benefits of gender diversity (Ellemers, 2014; Hunt et al., 2018), women remain persistently underrepresented in senior leadership roles across various sectors, including the legal profession, indicating that structural inequality persists despite meritocratic ideals (Clark, 2024; SRA, 2024).

This chapter has critically examined the literature on the dominant metaphors, the glass ceiling (Morrison et al., 1987) and the glass cliff, used to describe women's career progression, which demonstrate structural and symbolic barriers to women's leadership (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). Expanding the metaphorical range, it also considers the labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007), as well as the concepts of the glasshouse, glass walls and glass cushions. Drawing on Morgan's (2006) framework of organisational metaphors, the study employs journeys, pathways and trajectories to represent women's career progression. However, these metaphors, while conceptually helpful, often portray women as constrained and reactive, failing to account for the emotional labour, risk-taking, strategic agency, and resilience that many women enact as they navigate their professional lives (Southwick et al., 2014; Bell et al., 2024). This review highlights the multi-level factors, including societal, cultural, individual, organisational, regulatory, and contextual, that sustain the glass ceiling and perpetuate leadership inequality (Taparia & Lenka, 2022). The personal consequences for women include burnout, diminished organisational commitment, psychological distress, and, paradoxically, the cultivation of resilience (Southwick et al., 2014; Babic & Hansez, 2021). Organisational costs are equally significant, including talent attrition, reputational risk, and reduced competitiveness in attracting and retaining diverse talent (Babic & Hansez, 2021). These outcomes reveal the systemic failure of organisational structures to accommodate and support women's progression beyond tokenistic representation (Kanter, 1977).

In evaluating the extant literature on the glass cliff, the chapter critically analysed its theoretical underpinnings, including stereotypical doxa such as ‘think manager, think male’ and ‘think crisis, think female’ (Schein, 1973; Ryan et al., 2011). Women are often positioned as agents of change during periods of organisational instability, where their appointments serve as symbolic resets rather than strategic empowerment. While some women exercise agency in accepting these precarious roles, they are frequently subjected to harsher scrutiny and offered limited support (Bruckmüller et al., 2014; Ryan et al., 2016). The literature also identifies mitigating factors such as reduced gender inequality, supportive institutional contexts, and inclusive leadership cultures that can buffer against the risks associated with the glass cliff (Kulich et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2016). Bourdieu’s (1977, 1990) notions of habitus and symbolic violence were considered as an added lens to unmask how gendered inequalities get naturalised within professional environments and obscured by the veneer of meritocracy, reproduce male privilege while marginalising alternative expressions of leadership (Rottenberg, 2014; Gill, 2017). These insights reinforce the need to move beyond descriptive metaphors towards more critically engaged frameworks that recognise women’s agency and resistance within organisational patriarchal structures.

Significantly, this chapter identifies a conceptual gap in the existing literature: the dominant metaphors fail to adequately capture the intentional, strategic, and courageous choices women make as they navigate hostile workplace environments. To address this, the chapter introduced the concept of the *leap of faith* (Kierkegaard, 1843) as an alternative metaphor that centres on women’s agency, emotional resilience, and conviction in the face of uncertainty and structural constraints. Unlike metaphors that frame women’s progress as conditional or constrained, the *leap of faith* reflects acts of defiance, purpose, and belief in possibilities beyond existing organisational rationalities. It is employed critically to resist neoliberal tendencies that individualise responsibility, placing the onus on women to adapt rather than prompting structural transformation (Gill, 2017; Bell et al., 2024). This chapter thus establishes a critical theoretical foundation for analysing how gendered structures, professional norms, and symbolic power shape women’s career trajectories. The next chapter builds on these insights by focusing on the legal profession, a sector where women have long comprised the majority of entrants yet continue to encounter significant barriers to senior leadership. In doing so, it explores how the glass ceiling and glass cliff manifest in the legal context, and how women solicitors navigate, resist, and reconfigure their journeys within a system that remains institutionally resistant to gender equity.

Chapter 3 – Literature Review: Legal Profession as the Context

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the theoretical foundation of this research by examining the historical evolution of women's participation in the workforce and professions, and how these legacies continue to shape contemporary workplace norms and dynamics. These legacies were critically reviewed through the metaphorical frameworks of the glass ceiling and the glass cliff, which illuminate the structural and symbolic barriers women face in career progression and leadership (Morrison et al., 1987; Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Building on this, the current chapter positions the legal profession as the context for the study, highlighting persistent gendered inequalities in career progression. Despite the increasing entry of women into the legal profession, senior leadership remains disproportionately male (SRA, 2024). This chapter examines how formal and informal power structures reproduce inequality and considers the gendered implications of diversity initiatives and neoliberal reforms in the legal profession (Aulakh et al., 2017; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). Recognising the importance of context and perception (Ryan et al., 2016; Taparia & Lenka, 2022), the legal profession provides a valuable lens through which to explore how women solicitors negotiate, resist, or reconfigure their career pathways. In doing so, this chapter sets the stage for exploring the lived experiences of women solicitors as they navigate progression within a male-dominated profession, with an empirical analysis presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

3.2 Overview of the Legal Profession

Prior to examining the roles and experiences of women in the legal profession, an overview of the solicitors' profession in England and Wales is provided in Appendix A to contextualise the historical and structural landscape of the profession. This appendix details the academic, professional, and practical stages of advancement, outlines the career opportunities available to solicitors, and discusses the regulatory framework governing the profession. Additionally, it provides contextual background on women's progress in this field and situates the present research within this broader context. Henceforth, 'legal profession' denotes the solicitor's profession in England and Wales.

Following the enactment of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 (Government Legal Department, 2019), women were formally permitted to enter the legal profession. Prior

to this, the term “*person*” in the Solicitors Act 1843 had been interpreted to refer exclusively to men (Bourne, 2019). The Law Society’s earlier refusals to admit women could no longer be justified based on legal precedent. Historical evidence, however, suggests that women were already engaged in legal work even before formal recognition was granted (Baksi, 2019). In 1922, Carrie Morrison became the first woman to be admitted as a solicitor in England, alongside three others (The Law Society, 2022). These pioneering women went on to establish the “1919 Club,” which later evolved into the Association of Women Solicitors (2022), aimed at supporting and promoting women within the profession. A timeline of key developments in women’s entry into and progression within the solicitors’ profession since 1919 is provided in Appendix B (First 100 Years, 2022) to contextualise this study.

After overcoming initial barriers to entry, women have entered the legal profession in increasing numbers. By the 1980s, women had achieved parity with men in law schools, and since 1990, they have represented 60% of new entrants to the profession, now outnumbering men as solicitors (The Law Society, 2019a; SRA, 2024). More than a century since the first women qualified as solicitors, they now outnumber men two to one as law undergraduates (Fouzder, 2023). Despite these advances, structural and cultural barriers, along with discrimination against women’s advancement, persist in the profession (Aulakh et al., 2017; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). Although increased entry-level participation has boosted women’s presence in the profession, their advancement to senior roles remains slow (Pringle et al., 2017). Holden (2020) notes that although notable shifts have occurred in this historically patriarchal field, further progress is needed, a view echoed by the Law Society, which emphasises that advancing gender equality benefits not only women but the legal profession as a whole.

Although women have comprised the majority of new entrants to the solicitors’ profession since the 1990s, they remain underrepresented in senior roles, making up only 37% of law firm partners (SRA, 2024). Legislative and regulatory measures, such as the Legal Services Act 2007 (Legislation.gov.uk, 2021) and the Solicitors Regulation Authority’s (SRA) diversity and inclusion initiatives, aim to foster a more representative profession (Legal Services Board, 2016; SRA, n.d.). Yet, as Dana Denis Smith, founder of the First 100 Years project, observed, the history of women in law since 1922 is essentially that of the last three decades, reflecting the slow and uneven pace of change (LawCareers, 2021). This stagnation underscores the structural barriers that continue to limit women’s progression and long-term career fulfilment within the legal profession. While the SRA’s biennial workforce diversity reporting assesses how well the profession reflects society, the latest data shows that women

make up 62% of solicitors (Figure 3.1) yet hold a disproportionately small share of senior positions (SRA, 2024).

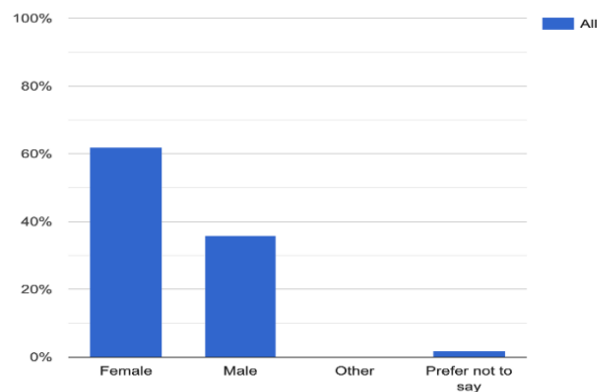


Figure 3.1 Diversity in Solicitors Profession 2023 (SRA, 2024)

Despite comprising the majority, women solicitors continue to face significantly fewer advancement opportunities than their male counterparts (Sommerlad, 1994; Aulakh et al., 2017). This underrepresentation is reinforced by traditional legal hierarchies that have struggled to adapt to market liberalisation, competition, and service diversification. As Paterson (2011:9) observes, outdated structures have left the profession “factionalised, heterogeneous, and fragmented,” undermining coherence in identity, values, and career progression. Although the profession has modernised, traditional symbols, imagery, and standards from before 1922 continue to influence its culture, contributing to the underrepresentation of women in senior roles. Intersecting identities, such as gender, ethnic background and social class, further exacerbate this disparity for women (Tomlinson & Muzio, 2010; Tomlinson et al., 2012; Aulakh et al., 2017), resulting in greater obstacles and harsher experiences. The dynamics of professional closure reinforce such disparities, a process by which access to the legal profession’s most valued roles is regulated and restricted, often underpinning existing hierarchies (Parkin, 1979; Witz, 1992). The following sections examine how structural, cultural, and policy-level developments have influenced the progression of women within the legal profession.

Professional closure

As noted in Chapter 2, the concept of patriarchy, once associated with male dominance in the household, has evolved to encompass wider societal structures, including the labour market, where men hold power and women remain structurally subordinate (Millett, 1977; Hartmann, 1979; Hearn, 1987; Walby, 1990). This extension highlights a broader shift in the

profession, from an elite, insular group primarily serving the interests of the powerful, to a more publicly accountable and regulated sector (Burrage, 1996). However, despite significant progress for women in law and sociopolitical changes, the subordination of women solicitors remains deep-rooted (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). Quotations from the early 20th century highlight the formidable resistance to women entering the legal profession, reinforcing persistent gender biases that have shaped its culture and norms. In 1917, Lord Sumner addressed the Lords on the Solicitors (Qualification of Women) Bill, stating:

“I am unable to see what the danger is that is to arise from admitting women to be solicitors... it is very... probable that the women who are to benefit by this reform will be disappointed in the result because I fear that their place in the profession is likely to be that of dull, drudging, subordinate clerks in solicitors’ offices.”

(Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019:255)

Earl of Selbourne further contributed:

“This is not a bill to compel you to employ women solicitors. Nobody needs employ a woman even after she is qualified....”

(Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019:255)

Walby defines patriarchy as “a system of social structures in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women” (1990:20), identifying six interrelated sources of patriarchy: paid work, housework, culture, sexuality, violence, and the state. These domains collectively reinforce male dominance, both publicly and privately. While comprehensive, Walby’s framework has been critiqued for lacking a more nuanced, intersectional perspective to better understand inequality (Crenshaw, 1991). The following sections explore how these patriarchal forces manifest within the legal profession.

Women solicitors, despite significant increases in their numbers, continue to face both horizontal and vertical divides (Hagan & Kay, 1995; Sommerlad, 2002; Stake et al., 2007). The horizontal divide refers to the segregation of women into specific, often less prestigious, areas of law, while the vertical divide involves the limitation of women’s advancement to higher, more influential positions. Male-dominated decision-makers often restrict women to lower-level, less prestigious positions with inferior terms (Bolton & Muzio, 2007). Eisenstein’s ‘capitalist patriarchy’ concept explains how the capitalist class and hierarchical

sexual structures shape the power dynamics of the legal profession (1995:196). Further, SRA's report highlights persistent stratification by class, gender, and ethnicity (Aulakh et al., 2017). Women are often channelled into traditionally feminine practice areas, such as family and employment, while men dominate more lucrative sectors, such as corporate law. This gender stratification limits women's advancement and earning potential (Crompton & Sanderson, 1990; Witz, 1992; Macdonald, 1995).

Additionally, the 2017 report noted that commercial interests within firms drive social class exclusion, to maintain the male-gendered habitus, which influences how they approach their work, their interactions with clients and colleagues, and their professional identities, shaped by the belief that professional success is associated with men from privileged backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1977). Firms value the cultural capital generated at prestigious universities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), thereby reproducing these values, reinforcing inequalities across generations. Without addressing these internal conflicts, discrimination will persist despite the efforts by organisations and professional bodies to promote diversity and inclusion. Unlike studies attributing women's exclusion and attrition in law to patriarchy (Harrington, 1993; Kay & Hagan, 1995; Brockman, 2001), Bolton and Muzio (2007) offer an alternative view. Analysing Law Society data from 1983 to 2003, they argue that while external barriers to entry have been regulated by meritocracy, internal mechanisms still use informal gender-based methods to exclude women from partnership and high-status roles. They view these barriers not as unintended patriarchal consequences but as a pattern of internal closure (Witz, 1992; Harrington, 1993; Kay & Hagan, 1995; Brockman, 2001). Given that men predominantly occupy leadership roles in law firms, with 63% of partners in law firms being men (SRA, 2024), disentangling the cause and effect of barriers faced by women is challenging. Bolton and Muzio's study (2008) of law and other male-dominated professions shows how traditional masculine norms continue to influence professional practices, perpetuating gender-based exclusion.

In male-dominated societies, legal frameworks and social norms often reinforce male dominance, rendering it invisible. A notable example is the interpretation of the word "person" in the Solicitors Act 1843, which was historically interpreted to refer exclusively to men (Bourne, 2019). Subsequently, male role models and norms continue to shape the legal profession, marginalising women and undermining their contributions (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Davies, 1996). Acker theorises the ideal worker as white, male, middle-class, and unburdened by external responsibilities (1990). Law firms as organisations perpetuate gender inequality through socially constructed norms and practices that centre on the notion of the ideal worker (Calás et al., 2014), resulting in the male-coded habitus

(Bourdieu, 1977) of the legal profession. Despite advances, masculine norms persist in evaluating professionalism, which is masked as neutral meritocracy, leaving women to continue operating under entrenched male authority. MacKinnon (1989:223) critiques such stereotyping as inaccurate, exaggerated, and a fundamental injustice in liberal terms. Achieving true gender equality, therefore, requires ongoing collective efforts from women, legislation, and institutions (Muzio & Tomlinson, 2012; Pringle et al., 2017; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019).

Beyond the feminisation narrative

Numerical gains for women in the legal profession are frequently equated with progress, yet senior-level representation continues to indicate limited progress. This challenges the assumptions of time-lapse theory, which suggests that increased female participation will naturally lead to equality in senior roles over time through accumulated experience and merit (Pringle et al., 2017). These early entrants were often expected to serve as role models, encouraging the pipeline of women leaders (Ibarra et al., 2010). However, the persistence of structural barriers suggests that representation alone is insufficient. Menkel-Meadow (1989) notes that feminisation in the U.S. legal system entails more than rising numbers; it requires women to wield real influence. Definitions of ‘feminised’ vary, with some linking the term to traits such as empathy, relatedness, nurturance, and collectiveness (Lenz & Meyerhoff, 1985; Sherry, 1986), while others emphasise the integration of gender equity values into legal practice and work-life structures (Olsen, 1990). In the context of this research, feminisation is only meaningful if it evidences cultural and structural shifts, particularly in how leadership and legitimacy are defined and enacted. These unresolved tensions point to the need to move beyond the feminisation narrative and instead examine how ongoing barriers, including professional closure, the glass ceiling, and the glass cliff, continue to shape the lived realities of women in the legal profession.

These tensions are further complicated by the persistent expectation that women must conform to the male-defined leadership norms to succeed, raising questions about whether the legal profession can accommodate alternative expressions of leadership and legal practice. Gender stratification in traditional law firms is embedded in hierarchical structures where biases influence role allocation, advancement, and visibility, reinforcing patriarchal and capitalist dynamics (Walby, 1990; Acker, 1990; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). Menkel-Meadow (1989) urges a critical interrogation of entrenched gender stereotypes and advocates investigating how socially constructed gender differences shape innovation in the profession. Unlike the individualised framing in the glass ceiling framework (Taparia &

Lenka, 2022), she argues that reconciling work and family responsibilities should not be treated solely as a women’s issue. This call to reframe the narrative echoes MacKinnon’s (1983) critique of whether women must conform to male archetypes to drive change, and highlights Eagly’s (1987) concern that the profession fails to make space for women’s traits. Collectively, these insights revisit the “same or different” debate explored in Chapter 2, questioning whether the current structures allow space for genuine transformation or merely reproduce dominant norms under the guise of inclusion.

Women’s numerical dominance in the solicitors’ profession (Ames, 2022), does not necessarily equal influence and can obscure persistent structural barriers to senior roles. Ryan (2023) warns against relying solely on headcounts in equality planning, and Begeny et al. (2022) caution that overstating progress can hinder real advancement. Indeed, feminisation, quite contrarily, has often reinforced, rather than dismantled, patriarchal norms, where mid-level female associate solicitors are leveraged for profitability, and the high attrition rate that follows limits the partnership expansion. (Bolton & Muzio, 2008). This mirrors the ‘up-or-out’ trajectory (Morris & Pinnington, 1998) and the ‘up-and-go-nowhere’ pattern (Malhotra et al., 2010). As Figure 3.2 illustrates, women’s attrition significantly increases after age 35, with much fewer remaining in later career stages compared to men (The Law Society, 2023).

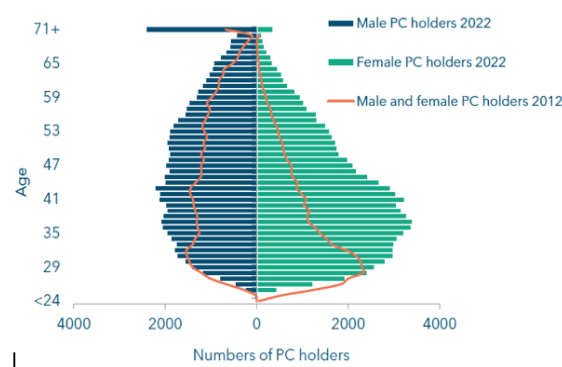


Figure 3.2 Age distribution of solicitors with practising certificates in England and Wales.
The Law Society, 2023

This attrition is often linked to delays in promotion during the family formation years, where gender bias continues to hinder women’s advancement (Chambliss, 1997, in Kay & Gorman, 2008), while male colleagues progress uninterrupted. The drop from 62% of newly qualified solicitors to only 37% of female partners highlights the presence of persistent barriers. Although this has narrowed slightly from 35% two years ago (SRA, 2024), it remains

premature to suggest women are making meaningful inroads to the top. The numerical dominance of women at the entry level is sometimes misinterpreted as evidence that gender equality has been achieved. However, this perception obscures the persistent structural and cultural barriers that continue to restrict women's progression, calling into question whether gender mainstreaming (Walby, 2011a), alone is sufficient to drive substantive change.

Is gender mainstreaming enough?

Gender mainstreaming, defined as the systematic integration of gender equality into all policies, programmes, and institutional practices (Walby, 2011a), seeks to embed equality consideration into the core functioning of organisations. Although it aims to address structural inequality, its effectiveness depends on whether it actively challenges the entrenched patriarchal norms that continue to underpin male-dominated professions such as law. Too often, the rhetoric of mainstreaming masks a reluctance to confront the cultural and structural foundations of inequality. Contemporary scholarship has expanded this debate by framing gender as a continuum, encouraging the expression of diverse identities and the potential to disrupt fixed gender binaries (Mavin & Grandy, 2012; Gill & Scharff, 2013). The concept of “doing gender differently” by Mavin and Grandy (2012:221) recognises that individuals can simultaneously enact multiple expressions of femininity and masculinity, creating opportunities for cultural change. To enable this transformation, Acker (1990) argues that gender must be embedded into organisational theory, challenging the assumption of neutrality in structures that largely reflect male norms. Similarly, Kanter’s (1977) work highlights that under-representation is rarely a matter of personal capability; it is the product of structural arrangements that confine women to lower-tier positions or token roles at the top.

In the legal profession, gender mainstreaming has been advanced through legislative measures such as Equal Parental Leave (Department for Business, I.&S., 2014), the Equality Act 2010, and the Gender Pay Gap Information Regulations 2017 (Legislation.gov.uk, 2022a). Professional networks such as the Association of Women Solicitors (2022), the 30% Club (2022), Women in the Law UK (2021), and the Fawcett Society (2022) provide mentoring, networking, and advocacy. The Women in Law Pledge (The Law Society, 2022b), currently endorsed by 50 organisations, commits signatories to gender equality targets, while initiatives such as First 100 Years (2022) celebrate women’s achievements in the legal profession. Further, firms like Linklaters (2022) have set strategic gender parity goals for 2030, signalling organisational intent to accelerate change towards gender equality.

Despite all these initiatives, the data tell a different story: women trail at the partnership level (SRA, 2024), and since 1841, only seven women have served as Law Society presidents. Those who have reached the top, like Christina Blacklaws, who initiated global roundtable meetings, identified unconscious and conscious bias, the law being “male-shaped”, favouring men, and the insupportable work-life balance as key challenges to women’s progression (Bowcott, 2019; Taddia, 2022). These patterns illustrate the endurance of barriers which restrict women’s advancement to leadership levels. As Sommerlad and Sanderson (1998) caution, reforms often falter when the complexity of inequality is underestimated or when proposals are relegated to policy rhetoric. Without cultural as well as structural change, gender mainstreaming risks becoming symbolic policy rhetoric rather than capable of achieving lasting transformation. The UN’s designation of gender equality as a global sustainability goal (UN, 2023) further emphasises the urgency of moving beyond symbolic measures towards systemic, lasting and measurable change. Against this backdrop, the persistence of structural and cultural barriers in law makes the concepts of the glass ceiling and glass cliff particularly relevant as a lens for understanding women’s career trajectories and leadership experiences in the profession.

3.3 Glass Ceiling in the Legal Profession

As noted, only 37% of law firm partners are women; the disparity is even more pronounced in larger law firms, where women comprise only 28% of partners (SRA, 2024). These statistics demonstrate the enduring impact of the “glass ceiling” phenomenon in the legal profession. A photograph of law firm partners in 1982 visually illustrates the severity of women’s scarcity in the legal profession (LawCareers.net, 2021), Figure 3.3, accentuating women’s persistent challenges in reaching the legal profession’s upper echelons.



Figure 3.3 Image of partners in a legal firm in 1982 LawCareers, 2021

The lawyer (2015) reported that the glass ceiling had yet to crack due to the lack of gender parity in partnerships, echoing Skordaki's (1996) findings, highlighting the enduring structural barriers and gender discrimination. Sommerlad and Sanderson (2019) proposed three speculative approaches to explain gender-based disparities in the legal labour market: individual choices, human capital theory, and cultural and structural barriers. However, Webley and Duff's (2007) research challenges the idea that women's career outcomes are merely the result of individual choices. Their study, commissioned by The Law Society, shows that the core legal profession's values, emphasising profit over ethics and equality, contributed to 439 women leaving the profession, suggesting that cultural and structural barriers significantly shape women solicitors' career paths, not just individual decisions.

In the absence of structural and cultural barriers, women would be expected to occupy the majority of leadership roles in professions that value compassion, collaboration, and care. Contrastingly, men in female-dominated professions such as teaching and nursing experience a "glass escalator" effect, rapidly ascending to leadership roles (Williams, 1992). Research also suggests that the higher the proportion of women in an occupation, the more likely a man will be promoted to a managerial position (Maume, 1999), undermining the notion that women's choices are free from external influences. This disparity points to the persistent influence of structural and cultural barriers, preventing the conversion of numerical gains into influential positions, exposing the limitations of assuming that time and talent alone will correct gendered imbalances. Sommerlad and Sanderson (2019) argue that the legal profession manipulates the vagueness of notions of choice and commitment to marginalise women, allowing the profession to engineer and maintain exclusionary practices, effectively managing the influx of women without addressing underlying structural and cultural barriers. Thus, the narrative of women's voluntary departure from the legal profession obscures the systemic factors perpetuating gender inequality within it.

Aulakh et al. (2017) found that despite greater demographic representation, the legal profession remains stratified by class, gender, and ethnicity. Large city firms handling high-value work are often dominated by white, privileged men, who frequently have familial connections to higher education, thereby reinforcing the established habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Women, particularly those from minority ethnic backgrounds, continue to face systemic barriers to senior roles, especially in commercial practice. Thus, structural inequalities persist beneath the surface-level gains in diversity, perpetuating disparities in opportunities and outcomes. Women have undoubtedly made progress in a historically male-dominated profession, yet the enduring glass ceiling continues to keep many at the lower and middle tiers of law firm hierarchies. Despite equality

legislation and organisational initiatives, the gender gap remains stark. Structural power imbalances have been slow to shift, sustaining barriers to opportunity and representation (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). The key hurdles women face in the legal profession are:

Male-dominated culture

Sommerlad et al. (2013) found that white males, the highest socio-economic group, still dominate the legal profession's culture. This view is supported by extensive literature (Duff & Webley, 2004; MacMillan et al., 2005; Bolton & Muzio, 2007, 2008; Sullivan, 2010; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019), highlighting persistent barriers faced by women and minorities. The study identified class-based exclusion and less accessible informal networks as barriers to women and minorities. Law firms' structures and processes reflect the ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions of privileged white males acquired through their life experiences, shaping their behaviours and perceptions. This 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977) influences how they approach their work, interact with clients and colleagues, and develop their professional identities. Despite being attributed to discrimination and exclusion, Rolfe and Anderson (2003) argue that the legal profession's hierarchical structure and lack of differentiation also contribute to inequality, indicating that both interpersonal and structural dynamics hinder gender parity in law.

Solicitors from prestigious institutions often exhibit greater confidence and a more assured professional demeanour than those from less elite backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991; Sullivan, 2010). Symbolic violence subtly reinforces gendered norms, embedding hierarchies that marginalise women without overt coercion. The prestige of elite firms and education sustains social stratification (Buckham & Lee, 2002, in Sullivan, 2010). Women face barriers such as long hours, billable targets (Johns, 2020), and networking pressures, while flexible working is often stigmatised (Acker, 1990; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019) and is interpreted as a lack of commitment. Masculinity remains embedded in the profession's core values (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019), shaping leadership ideals and reinforcing male-dominated hiring practices. This pattern undermines women's perceived competence and reinforces their outsider status, often resulting in dismissive remarks and assumptions about their career paths (Sommerlad, 2008). The resulting pressure to conform, as seen in the queen bee phenomenon (Derks et al., 2011), forces women to conceal their identities, heightening professional strain.

Research commissioned by the Law Society reveals that embedded ethos, working practices, and professional career structures are the primary barriers to women's re-entry (Sommerlad & Allaker, 1991). Other studies, such as Sommerlad (1994a) and Sommerlad & Sanderson

(2019), also echo these findings. These findings highlight the complexity of achieving substantive change and effective retention strategies, revealing that the challenges extend beyond mere skill sets to the fundamental organisational dynamics that maintain gender disparities. Sommerlad and Sanderson argue that advancement in the legal profession depends more on personal relationships and patronage than talent (2019). Male-dominated social networks, like sports and drinking clubs, often exclude women who lack similar connections and face familial responsibilities that prevent them from attending networking events, hindering their career advancement. Notwithstanding claims of impartiality, men in leadership often prefer candidates like themselves. Recruitment agencies report that larger firms sometimes explicitly request male candidates due to concerns about the increasing number of women solicitors (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019:161). Firms believe that maintaining a male-dominated partner list upholds credibility, reflecting negative stereotypes about women (Jack & Jack, 1989, in Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019).

Unconscious bias in recruitment and work allocation remains a key barrier to gender equality (Bowcott, 2019). A Canadian study found widespread perceptions of double standards and gender bias among lawyers, 99% of women and 83% of men (Brockman, 1992a, in Kay & Gorman, 2008). Such bias contributes to lower organisational commitment, increased turnover intentions (Foley et al., 2006), diminished self-esteem, higher anxiety and depression, and reduced feelings of power and prestige among women solicitors (Gutek et al., 1996; Kobryniewicz & Branscombe, 1997; Foster, 2000). These findings support the view that the labour market is socially constructed and shaped by gender, race, and class (Gaskell, 1995; McGivney, 1993, in Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019), rendering partnership advancement in law exclusionary and rooted in gendered norms (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019).

Building on this, narratives that frame women's career outcomes as personal choice (Hakim, 1995) risk obscuring the structural and cultural barriers that persist within law firms (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). Such narratives perpetuate the belief that men are natural leaders, while women, particularly mothers, are seen as less committed or overly emotional (Cuddy et al., 2004). Sommerlad and Sanderson (2019) argue that the issue lies not in feminine traits themselves but in their devaluation within the legal context echoing Reece (2000), who notes that legal culture historically favours masculine qualities like logic and competitiveness, which is an outdated view increasingly challenged by calls for a more fluid and inclusive understanding of gender (Mavin & Grandy, 2012).

Despite the persistent rhetoric around diversity and inclusion, this review highlights that organisational practices often fail to reflect these ideals. Although more women are entering the legal profession at junior levels, this has not led to significant cultural change at higher levels. Tomlinson et al. (2012:246) identify six strategies women use to navigate the profession: assimilation, compromise, playing the game, reforming the system, location/relocation, and withdrawal. Except for reforming the system, most of these strategies reinforce existing structures rather than challenge them. Whilst helpful in explaining women's responses to inequality, the model underestimates intersectional nuances and long-term effects. Similarly, Bacon and Blyton (2006) view "playing the game" as a survival tactic in competitive environments but give limited consideration to how such conformity increases stress, diminishes authenticity, and results in unequal experiences. Ultimately, despite increasing numerical diversity, entrenched practices and power relations remain, hindering progress towards genuine inclusion.

Role of gender and leadership stereotypes

There are almost as many definitions of leadership as people defining it (Bass, 1981). For instance, Cohen (1990:9) defines leadership as influencing others to their maximum performance. While leadership is theoretically gender-neutral, it is often perceived and practised with gender biases and stereotypes. Historically, leadership has been associated with masculinity, influenced by the "great man" theory and the belief that only men possess leadership attributes, hence "think manager, think male" (Schein 1973, 1975). However, recent literature emphasises leadership as a learnable skill (Kouzes & Posner, 1995). Although leadership theory has historically been biased towards white, male, non-disabled, heterosexual individuals (Cook, Heppner & O'Brien, 2005), there is growing recognition of its gender-neutral potential. Despite this, gender disparities persist in leadership roles, and achieving gender parity in them remains challenging.

The discourse on leadership increasingly incorporates gender dynamics, often positioning women as outsiders within a predominantly masculine construct. Discussions focus on how women can lead successfully while adhering to feminine expectations and navigating masculine leadership styles (Koller, 2004; Eagly, 2005; Ollilainen & Calasanti, 2007). Contemporary leadership theory emphasises leaders discovering their unique voice and helping others find theirs (Covey, 2004; Hlupic, 2014). The shift from autocratic to servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) aims to inspire and empower individuals (Hlupic, 2019). Traditional command-and-control styles inhibit innovation and productivity, with new models emphasising collaboration and empowerment (Hlupic, 2019). Despite evolving

leadership theories, gender biases persist, with male-dominated environments favouring confidence and dominance over women's stereotypical collaborative, perceptive and sensitive traits (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This persistence remains despite studies indicating that women on boards are more likely to assess risks carefully and effectively oversee firm management, which often results in above-average returns (Dhir, 2015, in McClane & Rosenblum, 2022).

Further, McKinsey's '*Women Matter*' Report (2008) supports that women leaders better understand and respond to followers' needs, often adopting a more democratic and less autocratic style than men (Eagly et al., 2003; Rowold & Rohmann, 2009). However, their subjective realities shape women's experiences in historically male-dominated spaces (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011). They face barriers rooted in the "hero model" of leadership, which prioritises perfection and job dedication, neglecting collaborative styles (Hurley & Choudhary, 2016). Gender discrimination, stereotyping, and the glass ceiling hinder women's progress in corporate hierarchies (Oakley, 2000; Krivkovich et al., 2017). Foster (1995:1649) argues that gender bias in the legal profession "follows society's role dichotomies." Women may be breaking the glass ceiling, but stereotypes and gender bias keep the profession gender-segregated and question the competence of women solicitors to do high-status work, which men often reserve for themselves.

In addition to the gender and leadership stereotypes contributing to the glass ceiling and the glass cliff phenomena, as noted in Chapter 2, Braun et al. (2017) present a different angle to the underrepresentation of women in leadership, attributing it to the gender biases that align women with follower roles due to their communal nature. This affiliation perpetuates the promotion of men into leadership positions. Haslam et al. (2001) suggest leaders cultivate followers by fostering shared interests and ingroup identity, which may prompt male leaders in the legal profession to favour like-minded men in promotions. Furthermore, men who hold traditional views on gender roles (Glick & Fiske, 1996) are more likely to reinforce these biases in decision-making, a dynamic that may be particularly evident in the legal profession, where senior leadership remains disproportionately male.

Double burden

The double burden of work and home life responsibilities, along with a reluctance to self-promote, further impede women's professional advancement (Rudman & Glick, 2001; Bowles & McGinn, 2005). Women leaders often struggle to conform to gender roles and meet leadership demands (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). This conflict shifts research

focus on barriers rather than facilitators of their advancement (Veale & Gold, 1998). A paradigm shift, focusing on gender in new leadership theories, is necessary due to the historical exclusion of women from traditional models. Sommerlad and Sanderson (2019) challenge the assumption that workplace processes, like recruitment and remuneration, are separate from home life, highlighting their interconnectedness. Domestic arrangements significantly shape careers, affecting both men and women. Women, as predominant caregivers, face a gendered disparity that extends into the workplace, leading to their marginalisation and contingent authority in the legal profession (Thornton, 1996). This marginalisation, rooted in the profession's fraternity-like culture and exclusionary practices, reinforces male dominance, limiting women's career advancement and maintaining their secondary status within the legal hierarchy (Thornton, 1996:173).

Further, Sommerlad and Sanderson (2019) posit that a career break for family reasons is crucial to understanding the position of women solicitors. Elucidating this position, McGlynn states that the "baby bar" has replaced the historical "marriage bar", leading employers to view women's careers as limited (1996:229, in Sommerlad and Sanderson, 2019). Aligning with Hakim's preference theory (1998), firms adopt a voluntarist approach, implying that women choose career breaks and are responsible for the consequences. Women returning from breaks often face perceptions of lacking skills, confidence, and commitment (Cuddy et al., 2004). However, this view is flawed, given that mandatory continuing professional development (CPD) ensures that all lawyers, regardless of breaks, stay updated. The perceived lack of confidence among returning women solicitors often results from how their coworkers treat them rather than an actual deficiency in competence. Sommerlad and Sanderson (2019) criticise the assertion that women lack commitment, arguing that commitment is an ideological construct rather than a measurable attribute. The ambiguity in whether commitment is assessed quantitatively by the hours in the office or qualitatively by output, accessibility, and conformity raises questions about the fairness and validity of these assessments. This critique highlights the inherent biases that preserve the status of women solicitors as second-class professionals, with the ambiguity in the constructs used to exclude women.

Assumptions about women's preferences for family, work, or flexible hours persist, despite such concerns not being gender-specific. However, men often hesitate to request flexible working arrangements due to the gendered stigma and perceived risks to career progression (Allen & Winton, 2023). Rather than assuming women's career ambitions (Hakim, 1998), Walsh's (2012) study of 384 non-partner women solicitors revealed that, despite strong

career aspirations, many prioritise work-life balance, indicating that ambitious women perceive limited promotion opportunities due to firm-specific cultures which lack flexible work arrangements, disproportionately affecting women lawyers who are also mothers, prioritising family over extended work hours. Research further quantifies this disparity (Kay & Hagan, 1998; Aulakh et al., 2017), showing that men are significantly more likely than women to attain partnership positions. Data collected from the largest UK and US law firms in London also revealed a sharp drop-off in the number of women as they progress up the legal ranks, compounded by stark pay gaps between the sexes, particularly at higher levels of the £28 billion legal industry (Beioly, 2020).

Consequently, research highlights the structural challenges faced by women with children in law, challenging the narrative of free choice (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019; The Law Society, 2019). Cultural norms frame women as primary caregivers yet often undervalue their economic and social contributions. In contrast, men are still seen as the default breadwinners (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This binary devalues parenting and contributes to diminished confidence and imposter syndrome among women (Clance & Imes, 1978). The legal profession has historically reinforced patriarchal responses to motherhood (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 1998). However, proposals to recognise parenting financially, such as shared parental leave, may signal a shift towards valuing caregiving and reframe parenting as a contribution rather than a liability. The COVID-19 pandemic further disrupted norms, accelerating digital and flexible working advancements; some argue that these advancements outpaced leadership efforts (Dawson, 2020). The pandemic necessitated widespread remote working, offering flexibility but also intensifying challenges for parents, particularly mothers, due to school closures and increased sharing of childcare responsibilities (Wren & Partridge, 2021). This review highlights the need for profound structural change to achieve genuine gender equality, which may be accelerated by increased representation of women in senior positions. This change could drive more inclusive workplace policies and practices, benefiting all employees, irrespective of gender, as they strive to integrate career and personal life responsibilities.

Gender pay gap

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS.gov.uk, 2021), the gender pay gap remains a persistent issue in the UK. Within the solicitors profession, an analysis of the 42 largest law firms' gender pay gap indicates a similar trend (Figure 3.4) (The Law Society, 2021). Goulbourne (2018) links this gap to women's underrepresentation in senior roles. Despite the increasing number of women entering the legal field, earnings disparities

between male and female solicitors persist, mirroring broader systemic issues. Under the Gender Pay Gap Information Regulations 2017 (Legislation.gov.uk., 2022b), law firms with 250 or more employees are required to report gender pay gap data. However, many firms exclude high-earning equity partners from these reports on the basis that they are owners rather than employees, which makes the representation of gender equality imprecise. A prominent City law firm’s 2020 report showed that women were paid 65.7% (mean) less than men in 2019 (Wren & Partridge, 2021). However, excluding partners, the gap was reduced to 20%, demonstrating the distortion of gender pay equity (Wren & Partridge, 2021). Dinovitzer et al. (2009) found that gendered expectations and the undervaluation of women’s contributions perpetuate income disparities in the legal profession.

The Law Society’s statistics for hourly pay indicate larger firms’ gender pay gap is much higher than the national average, with a 20.3% mean compared to the 14% national average and 32.4% median to the 12.6% national average (The Law Society, 2021).

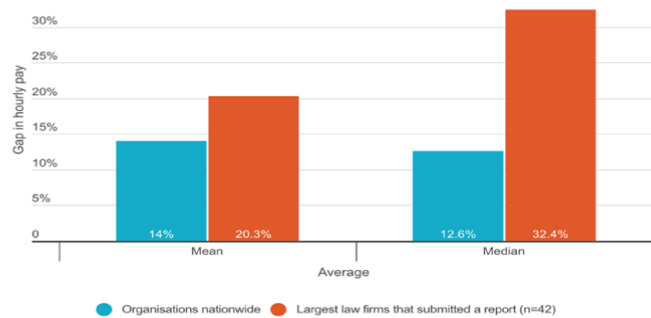


Figure 3.4 Hourly pay large law firms' pay gaps compared to the national average, 2020 (The Law Society, 2021)

The bonus pay in large law firms follows a similar trend. While a comparable percentage of men (58.3%) and women (59.6%) received bonuses during the April 2020 pay period, the bonuses received by men were significantly higher (Figure 3.5). The average gap between men’s and women’s bonus payments in 2020 was 39.4% (The Law Society, 2021). This disparity in bonus pay contributes to the broader pay gap within the legal profession, primarily due to women’s underrepresentation in senior positions.

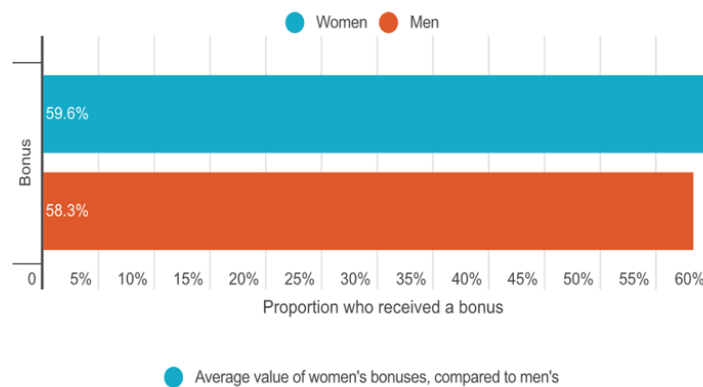


Figure 3.5 Bonus pay – comparing proportion and value between men and women in large law firms, 2020 (The Law Society, 2021).

This gendered disparity in pay is persistent and lacks fairness and transparency (Tsang, 2003). It is likely to discourage women solicitors from overcoming numerous barriers, only to earn significantly less than their male counterparts. Aligned with Goulbourne’s research, Kulich, Ryan, and Haslam (2007) found that performance-related bonuses in leadership roles vary by gender. Women leaders’ bonuses are often based on subjective perceptions of charisma and leadership ability rather than objective organisational performance. For men, contrastingly, improved organisational performance enhances perceived charisma and leadership ability, leading to more significant bonuses. This discrepancy suggests that until women’s leadership abilities are valued equally, they will lack equal power and agency. The law firms allocating higher-paid practice areas to men also exacerbate the gender pay gap, inferring that equality in the distribution of work will eventually lead to pay equality. The disparity in pay and rewards highlights the need for systemic change to ensure women are fairly compensated and recognised at all levels of the legal profession.

Furthermore, a survey by Next 100 Years (2022) and Gapsquare revealed that 84% of women believe achieving pay equality in the legal sector will take until the next generation or beyond. Analysis of Gender Pay Gap reports from 2017 to 2022 indicates a persistent and significant gender pay gap, with the legal profession showing one of the most significant gaps at 25.4%. Without proactive measures and positive action, achieving pay parity will fall to future generations. The report “Closing the Gender Pay Gap in the Legal Profession” identified critical barriers: the lack of transparency in reward and career progression, reluctance to engage in open discussions, and publishing grading structures to embrace transparency. Further, promotion decisions often prioritise experience over productivity, which in turn adversely affects women who take time out for family and are perceived as less competent and committed, which affects their wages and career progression (Stephen & Correll, 2010). A more targeted approach from senior leadership may help support women

in the talent pipeline to remain and thrive in the profession, contributing to more sustainable and inclusive career progression. As it stands, Law Society president Nick Emmerson states, “the gender pay gap and its various causes remain one of the main issues facing women in the legal profession” (Goodman, 2024).

Sexual harassment

The legal profession, known for its conservatism, does not escape this significant issue affecting many women, with 38% of female lawyers reporting experiences of sexual harassment (Webber, 2019). Many women are reluctant to report the widespread sexual harassment due to the hierarchical nature of firms, fearing retaliation, jeopardising their career progression and negative social costs (Kaiser & Miller, 2001). Junior women can be perceived as submissive due to power dynamics within firms, leading to their exploitation (Richard et al., 1991, in Cikara & Fiske, 2007). Although sexual harassment is illegal, the profession has seen a worrying increase in reported cases, rising from 63 in 2018-2019 to a 16% rise in 2019-2020 (Topping, 2020) and conversely, reported complaints to the SRA dropped by a third in 2020, likely due to reduced face-to-face interactions during the pandemic lockdown, both in and out of working hours (Roberts, 2021). Despite law being a profession committed to justice, these statistics reveal a disappointing persistence of gender-related issues.

The legal sector has struggled to dismantle hierarchical structures that enable power abuses within it (Dunn, 2020). Leniency in cases of sexual misconduct, such as a male partner being fined but allowed to continue practising, sends the wrong message about accountability (Dunn, 2020). This pervasive issue has led some firms to consider financial penalties and profit share deductions for partners under internal investigation. Additionally, the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal has penalised such instances of professional misconduct, sending a clear message yet also highlighting ongoing challenges in addressing sexual harassment within the profession (Roberts, 2021).

A survey conducted by the Law Society highlighted the “masculine shape of the law” as a significant barrier for many women solicitors (Grant, 2019). In many firms, women’s inclusion is entwined with the implicit use of their sexuality as a professional asset (Filby, 1992; Hearn & Parkin, 1995). This commodification undermines authority and reinforces gendered disadvantage, particularly when women are valued more for their appearance than for their competence (Thornton, 1996; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). The entrenched culture of male deference and hierarchy in law firms fosters domination and sexual

objectification (MacKinnon, 1987). Practices like after-hours drinking reinforce exclusionary dynamics, disadvantaging women who opt out and fuelling perceptions of a lack of commitment (Sommerlad, 1998). The constructs of commitment and choice in such contexts are, therefore, deeply embedded in male norms. A general reluctance to report misconduct, including harassment, sustains these systemic issues, undermining women's confidence and creating conflict between their professional and gender roles (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). Women find it difficult to reconcile their sex role with their work role (Gutek, 1989, in Baugh, 1997) and may endure adverse effects on their performance (Fredrickson et al., 1998).

Presenteeism

Presenteeism, a concept where workers come to work despite being ill (Hemp, 2004) or the “jackets on chairs” culture, is another significant barrier to women's progression in law. Most law firms bill clients based on time sheets, rewarding solicitors for the hours they work, which lacks flexibility and generates inequality due to women's caring duties. This long-hours culture, highlighted by a Law Society survey (Bowcott, 2019), harms work-life balance and job satisfaction, often leading to burnout within 15 years for partners in city law firms. Moreover, the tension between gender and leadership stereotypes compels women to work harder to gain recognition and establish legitimacy, yet they continue to face disproportionate scrutiny (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Even when they break the glass ceiling, they're often underpaid and undervalued, reinforcing the gender pay gap. These persistent barriers deter progress, making gender equity in law elusive.

A widely held perception in the legal profession is that commitment to the career necessitates long hours and prioritising career over private life. The “macho mythologising” of long hours is epitomised by an average working day of 10-12 hours. Sommerlad (2002:220) states, “Long hours are either presented as natural or as evidence that its most enthusiastic exponents have balls.” This belief underpins gender-typing, reinforcing the notion of women's difference, as their domestic responsibilities and maternity leave often hinder them from demonstrating the “appropriate” level of commitment through physical visibility. This powerful exclusionary mechanism keeps women out of the “old boys' club” (Oakley, 2000; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019).

