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Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Views of Women from the Second-Wave Feminist Movement

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Abstract
This is a qualitative study of the career perspectives of early female leaders in Canada whose careers emerged from the second-wave feminist movement and who ascended to executive leadership positions. Using a discourse analytic lens, we analyze their perspectives on women's limited presence in executive leadership roles. The research participants suggested that women lacked the necessary resilience or personality; women lacked requisite political skills; affirmative action policies have hindered women's career advancement; and women have been unable to put their careers over family in the way that is required for executive leadership. The views expressed by these participants are often contrarian to current thinking about gender and leadership but underline the gendered nature of persistent barriers to executive leadership past and present.

KEYWORDS
affirmative action, discourse analysis, executive leadership, power and politics, women, work/life balance

Résumé
Cet article est une étude qualitative des perspectives de carrière des premières femmes leaders au Canada qui ont vu leurs carrières démarrer à la faveur du mouvement féministe de la deuxième vague et qui ont accédé à des postes de direction. En recourant à l'analyse du discours, ses auteurs examinent les perspectives des femmes sur la présence limitée des femmes dans les postes de direction. Le dépouillement des données recueillies permet de constater que pour les participantes, les femmes n'ont pas la résilience ou la personnalité nécessaire; les femmes n'ont pas les compétences politiques requises; les politiques liées à la discrimination positive entravent l'avancement pro-fessionnel des femmes; et les femmes ne sont pas en mesure de faire passer leur carrière avant leur famille, de la manière requise pour occuper des postes de direction. Les points de vue exprimés par ces participantes vont souvent à

l'encontre de la pensée actuelle sur le genre et le leadership, mais soulignent la nature sexuée des obstacles persistants auxquels les femmes font face ou ont fait face pour accéder au leadership exécutif.

> Don't exhibit insecurities by insisting on sex neutral language and titles. Be proud that you're a woman and be PROUD if you're in a job that has been traditionally a man's job.

Half a century has passed since the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada. At that time, women made up 3.9% of managers and held less than 1% "of the top corporate positions in Canada" (Royal Commission on the Status of Woman, 1970, p. 28). Although some progress has been made over the past half century, women continue to be underrepresented in executive leadership in Canada. According to a 2021 report, just under 10% of named executives in Canada's 100 largest public companies are women (Rozenzweig & Company, 2021) and only about 3.5% are helmed by a woman (MacDougall et al., 2019). Over the past 20 years, it has been a slow march to executive leadership for women. For instance, between 1999 and 2020, women's representation at the C-suite level increased by approximately 1% every five to seven years (Hinchcliffe, 2020; Pew Research Group, 2015).

Yet a small number of women, whose educational and professional careers emerged during the second wave of feminism (1960 to mid-1980s), made groundbreaking inroads into senior management at a time when there very few women in executive leadership positions. During this time, societal and cultural norms were just evolving to focus on educational opportunities, gender roles, and women's right to work and equal pay (Marks, et al., 2016; Sangster, 2015), which "involved major political and cultural shifts in the way women understood themselves and their place in society" (Luxton, 2001, p. 76). While these societal changes—including the focus on equal opportunities (Coleman, 2011)—were intended to generate career opportunities for women, the limited number of women in executive leadership suggests that the promise of second-wave feminism was realized by a limited few then. The statistics underscore that, despite the existence of these policies for decades, little progress has been made in the advancement of women in Canada to the most senior positions (Kumra, 2017).

The present paper focuses on an overlooked aspect of leadership in Canadian organizations, namely early Canadian women whose lives were shaped by the thinking, actions, and policies derived from the second wave of feminism who have ascended to the ranks of executive leadership. Although there has been some writing on women and leadership in unions (see for instance Marks et al., 2016), politics (see for instance Bashevkin, 2010; Gidengil et al., 2008), and the professions, such as journalism, law, and psychology (Ruck, 2015), there is surprisingly little research on these how women from the second wave reached executive levels in Canadian boardrooms. An understanding of women's historical struggles and their strategies in navigating a male-dominated (organizational) culture is essential for the praxis of social change (Sangster, 2015), and to create conditions for equality for women and girls (Storberg-Walker & Haber-Curran, 2017, p. 13). Our paper offers an understanding of how these women succeeded in navigating the structural and institutional barriers to gain entry to executive leadership in Canada.