Furthermore, the emphasis on client care beyond regular working hours disadvantages women, who, if they refuse to conform, face career stagnation, and if they comply, suffer from poor work-life balance and potential sexual harassment (Roberts, 2021). Despite the flexible working policies, a study surveying London-based lawyers identified a significant

“implementation gap” (Budjanovcanin, 2018). Women fear the “flexibility stigma” (Chung, 2018), which leads to perceptions of lesser commitment, adversely affecting their chances for pay raises and procuring interesting work and contributing to their decision to leave the profession. The legal profession’s outer closure has gradually eroded since the 1970s due to feminisation (Bolton & Muzio, 2007). However, since women represent only a third of the partners, indicating that law firms enforce policies that support exclusionary dynamics (Murphy, 1988), limiting opportunities for outsiders, moving the closure internally (Ashley & Empson, 2012). Women solicitors are often treated as expendable, maintaining a labour reserve without disrupting the partnership structure. The persistent culture of presenteeism (Hemp, 2004), long hours, and biased evaluation standards will continue to contribute to the relative scarcity of women in senior roles until these issues are addressed. This dearth is demonstrated by the trend of women solicitors’ drop-out rate significantly increasing in law firms 10-19 years of PQE. This trend persists beyond 19 years in practice, with the number of women solicitors more than halving, as shown in Table 3.1. This drastic reduction in numbers from 22,988 at 0-9 years post admission to 15,150 at 10-19 years post admission is despite women forming a clear majority compared to their male colleagues (14,887 at 0-9 years post admission). The majority ratio reverses in favour of men at 20-29 years post admission.

Solicitors in private practice in England and Wales						
Years since admission	All	%	Male	%	Female	%
0-9	37,875	39.5	14,887	31.2	22,988	47.7
10-19	28,062	29.2	12,912	27.0	15,150	31.5
20-29	17,337	18.1	10,214	21.4	7,123	14.8
30-39	8,795	9.2	6,338	13.3	2,457	5.1
40-49	3,372	3.5	2,946	6.2	426	0.9
50 plus	513	0.5	494	1.0	19	0.0
Total	95,954	100.0	47,791	100.0	48,163	100.0

Solicitors in employed and other sectors, or not attached to organisations**						
Years since admission	All	%	Male	%	Female	%
0-9	18,896	35.0	7,195	30.2	11,701	38.9
10-19	20,385	37.8	8,652	36.3	11,733	39.0
20-29	9,921	18.4	4,927	20.7	4,994	16.6
30-39	3,566	6.6	2,075	8.7	1,491	5.0
40-49	1,031	1.9	861	3.6	170	0.6
50 plus	138	0.3	134	0.6	4	0.0
Total	53,937	100.0	23,844	100.0	30,093	100.0

Table 3.1 – Experience by number of years since admission SRA 2022

These figures highlight the inefficiency of the efforts to address gender equality, as the disparity between the number of women entering the legal profession and those reaching senior positions remains significant and persistent. Women earn less, are more likely to leave the profession, and are less likely to get a partnership, especially an equity partnership, than men (McMahon & Edmonds, 2023), highlighting that more needs to be done to promote, keep, and support women in top roles. Factors such as the “anytime and anywhere” management style, long working hours, and the double burden of home and work life have

been identified as key contributors to the challenges faced by women in the legal profession. Women lawyers face pay disparities, limited access to partnership positions, and loss of valuable knowledge and skills when exiting the profession (Harrington, 1993; Kay & Hagan, 1995; Brockman, 2001; Law Society, 2004; Sommerlad, 2002; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019).

Although the legal services market grew by 8.3% in 2023, driven largely by commercial law (50%), followed by family and employment law (Business Wire, 2024), firms continue to struggle with the significant attrition of women. This ongoing trend persists despite growing recognition of the importance of sustained careers for both genders (Muzio & Tomlinson, 2012). While loyalty and commitment are expected to yield cumulative career progression and job security (Inkson & King, 2011; Sabellis & Schilling, 2013), these outcomes often fail to materialise for many women in practice. The perceived lack of advancement opportunities, rooted in benchmarks aligned with masculine breadwinner ideals (Bolton & Muzio, 2008), not only discourages women from aspiring to partnership but also contributes to their attrition from the profession.

The literature review indicates that the gender discrimination faced at the point of entry 100 years ago has now shifted to the duration of women solicitors' career trajectories. Although there is improvement in women attaining partnerships, gender remains a persistent factor in employment, pay, and leadership presence (Barreto et al., 2009), who note that gender bias and sexism have taken a more contemporary, rather than blatant form, attributing this to the comparative increase in women in senior roles. Correspondingly, research (Aulakh et al., 2017) highlights a lower probability of women becoming partners than their male counterparts. As shown in Figure 3.6, white males had 73.5% chance, whereas white females had 18%. These figures are even lower for minority ethnic groups' solicitors. Noticeably, males from these groups had a higher probability of becoming partners (29.1%) compared to both white females (18%) and minority ethnic groups females (13%) (Figure 3.6).

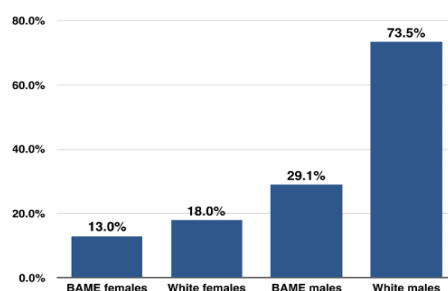


Figure. 3.6 The average probability of solicitors' prospects of becoming a partner by gender and ethnicity (Aulakh et al., 2017)

These issues align with Walby's theory of systemic gender inequality, highlighting how institutional structures extend gender disparities, emphasising the need for comprehensive policy changes to achieve true gender equality (1990). Despite these inequalities, women solicitors build resilience, confidence, and self-belief as they navigate challenges, especially gender bias and exclusion, through gaining experience, managing complex cases and overcoming professional obstacles (Sommerlad, 2016). Zheng et al. (2018) propose that women handle the tensions between agency and communality differently; some adopt the paradox mindset, embracing both simultaneously, which boosts their resilience (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004) and effectiveness, aligning with "doing gender differently" (Mavin & Grandy, 2012:221). Yet, others adopt a dilemma mindset that depletes their resilience. Nonetheless, experience strengthens their confidence, enabling them to trust their judgements and skills and reinforcing their ability to persevere and succeed in demanding environments (Kay & Gorman, 2008). These qualities prove essential in women overcoming barriers and advancing in a traditionally male-dominated legal profession (Bolton & Muzio, 2007). However, this review highlights ongoing structural challenges that the profession faces in adapting to the profession's changing demographics.

3.4 Glass Cliff in the Legal Profession

Since Ryan and Haslam's seminal work (2005), research has primarily used archival and scenario-based experimental methodologies to detect the glass cliff phenomenon (Bruckmuller & Branscombe, 2010; Ryan et al., 2011; Gartzia et al., 2012). These studies focused on outcomes such as organisational performance and leadership success or failure, without necessarily considering the underlying processes that lead to glass cliff positions. One reason for the dearth of research into circumstances leading up to and following the appointment is the likely reluctance by the leadership to analyse recruitment practices due to the potential revelation of gender bias or discrimination. The ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding the circumstances leading to leadership changes are often influenced by organisational politics, complicating the determination of clear reasons for appointments (Sabharwal, Levine & D'Agostino, 2016; Esposito, 2021). Over time, researchers shifted their focus to understanding the "what" and "why" of the glass cliff phenomenon, recognising the limitations of archival studies in revealing its origins (Ryan et al., 2016). Numerous studies have since examined processes associated with appointing women to perilous positions, as discussed in Chapter 2, sections 2.6 - 2.9.

Consequently, the context-dependent nature of the glass cliff phenomenon affirmed the choice of the solicitors' legal profession for its exploration. To the researcher's knowledge, the only academic research in law was conducted by Ashby, Ryan, and Haslam (2007). Their experimental study examined whether legal cases allocated to women had a higher chance of failure. Law students were assigned legal cases ranging from low to high risk. The study found that while male candidates were as likely as female candidates to lead in lower-risk cases, there was a significant preference for female lawyers in high-risk cases, consistent with the glass cliff phenomenon. This study involved 114 law students, and since perceptions are crucial in understanding the phenomenon (Ryan et al., 2016), students' viewpoints, who lack experience in legal practice and the cultural and social aspects of professional life, could offer only an objective perspective. Given the nuanced nature of the phenomenon (Morgenroth et al., 2020), its exploration in the solicitors' profession necessitated qualitative interviews with practising women solicitors in partnership to capture their understanding of the experienced dynamics within the specific organisational context. Ryan et al. (2016) viewed the glass cliff as a phenomenon rather than a theory, aiming to explain and integrate numerous empirical findings, highlighting that it is meant to be observed rather than proven. Therefore, this study considers the situational factors, organisational context, and how position holders make sense of their lived experiences to analyse the phenomenon.

Despite notable challenges, women solicitors who break through the glass ceiling may encounter new workplace obstacles. While there has been progress in women holding senior positions in law firms, as noted advancements remain sluggish despite widespread diversity initiatives. Currently, 62% of solicitors are women (SRA, 2024), with 53% in law firms, 45% men, and 2% undisclosed. The increasing trend of appointing women to leadership roles in law firms (Mun & Jung, 2018) as well as its feminisation at lower levels, has led to assertions that gender equity is no longer an urgent concern in the profession (Ames, 2022). However, Ryan cautions against merely citing statistics without implementing effective gender equality initiatives and understanding the circumstances of women's appointments (Ryan, 2023). This situation may reflect what Sterbenk et al. (2021) term as gender-washing or fempower-washing where diversity initiatives risk appearing symbolic rather than substantive, potentially falling short of fully embedding Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) principles such as fair treatment, equal opportunities, and respect for all individuals (Özbilgin, 2023, in Vincent et al., 2024). The disparity in partnership statistics underscores the need to examine the circumstances and nature of women's partnership appointments (Ryan et al., 2011; Bruckmüller et al., 2014). This study explores the experiences and

psychological processes behind women's appointments beyond numerical representation, which has been considered imperative (Esposito, 2021; Ryan, 2023).

Additionally, existing research often focuses on failure, potentially neglecting success stories and propagating negative stereotypes about women's leadership in crises. This emphasis can reinforce negative stereotypes by highlighting failure and risk rather than challenging them (Ryan, 2023; Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024). Media narratives have also focused on dramatic outcomes rather than the phenomenon's complexities, creating perceptions that may not match reality, as noted by Shor et al. (2022) in the "paper cut" effect in media coverage. This study intends to qualitatively explore the narratives of women solicitors in partnership roles, understanding their journeys, the circumstances surrounding their appointments, possible encounters with glass cliff scenarios, and the impact on their career trajectories. As highlighted in recent studies, addressing workplace equality requires exploring the contexts rather than trying to fix women (Ryan, 2023; Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024). Instead, interventions need to focus on the organisational context and culture that sustain inequalities, shaping women's ambitions, motivations, and how their skills are recognised and valued (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024).

This research provides valuable insights by analysing the circumstances within the legal profession and decision-making processes regarding these roles. It examines the nature of the roles and their outcomes, whether the women solicitors were successful, pushed off, or opted off the glass cliff (Ryan et al., 2007). It shares participants' experiences that they may otherwise hesitate to discuss openly due to likely professional repercussions and associated stress. Most glass cliff studies have focused on gender bias in selection (Ryan et al., 2016; Kulich et al., 2021), with limited investigation in the legal profession, particularly regarding postholders' decision-making processes. By utilising individual participant experiences, this study identifies themes across the data corpus, offering a comprehensive understanding of potential interactions with the glass cliff phenomenon. Finally, the study hopes to fill the gap between research findings and practical applications within organisations, using this knowledge to make more equitable leadership appointments and support those in high-risk positions.

Furthermore, despite the formidable barriers confronting women in the UK legal profession across academia, solicitors, barristers, and judges, their determination and optimism persist (McGlynn, 1998). McGlynn stresses the importance of contextualising women lawyers' experiences within broader institutional frameworks, highlighting systemic factors such as the economic structure of law firms, legal culture, and societal gender inequalities. As law

practice becomes increasingly commercialised, the legal profession's upper echelons continue to function as a "boys' club" (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). This environment often sees women solicitors falter or exit at the lower rungs of the hierarchical ladder, limiting the pool of potential partnership candidates to predominantly male counterparts. The notion of women solicitors leaving the profession at the peak of their careers, typically between 10 to 20 years post-qualification, highlights the urgent need to address the barriers hindering their advancement. Despite ongoing debates and initiatives at national and global levels, meaningful progress toward gender equality in the legal profession remains slow. Given the scarcity of research on the glass cliff phenomenon within the legal profession, this study seeks to advance the literature by critically examining its manifestations in this specific context.

Conclusion

This chapter underscores the pervasive impact of the glass ceiling in the legal profession. Despite women gaining a numerical majority at the entry level after a century of being allowed to join the legal profession as solicitors, they continue to be disadvantaged in promotions to partnership positions, comprising only 37% of the partners (SRA, 2024). This disadvantage is intensified by the intersectionality of ethnicity and class (Aulakh et al., 2017). A masculine culture prevails, resulting in a profession stratified by gender and specialisations, indicating professional closure practices (Witz, 1990; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). The critical barriers faced by women include conscious or unconscious gender bias resulting in a male-dominated culture, a paradox between gender and leadership stereotypes, work-life balance issues, presenteeism, and sexual harassment. Given the limited research on the glass cliff within the legal profession, using quantitative experimental design, and the importance of understanding perceptions and context (Ryan et al., 2016; Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024), this study offers critical qualitative insights into its potential contribution to the underrepresentation of women in partnership roles. Through reflexive thematic analysis of women solicitors' narratives, it explores how glass cliff dynamics may manifest in legal career trajectories. The following chapter outlines the study's methodology, including its aim, research questions, design, and methods, as well as considerations of credibility, trustworthiness, and ethical practice.

Chapter 4 - Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

Building on the previous chapter, which positioned the legal profession as the context for this study, this chapter outlines the research methodology used to investigate the underrepresentation of women solicitors in partnership roles. Despite growing female entry into the profession over the past century, structural barriers persist, including gender bias, leadership stereotypes, work-life imbalance, presenteeism, and sexual harassment. These are compounded by a male-dominated professional culture that continues to shape career trajectories through gendered and intersectional inequalities. This study examines how the glass ceiling and the less-researched glass cliff phenomena in the legal profession contribute to these disparities. Accordingly, the current chapter details the qualitative research design and methodological approach adopted. It presents the study's aim, objectives, research questions, and rationale for the chosen methods, alongside the sampling strategy, data collection and analysis processes, and data management considerations. It concludes with a discussion of credibility, trustworthiness, and ethical integrity, which underpin the study's rigour.

4.2 Aim and Objectives

The aim and objectives of this research are as follows:

Aim

This research explores the ongoing underrepresentation of women solicitors at the partnership level within the legal profession in England and Wales.

Objectives

1. To explore the prevalence and persistence of the glass ceiling phenomenon and its influence on the progression of women solicitors to partnership roles.
2. To explore the experiences of women solicitors in partnership positions, using the lens of the glass cliff phenomenon to better understand the ongoing lack of gender parity at the partnership level.

4.3 Background and Research Questions

The literature review in Chapter 2 reveals that women encounter significant barriers in attaining senior positions, symbolised by the metaphor of the “glass ceiling,” defined as “a transparent barrier that keeps women from rising above a certain level in corporations” (Morrison et al. 1987:13). Chapter 3 contextualises these challenges for women solicitors in the legal profession. Despite significant interest, the glass ceiling has remained underexplored and therefore, remains elusive (Powell & Butterfield, 2015). When women do attain senior leadership roles, these positions are often riskier and more prone to failure (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). A more detailed background to the study is provided in section 1.2 in chapter 1. This study explores women solicitors’ journeys from entry into the profession to partnership, examining how they navigate persistent challenges and their contribution to the ongoing lack of gender parity in partnerships.

Academic writing requires clarity and precision, with language that is formal and well-structured. Accordingly, the research questions were carefully formulated, ensuring they stimulate relevant insights while remaining focused and manageable. Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2016) emphasise that clearly defined research questions form the foundation of a robust study. Clough and Nutbrown’s (2012) “just right” test was applied to ensure the research questions were appropriately scoped, neither too broad nor too narrow, allowing for the generation of meaningful insights that could be feasibly explored within available resources, access, and time constraints. Moreover, in line with Wilson (2014:3), likening the research questions to “the glue that holds the project together,” the research questions played a central role in helping maintain the focus throughout the research process, from selecting the context and sample to drawing conclusions and formulating recommendations. Therefore, clearly defining the following research questions was essential to ensure the study’s integrity.

Research Question 1: What are women solicitors' experiences of navigating the pathways to partnership positions through the lens of the glass ceiling phenomenon?

Research Question 2: How do women solicitors experience partnership roles in the context of the glass cliff phenomenon?

4.4 Methodology - Philosophical Assumptions

Methodology refers to “the approach and strategy used to conduct research” (Wilson, 2014:3). Research philosophy involves how things are viewed, along with the beliefs and

assumptions regarding knowledge development (Saunders et al., 2009; Yin, 2009). This philosophical stance determines the research design by specifying the required evidence, how it will be collected and interpreted, and compels the researcher to consider their role within the process (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). This section outlines the research philosophy, researcher's underlying beliefs, and the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions, thereby framing a practical methodology for this research (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007), and explains why these choices were made (Crotty, 1998).

Ontology denotes “the science or study of being” (Blaikie, 2010) and concerns the nature of what is possible to know and what constitutes reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher's ontological assumption was subjectivism, which “asserts that social actors are continually accomplishing social phenomena and their meanings” (Bryman, 2012:29). Accordingly, the researcher believed that reality is not fixed but socially constructed, leading to multiple realities since every experience is distinctive (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, the study was approached with the belief that individuals may perceive and interpret reality differently, influenced by their social context, experiences, and interactions. This ontological stance guided both the research process and the interpretation of findings, acknowledging the diverse perspectives and interpretations of reality that may emerge within the studied phenomena. Based on this assumption, the research aimed to capture the meanings women solicitors assign to their experiences, in building their realities, and to provide insights that address the research questions.

Epistemology refers to the assumptions about what constitutes acceptable, valid, and legitimate knowledge and how it is acquired (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It encompasses theories of knowledge and the scope of what is possible to know about the world. Given the diverse, multidisciplinary nature of business and management studies, a wide range of epistemologies, is available, including those based on numerical and visual data, archival research, autobiographical accounts, and narrative (Gabriel et al., 2013). The researcher adopted the interpretivist paradigm over the mutually exclusive paradigm of positivism, based on differing views of the nature and sources of knowledge. Gill & Johnson posit that the interpretivist approach centres on methods that observe people and their social behaviour (1997). The researcher aligned with the interpretivist paradigm, recognising that reality is subjective and socially constructed. Interpretive frameworks view knowledge as constructed through participants' views and researchers' interpretations (Creswell, 2013) and that multiple socially constructed realities exist (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In the context of this

study, which explores the lived experiences of women solicitors navigating the pathways to partnership and beyond, an interpretivist lens enables a deeper engagement with how participants make sense of their professional journeys within a gendered organisational culture. This approach values the meanings that participants assign to events, relationships, and institutional practices, particularly in relation to phenomena such as the glass ceiling and glass cliff. The researcher, as a co-constructor of meaning, interprets these narratives reflexively, acknowledging her positionality in shaping the analytical process. This orientation aligns with the study's commitment to understanding complex, socially embedded experiences in a way that honours the subjectivity of women's perspectives within the legal profession.

Alongside an interpretivist orientation, the researcher also adopts a pragmatic approach situated on the positivism-interpretivism continuum (Collis & Hussey, 2014:54), selecting methods and tools based on their usefulness in addressing the research problem, rather than adhering strictly to a single philosophical tradition (Kelemen & Rumens, 2012; Morgan, 2014). Grounded in the philosophical tradition of pragmatism, conceived by Peirce (1934), James (1907), and Dewey (1938), the pragmatic approach emphasises practical engagement with the real world to explore the practical implications of held beliefs (Capps & Capps, 2004). It prioritises practical outcomes, contextual relevance, and methodological flexibility in addressing complex real-world problems (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). It acknowledges the existence of multiple realities and supports the exploration of diverse perspectives (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012), making it particularly well-suited to research grounded in participants' lived experiences. Accordingly, it enables a flexible and context-sensitive inquiry into how women solicitors navigate their pathways to partnership and their experiences within the role, particularly within the context of the glass ceiling and glass cliff phenomena. Anchored in the practical issue of women's underrepresentation at senior levels, the study aims to generate insights that are both theoretically informed and practically relevant to law firms, regulators, policymakers, and aspiring women solicitors. By prioritising methods that best serve the research aim, the pragmatic approach bridges theory and practice (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Feilzer, 2010), cultivating actionable knowledge and enhancing the transferability of findings (Morgan, 2007; Kelly, 2019). This research design, therefore, integrates interpretivist and pragmatic principles to support a flexible, context-sensitive exploration of gendered experiences in the legal profession.

The axiological assumptions relate to the role of values and ethics in the research process. These were value-driven, grounded in the researcher's subjective and objective viewpoints

(Saunders et al., 2012), which significantly influence the interpretation of results (Saunders et al., 2009). The researcher believed that gaining insight into women lawyers' discernments could enhance understanding of their experiences and contribute to identifying ways to achieve a more level playing field for both genders in the legal profession. In this context, the researcher acknowledges that her personal values, beliefs, and ethical considerations have shaped the research process, from formulating research questions to interpreting the findings. In recognition of the influence of values and to keep reflexivity and transparency central to this research, the researcher critically reflected on her biases and perspectives throughout the research process and outlined these in detail in Chapter 1 (section 1.6).

Furthermore, the researcher adopted an inductive approach, developing knowledge from observations of the shared narratives of participants' experiences and proposing theories grounded in these observations (Goddard & Melville, 2011). Given the exploratory nature of this research, no hypotheses were formulated; instead, the study commenced with clearly defined aim, objectives, and research questions. Data collection aimed to understand the barriers women solicitors face in the context of the glass ceiling and glass cliff phenomena, aiming to generate new knowledge or build on existing knowledge. This research involved "the search for patterns from observation and the development of explanations" (Bernard, 2011:7). While an inductive approach did not discount the use of theory during the formulation of the research aim and questions (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012), it prioritised identifying patterns and consistencies in participants' experiences to draw meaningful conclusions.

Additionally, the qualitative paradigm was chosen as the selected philosophy does not necessitate multiple approaches but instead seeks a methodology that enables credible and relevant data collection (Kelemen & Rumens, 2008). As the context is considered significant in understanding phenomena within their social, cultural, and historical contexts, the choice of a qualitative method allowed the researcher to explore rich and nuanced aspects of the participants' lived experiences and interactions (Saunders et al., 2019). Unlike the positivist concept of a single objective reality, qualitative methods support the notion that "subjective inquiry is the only kind possible" (Erlandson et al., 1993:xi; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007), aligning with the interpretive paradigm adopted. Qualitative research produces findings not derived from statistical procedures but from real-world settings where phenomena unfold naturally (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:17; Patton, 2001:39). As this research is exploratory in nature and given that quantitative methods are typically associated with deductive reasoning (Ghauri & Grøhaug, 2005), a qualitative approach was considered more appropriate for

exploring the lived experiences of women solicitors. This approach emphasises words, images, and objects in data collection and analysis (Clark et al., 2021:572), and aligns with the focus on context, open-mindedness, and inclusivity in human resource management research (Cooke, 2017). Sabharwal (2013) and Esposito (2021) advocate for exploring women's experiences, particularly in relation to the glass ceiling and glass cliff. This study examines these dynamics within the legal profession, emphasising the importance of historical and contextual factors in shaping women's lived realities and informing meaningful change.

4.5 Research Design

Research design refers to the overarching strategy used to address research inquiries (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012). This exploratory study selected methods informed by interpretive and pragmatic principles, ensuring alignment between the research aim, context, timeframe, and data collection methods.

Research sample selection and recruitment methods

Given that qualitative research prioritises understanding participants' perspectives rather than formulating generalised hypotheses (Mason, 2010), it focuses on gaining deeper insights into their experiences. The selection criteria for participants were carefully aligned with the research aim, objectives, and questions, considering theoretical frameworks, resources, and methods for data collection and analysis. This approach ensured that participant selection was intentional and justified, enhancing the relevance and credibility of the findings. The sampling strategy aimed to capture aspects of the social context of the target population, providing rich insights into their experiences as they navigated hierarchical structures and relationships.

The research focused on women solicitors holding partnership status in law firms in England and Wales. A purposive sampling strategy, a non-probability technique, was chosen to intentionally select cases that could best address the research questions and deepen understanding of the studied phenomena (Creswell, 2009). In qualitative research, Morse (1998:73) outlines criteria for a "good informant," emphasising participants' requisite knowledge, experience, ability to reflect and articulate, availability, and willingness to engage in the study. Accordingly, the sample comprised women lawyers practising across various legal fields and geographic locations sourced from the researcher's LinkedIn network. While intersectionality was not the primary focus, it was not a criterion for inclusion or exclusion. Contacts from the Association of Women Solicitors and The Law

Society were considered but ultimately not required due to a favourable initial response. Despite being a busy period for lawyers from November 2022 to January 2023, including pre-and post-Christmas and New Year, numerous eligible participants expressed interest through initial outreach via LinkedIn. A total of 154 invitations were sent, with an initial communication (Appendix C). Those approached who were interested received the 'Participant Information Sheet' (Appendix D) and Consent Form (Appendix E) via email. The latter were signed and returned to the researcher via email. MS Teams interviews were scheduled and recorded with the participant's consent, in accordance with the COVID-19 safety measures outlined in the ethics approval. Rescheduling was required for some participants due to unforeseen circumstances, such as court hearings, emergency clients, and family commitments, all of which were managed flexibly by the researcher by setting up alternate interview times and dates.

In qualitative research, sample size is typically not predetermined but is instead contingent on the depth needed to understand the phenomena. Twenty to thirty participants were deemed optimal for capturing diverse perspectives; data saturation, where new insights cease to emerge, signalled sample sufficiency (Sargeant, 2012). Initially, 65 individuals expressed interest, and 31 interviews were successfully conducted via MS Teams. One participant who did not practice in England and Wales was excluded. The final sample consisted of 31 women solicitor partners in various law practice areas, including commercial, employment, family, property, regulatory law, wills and probates, and litigation. The demographics of the participants are presented in Table 4.1. The geographical distribution entailed eight participants from London, four from the Southeast, ten from the Northwest, and seven from the Northeast, with two participants practising in the Midlands. Firm sizes ranged from small to national, international and magic circle firms.

Participants	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Children	Relationship status	Job Title
Amber	Female	47	White	3	Married	Founder
Nadia	Female	54	MEG*	3	Married	Founder
Rachel	Female	42	White	0	Partner	Founder
Sheryll	Female	36	White	2	Married	Founder
Joanna	Female	57	White	4	Partner	FSE Partner**
Phoebe	Female	66	White	1	Married	Founder
Iqra	Female	47	MEG*	2	Married	Equity Partner
Maryam	Female	33	MEG*	0	Married	Founder
Linda	Female	50-55	White	0	Married	Equity Partner
Camila	Female	52	White	2	Married	Partner
Leila	Female	53	MEG*	1	Married	Founder
Sonia	Female	51	White	3	Married	FSE Partner**
Priya	Female	45-50	MEG*	2	Married	Sal. Partner***
Mia	Female	45-50	MEG*	2	Married	Founder
Melanie	Female	37	White	2	Married	Equity Partner
Samantha	Female	37	White	2	Married	FSE Partner**
Julie	Female	48	White	2	Married	Founder
Aurora	Female	53	White	3	Married	Founder
Anne	Female	55	White	1	Single	Equity Partner
Scarlett	Female	47	White	2	Married	Sal. Partner***
Susanne	Female	47	White	2	Partner	Equity Partner
Abigail	Female	42	White	0	Married	FSE Partner**
Eleanor	Female	53	White	2	Married	Founder
Inaya	Female	40	MEG*	2	Married	Founder
Olivia	Female	34	White	2	Married	Sal. Partner***
Emily	Female	48	White	3	Married	Equity Partner
Christine	Female	62	White	2	Single	Sal. Partner***
Lisa	Female	37	White	2	Married	Equity Partner
Natalie	Female	64	White	5	Married	Equity Partner
Michelle	Female	51	White	5	Single	Equity Partner
Sandra	Female	39	MEG*	2	Married	Sal. Partner***

Table 4.1 Demographics of the participants *MEG Minority Ethnic Group **Fixed Share Equity Partner ***Salaried Partner

The ethnicity breakdown (Table 4.2) of the sample included participants from a range of ethnic backgrounds: 15 identified as White British, 2 as White Irish, 6 as White Other, 1 as British Indian, 6 as British Pakistani, and 1 as British African. While the sample was predominantly White, the inclusion of participants from South Asian and Black backgrounds provided valuable insights into how ethnicity intersects with gender in shaping career trajectories within the legal profession.

Ethnicity	Number of Participants
White / British	15
White / Irish	2
White /Other	6
British Indian	1
British Pakistani	6
British African	1
Total	31

Table 4.2 Distribution of participants by ethnicity

The sample comprised 31 women solicitors with an age range of 33 to 66 years, reflecting a breadth of career stages and experiences. This diversity enabled insight into both early and later career trajectories, including long-term perspectives on progression to partnership. Participants reported a range of relationship statuses. For the purposes of this study, the category 'single' includes those who were widowed or divorced at the time of the interview. Of the 31 participants, 27 had children, providing insights into how motherhood intersects with legal career progression. The four participants without children also provided valuable perspectives, highlighting the dynamic between gendered barriers, parental status and career progression. Their titles varied, as noted in the demographic details provided in Table 4.1, with 11 participants having established their own firms.

Data collection strategy and methods

The study involving women solicitors in law firms favoured interviews over focus groups due to concerns regarding the competitive and close-knit nature of the legal industry, potentially impacting participants' openness. Trow's argument that "the problem under investigation properly dictates the methods of investigation" informed this decision (1957:33). Qualitative interviews were chosen due to their ability to delve deeply into individual experiences while still elucidating common themes. Data collection was conducted exclusively online using MS Teams software to accommodate pandemic-related constraints and geographical dispersion. Despite limitations, 31 in-depth interviews were completed over three months, from November 2022 to January 2023.

Sommerlad and Sanderson (2019:291) highlight the subjective nature of "gender" and "profession" as social constructs with wide-ranging meanings, impacting women's experiences in the labour market. This subjective attribution thus makes the fate of women in the labour market significantly dependent on perceptions. Women base their career decisions on their understanding of the varied manifestations of the profession within the backdrop of events in their lives. Since the research wished to explore the participants' understanding of their interactions with the workplace processes and structures, interviews were considered the most appropriate method. The interviews lasted an average of approximately one hour and fifteen minutes each, ranging between forty-three minutes to over two hours. All interviews were recorded with participants' verbal consent and signed consent forms. The researcher minimised note-taking during interviews to foster open sharing. Although face-to-face interviews were preferred for observing non-verbal cues, online interviews facilitated rapport-building, did not negatively impact the body language observation and allowed flexibility in participant recruitment regardless of their

geographical positioning. The researcher was able to generate a rapport due to her experience and background in the legal profession and interviewing, which yielded opportunities to ask probing questions. Video recording in MS Teams allowed for later review of expressions and body language and avoided the potential drawbacks of face-to-face interviews, such as travel costs and interviewer influence. After the interview, the researcher asked if they would like to add anything or ask any questions and thanked the participants for their time and open sharing of their journeys. Post-interview, the researcher recorded significant observations and emotions, including how the interview unfolded and how she herself felt during the interview.

A laptop was used to record the MS Teams video interviews, and a smartphone was used as a backup recording device. The researcher utilised the transcription function in MS Teams to transcribe the recordings. These transcriptions were then systematically verified for accuracy by replaying the interviews several times through audio and video options and correcting any errors to prepare them for formal analysis.

Research instruments

This study employed qualitative, semi-structured interviews due to their flexibility and ability to capture participants' thoughts and feelings. Combining structured and unstructured elements, semi-structured interviews were guided by a list of questions detailed in the "Semi-structured Interview Schedule" (Appendix F). Open-ended questions elicited comprehensive responses, aligning with the research's exploratory nature. The researcher's previous experience also influenced the choice of this method. While the order of questions was generally followed, some were omitted if already sufficiently addressed. To ensure rigour, the researcher adhered to the five-step framework by Kallio et al. (2016) in developing the interview schedule, which included:

i) Identifying the prerequisites for using semi-structured interviews

The researcher evaluated the suitability of semi-structured interviews as a robust and flexible data collection method relevant to the research questions. This technique was deemed appropriate for exploring women's perceptions and opinions (Barriball & While, 1994), and complex, emotionally sensitive issues (Barriball & While, 1994; Åstedt-Kurki & Heikkinen, 1994). It enabled a focused exploration of topics significant to participants, facilitating the expression of diverse perspectives (Cridland et al., 2015).

ii) Retrieving and using previous knowledge

The researcher acquired a broad understanding of the topic through critically reviewing the pertinent literature (Barriball & While, 1994; Krauss et al., 2009). This comprehensive understanding of the research topic (Rabionet 2011) and pre-interview preparation (Turner 2010) helped create a prearranged framework for the interview (Barriball & While 1994; Turner 2010), allowing a clear focus on the aim of the study (Krauss et al. 2009); thereby assisting the researcher in creating a conceptual foundation for the interviews (Åstedt-Kurki & Heikkinen 1994).

iii) Formulating the preliminary semi-structured interview guide

The researcher created a semi-structured interview guide comprising questions (Whiting, 2008; Krauss et al., 2009) to direct the conversation towards the research topic (Krauss et al., 2009; Cridland et al., 2015). The guide remained flexible (Dearnley, 2005; Turner, 2010), allowing the conversation to flow smoothly (Åstedt-Kurki & Heikkinen, 1994; Cridland et al., 2015). Questions were designed to elicit rich data (Turner, 2010) by being participant-oriented (Barriball & While, 1994), non-leading, open-ended (Turner, 2010; Chenail, 2011), and clearly worded (Turner, 2010). The guide aimed to provoke spontaneous, in-depth (Baumbusch, 2010), unique (Krauss et al., 2009), and vivid responses (Dearnley, 2005), reflecting participants' personal feelings (Whiting, 2008) and stories (Rabionet, 2011). The researcher aimed to collect data capable of generating emerging conceptions (Dearnley, 2005; Krauss et al., 2009). Questions included what, who, where, when, and how, along with why questions (Turner, 2010), to elicit detailed narratives (Chenail, 2011).

In addition to the two levels of questions, namely main themes and follow-up questions (Kallio et al., 2016), the researcher posed some initial demographics questions to put the participants at ease before delving into the main questions, progressively (Krauss et al., 2009), breaking the ice and creating a comfortable environment (Cridland et al., 2015). The question gradually moved to more in-depth questions, getting them to reflect on their decision-making and emotions (Whiting, 2008, Baumbusch, 2010, Cridland et al., 2015), and the interview finally ended with some lighter notes (Baumbusch, 2010). Follow-up questions often were either spontaneous or in reaction to the responses given by the participants (Whiting, 2008; Turner, 2010; Chenail, 2011). Since the researcher carried out all 31 interviews, there was no need for predesigned follow-up questions to maintain consistency (Krauss et al., 2009). The researcher used follow-up questions to elaborate on some of the points raised (Whiting, 2008) and requested to illustrate the issue through examples (Dearnley, 2005) to gain deeper insights. The researcher employed verbal and

nonverbal probing techniques, including verbally agreeing or showing interest in participants' ideas (Whiting, 2008; Turner, 2010) and building rapport, creating a comfortable environment through nodding, smiling, and using appropriate expressions. Intentional silence was used as a non-verbal probe to allow participants to think aloud and elaborate further (Whiting, 2008).

iv) Pilot testing of the guide

The researcher tested the semi-structured interview schedule to ensure its relevance and to make necessary amendments (Chenail, 2011), thereby improving both data quality and research integrity. Initially undecided about including a pre-interview demographic questionnaire, the researcher chose to use it as an icebreaker after the pilot test. Testing also helped to pre-assess compliance with research ethics and the researcher's data collection capability (Chenail, 2011). Among the three methods for testing: internal testing, expert assessment, and field testing (Kallio et al., 2016), internal testing was irrelevant because it was done by the sole researcher. Expert assessment by the supervisory team and field-testing with friends and family, including lawyers, provided valuable insights (Krauss et al., 2009; Turner, 2010; Chenail, 2011). This simulation illustrated the interview's effectiveness in stimulating diverse perceptions and experiences (Barriball & While, 1994; Chenail, 2011). Testing the question order ensured a smooth flow and helped to determine session duration and other design shortcomings (Turner, 2010; Cridland et al., 2015).

v) Presenting the complete semi-structured interview guide

Following these steps, the researcher developed a logical, semi-structured interview guide to effectively address the study's aims, enhancing the instrument's trustworthiness as a qualitative research method (Barriball & While, 1994). As the sole research instrument, the researcher conducted 31 interviews, demonstrating the qualities of a successful interviewer (Kvale, 1996). With a background as a solicitor, the researcher avoided jargon and ensured questions were clear and straightforward.

The interview approach included allowing participants to finish speaking, using reflective pauses, handling information empathetically, and gently redirecting off-topic conversations. Clarifications were sought for inconsistencies, and examples were requested to elaborate on points, avoiding imposed meanings. The researcher balanced the conversation, neither dominating nor being too passive, and emphasised confidentiality in the information sheet and consent form. Participants could provide their email addresses to receive key findings (Appendix E). Participants were thanked for their time. Despite occasional interruptions, the

researcher maintained the interview flow and managed expectations relating to participants' experiences as a non-practising solicitor.

Data management

Given the identifiable data collected, it was stored in Nottingham Trent University's (NTU) data store, adhering to current policy. Automatic backups negated the need for the "3-2-1" backup principle. Initial connection issues due to software compatibility were promptly resolved. Data was secured in password-protected files and verified for accuracy once transferred. It was accessible only via Pulse Secure, a secure link on the researcher's laptop, coordinated in consultation with NTU's Research Data Management Officer. Access to university data storage was gained through the "Active Research Data Storage Request Form, funded by the university due to the sensitive nature of the data. The data, estimated at 20-50 GB, was stored securely on NTU servers to ensure confidentiality. Standard considerations like informed consent were addressed with the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix D) and Consent Form (Appendix E), emphasising voluntary participation and the option not to answer all questions.

MS Teams' transcription function was used during online interviews, enhancing data security due to NTU's service-level agreements. Transcription by the researcher eliminated the need for non-disclosure agreements. Alternatives like Otter AI were considered but lacked a license agreement with NTU. MS Word's dictation was unreliable in pilot tests due to inactivity shutdowns. NTU's data protection impact assessment on Microsoft functions made MS Teams and its transcription service an ethical and prudent choice. A secondary device was used for backup; once transcription from MS Teams was verified, the secondary version was deleted, and the MS Teams version was saved on secure servers. Interview transcriptions and recordings were converted to MP4 and uploaded, with access restricted to the researcher. Pseudonymised transcripts were stored separately, using unique participant codes to enhance anonymity. Participants were informed their data would remain confidential, with only anonymised information used in publications, including the thesis. Participants were initially referred to as Participants 1-31, but later pseudonymised names were used to maintain a more personal connection in the study.

Special category data required additional protection under GDPR (ICO, 2022). Lawful processing was based on explicit and informed participant consent (Articles 6 and 9, UK GDPR). Consent forms were signed and then securely stored. Confidentiality and data security were treated as paramount. "Jigsaw identification" risks were mitigated by redacting

identifiable information and maintaining anonymity. The principle of data minimisation was followed, and only necessary information was collected to achieve research objectives. Pseudonymisation ensured participant anonymity, with identifiers stored separately to facilitate potential data withdrawal. Data management adhered to NTU's open research principles, promoting data accessibility for peer review and future collaboration.

In conclusion, personal, sensitive, and confidential data were necessary for the research. The Data Management Plan documented steps for pseudonymisation, anonymisation, data withdrawal, backup, file naming, and version control, ensuring a robust approach to data management and compliance.

Data analysis

Once generated, the researcher considered various qualitative data analysis methods. Thematic Analysis (TA), advocated by Braun and Clarke (2020), was chosen due to its flexibility and ability to capture themes across the entire data corpus from the 31 interviews. Informed by the need to analyse talk and text rather than numerical data, this choice ruled out methods like Content Analysis and Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Methods like Narrative Analysis (Reissman, 2008) and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009) were deemed unsuitable due to their time-consuming nature and focus on individual-level experiences, respectively.

TA allowed for a thorough exploration of the challenges faced by participants and their experiences before and after their appointment as partners in legal firms. Reflexive TA was selected for its theoretical and methodological transparency, enabling the researcher to actively develop themes while engaging in reflexive practice (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2022). The researcher, a non-practising solicitor, leveraged her familiarity with the context, while acknowledging her assumptions and positionality throughout the research process. The analysis focused on shared meanings and differences in participants' experiences, with the researcher adopting an inductive approach while incorporating theoretical insights to ensure comprehensive data coverage. This approach balanced semantic and latent levels of meaning, exploring both explicit and implicit aspects of participants' experiences. In line with Big Q qualitative research (Kidder & Fine, 1987; Braun & Clarke, 2013), this reflexive thematic analysis followed a non-positivist framework (Braun & Clarke, 2022), using qualitative data generation and analysis techniques that reflect the values of qualitative research. These values include appreciating the researcher's subjectivity as a resource rather

than as a bias that must be controlled. Big Q researchers characteristically theorise truths as mind-dependent rather than mind-independent (Tebes, 2005).

Further, there are variations within reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2022:10) that the researcher reflexively pondered regarding her stance on the four indicators (Table 4.3). The researcher's orientation to data was somewhere along the continuum, as the literature review informed the process; however, coding was initially driven by the data, before revisiting the theoretical frameworks as a second-level layer of analysis to ensure all data dimensions were captured to address the research questions. Similarly, the researcher did not solely focus on semantic meaning, where interpretation occurs at a surface level, but also engaged with latent meaning, interpreting deeper, underlying dimensions of participants' experiences. Furthermore, the qualitative framework adopted was both experiential and critical. The researcher explored participants' perspectives within the context of the glass ceiling and glass cliff phenomena. Finally, the researcher positioned herself on the continuum between realist essentialism and relativist constructivism (Braun & Clarke, 2022:10). Since the participants' narratives were to be analysed and meaningfully represented, the researcher actively probed and unpacked these situated realities.

The Variations of Reflexive TA		
Orientation to Data	More inductive: where the analysis is located Within, and coding and theme development are driven by the data content	More Deductive: where the analysis shaped by existing theoretical constructs, which provide the lens through which to read and code the data and develop themes.
Focus of meaning	Semantic: where the analysis explores meaning at the more surface, explicit, or manifest level.	Latent: where the analysis explores meaning at the more underlying or implicit level
Qualitative Framework	Experiential: where the analysis aims to capture and explore people's own perspectives and understandings	Critical: where the analysis focuses on interrogating and unpacking meaning around the topic or issue.
Theoretical Frameworks	Realist essentialist where analysis aims to capture truth and reality, as expressed within the dataset.	Relativist constructionist: where analysis aims to interrogate and unpack the realities that are expressed within the dataset.

Table 4.3 The Variations of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2022:10)

Reflexive TA's flexibility enabled the researcher to navigate the analysis of their truth and realities while also interrogating and unpacking them, capturing the nuanced meanings shared by participants without being confined to either end of the spectrum (Braun & Clarke, 2022:9). The data analysis was conducted "at the juncture of the dataset, the research context, and the researcher's skill and locatedness" (Braun & Clarke, 2022:11). Reflexive TA's flexible approach was akin to a compass and map guiding the researcher (Braun, Clarke &

Hayfield, 2019). This flexible approach served as the scaffolding for the research project, evolving in response to the data, context, and the researcher's reflexive engagement. The researcher followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages of thematic analysis:

Familiarising

The researcher began verifying transcriptions promptly after each interview, noting her own reflections, participant observations, body language, and background details. Familiarising herself with the data involved meticulous review of MS Teams video recordings and checking autogenerated transcriptions. This process was vital for correcting transcription errors and ensuring textual flow, as the software inserted a new line with each pause. Although sentence timing was excluded to preserve reading coherence, significant long pauses were noted. During the data review, the researcher identified recurring themes, such as experiences of exclusion in male-dominated workplaces and distinctive issues like the normalising of sexual harassment. She listened to audio recordings multiple times, noting nuances in intonation and tone that were more perceptible than the video versions. Immersion in the data enabled the researcher to retain a nuanced understanding of each participant's journey and key points. This deep engagement facilitated the next step of coding, where the researcher reviewed each interview thoroughly prior to commencing formal analysis.

Coding

The researcher conducted a thematic analysis of data gathered from 31 interviews, initially employing manual coding and later transitioning to NVivo software. Drawing from Braun and Clarke's framework, the researcher meticulously analysed the transcripts, immersing herself in participants' narratives and emotions (2022). The iterative coding process involved refining code titles to capture participants' words and accurately amalgamating similar codes. This iterative approach ensured the robustness of the analysis. Quotes were selected to reflect code meanings, and data that did not fit existing codes were saved for reconsideration. This systematic process facilitated the creation of coherent themes, akin to stitching together a patchwork blanket to narrate the story embedded within the data.

Generating initial themes

The researcher proceeded to generate themes, conceptualising this process as categorisation. Themes, defined as larger patterns of meaning, were constructed from the previously identified codes, following Braun and Clarke's framework (2022). These themes served as

a conceptual scaffolding for organising observations and were named based on prevalent topics or emotionally significant moments observed during interviews. The researcher noted instances of emotional significance post-interview, contributing to theme development. Braun and Clarke emphasise that themes in thematic analysis are constructed, not discovered. Themes were generated through the researcher's interpretive engagement with participants' narratives, reflecting a systematic, methodologically robust approach to thematic analysis.

Developing and reviewing the themes

The researcher initially employed descriptive, summaries-based themes, such as challenges and facilitators, but found them insufficient for capturing the interpretative depth required in reflexive thematic analysis. Consequently, the researcher sought to identify socially constructed shared meanings through deep engagement with the data, emphasising participants' subjective interpretations of their experiences. The researcher aimed to systematically and rigorously construct themes that authentically reflect participants' accounts, aligning with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis.

Refining, defining and naming the themes

During this stage, the researcher iteratively revisited the codes, ensuring that the chosen names accurately reflected the subject matter they represented. This recursive process involved tailoring and changing theme names to align with the deeper meanings conveyed by participants' interpretations of their experiences (Table 4.4 Coding Tree). The researcher's interpretation was influenced by her positionality within the research, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Coding Tree	Themes	Codes
Experiences of Women Solicitors in the Legal Profession to Partnership Positions and Beyond	Theme 1: Male-dominated culture and exclusion	Gender ratio Boys club Public perception Typical areas of work Elitism Feeling of exclusion Ethnic minority Prejudice Lack of support / Sink or swim Culture of long hours Billable hours
	Theme 2: Conflict between gender and leadership stereotypes	Poor Treatment Queen Bee effect Playing the game Role of Upbringing Work-Life Balance Sexual Harassment Empathy Competence
	Theme 3: Structural issues	Cost of qualifying Hard to get in Poor rewards / Pay gap Long hours & billing / Presenteeism Lack of transparency pay & promotion. Lack of female role models, mentors, sponsors, Connections and Networking Work-Life Balance Long hours & Billing Lack of Support during and post-maternity Unrealistic metrics
	Theme 4: Circumstances surrounding the appointment	Women's own choice Unrealistic demands Higher Scrutiny Lack of recognition and rewards. Lack of support within the role Lack of autonomy / Titles only
	Theme 5: Participants' responses	Negative Lack of confidence Harsher self-judgment Queen bee effect Stress / Burnout Disenchantment / Reduced commitment Possible Reputational Damage Shorter Tenure Positive Different Style Compassion Inclusivity Doing gender differently Resilience Autonomy Risk-taking Networking Male Allies /Sponsors Women supporting women COVID-19 - Flexible working Refusal to accept the status quo

Table 4.4 Coding Tree – Outline of codes building the main themes

Writing up

The reflexive thematic analysis of the extensive data proved to be a recursive, non-linear process, evolving even during the writing phase as different aspects gained prominence. The researcher consciously navigated the continuum of reflexive thematic analysis variations (Table 4.3) while deliberating on writing style, ultimately opting for a first-person perspective exclusively in the reflexivity sections. The objective of thematic analysis

extended beyond data summarisation to interpreting its main features, with research questions open to evolution throughout coding and theme development. Quality procedures inherent to thematic analysis, such as a two-stage process reviewing themes against the coded data and the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2013), ensured thorough and robust analysis. The analysis was checked for coherence with the researcher's theoretical and philosophical assumptions. In essence, the research process ensured conceptual alignment and methodological integrity (Levitt et al. 2017). The researcher felt a responsibility to represent the voices of the women participants, prioritising their narratives as a matter of ethical and scholarly commitment.

4.6 Credibility and Trustworthiness

Establishing credibility and trustworthiness was essential to this qualitative research, which aimed to understand phenomena within the specific context of the legal profession. As Patton (2001:39) notes, qualitative inquiry takes place in “real world settings [where] the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest.” This study, which explored women solicitors’ experiences of navigating the legal profession and progressing to partnership, adopted a naturalistic approach to interpret participants’ perspectives within their professional and socio-cultural contexts. The goal was to understand how participants construct meaning around their career paths and identities, in contrast to the generalisability and causal determinism pursued in quantitative research (Hoepfl, 1997).

Unlike quantitative paradigms that emphasise external and internal reliability and validity (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982), qualitative research highlights the interconnectedness of credibility, transferability, and trustworthiness. In this study, external validity and replicability were inherently limited due to the uniqueness of each participant’s lived experience and workplace context. However, the researcher’s legal background enabled a socially proximate stance, fostering rapport and depth in engagement. Internal reliability, typically involving multiple observers, was not relevant in this single-researcher design. Instead, credibility depended on the researcher’s ability to interpret data with integrity and insight, aligning with the idea that “the researcher is the instrument” (Patton, 2001:1). Her dual positioning as both insider to the profession and outsider to participants’ specific firms supported reflexive engagement and sensitive interpretation of gendered experiences. Credibility was further strengthened through in-depth participant engagement, triangulation of multiple data sources, including video and audio recordings, interview notes, and a reflective audit trail. Detailed note-taking, rich description, and rigorous transcription

practices ensured data accuracy. Repeated listening and transcript review helped preserve tone, body language, and subtle meanings critical to interpretation.

Rigour was further strengthened by applying the five-step framework from Kallio et al. (2016) to develop the semi-structured interview guide, ensuring alignment between the research aims and data generation. The researcher also clarified her positionality, legal background, and sampling rationale, enhancing transparency. Trustworthiness was reinforced through reflexive transcription and analysis, acknowledging subjectivity as an analytic resource rather than a bias to be suppressed (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Tebes, 2005). The iterative process of listening, coding, and theme development reflects this reflexive stance. Detailed participant narratives and direct quotes enable readers to assess the relevance of themes elsewhere. Confirmability was ensured through transparent documentation of analytic decisions and the separate storage of raw data and coded material. Ultimately, this study's trustworthiness arose from a sustained commitment to methodological integrity, ethical practice, and genuine representation of participants' voices. Through rigorous engagement with data and process, the study maintained both conceptual and methodological consistency (Levitt et al., 2017).

4.7 Ethical Considerations

Any likely adverse consequences of undertaking this research were addressed by the researcher obtaining ethical approval from the NTU Business School Ethics Committee and adhering to the well-defined ethical procedures set by the University's code of guidance regarding ethical research. The researcher ensured participant confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study, as outlined in the Data Management section above. Precautions were taken to protect sensitive information and uphold ethical standards. Participants were informed of the nature and scope of the research and the right to withdraw, and oral consent was sought before the interview recording began. All participants also signed consent forms (Appendix E), having considered the benefits and possible risks from the participant information sheet (Appendix D), to ensure that fully informed consent was obtained. Additionally, all participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to refuse involvement in the study. Interviewees could withdraw from the study up to four weeks after the data collection, although no participants chose to do so. The participants were assigned a participant number and a pseudonym, and all identifiable data were anonymised. Any direct quotes used in subsequent publications will not include any identifiable information or genuine names of the participants or their organisations.

The researcher was mindful of the potential risk that some participants may get emotionally distressed when discussing their life experiences. The researcher would have offered to suspend the online interview, if necessary, though this was not required in any of the interviews. In contrast, some participants found the sessions therapeutic and cathartic, gaining a sense of how much they had progressed. The researcher did not anticipate any other ethical issues or risk of harm, as the selected sample was not particularly vulnerable. Participants were selected based on inclusion criteria and were not offered any form of payment, monetary or otherwise, for their participation. As a non-practising solicitor, the researcher has shared her positionality in the section below. Although this was not explicitly disclosed to participants unless asked, this information was publicly available from the researcher's LinkedIn profile. Braun and Clarke suggest this is a strength rather than a weakness (2022).

4.8 The Researcher's Positionality as a Research Instrument

As previously mentioned, in qualitative research, the researcher is considered the instrument of data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), through whom the data is generated and interpreted. In this context, it is essential for readers to understand the relevant facets of the researcher's self. Accordingly, the researcher has been introduced in Chapter 1, including her assumptions, biases, expectations, and experiences that inform and justify her capacity to undertake this research (Greenbank, 2003). Her specific role in the research is further outlined in the following section.

The researcher's role

The researcher was the sole instrument of data collection, conducting all 31 participant interviews. She introduced herself and outlined the research topic using the Participant Information Sheet. Participants were invited to describe their legal journeys within the framework of the semi-structured interview schedule. The researcher did not disclose her status as a non-practising solicitor unless explicitly asked, nor did she elaborate on the concepts of the glass ceiling or glass cliff to avoid confirmation bias. While she anticipated some accounts of challenges that might reinforce perceptions of the glass ceiling, there were no preconceived expectations regarding participants sharing narratives of the glass cliff phenomenon. The researcher engaged in reflexive consideration of her positionality and identity as an interviewer of women solicitors, including the potential power dynamics within the interview process. Although the term *elite* lacks a fixed definition, it "can mean many things in different contexts" (Plesner, 2011:473). What distinguishes elites from non-elites is the "ability to exert influence" through "social networks, social capital and strategic

position within social structures” (Harvey, 2011:433), which could potentially classify the participants as belonging to the elite category.

Interviews provided a valuable opportunity to engage with women solicitors at the apex of their careers, individuals often deemed hard to reach, offering the potential to uncover novel insights (Natow, 2020). Such interviews help reveal elite motivations, assumptions, and decision-making processes (Ma et al., 2020). While interviewees are typically viewed as vulnerable, this dynamic shifts in elite interviews, where power may favour participants (Lewis, 2021). Power is not static, and imbalances can hinder the researcher’s focus (Boucher, 2017). Methodological challenges such as access, trust, and rapport were addressed through the researcher’s legal background, pre-interview preparation, and familiarity with participants’ LinkedIn profiles and elite interview literature (Mikecz, 2012). Trust was built from the initial contact and maintained throughout the research (Ostrander, 1993). Gaining access and interpreting elite narratives posed challenges (Welch et al., 2002; Thuesen, 2011), but a strong contextual understanding enabled the researcher to ask probing questions and foster meaningful dialogue (Moore & Stokes, 2012). Elite participants are often under-researched due to their ability to shield themselves from scrutiny (Hunter, 1995). The researcher’s familiarity with legal acronyms and jargon (Mikecz, 2012), combined with her professional background, visible via LinkedIn, helped reduce authority imbalances and foster respect by projecting a “positive image” (Harvey, 2011:434).

Positionality was not defined solely by the insider/outsider binary but was experienced as a continuum requiring active management (Mikecz, 2012). During interviews, the researcher embodied multiple roles (Cassell, 2005; Caven, 2012). Of the four identities noted by Caven, agony-aunt, hostage, intruder, and friend, the researcher oscillated between therapist, friend, and intruder. Many participants found the interviews cathartic, openly sharing personal and professional challenges. Some, however, hesitated before disclosing sensitive information, occasionally verifying confidentiality or requesting to review direct quotes. The researcher was mindful of balancing her voice with participants’ agendas (Ezzy, 2010). Given that elites often control their narratives, rapport was fostered by personalising questions, showing genuine interest, and demonstrating engagement with the topic (Laurila, 1997). This encouraged open dialogue. A few participants reflected with uncertainty on their career decisions, questioning whether alternative paths should have been considered. Across the 31 interviews, the researcher felt deeply trusted, while also bearing the responsibility of faithfully representing participants’ voices.

Finally, interviews rely not only on the researcher's technical expertise but also on their epistemological and ontological stance (Cassell, 2005). In this study, the researcher was guided by interpretivist and pragmatic epistemological assumptions, with a subjectivist ontological position. This interactive approach enabled the researcher to access and interpret participants' multiple realities (Denzin, 2001). Reflexive awareness of her accountability, subjectivity, and the complexities of power dynamics was central (Denzin, 2001; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), particularly given her position as a minority ethnic group researcher (Rodriguez & Ridgway, 2023). The researcher recognises that her intellectual and social background, as well as her theoretical orientation, inevitably shape the research. In sum, these methodological decisions underpin the credibility, integrity, and coherence of the research, forming a robust foundation for the subsequent analysis.

Conclusion

This chapter presents the aim, objectives, and research questions, based on a critical review of the relevant literature. This research adopts a design that combines interpretive and pragmatic principles as its philosophical stance, enabling a flexible, context-sensitive exploration of women's gendered experiences in the legal profession. Adopting a reflexive thematic analysis within a qualitative paradigm enabled a rich exploration of women solicitors' lived experiences of navigating the legal profession. The chapter outlined the rationale for the purposive sampling, data collection, and reflexive thematic analysis, alongside strategies to ensure credibility, trustworthiness, and ethical integrity. The researcher's positionality and reflexive engagement were integral to both the data collection and interpretation process. These methodological foundations provide the basis for the presentation and discussion of findings. The following chapter addresses Research Question 1 by exploring the prevalence and persistence of the glass ceiling phenomenon in the legal profession and how it shapes participants' experiences on their journey to partnership positions. This analysis is structured around four key themes that emerged from the data: Theme 1 - the influence of male-dominated cultures and the perception of exclusion; Theme 2 - conflicts between gender and leadership stereotypes; Theme 3 - structural barriers that hinder career progression; and Theme 5 - the participants' responses to these challenges. Theme 4 – the circumstances surrounding the appointment is discussed in Chapter 6.

Chapter 5 – Discussion and Findings: Pathways to Partnership

5.1 Introduction

Building on the methodological foundations established in the previous chapter, this chapter presents the study's findings. It explores key themes from women solicitors' accounts as they navigated pathways to partnership, highlighting structural, cultural, and interpersonal barriers commonly conceptualised through the glass ceiling metaphor (Morrison et al., 1987; Taparia & Lenka, 2022). Four key themes are examined in this chapter: **Theme 1: Male-dominated culture and feelings of exclusion**, **Theme 2: Conflict between gender and leadership stereotypes**, and **Theme 3: Structural barriers**, all of which highlight the interpersonal, cultural, and institutional constraints that hinder women's advancement. Theme 4: Circumstances surrounding appointment to partnership is addressed in the next chapter, where the focus shifts to women's experiences of partnership roles, conceptualised through the glass cliff metaphor (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). **Theme 5: Participants' responses**, reflecting women's experiences, strategies, and acts of resistance, spans across **both Chapters 5 and 6**, providing insight into how participants navigated and negotiated both the glass ceiling and the glass cliff. This chapter situates the findings within the existing literature and addresses Research Question 1, which examines the persistence of the glass ceiling in the legal profession. Despite women making up 62% of entry-level solicitors, they hold only 37% of partnerships (SRA, 2024), prompting a critical examination of the barriers that shape their progression.

5.2 Discussion of the Findings

The presented themes are based on the narratives of 31 women solicitors interviewed through semi-structured interviews, all of whom had held partnership positions. One participant was a director in a firm structured as a company rather than a partnership, and another did not specify her current role, though both had previously held partnership positions. As noted in the methodology (chapter 4), participants were geographically spread, with eight based in London, four in the Southeast, ten in the Northwest, seven in the Northeast, and two in the Midlands. They practised across small, medium, and large-sized firms, including Magic Circle and national and international firms, and ranged in age from 33 to 66 years. The majority of participants identified as White British or White Other, with eight participants belonging to minority ethnic groups (Table 4.2). They varied from newly appointed partners

to those with extensive experience within current or previously held partnership positions. Notably, more than a third of the participants had founded their firms. While their specific experiences varied by firm size, practice area, career stage, and other intersectionalities, they all expressed a shared awareness of the gendered dynamics within the profession. This diversity provided rich insight into their experiences during the pursuit of partnership (Chapter 5) and experiences within partnership roles (Chapter 6), enabling an exploration of both shared and differentiated experiences within the legal profession. Their accounts offer the foundation for the following thematic discussion, encapsulated in the generated themes, and contextualised within the existing literature. Pseudonyms are used for all participants to ensure anonymity.

Theme 1: Male-Dominated Culture and Exclusion “Old Boys’ Club”

Historically, women were not allowed to qualify as solicitors until the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 (Gov.uk, 2019) changed the law to include women in the interpretation of “person” in the Solicitors Act 1843 (Bourne, 2019). Historical evidence indicates that, despite these formal exclusions, women worked as lawyers even without official recognition (Baksi, 2019). Carrie Morrison became the first woman to qualify as a solicitor in England and Wales in 1922, along with three others. These women founded the “1919 Club,” which later evolved into the Association of Women Solicitors (2022), to support and advance women in the legal profession. By the 1980s, women had achieved parity with men in law schools, and since 1990, they have represented 60% of new entrants, now outnumbering men as solicitors (The Law Society, 2019a; SRA, 2024). As of 2023, the solicitors’ profession comprises 62% women, 36% men, and 2% non-disclosed (SRA, 2024).

Despite these statistics, women remain underrepresented in senior roles, comprising 37% of partners (SRA, 2024; Pringle et al., 2017). Although educational attainment and professional ambition have increased (Goldin et al., 2006; Blau & Kahn, 2013), participants reported continued workplace segregation by gender, aligned with Acker’s (1990) theory of gendered organisations. Gender appears to remain embedded in workplace structures, processes, and practices. This stratification persists despite the Equality Act 2010 (Legislation.gov.uk, 2022a), which prohibits unfair treatment based on protected characteristics, including sex, race, disability, age, and religion, suggesting that legal remedies alone may not be sufficient to dismantle entrenched masculine norms (MacKinnon, 1987; Taparia & Lenka, 2022). The participants’ accounts highlight that achieving gender parity and equality in positions of authority remains a critical issue. This continued presence of the glass ceiling (Morrison et

al., 1987; Singh et al., 2023) undermines not only equality but also the documented benefits of gender diversity, such as broader market insight and innovation through varied perspectives (Carter et al., 2003; Triano, 2013; Ellemers, 2014; Hunt et al., 2018). The partnership statistics challenge the time-lapse theory, which posits that progress will naturally follow increased participation (Pringle et al., 2017), suggesting the presence of other barriers that need to be addressed rather than focusing solely on numerical increases (Menkel-Meadow, 1989).

The findings reveal that while women solicitors are increasingly advancing to partnership roles, they frequently encounter significant individual, structural, organisational, and contextual barriers, aligning with the glass ceiling phenomenon (Morrison et al., 1987; Elacqua et al., 2009; Babic & Hansez, 2021; Taparua & Lenka, 2022). Critically examining historical trends reveals how women's confinement to the domestic sphere and the undervaluing of their labour (Tilly & Scott, 1987) continue to shape contemporary gender inequalities in the workplace. The intersection of capitalism and patriarchy, sustaining job segregation by sex, positioning women's labour as undervalued and subordinate to men's (Hartmann, 1979), was palpable in participants' accounts. The economic boom, changing societal norms, and increased demand for labour may have led more women into the workforce (Goldin et al., 2006); yet, despite gender equality initiatives and significant legal reforms, the cumulative impact of patriarchal structures remains distinctly demonstrable in the participants' narratives (Hartmann, 1979).

Although the legal profession is reportedly becoming more diverse (SRA, 2024), many participants described ongoing inequalities influencing their career paths both before and after entering the profession. While motivations for choosing a career in law varied, from it being a “*good solid option*” (Christine), “*I’ve always wanted to be a lawyer*” (Sandra), to “*It sounded good, sounded professional.*” (Lisa), a strong theme was participants' shared feeling of exclusion in the profession, causing some to contemplate leaving the profession altogether. Participants highlighted the emotional and financial toll of qualifying, noting structural barriers to accessing work experience and training contracts, which are often reliant on unpaid labour and reinforce class-based exclusion (Ashley & Empson, 2012). Feelings of exclusion were especially pronounced among those from ethnically diverse or less privileged backgrounds, echoing the findings of Crenshaw (1989, 1991), Sommerlad et al. (2013), and Aulakh et al. (2017). The profession was generally viewed as dominated by men from prestigious universities and privileged backgrounds, reinforcing its stratification not only by gender (Crompton & Sanderson, 1990; Witz, 1992; Macdonald, 1995) but also

by class and educational capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Ashley & Empson, 2012; Sommerlad et al., 2013). The pressure to conform to the dominant professional ideal, embodied by the archetypal lawyer as white, male, and privately educated, emerged as a persistent and psychologically taxing challenge throughout participants' career trajectories (MacKinnon, 1989), reinforcing exclusionary norms and limiting authenticity within the profession.

"White, male, middle-class, nice public-school accent, ... a little pinkie signet ring, ..., probably plays rugby and cricket, golf with the boys."

Amber

Participants' narratives revealed how class and gender intersect to shape exclusion in the legal profession, where status, pedigree, and cultural capital often outweigh competence or client service (Witz, 1992). Internal closure mechanisms and entrenched elitism continue to marginalise women, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds, long after their formal entry into the profession (Witz, 1990; Walby, 1990; Ashley & Empson, 2012; Sommerlad et al., 2013). Melanie's account of being questioned about her parents' occupations and disparaged for attending a non-elite university, "*Oh, well, that's a Polytechnic,*" illustrates symbolic gatekeeping that reinforces class boundaries. Notably, Joanna, an Oxbridge-educated partner at a global firm, also felt alienated from elite male circles (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), indicating that prestige and social capital alone do not eliminate exclusionary norms. These experiences reflect the interlocking structures of class and gender that underpin access to power and legitimacy in law (Hartmann, 1979; Walby, 1986; Hearn, 1987). Participants observed male bias towards their universities, with Oxbridge often cited as the implicit benchmark, reflecting how social capital from prestigious institutions can act as an exclusionary tool.

"I didn't go to college; I went to uni, but then later, I realised they were talking about ...Oxbridge... I was the only non-Oxbridge person in the room...I was so naïve, ... so I had lots of little incidents where it happened to be all men, and I happened to be the, in my mind ...least well-educated."

Melanie

Melanie's experience highlights how such prestige markers carry symbolic value beyond academic merit, perpetuating the profession's cultural elitism and exclusionary networks, preserving not just gendered but also social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Sullivan, 2010). For some, these experiences eroded confidence and intensified exclusion, producing stress and diminished job satisfaction, typical outcomes of

the glass ceiling (Babic & Hansez, 2021; Taparia & Lenka, 2022). Advice from seniors to avoid socialising with administrative staff further exemplifies symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991), reinforcing the elite, gendered habitus that preserves existing hierarchies, marginalising women's inclusivity within the profession.

Drawing on Parkin's (1979) theory of exclusionary closure, participants highlighted how the expected conformity to an idealised, white, male, and privately educated professional benchmark operates as an unspoken gatekeeping tool (Parry & Parry, 1976; Freidson, 1983; Dingwall et al., 1988). One participant's recollection of being ignored by a senior male partner for years after wearing a trouser suit underscores the everyday reproduction of symbolic violence, describing the subtle, often invisible imposition of dominant norms that render women's difference as deviance, legitimising exclusion without overt coercion (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991; Ashley & Empson, 2012; Sommerlad et al., 2013).

"We were two trainees, and they offered him a full-time role following the completion of our training contracts. They offered me 12 months. He turned them down. I spent the first few months of my world clearing up after him."

Amber

Participants' accounts, including Amber's, challenged the notion of meritocracy as gender-neutral, revealing how legal practice continues to privilege masculine norms of competence, authority, and leadership (Acker, 1990; Keelan, 2009). Women described being assessed against male-defined standards of success (Acker, 1990), often being compelled to suppress their individuality and adopt traits aligned with dominant norms to advance (Pateman, 1988; Crompton & Le Feuvre, 1996). Their credibility was frequently questioned due to gendered assumptions, reinforcing unequal expectations (Williams, 2008). From the outset of their careers, many felt their skills and qualifications were devalued in favour of the cultural and symbolic capital embodied by male leaders (Bourdieu, 1986), reflecting the persistent "think manager, think male" stereotype (Schein, 1973, 1979; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig et al., 2011). This dynamic, interpreted through Bourdieu's notion of habitus (1977), exposes how ingrained norms sustain the association between leadership and masculinity. While Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and symbolic violence did not explicitly focus on gender, feminist scholars such as Skeggs (1997) and McNay (1999) have extended his framework to explain the structural disadvantage faced by women in professional fields. The study utilises these concepts to help reveal how implicit norms and power structures perpetuate the barriers that restrict women's advancement in the legal profession.

Post-qualification, participants consistently described male-dominated senior leadership structures and a pervasive gendered culture across firms of all sizes, where gender ratios were, almost always, skewed in favour of men occupying decision-making roles, reinforcing law firms as gendered organisations both structurally and culturally (Acker, 1990, 1992, 2006; Walby, 1990a; Williams et al., 2012). Despite formal inclusion since 1922, patriarchal logics continue to underpin what counts as cultural capital within the profession (Sommerlad et al., 2013).

“There was a bit of a boy’s club, ... they would go ... to the races... take the afternoon off, and it was encouraged, whereas the women didn’t feel.... the invite was there.”

Rachel

Participants’ references to a “boy’s club” revealed their sense of exclusion from gendered informal cultures embedded in professional life (Kanter, 1977; Sommerlad, 2002; Babic & Hansez, 2021), often revolving around masculine bonding activities, such as sports, pub outings, or evening events, which served as informal avenues for influence and visibility. Women felt excluded from key networks where business development (BD) opportunities, and access to decision-makers were concentrated, undermining their social capital and limiting access to mentorship, sponsorship, and senior allies (Bourdieu, 1986), creating a cyclical effect, where women’s underrepresentation at senior levels inhibited their access to the very relationships and knowledge channels that would support their advancement (Larson, 1977:233). The resulting lack of differentiation at the top reinforced structural hierarchies and maintained the glass ceiling (Rolfe & Anderson, 2003; Taparia & Lenka, 2022). Despite the Law Society’s equality initiatives (Holden, 2020), participants’ experiences reflected the persistent influence of a male-dominated culture. Frequent allusions to the “old boys’ club” (Oakley, 2000; Taparia & Lenka, 2022) align with research showing that proximity to senior decision-makers, often fostered through these informal, male-oriented settings, correlates with higher promotion rates (Cross, 2010; Navarro-Astor et al., 2017; Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2019). Several participants perceived these exclusionary practices as deliberate internal closure mechanisms designed to safeguard male privilege (Witz, 1992; Brockman, 2001), a view made explicit by Rachel, a founding participant.

Participants’ accounts further illustrated how progression was often shaped by opaque organisational norms rather than transparent meritocratic principles, echoing broader research on gendered exclusion in law (Harrington, 1993; Kay & Hagan, 1995; Brockman,

2001). Advancement to senior roles was frequently governed by informal, male-coded expectations, which Bolton and Muzio (2007) term internal closure mechanisms. These hidden barriers were intensified for those facing intersecting disadvantages related to ethnicity and class (Crenshaw, 1989), as illustrated by one participant from a minority ethnic background.

“The contrast of disadvantage because I was female, I was Asian, I was a single mum, and I didn’t want to give anybody the excuse that ... she’s a woman or because she’s from a different background. So, I had to work three times as hard, and I did.”

Leila

Many participants reported heightened stress and imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978), fuelled by the continual pressure to prove their competence and legitimacy in a culture where they felt they never fully belonged. These feelings, rooted in anxiety, embarrassment, and self-doubt, were intensified by the expectation to embody the image of the typical lawyer (Langford & Clance, 1993). Although such experiences are often regarded as personal psychological issues, these findings emphasise their underlying roots in organisational norms and societal expectations (Scott, 2000; Hakim, 2000).

“I believe that middle-class white males started this profession... interested in creating more in their image. I think that females have the choice either to participate in Stockholm syndrome or ... they’ll find it very, very challenging. So, when the patriarchy has held the top position for so long... anything that looks like striving for equality feels like oppression to those in the privileged position. So, it’s challenging for them to even perceive that it might be perpetuating inequality if a woman isn’t treated in a manner equal to them.”

Amber

This narrative reveals how women navigate the profession’s entrenched gendered and classed power structures, indicating that legitimacy in law is often measured against white, middle-class male norms, shaping what is rewarded and who is included in the dominant in-group’s habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ashley & Empson, 2012). A recurring tension in participants’ accounts was whether to assimilate into dominant professional norms or to resist them. Socially constructed gender differences continue to shape biased expectations and workplace norms (Allen & Winton, 2023), while both

assimilation and the essentialising of difference risk reinforcing the very inequalities they seek to address (Crompton & Le Feuvre, 1996; Williams, 2018). Adapting to patriarchal norms through assertiveness, long hours, and competitiveness perpetuates exclusionary structures and comes at a personal cost (Acker, 1990), whereas alternative approaches, such as collaboration and inclusivity, are often dismissed as lacking ambition or professionalism. This persistent dilemma was a common thread in many participants' narratives, creating a no-win situation.

Amber's narrative, echoed by many participants, interpreted through Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and symbolic violence, illustrates how gendered exclusion becomes internalised, masking systemic inequalities as personal shortcomings (Bourdieu, 1977, 1992). Amber's critical perspective on the entrenched gender dynamics favouring men in the profession, invoking Stockholm syndrome¹ (Kacker & Juneja, 2022:229), highlights the complex dynamic wherein women may internalise and conform to the norms and structures of a patriarchal system, even if this works against their best interests. Her experience reveals how dominant norms coerce compliance, penalising non-conformity, not through explicit punishment, but via social cues and silent marginalisation. Wearing a trouser suit, interpreted as a challenge to established gender norms, had rendered her virtually invisible to a senior male partner throughout her time at the firm, signalling how non-conformity is penalised without overt sanction. Participants shared numerous similar everyday micro-practices that uphold the profession's masculine habitus, shaping what is recognised as professional and legitimate. Amber's reflections evoke a form of institutionalised Stockholm syndrome, where survival within patriarchal structures necessitates complicity, even when it undermines self-worth or ambition. Her account exemplifies how performative adherence to dominant expectations is internalised by women to remain viable in the profession, a subtle form of exclusion that upholds structural inequality under the guise of professional standards.

Within this symbolic order, male dominance remains invisible yet firmly entrenched. Rather than addressing systemic bias, organisational responses tended to individualise women's struggles, casting them as matters of personal resilience or fit (Williams, 2018). This strategic deflection, frequently justified as "risk management," serves to preserve institutional image while reinforcing existing hierarchies (Ashley & Empson, 2012). As supported by wider research (Duff & Webley, 2004; Bolton & Muzio, 2007, 2008; Aulakh

¹ Stockholm syndrome is a condition in which hostages develop a psychological bond with their captors during captivity. It is a kind of a psychological response wherein a captive begins to identify closely with his or her captors as well as with their agenda and demands.

et al., 2017; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019), such practices continue to consolidate white male dominance and restrict meaningful access to leadership for women and minority groups.

Several participants characterised so-called “traditional” firms as spaces where entrenched patriarchal legacies remained firmly intact, particularly in leadership structures dominated by older male partners, which was the case in most firms. The term “traditional” was often used to describe environments steeped in informal hierarchies and exclusionary social practices, echoes of an “old boys’ club” culture subtly marginalising women. These dynamics were not always overtly hostile but often manifested as differential treatment, condescension, or being overlooked in favour of male peers (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). These mechanisms show how traditional male-dominated values are passed down through generations in the profession (Walby, 1990; Babic & Hansez, 2021), where male dominance is maintained not only through structural inertia but through implicit assumptions about competence, leadership, and belonging. While the glass ceiling has traditionally referred to blocked promotion pathways, participants’ accounts extended this metaphor to emphasise a cultural ceiling, where informal expectations and social codes act as powerful gatekeepers owed to the white male middle-class evolution of the profession (Taparia & Lenka, 2022), limiting women’s ability to succeed on their own terms.

"He was in his 70s, and his views were, women stay at home, and men know what they're doing, and he didn't have a lot of respect for women..., just very sexist."

Rachel

Rachel’s account of a senior colleague’s opinion, rooted in overtly sexist views, illustrates how traditional gender ideologies still permeate professional assumptions of competence. Despite the formal neutrality of legal professionalism, its foundations remain shaped by historically masculine norms (Hanlon, 1999), where authority is implicitly male-coded. Social role and role congruity theories (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Karau, 2002) help explain why women who display leadership traits are often judged more harshly, as ambition and assertiveness clash with gendered expectations of femininity (Weyer, 2007; Fazal et al., 2019). These judgements are not merely personal biases but are institutionally reinforced through mechanisms of occupational closure (Parkin, 1979), where definitions of professionalism operate as gatekeeping tools. Rather than levelling the playing field, the

rhetoric of professionalism is often employed to mask gendered exclusion under the guise of meritocracy (Freidson, 1983; Walby, 1990; Watson, 2002).

Most participants' descriptions of their workplace experiences embodied the definition of patriarchy, especially in their earlier post-qualification years, as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women" (Walby, 1990:20), highlighting its role in shaping the profession. Many cited that this attitude evolved from private to public forms (Hearn, 1987; Walby, 1990a), as senior males had stay-at-home wives and did not understand the realities of working women. Correspondingly, males occupied the senior equity or management board positions with a tokenistic female presence (Kanter, 1977; Marshall, 1984), presenting a significant barrier to participants' advancement to senior roles (Elacqua et al., 2009). However, firms founded by women (eleven participants) or led by women in influential roles like CEO, senior partner, or managing partner were exceptions, displaying a more balanced gender ratio or favouring women.

"Two male lawyers, one more PQE (post qualification experience) than me, one less, I was hitting 150, 160% of my chargeable targets, week in week out. They were hitting between 50 and 60% and in front of the whole firm, I was told I must be recording my time wrong, not these guys need to pull their socks up."

Amber

This reflection epitomises the gender bias, unequal standards, and role incongruity that women's competence is not only questioned but actively devalued in professional settings, even when they outperform their male counterparts. This aligns with Heilman's (2001) concepts of descriptive and prescriptive bias, which describe how women are and how they should be. Amber recalled being judged against these stereotypical expectations and penalised for nonconforming behaviours, accused of error despite exceeding targets, while underperforming male colleagues faced no scrutiny. As noted, women demonstrating assertive and ambitious traits often face negative evaluations (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which is intensified by the likeability-competence trade-off, where high-achieving women are seen as unlikeable (Erfani et al., 2023). Biernat and Kobrynowicz (1997) similarly found that women must significantly outperform men to be viewed as equally competent, yet, paradoxically, even overperformance may invite criticism. Aligning with research, this account also indicates that women's success is often misattributed or dismissed (Heilman et al., 1995; Johnson et al., 2008) due to the embedded gender norms in organisational cultures distorting the perception of merit. Most participants experienced this differential treatment in performance evaluation and recognition, reinforcing the perception of the glass ceiling

(Babic & Hansez, 2021; Tappin & Lenka, 2022). The participants' narratives consistently reflected the systemic barriers that continue to shape women's professional trajectories (Syed et al., 2018; Krivkovich et al., 2022), slowing their progression.

Amber's experience further illustrates how gendered scrutiny functions as a mechanism to reinforce women's subordinate positioning, aligning with Berdahl et al.'s (1996) observation that while women may challenge male dominance, men's harassment of women often serves to reinforce their inferior status. The unwarranted public scrutiny she faced intensified her sense of injustice, portraying her gender as a liability rather than an incidental attribute (Bass & Avolio, 1992; Shackleton, 1995; Li & Leung, 2001). Despite her high performance, Amber, like many others, felt her contributions were undervalued and that she was relegated to follower roles (Braun et al., 2017). This trend reflects a broader, persistent pattern of undermining women's achievements, slowing their progress and forcing them to navigate structural and interpersonal obstacles. The labyrinth metaphor (Eagly & Carli, 2007) aptly captures this dynamic, where advancement is not merely blocked at the top levels but is distorted throughout, requiring constant navigation through winding, uncertain paths. Rather than a single barrier at the top as suggested by the glass ceiling, women faced cumulative, shifting constraints that demand resilience, adaptability, and ongoing negotiation, reflecting the lived realities of women solicitors in a male-dominated profession.

From the participants' accounts, the law firm's culture still features masculinity, defining the core cultural capital in the profession (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 1998), favouring men at all levels within firms in their recruitment, rewards, promotion and decision-making processes. Women having surpassed the hurdles of the external closure by the academic institutions seemed to face internal closure strategies, which were palpable in the participants' accounts, where the senior male lawyers sought "to maximise rewards by restricting access to a circle" (Parkin, 1974:3).

Law firms' maintenance of the habitus is possibly driven by increased competition induced by neoliberal marketisation, which reinforces their professional identity by emphasising differentiation. The Alternate Business Structure (ABS), which allows external ownership, has blurred the lines between corporate lawyers and business professionals (Mueller et al., 2011; Tilley, 2018). This shift has made generating new business challenging, particularly given client price sensitivity, the rise of online legal services, and solicitors' limited marketing skills (The Law Society, 2024). These challenges may reinforce the profession's habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), preserving its traditional structure as a differentiation strategy. However, echoing Paterson's view, outdated organisational models have left the profession

“factionalised, heterogeneous, and fragmented,” resulting in a lack of coherence in identity, values, and career progression (2011:9), participants frequently referred to their firms as “traditional” or “old-fashioned,” highlighting a male-dominated culture where most felt excluded. This exclusion undermined their sense of inclusion safety, a fundamental component of psychological safety as outlined by Edmondson (2019), which is considered essential for fostering an inclusive and productive work environment. Although this framework is appraised for oversimplifying complex organisational dynamics and lacks sufficient empirical validation (Newman et al., 2017; Frazier et al., 2017), it remains a valued tool for evaluating psychological safety in organisations. Differential treatment due to gender bias was a recurring theme in participants’ narratives, impeding their acceptance and inclusion in the workplace, presenting as one of the key challenges adding to the thickness of the glass ceiling.

“It’s all part of ... we will always do it this way because we’ve always done it this way. It must be the best way; we, therefore, don’t need to innovate, change, or step down from our pedestal and perceive ourselves to be the service providers that we are, which is all we are.”

Amber

Highlighting the resistance to changing the established yet ineffective norms, she suggests a sense of entitlement among male colleagues, obstructing self-reflection and progress. Referring to lawyers as service providers suggests encouraging new approaches to enhance the quality of legal services by prioritising the client’s needs. In contrast, the participants’ accounts repeatedly reflected the archetypal male mould (MacKinnon, 1983; Acker, 1990), which the profession expected them to imitate, silencing any different perspective on practising law and the resulting feeling that their views were not valued. Heightening their sense of exclusion and aligning with Menkel-Meadow’s (1989) emphasis on the need to examine how gender bias constrains innovation in legal practice.

The sense of exclusion was buttressed by participants’ descriptions of the perceived persona of a lawyer by the profession and the public as “aggressive” and “*I will take you down*” (Rachel), an elite male with social and cultural capital, which is considered more important than competence. One Magic Circle equity partner recalled the absence of female role models in corporate law when she was making career choices, limiting her access to mentorship, sponsorship, and business development opportunities (Elkin, 2006; Ibarra et al., 2010). The culture was marked by “*a lot of bravado... drinking and staying up all night,*” which she described as “*overly macho*” (Emily). This aggressive ideal “follows society’s

role dichotomies”, positioning men in prestigious areas, such as commercial law, while relegating women to less profitable fields such as family and employment law (Foster, 1995:1649). These patterns reinforce the glass walls (Lyness & Terrazas, 2006; Powell & Butterfield, 2015) and horizontal as well as vertical stratification noted in earlier research (Hagan & Kay, 1995; Sommerlad, 2002; Stake et al., 2007).

Notably, just under half of the participants worked in fields related to family and employment law, which are often seen as extensions of traditional gender roles. The fact that most participants worked in commercial and litigation fields challenges traditional assumptions, demonstrating how women strategically disrupt the conventional image of a lawyer. Their narratives align with critiques of Bourdieu’s symbolic violence, which can overlook the capacity of subordinated groups to recognise and resist exclusionary norms (Lovell, 2000). Yet, as their narratives reveal, cultural expectations place the burden on women to outperform male peers to gain recognition, masking systemic gender bias, obscuring structural inequality by framing underrepresentation as a matter of individual ambition or choice, thereby reinforcing neoliberal individualism and deflecting attention from institutional inequality and potential transformation (Gill, 2007).

Another prominent trend was the lack of support mentioned by the majority in the male-dominated cultures, which made them consider leaving their firms. This treatment varied from being left to “*just get on with it*” (Rachel) to being left to run the department (Sonia) to more bullying behaviours, where a senior male lawyer told one participant, “*I knew nothing, and he would have to sort of break me, break my spirit to build me back up again,*” (Scarlett), aligning with the findings that women’s feedback is less actionable compared to men (Doldor et al., 2021). The likely culture, which, according to Alvesson, revolves around lived experiences, focused on people, relationships, meanings and emotions (1993), is instead one of fear, posing a significant barrier to progression, as it discourages women from advocating for themselves and fully participating in career development opportunities. Most participants moved firms frequently if they perceived poor treatment, lack of rewards and promotion prospects, and differential treatment to their male colleagues, suggesting they encountered a “glass ceiling” that impeded their advancement (Elacqua et al., 2009; Babic & Hansez, 2021). In some cases, this perception dampened their ambition of pursuing senior roles within traditional firms, leading them to voluntarily opt out (Schmitt et al., 2002).

“Occasionally you see women challenging, but they are silenced ... or if it’s not taken any further, why bother and to some extent, I suppose it’s why I didn’t put myself forward for senior or managing partner, because I thought about it long and hard.”

Emily

An example of symbolic violence, this account aligns with the “negotiated resignation” scenario (Wrigley 2002:37), where women internalise structural limits to recalibrate their ambitions and stop seeking advancement, perpetuating underrepresentation in senior roles (Stroh et al., 1996). Many participants reported encountering pushback when asserting themselves or advocating for change, leading to a hostile work environment that impacted their work-relatedness and stress levels (Babic & Hansez, 2021). This feeling of exclusion reflects the internalised barriers that caused the participants' self-doubt, which was notably more acute in participants belonging to diverse ethnic groups (Crenshaw, 1991; Tomlinson & Muzio, 2010; Tomlinson et al., 2012).

“I was undermined so much and then isolated by being put in a very remote office compared to everyone else; I felt that my communication and ability to connect with the other lawyers ... I didn't have that connection ... so I felt, for me, that it was just a very lonely, isolating experience.”

Maryam

Belonging to a minority ethnic group, Maryam recounted being among the few females and *“the only non-white and visibly ethnic person”* in a firm of 60 people. She raised her concern with management about staff *“clicking their fingers...or just waving a hand”* to get her attention and eventually being given an anglicised name. She felt let down by the white management’s response: *“These staff members have been working here for 20-30 years, and I’ve never experienced anything like that,”* leaving her feeling very isolated. Notably, these exclusionary practices, a form of symbolic violence preserving the law’s elitist habitus, were most pronounced for the eight participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds, whose deviation from the white male benchmark was compounded by gender and, for some, social class, reflecting broader literature (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Tomlinson & Muzio, 2010; Tomlinson et al., 2012a; Aulakh et al., 2017). Further, Abigail, a white non-British partner in a 100% white and 87% male partnership, highlighted that despite having the advantage of not being visibly different, she felt she had to work a lot harder for a lot less, echoing Biernat and Kobrynowicz’s findings (1997), which suggest women have to significantly outperform to be considered equally competent.

*“What you have to do is so much more than if you are just a white British man... I did not realise the extent of misogyny and racism in law firms until I got partnership because once you get behind the door, they regard you as like one of them and so, they...speak freely, and you realise the s*** they actually think... It’s almost like you don’t know what you don’t know, you know?”*

Abigail

Aulakh et al.s’ (2017) research supports this finding, indicating that the profession is stratified by gender, race, and class, with white males still dominating the profession’s culture (Duff & Webley, 2004; MacMillan et al., 2005; Bolton & Muzio, 2007, 2008; Sullivan, 2010; Sommerlad et al., 2013). Amber raised the significance of white allies advocating altruistically for underrepresented ethnic groups, noting that genuine allyship can break systemic barriers and, by diversifying the profession, enhance its legitimacy and its ability to serve a diverse society. Contrary to Alvesson’s acknowledgement that gender, generation, class, and occupational groups contribute to cultural diversity rather than homogeneity (2002), the participants from less privileged backgrounds shared a feeling of being particularly out of place, with firms’ preference for cultural and social capital with posh accents cited. The differential treatment, rooted in the male-gendered historical development of the legal profession, emerged as an overarching theme. Amber reflected on the undue, and often unwarranted, deference shown to male colleagues, which she observed in many instances.

“It’s almost like death by 1000 paper cuts. So apart from those very big dramatic incidents like getting a case struck out of High Court and not being told off for it, ...men who continually retain their positions while the women don’t...., it’s a multitude of attitudinal signals.”

Amber

Echoing Taparia and Lenka’s systematic review of the glass ceiling, participants described how informal ‘old boys’ networks’ in law firms restrict access to social capital, mentoring, and sponsorship (Oakley, 2000), supporting Elacqua et al.’s (2009:293) view that glass ceilings endure where gendered treatment is normalised. Women solicitors reported marginalisation within a profession, shaped by male-dominated organisational cultures (Babic & Hansez, 2021) and by structural and cultural norms rooted in its historic construction by and for white, middle-class men (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). This

legacy defines merit and professionalism in exclusionary terms, reinforced through professionalisation processes (Freidson, 1983; Walby, 1986), internal closure mechanisms (Witz, 1990, 1992), and the profession's masculine habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). Broader gendered and classed narratives devalue women's social positioning, further entrenching inequality (Taparia & Lenka, 2022) and sustaining perceptions that women must navigate slower, more obstructed routes to senior roles (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Elacqua et al., 2009), particularly for those with multiple, intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).

Theme 2: Conflict of Gender and Leadership Stereotypes

The second theme generated focused on the narratives of participants' experiences regarding dynamics reflecting the tension between social expectations of their gender and leadership norms. Although studies show no inherent neurological basis for gendered behaviours (Fine, 2013), gender disparities in progression persist. McKinsey's research revealed that for every 100 men promoted from entry-level to manager, only 87 women advance (Krivkovich et al., 2022). This disparity reflects enduring stereotypes around gender roles and leadership traits (Schein, 1975; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women are still viewed as nurturing and responsible for caregiving (Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018), while men are seen as assertive breadwinners, traits aligned with traditional leadership (Schein, 1973, 1975). This assumption affects women's self-perception internally and negatively impacts their external evaluation (Fitzsimmons et al., 2014). As a result, women who lead with collaboration, empathy, or adaptability often go unrecognised in male-dominated hierarchies, echoing the role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Empathy versus proficiency

As noted, role incongruity (Heilman et al., 1995; Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Johnson et al., 2008) positions women as less suited for leadership and when they do attain senior roles, they are judged more harshly. Consistent with Erfani et al.'s (2023) research, participants' accounts reflected the likeability–competence trade-off, whereby women who displayed assertiveness or ambition, traits typically associated with leadership, were perceived less favourably. This dynamic intensified the precarity of the balance required to be seen as both capable and socially acceptable. The narratives of most participants indicated that these conflicting stereotypes exposed them to ambivalent sexism, including both benevolent sexism (BS), restricting autonomy through 'protective' behaviours (Glick et al., 1997; Glick & Fiske, 1999; King et al., 2012), and hostile sexism (HS) (Glick & Fiske, 1996; 2001) towards non-traditional women. Sonia's experience with

the exiting male head of the department, who asked her which of her two male colleagues, one far junior to her, would be suitable for the role, characterised BS. Upon being challenged, he explained:

“I didn’t think you wanted a leadership role, ... you’ve got a family, and you work part-time.”

Sonia

In her perception, he gave away the unconscious bias and the discriminatory thought process in line with social role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly et al., 2000), role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig et al., 2011) and “think manager think male” (Schein 1975, 2001) all linking leadership to qualities most associated with men. His beliefs centred around “women take care, and men take charge” (Hoyt & Burnette, 2013:1307), and men are the family’s primary breadwinners (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This finding supports earlier observations, which align with Heilman’s (2001) view that gender stereotypes produce both descriptive biases (how women are expected to be) and prescriptive biases (how they should behave). The decision-maker’s support for male candidates, who mirrored his values and background, reflected traditional gender norms (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Haslam & Platow, 2001). Seemingly helpful, it blocked her growth and advancement to the head of the department role (King et al., 2012; Ellemers, 2014), reinforcing the stereotype that women are nurturing and responsible for child and parental care (Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018). An example of modern or subtle sexism, it still perpetuates gender inequality (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1986), affecting her loyalty to the firm and ultimately resulting in her leaving. Her narrative highlights how competent women often fail to advance as equally qualified men and must significantly outperform male peers to be regarded equally capable (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997), reinforcing a double standard that heightens pressure in professional roles. This assumption was evident in many participants’ accounts, with several noting that their male peers earned significantly more for performing the same work, or in some cases, less.