Our aim is to understand how these women navigated the barriers to leadership roles. This knowledge can assist with current organizational change efforts as women continue to face barriers in breaking the glass ceiling. We draw from Hakim's (2000, 2006) preference choice theory, which asserts that women can fully achieve their career goals as a result of equal opportunity legislation and family-friendly policies. According to Hakim, women make their choices based on their preferences to be career focused, home focused, or a combination of both career and family, and that these choices are mediated by organizational and government policies. While we know that such policies have had some effect in advancing women's careers particularly into middle-level management (see for instance Jain et al., 2010; Ng & French, 2018), we are interested in learning whether

women whose careers were developed in the second wave perceive these policies as helpful—or not—to advancing women into executive ranks within the Canadian context. In other words, what do the experiences of women executives, whose careers emerged during the second wave of feminism, say about Hakim's preference choice theory and the role of equal opportunities and family-friendly policies for those with leadership aspirations.

1 | CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND AND THEORY

The present paper focuses on a group of early women leaders who made tremendous progress in overcoming barriers to ascend to executive leadership in Canada. The women in our study were young adults (born between the mid-1930s and mid-1950s) during the second-wave feminist movement in Canada and were educated and socialized during that era. These women launched their education and careers at a time of societal changes that "involved major political and cultural shifts in the way women understood themselves and their place in society" (Luxton, 2001, p. 76).

Around the same time, universities and colleges enrolled women in large numbers. In 1980, 45% of undergraduates enrolled in Canadian universities were women, and by the mid-1980s women's enrolment exceeded men's (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2011). Increased education and greater labour market participation have resulted in women organizing themselves and having their voices heard (Luxton, 2001).

Second-wave feminists were not homogenous in their views and struggles. Liberal feminists held the position that women should gain greater equality (i.e., be treated the same as men) particularly in the arena of work (Coleman, 2011; Marks et al., 2016). As a result, liberal feminists advocated for equality of opportunity to allow women greater opportunity to participate in the labour market. In contrast, socialist feminists were more concerned with division of labour, especially within the household, and advocated for universal childcare. This would enable women to enter paid employment (Ferguson, 1988; Marks et al., 2016). While divergent in their perspectives, both propositions—equal opportunity and family-friendly policies—play critical roles in affording women the freedom to choose between paid employment and family care. The demands of family care are cited as central in limiting women's advancement and their participation at senior levels (Doughney, 2007; Wood & Newton, 2006).

In this regard, sociologist Catherine Hakim (1995, 2000, 2006) suggested that developments in the feminist movement (such as equal employment opportunity and family-friendly policies) have enabled women to freely pursue their careers. She suggested that men and women do not differ in their abilities; rather individual motivation, life goals, and attitudes are key determinants of women's career advancement (2006). Hakim advanced the preference choice theory and asserted that the lack of women in leadership roles reflects choice rather than institutional constraints, generating some backlash.

Much of the controversy surrounding Hakim's preference theory stems from her downplaying of social and structural barriers to women's advancement, and her suggestion that women are drivers of their own careers. Hakim's opponents have argued that women's choices are constrained by social, institutional, and structural barriers (Corby & Stanworth, 2009). Indeed, Hakim's view, which represents a strand of feminist thinking not representative of feminism as a whole (Philp & Wheatley, 2011), has generated numerous debates (see for instance Broadbridge, 2010; Crompton & Harris, 1998; Kumra, 2010; McRae, 2003). In reality, the career attainment and outcomes of women are affected by both institutional and structural barriers as well as individual-level factors. A contrarian view, espoused by women from the second wave in our study, rejects these claims and instead attribute women's success to personal agency and the hard choices and sacrifices they make.

Against this political and cultural backdrop, the present study, based on a research roundtable with Canadian female executives who are corporate board chairs, senior academic administrators, and government leaders, explores the experiences of early female leaders in Canada. The study draws upon discourse theory to examine the language used by these female leaders when discussing how equal opportunities and family-friendly policies supported or challenged their careers. According to Baxter (2010), "discourse theory provides a means of analysing the complex interactions between individual agency and institutional level discourse, and how this often positions female leaders in competing and conflicting ways" (pp. 9–10). Our study surfaces and problematizes the complexities that underpin the institutional and structural versus individual-level debates and the role of personal agency, resilience, and sacrifice. The strategies and knowledge gleaned from these early women may serve to inform us as to the changes necessary to overcome barriers that continue to hold women back in their career progressions.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Design

A facilitated participatory roundtable format was used to gain insights from the female executive leaders. The roundtable approach has been applied to various contexts to surface a range of comments that inform research insights and policy issues (see Cresswell et al., 2013; Daly et al., 2009; Farer et al., 2005; Moens et al., 2010). While there are limitations to adopting a roundtable discussion approach for gathering narrative data (and these are summarized later in the paper), the current research project benefitted from the opportunity to hear multiple perspective constructed and challenged in real time through engagement with women in leadership positions.