“On qualification, I found out that my peer.... exactly the same qualification as me, but a man was being paid a third more than I was ... So, I raised it as an issue with my supervising partner, and his response was if money is so important to you, we will write you a reference so that you can ... apply for other jobs.”

Susanne

Unable to justify the gender prejudice, the firm implied she was lucky to have the job, which she ought to value. In contrast to the assumption of men being the breadwinners (Eagly & Karau, 2002), many participants were either single mothers or the primary earner for the family, rendering the assumptions arising from social role theory (Eagly, 1987) outdated. Susanne's narrative demonstrates how male-dominated structures confine women to lower-status roles with poorer terms (Bolton & Muzio, 2007), reflecting how capitalism and patriarchy reinforce gendered power dynamics, limiting progression and pay (Crompton & Sanderson, 1990; Witz, 1992; Eisenstein, 1995; Macdonald, 1995). Melanie described how her male boss's excessive micromanagement eroded her autonomy, a form of patronising discrimination (Glick & Fiske, 2007) that undermined her confidence and decision-making (Rudman et al., 2007). In contrast, her female boss fostered trust and independence. While seemingly supportive, the male boss's behaviour reinforced stereotypes casting women as nurturing but unfit for leadership (Cikara et al., 2009), echoing Braun et al.'s (2017) link between gender bias and women's underrepresentation in leadership. Coupled with male leaders' tendency to 'overhelp' and promote like-minded men (Haslam et al., 2001), these practices exemplify symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1977), subtly maintaining hierarchical boundaries, keeping the out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) out of the male-dominated habitus.

This inconsistency led participants to work extra hard to exhibit and communicate counter-stereotypical evidence of their agency and competency to establish their right to be part of the high-status profession (Glick, Zion, & Nelson, 1988). However, some participants experienced that exhibiting agency and being assertive, although encouraged in men, were seen as a threat (McDowell, 2015) since it was against the prescribed and proscribed gender norms, resulting in backlash (Rudman, 1998). Inaya shared an example of recruiting help with the excessive workload but was admonished by the firm by offering the junior male lawyer significantly higher pay than her, one of many examples shared by the participants of the gender pay disparity. Asking questions about the structures and processes resulted in the management undermining Maryam, being placed in an isolated office and impairing her efforts to achieve her targets (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). The shared narratives consistently presented double bind: traditional roles undermine leadership potential, while assertiveness is judged as "unfeminine" (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001:786). These examples of being judged severely for their actions (Eagly et al., 1992) are intended to instil low expectations for women in management but also legitimise the exclusion for failing to live up to the benevolently sexist prescriptions for seeking leadership (Cikara et al., 2009).

Participants felt that male colleagues did not understand the strength of their inclusive and compassionate style (Walker et al., 1996), challenging their contributor safety (Edmondson, 2019) where their ideas were not taken seriously, or they did not feel they had a voice, also lacking the challenger safety where they could feel safe to suggest changes culminating in feeling excluded and amplified stress. These experiences eroded participants' psychological safety, discouraging them from contributing fully or challenging entrenched norms on their pathway to partnership. In particular, many raised their inclusive and compassionate style, was not recognised at best or, at worst, was seen as a weakness due to the perceived paradox of leadership and gender stereotypes hindering their chances of ascension to senior roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

“The team I run runs at a lower utilisation. That’s a conscious decision by me. I’m not stupid ... I choose not to make them work 8 to 10 hours a day unless you have to. So, we try to average 6 to 7 chargeable hours a day...as a consequence of that, people don’t leave, but the billing rate I charge out is higher, so my profit still remains the same or better, even though my people aren’t absolutely on the floor dead, they’re cared for, and I notice ... I’ve... created, I hope a culture of how are you? Are you OK? Oh, gosh.... they worked 10 hours last night, or they’ve worked through the night. Let’s give them a day or that type of care.”

Emily

She attributed this success to women being more empathetic, shifting away from the traditional focus on maximising billable hours at the expense of team well-being and helping avoid burnout (Heinemann & Heinemann, 2017). This approach facilitates retention and achieves higher productivity, exhibiting that compassion and profitability are not mutually exclusive (Chamorro-Premuzic & Gallop, 2020). She suggested that male partners can be caring but often struggle with this approach due to the stereotypical association of masculinity and aggression with leadership expectations and being adversely judged by their in-group (Schein, 1973, 1975; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Conversely, there is increasing support for this emotional dexterity: “Women have a unique combination of interpersonal and work ethic traits that seem tailor-made for the management ranks” (Wells, 2001:43; Hlupic, 2014, 2019). This perspective emphasises the significance of soft skills, such as adaptability and continuous learning, in managing an organisation (Ellemers et al., 2012), which seemed to be lacking among traditional lawyers and firms, as described by the participants, especially in larger firms. Nearly half of the participants emphasised the need for personability and for the client’s best interests to be at the core of legal service

provision, rather than targets and profit generation (Webley & Duff, 2007). Participants frequently equated women's collegiate and caring nature at work with positive outcomes for the team's well-being and overall productivity. Iqra exhibited her collegiate style: *"I'm only as good as the people around me, and the people around me make me look good, really."* Most emphasised a more inclusive team management style rather than the transactional style encouraged by the culture of billing targets prevalent within traditional firms (Bass et al., 2003). Research corroborates that more feminine traits possess significant leadership potential in modern, inclusive contexts (Alvesson, 1991; Chamorro-Premuzic & Gallop, 2020), where leadership is viewed as social integration rather than control, which men could learn from rather than asking women to lean in more (Sandberg, 2013).

However, the participants' discourses highlighted their empathetic, caring, and nurturing nature (Eagly & Karau, 2002), is considered irrelevant in the boardroom and judged as not proficient. As a result, they did not feel understood, drew greater attention, and were more easily singled out for disparagement (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hegarty & Bruckmuller, 2013). This paradox and the judgments that followed caused them to feel isolated and unheard, hindering their progression and leading to a dwindling pipeline of potential partners. Participants' narratives contest the claim that women dominate the solicitors' profession (Ames, 2022), aligning with Menkel-Meadow's (1989) argument that feminisation entails more than numerical presence, it requires substantive influence. The findings challenge the idealised assumption that a "feminised" profession necessarily upholds values such as empathy, collaboration, and feminist ethics (Lenz & Meyerhoff, 1985; Sherry, 1986; Olsen, 1990).

On the contrary, many participants' accounts reinforced findings from Glick (1991), noting that male characteristics often predict job prestige and salaries, suggesting that gender as a differentiating characteristic in employment, pay, and presence in leadership positions continues to play a persistent role (Barreto et al., 2009). Eleanor shared that her firm wanted to hire *"someone with more gravitas"* at her level. They recruited a male solicitor, privately educated with a posh accent, leaving her feeling inadequate within the team. This dynamic exemplifies symbolic violence as a boundary-marking force of the habitus, where she was made to feel like a misfit through subtle cues rather than overt exclusion (Bourdieu, 1977; 1991). Many participants echoed this sentiment, observing that less qualified male lawyers received higher pay or promotions over them. The ingrained male-dominated culture, as discussed in Theme 1, furthers the stereotypes within the legal profession, emphasising its

public image and habitus, preserving historical gender biases and the identity of the male ingroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

"People are scared to instruct lawyers; they're seen as scary, and I think when you're starting out as NQ [newly qualified], and ... until you get your experience, you feel like you got to project a persona of I am tough, and I'll take you down."

Rachel

This statement offers insights into the internalised pressure to project a persona, adding stress and anxiety to women who feel compelled to conform to stereotypes of what a lawyer should look like, confirming the habitus (Bourdieu, 1987) and professional closure (Witz, 1990) arguments. Her narrative suggests until women gained confidence in their self-efficacy, through experience and overcoming challenges (Bandura, 1997) and understood the landscape of the profession better, they employed an amalgamation of five out of the six strategies identified by Tomlinson et al. (2013:246), they assimilate, compromise, play the game, reform the system, move to other firms, and withdraw altogether as was seen by many participants moving firms and a few temporarily leaving to undertake law-related jobs or locums. Five strategies, barring reformation, maintain existing structures rather than promote transformative change. This projection of toughness to gain respect and credibility hindered an authentic connection with clients and colleagues, as well as the stress caused by the misalignment of their values and those of firms, which created a conflict between the client and the lawyers as they were incentivised to charge as much as possible (Amber) with a relentless emphasis on billing targets as seen in most participants' narratives.

Queen bee effect – Playing the game?

As noted above, the double bind of prescriptive and descriptive stereotypes (Heilman, 2001) left the participants in a no-win situation. If they exhibited agentic characteristics associated with successful leaders, they were judged punitively. Conversely, if they conformed to their 'traditional' gender role, they were seen as lacking leadership potential based on unconscious bias and the role congruity theory of prejudice (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001:786). The sameness–difference dilemma reduces gender to an individual concern, obscuring structural inequalities (Fogarty et al., 1981). Many participants expressed this confusion, recalling instances when they were mistaken for secretaries or ignored at meetings in their earlier years, highlighting that masculinity underpins the core cultural capital within the solicitors' profession (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). This outsider status leads to derogatory remarks and assumptions about their career choices (Sommerlad, 2008).

"We walked into the room, and there were... four or five men standing... we walked along, and everyone shook hands as we passed, and when I got to a particular guy, I put my hand out, and he looked at me, looked up and down and then put his hand in his pocket."

Scarlett

Her corporate meeting experience highlighted law generally, but corporate law, in particular, is perceived to be a forte for male lawyers. Her team seemingly overlooked this incident, reinforcing her feeling that she did not belong despite having the same qualifications and career path as her male colleagues. This and similar shared examples help explain and elucidate why many participants reported negative experiences with female superiors. Since women often struggle to attain and maintain senior positions due to the paradox associating masculinity with power and authority (Charles & Davies, 2000:545, in Mavin 2008), participants' narratives reflected an effort by some women to maintain the image of the traditional male lawyer (Schein 1973, 1975, 2001; Croson & Gneezy, 2009) to advance their career progression. This perception reinforced the workplaces as less inclusive and equitable to women. The "Queen Bee" effect describes how some women in leadership roles in male-dominated fields may distance themselves from other women, thereby hindering their progress (Derks et al., 2011). Some described the queen bee effect as women "playing the game," adopting stereotypes associated with leadership and male values and behaviours entrenched in the traditional firm's patriarchal ethos. This dynamic also signifies the pressure that dominant organisational diversity discourses place on women, emphasising self-management, resilience, and strategic career navigation, and assigning them the responsibility to adapt to entrenched male-normed cultures (Rottenberg, 2014; Gill, 2017), to progress within inequitable structures, while leaving the underlying exclusionary systems intact. Hence, scholars' caution against framing gender as secondary and emphasising its centrality to organisational analysis (Beechey, 1978; Garnsey, 1978) remains crucial.

"Any sign of ... softness was perceived as a weakness, so, I don't blame them for behaving in that way because I do think it was something that was respected by male partners in the female partners at the time, but for junior lawyers dealing with that, it was pretty brutal.... I do know a few female partners who behave like that and then outside of work are totally different."

Scarlett

Some participants believed that for senior women, it was essential to be “*quite ballsy and bullish*” (Samantha) to get to senior positions. It became part of their way, aligning with the .scholastic preference for “self-group distancing” as the “Queen Bee effect” implies women as the problem (Elsesser, 2020). Arguably, it is not a direct source of gender inequality but a reaction to discrimination and threats to their social identity in a male-dominated profession (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Derks et al., 2016) and is indeed a survival mechanism to avoid feeling like a misfit (Bryans & Mavin, 2003). It forces women to suppress their authenticity, causing additional stress. Some other narratives indicated less understanding.

“I have met some women who were very brutal and couldn’t give a flying monkey about you either, if they have to trample over you to get to where they need to get to, they would do it.”

Sandra

These views emphasise that traits such as ambition, assertiveness, and competitiveness are not inherently tied to males, highlighting the importance of recognising the variability of these characteristics across individuals, irrespective of gender. Rudman and Glick (2001) note that prescriptive gender stereotypes wrongly frame assertiveness and ambition as male traits, despite their socially constructed nature. This challenges reductive stereotypes and supports Mavin and Grandy’s (2012:221) concept of “doing gender well and differently,” reflected in participants’ rejection of binary constructions and enactment of gender as a continuum. This outlook also aligns with West and Zimmerman’s (1987:130) view of gender as “an ongoing activity embedded in everyday interactions,” continually negotiated in context. Linda’s account of male partners who “*don’t mind ranting and shouting*” illustrates scope for more authentic, less scripted leadership performances. Her narrative suggests gender diversity in senior roles can be complementary rather than zero-sum logic, fostering inclusive cultures that value difference as a strategic and cultural strength (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Torchia et al., 2011).

Nonetheless, participants noted the queen bee effect compounds the barriers faced by junior women, presenting senior women as poor role models and exemplifying prescriptive stereotypes with typically male leadership traits (Heilman, 2001). Their accounts aligned with women in law, highlighting the lack of encouragement and support for other women (The Law Society, 2019). This pattern suggests that women bosses may align with the male ingroup, portraying women as lesser in some way (Chattopadhyay et al., 2004:184). Building on this, Emily felt that imitating male behaviours, such as learning to shout out more, was “*playing the game in the arena created by the man instead of dismantling the arena... and I*

find that irritating at best.” Further, aligning with the negative impacts of the queen bee effect, Amber shared that those who emulate the male behaviours not only bear the emotional burden of compromising personal values for career advancement, but they,

“have internalised the misogyny, and they’ve become some kind of caricature of the thing that oppresses us. They’re playing the game to their own detriment; finally, I feel or to the detriment of their children.”

Amber

Interestingly, her account also noted that male colleagues who deviated from the established norms were also marginalised (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), in an attempt to preserve the dominant habitus (Bourdieu, 1997). Anne echoed the negative impact of the queen bee effect, sharing that a female senior undermining her with clients and making unfounded allegations about her, affected her self-belief, setting her career back several years. She could not pinpoint the reasons for her behaviour beyond possible jealousy of her being young. She had not seen male juniors treated similarly but was mindful that this did not mean it did not happen. However, another participant felt that this trend was more prevalent in the 1990s and early 2000s, when well-being was not generally discussed, indicating a possible lesser chance of the effect in the present day.

Participants often navigated tension between fitting into the dominant masculine culture and practising law authentically, with few openly challenging exclusion. Rather than advancing by becoming “man-shaped” through practices like late-night drinking or golf (Bowcott, 2019), many remained silent to avoid conflict, deepening feelings of isolation from the profession’s core culture. While some had progressed by “playing the game” (Tomlinson et al., 2012), others found this strategy deepened the existing constraints on their sense of belonging. Contrary to the Queen Bee effect, most participants resisted pressure to conform to the masculinised norms of the legal profession. Despite symbolic violence and an enforced habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991), they progressed, developing confidence, discernment (Kay & Gorman, 2008), and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986, 1997, 2001), which empowered them to reject assimilation and navigate their careers on their own terms.

Participants’ narratives suggested their discernment and resilience grew from the discrimination they faced, motivating them, fuelling their drive for success (Kanter, 1977; Ely et al., 2011; Southwick et al., 2014). The perceived prejudice stemming from the intersectionality of ethnicity was an additional factor that drove participants from

underrepresented ethnic groups to work harder and develop the unique resilience needed by women of diverse backgrounds (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins et al., 2009).

“Embracing who I am ... that’s your superpower, and I think so many people, particularly women, make the mistake of emulating the men, ..., trying to blend in with the norm.... I don’t try and blend in ...I just do my own thing, and that’s worked out very well ... I have attracted clients who ... really appreciate my candour”.

Abigail

As a white non-British participant, she felt that being authentic and staying true to her values (Maslow, 1968; 1971; Harter, 2002) empowered her, offering unique perspectives and enabling her to succeed authentically (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). These qualities became her strengths, enabling her to build genuine connections and meaningful impact in her professional endeavours. A recurring discourse in the study positions women as inherently more sympathetic and empathetic, traits often associated with nurturing team well-being. While many participants recognised these qualities, they also resisted such generalisations. Most senior women expressed empathy towards junior colleagues navigating the pipeline, but this was not consistent across all cases, signifying the tensions between authenticity and conformity (Eagly & Karau, 2002). One firm owner explicitly rejected this characterisation, instead aligning herself with traditionally masculine traits, highlighting the diversity of leadership identities among women and challenging reductive gendered expectations (Mavin & Grandy, 2012). Such assumptions risk reinforcing the glass ceiling by confining women to roles that prioritise care over authority, thereby limiting access to positions of real power and influence (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

"I'm not really into women having three pregnancies on the business. I really think that if you want your children go and have your children, but don't expect us to pay for it..., if you're crying in corners or farting about with the childcare and not being effective, if anyone, really you have got yourself to blame because you're not going to make it. I mean, corporate law and clients don't really want people who are what I would call half-baked, not up to the job."

Phoebe

She reflected that entering law after starting a family shaped her views, noting that while she did not want others to sacrifice family life, trade-offs were often inevitable. This aligns with Hakim’s (1998) preference theory, which links women’s career outcomes to individual choice, though critics warn such framing obscures structural exclusion (Crompton & Harris,

1998). The persistence of the queen bee phenomenon (Faniko et al., 2020; Ellemers et al., 2004) illustrates how women may internalise masculine norms to survive in patriarchal settings. Reflective of low inclusion and psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019), it suppresses diverse leadership identities. As participants' accounts emphasised, these dynamics intersect with entrenched gender and leadership stereotypes, where women's professional roles are filtered through the lens of male-centric normative expectations (Taparia & Lenka, 2022), further constraining their progression to partnership.

Theme 3: The Structural Issues

Structural issues, also known as organisational issues or inter-situational factors (Babic & Hansez, 2021; Taparia & Lenka, 2022), shaped the third theme, providing further insights to help address Research Question 1. Considering the protracted process of becoming a solicitor, including the academic, professional, and practice stages, coupled with high costs and stringent regulations (Appendix B), makes qualifying as a solicitor a significant commitment of time, money, and effort. This raises the question of why, despite women comprising 62% of qualified solicitors, they account for only 37% of partners in law firms and just 28% in larger law firms (SRA, 2024). The structural factors' role in participants' participation and progression, and in the prevalence and persistence of the glass ceiling in the legal profession, was shared by many participants. Almost all participants shared the belief that the law firms are structured around a male worker (Acker, 1990; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 1998), with resistance to change unveiled by the participants' narratives in the discussion of Themes 1 and 2 above. Beyond cultural norms and gendered expectations, participants' narratives revealed how deeply embedded key structural barriers continue to constrain women's progression, reinforcing the unequal representation at the partnership level.

Culture of long billable hours - Presenteeism

Most participants shared insights into the expectation of long hours, with a machoistic value attached to being up all night, especially in the corporate field and the high-billing culture in law firms, which surpassed all other concerns, resulting in presenteeism (Hemp, 2004; Johns, 2010). This pattern continued from the training stage into the post-qualification era, only with lesser supervision. A property litigation solicitor shared the impact this high expectation and low supervision had on her.

“It was very stressful, just the work itself... it was high volume, long hours, early morning starts, late nights, weekends, and working on your holidays...you’ve got this piece of paper that says you qualified... you're literally still learning and there wasn't a great deal of supervision.”

Rachel

There was an expectation of unlimited availability, and an almost production line factory approach was employed for the participants to churn out billable hours. The narratives explained that the junior solicitors were used to generate many times their salaries with the expectation to be available at all times, which was justified by the focus on client service.

“Female lawyers were being actively managed out when they got to a senior level..., there were some blockers.... particularly in corporate and private client where it was a very male-dominated environment and the ability for anybody to work differently ... to accommodate a family or caring responsibilities was really frowned upon..... you had to constantly be at your desk, and you had to stay late.”

Sonia

This narrative, firstly highlights the marginalising and exploitation of women solicitors and their work, aligning with the professional closure literature (Witz, 1990). Most law firms bill clients based on time sheets, rewarding solicitors for the hours they work, which lacks flexibility and generates inequality of opportunities due to women’s caring duties. Secondly, it amplifies horizontal and vertical segmentation and stratification arguments, where firms often direct women into traditionally feminine practice areas such as family and employment. Many participants raised that men dominated the more lucrative sectors like corporate law; just under half the participants practised in areas such as family, employment, wills, trusts, and probate. This trend limits women’s advancement and earning potential (Crompton & Sanderson, 1990; Witz, 1992; Macdonald, 1995), being confined to the lower and mid-levels of the hierarchical pyramid, serving as the primary source of labour. Yet, the power is held in well-established autonomous silos of mainly white middle-class privileged men in senior positions, as shared by majority of the participants. The shared narratives align with the widely held perception in the legal profession that commitment to the career necessitates long hours and prioritising career over private life (Sommerlad, 2002; Tomlinson et al., 2012).

The “macho mythologising” of long hours is epitomised by an average working day of 10-12 hours. Further, Sommerlad (2002:220) states, “Long hours are either presented as natural or as evidence that its most enthusiastic exponents have balls.” The insights shared align with Bolton and Muzio’s observation that feminisation, rather than generating equality, reinforces masculine and patriarchal notions, with firms exploiting mid-level female associate solicitors for profit and maintaining high attrition rates at this level to limit partnership expansion (2008). This approach aligns with the firms’ business model utilising two strategies, firstly to generate a surplus, employing mainly female solicitors and secondly, a high level of workforce attrition from the profession to restrict the unwanted expansion of the partnership thereby reinforcing the perceived glass ceiling for women solicitors which makes re-entry hard because of the primary barriers of the male ethos, working practices and career structures (Sommerlad, 1994a; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 1998). This pattern reflects the up-or-out model (Morris & Pinnington, 1998) and the ‘up-and-going-nowhere’ trajectory in UK firms (Malhotra et al., 2010). It echoes the Law Society’s data showing a sharp drop in women solicitors after age 35, with few remaining into their late 50s and 60s (The Law Society, 2023).

The structures, policies and processes in law firms, are all based around a male worker, reflected in the participants’ narratives which divulged the loss of confidence at the initial stages, with some developing imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978); almost all suffered from stress (Babic & Hansez, 2021; Taparia & Lenka, 2022) and some from burnout (Burke, 2004; Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). Some reported being physically sick with stress, and some recollected it as an exhausting time. A family solicitor shared:

“My stress levels, my moods, my health deteriorated, and it wasn’t until that moment in that hospital... I thought, Oh, my goodness, ... stress presents in a lot of different ways ... you’re throwing up in the morning... you’re told to just suck it up and get on with it, and that’s what you end up doing, but ... I wasn’t very healthy; my stress levels were sky high.”

Julie

Firms’ high commitment to productivity (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019) primarily drove multifaceted measures, including high billing, business networking, and winning new clients. These pressures fostered a culture of presenteeism (Hemp, 2004; Johns, 2010; Budjanovcanin, 2018), where participants felt compelled to be visibly present and prove their commitment to their careers, regardless of personal circumstances (Tomlinson et al,

2012). Maryam, another family solicitor, shared that she worked “*all hours of the day, evenings, weekends over Christmas period, so there was definitely no balance for me.*” Participants described law firm policies as rigid and exclusionary, particularly around flexible working. Samantha was denied part-time hours post-maternity leave due to her firm’s “traditional” ethos, reflecting outdated norms (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). Firms often cited client demands and performance cultures centred on billable hours and business development (Bolton & Muzio, 2008), disadvantaging women with caregiving roles where after-hours visibility remained key to advancement (Tomlinson et al., 2013; Ansari, 2016; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Deschacht, 2017). Public shaming of underperformance, described by Rachel as a “*pressure pot... designed to shame you and make you work harder,*” persisted alongside unadjusted billing expectations despite additional non-billable duties, reinforcing long-hours cultures and sustaining invisible barriers to progression (Acker, 1990).

“The legal profession has got a long way to go... when I was climbing the ladder and I was looking up to people as a starry eyed young lawyer who is working all hours, that God gives her and is bringing in business to the firm and not asking for a pay rise, not asking for a promotion...they were good to me because I was a goose laying golden eggs who didn't upset the apple cart, just towed the party line.”

Inaya

Another participant’s comment reflects an ethos within some firms that prioritises symbolic recognition over meaningful remuneration, suggesting a culture that values titles more than the tangible well-being and financial security of its associates.

“The role of becoming associate, you don’t get pay rise with it... it’s just merely a title, ... we’ve all got bills to pay, and if you’re putting all these hours in, ... I’d rather it be reflected in my pay than a title.”

Rachel

As many women enter the reproductive phase, they are driven out through overt or subliminal methods, guarding the profession’s exclusivity (Sommerlad, 2002, 2008; Bolton & Muzio, 2007; Tomlinson et al., 2012). Women are often judged as lacking commitment due to perceived conflicts between their productive and reproductive roles, resulting in less linear career paths compared to their male counterparts (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Cuddy et al., 2004; Bolton & Muzio, 2007; Deschacht, 2017). These structural barriers measured the

participants' commitment through long hours and presenteeism, an essential precursor for promotion considerations (Tomlinson et al., 2012), resulting in them becoming disenchanted and demotivated, thereby experiencing reduced commitment to the firms and the resulting withdrawal in some cases (Babic & Hansez, 2021; Taparia & Lenka, 2022).

"The workload was getting too heavy ... because it was giving a lot more responsibility, a lot more management stuff, and it just all got bit too much, and I ended up just locuming for a whole year."

Julie

Although flexible working schemes are recognised as vital to retaining women managers (Davidson & Cooper, 1992; Tomlinson et al., 2013), participants described how distrust and resentment from colleagues eroded loyalty and belonging. Entrenched social role expectations equated commitment with visibility, valuing male leaders and child-free female partners for long hours (Bolton & Muzio, 2007) and reinforcing a culture of presenteeism (Lewis, 2001; Sommerlad, 2002; Hemp, 2004; Johns, 2010; Budjanovcanin, 2018) that disadvantaged those with caregiving responsibilities (Ely & Meyerson, 2000a; Cuddy et al., 2004). The expectation to be first in and last out, ingrained during training, combined with disparaging remarks and demeaning treatment, created a hostile environment (Webley & Duff, 2007; Ashley & Empson, 2017) that compounded the structural and cultural barriers already faced (Sommerlad et al., 2013; Babic & Hansez, 2021).

While COVID-19 prompted a shift towards flexible and remote working practices, promoting digital strategies and solutions more than firms' leadership (Dawson, 2020), the resistance has persisted. Despite having family responsibilities, Inaya, with a young family, faced criticism for being obstructive and breaking the rules when advocating for flexibility and remote working during COVID-19. Interestingly, reflecting on what constitutes good work, Phoebe, a corporate lawyer who established her firm, felt:

"It's not necessarily about staying from seven in the morning till nine at night. It's about actually wanting to do the job right and caring about what the outcomes are."

Phoebe

Advocacy for flexible work can be inferred from this narrative if the outcomes are not adversely affected. However, as the only participant who shared, *"I've always been more in a man's world than a woman's world,"* she rejected a request for flexible working based on

corporate clients' needs. Some participants shared that their firms' profits were not unduly affected by COVID-19, indicating the possibility of adapting policies to allow more autonomy over their time and work (Harding, 2007; Patterson & Mavin, 2009). Yet, there was mention of firms beginning to insist on physical attendance at the offices again. Most accounts illustrated ongoing challenges in promoting flexible working and addressing established cultural norms within law firms that hindered participants' professional advancement and well-being (Bolton & Muzio, 2007; Webley & Duff, 2007; Tomlinson et al., 2012).

Unwanted sexual conduct

Participants' narratives illuminated the persistent undercurrent of sexualisation in professional networking spaces, particularly those involving evening events and alcohol, spaces where cultural expectations and male-dominated dynamics intersect. These settings, structured through the profession's gendered habitus, normalised behaviours that subtly reinforced exclusionary practices (Bourdieu, 1991). The use of women's appearance and presence as social or commercial capital reflected forms of symbolic violence that maintained masculine dominance under the guise of tradition and sociability (Bourdieu, 1977; Pringle, 1989; Filby, 1992). With most clients being male, several women reported that their sexuality was subtly, and at times overtly, positioned as a form of cultural capital. This dynamic aligns with Gutek and Morasch's (1982) theory of sex-role spillover, where gender and occupational roles collide, particularly in male-dominated settings. Women, often perceived as incongruent with professional roles, intensifies the likelihood of sexual harassment (Gutek & Cohen, 1987). The more non-traditional the role, the greater the risk of objectification and unwanted propositions. Although only six participants explicitly disclosed experiences of harassment, 38% of female lawyers in the UK report such incidents (Webber, 2019), suggesting a wider culture of silence, minimisation, or strategic tolerance.

Anne's account of repeated propositions across firms, which she deflected with humour, echoed a coping mechanism familiar to many professional women. However, she acknowledged the corrosive psychological impact this may have on others. This supports Satterfield and Muehlenhard's (1997) findings that sexual harassment diminishes women's confidence and self-efficacy, reducing their willingness to pursue advancement in male-dominated fields. Such gendered intrusions, even when normalised or dismissed, remain structurally significant, eroding agency, limiting progression, and reinforcing the gendered hierarchy of the legal profession.

“Compromise agreement is a legal agreement between two parties... the employer pays the other money in exchange for the employee not pursuing a claim and also signing a nondisclosure agreement.... I cannot think of a better example of misogyny in action... for somebody to have [multiple] compromise agreements and for them to still be valued as a senior person within the partnership, whereas the ... women get exited.”

Abigail

The role of non-disclosure agreements to silence the affected women through compromise agreements was an example of the deference offered to men, whilst women faced the upheaval of looking for other jobs with their confidence damaged (Satterfield & Muehlenhard, 1997). This incongruence between gender and work roles triggers status beliefs and casts doubt on women’s qualifications and legitimacy, leading to their credentials being questioned and to questions about how they may have achieved them (Cikara et al., 2009). Notably, firms with more women in leadership experienced less harassment, indicating that leadership values shape organisational culture and tolerance of discriminatory behaviour (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Ellemers et al., 2004). Some participants believed that as more women reach senior roles and societal attitudes shift, such behaviour would become increasingly intolerable. However, others pointed to persistent norms that allow inequitable behaviours toward women lawyers, as noted by Abigail above. This dynamic undermines women’s legitimacy by framing their professional identity through a gendered lens, valuing aesthetic capital over legal competence. It reinforces symbolic boundaries around who qualifies as a “serious” legal professional, subtly eroding women’s credibility and constraining advancement by casting femininity and authority as incompatible and affecting perceptions of their career longevity (Thornton, 1996).

“We all, weirdly, were white with blonde hair.... I felt that we had a particular look, one of the partners had an absolute crush on the female trainee in the year above me.”

Sonia

Women navigating the dynamic of being seen as both competent and sexual find that it creates confusion (Gutek, 1989, in Baugh, 1997). Leila, a founder, shared that being propositioned by a businessman in exchange for work made her work life challenging. Some participants raised sexism and sexual harassment as symptomatic of the broader societal inequalities that are likely to permeate most institutions, extending beyond the legal industry

(Taparia & Lenka, 2022). Anne mentioned that she laughed propositions off, noting that is how things were in the 90s; however, she raised concerns about the safety of the next generation of women, holding social media responsible to some extent.

Indicatively, complaints to the SRA dropped by a third in 2020, likely due to reduced face-to-face interactions during the pandemic lockdown (Roberts, 2021). The legal sector has struggled to dismantle its entrenched hierarchical structures, leading to power abuses (Dunn, 2020), particularly along gendered lines, which may, in part, stem from the perceived leniency in imposing penalties or fines, enabling some individuals to continue practising without substantive consequence (Dunn, 2020). Taparia and Lenka (2022) argue that weak implementation of legal and regulatory frameworks contributes to the persistence of the glass ceiling, an assertion supported by participants' experiences. In response to the growing recognition of such issues, some firms have begun considering financial sanctions for partners implicated in internal investigations. Similarly, the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal has taken steps to penalise professional misconduct, aiming to uphold ethical and professional standards within the legal profession (Roberts, 2021).

Professional socialisation and proximity to the decision makers

As also mentioned in Theme 1: male-dominated culture, most participants described how social and work practices were centred around male interests, leaving women lawyers feeling excluded (Bolton & Muzio, 2007; Tomlinson et al., 2013). Abigail believed that her partnership composition, being all white and overwhelmingly male, contributed to this perception.

"The men have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, and I also think a lot of them really struggle to identify with women's reality. Because law is a very high-earning profession, a lot of them have stay-at-home wives who do all the stuff, carry the mental load, organise the birthdays, the housekeeper, and everything."

Abigail

This dynamic created barriers for the participants, making it difficult to engage in activities like golf weekends, especially with additional responsibilities at home (Kay & Gorman, 2008). As a result, professional socialisation norms exclude women from crucial decision-making proximity (Elacqua et al., 2009). The perception gap mentioned in Abigail's statement indicates that without an understanding of women's realities, particularly by male decision-makers, addressing the glass ceiling remains challenging (Ely & Meyerson, 2000a; Elacqua et al., 2009; Babic & Hansez, 2021). Maryam, for instance, described a work culture

centred around frequent bar or pub gatherings, where, despite her strong business performance, she felt alienated as one of the few non-white women. Iqra shared similar feelings of exclusion from key business decisions made during after-work social activities (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 1998; Elacqua et al., 2009; Cross, 2010; Babic & Hansez, 2021), exemplifying how professional closure maintains a male elitist habitus (Berlins & Dyer, 1982; Bourdieu, 1991; Witz, 1990), sustained by the belief that male partnerships uphold credibility, reinforcing gender stereotypes (Jack & Jack, 1989, in Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). The narratives indicate that, despite rhetoric about diversity, the reality of policies and practices often falls short.

“I would have had sponsors and mentors; ... no one gave me one client relationship; I built them from scratch, you know.”

Emily

Reflecting on the challenges as a woman solicitor with kids in a magic circle firm, she highlighted how corporate structures and networking events predominantly held in the evenings were centred around cricket, golf, rugby or motor racing, incompatible with her caring responsibilities (Kay & Gorman, 2008). This lack of access to decision-makers and networking opportunities hindered her relationship building, mentorship, and sponsorship, crucial for career advancement, benefiting her male colleagues (McDonald, 2011). This trend deprived the majority of the participants of the inclusion safety necessary for an inclusive and productive workplace (Edmondson, 2019). The narratives aligned with Sommerlad and Sanderson’s contention that advancement in the legal profession relies more on personal relationships and patronage than talent (2019). Reflecting on her journey, she shared that had she been a man, she would have been offered a partnership much earlier.

While a few participants benefitted from mentorship, some experienced breaches of confidentiality, with potentially compromising information shared in confidence being relayed to decision-making partners. This further undermined their progress within the firm. Abigail, who had successfully created a niche for herself, commented on the value of networking differently:

“You have to find the ways of business development that work for you. So, I don’t drink alcohol and I don’t play golf ...I would do a lot of knowledge base marketing... you just have to find what works for you and work to your strengths, ..., I think it would have been a big mistake for me to have said I’m going to take up golf,

or ... start being a big drinker, or I'm gonna go to the, ... the lap dancing bars I think ... you have to identify what your strengths are and then work to them."

Abigail

The male-oriented networking patterns acted as gatekeepers, limiting women lawyers' proximity to male decision-makers, fostering an exclusionary culture amongst the participants, leading to feelings of isolation, marginalisation, decreased job satisfaction and commitment, ultimately influencing their subsequent career decisions and advancement (Kanter, 1977; Elacqua et al., 2009; Tomlinson et al., 2012; Babic & Hansez, 2021).

Role models, mentors & sponsors

The feeling of exclusion highlighted by nearly all participants appeared to contribute to interpersonal challenges, including a dearth of female role models, limited access to mentorship (Ibarra et al., 2010), sponsorship opportunities, and restricted entry into business development networks (Elkin, 2006). Participants perceived these barriers as obstructing their progression into partnership and leadership roles (Brass, 1985; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Brown & Trevino, 2014). The perception of a lack of female role models and mentors was palpable among many participants.

"I think it was still seen as a predominantly male space... I never saw a female corporate partner or heard of a female corporate partner. So, you couldn't look above you and see anybody that you would identify with. I mean, they were pretty few and far between in other spaces as well."

Emily

Indicating the scarcity of women partners, particularly in corporate law, which is predominantly associated with agentic qualities such as confidence, assertiveness, and aggression (Schein, 1973, 1975), impacted her perceived opportunities. However, some participants worked in corporate litigation successfully and were compassionate towards their teams, contrasting the challenges outlined by social role theory (Eagly, 1987) and role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), emphasising the need for the balance in perceptions of warmth versus competence. In a field atypical for women, Iqra recollected:

"As a female, a woman of colour...there was nobody else around me that looked like me... and I thought right, I'm gonna have to set a precedent here."

Iqra

She described feeling isolated and out of place in a field of law, with not many women solicitors in senior posts. She shared “ *there was clearly an imposter syndrome because I was out of my depth*”, a phenomenon where individuals doubt their accomplishments and fear being exposed (Clance & Imes, 1978). These feelings, as highlighted in Theme 1, are often linked to trait anxiety and the internalised pressure to appear highly competent (Langford & Clance, 1993). She signals a conscious decision to challenge entrenched norms and actively reshape the culture within her firm through inclusive leadership for women in the pipeline. Being entrusted with autonomy over her practice and feeling empowered to suggest change and challenge decisions enabled her to experience what Edmondson (2019) terms “challenger safety”, a critical component of psychological safety that supports innovation and dissent without fear of negative consequences. In cultivating a supportive environment, she demonstrated inclusive leadership, fostering mutual respect and compassion within her team, which in turn facilitated collective success and a sense of belonging (Ely & Meyerson, 2000).

Smoke and mirrors – Lack of transparency in processes

Most participants expressed their frustration regarding the lack of transparency in processes such as promotion, pay, and rewards. There was a perception of preferential treatment towards the male colleagues, regardless of their capabilities or experience (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). Many perceived a shield protecting male colleagues throughout their career journey, akin to the “glass escalator” effect (Williams, 1992), the opposite of the glass ceiling. This phenomenon is observed in female-dominated professions, where men benefit from structural advantages and are more likely to be promoted to leadership positions. Since women comprise 62% of the entry-level workforce (SRA, 2023), this phenomenon is palpable, exacerbating the feelings of exclusion and differential treatment experienced by participants (Elacqua et al., 2009; Babic & Hansez, 2021). The consistency of reward and promotion systems varied across firms, with larger firms having more extensive processes. This inconsistency allows reinforcement of subjective decision-making and unconscious bias, potentially disadvantaging underrepresented groups, particularly women and those with caring responsibilities, by rewarding those who conform to dominant, often male norms of visibility, availability, and self-promotion (Ashley & Empson, 2012).

“There was a panel interview with partners not drawn from your practice group even and not drawn from the UK, you know, an international panel..... assessing you doing certain activities over a two-day residential course.”

Joanna

Yet, medium- to small-sized firms lacked a consistent approach.

“...tapped me on the shoulder ... I can see your figures... I can’t guarantee it, but you need to apply, and the exact same thing happened exactly a year later with the partnership; just taps me on the shoulder; you’re ready to be a partner now, so you need to apply.”

Linda

This lack of transparency extended into recruitment and disciplining processes. A participant shared being called upon during her maternity leave to attend a potential redundancy meeting:

“They wanted to get rid of somebody within the team ... they said that they were going to effectively interview both of us, and then one would have to go.... I thought, I don’t want to do this. So, I said to them I want you to choose me. I want to go, and they said no ... we just put you through the process because we wanted to get rid of the other person.”

Michelle

She left the firm dissatisfied with its lack of transparency, insufficient support for performance issues, and a lack of empathy during her maternity leave, which caused significant stress (Taparia & Lenka, 2022). Similarly, Eleanor, an employment solicitor, elaborated on the firm’s profit-driven model; despite claiming to support work-life balance, the bottom line is that success is primarily measured by financial metrics, and anyone whose contributions drop will be exited. Scarlett shared a similar sentiment, describing the opaque promotion process as *“a bit of smoke and mirrors”* and calling for more honest dialogue to ensure fairness. In contrast with Powell and Butterfield (2015), who suggest that transparency, accountability, and structured promotion processes can mitigate gender bias and the resulting perception of the glass ceiling, participants’ narratives described law firms lacking such transparent mechanisms, relying on discretionary practices that obscure decision-making and sustain gender disparities. These findings emphasise the need for greater procedural clarity in legal settings to promote both gender equality and organisational effectiveness, both of which, the scholars emphasise, are interconnected.

Additionally, a lack of transparency persisted in how participants’ contributions were recognised. Despite working part-time, Emily only became aware of her significant financial

impact upon resigning. The subsequent offer of promotion appeared reactive, signalling the firm's intent to retain her value without prior acknowledgement of her contributions. This was perceived as a strategic move to maximise partner profits while avoiding formal recognition (Bolton & Muzio, 2008). Such opacity was viewed by participants as a deliberate control mechanism, fostering uncertainty and inhibiting women from seeking advancement or equity. These practices, described by some as a false economy, sustained silos, self-doubt, and insecurity among female professionals, reinforcing structural inequities within the firm.

Some participants raised concerns that firms prioritised post-qualification experience (PQE) over productivity in promotion decisions, disadvantaging those who took maternity leave or career breaks. Men were often assigned higher-paid practice areas, exacerbating gender-based pay disparities, which persisted even in senior roles, disincentivising women from seeking partnership positions, aligning with reports highlighting disparities in bonuses and pay (Goulbourne, 2018; The Law Society, 2021), with women often receiving less than their male counterparts despite their equal or more significant contributions. Inaya attributed this to biased remuneration committees favouring individuals who resembled them (*"male, pale, and stale"*). This sentiment aligns with research indicating that when male leaders favour those who mirror their values and backgrounds (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Haslam & Platow, 2001), they perpetuate exclusionary norms that restrict women's leadership progression (Ellemers, 2014).

"We now talk about gender equality and pay equality... when you're going to say these things, make sure that they're implemented on the ground. Don't make your staff feel like second class citizens... make sure that those inequalities don't exist in the first place because they do, they really do, and when employers think that it's OK to pay your male counterpart X and the female counterpart Y. Just use a bit of common sense, they are gonna talk to each other. They will find out, ...you make that person feel so worthless... Don't go out and promote ... we've got a cultural diversity champion and blah, blah, blah. It's just words. It's just lip service."

Priya

Beehr et al. (2004) suggest that individuals perceive their own promotion as due to competence, and others' as due to external factors such as favouritism. However, the perceived discrepancy in gender disparity in promotions and rewards seemed to contradict this suggestion. Priya's narrative conveyed deep frustration with firms' failure to translate their rhetoric on gender and pay equality into tangible action. Sharing her disillusionment at the persistent pay inequality, she highlights its damaging effects on morale and the

resentment it fosters. This aligns with data from leading UK and US law firms in London, showing a sharp drop-off in women's progression and significant pay gaps at senior levels of the £28 billion legal sector (Beioly, 2020).

The persistence of significant gender pay disparities in law firms reveals a smoke-and-mirrors effect within processes of reward and promotion. While the Gender Pay Gap Information Regulations 2017 (Legislation.gov.uk., 2022b) mandate firms with over 250 employees to disclose pay data, many strategically exclude equity partners, presenting a misleading picture of equality. For example, one City firm reported a 65.7% mean gap in 2019, which dropped to 20% when partners were excluded, demonstrating how reporting practices can obscure entrenched inequities (Wren & Partridge, 2021). These distortions conceal the ongoing undervaluation of women's work and reinforce traditional gender expectations (Dinovitzer et al., 2009). Law Society data confirm that pay gaps in large firms surpass the national average (20.3% vs. 14%), with bonus gaps averaging 39.4%, despite equal representation in bonus receipt (The Law Society, 2021; Kulich et al., 2007). A survey by Next 100 Years (2022) and Gapsquare confirms the sentiments implied in participants' narratives, finding that 84% of women believe pay equality in law is unlikely until the next generation or beyond, with persistent gaps driven by obscure reward systems and reluctance to discuss career progression openly. The illusion of meritocracy, compounded by opaque systems (Tsang, 2003), not only misleads but also dissuades women from pursuing advancement, as they are aware that the playing field remains uneven.

The findings align with the studies showing that women leaders are more likely to be evaluated based on subjective traits such as charisma and interpersonal style, whereas men's bonuses and promotions are more directly tied to quantifiable performance outcomes (Lyness & Heilman, 2006; Eagly & Carli, 2007), leading to more substantial bonuses. This discrepancy suggests that until women's leadership is equally valued, they will lack equal power and agency (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). The gender pay gap is worsened when firms allocate higher-paid practice areas to men. Fairer distribution of work is key to achieving pay equity. These disparities underscore the need for systemic change to ensure women are fairly rewarded and recognised across the legal profession. Stressing the need for fair, transparent processes to prevent women from feeling devalued, Priya urged firms to move beyond superficial gestures and genuinely address gender disparities. She warned against "gender washing" or "fempower-washing" (Sterbenk et al., 2021) instead of encouraging inclusive practices grounded in fairness, equal opportunities, and respect for all individuals (Özbilgin, 2023, in Vincent et al., 2024). Such structural biases are likely to undermine efforts to achieve gender equality in the profession and act as a disincentive for women to

aspire to partnership roles, thereby contributing to the persistence of the glass ceiling as raised by Research Question 1.

Work-life integration

Of the 31 participants, 27 had children and shared the significant challenge of balancing family priorities with their careers. Understandably, participants without children did not raise this as an issue but highlighted the importance of work-life balance. Consistent with the literature, participants shared a “double burden” of family and work, presenting one of their most critical challenges (Babic & Hansez, 2021), which is exacerbated by their relative reluctance to self-promote (Rudman & Glick, 2001; Bowles & McGinn, 2005). Managing work-life boundaries strained their well-being and affected their families, partners, and, at times, their teams. The paradox between gender and leadership stereotypes means women often face the dual challenge of meeting leadership expectations while conforming to gender norms (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001), a tension intensified by the male-dominated habitus of the legal profession (Bourdieu, 1991) and structural biases favouring the traditional male lawyer (Acker, 1990).

Consequently, the conflict between pursuing a successful legal career and meeting family commitments was exacerbated by the concern of falling behind their male colleagues, feeling they needed to overprove themselves to avoid career setbacks. These fears were confirmed when Inaya, a solicitor in a national firm, shared witnessing a friend in a leadership role being demoted while she was on maternity leave, highlighting the nature of the impact of women’s reproductive roles on their careers. This aligns with existing scholarship that documents the penalisation of motherhood. Cuddy et al. (2004) describe how working mothers are frequently judged as warm but incompetent, a stereotype that can materially harm women’s leadership trajectories. Often, firms penalise women on maternity leave by not reducing their targets, deeming them as having missed them. Several shared disparities in promotion around and post maternity, reinforcing gender bias. One solicitor returned to find her office reassigned and was placed at a makeshift desk with admin staff (Abigail). In another case, a senior male publicly blamed a female solicitor’s fertility for the team missing its target and the attached bonus in a team meeting. These narratives resonate with Ely and Meyerson’s assertion that organisational structures often remain blind to gendered life realities, thereby reproducing systemic disadvantage under the guise of neutrality (2000). In this context, maternity becomes not just a personal milestone but a professional liability, reflecting deep-rooted biases about women’s suitability for leadership.

“A lot of women lawyers, promising lawyers at different stages, were leaving once they had babies, and they were going and setting up their own firms, which is what I ended up doing because it became incredibly, incredibly unjust.”

Inaya

Women are making choices that are influenced by the constraints they encounter within the profession. Various theories attempt to explain women’s challenges in the legal profession and the gender inequity at the top, through notions such as Human Capital theory (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 1998), which focuses on individual choices and strategies and others that point to structural or cultural barriers as primary causes. In practice, as revealed by the participants’ narratives, these factors are intertwined, aligning with Sommerlad and Sanderson (2019), who challenge the assumption that workplace processes, like recruitment, remuneration, and promotion, are separate from home life. Women’s choices are made against the constraints posed by the factors discussed here within the context of social role theory (Eagly, 1987), role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), and structural and cultural influences. Women’s disproportionate caregiving responsibilities undermine their authority and progression in the legal profession (Thornton, 1996). Suggestions that women act in their best interests (Rational Choice Theory, Scott, 2000), which aligns with Hakim’s Preference Theory (1998), propose that women make career choices based on their preferences. This perspective shifts focus on barriers rather than facilitators of their advancement (Veale & Gold, 1998), overlooking the social, cultural, and structural factors the participants confronted shaping their preferences and limited their choices. A participant shared the perception firms have of women solicitors:

“They’ll go off and have babies or when they’ve had babies they can’t come back and do a professional job.”

Julie

This narrative reflects the voluntarist approach firms adopt, framing career breaks as women’s choices and therefore, their responsibility for shaping their careers (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). McGlynn notes the “baby bar” has replaced the historic “marriage bar,” limiting how employers perceive women’s career potential (1996:229, in Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). Although Julie believed this perception motivated them to take on more to disprove the general perception that women can’t cut it, the added stress was the opportunity cost (Ely et al., 2011).

Work–life integration emerged as a major barrier to progression, with participants citing inflexible targets and punitive responses to maternity leave, including demotion and public shaming, which threatened inclusion and learner safety (Edmondson, 2019). While career choices are shaped by various factors (Dietrich & List, 2012), the lack of flexible working often pushed women to seek more inclusive environments. Although recent legislative changes permit flexible working from day one (Gov.uk, n.d), their impact remains unclear, especially amongst remote work cultures. Participants described a persistent tension between perceived commitment and structural inflexibility, as commitment is ideologically tied to long hours and visibility (Johns, 2010), sidelining caregivers (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2023). Despite growing spousal support (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Livingston, 2014), many firms continue to endorse masculine ideals of uninterrupted career paths. Framing work–family conflict as a personal issue (Taparia & Lenka, 2022) masks the profession’s resistance to inclusivity. As Menkel-Meadow (1989) contends, meaningful reform requires challenging gendered assumptions, not reinforcing rigid success models.

Contrary to Vianen and Fischer’s (2002) claim that women are less ambitious, most participants remained highly driven even after becoming mothers, maintaining their credentials to stay competitive. These findings align with Walsh’s (2012) study of 384 non-partner women solicitors, which highlights that while ambition remains strong, many prioritise work–life balance due to inflexible firm cultures. Even the most committed participants, like Inaya, felt compelled to work through maternity leave to avoid perceptions of reduced commitment, at the cost of precious time with her child.

Claims that women are less ambitious and opt out of leadership roles are challenged by evidence from the narratives, showing that even women with no caregiving responsibilities face persistent structural and cultural barriers, as other research highlights men are considerably more likely to reach partnership positions than women (Kay & Hagan, 1998; Bolton & Muzio, 2008; Aulakh et al., 2017). As Mia noted, the male-dominated status quo reflects systemic exclusion rather than a lack of ambition. One participant reflected on women’s choice of law as a profession:

“I still don’t think law is a great career for women... I see misogyny day in, day out.... and they are given the message that they are lucky, ... a privileged person to work in this UK top 50 firm.”

Abigail

Her narrative reflects that despite advances in gender equality, misogyny and gender-based discrimination remain prevalent. She shared that being perceived as “*lucky*” or “*privileged*” to work in a prestigious firm can mask the underlying inequities faced by women lawyers. She observed that women lawyers often seemed almost grateful to be there, typically lacking confidence, while male lawyers do not appear to have this issue. Women, culturally conditioned into caregiving roles, are often undervalued economically, contributing to diminished confidence and imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978), making their “choices” feel illusive. The legal profession reinforces these patriarchal norms by idealising linear, full-time careers, demanding a rethink of how merit and commitment are defined (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 1998:13).

“This kind of battering over a period of years, I see so many women in law who are just wildly lacking in any kind of confidence and are almost grateful to have a job.”

Abigail

Such actions communicate a clear message of devaluation and exclusion, undermining women’s professional status. Abigail’s narrative illustrates the complex interaction of systemic barriers and internalised beliefs that cyclically affect women’s self-worth and professional agency (Tomlinson et al., 2012). Her suggestion that some women feel grateful to have a job implies a sense of indebtedness or lowered expectations, further impacting their aspirations for advancement to management roles. Profession’s preference for linear careers prompts women to conceal their parental duties in the workplace, indicating the prejudice they perceive for their caring responsibilities (Williams, 2000).

“We all did this through our careers; we almost denied we had children; if we were going to a parents’ evening or a sports day, we would say we were going somewhere else, you know, an accountants meeting and yet the men who we worked with, if they’ve got a Nativity play to go to would tell everybody and say how great it was and all the rest of it.” This behaviour was shaped by her feeling “*like you were sort of second best and that people would think, you know, you’d prioritise your children, which of course you would, who wouldn’t.*”

Michelle

Highlighting the persistent stress of being judged as lacking commitment, this narrative exposes the dual standards, where men are often praised for acknowledging family

responsibilities, while women face scrutiny. Workplace norms across law firms cultivate a culture of sacrifice and self-denial, with “commitment” and “choice” framed through a masculine lens (Sommerlad, 1998). Fitting in with the masculine dominant cultural capital in the profession (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 1998), becomes a source of chronic stress, an injustice, MacKinnon (1989:223) critiques as both exaggerated and emblematic of liberal failings. This sentiment is mirrored in the findings of this research, where legal workplaces uphold gendered norms under the guise of fairness, reinforced by liberal ideologies such as merit and equal opportunity, that fail to challenge the patriarchal underpinnings, determining the structural and systemic inequalities in the profession. Despite some formal progress, the glass ceiling persists through subtler mechanisms that privilege linear, uninterrupted career paths (Muzio & Tomlinson, 2012; Pringle et al., 2017). These norms marginalise those with caregiving roles or alternative trajectories, with many participants, regardless of parental status, reporting exclusion from masculinised expectations.

These findings demonstrate how male-dominated culture and gendered leadership stereotypes create a double bind, expecting women to be both assertive and nurturing while penalising them for either. This no-win situation undermines women’s leadership legitimacy, reinforces symbolic exclusion, and is entrenched by rigid working patterns, informal networks, and unequal access to high-value work. Women’s underrepresentation in senior roles thus stems from interlocking systemic forces, rather than individual choice. Participants navigated these barriers in varied ways, from working around obstacles to redefining success by founding their own firms. In agreement with Eagly and Carli (2007), the findings suggest that the glass ceiling oversimplifies the barriers women face, which align better with their metaphor of a labyrinth, a complex, winding path demanding persistence, strategy, and resilience rather than a single barrier at the top (Morrison et al., 1987). As their careers advanced, Maclaran et al.’s (1997) glasshouse metaphor aptly encapsulates the cumulative constraints of masculine leadership ideals, their high visibility and scrutiny, opaque advancement systems, and presenteeism, creating structures in which women can see opportunities yet find them challenging to access. This study positions such organisational cultures not merely as precursors to the glass ceiling, but as symptoms of deeper structural patriarchy embedded in the legal profession’s evolution, which transcends the previously identified organisational culture, along with interpersonal and inter-situational dynamics (Babic & Hansez, 2021).

Theme 5: Participants' Responses to the Glass Ceiling

In addressing Research Question 1, the study identifies enduring barriers participants faced as they navigated their paths towards partnership roles, barriers that may discourage many from pursuing similar ambitions. They employed varied strategies to navigate these challenges, providing valuable insights into their resilience and agency in confronting and negotiating the obstacles along their journeys. Beyond exposing the cultural and structural factors that sustain gendered hierarchies, the findings reveal how participants' responses shaped their career trajectories. Their narratives illuminate the complexities of progressing from qualification to partnership. Theme 5 highlights both the enabling and constraining aspects of this journey, showing how participants adapted, persisted, and redefined success within an inequitable system.

Negative Responses: The Toll of the Glass Ceiling

The data from 31 participants' narratives reveal that the pursuit of ambition and progression within law firms often came at a cost. Across Themes 1 to 3, participants described how structural and cultural barriers undermined their well-being and professional confidence. Many reported growing dissatisfaction, frustration, emotional disengagement, and high levels of stress (Elacqua et al., 2009; Babic & Hansez, 2021; Taparia & Lenka, 2022) as evidenced in their shared narratives. In some instances, this culminated in burnout (Burke, 2004; Johnson et al., 2016; Tiwari et al., 2019) and hospitalisation, with others expressing a loss of self-belief and the onset of imposter feelings (Clance & Imes, 1978). Participants attributed their increased stress to multiple interconnecting pressures, including exclusion from influential networks (Cross, 2010; Navarro-Astor et al., 2017), being overlooked for promotion, a lack of senior mentorship and sponsorship (Elkin, 2006; Ibarra et al., 2010), inadequate recognition and reward, sexist treatment (Glick et al., 1997; Glick & Fisk, 1999), and family-unfriendly processes and practices (Cuddy et al., 2004). These challenges were compounded by an obsessive focus on billable hours and opaque processes that enabled subjectivity and consistently privileged male colleagues (Tomlinson et al., 2012). Notably, these challenges were particularly acute for women from underrepresented ethnic and lower socio-economic backgrounds who faced the double or triple burden of gender, class and ethnicity expectations, making them feel like misfits in an elitist male-dominated profession constructed by white middle-class men who dominate the senior leadership and management board positions (Crenshaw, 1989; Aulakh et al., 2017). For many, the cumulative effect of these conditions prompted serious questioning of their place in the profession and, in some cases, the recalibration of their aspirations altogether (Wrigley, 2002).

Positive Responses: Resilience, Refusal to Accept the Status Quo and Risk-Taking (3Rs)

Notably, much of the literature on the glass ceiling emphasises the structural disadvantages women face, which worsen with seniority (Elacqua et al., 2009; Cotter et al., 2001; Babic & Hansez, 2021; Taparia & Lenka, 2022; Shor et al., 2022). This study, in addition to examining the systemic barriers, also highlights the strategic agency and resilience (Southwick et al., 2014) demonstrated by participants in response to these barriers. Although some, owing to their underrepresentation, fostered self-doubt and internalised exclusion or disengagement at specific points in their journey early on (Kanter, 1977), most women actively resisted institutional constraints, reframing success, challenging dominant norms, and forging alternative paths to partnership. These responses were not uniform but reflected diverse, context-specific strategies, ranging from leveraging their compassionate styles to cultivate inclusive teams to establishing their own firms (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Carnes & Radojevich-Kelley, 2011) and redefining their professional identity on their terms (Muzio & Tomlinson, 2012; Pringle et al., 2017). The responses also shed light on the intersectional agency that women from overlapping intersectionalities utilised to resist exclusionary norms and redefine success (Crenshaw, 1989). In doing so, the participants not only navigated the limitations imposed by gendered structures but also contributed to reshaping the profession from within. The following section examines these affirmative responses, highlighting the ingenuity, courage, and leadership displayed in resisting systemic barriers.

Navigating the adverse working conditions captured in Themes 1 to 3, participants gradually transformed negative experiences into opportunities for growth, drawing on positive emotions to build resilience (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004; Kim-Cohen & Turkewitz, 2012; Southwick et al., 2014). Resilience is defined as, “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress” (Southwick et al., 2014:2) and is dynamic, context-dependent capacity that builds over time (Pietrzak & Southwick, 2011; Kim-Cohen & Turkewitz, 2012). Aligned with this, there was a noticeable shift in participants’ narratives as they became more experienced, and gained ownership over their careers, recognising that structural inequalities rather than personal deficits were responsible for their negative experiences (Walby, 1990). Despite persistent challenges, they gained confidence through managing complex cases and overcoming exclusion (Sommerlad, 2016), developing their belief in their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997, 2001), and capacity to thrive in environments shaped by masculine norms (Bolton & Muzio, 2007; Kay & Gorman, 2008). Furthermore, their resilience was strengthened by adopting a growth rather than a dilemma mindset (Zheng et al., 2018), where they simultaneously managed the tensions

between agency and community, thereby strengthening rather than depleting their resilience (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004) and effectiveness. This perspective aligns with Mavin and Grandy's notion of doing gender differently (2012:221), where they could concurrently undertake multiple enactments of femininity and masculinity depending on the need, creating possibilities for gender binaries over time. They demonstrated perseverance, cultivating support networks of partners, family, friends, and mentors (Ragins & Kram, 2014; Spitz, 2017) that fostered emotional intelligence and strategic adaptation, enabling them to navigate exclusion (Kanter, 1977; Hopkins et al., 2008), recover stronger, and develop innovative solutions.

"I have a house husband, and our roles are entirely reversed from the traditional....., but it's still noteworthy, unfortunately, we need to get to the point where this stuff is not noteworthy."

Amber

Hoping for a future where her situation is not remarkable but part of a broader acceptance of diverse family structures that subvert traditional gender roles, her narrative conveys palpable hope. Armed with the support networks, increased resilience, and a belief in their skills to succeed despite the challenges came the increased aptitude for risk-taking, evidenced by a notable trend of frequent departures from firms (Tomlinson et al., 2012), indicating the participants' refusal to accept the status quo of the traditional firms, where white males, the highest socio-economic group, maintain a male-dominated habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; Sommerlad et al., 2013) which as mentioned in previous narratives, remains structured around male lawyers (Acker, 1990). Participants sought environments with less discrimination, more equitable and inclusive cultures, and better opportunities for advancement and rewards, reflecting their ambitions (McDowell, 2015; Field et al., 2023). Participants had adopted several strategies during their careers (Tomlinson et al., 2012), including assimilation, compromise and relocation to other firms (McDowell, 2006, in Ryan et al., 2007). Some even withdrew temporarily from the profession (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Babic & Hansez, 2021). They demanded fairer treatment from traditional firms and refused to accept the differential treatment and the male-dominated status quo when their expectations were unmet (Bell et al., 2024). In response, many sought to reform the service delivery model as an alternative strategy (Tomlinson et al., 2012). While organisations often attribute women's departures to a lack of ambition (Fels, 2004) and deem them as pushed out, the participants did not lack ambition; instead, they chose to opt out and continue their careers elsewhere (McDowell, 2006, in Ryan et al., 2007) due to the experienced constraints.

Based on their responses to the challenges they encountered, participants could be categorised into three distinct groups: those who founded their own firms, those who transitioned to firms with a visible presence of women in influential positions, and those who remained within traditional firms. Several founders left before reaching partnership, rejecting the pressure to conform to male-dominated archetypes (MacKinnon, 1983) and challenging the legitimacy of the traditional model. In doing so, they exercised agency, taking risks based on the built resilience, challenging Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence (Swartz, 1997), and refusing to accept the status quo of male-dominated traditional firms (Bell et al., 2024). Their actions align with Tomlinson et al.'s (2012) notion of transformative practices that aim to disrupt the traditional firm model. For those who established their own firms (Ryan & Haslam, 2007), the decision stemmed from a desire for autonomy, balance, and self-defined success, values often marginalised in mainstream legal cultures (Harding, 2007; Patterson & Mavin, 2009). Leila shared that she would rather be her own boss and do things her way. Another shared

"I know I'm good at the work that I do and I'm going to make it work for me rather than ... allowing them to define what I'm worth and what I should or shouldn't be able to do and just having no one else to answer to ... If something feels right, I go for it."

Maryam

A participant from a minority ethnic group with a strong sense of self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation declined a partnership offer, instead pursuing greater autonomy and independence and setting up her own firm (Patterson & Mavin, 2009). Similarly, another founder participant from an underrepresented ethnic group expressed a desire to shape their own future and leave a positive legacy, wishing to serve as a role model (Ibarra et al., 2010), and demonstrate to future generations that success can be achieved through models different from those of traditional firms (Mia). For participants from diverse backgrounds, resilience was forged through navigating intersecting oppressions, which heightened both emotional labour and the demands of strategic self-positioning (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins et al., 2009). Participants viewed perseverance as essential to their success, sharing a resilience characterised by persistence and an unwavering belief in their readiness for opportunities despite the setbacks they faced. The narratives revealed a cyclical dynamic whereby greater exposure to the adverse impacts of inequality fostered heightened resilience, which in turn emboldened participants to engage in risk-taking behaviours, underpinned by a refusal to

accept the status quo within the male-dominated system from which they felt excluded. Consequently, participants often took a *"leap of faith...and see what happens"* (Sandra).

As noted in Chapter 2, while literature acknowledges women's agency through career shifts or entrepreneurship (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Carnes & Radojevich-Kelley, 2011), it often lacks metaphors that capture their strategic agency, emotional risk-taking, and self-determination. Some participants, establishing their own firms or leaving traditional firms, took a *leap of faith*, a decision they took without clear support or certainty of success. Their resilience and risk-taking embodied faith as a personal commitment in the face of professional uncertainty. This idea draws from Kierkegaard's (1843) notion of faith as trusting a path even when the outcome is unknown. Although he used this in a religious sense, the women in this study showed a similar belief in their judgment, experience, and purpose. By walking away from male-dominated structures, they exercised agency and chose pathways that better aligned with their values. However, this kind of personal, faith-driven decision-making is not without criticism. Habermas (1991) challenges these emotional choices, arguing that they lack rationality, shared reasoning or wider social support. Instead, favouring a model of action rooted in deliberation and shared norms rather than isolated, private conviction based on faith.

In this research, participants' accounts demonstrate how structural inequality often silences women's voices or excludes them from decision-making spaces, thereby undermining communicative rationality itself. In this regard, the women's "leap" should not be viewed as irrational, but rather as a form of strategic resistance, a refusal to remain complicit in symbolic violence within the male-dominated legal habitus (Swartz, 1997; Bourdieu, 2001; Bell et al., 2024). This study employs the leap of faith metaphor to illustrate participants' resilience in navigating uncertain career progression paths without structural support or external validation. Their risk-taking, rooted in built resilience, reflects a personal commitment made in the face of uncertainty and a deliberate rejection of the inequitable and differential treatment encountered in traditional law firms (Kierkegaard, 1843; Habermas, 1991; Honig, 2021). This refusal constituted an active, embodied political and ethical stance, 'a decline to recognise, rather than resist or simply oppose, masculine leadership norms' (Bell et al., 2024:1). In doing so, they exercised agency, demonstrated strategic risk-taking (Dhir, 2015, in McClane & Rosenblum, 2022), and shielded themselves from further marginalisation. While refusal differs from other coping strategies observed in the profession (Tomlinson et al., 2012), it aligns closely with reformation, as participants sought systemic change. Participants, therefore, in confronting the glass ceiling (Morrison et al., 1987), navigating the labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007) and existing within a glasshouse structure

(Maclaran et al., 1997), embodied the “3Rs” **resilience**, by persisting through exclusionary cultures; **refusal**, by rejecting male-dominated models of success that constrained their identities and ambitions and **risk-taking**, by leaving secure roles to pursue uncertain, values-aligned paths.

“Even the smallest forms of disruptive self-expression can be exquisitely powerful ... and inspire enough people and sooner or later you get real change... It is the women making the difference... just pushing away at these things, just pushing, pushing, pushing.”

Abigail

Although the attempted reformation is modest, the participants’ everyday acts of defiance, described by Abigail as “*just pushing, pushing, pushing*” powerfully embody the 3Rs of resilience, refusal and risk-taking, reflecting a quiet yet cumulative resistance that gradually challenges entrenched norms. Participants’ narratives resonate with Walby’s (2011) concept of gender mainstreaming, which seeks to integrate gender equality perspectives into broader efforts; however, this research suggests that it remains insufficient, as more profound structural and cultural inequalities persist. Abigail’s account highlights that women are often initiators of change, highlighting their agency. Despite initiatives such as the Women in Law (The Law Society, 2022), First 100 Years (2022), the Equality Act 2010, and the Gender Pay Gap Regulations (2017), alongside firm-level pledges such as Linklaters’ (2022) target for gender parity by 2030, progress is slow. This ongoing resistance within legal culture endures despite strong evidence linking diversity to organisational success (Hunt et al., 2018) and its endorsement as a UN sustainability goal (United Nations, 2023).

The findings challenge the prevailing literature, which often portrays risk-taking as typical for men but not women (Eckel & Grossman, 2008; Charness & Gneezy, 2012). This portrayal likely persists because risk-taking is also used to blame and marginalise women, thereby curbing their ambitions (Lupton, 2013). Furthermore, perceived gender differences in risk-taking are often cited as justification for the relative absence of women in senior roles, despite evidence that such generalisations oversimplify complex behaviours (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Furthermore, the fact that most participants had children disproves law firms’ justification for limiting partnership prospects due to requests for flexible and hybrid working arrangements (Thornton & Bagust, 2007). Participants felt their innovative ideas and desire to modernise the profession were not understood or valued. Participants felt they had little

to lose, as they worked harder than most of their male colleagues and generated income for firms that did not reasonably or proportionately acknowledge or reward their efforts. Therefore, from their mid-careers onward, participants consistently demonstrated a willingness to take risks, aligning with scholarly recommendations (Glass & Cook, 2016, 2020). This appetite for risk grew in proportion to the challenges they encountered. They viewed their departures from traditional firms as an empowering personal choice, allowing them to exercise control and agency over their careers (Schmitt et al., 2002). They risked the security of a regular income without any guarantees that setting up their firms or moving to new firms would pay off, aligning with the leap of faith metaphor. However, as Mia noted, the worst-case scenario would simply be a return to another firm, a situation they felt confident navigating, given their experience and proven track record. This outlook aligns with Habermas' critique that while faith involves a personal leap, it must still consider supporting evidence (1991). Participants who stepped away from traditional legal paths faced uncertainty but acted with confidence rooted in professional resilience and a strategic belief that they could return if needed, balancing risk with rational discernment. Their refusal to accept inequitable treatment reflected a conscious rejection of the male-dominated norms of the profession (Gerson, 1986), where success is typically measured by:

“Partner equity profits per firm... that is the main metric of how one city firm ...compares itself to another ... it's really about money and for as long as we're measuring our success just by money... ultimately, if someone's financial contribution wanes... a lot of firms, city firms, will, you know, just exit you.”

Eleanor

The prioritisation of profits observed in almost all firms often came at the expense of people, leading to ethical compromises (Webley & Duff, 2007). The emphasis on financial metrics undermines the broader contributions made by women through largely unpaid management duties assigned to them, such as leading health and safety and diversity initiatives, serving on remuneration committees, and supervising junior staff, tasks that are crucial for professional development and retention but are often neither measured nor credited to them (Ashley & Empson, 2017). Amber, the sole breadwinner expecting her third child, did not receive a contract after her firm was taken over. Motivated by the differential treatment she had experienced throughout her career, she eventually established her firm, continuously evolving it to address the inequities she had faced.

“That was the final nail in the coffin of ever wanting to work for “the man” again... [her firm] was intentionally everything that the law firm was not: no time recording, fixed fees, super commercial and flexible.”

Amber

The focus was on delivering client-centric services rather than emphasising billable hours, with the workforce’s well-being at the core of her business model. Nearly all participants prioritised compassionate, personable, and ethical service delivery, moving away from masculine, command-and-control leadership styles (Koller, 2004; Eagly, 2005; Ollilainen & Calasanti, 2007), which hinder innovation, towards models centred on collaboration and empowerment (Greenleaf, 1977; Hlupic, 2019). Rooted in compassion and collegiality, their approach aligns with contemporary leadership theory, which encourages leaders to discover their own voice and support others in doing the same (Covey, 2004; Hlupic, 2014). Sheryll, a tax planning solicitor, realising her development had stagnated at a large commercial firm, chose not to move to another firm because, *“in a big firm, it’s the same thing, just a different office really.”* Instead, she identified a gap in the market and decided to *“change things a little bit”* by establishing her firm with another female solicitor. Sheryll’s ethos was exemplified in her approach to client interactions, where she valued the importance of relationships over immediate financial gain. She shared how older clients often call her *“just to chat”* without any work needing to be done or charged for, because this personal connection is *“very important to that family.”* Investing time in these relationships, according to her, not only builds trust but also brings in recommendations and strengthens long-term relationships. She felt that large firms, focused on profit, overlooked the personal touch, expecting *“billing 7-8 hours”* daily. Her firm, in contrast, prioritised personalised service over a transactional approach (Bass et al., 2003). One example of the superficial, transactional approach in large firms was well-being sessions that left chargeable hour targets unchanged, adding pressure on attendees to work longer. While most founders acknowledged the hard work of establishing a firm, one participant, reflecting on a decade of growth, noted:

I didn't realise that when you set up a law firm, it's really hard to have a life. I mean, I try. I try very hard and my husband's very supportive. And we have ... small children and, ... I might have had more fun if I hadn't.

Eleanor

She described being completely autonomous, but there is incredible responsibility accompanied by a different kind of stress, and she emphasised that those who have their own firms have to remember why they did it, possibly referencing the lack of autonomy and the differential treatment she received through her journey. These firms had a gender ratio favouring women, not by deliberate intention, but because their reputation for flexible working patterns attracted more women. A founder participant shared that most of her 15 staff members are female.

“We [are]... completely flexible in terms of hybrid working and ... I'm still taking on people now following maternity leave and unsuccessful consultations about returning to work on a flexible or part time basis and I'm like, well, I've got at home for you”. Additionally, she “Trained and qualified a solicitor in 2017, it was probably the first remote training contract in the jurisdiction.... she trained around ... children, so everything was flexible, relaxed.”

Amber

Women lawyers who have set up their own firms are attracting talent that traditional firms are losing, especially after maternity leave and unsuccessful consultations about returning to work on a flexible or part-time basis. She advocates diversifying the legal service users by considering female-led firms based on merit rather than traditional, homogeneous choices. Non-founding participants strategically managed their careers by frequently transitioning between firms, meticulously preserving their professional reputation until they identified an institution whose values aligned with their own. This alignment was often found in firms led by female executives with autonomy to shape strategic narratives and influence work practices, highlighting that despite changes in legal practice, outdated hierarchies and firm structures have resisted adaptation, leaving the profession “factionalised, heterogeneous, and fragmented” (Paterson, 2011:9) and lacking coherence in identity, values, and career pathways. A family solicitor exemplified this strategic approach, demonstrating how she navigated opportunities and challenges to effectively position herself for career advancement (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

“I either needed to move firm ... where I could see the opportunities more visibly, or I needed to carve out my own area and be able to show my worth in another way that wasn't... just happening to have tenure.”

Lisa

Self-awareness and career differentiation contributed to participants' resilience in overcoming challenges (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). A recurring pattern was women's tendency to support other women, with many describing senior women as inclusive and catalytic agents of change, whether in traditional firms, female-led firms, or firms they founded. The presence of women in leadership appears to foster greater compassion, support, and inclusion, aligning with the trickle-up theory, which suggests that increased female representation at junior levels will eventually lead to parity at senior levels in male-dominated professions (Pringle et al., 2017). However, gender parity in partnerships remains elusive, indicating, aligned with the findings, that barriers extend beyond the lack of female role models (Ely et al., 2011).

“I do think she has different skills because she is a woman, and I think part of that is the communication skills and the softer side of things.”

Susanne

Participants' past inequitable experiences seem to have fostered a trend of not penalising lawyers for parental responsibilities, suggesting that supportive cultures promoting diversity and inclusion can effectively help women overcome challenges (Ely & Meyerson, 2000a). They offer flexible working hours, accommodating the work and family responsibilities often lacking in traditional firms (Davidson & Cooper, 1992), with inclusive cultures (Kay & Gorman, 2008) focusing on personable, client-centric service delivery, building long-term relationships rather than the transactional approach adopted in traditional firms (Abel, 1989). Comprehensive support for women during and after maternity leave was also shared, reflecting a culture of openness and solidarity. However, a founder shared concerns about running a profitable, compliant firm while maintaining a work-life balance. Amber and Eleanor, both founders, raised concerns about junior lawyers expecting work-life balance and high pay without fully understanding the financial dynamics of running a firm (De Klerk, 2010; Donovan & Finn, 2013; Waworuntu et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, most participants who attained senior roles challenged traditional norms by fostering inclusive environments where employees are encouraged to bring their whole selves to work through open communication channels. Aurora shared that if anyone with children is late to her firm, they are late, but do not face any adverse implications. Julie, a family solicitor, believed that her staff's health and family came first.

“I’m trying to correct all the horrible things like that I had to deal with to ensure that it doesn’t happen to anyone on my watch.”

Julie

Echoing Julie’s sentiments, Susanne observed that some men also struggle with the rigidity of “*working in a corporate kind of guerrilla factory.*” Leaving her previous firm over its lack of transparency, she found greater support under female leadership and now champions an “empowered working” model that values flexibility and contributions beyond revenue. Women in senior roles were seen as pivotal in reshaping law firm culture, tackling systemic barriers, and rejecting presenteeism (Budjanovcanin, 2018). Participants described fostering openness through staff discussions of sensitive issues, empathetic recruitment, and initiatives such as menopause support groups (inclusive of men), private healthcare, and mentoring via LinkedIn, personal branding, and allyship, reflecting strong solidarity. In contrast, one founder aligned with traditional masculine norms criticised maternity leave and upheld “maximum rewards” for prioritising work over other commitments (Hakim, 2000), echoing the traditional emphasis on commitment, choice, and personal sacrifice that often penalises women for reproductive roles (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019).

To summarise, participants’ reflections confirm the persistence of the glass ceiling (Morrison et al., 1987; Babic & Hansez, 2021; Taparia & Lenka, 2022), shaped by male-dominated culture, structural barriers, and gendered leadership stereotypes. While Babic and Hansez (2021) identify organisational culture, situational dynamics, and interpersonal interactions as precursors, this study argues these stem from the legal profession’s deeper patriarchal foundations, making male-dominated culture a symptom rather than the root cause. Many participants responded to discouragement, marginalisation, and stalled careers in traditional firms with active resistance, leaving, founding firms, or seeking workplaces offering psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019), expanding understandings of the glass ceiling’s impact beyond strain and turnover (Babic & Hansez, 2021). Departures before the partnership reflected resilience, self-belief, and a rejection of structures that undermine identity and equality, challenging male-normed cultures and creating alternative leadership models. Gendered barriers emerged throughout women’s careers, not only at the top, aligning with the labyrinth metaphor (Eagly & Carli, 2007) and the “glasshouse” (Maclaran et al., 1997) as systemic enclosures. Despite a rise in women partners from 35% to 37% (SRA, 2024), cultural change and parity remain absent (Zimmer, 1988; Ames, 2022; Ryan, 2023), underscoring persistent structural inequities and the transformative albeit modest potential of women’s collective action. Finally, the leap of faith metaphor is adopted within the broader backdrop of the neoliberal shift that individualises responsibility, placing the

onus on women to adapt, self-manage, and demonstrate resilience, rather than driving structural reform (Rottenberg, 2014; Gill, 2017; Ryan, 2023).

Conclusion

This chapter, through an in-depth analysis of Themes 1 to 3, addresses Research Question 1 and affirms the enduring presence of the glass ceiling in the legal profession (Morrison et al, 1987; Babic & Hansez, 2021). However, this study advances existing literature by revealing how exclusionary dynamics manifest well before women reach senior roles, rooted not merely in organisational culture, but in a broader structural patriarchy embedded within the evolution of legal practice (Aulakh et al., 2017; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019; Babic & Hansez, 2021; Taparia & Lenka, 2022). This study extends glass ceiling scholarship by shifting focus from a singular threshold to a complex, winding professional journey with detours and dead ends, captured by the *labyrinth* metaphor (Eagly & Carli, 2007), where women confront gendered structural and cultural challenges from the outset, requiring persistence, strategic navigation, and incremental disruption. Participants' accounts reveal how masculine leadership norms, opaque advancement systems, and cultures of billable hours and presenteeism create a male-coded habitus, sustained through forms of symbolic violence that penalise women without overt coercion (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). Within this environment, cumulative barriers impede progression, a reality more accurately captured by the *glasshouse* metaphor (Maclaran et al., 1997), where gendered challenges arise at every stage of a career, not solely at the leadership threshold, representing a systemic enclosure that defines women's professional lives judging it by male-centric standards. These findings further expose how male-dominated culture intersects with gendered leadership stereotypes, particularly the double bind that expects women to be both assertive and nurturing yet penalises them for being either (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Koenig et al., 2011). This paradox, alongside structural inequities such as inflexible work patterns, presenteeism, exclusion from high-value work, and informal networks (Muzio & Ackroyd, 2005; Tomlinson et al., 2013), compounds these inequities, reinforcing symbolic exclusion (Bourdieu, 1991) and undermining their legitimacy and sense of belonging. The challenges were experienced more acutely by women with multiple intersecting identities, illustrating how overlapping forms of discrimination compound disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). Despite a marginal rise in women partners (SRA, 2024), the findings suggest that this has not translated into meaningful cultural change (Zimmer, 1988), and gender equality at the top remains elusive and at lower levels, it persists more in numbers than in lived experience (Ames, 2022; Ryan, 2023).

Together, these interwoven dynamics confirm that women's underrepresentation in senior roles is not the result of individual shortcomings, such as choice or commitment, but instead of deep-rooted systemic constraints. Although most participants faced discouragement and marginalisation, resulting in heightened stress, overall, their responses reflected **resilience** (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004; Southwick et al., 2014), **refusal** to accept the status quo (Bell et al., 2024), and **risk-taking** (Glass & Cook, 2016, 2020), representing "**3Rs**" in diverse strategic responses. Some exited traditional firms until they found alignment with their values, which was often in firms where women held influence (McGlynn, 2000). Others reframed success on their own terms by founding their firms before attaining partnership. Based on the findings, this study introduces a new metaphor of a "*leap of faith*" (Kierkegaard, 1843; Habermas, 1991), capturing women's courage, grounded not in resignation, but in self-belief in their skills and self-efficacy and discontentment with the profession's structures that compromised their identity and equality. In doing so, they extend existing understandings of responses to the glass ceiling beyond outcomes such as job strain, disengagement, and reduced productivity (Babic & Hansez, 2021), toward a strategic redefinition of success and resistance through innovation (Menkel-Meadow, 1989).

Within this constrained context, women's collective responses embody a persistent resistance that reimagines leadership, work culture, and success. These acts embody the 3Rs and highlight women's growing refusal to accept professional exclusion passively, as depicted by the existing metaphors such as the glass ceiling, glass cliff and labyrinth. The findings suggest that while the scale of reform remains modest, its impact is transformative. However, this metaphor also reflects a neoliberal shift that individualises responsibility, placing the onus on women to adapt, self-manage, and demonstrate resilience, rather than driving structural reform (Rottenberg, 2014; Gill, 2017; Ryan, 2023). These findings set the stage for the next chapter, which explores Themes 4 and 5, examining participants' experiences in partnership and the emergence of the glass cliff (Ryan & Haslam, 2005) in the legal profession.

Chapter 6 - Discussion and Findings: Ascension to Partnership

6.1 Introduction

Building on the glass ceiling literature (Morrison et al., 1987), the previous chapter explored participants' experiences on the pathways to partnership, revealing that barriers were encountered not only at senior levels but throughout their careers. Beyond the known strategies women use to navigate legal careers (Tomlinson et al., 2012), this study found participants often employed the 3Rs: Resilience, Refusal to accept the male-dominated norms and Risk-taking to cultivate values-driven innovation. Some established their own firms or joined organisations aligned with their values, while others negotiated autonomy within traditional firms, thereby circumventing the constraints of the glass ceiling (Dreher, 2003; Eagly & Carli, 2007). In line with Sabharwal (2013) and Esposito's (2021) research emphasising the need to examine women's experiences in leadership roles to examine the glass cliff phenomenon, this chapter focuses on investigating the surrounding circumstances of partnership appointments and the lived experiences of participants in these roles. It is organised around discussion of two generated themes: **Theme 4**, which explores the circumstances surrounding appointments to partnerships, often unseen and less understood (Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2006; Ellemers, 2014; Glass & Cook, 2016; Esposito, 2021), and **Theme 5**, which explores how participants navigated and experienced their appointments. Using the glass cliff phenomenon as a lens, which suggests women are disproportionately appointed to precarious leadership roles during crises (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), this chapter explores why, despite comprising the majority at the entry level, women solicitors remain underrepresented as partners in law firms (SRA, 2024). To avoid confirmation bias, participants were not introduced to the concept of the glass cliff prior to the interviews (Ryan & Haslam, 2007).

6.2 Discussion of the Findings: Beyond the Glass Ceiling – Introducing the Glass Cliff

Breaking the glass ceiling was a milestone, but for some, it led to the precarious leadership conditions of the glass cliff (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Others avoided this by founding their own firms or moving to organisations aligned with their values, often led by women. Across these pathways, participants enacted the 3Rs - Resilience, Refusal to accept the status quo, and Risk-taking, a dynamic cyclical process in which confronting inequality, built resilience,

fuelling their risk-taking and reinforcing their rejection of male-dominated norms (Crenshaw, 1991; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

The glass ceiling has long shaped understandings of women's underrepresentation in leadership (Morrison et al., 1987; Cotter et al., 2001) through the “think manager–think male” bias (Schein, 1973, 2001). This study also reveals experiences of the glass cliff, where the “think crisis–think female” pattern (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007) places women in precarious leadership roles during instability. Despite women comprising over 60% of solicitors since the 1990s (62% in 2023), only 37% reach partnership, falling to 28% in larger firms (SRA, 2024). This persistent underrepresentation reflects career trajectories shaped less by a single glass ceiling than by the labyrinth metaphor (Eagly & Carli, 2007), where progression involves navigating complex, intersecting challenges. Partnerships are frequently attained in contexts marked by organisational risk, fraught team dynamics, or symbolic diversity gestures (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). The following section examines these findings in relation to the extant literature.

Theme 4: Circumstances Surrounding Partnership Appointments

This section examines women's partnership appointments often made in contexts of organisational risk, aligning with glass cliff dynamics (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007; Morgenroth et al., 2020). Despite persistent structural barriers, participants attained partnerships (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Barreto et al., 2009) within traditional firms, in firms with more women leaders, or by founding their own, thereby circumventing exclusionary cultures. While most glass cliff research has focused on organisational motives for appointing women to precarious roles (Haslam et al., 2010; Morgenroth et al., 2020), this study offers a qualitative perspective on the circumstances of such appointments and the lived experiences of women solicitors as position holders (Haslam et al., 2010; Sabharwal, 2013; Esposito, 2021). Building on the only prior glass cliff study in law, a quantitative experiment with law students lacking workplace-based insights (Ashby et al., 2007), this research addresses the crucial role of position holders' perceptions (Haslam et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2016) and context (Morgenroth et al., 2020) in shaping the glass cliff effect. It contributes original, practice-based insights into the nuanced and often precarious conditions surrounding women's progression to partnership.

Through interviews with 31 women solicitors who achieved partnership, this study offers context-rich insights into the glass cliff in legal practice, addressing Research Question 2 and advancing understanding of barriers to gender parity at this level. The glass cliff

describes the tendency for women to be appointed to precarious leadership roles during crises, often prone to failure (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007; Ryan et al., 2011; Bruckmüller et al., 2014). This metaphor sits alongside others depicting women's career barriers, including the glass ceiling (Morrison et al., 1987), labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007), glass walls (Lyness & Terrazas, 2006; Powell & Butterfield, 2015), glasshouse (Maclaran et al., 1997) and sticky floors (Booth et al., 2003). While these metaphors highlight structural and cultural obstacles, they often depict women as passive, blocked by ceilings, confined by walls, steered toward crisis roles, navigating mazes, or captive in glasshouses, reinforcing portrayals of women as reactive to externally imposed constraints.

This analysis considered the broader organisational and market contexts of these appointments. Unlike earlier career stages described in Chapter 5, where male colleagues benefitted from preferential structures and promotion pathways (Aulakh et al., 2017; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019), these partnerships contrasted with the glass escalator and glass cushion metaphors (Williams, 1992; Maume, 1999; Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Eagly & Carli, 2016), which describe men's rapid ascent into secure, well-supported roles. Here, structural vulnerabilities, such as firm instability, leadership vacuums, or reputational predicaments, created openings for women's advancement that were simultaneously laden with heightened risk of failure (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). Participants' accounts reveal how such opportunities often required navigating inherited challenges, scarce resources, or unrealistic performance expectations (Ryan et al., 2011; Bruckmüller et al., 2014). Though framed as merit-based recognition, these appointments could function as symbolic violence, reinforcing organisational habitus and shifting the burden of turnaround or reform onto those least supported to deliver it (Bourdieu, 1977; 1991; 1992).

Building on this, the findings from 31 women solicitors' narratives reveal that, in law firms, glass cliff appointments are shaped by entrenched sectoral norms, such as competitive, male-dominated cultures and opaque advancement systems, which intensify the risk identified in the wider literature (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Morgenroth et al., 2020). This finding acknowledges the glass cliff's context-dependent nature, shaped by organisational norms and cultures of law firms (Ryan et al., 2016; Morgenroth et al., 2020), facilitating the emergence of glass cliff positions by producing distinctive patterns of risk, tenure, and career impact for women in senior legal roles (Ryan et al., 2016; Glass & Cook, 2016). The following section compares the conditions of the appointments emerging from this research with those proposed in the literature, along with their impact on the opportunities offered and the challenges faced, and how they influence participants' decisions to accept or reject such roles.

Selection bias: Think manager-think male, Think crisis-think female

Statistics highlighting that white men have the highest likelihood of attaining partnership (73.5%) (Aulakh et al., 2017) corroborate participants' narratives that decision-making power predominantly remains concentrated among "*male, pale and stale*" (Amber) equity partners, reflecting the pervasive think manager, think male (TMTM) bias (Schein, 1973, 1975). As noted in the previous chapter, this association is rooted in the profession's history of allocating prestigious, career-enhancing work to class-privileged men (Hearn, 1982). This bias also aligns with gendered leadership stereotypes in which men are viewed as agentic and competent, and women as communal and caring (Fiske et al., 2002; Koenig et al., 2011). Participants' journeys contrasted men's more direct access to "hot jobs" (Silva et al., 2012) and "glass cushions" (Ryan et al., 2016) with their own more precarious pathways. The think crisis, think female (TCTF) bias (Ryan et al., 2011), a contextual variation of TMTM, helps explain why women are appointed to high-risk roles during instability, compounding structural and cultural barriers (Hunt-Earle, 2012; Glass & Cook, 2016; Ryan et al., 2016; Braun et al., 2017). These patterns intersect with broader theoretical perspectives discussed in Chapter 5, including role congruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and social role theory (Eagly, 1987), underscoring the multi-causal nature of selection bias at the partnership level. Although gender bias is recognised as a key factor, the emergence of glass cliff positions reflects a more complex interplay of influences that cannot be reduced to a single theoretical explanation (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Hoyt & Burnette, 2013; Cook & Glass, 2014).

Most participants reported encountering gender bias in selection processes throughout their careers (Ashby et al., 2007; Haslam & Ryan, 2008, Studies 1 & 3). Partnership appointments were often shrouded in opaque and inconsistent procedures, ranging from informal invitations by a tap on the shoulder to protracted, multi-stage assessments lasting over a year, creating prolonged uncertainty about progression. A recurring pattern emerged in which women were offered partnerships during organisational turbulence, in a "multiplicity of guises" (Ryan et al., 2016:451), frequently triggered by crises such as the sudden departure or retirement of senior leaders. This aligns with the "appointment in a crisis" dynamic, however, unlike scenario-based studies that simulate financial decline (Kulich & Ryan, 2017), participants in this research navigated real, high-stakes challenges marked by escalating responsibilities and limited institutional support (Ibarra, 1993; Tharenou et al., 1994), conditions that rendered these roles particularly vulnerable to failure (Rink et al., 2013).

“The head of department went ... and he took a team with him ...and there had been a recent batch of retirements... So, we were left with literally one guy who’d been made a partner in the last six months ... and no other partner in [the department] in our firm. So, we basically just got the bull by the horns..., saw clients, did work, looked after the more junior members of the team...we were quite a big law firm without a leader and we were then asked by the partners...if we would like to apply ...to be the partners.”

Christine

Offered a partnership during a turbulent transition, she was expected to stabilise the team alongside a newly appointed male partner. Her account of *“just got the bull by the horns”* illustrates initiative and commitment, traits aligned with the “think crisis, think female” phenomenon (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). Women were perceived as suitable leaders during instability due to stereotypes of inclusivity and compassion (Powell et al., 2002; Ryan et al., 2011; Bruckmüller et al., 2014), with participants themselves describing women as more considerate and collaborative (Rosener, 1995; Book, 2000), possibly reflecting the impact of the social role theory (Eagly, 1987), where women perceive themselves as more nurturing due to social conditioning from a young age, which impacts their external evaluations (Fitzsimmons et al., 2016) for leadership aptness. It was noted that while men may share these collaborative traits, they were often seen as outsiders by other male partners, triggering negative bias towards them by the in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This perception reinforces gendered expectations and may lead women to internalise beliefs that they are best suited for crisis roles (Hunt-Earle, 2012). These findings echo studies showing women are disproportionately appointed to struggling firms, while high-performing firms favour male leadership (Kanter, 1997; Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007; Ryan et al., 2011, Study 1).

Notably, for approximately one-third of participants, partnership appointments involved setting up new departments or offices in different cities, with some assuming these roles on the first day of the pandemic lockdown.

“We want to offer you partnership, and we want you to head up the team [in multiple cities], so ... I did that it was like the week we went into lockdown.”