2.2 | Participants

The roundtable involved 21 business leaders (for instance, CEOs and chairs of corporate boards from Atlantic Canada), senior government leaders, and a small number of academics in senior academic administrative positions within universities (see Table 1). The panel included individuals who have been named to Canada's Top 100 Most Powerful Women, hold honorary doctorates, and one member who had received a national award for advancing the status of women in Canada.

T A B L E 1 List of Female Participants

Gender	Title
Female	Chairman, Board
Female	University Administrator
Female	University Administrator
Female	Partner, Law Firm
Female	University Administrator
Female	President & CEO, Media
Female	Government Leader
Female	Principal, Consulting
Female	University Administrator
Female	University Administrator
Female	University Administrator
Female	President & CEO, Transport
Female	President & CEO, Telecommunications
Female	University Administrator
Female	President & CEO, Consulting
Female	University Administrator

2.3 | Data Collection

The participants were invited to attend a presentation by a prominent female chair of the board of a major Canadian corporation, and to stay for the roundtable research session. Roundtable participants had experience mentoring other women, and many were responsible for their organization's diversity and inclusion efforts, such as implementing diversity management and complying with employment equity policies. The format of the research roundtable was a semi-structured discussion format with guide questions focused on why women are good for business; what has and has not enabled women to move into leadership roles; what issues need to surface to advance women into leadership roles; the challenges facing women in executive leadership; and strategies for advancing women into leadership roles. Participants were invited to share their personal experiences, perspectives, and insights. The intent of the roundtable was to better understand the lived experiences, challenges, and strategies of these early women in executive leadership. The roundtable was videotaped with permission from all the participants. The research project was approved by the research ethics board and each participant signed a consent form. Audio recordings from the roundtable were transcribed verbatim. The roundtable discussion lasted approximately two hours.

2.4 | Data Analysis

The analysis undertaken follows a two-step qualitative approach: a content/thematic analysis phase and a discourse analytic phase. The content analysis allowed us to inductively explore patterns and themes, the latter which served as the basis for a thematic analysis. As suggested by Patton (2015, p. 541), "the core meanings found through content analysis are patterns and themes" where themes take "a more categorical or topical form, interpreting the meaning of the pattern." Given our interest in the experiences of female leaders whose careers and education emerged during the second wave, we adopted a thematic approach that explored a "nuanced account of data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83).

Using a deductive approach, one of the authors reviewed the transcripts to identify textual excerpts that referenced patterns (well-established concepts and issues) including leadership, affirmative action, and work-family policies. Each of the two researchers reviewed the transcripts to identify emergent themes within these overarching patterns. As a baseline, we used a theoretical thematic analytic approach that themes were entities that "captured something important about the data in relation

to the research question" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Specifically, we were interested in exploring how themes related to leadership, affirmative action, and work-family policies present (or not) in the data. The themes identified by each author were reviewed, compared, and a consensus developed. Any disagreements in the themes between the authors were discussed until a common understanding was obtained. Based on the text analyzed, four themes emerged: leadership and the capacity for leadership is gender neutral; women avoiding and complying with power and politics; affirmative action is bad for women; and women cannot have it all even with family-friendly policies.

The second step involved bringing a discourse analytic perspective to enable a deeper consideration of the language used by the participants. The level of microanalysis provides insights into how language supports or resists the emergent ideas of second-wave feminism in relation to the lives of the leaders who participated in the study. As Hardy (2004) suggests, an examination of language helps us identify "the intricate way in which discourses lead to the creation and reification of certain phenomena" (Hardy, 2004, p. 416). This is particularly useful for the current paper because one of our goals is to understand how the language of female leaders supports or resists the policies and programs designed to facilitate progression to leadership roles. In turn, this will provide some insights into the persistent barriers that contribute to women's limited presence at senior levels within organizations. Applying elements of discourse analysis (Wood & Kroger, 2000) allowed us to explore, from a microanalytic lens, participants' construction of individual and institutional aspects of leadership and associated success factors and or challenges. Analysis of discourse helps reveal the assumptions that are taken for granted in organizations by illuminating the ways in which organizing principles are sustained or resisted, and to identify how language contributes to identity construction (see Grant et al., 1998) and leadership (Fairhurst, 2007).