Michelle

For some participants, partnership appointments coincided with periods of acute organisational disruption. Michelle described leading teams across multiple cities during the pandemic, managing the swift transition to remote work, while addressing the operational, legal, and safety challenges it posed, without previous experience. Melanie was required to make high-stakes decisions, including office closures, staff furloughs, and the drafting of policies and risk assessments. These experiences demanded resilience, adaptability, and a willingness to take risks as she navigated new challenges. Research during COVID-19 suggests that women leaders demonstrated strong crisis management capabilities, with countries led by women experiencing lower fatality rates (Somvichian-Clausen, 2020) and benefiting from empathetic, relationship-focused leadership approaches (Zenger & Folkman, 2019; Coscieme et al., 2020; Windsor et al., 2020). This alignment of think crisis, think female notion, with broader evidence highlights how the very relationship-focused approach, demonstrated in Michelle's narrative below, that enables women to navigate crises effectively may also contribute to their disproportionate placement in high-risk glass cliff roles (Zenger & Folkman, 2019; Coscieme et al., 2020; Windsor et al., 2020).

"I'd communicated with ... all the people in the different offices...So we've built up relationships with them anyway ... going into lockdown in some ways... was easier because we did everything remotely so I could make sure that the team was really brought together because ... prior to me heading the team, we met each other once a year, so, once I headed up the team, we met each other once a week virtually ...to pull us all together."

Michelle

The findings suggest that such appointments in crises were not only shaped by participants' perceived communal strengths (Bonner et al., 2022) but were also, at times, undermined by incomplete or misleading information, exacerbating their precariousness. In Susanne's case, the partnership role she was presented with was to lead a well-established practice in her field. Yet, she later discovered it was far less developed, increasing the strategic and operational risks associated with the position and rendering success extremely challenging (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010).

"There were next to no clients ... all the work I did was from clients that came with me or clients that I won.... I felt betrayed, I felt misled, I felt manipulated."

Susanne

Despite promised support, she was left to meet business targets alone, leading to disillusionment and her eventual departure. She later joined a culturally aligned, female-led firm, highlighting the role of women in supporting others' careers (Ashley & Empson, 2017). Other participants described similar experiences, including being placed in precarious roles post-merger or being subjected to unrealistic expectations. Such appointments often reflected assumptions about women's interpersonal strengths during organisational crises (Ryan et al., 2011; Bruckmüller et al., 2014), exemplifying the "double irony" (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010): women chosen not as ideal leaders, but because male traits were seen as unsuitable for turbulence. These reactive strategies (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Boin & Hart, 2003) question the fitness of traditional male leadership models in crisis contexts (Pillai, 1996; Mulcahy & Linehan, 2013). These insights suggest that glass cliff appointments may function as risk displacement, a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991), placing women in roles with entrenched vulnerabilities (Kulich et al., 2015), based on their being relationally adept, increasing reputational exposure, while obscuring systemic failings (Haslam et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2016).

Further, this research suggests that crises can weaken the "think manager, think male" association (Schein, 1973; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Unlike earlier studies centred on financial downturns, the crises here reflected organisational instability, making the roles precarious for most participants (Kulich & Ryan, 2017). Often relying on stereotypes of women's inclusiveness and compassion (Eagly et al., 1992; Eagly & Carli, 2003; Sczesny et al., 2004), these appointments benefit firms but heighten stress and sometimes lead to burnout for the participants (Pillai, 1996; Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Kulich et al., 2021). Such patterns reinforce how leadership and gender stereotypes shape women's placement in glass cliff roles (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Ryan et al., 2011; Gratzia et al., 2012; Rink et al., 2013). In contrast to the tension between leadership and gender stereotypes, participants often saw their inclusive traits as strengths in challenging contexts (Mano-Negrin & Sheaffer, 2004). For example, Camila described herself as "*so relationship-driven*." However, her inclusive style led her to be headhunted by another firm, being viewed as an effective troubleshooter (Ryan et al., 2007), to another glass cliff role to establish a new department in her area of expertise. These findings suggest that such appointments are shaped not only by financial performance but also by the nature of the crisis and perceptions of leader–role fit (Meindl, 1995; Ryan et al., 2016) with women's communal traits more closely linked to relational crises than financial ones (Kulich et al., 2021).

Participants described navigating a persistent gap between leadership expectations and gender stereotypes, often having to prove themselves in roles coded as male. Arguably, many were placed in precarious positions due to gender prejudice and in-group favouritism (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Swim et al., 1995; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Branscombe, 1998; Reskin, 2000; Ryan et al., 2007). In the feminised legal profession (Sommerlad, 2002), at least at lower and mid-levels, women could be viewed as expendable, used to protect male reputations (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). This trend helps explain why men are linked to stability while women are appointed during uncertainty, reinforcing glass cliff dynamics (Brown et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 2011). Such patterns reflect professional closure, where perceived failure in high-risk roles hinders women's progression and sustains male dominance (Hagan & Kay, 1995; Sommerlad, 2002; Stake et al., 2007). In cases like Susanne's, failure was attributed to women rather than structural factors (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), while male colleagues often remained unaware of gendered workplace dynamics.

Because we take the bulk of the domestic chores, for example, those men will go out into the world and treat women in their workplace in exactly the same way, ... it's much, much easier to get rid of people who don't accept the status quo, then it is to work with them and change it and you've got magic circle firms showing off on LinkedIn about having 25% female board members. Whoop De Doo? I mean, that's not impressive."

Amber

Her narrative illustrates her discernment of traditional gender roles and societal expectations (Eagly, 1987) that shape men's views and engagement with workplace gender equality. Such views and gaps in understanding help explain why men may overlook the precariousness of women's partnership challenges or instead justify them benignly (Ryan, Haslam & Postmes, 2007; Ryan et al., 2016), potentially to preserve their privileged status quo (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988) and male-gendered habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). Amber's interpretation illustrates how women resisting the profession's male-dominated norms are marginalised, with male-centric standards devaluing alternative leadership styles and framing them as misaligned with gendered expectations (Bourdieu, 1986). This dynamic represents symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1977) that legitimises appointing women as 'natural' crisis managers. While the glass cliff metaphor captures this precarity, it risks obscuring deeper systemic biases in organisational decision-making (Morgan, 2006). Addressing these patterns demands challenging the cultural logics that render such appointments both rational and inevitable.

Rather than embracing alternative leadership styles, participants recalled the orchestrated exits of women who challenged the status quo. Amber’s account demonstrates how power is internalised and reproduced within professional structures, often unopposed due to fears of repercussions. The prevalence of glass cliff appointments in this study, described as a “significant feature of the organisational landscape for women who achieve high office” (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Sabharwal, 2013; Ryan et al., 2016:453), reflects this dynamic. Many were chosen for collaborative, team-building roles, contrasting with masculine norms of assertiveness and dominance (Schein, 1973; Fiske et al., 2002; Appelbaum et al., 2003). These findings challenge the effectiveness of gendered leadership archetypes embedded in the legal habitus, which underpins the persistence of glass cliff roles. Women’s perceived inclusivity accentuates the case for diverse leadership models (Hlupic, 2019; Chamorro-Premuzic & Gallop, 2020). However, when valued only in times of crisis rather than as indicators of long-term leadership potential (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Post et al., 2019), these skills contribute to women’s marginalisation. This helps explain women’s continued marginalisation and underrepresentation in partnerships.

Firms strategically signalling change: Titles only?

Participants reported that some firms appointed them as symbolic gestures toward diversity, yet offered limited structural support, an emerging pattern consistent with glass cliff dynamics (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007; Cook & Glass, 2016). Such appointments, as research suggests, often placate stakeholders without delivering substantive structural reform (Lee & James, 2007; Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Kulich et al., 2015). The study also identified varied partnership models influencing participants’ progression, autonomy, and satisfaction: of the 31 senior women, 11 were founding partners, nine equity partners, five salaried partners, four fixed-share equity partners, one a company director, and one unspecified (Table 6.1). As noted earlier, the company director had previously held a partnership role, while the other participant had occupied multiple partnership positions across different firms.

Partnership Status	Number of Participants
Founding Partner	11
Equity Partner	9
Fixed Share Equity Partner	4
Salaried Partner	5
Partner (didn’t specify)	1
Director	1
Total	31

Table 6.1 Distribution by different partnership levels

Explaining these variances, one participant described equity partnership as involving,

“More financial benefits a share of the profits and.... there is an element of decision-making that is just reserved for equity partners more to do with the finance of the business.”

Olivia

Equity partners were seen as the most prestigious, with profit shares and voting rights, though perceptions of their influence varied. Fixed-share partners ranked above salaried partners but held more limited authority.

“They call it a Tier 2 partner... technically, legally it’s not a salaried partner because the salaried partner is an employee and not a proper partner So, I have a small amount of equity in the business, not very much, and I basically get a salary, but it’s not described as that, it’s a fixed-share, it’s not profit dependent....”

Joanna

A fixed-share partner in an international firm described her role as a “Tier 2” partnership, highlighting the nuanced hierarchy within partnership models. Her ownership was fixed, offering a salary and a small stake not tied to firm profits, distinct from full equity. In contrast, many viewed salaried partners as equivalent to employees.

“I suppose with being a salaried partner, ... you’re still an employee.”

Olivia

Participants noted the nuanced nature of law firm partnerships, questioning their value when roles lacked genuine influence or autonomy (Glass & Cook, 2016). Salaried partnerships were often seen as particularly undervalued, at times likened to paralegals without strategic input. One participant stressed the importance of critically considering what becoming a partner truly entails.

“I think when you become partner at an organisation, you need to take a step back and ...question yourself, what does... becoming partner really mean? Are you a statistic to show the outside legal world that this is how many partners we have... Is being a partner for the sake of being a partner, and it means nothing; being a partner

could be the equivalent of being a paralegal...What being a partner at one firm may mean doesn't mean the same as being a partner at another firm."

Priya

The findings challenge the notion of partnership as a mere badge of honour, raising questions about its meaning in terms of responsibility, influence, and recognition (Lyness & Thompson, 1997; Glass & Cook, 2016). Drawing on Kanter's (1977) theory of tokenism, participants' accounts suggested that some women's appointments functioned primarily as symbolic representation, conferring the appearance of diversity while restricting substantive authority. As Kanter notes, such positions are often subject to even more heightened visibility in the glasshouse (Maclaren et al., 1997), performance pressures, and role stereotyping, conditions echoed in participants' reports of limited decision-making opportunities (Bruckmüller et al., 2014; Ryan et al., 2016). In this context, tokenistic appointments may reinforce glass cliff dynamics by positioning women in high-risk roles without the structural power to succeed. Several participants perceived their appointments as tokenistic (Kanter, 1977), marked by symbolic visibility without substantive authority. Exclusion from key decisions and strategic forums reinforced the sense that diversity optics outweighed genuine empowerment (Bruckmüller et al., 2014; Glass & Cook, 2016). Scarlett, for example, described a male-dominated board where women partners had minimal influence (Cooper et al., 2021). In such contexts, the expectation to manage instability while preserving harmony (Eagly & Wood, 2012) left them acutely vulnerable to glass cliff conditions (Ryan et al., 2016).

Participants described how the authority gap and lack of support in senior roles (Glass & Cook, 2016; Sieghart, 2022) made leadership both challenging and isolating, especially in smaller firms, which were resistant to change. In larger firms, frustrations centred on bureaucratic constraints that curtailed autonomy; one participant even cited the protracted process of booking a dinner table. With women comprising only 28% of partners, such appointments can be viewed through a Bourdieusian lens as symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1977, 1992), granting visibility without proportional power and perpetuating glass cliff dynamics (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). This aligns with Ashley and Empson's (2017) view that elite firms protect legitimacy through exclusionary norms, sustaining the male-gendered habitus under the guise of meritocracy (Bourdieu, 1991). Priya's account highlights the importance of proactively assessing partnership roles before acceptance (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This includes reviewing the role's status, gender ratios within the firm (Kanter, 1977, in Ryan et al., 2011), organisational culture (Lord et al.,

1984, in Ryan et al., 2011), and wider cross-cultural dynamics (Schein, 2001). Such reflection can help women avoid glass cliff roles that are symbolic rather than substantive.

"...the reason I left there is I don't think they particularly valued the work I did because I just think they saw me as...equality and diversity; we got the female on the board."

Julie

Appointing women to leadership positions can signal change while subtly reinforcing glass cliff dynamics (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2011). Rather than treating gender diversity as a numbers game (Mulcahy & Linehan, 2013; Krishnan & Szczepura, 2021), this study ascertained the lived experiences of women within these roles (Sabharwal, 2013; Esposito, 2021). Participants' accounts revealed how variations in partnership status and limited autonomy often signalled "gender-washing" or "fempower-washing" (Sterbenk et al., 2021), symbolic gestures towards EDI that lacked the substantive change needed for genuine equality (Özbilgin, 2023, in Vincent et al., 2024).

Tokenism emerged more sharply at equity partnership and board levels, which remain male-dominated (Kanter, 1977; Marshall, 1984; Ridgeway, 1991). Participants described being sidelined in meetings unless endorsing male colleagues' agendas, fostering a climate of fear and low psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019; Cooper et al., 2021). Graded partnerships were often viewed as symbolic compliance, intended to appease regulators and stakeholders allocating hard to achieve mandates, without redistributing the requisite power, creating fertile ground for glass cliff scenarios (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). Despite the SRA reporting that women now make up 62% of solicitors, representation falls to 37% at the partnership level and 32% in full-equity roles, declining further to 28% in larger firms (SRA, 2024). As noted in the findings, participants faced many challenges represented by the glass ceiling, labyrinth and glass cliff and other metaphors, at all stages of their journeys: 11 participants had founded their own firms, including five from minority ethnic backgrounds, illustrating how women utilising the 3Rs, carve alternative routes to leadership when excluded from traditional pathways.

Many participants shared that partnership titles, especially salaried ones, were often awarded without matching rewards, with increased non-billable management duties limiting their advancement (Cook & Glass, 2014; SRA, 2024) on an already protracted career ladder, as seen in Chapter 5. Some viewed these roles as aimed at changing the firm's image.

“[The firm] used to have a reputation as being an all-boys’ club, but I think they’re... actively trying to change that perception and actively recruit women.”

Samantha

In contrast, Iqra, a solicitor from a minority ethnic background, pursued a salaried partnership without additional pay to gain client credibility, an example of the “playing the game” strategy adapted to male-dominated organisational norms (Tomlinson et al., 2012). Her performance in this symbolic role secured her an equity partnership. A similar pattern emerged among participants from minority ethnic and lower socioeconomic backgrounds, where the glass cliff effect was especially pronounced (Crenshaw, 1991; Kulich et al., 2013; Cook & Glass, 2014a). For instance, Priya was promoted after a male colleague’s departure, inheriting a dwindling and unstable team. While framed as progress, such appointments often reinforced conditions leading to glass cliff outcomes (Cook & Glass, 2014a), ultimately prompting her exit. Mia, another solicitor from an underrepresented ethnic background, noted that women from ethnically diverse backgrounds face greater barriers to progression than their white counterparts (Webley & Duff, 2007; Aulakh et al., 2017).

Despite ethnic diversity among solicitors rising from 14% to 19% between 2015 and 2023 (SRA, 2024), stratification by class, gender, and ethnicity endures, with partnership prospects lowest for women from ethnically diverse backgrounds at 13% (Aulakh et al., 2017). Significantly, most participants described conditions indicative of glass cliff roles, suggesting firms often use women’s appointments to signal progress and meet diversity targets without granting genuine authority (Ridgeway, 1991; Ryan & Haslam, 2007; SRA, 2024). Reinforcing tokenism, such roles have limited or no influence. Genuine inclusion requires recognising intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1989; Tzanakou, 2019, in Ryan, 2023) and moving beyond numerical representation (Haslam & Ryan, 2005, 2007, 2008) to address decision-making, support structures, and leadership trajectories (Ryan et al., 2016; Morgenroth et al., 2020). Given the short tenure of these roles (Glass & Cook, 2016), exit interviews could inform cultures grounded in lived experiences (Alvesson, 1993).

Lack of support

A consistent pattern exhibited in this study was that glass cliff appointments were made almost always in male-dominated settings with minimal structural support, heightening their precariousness (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Glass & Cook, 2016). Senior leadership remained overwhelmingly white and male (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 1998; Aulakh et al., 2017),

reinforcing the gendered hierarchies (Acker, 1990) described by the participants. Firms founded or led by women were rare exceptions. Even when participants' appointments disrupted traditional stereotypes in a masculine profession (Schein, 1973), they often unfolded in conditions emblematic of the glass cliff (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Gartzia et al., 2012). Scarlett recalled that "*only one was female*" out of 12–15 partners, while Inaya described an "*all middle-aged white male*" board. Emily, despite leading a top-performing practice as a magic circle firm equity partner, felt neither understood nor recognised, emphasising that performance alone rarely secured legitimacy or influence for women.

"They never really recognised it in the way that I genuinely think, had I been a guy, it would have been recognised... my male partners... seem incapable actually of recognising success in a different form to that which they create and deliver."

Emily

This study highlights women's double disadvantage in leadership: while men are more readily accepted as leaders, women must prove competence to a higher standard and are penalised for traits rewarded in men (Heilman, 2001; Rudman & Glick, 2001; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Such bias reinforces masculine norms of success and limits recognition of women's contributions, sustaining homogeneity in decision-making and heightening the risk of groupthink (Kanter, 1977; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Torchia et al., 2011). Participants described persistent gaps in support and resources, which discouraged risk-taking and constrained ambition (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007; Gupta et al., 2017). Without the psychological safety needed to challenge the status quo (Edmondson, 2019), these conditions created stress rather than empowering the participants. Viewed through a Bourdieusian lens, these findings reflect an organisational habitus that privileges masculine capital and marginalises divergent leadership styles, perpetuating gendered hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986). These findings point to the need to disrupt entrenched norms and embed inclusive leadership models that value diverse contributions.

Many participants reported being assigned increasing management responsibilities as they progressed, without corresponding recognition or reward, making their roles more demanding and precarious. While qualities like inclusivity and compassion were crucial for staff retention, they were undervalued by firms because they did not directly drive profit, and were rarely rewarded beyond occasional, smaller bonuses compared to their male peers (The Law Society, 2021). This aligns with Kulich et al.'s (2007) findings that women in

glass cliff roles face high expectations but receive little support. The lack of institutional validation reinforced the instability of their positions and heightened the risk to their reputational capital (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Julie, the only woman on an all-male leadership team, shared that her contributions, despite leading key initiatives, were routinely overlooked (Ely & Meyerson, 2000).

"I don't know whether it was because I was a female or whether I just got things done; they then put more and more on my shoulders. struggles go up exponentially, and the reason I left there is I don't think they particularly valued the work I did."

Julie

The study revealed a persistent imbalance between partnership titles and the structural support needed to succeed. Unlike male partners' reduced targets to allow for management responsibilities, women were expected to meet targets while absorbing escalating management duties without recognition or allocated time, thereby perpetuating the long-hours culture, presenting it as natural or as evidence of their commitment and legitimacy (Sommerlad, 2002; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). This finding aligns with McKinsey's research, driving participants' decisions to leave, including unequal treatment, being overworked and under-recognised, and spending time on unacknowledged tasks, such as advocating for flexibility or regulatory compliance, which hindered their advancement (De Smet et al., 2021).

Pay disparities of £10,000 or more for equivalent experience reinforced perceptions of exploitation and marginalisation among participants (Ashley & Empson, 2017; Wren & Partridge, 2021). Such inequities entrenched women's "outsider" status (Kanter, 1977), heightened stress (Ryan et al., 2009) and discouraged them from challenging bias for fear of backlash (Swim & Hyers, 1999; Kaiser & Miller, 2001). Ryan et al. (2009:281) explain through their gender-stress-misidentification model that such appointments occur not because women are supported for long-term success, but because leaders under pressure misidentify "bringing in a woman" as a strategy for change. Consistent with glass cliff dynamics, many ultimately left these roles when performance demands were unsupported by the resources or authority necessary for long-term success (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Glass & Cook, 2016).

Partnership offers often followed mergers or restructuring, placing women in roles with fewer staff, rising demands, and minimal autonomy, voice, or resources (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Camila questioned whether it was *"really worth it,"* ultimately leaving after being

expected to elevate the practice she had built without adequate backing. Maryam, tasked with establishing a branch office, faced social exclusion, restricted access to networks, and public undermining by management (McGuire, 2002; Taylor, 2010), conditions that eroded her ability to succeed. Such isolation weakened internal support, with women often blamed for underperformance (Meindl, 1995) and less likely to be rehired in leadership roles after failure (Ferris et al., 2003; Ryan & Haslam, 2007). These dynamics align with gendered assumptions that equate failure with incompetence rather than context (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Ryan et al., 2011) and with Ryan et al.'s (2009) observation that precarious appointments heighten stress while reinforcing outsider status, deterring women from challenging bias. Maryam eventually exited, refusing to remain in a symbolic role lacking substantive authority (Bell et al., 2024), but not before helping recruit her replacement to minimise reputational damage (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). Similarly, Priya reflected, *“I stayed there for about a year because I thought ... if I stay any less, it’s gonna look bad...”*.

In addition to limited social support, several participants shared a lack of financial backing for marketing or HR necessary to set up new offices, compounding the challenge and drawing on stereotyped expectations of women’s communal strengths (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Eleanor, for instance, was offered equity partnership on binding terms that tied her to the firm’s financial obligations for several years.

*“The managing partner said ... if you don’t accept equity partnership now and, on this basis, ... you’re basically gonna be treated as an exiting partner, ... and so I...thought ****, I need to have another option...”*

Eleanor

Discovering that a fellow partner avoided the same inequitable treatment triggered anxiety and eroded trust, as the firm’s prioritisation of profit over fairness fostered disaffection, disengagement, and attrition (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Kay & Gorman, 2008). Since her expectation of her loyalty and commitment yielding cumulative career progress, her perceived injustice in promotion and reward systems undermined her organisational commitment (Inkson & King, 2011; Sabellis & Schilling, 2013; Kulich et al., 2015). This dynamic reflected a transactional leadership style (Bass et al., 2003), where contingent, financially driven rewards weakened intrinsic motivation and long-term engagement (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). Participants labelled this profit-driven focus *“counterintuitive”* (Amber), noting that while it secured short-term compliance, it diminished morale and

reinforced instrumental rather than inclusive leadership. This mirrors legal profession studies showing that overreliance on billable hours and revenue metrics exacerbates burnout, undermines collaboration, and sidelines non-revenue work such as mentoring and diversity initiatives (Kay & Gorman, 2008; Sommerlad, 2016).

“I would say I have a voice if what I’m talking about is in favour of the men, so if I’m talking ... we really need to increase our profitability...the men are on board; it’s all great. You’re such a brilliant leader.... If my idea is should bring in an external consultant to accelerate our progress ..., in particular, gender and race equality. I do not have a voice, so it really depends on what you’re suggesting.”

Abigail

Many participants described receiving support from male seniors only when advancing their agendas, without financial risk. Firms often offered partnerships to build profitable departments, limiting women's influence on values-driven initiatives. This selective validation suppressed dissent and revealed a performative approach to diversity, reflecting professional closure (Witz, 1992). Despite the removal of formal barriers in 1922, a gendered habitus persisted (Bourdieu, 1990), casting women as expendable in crises but unsuitable for long-term leadership. These dynamics enact symbolic violence, under the guise of meritocracy, further reinforcing women’s marginalisation in the profession (Bourdieu, 1990). The widespread absence of formal or informal training further left many unprepared for partnership, undermining transition and crisis leadership (Ashby et al., 2007).

“All the sort of financial discipline, how to manage your bills, none of that, absolutely I never had any form of leadership training.... One day, I was an assistant, and the next day, I was a partner.”

Joanna

Contrarily, most participants observed male colleagues receiving informal mentoring, sponsorship, and networking support, critical for partnership preparation, reflecting how male leadership norms shape glass cliff dynamics (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). Leadership development for women was rare or poorly timed, hindering their leadership identity formation and reinforcing a narrow talent pipeline (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). Persistent institutional barriers limited access to sponsorship, mentoring, and succession planning (Cook & Glass, 2014b), perpetuating symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991) in professions reliant on expertise and innovation, such as law (Walby, 2011). While

organisational support can mitigate glass cliff effects (Rink et al., 2013), participants reported post-promotion roles lacking real power, rendering their appointments symbolic rather than substantive (Bruckmüller et al., 2014; Glass & Cook, 2016).

Unlike scenario-based research (Kulich & Ryan, 2017), participants in this study navigated real crises characterised by increasing responsibilities and limited support (Ibarra, 1993; Tharenou et al., 1994). This lack of backing heightened vulnerability to failure (Rink et al., 2013). The authority gap (Sieghart, 2022) and absence of senior sponsorship pushed women toward glass cliff positions, often leading to isolation, especially in smaller firms resistant to change. In larger firms, women faced bureaucratic constraints, reflected in their continued underrepresentation, holding just 28% of partnership roles (SRA, 2024). Consistent with Kanter's (1977) theory, women as minorities in senior roles were more frequently appointed to precarious positions, where lack of authority and support undermined their ability to succeed (Glass & Cook, 2016). However, participants in firms with greater female leadership (Brown et al., 2011) and access to both social and financial resources reported more positive outcomes, suggesting that supportive infrastructures are key to women's advancement as research shows that prejudice decreases progressively for subsequent women in an organisation (Lee & James, 2007).

"We have eight or nine partners and only two of them are men, so it's a complete turnaround ... It's a really supportive, collegiate, non-competitive environment, and everybody genuinely wants to help each other."

Sonia

Collectively, these findings reveal how the absence of meaningful support structures contributes to women's placement in precarious leadership roles, reinforcing the glass cliff phenomenon. While isolated examples of female-led firms suggest potential for change through trickle-up effects (Sommerlad, 1994; Ely, 1995; Gorman, 2005), such progress is constrained by deeply embedded power dynamics. Senior women may act as role models (Ibarra et al., 2010), yet their ability to enact change is often curtailed by scrutiny, bias (Lee & James, 2007), and lack of institutional power (Ellemers et al., 2004). Theoretical models such as trickle-up and time-lapse (Pringle et al., 2017) theories overlook these structural and symbolic barriers (Lenz & Meyerhoff, 1985; Sherry, 1986), which continue to sustain gendered hierarchies. Ultimately, the research highlights how inadequate support reinforces women's marginalisation in leadership, masking enduring inequalities behind a veneer of progress.

Higher scrutiny

Given the profession's male-dominated evolution, women lawyers in senior roles remain perceived as atypical, attracting heightened scrutiny and criticism (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Brescoll et al., 2010; Hegarty & Bruckmüller, 2013; Shor, van de Rijt & Kulkarni, 2022).

"That seems to be the way it goes with pale, male and stale, getting away with being rampantly mediocre and in some instances negligent and not ever really being penalised in the way that a female would be penalised for it."

Amber

This study's findings support existing research on asymmetrical evaluation in senior roles, where women face harsher penalties than men for comparable issues (Reskin, 1993; Gupta et al., 2017). Participants described being placed in high-pressure roles with limited authority, which intensified their exposure to criticism and reputational risk. As in prior studies (Schaller & Maass, 1989; Boin et al., 2010), high-profile failures evoke disproportionate scrutiny. This judgment led some women to deprioritise networking, crucial for progression, in favour of performance, a trade-off that limited their visibility and future opportunities. Echoing Brescoll et al. (2010) and Meindl (1995), women were perceived as expendable, often used to shield male leaders, and blamed for failures shaped by structural constraints (Smith, 2021). These patterns were compounded by intersecting inequalities such as race, age, and class (Crenshaw, 1989; Eagly & Carli, 2007), leading to heightened scrutiny and social exclusion (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2003; Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2006; Glass & Cook, 2020).

Participants described a persistent double bind, navigating a narrow behavioural continuum, agentic enough to lead, yet communal enough to be accepted, generating emotional strain and identity conflict (Heilman, 2001; Ely et al., 2011; Williams & Dempsey, 2014). Many reported moderating their ambition or softening their authority to avoid backlash, which inadvertently reduced their visibility and progression (Stroh et al., 1996; Wrigley, 2002). These findings resonate with the glasshouse metaphor (Maclaran et al., 1997), demonstrating how Ridgeway's (2001:644) "gender frame," filters leadership expectations through masculine norms, compelling women to mask authenticity to meet contradictory standards, reinforcing perceptions of their unsuitability for sustained leadership (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Ryan et al., 2011). The resulting performance paradox, where fulfilling one expectation defied another, undermined their confidence, reinforced

their marginalisation by sustaining the glass cliff as a mechanism of gendered exclusion (Rudman & Glick, 2001; Eagly & Karau, 2002).

“Rather than seeing my skillset as being an addition to the firm, they saw that as me highlighting deficiencies that they had within the firm that they didn’t wanna address, so it was easier to kind of say no to side-line rather than to say other people needed to raise their game.”

Susanne

Despite her strong business development record, she experienced isolation and criticism, contributing to psychological distress (Kulich & Ryan, 2017). Her account supports Morgenroth et al.’s (2022) finding that women are more often blamed for failure than credited for success. Such scrutiny likely reflects the firm’s entrenched resistance to change and the absence of a psychologically safe environment that values diverse perspectives (Alvesson, 2002; Edmondson, 2019), which discourages risk-taking and stifles innovation (Morgenroth et al., 2022). Her experience notably improved in a firm with greater female representation in senior roles (Brown et al., 2011; Sommerlad, 2016).

“Like you’re in that club rather than on your own, and if something went wrong, you know that it would be on purely on you rather than have anyone else that would stand alongside you.”

Susanne

In firms with more women in senior roles, participants reported feeling more empowered and optimistic, echoing Sommerlad’s (2016) research, which shows that gender-diverse leadership reduces glass cliff risks and improves promotion outcomes (Cook & Glass, 2014a; Morgenroth et al., 2020). The presence of other women mitigated tokenism (Lee & James, 2007) and fostered supportive, innovative environments. Leadership in these firms was described as empathetic, team-oriented, and transformational (Chamorro-Premuzik & Gallop, 2020), challenging exclusionary norms (Fajak & Haslam, 1998; Ellemers et al., 2004). A legacy of female leadership buffered against the precarity of being a ‘first’ (Haslam et al., 2010; Brown et al., 2011). Consistent with Ryan’s (2023) call for systemic transformation, participants stressed that progress requires structural change, mentoring, flexible working, and inclusive evaluation, rather than numerical targets. Reshaping the profession’s habitus (Bourdieu, 1990; Ely & Meyerson, 2000) emerged as a key factor in sustaining women’s long-term inclusion and success in law.

Lack of acknowledgement and reward

Women appointed to senior roles frequently encountered a metaphorical “glass cliff,” tasked with crisis leadership yet denied the recognition, rewards, and structural support afforded to male peers (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Glass & Cook, 2016; Ryan, 2023). In male-dominated law firm cultures, contributions were marginalised through symbolic violence and subtle gendered practices that eroded authority and reinforced exclusion (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991). Reward systems privileged assertiveness over collaboration (Schein, 1973, 1975) and long-hours cultures penalised those with caring responsibilities (Ansari, 2016; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2018). Limited access to influential networks constrained women’s social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Cross, 2010; Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2019), leaving them under-recognised and precariously positioned. The gender pay gap is stark; women solicitors in large firms earned 32.4% less per hour (median) compared to the national average of 12.6% than men and received lower bonuses (The Law Society, 2021). Goulbourne (2018) links these disparities to the underrepresentation of women in senior roles. Through Bourdieu’s lens of habitus and symbolic violence, these findings reveal enduring structural inequalities that devalue women’s contributions and limit their progression (Skeggs, 1997; McNay, 1999). Despite breaking through or circumventing the glass ceiling, many participants expressed disillusionment with partnership, citing a persistent lack of reward and recognition. Even those who attained equity partner status continued to face the precariousness associated with glass cliff positions, where women’s leadership is often undervalued and their authority constrained despite formal status, reflecting persistent structural inequalities in recognition and reward (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Glass & Cook, 2016; Morgenroth et al., 2020).

“a peculiar setup where you ended up being paid less than you were as a salaried partner.... I actually felt that that had been done deliberately, you think you’re being promoted, but actually, I think the firm was doing that to save money ... and then thinking this seems really stressful,”

Susanne

The symbolic elevation of women to equity partner roles, without corresponding reward or influence, reflects a gap between title and substance, echoing theories of professional closure (Acker, 1990) and in-group favouritism (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Chattopadhyay et al., 2004). This undervaluation of their contributions further reinforced women’s outsider status (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Cost-saving priorities over equitable treatment raised ethical concerns and

led to attrition; she ultimately left, describing a greater value alignment in a female-led firm (Glass & Cook, 2016).

“And from the second I joined...loved it, ... so supportive. They did everything they said they would do and more, ... what I felt has always been lacking was the personal skills. I think lawyers are dreadful at it anyway. But just people getting in touch thing. I'm so excited that you're gonna join us. Really looking forward to working with you. That's great opportunities for us to do stuff together, you know, and you feed off that and you think yeah, I like this...this is what we do it for rather than always being completely isolated and on your own.”

Susanne

Susanne’s experience demonstrates how supportive female leadership can enable women to thrive without the constraints of exclusionary cliques or unrealistic demands. In contrast, male colleagues often failed to acknowledge women’s achievements, reducing their leadership to superficial traits such as “nice” or “smiling a lot” (Emily). Such dismissal, coupled with harsher performance standards, reflects structural inequality embedded in organisational systems (Acker, 1990; Eagly & Carli, 2007). These dynamics also align with Stereotype Threat Theory (Steele & Aronson, 1995), where the awareness of negative stereotypes increases pressure, undermining confidence and cognitive functioning. Emily’s sense of exclusion was compounded by misalignment with masculine norms (Peters et al., 2012) and cultural marginalisation (Saucerman & Vasquez, 2014). Consistent with Ryan (2023) and Ryan & Morgenroth (2024), these findings underscore that gender gaps in leadership are rooted in organisational culture rather than individual deficits, reinforcing the need for systemic, not individual, change.

Women exercising their own choice

While research often frames women as more risk-averse and less inclined to pursue precarious leadership roles (Eckel & Grossman, 2008; Rink et al., 2012; Charness & Gneezy, 2012), participants’ accounts complicate this narrative. Several accepted roles with high demands, establishing new departments, managing multiple offices, building clientele from scratch, hiring and training staff, despite limited resources and uncertain prospects. In line with Woods’ proposition (2004, in Ryan et al., 2016), some acknowledged the potential career risks yet pursued these positions as opportunities to prove themselves, reflecting Ryan et al.’s (2007) observation that women may accept challenging posts believing better opportunities may not arise. This readiness to embrace risk, even in risky organisational

contexts, reframes agency not as aversion but as a strategic career move given the constraints.

“I think at the time, because partnership for a woman was difficult in any firm, let alone a magic circle and then partnership for a part-time partner who’d had ... children was unheard of. I just think I was chuffed that I was getting a partnership because it was such a big deal..... Wow, look what I’ve done. I’ve broken through..... Go me.”

Emily

Emily’s account reflects pride in balancing career and family demands, since motherhood constrains women’s career advancement (Cuddy et al., 2004; Ansari, 2016; Deschacht, 2017), highlighting structural barriers faced by women with caregiving responsibilities, particularly in prestigious city firms, where female partner representation remains as low as 28% (SRA, 2024). Her experience underscores systemic gender bias against part-time women solicitors, since organisational structures are implicitly designed around an ideal worker, unencumbered by domestic or caregiving duties (Acker, 1990) and demonstrates agency and resilience in navigating these challenges (Southwick et al., 2014). Despite limited recognition from male peers, she perceived herself as having broken through the glass ceiling. Emily’s narrative, like many others, illustrates Mavin and Grandy’s (2016) notion of women doing gender on a continuum, as participants balanced agentic and communal behaviours to counter perceptions of being either too dominant or too passive, navigating leadership through a gendered lens (Heilman, 2001). Similarly, when asked about her decision-making process to lead the national team, Michelle responded:

“...It was a yes straight away because...I just felt I’d sat for a year or so thinking about if I ran this team, I would do this, that and the other ..., was given the chance ... and I just took it.”

Michelle

Her proactive approach was demonstrable in her formulation of strategies exhibiting a visionary mindset, in contrast to research that shows that women lack vision compared to men (Zenger & Folkman, 2019). Her immediate acceptance also indicated self-belief, assertiveness, and confidence in her self-efficacy to succeed (Bandura, 1997), as well as her ambition for career progression, despite research suggesting that women are less ambitious

than men (Vianen & Fischer, 2002). Another example was shared by a minority ethnic group family law solicitor:

"They wanted me to establish that department for them ... a great way to have a little bit of a mixture ... doing the legal casework as a lawyer but mixing in the business and the marketing side of skills as well, which was appealing to me. So, I seized that with great haste, and I accepted that ... straight away. I was very, very keen and excited about that opportunity."

Maryam

Most participants viewed their career journeys as arduous and stressful, with decisions to accept high-risk leadership roles often driven by constrained opportunity rather than genuine choice, supporting the notion of a “risk tax” (Glass & Cook, 2019; Esposito, 2021). These roles were typically framed as strategic, but for many participants, they represented the only available pathway to leadership (Ryan et al., 2007; Haslam & Ryan, 2008). Despite literature suggesting women are generally more risk-averse than men (Eckel & Grossman, 2008; Charness & Gneezy, 2012), participants described these appointments as calculated risks to counter systemic exclusion rather than indications of low self-efficacy (Darouei & Pluut, 2018). This dynamic underscores the importance of interpreting women’s decisions in a contextual manner, rather than attributing them solely to individual risk preferences (Rink, Ryan, & Stoker, 2012).

Participants frequently relied on their relational leadership traits, such as empathy and humility (Alvesson, 1991; Chamorro-Premuzic & Gallop, 2020), yet still encountered heightened scrutiny and precarious expectations (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Gupta et al., 2017). Failures were often attributed to personal shortcomings rather than structural barriers (Cappelli, 1991; Meindl, 1993, in Ryan & Haslam, 2005), reinforcing stereotypes of women as less effective as leaders and narrowing their future opportunities (Brickley, Linck, & Coles, 1999; Ferris et al., 2003). Given that only 87 women for every 100 men are likely to reach leadership roles (Field et al., 2023), participants viewed precarious roles as rare opportunities for advancement. Their strong professional identity and commitment to reshaping legal services were evident; however, structural inequities continued to constrain their leadership trajectories (Heilman, 2012; Ellemers, 2018; Ryan, 2023).

"I wouldn't speak out so much about stuff I've done, not because I'm lacking in confidence ... but...I like to be focused on team."

Camila

A key factor in women's acceptance of glass cliff roles was the unequal distribution of leadership opportunities. Many lacked visible sponsorship and felt uncomfortable with self-promotion (Terjesen & Singh, 2008), limiting their advancement, echoing findings that women do not promote themselves as well as men, owed to their inclusive style, characterised by humility and teamwork, rooted in their upbringing and stereotypes and are overlooked as a result (Bowles et al., 2005). LinkedIn data shows that assertive profiles attract more recruiter interest (Altenburger et al., 2017; Gracia et al., 2023). Similar trends appeared among minority ethnic participants, who prioritised collaboration over individual success (Simon et al., 2013). Though shaped by gendered norms, this preference may have reduced their visibility (Rudman & Glick, 1999, 2001); however, some believed their work should speak for itself, a view often disregarded by senior male colleagues.

These findings suggest that the glass cliff often represents not a break from the glass ceiling but its continuation into leadership roles, where women's advancement remains constrained by gendered expectations and structural inequities (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). Findings indicate that departures from partnership were not driven by diminished ambition or shifting priorities, although most participants had family commitments; none left the profession. Instead, entrenched structural barriers and the sustained strain of post-glass ceiling roles, compounded by ongoing differential treatment, eroded their engagement with traditional firms. Consistent with Ryan et al.'s (2009) gender-stress-misidentification model, this **reframes** women's underrepresentation as a product of systemic inequities and the ongoing psychological toll not just of the glass ceiling but also of its continuation into glass cliff roles (Sabharwal, 2013).

Theme 5: Participants' Responses to the Glass Cliff Appointments

The above section highlights how the glass cliff manifests in the legal profession, where women are more likely to be appointed to leadership roles during crises, increasing their risk of failure (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007; Glass & Cook, 2020). The risk was intensified for minority ethnic groups, who deviate even further from the white male leadership norm (Schein, 1973, 1975; Rosette et al., 2008). Although such appointments appeared progressive (Ryan & Haslam, 2007), participants reported lacking the support afforded to their male colleagues, increasing their vulnerability (Ryan et al., 2011). These findings reflect the higher ousting rates for women CEOs (38%) compared to men (27%) (Davidson & Brest, 2014, in Ryan et al., 2016). Participants described these roles as largely symbolic,

offering visibility but limited authority, reinforcing structural barriers and limiting women's progression (Kanter, 1977; Marshall, 1984; Ridgeway, 1991; Ryan & Haslam, 2005). The following section examines the consequences of these appointments and the participants' responses.

Negative Responses: Increased stress and self-doubt

In the legal profession, where credibility and competence are intensely scrutinised, most participants appeared to occupy glass cliff roles (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010), often with unclear mandates and unrealistic expectations, contributing to heightened stress and self-doubt. One participant, reflecting on this experience, left her partnership to establish her own firm.

"I think there's this sense of, ... people think that becoming a partner is the Holy Grail, it's not, it's like literally ... someone's just finally opened the door for you and then what you don't realise is that there's like a whole new set of ladders have to negotiate and it's a completely different skill set."

Eleanor

She received little support from partners when requesting flexible work due to serious illness, ultimately leading to her departure (Haslam, 2004; Haslam et al., 2004). Overall, participants were ill-prepared for partnership challenges, most describing their roles as precarious and demanding, and lacking skills typically not taught in legal training (Ely et al., 2011). Many women worked harder than their male peers without receiving recognition, which contributed to burnout and poor health (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Ryan et al., 2010; Tiwari et al., 2019). The profit-driven model of traditional firms was misaligned with participants' values, exacerbating the stress of glass cliff roles. These roles subjected women to heightened scrutiny, forcing them to prove their legitimacy against male benchmarks (Acker, 1990; Maclaran et al., 1997; Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). This disconnect led to reduced organisational commitment, job satisfaction, and increased turnover, resulting in heightened stress (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). In contrast, perceived gender inequality appeared to benefit men, enhancing their organisational identification (Ryan et al., 2009).

Participants noted that, unlike men who were presumed competent, women had to constantly prove themselves to be seen as equal (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997; Ellemers, 2014). This stemmed from exclusion from masculine leadership norms (Peters et al., 2012) and cultural

barriers (Saucerman & Vasquez, 2014). Many described how glass cliff roles intensified self-doubt and imposter feelings, shaped by harsher judgments and higher expectations (Kulich et al., 2007; Ryan et al., 2011). Though rooted in structural and social contexts (Feenstra et al., 2020), some internalised these pressures, feeling inadequate despite systemic causes (Clance & Imes, 1978; Bell et al., 2024). Addressing imposter syndrome requires tackling structural barriers, not ‘fixing’ women (Ryan, 2023; Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024), and transforming organisational cultures that constrain recognition of their abilities (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024). An example of the stress and emotional exhaustion women put themselves under to prove their commitment and competence was shared by Emily, comparing herself to her hypothetical counterpart who:

“Proofread everything.... won loads of clients...would bill loads of hours she would be generating x more millions than I was. ... would be on top of the case law, she was a phenomenal leader who would be able to speak without script...and so, in every way, she was performing at the highest possible level, and so, of course, I was always beating myself up.”

Emily

Her leadership experience in a large firm highlights the heightened stress women face compared to their male peers (Burke, 2004). Despite her success, a lack of recognition led to health decline and regret over her choices. *"I probably worked to my detriment because ... if I hadn't taken it on, ..., I'd have built my practice, I've had more time, I probably wouldn't, you know, I became very ill at one point."* The adverse impact prompted her to step back from pursuing further leadership roles (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; van Knippenberg, 2000).

“I’m taking my foot off the pedal anyway because ... I’m just not working that hard anymore...then I’d sit tight ... not generating the income that I said, like all the men do”

Emily

This statement highlights the perceived advantage men enjoy in the legal profession referred to by the glass cushions and hot jobs (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Silva et al., 2012; Ryan et al., 2016). The narratives conveyed that, rather than addressing the structural challenges or crisis contexts, firms often placed responsibility for success or failure on the participants (Bell et al., 2024). This deflection heightened stress and feelings of imposter syndrome (Ryan et al., 2009; Clance & Imes, 1978), while limiting organisational learning and entrenching

masculine norms in leadership selection, thereby maintaining the male habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). Their experiences align with the gender-stress-misidentification model (Ryan et al, 2009), which links dissatisfaction to gendered workplace dynamics, a key element of the glass cliff. High expectations and scrutiny combined with limited support affected participants' mental health (Kottke & Agars, 2005; Kim et al., 2013; Lekchiri et al., 2019). Leila, a minority ethnic participant, echoed these experiences, describing how she had to work *"three times as hard"* as white male colleagues, reinforcing research showing women from ethnic minorities face intensified glass cliff risks (Cook & Glass, 2014). Ultimately, she declined partnership, opting to lead on her own terms.

"If I was a British man who brought in the volume of work, I brought in or was involved in as much as I'm involved in ... got the client feedback and the audit reports ..., you know, they'd probably make me like the king of the world."

Abigail

Portraying the experience of being a minority woman with the *"advantage of not even being visibly different... what you have to do is so much more than if you are just a white British man"* to reach the same level (Rudman & Glick, 2001). Pressure to conform to the "traditional" lawyer benchmark (Acker, 1990) led most to feel undervalued and unsupported (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Davies, 1996), often interpreted as lacking commitment or professionalism (Acker, 1990), resulting in reduced motivation, stress, and mental health strain (Ryan et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2016; Tiwari et al., 2019).

Furthermore, maintaining a work-life balance was a significant source of stress, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified gendered expectations and harsher standards for women in law (Brubaker, 2020; Krishnan & Szczepura, 2021). McKinsey (2020) reported that women, comprising 39% of global employment, accounted for 54% of job losses, while 90% of women lawyers took on additional childcare duties, with 73% struggling to cope (Next 100 Years, 2020; Kahng, 2021). As shown in Table 6.2 below, most participants had children, yet their career aspirations remained undeterred. While home parenting placed significant demands, particularly on those with young children (Wren & Partridge, 2021), they continued to pursue senior roles. Many emphasised the urgent need to challenge such persistent gender inequalities, and most who were successful in their roles within traditional firms or had set up their own firms emphasised the role of a supportive partner or network (Ely et al., 2011).

"I've got an amazing husband... I think without a partner that fully supports you, I can't imagine it would have been the journey that I've had."

Emily

Although experiences varied, most participants viewed COVID-19 as having a positive impact on workplace norms. They welcomed remote and hybrid working without loss of productivity, echoing CIPD (2024) guidance that effective hybrid arrangements can support productivity and enhance employee wellbeing.

"The managing partner wasn't very keen on people working from home, but COVID came, and we were all forced to work from home. We ... as a business, made more profit in that year than we did previously... So now we have flexible and agile working."

Sandra

Amber echoed a senior partner's comment from Dawson (2020), asking whether the CEO or COVID-19 had done more for digital transformation. Michelle, a national lead, appreciated the shift from rigid norms, such as formal dress, and improved communication. However, some noted challenges, such as weakened relationship-building due to reliance on digital platforms. For Melanie, a newly appointed partner, managing staff and risk assessments during the early pandemic significantly increased stress, reflecting the intensified pressure and scrutiny often faced by women in precarious leadership roles (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Cook & Glass, 2014a).

"I remember a few times my husband ... say, you haven't had a shower, you haven't had breakfast, you haven't had a cup of tea, and it would be like midday..., I just had the mentality of a gotta get through it."

Melanie

Number of Children	Number of Participants
0	4
1	3
2	16
3	5
4	1
5	2
Total	31

Table 6.2 Distribution of participants by number of children

Others reported that the pandemic normalised flexible working, enabling some women to meet targets during maternity leave and reducing penalties traditionally associated with absence, as physical networking shifted from late-night events to digital platforms (Cuddy et al., 2004). This disruption highlighted how structural change, and not individual adaptation, can create more equitable conditions for women's career progression.

Reduced commitment to the organisation / shorter tenure

This study found that, despite women being ambitious and indicating that workplace flexibility promotes their well-being and productivity, women's representation in leadership roles, as per statistics (SRA, 2024), is not increasing proportionately (Field et al., 2023). The participants' commitment was diminished by the denial of their flexible working requests. In line with McKinsey's findings, participants described seeking greater flexibility elsewhere and were increasingly willing to move firms to achieve their goals while carefully protecting their professional reputations (De Smet et al., 2021). In alignment with previous research, three key factors drove their decisions to leave: unequal treatment, being overworked and under-recognised, and spending time on unacknowledged tasks, such as advocating for flexibility or regulatory compliance, which hindered advancement (De Smet et al., 2021).

Participants' accounts suggest that their challenges stemmed from embedded structural barriers affecting their conduct, well-being, and career decisions, leading to disenchantment, demotivation, and reduced commitment to their firms (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). They worked hard for rewards disproportionate to their effort and time. Their experiences led more than a third of the participants to leave and establish their own firms, aligning with Belkin's view (2003, in Ryan et al., 2007) that women may leave leadership roles to seek success in non-traditional ways. The lack of support, being undermined, and the differential treatment received in comparison to a less experienced male colleague saw Inaya, a partner and head of department, feeling:

“So vulnerable and you feel alone, ... lost total confidence in myself... the stress I was under, and it was all very subliminal. It was ... passive-aggressive.” She left the firm and, having considered going to another firm, *“Then I looked at their boards. They're all middle-aged white men. I'm sick and tired of bowing down to the hierarchy, and I said no, I'm gonna do this on myself.”*

Inaya

The narratives suggest that law firms have largely ignored the role of gender in their processes, failing to fully acknowledge and understand its impact (Connell, 1987; West & Zimmerman, 1987). There were instances shared in which participants were replaced by white male colleagues (Cook & Glass, 2014a), a phenomenon regarded as a return to normality, known as the “saviour effect” (Cook & Glass, 2014b). Their treatment led participants to perceive discrimination, engendered anger (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002), and question whether the personal cost was worth it, resulting in many leaving for better work-life balance and reduced stress. The participants’ responses aligned with Crocker and Major’s (1989) suggestion that they protected their self-esteem by attributing adverse outcomes to prejudice, comparing themselves to other women solicitors, and placing value on their strengths. They refused the exploitative dynamic reflected in Acker’s concept of gendered organisations, where participants observed differences in advantage, exploitation, control, action, emotion, meaning, and identity based on gender (Acker, 1990:146).

Reputational damage

Glass cliff roles posed significant reputational risks for the 25 participants, with potential lasting effects on their career trajectories and the firms they represented (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). Externally, failure was often attributed to the individual rather than contextual factors, reinforcing stereotypes that women are less suited to leadership (Kulich et al., 2007; Ellemers, 2014). In the legal profession, where reputation is closely tied to progression, such damage can limit future opportunities (Ryan et al., 2011; Ellemers, 2014). Internally, reputational harm led to isolation, loss of support, and self-doubt, sometimes fostering imposter syndrome as Inaya’s experience illustrated above (Clance & Imes, 1978).

Participants described being marginalised by the male habitus of firms dominated by “*middle-aged white men*” (Inaya), experiencing symbolic violence despite appearing included (Bourdieu, 1990). Some rejected these norms and left, weighing the reputational risks of staying versus exiting, causing added stress (Brescoll et al., 2010). Several raised the frequent use of compromise agreements, confidential settlements involving non-disclosure clauses, which obscure women’s experiences, maintaining secrecy but helping to limit reputational damage (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). Despite legal protections, participants frequently reported gender-based penalties and unequal treatment. Many left to protect their careers when conditions became untenable. These exits contribute to high turnover and

reputational risk for firms, thereby weakening their talent pipeline and capacity for partner selection (Pearson & Clair, 1998).

“During my notice period, I helped them find another solicitor who would be able to pick up on the workload...the anxiety and the worry of not wanting to leave anywhere on a bad term, even though I felt that I was constantly being wronged.”

Maryam

The experiences shared by most participants vividly illustrate Walby's definition of patriarchy as “a system where men dominate, oppress, and exploit women” (Walby, 1989:214). Glass cliff roles resulted in reduced organisational identification among participants with significant negative implications (Ryan et al., 2009) as having to prove their legitimacy in hostile and unsupportive environments, diminished their psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019), contributing to burnout, disengagement, and ultimately attrition, particularly in case of women from minority ethnic backgrounds facing intersecting forms of marginalisation (Crenshaw, 1989; Ryan, 2023). Numerous participants chose the option to move in line with one of the career strategies identified in literature in response to the challenges they faced (Carbado & Gulati, 2000; Mickel & Dallimore, 2009; Tomlinson et al., 2012). Examples shared by the participants suggest that although such positions are presented as opportunities, they are in fact imbued with symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1999), as they serve to reinforce and instrumentalise gendered power dynamics under the guise of inclusion, setting them up to fail (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; 2007).

Positive Responses: Resilience, Refusal to Accept the Status Quo and Risk-Taking (3Rs)

Examining participants' experiences through the glass cliff metaphor reveals both the fragility of women's appointments and the systemic biases shaping them (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Bruckmuller & Branscombe, 2010). While the metaphor can obscure deeper organisational dynamics (Morgan, 2006), participants' narratives made these biases visible within the context of partnership roles. Their accounts showed how reputational risk, limited support, and symbolic inclusion adversely impacted their professional identity and well-being. Addressing the glass cliff, therefore, requires challenging dominant organisational consistencies that marginalise women's experiences and instead focusing on lived realities, recognising how different groups interpret and value work, relationships, and leadership differently (Alvesson, 1993). From a Bourdieusian perspective, firms' organisational norms reflect a gendered habitus that positions women as natural crisis leaders, rendering their

appointment to precarious roles, both rationalised and expected, normalising the symbolic violence, while masking the structural inequities that sustain them (1977, 1984, 1991).

Nonetheless, despite all the challenges, the participants notably remained positive about their achievements and work. A prominent factor helping the participants contend with the multiple challenges was their unwavering ability to spring back from adversity. Their resilience (Southwick et al., 2014), built through a growth mindset, perseverance, and support from spouses (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Livingston, 2014), family, and friends' networks, enabled them to handle challenging and stressful situations, bounce back, and find innovative resolutions (Southwick et al., 2014; Spitz, 2017).

“I didn’t want to fail, that’s the thing that drove me, I just didn’t wanna fail…… I think for me, if I see something, whatever it is, it’s a challenge, ... and I need to do it well.”

Nadia

Her deep-rooted motivation, shaped by her upbringing, led her to view challenges as opportunities for growth. While research shows that women are no less ambitious than men, they often express lower confidence in their ability to succeed (McKinsey, 2016). However, this study found that despite facing discrimination throughout their careers, including in partnership roles, participants did not question their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 2001). Instead, they built resilience incrementally, using hardship as motivation (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004; Southwick et al., 2014). This finding challenges claims that women with lower career self-efficacy are more likely to accept precarious roles as opportunities (Bandura & Locke, 2003; Darouei & Pluut, 2018). Most remained ambitious, actively building networks and developing skills to continue their leadership journey (Eagly & Carli, 2007) but on their terms (De Smet et al., 2021).

Next step was before ... I was 30, I wanted to be a partner in a law firm, that was my own personal target ... and I have met that.”

Iqra

Despite the risks, participants remained committed to reaching partnership status, willingly paying the “risk tax” by enduring bias and discrimination (Glass & Cook, 2020). They adopted a range of strategies, including assimilation, compromise, playing the game, reforming the system, relocation, and, in some cases, temporary withdrawal, to navigate gendered cultures (Tomlinson et al., 2012). However, these strategies were often found to overlap rather than be actively implemented independently. Some participants assimilated

or compromised with the masculine workplace norms in earlier stages of their careers. Understanding the workplace dynamics with experience, some also played the game discreetly (Bacon & Blyton, 2006; Tomlinson et al., 2016), as Emily described doing things “*under the radar*.” Others combined withdrawal with reformation by leaving traditional firms to join or establish ones with better gender representation or more supportive cultures (Rink et al., 2012). Notably, participants from minority ethnic and lower socioeconomic backgrounds experienced these challenges more intensely, highlighting the intersectional nature of exclusion in legal careers (Crenshaw, 1989; Aulakh et al., 2017).

As highlighted in the literature, several interrelated metaphors explore women’s career progression, including the glass ceiling (Morrison et al., 1987), glass cliff (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007), glass walls (Lyness & Terrazas, 2006; Powell & Butterfield, 2015), sticky floors (Booth et al., 2003), glass cushion (Ryan & Haslam, 2005) and glasshouse (Maclaran et al., 1997). These ‘glass’ and other metaphors reveal the invisible barriers women face, depicting them as obstructed by ceilings, confined by walls and sticky floors, steered toward cliffs, lost in labyrinths, and scrutinised within the glasshouse. As also mentioned in Chapter 5, while some literature briefly acknowledges women’s shifts to independent paths (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Ryan, Haslam & Postmes, 2007; Carnes & Radojevich-Kelley, 2011), it lacks a metaphor that reflects their strategic agency, emotional resilience, and self-determination demonstrated by the 31 participants in this study. This research introduces the metaphor of a “*leap of faith*” drawn from Kierkegaard’s existential philosophy (1843) and later critiqued by Habermas (1991), to capture the participants’ proactive responses to unstructured and unsupported career landscapes. As evident from participants’ accounts of their career journeys, their incrementally developed *resilience*, built through facing adversity (Southwick et al., 2014), they *refused to accept the status quo* of the inequitable treatment (Bell et al., 2024), which cyclically increased their capacity for *risk-taking* (Glass & Cook, 2016, 2020), culminating in their departures from male-dominated traditional firms, exemplifying the 3Rs. Their leaps were from structural exclusion and cliff-edge positions without safety nets, representing precarious inclusion, into the unknown professional terrains. The developed resilience (Southwick et al., 2014) did not come as compliance but as a conscious refusal to internalise failure within systems that set them up to fail (Bell et al., 2024). Their refusal constituted an agentic challenge to the status quo, exposing and resisting the normalisation of untenable conditions within the profession.

“Please don’t think I’m arrogant here, and I’ve only just started to recognise it; I do think I am.... mentally very quick, and so things that can take other people an awful

long time, I can do very quickly.”

Emily

This growing self-awareness and confidence was tempered by participants’ concern not to appear overly assertive, a reflection of how women’s confidence is often socially constrained due to the paradox of gender and leadership stereotypes (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Although research suggests that women’s confidence increases with age and may eventually surpass men’s in later life (Zenger & Folkman, 2024), however, the empirical data analysis revealed that among founders, confidence levels in their abilities and skillsets were notably higher earlier on, with a significant proportion aged in their early 30s or 40s. This contradicts deficit-based “lean-in” narratives that assign fault and responsibility to women’s behaviour rather than addressing structural inequality (Heilman, 2012; Sandberg, 2013; Ellemers, 2018; Ryan, 2023). Participants increasingly recognised that the challenges they faced were not due to personal inadequacy but rooted in a male-dominated professional culture, aligning with evidence that the glass cliff is more pronounced in highly gender-unequal environments (Morgenroth et al., 2020). Many employed positive affirmations and took pride in their achievements, reframing self-doubt as a response to systemic bias. They rejected internalised blame, embraced autonomy, and resisted the stereotype that women are more expendable than men in leadership (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010).

“I like to do things my way, and I like to just get on and do it, and I don't like people to be in the way.”

Susanne

Emily, an equity partner in a magic circle firm, shared:

“We're getting more women in, that's not the problem now ...but what I'm seeing is more people behaving like employees, not partners. I'm not sure they're going to drive the cause. I'm talking about cultural change now rather than just gender diversity. So, in order to change the culture of firms, I think you probably need to start at do we have the right model in place.”

Emily

Emily’s observation that women partners often behave like employees reflects enduring male-gendered norms, limited autonomy, and lack of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019). These dynamics contribute to professional closure (Witz, 1990) and uphold the status quo in traditional firms (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 1998), forming integral pillars that support the male-gendered habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). Most participants believed that

adopting a “play the game” strategy (Bacon & Blyton, 2006; Tomlinson et al., 2012) to conform to masculine norms often perpetuated their outsider status (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988) as it required suppressing their authentic leadership styles. Others rejected this, recognising its role in maintaining power structures. In firms with more women in senior roles, participants described efforts to reshape rather than conform to dominant norms (Brockman, 2001), supported by peer networks (Rink et al., 2012). Some who stayed in traditional firms eventually left to avoid career damage, a pattern consistent with higher attrition among women and ethnic minorities (Webley & Duff, 2007; Payne-Pikus et al., 2010). A few who remained and thrived in traditional firms were given autonomy, a voice, and the freedom to lead, utilising their natural traits of collegiality and compassion (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Ultimately, most participants left traditional firms, not the profession, choosing to reject the male-dominated status quo (Ellemers, 2014). These findings highlight the need for a comprehensive approach to gender equality, extending beyond representation metrics, through the continuous evaluation of initiatives such as mentoring and diversity programmes that consider factors like race, class, and ethnicity (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012; Ryan, 2023).

There was a notable increase in risk-taking among participants, diverging from theories suggesting that the glass cliff effect deters women from leadership (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Ellemers, 2014; Darouei & Pluut, 2018). Instead, this study revealed a pattern of resilience and self-awareness. Many participants, particularly founders, chose self-employment over traditional partnerships, rejecting hierarchical, profit-driven firms in favour of values-based models (Harding, 2007; Carnes & Radojevich-Kelley, 2011). This choice represented a different form of risk-taking, grounded in confidence, autonomy, and alignment with personal values. Though women are still overrepresented in traditionally ‘nurturing’ fields like family law, wills and probate, often linked to lower status and pay (Bolton & Muzio, 2007; Tomlinson et al., 2012), only six of the eleven founders specialised in these areas. The remainder practised corporate and commercial law, including litigation, marking a shift from horizontal occupational segregation (Sommerlad, 2002). This challenges gendered assumptions about women’s emotional labour and disrupts the symbolic violence underpinning the male-dominated habitus of the legal field (Bourdieu, 1990). By entering high-capital legal domains, participants actively accumulate financial, cultural, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Kay & Gorman, 2008), negotiating their professional identity on their terms.

Many participants felt that the risks taken to reach partnership roles in traditional firms offered little financial or personal reward. Some left due to unfair practices; others sought

greater autonomy or believed they could lead and innovate more effectively on their own (Patterson & Mavin, 2009; De Smet et al., 2021). Unable or unwilling to adapt, traditional firms prompted participants to take a different kind of risk (Glass & Cook, 2019), establishing their own practices to avoid bureaucracy and gain independence. As noted in the previous chapter, participants often moved firms to better align with their values, particularly favouring environments where women held influential roles. This supports research suggesting that recognising prejudice can intensify gender group identification, which may serve as a buffer against psychological harm (Gurin & Townsend, 1986; Jetten et al., 2013). Such identification may help explain why women thrive in women-led firms (Lee & James, 2007; Brown et al., 2011). Enduring adverse conditions also appeared to positively influence participants' willingness to take further risks (Eckel & Grossman, 2002; 2008).

"I'm a real risk taker, ..., I can take decisions really quickly I will take a decision then I will see how we go through the process to get to that decision, or I will look at the data to support it rather than the other way around."

Emily

She exudes confidence and a propensity for high-risk tolerance, preferring action over extensive analysis and maintaining an adaptable mindset. Participants became increasingly forthright about their career aspirations, standing up to workplace discrimination and risking their careers when passed over for promotion, being paid less than their male peers, looking for genuinely meaningful, inclusive firms. Labelling women as disloyal for frequently changing jobs for better outcomes (Dowell, 2024) is reflective of gender biases and social norms that favour assertiveness in men, who are often praised as go-getters for exhibiting the same behaviour (Heilman, 2001; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Doldor, Wyatt, and Sylvester, 2021).

"In some ways, I think it has been easier getting promoted moving firms because there's always a business case ... they know they need someone at a certain level... I do think it's harder ... to get promoted internally because you need lots of things to align ... and that's not always there."

Samantha

She highlights the complexities of promotion dynamics within firms and how taking riskier choices can lead to greater gains (Glass & Cook, 2019), as also echoed by Abigail, whose female colleagues, who remained in the same firms earned significantly less aligning with findings of Hickey et al. (2022) suggesting that women have to move jobs to progress as opposed to men who tend to progress within the same organisation. Participants' decisions demonstrated courage and risk-taking, as they ventured into the marketplace or followed entrepreneurial paths without guarantees (Patterson & Mavin, 2009). One participant launched her firm during the pandemic, leaving a secure position because she believed she could make a more significant impact and be a role model for other women. These narratives underscore determination and resilience in pursuing their visions despite inherent challenges, highlighting their propensity for risk-taking (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

"I just wanted to be my own boss. I was just a single mum and then decided to give up a fixed salary and ... go self-employed, crazy ... looking back now, how can a single mum on no money actually do that? But yeah, I did. I don't regret it,"

Leila

Although founding a firm was challenging, participants found it rewarding, fulfilling their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and reflecting broader trends of women leaving corporate roles for greater fulfilment (Patterson & Mavin, 2009). Many took a "leap of faith" (Sandra), driven by values and meaningful work (Ely et al., 2011). Those in traditional firms often negotiated autonomy through performance (Rink et al., 2012), with smaller firms proving less bureaucratic and more open to risk-taking. Participants challenged traditional partnership models, redefining success through flexibility, cultural alignment, and empowered working practices, particularly in women-led environments, where autonomy and support were highest (Patterson & Mavin, 2009).

"If I was at a normal firm and I said ..., I can't be in ... before 10:00 o'clock... it just wouldn't be accepted, whereas here now doing what I'm doing, I do feel as though I'm accepted, and I can still prove my worth, but I can still be a mother and a carer."

Sheryll

This flexibility was observed in both female-led and in firms with women in influential positions. As a family law partner, Lisa shared that female leaders can have a significant impact on the workplace (Lee & James, 2007; Bruckmüller et al., 2014). She exemplified

this by staying in touch with her juniors during maternity leave, giving them a positive send-off, and welcoming women back with a coffee and a chat, offering advice on career progression while raising children. In line with this trend shared by many, a managing partner of a predominantly female, medium-sized firm shared:

“We’ve always been very flexible in terms of working hours, ... we’ve always been as accommodating as possible, and we’ve always said if people needed to leave for things like school plays or parents’ evenings, whatever, that’s fine. They could make the hours up another time. That’s just the way we’ve always operated.”

Linda

Webley and Duff (2007) highlight that women seeking flexible work are often perceived as less committed, prompting them to prove their dedication through increased output, which reflects institutional distrust. Notably lack of flexible working is one of the main reasons for women leaving organisations (De Smet et al., 2021). However, women-led firms are beginning to disrupt this norm by embedding trust, autonomy, and flexibility into their organisational cultures, redefining professional credibility on their own terms.

Women-led firms with a focus on value-based rather than profit-based models have improved gender balance and retention without relying on positive discrimination. Several participants described proactive outreach, such as university partnerships and offering paralegal experience, to support the next generation of lawyers. These firms, ranging in size, age, and specialisation, are gaining increasing recognition, impacting the legal landscape, with some ranked in the Legal 500 and Chambers and Partners. By offering flexibility and inclusive cultures, they are helping working mothers *“to quash this inequality,”* attempting to create a culture where *“you are allowed to have a voice”* (Inaya) and promote greater transparency around pay and promotion. These firms are attracting talent from traditional firms that are unable to accommodate modern working needs. Founders in influential roles are also initiating charitable work and promoting pay transparency to address structural inequalities. Contrary to the “queen bee” narrative, participants highlighted cultures of mutual support and collective leadership, echoing findings by Mavin (2008) and Derks et al. (2016).

“I think there’s a great feeling of hope. We’re standing on the shoulders of women who threw themselves under horses... went on marches, who fought for our rights,

and we owe it to them, to ourselves, to continue this.... So, let's do our best here, but with a great feeling of hope and positivity and not being beaten."

Amber

Showing gratitude for past gender equality efforts, she expresses determination to continue this legacy to promote egalitarian relationships and inclusivity for all (Hooks, 2000) and advocates for collective action to advance gender equality in the legal profession. As Eagly and Carli (2016:515) note, "metaphors have the power to shape social perception; they can be subtly manipulated to alter attitudes and behaviours." Despite women's traits such as self-awareness, compassion, and emotional intelligence supporting the contemporary leadership models (Greenleaf, 2007; Hlupic, 2019; Bourke & Titus, 2021), they remain underacknowledged (Eagly & Carli, 2007) in both academic and practical contexts.

Accordingly, this study introduces the metaphor of a "leap of faith" (Kierkegaard, 1843) to address a gap in the literature on gender and career progression, offering a rare positive framing of women's courage, risk-taking and agency in navigating their career journeys. Unlike dominant narratives that depict women as passive recipients of structural constraints, this metaphor highlights their internal conviction, emotional risk-taking, and willingness to progress without institutional guarantees (Ely et al., 2011; Eagly & Carli, 2016). It reframes participants as strategic agents of change who resist the male-gendered habitus and its entrenched practices (Honig, 2021; Bell et al., 2024). Their actions challenge male-dominated frameworks and offer an alternative pathway to legal service delivery, one rooted in purpose, resilience, and intentional disruption of norms (Glass & Cook, 2016; Ingersoll, Cook & Glass, 2023). This contribution promotes career progression as a deliberate and courageous act, advancing understanding of how women navigate uncertainty in professional life.

While the "leap of faith" metaphor captures the uncertainty women faced in career advancement, its uncritical use risks reinforcing neoliberal narratives that place responsibility on individual women rather than addressing systemic inequality (Rottenberg, 2014; Gill, 2017). This study employs it as a critical metaphor, exposing how structural barriers, rooted in Bourdieu's (1977; 1990) notions of habitus and symbolic violence, compel women to make risky, agentic decisions. Their 'leaps' reflect not freedom of choice, but responses to persistent structural exclusion and precarious inclusion, as they navigate the uncertain and uncharted professional terrain. Drawing on Kierkegaard (1843) and Habermas's critique (1991), the participants' faith was not blind optimism, but informed

confidence in their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Their actions reflect calculated agency in defiance of the persistent lack of structural reform. Participants' accounts lacked evidence of firms promoting women due to business (Hunt et al., 2018) or ethical imperatives (Webley & Duff, 2007; Özbilgin, 2023, in Vincent et al., 2024). Instead, the enduring masculine norms and market-led priorities continued to reinforce the glass cliff, hindering meaningful progress toward gender parity at partnership levels.

Conclusion

Responding to calls by scholars to examine how women experience senior roles (Sabharwal, 2013; Ryan et al., 2016; Esposito, 2021), this chapter explores the experiences of women solicitors in partnership roles through the lens of the glass cliff, where women are disproportionately appointed to precarious leadership roles (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). Addressing Research Question 2, the discussion focused on Themes 4, the circumstances surrounding the appointment, and Theme 5, women solicitors' responses to glass cliff roles, revealing that over two-thirds of the participants were appointed to roles marked by instability. These appointments often coincided with crises, such as mergers, retirements, key departures, or the COVID-19 pandemic, where women's inclusive and communal traits were presumed to be beneficial to stabilise times of uncertainty (Ryan et al., 2011). These appointments often carried insufficient support or authority and were shaped by enduring stereotypes like "Think Manager–Think Male" and "Think Crisis–Think Female" (Schein, 1973, 1977; Ryan et al., 2011; Bruckmüller et al., 2014), and frequently taxed women with opening new offices or managing high-stakes change. Rather than representing progress, these appointments often served firms' reputational purposes and reinforced gendered dynamics. These positions resulted in increased stress, self-doubt, shorter tenures, potential reputational damage, and slowed participants' advancement. The findings reveal how structural inequalities, embedded in symbolic violence and the gendered habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990), continue to restrict women's leadership trajectories by limiting their autonomy, recognition, and advancement. This dynamic underpins the persistent underrepresentation of women at the partnership level in law firms in England and Wales (SRA, 2024), where increased numerical representation does not translate to equality of autonomy.

Despite these barriers, participants responded with resilience, refusal to accept the status quo and strategic risk-taking. These were not isolated reactions, but continuous strategies adopted by participants in response to varying levels of exclusion, constituting a pattern of gendered agency. Over a third left traditional firms to establish their own firms, reimagining leadership models based on inclusion, values, and flexibility. Others navigated resistance

and bureaucracy, particularly in larger firms, yet found success in firms where women held influential roles and collective support was present. Those who remained in traditional firms negotiated social support (Rink et al., 2012), which enabled them to take measured risks and contribute to innovation. However, this often came with the pressure to prove their worth through sustained high performance. The concept of the “leap of faith” (Kierkegaard, 1843), emerged as a counter-narrative to deficit-models of women’s leadership, which are often captured by existing metaphors which focus on constraints rather than symbolising women’s agentic responses to systemic inequity. However, the study employs the “leap of faith” metaphor critically, as it risks individualising responsibility for transformation to achieve success for women, thereby reinforcing neoliberal narratives that individualise responsibility and obscure systemic inequality (Rottenberg, 2014; Gill, 2017). This study instead reclaims the metaphor as a critical lens, revealing how structural barriers, anchored in Bourdieu’s (1977, 1990) concepts of habitus and symbolic violence, necessitate women’s agentic, often risky decisions. Participants’ leaps were not acts of blind faith (Kierkegaard, 1843), but expressions of grounded self-belief and accumulated expertise (Bandura, 1997). Their trajectories demonstrate intentional, strategic agency rather than evidence of organisational commitment to gender equity. These ‘leaps’ reflect not autonomous choice but compelled responses to enduring exclusion and precarious inclusion as women navigate an uncertain, unexplored professional landscape through risky, agentic decisions.

Rather than falling or being pushed off from the glass cliff, participants repositioned themselves, creating chosen vantage points from which to lead. This study extends the glass cliff scholarship in the legal sector by highlighting not only the risks women face but also the transformative strategies they adopt, encompassing the 3Rs: resilience, refusal to accept the status quo and risk-taking. In doing so, it challenges linear and deficit-based accounts of women’s advancement. It emphasises that placing women in glass cliff positions, without genuine authority or structural support, is not progress but performative inclusion. True gender parity demands moving beyond surface-level diversity metrics toward systemic reform that embeds autonomy, recognition, and sustainable leadership pathways (Ryan, 2023). The next chapter synthesises these findings and proposes actionable recommendations for advancing gender equity in law firm partnerships.

Chapter 7 - Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Introduction

This study aimed to investigate the career paths of women solicitors in England and Wales, exploring how they experience and navigate the challenges encountered on their journeys to and within partnership positions. The research utilised the frameworks of the “glass ceiling” (Morrison et al., 1987) and “glass cliff” (Ryan & Haslam, 2005) phenomena to understand the legal profession’s slow advancement towards gender parity at the partnership level (SRA, 2024). This concluding chapter synthesises the study's findings, based on an analysis of 31 women solicitors’ accounts in law firms in England and Wales. The study employed semi-structured interviews within a qualitative paradigm, adopted an interpretivist perspective with a pragmatic approach and used reflexive thematic analysis to explore their lived experiences. By systematically addressing the research questions, guided by existing literature and empirical data, the study makes a valuable contribution to both academic scholarship and professional practice. This final chapter integrates the key conclusions of the study, discusses their implications and outlines recommendations for policy and practice. Finally, acknowledging its limitations, this research suggests directions for future studies to advance the scholarly discussion on the issues raised.

7.2 Significance of the Research

This research addresses a significant gap in understanding how women solicitors navigate ongoing barriers to partnership roles within law firms in England and Wales, in a profession that remains predominantly male despite decades of formal equality initiatives. Although women have entered the profession for over a century and now comprise 62% of entry-level solicitors, their advancement to partnership remains limited, with only 32% holding full-equity, profit-sharing partnerships, decreasing to 28% in larger firms with 50 or more partners (SRA, 2024). The value of this study, which adopted an inductive and reflexive approach, lies in its detailed exploration of the lived experiences of women solicitors throughout their careers, offering rich and nuanced insights into how the glass ceiling and glass cliff phenomena operate within the legal sector. This qualitative study extends beyond merely capturing a snapshot of their career progression by analysing their professional journeys as a metaphor for career advancement in a male-dominated profession, as well as

their experiences within those partnerships. Grounded in a critical review of the literature on the glass ceiling (Morrison et al., 1987) and glass cliff phenomena, (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007), the research posed the following aim, objectives and key questions to explore the dynamics contributing to women's underrepresentation at the partnership level. It addressed the limitations of quantitative studies by focusing on women's lived experiences, decision-making, and the factors shaping their professional trajectories (Sabharwal, 2013; Bruckmüller et al., 2014; Esposito, 2021). While not the primary lens, the study also drew on Bourdieu's notions of habitus and symbolic violence (1977, 1984) to analyse how gendered power relations are reproduced and resisted within law firms. The study compares empirical findings with existing research, offering academic, practice and policy insights into advancing gender parity and equality at higher levels of the legal profession.

7.3 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The study had the following defined aim and objectives, which were achieved through the stated research questions.

Aim

This research explores the ongoing underrepresentation of women solicitors at the partnership level within the legal profession in England and Wales.

Objectives

1. To explore the prevalence and persistence of the glass ceiling phenomenon and its influence on the progression of women solicitors to partnership roles.
2. To explore the experiences of women solicitors in partnership positions, using the lens of the glass cliff phenomenon to better understand the ongoing lack of gender parity at the partnership level.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are women solicitors' experiences of navigating the pathways to partnership positions through the lens of the glass ceiling phenomenon?

Research Question 2: How do women solicitors experience partnership roles in the context of the glass cliff phenomenon?

7.4 Key Findings

The study identified five key findings that illuminate the complex, gendered barriers women solicitors face as they progress to and within partnership roles, providing insight into the cultural, structural, and symbolic dynamics that continue to influence the legal profession.

Gatekeeping in an enduring male-dominated culture

A key finding revealed the persistence of informal practices within law firms, where patriarchal norms remain deeply embedded in the culture, structure, and processes, influencing women's access to opportunities, mentorship, and thereby affecting promotion prospects and decisions (Walby, 1989; Bolton & Muzio, 2008; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). Participants described the in-group favouritism (Chattopadhyay et al., 2004) and maintenance of male dominance at senior levels despite official commitments to gender equality. Most participants described the informal sponsorship and relationship-based appointments in law firms, highlighting that masculinity continues to dominate the cultural capital within law firms, often reinforcing an "old boys' club" mindset (Sommerlad, 2002; Ashley & Empson, 2017). Most raised concerns about the lack of transparency in processes (Powell & Butterfield, 2015), including promotion, pay, and rewards, highlighting a pattern of preferential treatment towards male colleagues, regardless of experience or merit (Williams, 1992). The relative scarcity of female role models (Ely et al., 2011), mentors (Ragins & Kram, 2014), and sponsors (Ibarra et al., 2010), and in some cases, the existence of queen bees (Derks et al., 2011), was observed to limit participants' access to vital opportunities for networking, business development, and promotion. Participants' narratives revealed internal occupational closure mechanisms (Witz, 1992; Brockman, 2001), leaving most participants feeling excluded, unheard, and having their strengths overlooked. These exclusionary dynamics suggest that maintaining the profession's elite habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991; Sullivan, 2010) hinders participants' progress and contributes to the slow pace of achieving gender parity at partnership levels (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019; SRA, 2024).

Gendered expectations and the double bind

Most participants explained that their competence was questioned, especially when their compassionate and inclusive approach diverged from traditional leadership expectations. The widespread gender norms about what women are like and should be like, combined with

the paradoxical demands of leadership, generated conflicts between their natural traits of compassion and empathy and the expectations of partnership qualities such as assertiveness, aggressiveness, and self-confidence, characteristics typically associated with men (Schein, 1973, 1975). This paradox placed participants in a double bind: they felt penalised for adhering to gendered norms seen as lacking partnership attributes in a male-centred legal culture and simultaneously risked being disliked for challenging such norms (Heilman, 2001), highlighting the enduring influence of role incongruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which reinforces leadership as a male domain. This situation undermined participants' confidence and negatively affected their potential for partnership evaluation, slowing both their progress and that of gender equality in partnership roles.

The Work-Life imbalance

Most participants identified work-life balance as one of their key challenges, citing structures and processes as incompatible with caregiving responsibilities and personal well-being, thereby disproportionately influencing their career decisions (Taparia & Lenka, 2022). Participants' commitment to their careers was measured by male benchmarks, characterised by expectations of long hours, presenteeism, and informal male-centric networks around drinking, cricket, golf, rugby or motor racing, making presenteeism a symbol of success and competence, thereby reinforcing the deeply ingrained male-gendered culture in most law firms (Sommerlad, 2002). This exclusion of participants with caring responsibilities from close contact with decision-makers slowed their progress (Elacqua et al., 2009; Babic & Hansez, 2021). Participants' accounts revealed the structures, processes, and social norms reinforce an elitist culture, reproducing a gendered habitus and ultimately sustaining the male advantage in senior roles. The findings suggest that COVID-19 precipitated a shift towards flexible working practices (Dawson, 2020), but resistance in most traditional firms has continued.

These findings, which in some cases included early loss of confidence, stress, and burnout (Kim et al., 2013; Heinemann & Heinemann, 2017), highlight how differential treatment, such as gender pay gaps, being overlooked for promotion, limited support for flexible working (Cuddy et al., 2004; Ansari, 2016), and rewards misaligned with effort, sustain male-centric structures, processes, and practices. These factors create persistent challenges for women across their careers, including at the highest levels, thereby reinforcing the glass ceiling. However, the findings reveal that almost all participants experienced the glass ceiling at varying levels of intensity, identifying it as a widespread set of barriers that hinder

women's progress to partnerships throughout their journeys, not just at the top aligning more with the metaphors of labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007) and the glasshouse (Maclaran et al., 1997).

Risk and responsibility without power

Most participants reported being made a partner during times of crisis of varying severity (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), involving a high risk of failure, illustrating the glass cliff phenomenon. These crises encompassed firm mergers, retirements of department heads, departures of key personnel, opening branch offices, managing multiple offices across different cities, launching new departments in their areas of expertise, and COVID-19 lockdowns. With limited financial and social support (Rink et al., 2012), recognition, rewards, and increased scrutiny (Hegarty & Bruckmüller, 2013), many viewed these appointments as symbolic gestures aimed at reputation management rather than genuine opportunities for advancement, highlighting that parity does not equate to equality in influence or progress (Ridgeway, 1991; Ryan & Haslam, 2005). These circumstances amplified the fragility of these positions and impeded long-term career development (Brescoll et al., 2010). Several participants described being assigned significant responsibilities without formal recognition through a title, reinforcing both the glass ceiling and the glass cliff.

Strategic survival: Resilience, refusal and risk-taking (3Rs) and a leap of faith

Faced with the structural and cultural barriers represented by the glass ceiling and glass cliff, participants employed multiple strategies not only to survive but also to assert agency and regain control over their professional development. Having persisted in unsupportive environments, they developed personal **resilience** (Southwick et al., 2014), though at significant personal costs. Most **refused the male-dominated status quo** and took calculated **risks** (Glass & Cook, 2019), some by accepting precarious opportunities, in the hope of achieving future autonomy and recognition. Some opted to leave firms to establish their own, before reaching partnership, having experienced and pre-emptively anticipated the lack of support and differential treatment compared to their male colleagues. They represented a proactive rejection of a system they viewed as structurally biased and misaligned with their values and well-being. Others stepped away from the partnership track in search of firms with cultures that aligned with their values or established their own firms. However, the majority chose **refusal**, (Bell et al., 2024) actively rejecting traditional career paths in traditional law firms (Bell et al., 2024). Their responses involved a profound **leap**

of faith (Kierkegaard, 1843), driven by a desire to gain autonomy over their time, potential, well-being, and professional identity rather than seeking guarantees.

Across both the glass ceiling and glass cliff experiences, participants demonstrated 3Rs: Resilience, Refusal and Risk-taking not as isolated traits, but as sustained, strategic responses to a profession that repeatedly questioned their legitimacy. These were not acts of passive adaptation but expressions of agency, conscious efforts to navigate, reimagine, or reject roles that constrained their identity and values. Yet, these responses must be understood within the context of neoliberal professional culture, where the burden of adaptation, persistence, or withdrawal is placed on women rather than prompting structural change (Rottenberg, 2014; Gill, 2017).

Intersectionalities beyond gender

Although gender was a primary focus, participants' narratives revealed that those from minority ethnic groups and non-professional socioeconomic backgrounds had journeys shaped by their overlapping intersectionalities, such as ethnicity, social class, and educational and family background (Crenshaw, 1991; Opara et al., 2020). Their intersecting identities had a particularly profound impact on how they were perceived, limiting their access to networks, opportunities, and mentorship, as well as their overall credibility within the legal profession, intensifying the challenges. Participants from minority ethnic backgrounds, especially those with children, often found that they had to work harder to prove their legitimacy (Cuddy et al., 2004). This finding emphasises the need for a more nuanced intersectional approach to initiatives tackling inequality in the legal profession that goes beyond just gender, as this study confirms that gender alone does not fully capture the complexity of barriers to progression (Ryan, 2023).

Collectively, these findings form the basis for the study's academic contributions, advancing theoretical perspectives on the glass ceiling and glass cliff phenomena and informing practical strategies for addressing gendered barriers in legal careers.

7.5 Academic Contributions

By addressing Research Question 1, which explored how women solicitors experience and navigate pathways to partnership roles, this study advances the recent conceptualisation of the glass ceiling in previous literature. Most literature often depicts it as a fixed barrier at the

top levels, primarily using numerical indicators in quantitative studies, emphasising representation gaps without exploring its complex interaction with factors such as motherhood, intersectionalities, or women's agentic responses (Morrison et al., 1987; Cotter et al., 2001). The findings of this research align more closely with the labyrinth metaphor (Eagly & Carli, 2007), which conceptualises women's leadership journeys as nonlinear, complex, and marked by recurring obstacles that require strategic navigation, depicted in the cumulative challenges participants described across different stages of their careers, including before and after entering the metaphorical "glasshouse" (Maclaran et al., 1997), which upholds the glass ceiling, representing the male-dominated profession, in which they remain judged and scrutinised against male benchmarks compelling them to mask their authenticity, resulting in heightened stress (Ryan et al., 2009).

This research also aligns with Taparia and Lenka's (2022) framing of the glass ceiling as an interrelated set of structural, cultural, and normative barriers that interact and reinforce each other, cumulatively hindering women's progression and maintaining systemic gender inequality in professional hierarchies. However, the quantitative approach, although valuable, often lacks insights into the lived experiences of women. This study, through adopting a reflexive, qualitative approach, captures and deepens the understanding of how and why gendered structural and cultural barriers persist and how are they experienced by women solicitors across their career trajectories in the legal profession. This study, by offering a profession-specific understanding of the glass ceiling, responds to Freidson's (1983) call to examine gender inequality within the specific context of professions. It also complements Babic and Hansez's (2021) framework by illustrating the role of the legal profession's patriarchal evolution as an additional factor, which transcends the organisational gender cultures, adding to the interpersonal, inter-situational factors, which cumulatively contribute to the perception of the glass ceiling, which continues to influence women's progression.

This research, therefore, contributes a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the glass ceiling in the legal profession. The findings demonstrate that the glass ceiling is a dynamic, culturally embedded concept maintained through structural, symbolic, and interpersonal mechanisms, reinforced by the internal mechanisms of occupational closure in law firms (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991; Witz, 1990; Muzio & Ackroyd, 2005), which hinder women's progress not only at senior levels but throughout their careers. By addressing Research Question 2, which examined how women solicitors experience partnership roles, the study notably enhances understanding of the glass cliff phenomenon by exploring the

circumstances in which women solicitors attain partnership roles, building on Ryan and Haslam's (2005; 2007) research on women's appointments to precarious leadership positions. While previous studies have primarily focused on quantitative analysis (Ashby et al., 2007; Cook & Glass, 2014; Ryan et al., 2016), this research qualitatively examines women's subjective experiences in these roles, revealing the situational dynamics that influence such appointments. By contextualising the research in the legal profession, the study also accounts for the context-dependent nature of the glass cliff (Morgenroth et al., 2020) and how perceptions affect its impact (Haslam et al., 2010), providing deeper insights into the lived realities of women solicitors in partnership positions.

Notably, existing glass cliff research primarily examines selection processes (Ryan et al., 2016; Kulich et al., 2021) and the intentions of the organisations, whereas this study offers a novel perspective by exploring the subjective experiences and decision-making processes of position-holders appointed in precarious roles. While existing research has primarily examined the glass cliff in politics and corporate contexts, to the researcher's knowledge, this is the first qualitative study to explore the glass cliff phenomenon within the legal profession. The findings reveal the presence of the glass cliff in law firms, where participants were often promoted to partnership positions during periods of instability, with limited support and autonomy. By not prewarning participants about the glass cliff and selecting individuals from a range of firm types, the study minimises identity-based response bias related to gender dynamics (Ryan & Haslam, 2007), enhancing the credibility of its contribution.

The study, therefore, emphasises that the glass ceiling and the glass cliff in the legal profession are not isolated or separate phenomena but are embedded within its structural and cultural framework. They are reinforced by gender and leadership stereotypes, as outlined by social role and role congruity theories (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Karau, 2002), as well as by structural issues within law firms (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019). While not the primary analytical lens, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and symbolic violence were utilised as an added interpretive layer for understanding how the barriers were sustained through internalised norms, thereby helping to reproduce gendered power within law firms (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991).

Furthermore, this research highlights the metaphorical frameworks that collectively depict a continuum of systemic disadvantage, portraying women as passive subjects of the structural and cultural inequalities. The labyrinth captures the ongoing struggle; the 'glass ceiling'

blocks ascension to senior roles (Morrison et al., 1987); the ‘glass cliff’ describes the risky conditions of entry into leadership (Ryan & Haslam, 2005); the ‘glass walls’ and ‘sticky floors’ keep them sidelined in lower levels (Booth et al., 2003; Lyness & Terrazas, 2006;), and the ‘glasshouse’ reflects the constant visibility and judgment that erode authority and well-being at every stage (Maclaran et al., 1997). Together, they illustrate how women’s professional journeys (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) are shaped not by lack of ambition, but by structural inequalities, cultural bias, and gendered organisational norms. This study therefore introduces the metaphor of the *“leap of faith,”* offering a fresh perspective on women’s navigation of their professional journeys, moving beyond existing metaphors that portray entrapment. This study adds to a more agentic and deliberate portrayal of women’s professional journeys and how they overcome cultural and structural barriers through the emergent framework of the *3 Rs: resilience, refusal to accept the status quo, and risk-taking*. The study highlights the diverse strategies participants used to persist, adapt, or leave to challenge the inequitable landscape. For many, these strategies involved a profound leap of faith, choosing to redefine success on their own terms rather than conform to exclusionary structures. However, the study challenges the neoliberal narrative that places the burden of adaptation on women, focusing on fixing women rather than transforming the structures and organisational norms (Rottenberg, 2014; Gill, 2017; Ryan, 2023).

7.6 Professional Practice Contributions

Women solicitors

For women solicitors aspiring to partnership, this study offers critical insights into the structural and cultural barriers that continue to shape their progression. By examining how the glass ceiling and glass cliff operate in the legal profession (Sabharwal, 2013; Sabharwal et al., 2016; Esposito, 2021), the findings encourage women to be intentional in evaluating their career moves. Repeated exposure to adversity helped many participants build resilience (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004; Southwick et al., 2014), enabling them to challenge prevailing inequality by refusing to accept it, a concept described as leadership of refusal (Bell et al., 2024). Rooted in a strong sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986, 1997) and professional identity, this resistance was often supported by participants’ strategic risk-taking (Glass & Cook, 2016, 2020). When career progression was blocked or psychological safety was lacking (Edmondson, 2019), participants consciously chose to leave and take a “leap of faith” into firms that better aligned with their values (Ryan et al., 2009; Khilji & Pumroy, 2019) or decided to establish their own. These moves frequently resulted in greater job

satisfaction, professional development, and long-term fulfilment. Thus, by drawing on their resilience, refusing the inequitable status quo of traditional firms, and taking calculated risks, guided by an assessment of cultural fit and institutional support, participants were able to access more fulfilling and sustainable career opportunities.

For women solicitors aiming for partnership roles, this study's findings offer valuable insights into approaching leadership opportunities with caution. Apparent promotions during periods of crisis may reflect glass cliff scenarios (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007) and should be assessed in terms of expectations, available support, and timelines for goal achievement (Rink et al., 2012). A reflective and informed approach can support strategic decision-making and alignment with organisational cultures that enable long-term success (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The research findings highlight the importance of flexible working practices, which have become increasingly normalised since the COVID-19 pandemic (Dawson, 2020) and call for organisational cultures that do not penalise maternity leave or caregiving responsibilities, as these often hinder women's progression (Cuddy et al., 2004). Echoing Ryan's (2023) assertion that women do not need fixing, the research reinforces the need to reform the cultural and institutional conditions that sustain inequality. Traits often associated with women, such as empathy and collaboration (Eagly & Karau, 2002), are well-suited to modern, team-based leadership models. Rather than urging women to "lean in" (Sandberg, 2013), the findings support calls for leadership development that values diverse, inclusive styles (Alvesson, 1991; Hlupic, 2019; Chamorro-Premuzic & Gallup, 2020) from which men can also benefit.

Women solicitors are encouraged to recognise the influence of male-dominated cultures in law firms proactively and to develop self-efficacy over time (Bandura, 1977). Cultivating a broad skill set across legal, business, and leadership domains (Ibarra et al., 2010; Ely et al., 2011), communicating aspirations clearly (Rudman & Glick, 2001), and seeking mentoring and leadership training (Boone et al., 2013; Ryan, 2023) can enhance career progression. Analysing firm leadership structures and advancement patterns offers insights into inclusion and opportunity (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Taparua & Lenka, 2022), especially for individuals from underrepresented backgrounds (Alvesson, 2002; Pringle et al., 2017). Supportive policies that promote well-being and work-life balance are essential (Livingstone, 2014; Babic & Hansez, 2021). Furthermore, mentors, sponsors (Shapiro et al., 1978), and visible role models who exemplify the attainability of senior roles also play a significant role (Gibson, 2004; Ibarra et al., 2010). Genuine inclusion can reduce imposter syndrome and stress (Clance & Imes, 1978; Feenstra et al., 2020), while advocacy and

support from within firms can foster more equitable pathways for women and underrepresented groups (Opara et al., 2020; SRA, 2024).

Policy implications

By examining women's journeys to partnership and beyond, this research highlights the structural and cultural barriers affecting their progression and retention in law firms. It offers evidence-based insights to inform inclusive policy and practice. The findings stress the importance of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019) and supportive work cultures that mitigate stress and burnout (Ryan et al., 2009; Heinemann & Heinemann, 2017), which can enhance performance, client satisfaction, and organisational commitment while reducing turnover (Taparia & Lenka, 2022).

The participants' narratives emphasise the importance of nurturing inclusive cultures within the profession to reflect the diversity of the population it serves, a priority for the SRA (2024). Achieving this requires not only raising awareness of systemic blind spots but also implementing corrective measures, fostering a culture of accountability (Powell & Butterfield, 2015). However, overestimating progress toward gender equality can lead to complacency, hindering actual advancements (Begeny et al., 2022). The findings highlight that to promote sustainable gender equity, policy interventions must go beyond merely increasing numbers and address the structural and cultural barriers women face, including acknowledging the lived experiences of atypical and underrepresented lawyers (Acker, 1990; Alvesson, 1991; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019), auditing decision-making processes in partnership appointments, and analysing success rates by gender (Ely & Thomas, 2020). Additionally, qualitative insights, such as those from exit interviews, can reveal the psychological strain and precariousness associated with glass cliff roles (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Glass & Cook, 2016), which often lead to shorter tenures and burnout (Ryan et al., 2009; Heinemann & Heinemann, 2017).

To address intersectional findings beyond gender, policy responses must adopt an intersectional approach, rather than treating women as a homogeneous group (Wong et al., 2022; Tzanakou, 2019, in Ryan, 2023). As highlighted in reports (SRA, 2023) and studies (Aulakh et al., 2017), understanding disparities in professional outcomes requires attention to the lived experiences of those navigating a profession still shaped by elitist assumptions. Further, the findings suggest that mentoring, career planning, and leadership development initiatives could play a valuable role in supporting women solicitors as they progress towards

partnership (Rink et al., 2012; Boone et al., 2013; Ryan et al., 2016). Gendered assumptions about leadership (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Karau, 2002) can shape perceptions of imposter syndrome and perfectionism (Clance & Imes, 1978; Ryan et al., 2016), influenced by social and workplace experiences (Feenstra et al., 2020; Kark et al., 2022), and can be mitigated by fostering a sense of belonging and psychological safety. Recognising efforts to address disparities such as the gender pay gap (Beioly, 2020) and the underrepresentation of women in senior roles (Goulbourne, 2018), alongside valuing non-financial contributions like team cohesion and morale, may enhance commitment and engagement among women on the path to partnership.

A key reason for the participants' frequent moves was the lack of flexible working arrangements; these support both men and women in balancing caregiving responsibilities (Waworuntu et al., 2022), and when combined with inclusive practices that reduce penalties faced around maternity leave and career progression (Cross & Linehan, 2006; Lupu, 2012), may help law firms retain talent and enhance job satisfaction. Participants' accounts suggest that such approaches, already adopted in women-led firms, are effective. Additionally, some participants' narratives reported sustained productivity during the COVID-19 pandemic, which further supports this finding. Moreover, offering flexible working arrangements can provide a competitive advantage by retaining and attracting skilled professionals, particularly as traditional firms risk losing talent to more agile, values-driven alternatives that prioritise flexibility, wellbeing, and inclusive career development (Donovan & Finn, 2013; The Editorial Board, 2019; Dunn, 2020).

Furthermore, this research highlights the importance of collaboration between academia and legal practice in addressing gender inequality, suggesting that integrating diversity, unconscious bias, and inclusion into legal education from an early stage may foster more inclusive leadership trajectories for women in the legal profession. Addressing issues such as underreported sexual harassment (Dunn, 2020) and promoting psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019) could also help create more equitable and innovative work environments. Policy measures such as more detailed equal pay audits, legislative support for flexible work practices post-COVID-19 and support for mentoring and leadership programmes for underrepresented groups might also further boost progress, although the effects of recent regulatory changes, such as the 2024 amendment to the Flexible Working Regulations, enabling requests for flexible working from day one of employment rather than the prerequisite of 26 weeks of employment, are yet to be seen in legal practice. These findings highlight the need for systemic reform in how law firms define productivity and

commitment, calling for outcome-focused metrics and embedded support for work-life balance to advance meaningful gender equality, not just parity in numbers at senior levels.

7.7 Limitations

The researcher acknowledges that no investigation can be undertaken under perfect settings and is, therefore, unlikely to be all-inclusive. One limitation of the research was that the inclusion criteria did not consider women who had left the profession, having fallen off the metaphorical glass cliff. Participants' reflections on their career journeys' navigation were captured retrospectively in this cross-sectional study rather than longitudinally. Additionally, the purposive sampling strategy resulted in a relatively homogeneous group of like-minded, successful women solicitors in senior positions. Penultimately, the researcher, a qualified solicitor, although non-practising, remained mindful of her positionality and sought to manage her reflexivity throughout the research. However, as Braun and Clarke (2022) note, there are inherent limits to such reflexivity. Finally, because the sole investigator handled the development and interpretation of codes and themes, they did not benefit from peer review.

7.8 Future Research Opportunities

This research provides a foundation for future studies on gender dynamics in professional contexts. While its primary focus was gender, intersectional dimensions, such as ethnicity, social class, and education, also emerged and were considered in the analysis. Future research could more deliberately explore intersections, as each presents distinct and compounded challenges that warrant deeper investigation. Moreover, the cross-sectional design of this study offers a snapshot in time, limiting the longitudinal exploration of women's experiences and institutional conditions. Qualitative research, including repeat interviews, could offer richer insights into how women navigate and adapt to the dynamics of the glass ceiling and the glass cliff over time. While this study aimed for realistic representativeness within the practical constraints of method, time and access, further research could expand to include male partners, particularly with caring responsibilities, as well as judges, barristers, and legal executives. Comparative studies across these groups would provide a more holistic understanding of how gendered dynamics influence career progression across the broader legal profession.

Conclusion

By analysing women's career advancement through metaphors, this study frames their progression as a complex journey, navigating the labyrinth, negotiating the glasshouse, breaking the glass ceiling, confronting the glass cliff, and taking a leap of faith to overcome entrenched barriers. It reveals how systemic gendered expectations, rooted in male-dominated habitus and professional cultures, reinforced by subtle acts of symbolic violence, continue to restrict women's authority, visibility, and progression. In refusing inequitable treatment, women built resilience, increased risk-taking, and took a leap of faith, delivering legal services on their terms, adapting in a profession resistant to systemic change. This research offers a theoretically grounded, empirically rich understanding of exclusion experienced throughout, including at the highest levels, challenging superficial diversity initiatives and advocating structural reform that embeds autonomy, recognition, and accountability, fostering true parity and equality in senior roles. It contributes fresh insights to legal and organisational scholarship and lays a foundation for advancing meaningful gender equality in the profession.

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Appendices

Appendix A – History of the Legal Profession

A.1. Background of the Legal Profession

The legal profession is inherently conservative, grounded in its commitment to delivering services through prevailing institutions with strict ethical requirements. It is considered a noble profession since it aims to serve society by upholding and protecting the law and preserving its moral fibre. The earliest notion of a legal profession in England dates back to 1066, when clerics staffing the monarchies provided early litigation services, enabling the early semblance of a legal profession. Many types of legal agents developed over time, and the 19th century saw all non-barrister lawyers brought under the title “solicitor” (Glendon, n.d.).

Ever since, the legal profession, like other occupations, has sought to exercise substantial control over the market for the services it provides. The divide between solicitors and barristers has played out over the years, both of which, with capitalism as the backdrop, have sought control over their respective markets. This control was through the proficiency of the members in their knowledge and application of law, and by the regulation of the supply of solicitors. The Law Society, which was formed in 1825, remains the professional association representing and governing solicitors in England and Wales to date. For the purposes of this research, where the focus is on solicitors, the term legal profession will signify the solicitors’ branch of the legal profession unless otherwise indicated.

In the nineteenth century, although one didn’t have to attend university to become a solicitor, they did, however, have to serve a five-year long training / apprenticeship, known as articles, by law (Abel & Lewis, 1995). This acted as a twofold barrier; firstly, this apprenticeship was obtainable only through personal contacts in the profession and secondly, the training was expensive to undertake. Stamp duty had to be paid along with a premium to the training solicitor. Following completion of the apprenticeship, the qualified solicitor could immediately gain salaried employment with a firm with a view to eventually becoming a partner or alternatively could set up own practice (Abel & Lewis, 1995).

World Wars I and II massively impacted the supply of solicitors as nearly a tenth of all practitioners were killed or wounded. A third of the trainee solicitors or articled clerks, as they were then called, were also either killed or seriously wounded, resulting in a massive shortage of solicitors (Abel & Lewis, 1995). This, not surprisingly, was followed by an increase in the number of solicitors in the early nineteenth century, which slowed as the first professional examination was introduced in 1836. Over time, these key barriers to becoming a solicitor were abolished, with stamp duty eliminated in 1947 and premiums paid to the training solicitors slowly disappearing by 1960. Further, the duration of articles was reduced from five to two years, and graduates began to outstrip non-graduates. Articled clerks began being remunerated from the 1950s, introducing intense competition for training places and heightening demand; meanwhile, the number of training solicitors willing to train did not keep pace.

Following the expansion of legal education at universities, more legal students passed their Final Examination, rising from a record low of 48% in 1952 to a high of 74% in 1977 (Abel & Lewis, 1995). The Law Society, which had thus far avoided formalising the academic barriers to entry, stipulated a requirement of 48 hours of continuing education in the first three years of practice. The control had shifted from the profession, through meritocracy, to the academic institutions that exercised it by considering the multiple applications per place, funded by the government. It was this public education system which played a prominent role in helping remove the entry barrier to the profession for half the population based on gender. It was interesting to note the enthusiasm with which women enrolled in legal education courses; by the early 1980s, women had almost reached parity, accounting for 45% of all domestic undergraduate students enrolled at universities. The development of higher education, along with the civil rights movements, saw women's entry into universities and into law, one of the prestigious professions.

Consequently, the number of women solicitors began to grow significantly. This gave rise to a 'new breed of lawyers interested in human rights' (Lester, 2017:3-4), with a radical approach to legal work, contesting the traditional lawyering and the legal positivist scholarship. Margaret Thatcher's government introduced many liberalisation policies, including the deregulation of London's financial markets in 1986. These changes began to reduce the profession's authority of traditional specialist knowledge, leaving the professional project in 'serious disarray' (Abel 1988:189). The heterogeneity introduced by academic institutions led to diversification, dispersing the traditional legal professional model, which patriarchal influences had ruled. Women had begun to enter the legal landscape.

The Law Society, however, continued to exert control not only by limiting the number of lawyers but also by determining what legal services they could provide. Also, since the individual user of solicitors' services is a lay member of the public with little or no prior experience with law or lawyers. Therefore, more susceptible to being taken advantage of, the Law Society was quick to set ethical rules for solicitors in areas, amongst others, such as advertising and fees in non-contentious matters (Abel & Lewis, 1995). Clients could not, at the time, approach barristers directly, as solicitors were responsible for instructing barristers on behalf of their clients for advice and representation in court.

The legal profession has been distinguished from occupations by sociologists on the basis that lawyers are servants of the public, serving their needs through the acquired complex knowledge and its application to equally complex situations. Others have pointed to the profession's closed nature and the utilising of monopolistic characteristics within the professional labour market, a view shared by the economists (Cairnes, 1874:66-67; Friedman, 1962:137-160). Political scientists' view has been that of concern about professions' status as privileged private governments (Gilb, 1966). Policy makers, according to Laski (1931 in Dingwall and Lewis, 2014), note an overly constricted and inward-looking outlook on what they deem to be good for the public. It is, therefore, no surprise that the legal profession, in contending with criticisms of the above-mentioned nature, has had to draw a balance between being too closed and holding a monopoly over the provision of legal services on the one hand and remaining a noble profession rather than becoming a business with profit as the prime objective, on the other.

With that backdrop and the constant challenges to the scope of services solicitors can provide, for example, by licenced conveyancers, legal executives etc., eventually in 2007, the Legal Services Act 2007 (Legalservicesboard.org.uk, 2016), permitted law firms to become Alternative Business Structures ("ABS") whereby the law firms could allow external investment sources as well as allowing non-lawyers with wider business acumen to become partners and be managed by them. This has led to many ABS Law firms emerging, including some of the Big Four accountancy firms – Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC), Ernst & Young (EY) and Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdeler (KPMG), which now also offer legal services in addition to their accountancy services. There are also personal injury firms, such as Direct Line and National Accident Helpline, that provide legal services. The trend of some law firms seeking external capital by floating on the Alternative Investment Market (AIM) at the London Stock Exchange (LSE) has also been seen (Tilley, 2018). This was a challenge for the traditional model of legal firms' structure, where the managing partners stereotypically

climbed up within the lockstep structure of the firm and did not necessarily have the requisite business acumen.

Bolton and Muzio posited that to understand professionalism in the legal profession, it is worth noting the worldwide attempts to define what comprises professionalism (2008). It is noticeable that there has been a profound lack of consensus amongst sociologists in defining “professions” as to which traits and attributes are to be included and emphasised (Millerson, 1964:5). The arguments being, when does an occupation attain the status of a profession and what are the inherent characteristics? Some have argued for the professions to be defined as a structure with attributes and traits specific to it that distinguishes it from other professions and others have advocated a process or a functional approach (Dingwall and Lewis, 2014).

Johnson describes professional jobs as those of producers who define both the needs of the consumer and how those needs should be met (1972). Marx described lawyers as the conceptive ideologists, who think and therefore constitute the form of the emergent relations of capitalist society (1976:60). However, Hanlon (1999:3) rendered these attempts as wasted effort since professionalism is “the product of a dialectical relationship with its environment,” rather than a static conception. It is arguable that, over time, the legal profession has had to balance contradictory views and societal changes, thereby blurring the distinction between law as a profession and a business. The advancement of the legal profession reflects wider societal changes and is shaped by the ongoing challenges it faces.

The legal profession has evolved over the last few decades in terms of work, skills, knowledge, and technology, as well as the size and location and in short, its traditional tenets. This transformation of the profession was affected by the interconnected dynamics of post-war social citizenship, the shift from demand-side to market-oriented economics, technological innovation, globalisation, as well as the “new legal order” under the European Court of Justice (Loughlin 2000:150-157 in Sommerlad, 2002). The government's encouragement of marketisation removed some of the professional boundaries, allowing solicitors to work with barristers in Legal Disciplinary Partnerships (LDPs) and, as mentioned above, form Alternative Business Structures (ABS) with non-lawyers. This was also encouraged by the similarities between the work of corporate lawyers and business (Mueller et al. 2011) and the ability of other competitors to access the legal services market. Modernisation in society was clearly reducing professional control over the production of lawyers.

Solicitors constitute the highest proportion of the legal profession in its entirety. There were 202,395 solicitors on the Law Society’s membership Roll in November 2023, out of which 165,361 are practising solicitors (SRA, 2023). The number of law firms in England and Wales stands at just below 10,000 (SRA, 2023). The loosening of controls for law firms to become ABSs has led to the rise of incorporated companies as the business model, accounting for 55% of all law firms, alongside sole practitioners (17%), partnerships (12%) and limited liability partnerships (LLPs) (16%). Table 1.

Date	Sole Practitioner	Partnership	Incorporated company	Limited Liability Partnership	Total
Nov 2023	1,588 (17%)	1,108 (12%)	5,174 (55%)	1,467 (16%)	9369 (100%)

Table 1. Breakdown of Recognised Sole Practices, Recognised Bodies and Licensed Bodies (Alternative Business Structure), (SRA, 2023).

A.2. Entry to the Solicitors’ Profession

Qualifying as a solicitor in England and Wales is a lengthy process that takes six or more years. It is a process that requires determination, commitment, resilience, in addition to good communication skills, intellect, teamwork and dedication, to name but a few. Qualifying as a solicitor involves the following three main stages:

A.2.1 Academic Stage

A university qualifying law degree, which takes 3-4 years (depending upon whether undertaken full-time or part-time), or a university degree in any subject or a qualification or work experience equal to a degree, for example, a solicitor apprenticeship combining the job experience and the legal training. This is followed by vocational training comprising one or two years (depending on whether undertaken full-time or part-time), the post-graduate Legal Practice Course (LPC), or, instead of the LPC, passing both stages of the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE)* assessment. SQE1 assesses legal knowledge, and SQE2 assesses the practical legal skills and knowledge.

*The Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) was introduced from 1 September 2021 and replaced the Graduate Diploma in Law and the Legal Practice Course. This will be phased in until 2032, and thereupon SQE will entirely supersede the existing path to practice, the

Legal Practice Course (LPC), which is a year-long, full-time course undertaken prior to the two years of full-time training as a trainee solicitor (Rab, 2021).

SQE is an SRA initiative to enable individuals from lower socio-economic groups to join the profession, as it offers a qualification or work experience equivalent to a degree. Still, research indicates that this may not be a successful initiative, given employers' partiality towards trainees with social and/or cultural capital developed at top universities (Sommerlad et al., 2013; Ashley & Empson, 2012). The cost implications also cast doubt on the initiative's meaningfulness and on the possible negative impact on standards and access to the profession (Bindman, 2016, in Abel et al., 2020). It is, however, the early stages of this initiative being rolled out, and the statistics report produced annually by The Law Society will show the impact of this change in the coming years. The annual statistics report for 2020 shows that the number of law graduates continued to rise, reaching 17,000 (Figure 1).

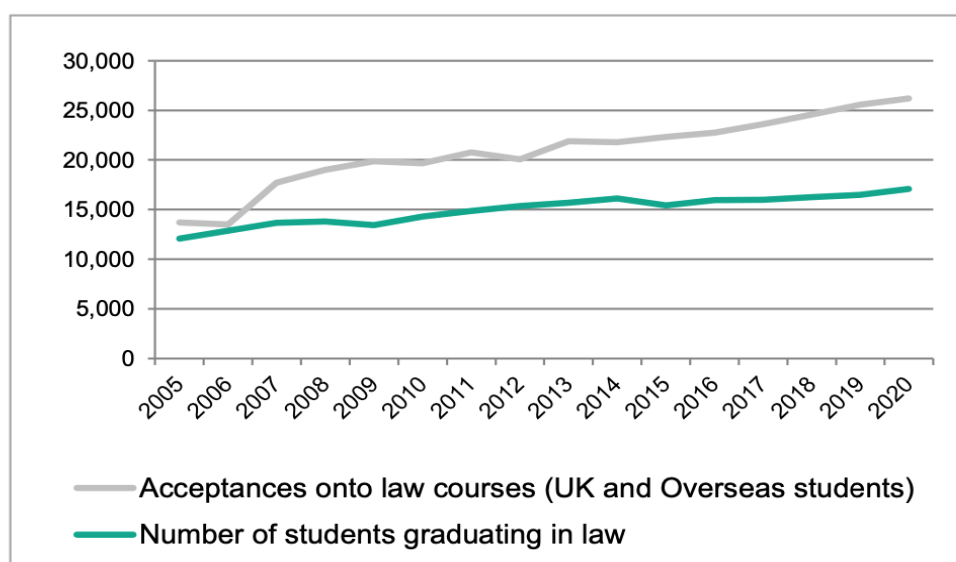


Figure 1: Number of students enrolled and graduating from the first Law degree in England and Wales (Annual statistics report 2020, SRA, 2022).

A.2.2 Professional Stage

Professional work-based training is required for 2 years before qualification. This training is undertaken as a trainee solicitor under supervision, usually in a firm of solicitors. In addition to these stages, the person must also pass the character and suitability requirements.

Acquiring a training contract for the professional stage is highly competitive. The number of applicants far outweighs the number of places, and many are, therefore, unable to proceed beyond this stage in their quest to become a solicitor. This is in addition to the attrition seen at the LPC course stage, which costs circa £12,000. Finance is a major factor that excludes

candidates from lower socio-economic backgrounds from the prospect of joining the legal profession. This cost is in addition to the repayment of student loans for the undergraduate degree fees at £9250 per annum, with interest repayable based on the UK Retail Price Index (RPI) once they commence work. In contrast, the payment for trainee solicitors during the two-year work-based training is minimal, with the requirement for the training firms being that of the minimum wage, although the big city firms pay a much higher wage to their trainees.

Although the number of training contracts and admissions to the Law Society's roll have increased steadily over the years, admissions to the Roll declined by 4% for the first time in 5 years (Figure 2).

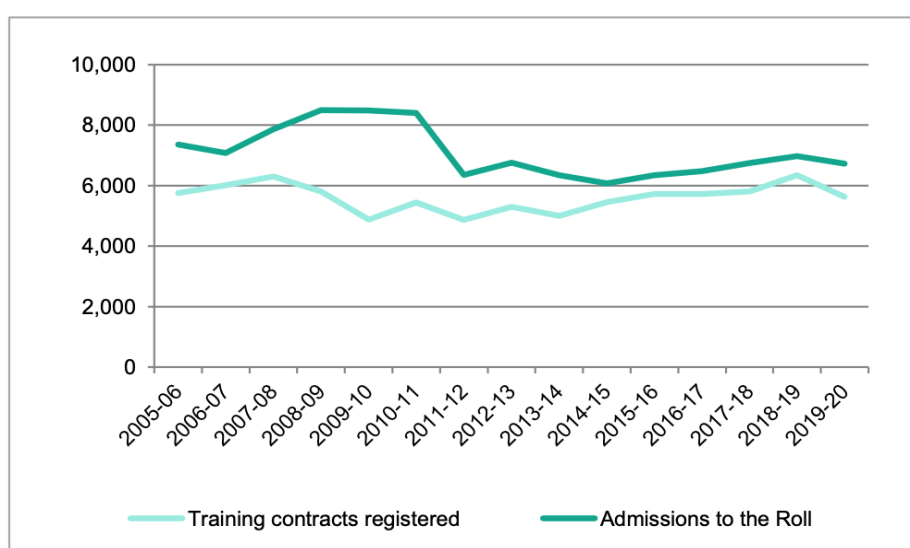


Figure 2: Number of training contracts registered and admissions to the Roll over time (Annual statistics report 2020, SRA, 2022).

A.2.3 Practising Stage

Once the academic and professional training stages are successfully completed, a practising certificate can be applied for. Anyone who goes on to practise in a SRA-regulated firm is required, as the authorised person, to have a practising certificate, or if they are a sole practitioner, their employee or a locum, a manager or member or have an ownership interest in an authorised body to deliver legal services. A practising certificate must be renewed annually, subject to payment of a fee. The practising certificate renewal fee for 2023/24 stands at £337 (SRA, 2023).

Further, continuing professional development (CPD) after qualification as a solicitor has a requirement of a minimum of 16 hours per year, as detailed in Figure 3 below.

Professional Organisation	CPD Policy	CPD Requirements	Evidence, Reporting Monitoring
Solicitors Regulation Authority	Mandatory	- All solicitors who work 32 hours or more / week must complete a minimum of 16 hours of CPD per year. - Newly qualified solicitors must complete 1 hour of CPD training for every complete month from their date of admission up to the following 31 October.	- At least 25% (4 hours) must consist of participation in accredited training courses. The remaining 75% may be met by participating in accredited courses or other activities - Annual reporting is required. Random samples of these are audited. - All solicitors are required to undertake CPD. Persistent non-compliance may result in delays issuing a certificate and / or disciplinary procedure.

Figure 3: Adapted from Professional Development Consortium, 2022.

Furthermore, solicitors must abide by the SRA’s published standards and regulations, which include ethical behaviour expectations, code of conduct, accounts rules, amongst other stipulations (SRA, 2022b). Considering the above process, it is fair to conclude that it requires colossal commitment, both financial and personal, to pursue a career in the legal profession as a solicitor. As seen in the continual increase in numbers over the last five decades (Figure 4), the solicitors’ profession has been highly popular.

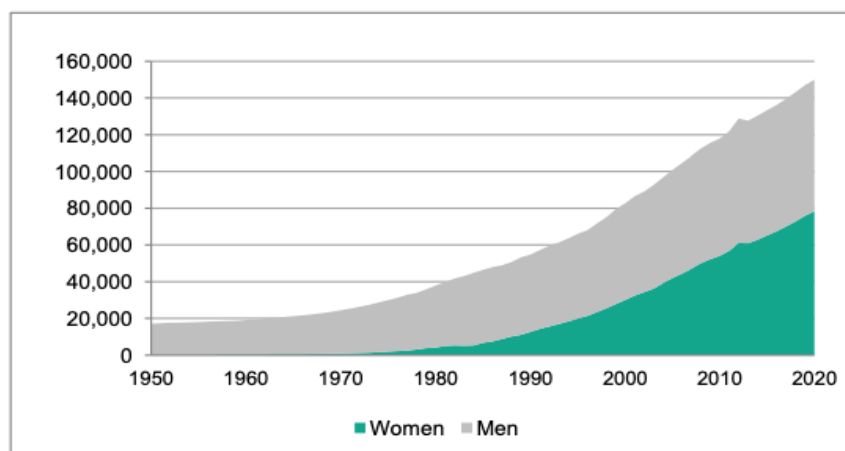


Figure 4: Growth in the number of solicitors with practising certificates 1950-2020 in England and Wales by gender (SRA, 2022).

A.3. Choice of Careers for Solicitors in England and Wales

The solicitor population is distributed in the following four main categories in England and Wales (SRA, 2017), with majority of the solicitors working in the first two. This classification varies in the scope of career development, geographic setting, and type of practice as well the gender and ethnicity distribution. The four types of legal careers are:

A.3.1 High Street Lawyers

These are mainly regional based firms, outside of central London populated in principle by female solicitors (83.6%) who are unlikely to have been promoted to a partnership status, which typically takes 6-7 years, and the typically undertake private client work and/or commercial law. Their business comes mainly from geographical convenience. This class of solicitors is formed by mainly sole practitioners

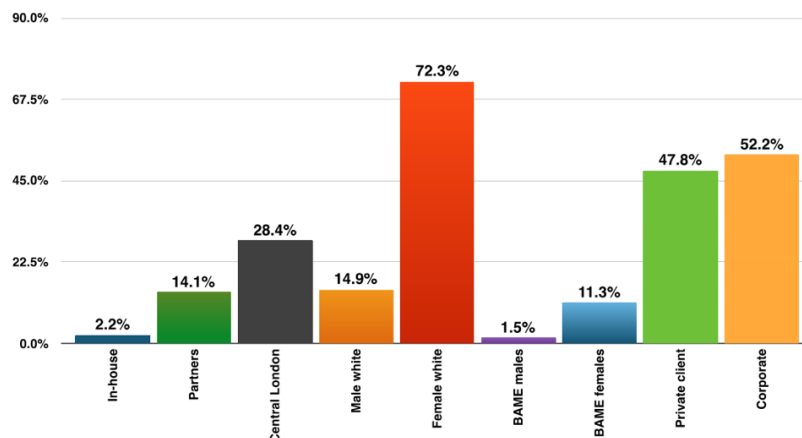


Figure 5: The features of the high street provider career (Mapping advantages and disadvantages: Diversity in the legal profession in England and Wales, Aulakh et al., 2017).

Significant amount of their work involves providing legal services including for instance, wills and probate, conveyancing, family law etc. serving the legal requirements of individuals and small businesses (Law Society, 2012 in Aulakh et al., 2017).

A.3.2. City Lawyers

Majority of the city lawyers work for firms with headquarters based in central London and are likely to be employed by national or international practices, undertaking corporate work. These represent the predominance of women lawyers mainly white females, in less senior positions, practitioners who are unlikely to have been promoted to the partnership status. This group represents lawyers who are likely to be well paid but face long hours and a demanding workload. Female solicitors represent 65% of this class of lawyers.

55% of sole practitioners in the legal profession are likely to be in the high street and city lawyers' group and represent the increasing number of women solicitors who do not make it to partnership level, working in less senior roles (Aulakh et al., 2017).

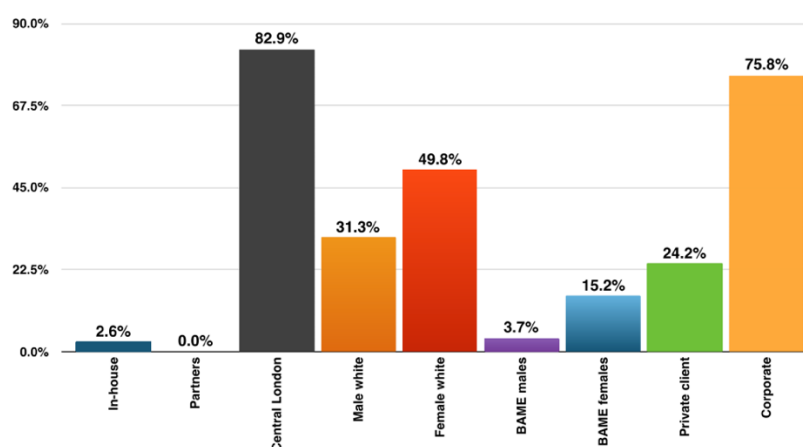


Figure 6: The features of the City lawyers' career (Mapping advantages and disadvantages: Diversity in the legal profession in England and Wales, Aulakh et al., 2017).

A.3.3 Corporate Fast Track Lawyers

Males predominantly staff this class; the practitioners are highly likely to be employed by a large London-based corporation undertaking high-net-worth premium client-based work. If they are outside London, they are likely to be in larger cities such as Manchester or Leeds. This group has a better chance of progressing to the partnership level than others. As seen in Figure 7, women are in the minority here, exhibiting the fact that males, both white and BAME, have a better chance comparatively to be in this group, presenting them with better opportunities to become partners. Men comprise 82.2% of the solicitors in this group compared to only 17.8% women solicitors (Aulakh et al., 2017).

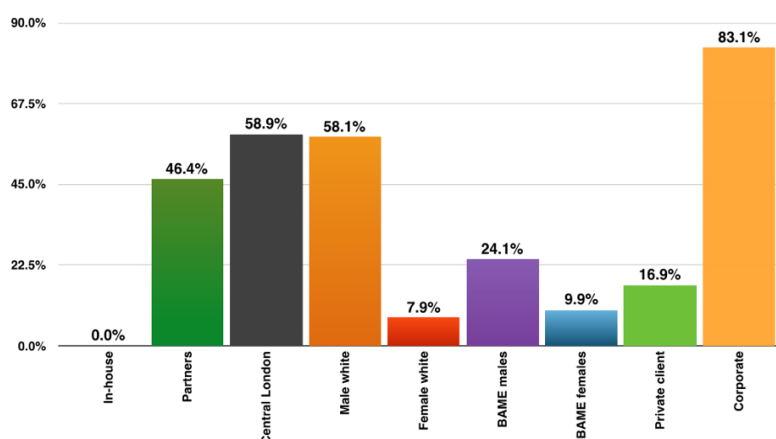


Figure 7: The features of the corporate fast track lawyers' career (Mapping advantages and disadvantages: Diversity in the legal profession in England and Wales, Aulakh et al., 2017).

A.3.4 In-house Lawyers

This class of lawyers is dominated by a mix of male and female in-house lawyers working for private or public companies rather than in private practice. They undertake mostly corporate work in either central London and/or regional cities.

Women form a high proportion of this group at 67.6%, since it is reported that they find juggling work and family commitments better in-house legal work, as there is less variation in working hours.

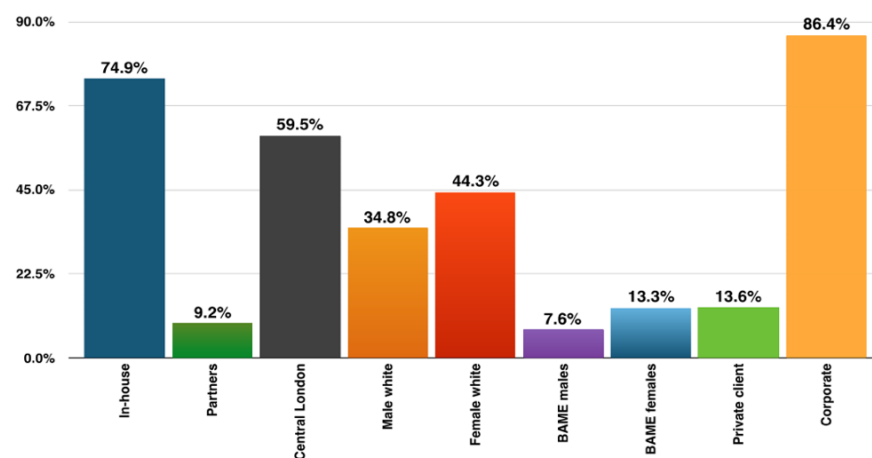


Figure. 8: The features of the in-house lawyers' career (Mapping advantages and disadvantages: Diversity in the legal profession in England and Wales, 2017; Aulakh et al., 2017).

Additionally, solicitors can work in central or local government, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), and Law Centres.

A.4. Regulation of the Solicitors' Profession

Having followed the long-drawn process of meeting the stringent entry qualifications, solicitors can advise clients and represent them personally in the lower courts (Magistrates' and County Courts and tribunals) and if they have obtained higher rights of audience, they may also represent clients in the higher courts (Crown Court, High Court, Court of Appeal, and the Supreme Court). Given that the solicitors form the largest part of the legal profession, and provide services directly to the clients, they are not surprisingly, subject to stringent rules and regulations.

The Legal Services Act 2007 (LSA) (The Legal Services Board. n.d) provides the legislative framework for regulating the provision of legal services in England and Wales. According to LSA, only those individuals and businesses authorised by an Approved Regulator (AR) or those who are exempt from the requirement to be authorised are entitled to provide reserved legal activities (Rab, 2021).

The six legal activities which are reserved for only the authorised entities include the following:

- The exercise of a right of audience (right of a lawyer to appear and conduct proceedings in court on behalf of their client).
- The conduct of litigation.
- Reserved instrument activities (Transactions involving real and personal property/ conveyancing).
- Probate activities.
- Notarial activities (primarily concerned with the authentication and certification of signatures).
- The administration of oaths.

To ensure that these activities are conducted in the requisite manner, the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA), as the Approved Regulator, keeps the 156,055 registered practising solicitors on the Roll (SRA, 2022a) under strict checks. It also acts against solicitors who breach the rules – for example, in case of dishonesty. The LSA details the five stringent professional principles that the solicitors undertaking the above legal activities must adhere to (SRA, 2021):

- Act with independence and integrity.
- Maintain proper standards of work.
- Act in the best interests of their clients.
- Person who exercises a right of audience or conducts litigation in relation to proceedings in any court, by virtue of being authorised persons, must comply with their duty to the court to act with independence in the interests of justice.
- That the affairs of clients must be kept confidential.

Given the long-drawn process from academic qualifications, the work-based training, the highly regulated professional environment demanding a high standard of ethics, to the ongoing commitment to learning, is not only arduous, but the expense involved throughout this process is enormous. It is evident that a decision to qualify as a solicitor requires funding, grit, resilience, persistence, passion, stamina and much more.

Appendix B – Timeline of Women in Law in England and Wales

- 1859** Maryam Rye set up a law stationery business in Lincoln's Inn to get young women into employment where women were trained to copy legal documents. This required good handwriting a skill considered appropriate for women.
- 1873** Maryam Grey who founded the Women's Educational Union petitioned along with 91 other women to attend lectures at Lincolns Inn which was unsuccessful.
- 1878** A group is founded to promote the legal education for women.
Janet Wood was the first woman in UK to complete a law degree (first class honours) Cambridge. Women had to take a "Special Exam for Women" of equal standard to the degree exam for men.
- Women were not granted degrees at Cambridge until 1947
- University College London was the first university to admit women to law on equal footing to men.
- 1879** Eliza Orme applied to take the law Society examination to become a solicitor but was refused permission.
- 1888** Eliza Orme became the first woman in England to gain a law degree from university college London at the age of 39 and had been practising law with a colleague preparing paperwork for property dealings, patent, registrations, wills, and mortgages etc.
- 1892** Cornelia Sorabji to do the Bachelor of Civil Law Examinations, a postgraduate degree. She waited 30 years to get her degree upon the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act in 1919.
- 1893** First woman, Reina Lawrence obtains LL. B (Bachelor of Laws) from the University of London. She could not, however, qualify as a solicitor until after the 1919 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act.
- 1903** Bertha Cave applied to be become a student at Gray's Inn so she could be called to the bar to become a barrister this was rejected
- 1906** Christabel Pankhurst was the only woman studying law throughout her degree between 1903 to 1906. She was the first woman to graduate from the Victoria University, Manchester (now the University of Manchester). She passed her degree with a first-class honour.
- 1913** Gwyneth Bebb and three other women, Maud Crofts, Karin Costelloe and Lucy Nettlefold, brought legal action to get the Law Society to admit them to its preliminary examinations, on the basis that women were a 'person' within the meaning of the Solicitors Act 1843. This was unsuccessful. The Court of Appeal decided that the gender-neutral wording of the Acts was determined through "long usage" in the common law (law declared by judges, originated from custom and precedent) and asserted that women were not included within the term "person". (Bebb v. Law Society, n.d).

- 1919** Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act in 1919 was passed ensuring women can enter the profession for the very first time after a very long legal battle. Women were allowed to receive degrees upon completion of their studies, and it allowed women to act on juries and act as magistrates too.
- 1920** 18th December was the date that saw Carrie Morrison as the first woman solicitor to be admitted by the Law Society. Mary Sykes, Maud Crofts and Mary Pickup followed after they all passed the Law Society examination.
- First female jurors were sworn in and served on a jury in England.
- 1923** Matrimonial Causes Act was passed which had the impact that women could apply for divorce based on the sole reason of adultery. Up until that point only men could apply for divorce based on adultery.
- Agnes Twiston Hughes became the first women to qualify as a solicitor in Wales.
- Edith Berthen joined a firm of solicitors (Hill Dickinson) as a solicitor.
- 1975** Sex Discrimination Act made the employing or promoting of a less qualified or less experienced male worker compared to a female worker. It stopped the demotion of employees returning from paternity or maternity leave. It also penalised companies who would not offer women employment based on the type of the work being inappropriate (physical). It also specified types of sexual harassment, which were unacceptable. This Act was rescinded in 2010, and its provisions were covered in the Equality Act.
- 1981** Dame Catherine Fiona Wolf became the first woman partner at the solicitors' firm CMS Cameron McKenna in London.
- 1995** Eileen Pembroke became the first woman solicitor to stand for the position of the president of the Law Society of England and Wales. She had cofounded a legal firm Fisher Meredith and had campaigned for domestic violence legislation which was passed in 1976.
- 1999** Diana Parker became the first female chairperson of Withers, a top 100 law firm in the country.
- 2002** Caroline Kirby was elected the first female president of the Law Society of England and Wales
- 2014** Sonya Leydecker became the first female Chief Executive Officer of a leading law firm Herbert Smith Freehills.
Since 2014, more than 60% of newly qualified solicitors each year have been women, yet only 50.2% of solicitors practising in England and Wales were female.
- 2019** 100 years had passed since the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919, this removed the barrier to women practising as lawyers and sitting as judges.
- Women form 61% of all solicitors in England and Wales.
- I. Stephanie Boyce is elected Deputy Vice president of the Law Society.

- 2021** I. Stephanie Boyce became the sixth female and first Black President in the history of 177 solicitors appointed as President of the Law Society since its inception in 1841.

Lubna Shuja is elected Vice President and will become the seventh female President of the Law Society.

Women form 52% of the solicitors' profession in law firms (SRA, 2022). An increase in the proportion of women in the profession but the women solicitors who are partners remains around 30%.

- 2022** Lubna Shuja becomes the seventh female President of the Law Society; first Asian and First Muslim President.

Adapted from First 100 Years (2020) *Timeline, First 100 Years*. Available at: <https://first100years.org.uk/digital-museum/timeline/> (Accessed: 17 December 2021).

Appendix C – Initial Communication

Dear,

Hope this message finds you well.

I am getting in touch as I am undertaking a research project for a PhD at Nottingham Business School. The purpose of the research is to explore the journeys experienced by women in reaching senior leadership positions in the legal profession.

I am looking for interest for interviews, which will be via MS Teams, likely to last an hour and can be organised at a time which is convenient for you.

The research focuses on:

Perceptions of Women Solicitors of their Journeys in the Legal Profession in England and Wales

Please be assured that this research project is being managed within the well-defined ethical procedures set out by Nottingham Trent University's code of guidance regarding ethical research. Any involvement in the research is voluntary, and any information collected will be confidential.

I do hope this is of interest to you. Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you have any queries or require any other information. I look forward to hearing from you on Anila.khalique2001@my.ntu.ac.uk.

Best wishes and kind regards

Anila

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Dr Valerie Caven (HRM) Valerie.caven@ntu.ac.uk

Participant Information Sheet

Date 8/10/2022

Perceptions of Women Solicitors of their Journeys in the Legal Profession in England and Wales

Principal Investigator: Anila Khaliq **Supervisory Team:** Dr. Sarah Pass and Dr. Valerie Caven

You are being invited to take part in a research study about experiences of women during their journey to leadership roles in the legal profession. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. If there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information, please do not hesitate to ask. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the research is to explore the unique perspectives and perceptions of women in traditionally male dominated disciplines to understand the underrepresentation of women at senior levels. It will identify themes in the experiences of possible barriers and enablers encountered, helping shape future academic research, organisational HR policies, and provide strategies for aspiring women to achieve success in male dominated fields.

2. Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you are a leader in the solicitors' legal profession in England and Wales, and you are a woman.

3. Do I have to take part?

No. It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part. If you do, you will be asked to sign a consent form (attached). Even if you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason, by emailing at the below email address, up to four weeks after the interview has taken place. If you withdraw, any information you have provided up until the point of withdrawal may still be used.

4. What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part, you will need to confirm your agreement by signing a consent form. You will be asked to participate in an interview which would be via MS Teams with the principal investigator, which will be recorded.

5. What do I have to do?

If after asking any questions you may have, you are still willing to be involved, you will be asked to sign the consent form. If you agree to take part, you will be asked for a face-to-face or MS Teams interview at a time and place appropriate for you. The interview will be regarding the issues facing women leaders. The interview is likely to last between 45-60 minutes and will be recorded.

6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

The interview will be taking up some of your time. Given the nature of the research topic, it is not expected to cover sensitive or personal areas. Any direct quotations from the interview

will be used in a non-attributable way, by removing any references which might identify you or your organisation as an individual. You are free to amend anything you have said in interview, or to change your mind about being involved in the research, at any time during the interview and up to four weeks after the interview has taken place.

7. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Although there will be no direct personal benefit for you, your contribution in the research will greatly benefit the understanding of the underrepresentation of women at senior levels in male dominated disciplines. The research would benefit from examining women's unique perspectives and perceptions of both barriers and enabling factors during their journeys. This will have implications to shape future research, affect organisational HR policies and help future generation of women in such disciplines. You will be offered the option of hearing back about the key findings of the project.

8. Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All collected information about you, during the research will be kept strictly confidential. Any information relating to you, such as transcriptions will have your name removed so that you cannot be recognised from it. Please be aware, that although every precaution will be taken to ensure confidentiality, there may be a risk that you might be identified through the nature of what you have disclosed. All attempts to ensure confidentiality will be undertaken in line with NTU code of conduct.

9. What will happen to the results of the interview?

The results will be used to shape the research and produce practitioner and academic outputs.

10. Open Access

At the end of the project, the anonymised information will be archived in a data repository for future reuse. Open access of research data is considered best practice, which means data is made publicly available, free of charge, to anyone who is interested in it. This allows the findings of this research project to be reviewed more carefully, whilst also offering opportunities for more research into this area.

11. Who has reviewed the study?

The study has been considered by Nottingham Trent University's Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee and has met with a favourable ethics opinion.

12. How will Covid-19 risk be managed?

To keep the participants and the research team safe, all interviews would be undertaken via MS Teams.

Thank you for reading this information sheet, and for considering taking part in this study. If you would like further information on the study, please contact:

Principal Investigator: Anila Khaliqie ✉ anila.khaliqie2001@my.ntu.ac.uk

Supervisors: Dr. Sarah Pass ✉ sarah.pass@ntu.ac.uk Dr. Valerie Caven ✉

Valerie.caven@ntu.ac.uk

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50 Shakespeare Street, Nottingham NG1 4FQ

Appendix E – Research Interview Consent Form

Consent Form

Date 8/10/2022

Perceptions of Women Solicitors of their Journeys in the Legal Profession in England and Wales

Principal Investigator: Anila Khalique
Supervisory Team: Dr. Sarah Pass and Dr. Valerie Caven

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 8/10/2022 for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my legal rights being affected. I understand that if I wish to withdraw, I have up to four weeks after the interview has been conducted for my data to be removed.

☐

3. If I take part, I give consent for the interview to be recorded as set out in the information sheet dated 8/10/2022

☐

4. If I take part, I give consent for direct quotations by me in the interview to be used in written outputs from the research. I understand that any quotations will be used in a non-attributable way.

☐

5. I understand that data collected during the study may be looked at by individuals of the research team (as stated in the information sheet 8/10/2022) where it is relevant to my taking part in this research. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my transcriptions.

☐

6. I agree to take part in the above study.

☐

7. I would like to be kept informed about the key findings of the project. Please contact me on the following email address:

☐

Email address:

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of Person taking consent

Date

Signature

Principal Investigator: Anila Khalique ✉ anila.khalique2001@my.ntu.ac.uk

Supervisors: Dr. Sarah Pass ✉ sarah.pass@ntu.ac.uk

Dr. Valerie Caven ✉ Valerie.caven@ntu.ac.uk

Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, 50 Shakespeare Street,
Nottingham NG1 4FQ

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Perceptions of Women solicitors of their Journeys in the Legal Profession

Question related to the following general themes will be included:

- **Demographics**
- **Job Role**
- **Experiences (of glass ceiling and glass cliff phenomena*)**
- **Challenges faced as a result**
- **Perceived causes of the phenomena**
- **Impact on workplace engagement**
- **Enablers that have helped**
- **What further action and by which stakeholders is needed to moderate the influence of the phenomena to help women rise to senior leadership positions?**

***The Phenomena of the glass ceiling or the glass cliff were not raised with the participants.**