3 | RESULTS

Our analysis of the roundtable discourse reveals four main themes, which we have identified as contrarian in nature because they do not align well with contemporary discussions regarding women and leadership, women and power and politics, affirmative action, and the capacity for women in executive leadership roles to "have it all." However, they reflected the environment and climate at the time in which these women experienced in their ascension to executive leadership. The views are also often simultaneously contrarian and contradictory because they both resist gendered understandings but are constructed in ways in that clearly implicate gendered underpinnings, allowing us to examine Hakim's hypotheses about women, choices, and career advancement. The four themes are analyzed and presented in the following sections. A summary table for discursive examples is presented in Table 2. (In the comments reproduced below, capitalization signifies words said with emphasis by the speaker.)

TABLE 2 Overview of the Patterns, Associated Themes, and Discursive Strategies

Patterns	Themes	Discursive Strategies
Leadership	Leadership and the capacity for leadership is gender neutral	"Leadership is sex neutral" – *firm declarative*
		"You have to..." – *directive*
		"I have NO patience for words like leadership being modified by the word 'women'." – *resistance to gender-based markers*
		"I think a lot of the successful women..." – *uncertainty and tempered language*
Power and politics	Power and politics: strategies of avoidance, strategies of compliance	"...and every successful woman that I have admired..." – *inclusive and extreme case formulation*
		"Don't try to change it" – *directive calling for compliance*
Affirmative action	Affirmative action is bad for women	"We should all be responsible for our own choices..." – *declarative and agentic*
		"They do it with drive and that's the way forward." – *agentic*
Family-friendly policies	Do family-friendly policies help or hinder women's advancement to leadership positions; can women "have it all"?	"There is no balanced life if you want to be in the fast lane." – *unambiguous, firm declarative*
		"I do not believe..." – *personal opinion*
		"...have to..." – *firm declarative*

3.1 | Theme 1: Leadership and the Capacity for Leadership is Gender Neutral

While there is a stream of research that seeks to bring a gendered perspective to our understanding of leadership and to explore the ways in which women's leadership differs from men's (see Koenig et al., 2011), comments expressed in the session unequivocally resisted the linking of leadership and gender. A fairly strident view expressed by one participant suggested that the capacity for leadership is neither inherently male nor inherently female:

> Leadership is sex neutral. It can be practiced by men and women alike. Both men and women can be GOOD at what they do, or they can be BAD but they are not inherently good or inherently bad because of their sex. There are many issues around what does or does not constitute effective leadership but they are NOT sex related. Some women shy away from leadership, so do some men. Some women are inept at it. So are some men. Some women excel at it. So do some men.

The footing for her firm declarative statement —"leadership is sex neutral" —serves as an unequivocal starting point from which she establishes the position that leadership is not tied to gender and clearly resists essentialist perspectives on leadership. The speaker systematically compares and then equates the experiences and capacity for leadership success or failure of both women and men on a variety of elements. This systematic construction supports her initial claim about the gender neutrality of leadership. Her comments were expressed as declarative statements of fact rather than personal opinion. This view was further reinforced by the following comment from the same speaker:

> Men, a lot of men, say that there's a good man for the job. A lot of women say there's a good man for the job. We're talking about something different I think. We're talking about the most senior and that's as big a fight for men as it is for women.

In this excerpt, the speaker continued with her systematic comparison of elements of leadership success needed by both men and women and supports her earlier assertion that the capacity for successful leadership challenges men and women equally. Although the speaker tries to equate men and women in their capacity for leadership, the construction draws on gendered underpinnings. The speaker notes, "a lot of men say that there's a good man for the job. A lot of women say there's a good man for the job." This foregrounds men as leaders, and backgrounds or even silences women as being thought of as suitable for leadership positions. The speaker did not state, "a lot of men say that there's a good woman for the job. A lot of women say there's a good woman for the job." This leader's construction brings up some very traditional and gendered understandings of candidate suitability for jobs.

Participant comments about leadership and career advancement provided some support for Hakim's perspective that career advancement is tied to individual level factors. As one speaker noted:

> I think a lot of the successful women in this room are here and successful because of force of personality. The kind of people who, when faced with obstruction or whatever, we really are do or die. Okay? We are not going to put up with it and we power on. We steamroll on.

At first blush, this comment is supportive of Hakim's perspective concerning the role of individual factors in career success in advanced level positions (for instance, "force of personality," "we power on. We steamroll on"). Yet, the use of the tempered "I think" (rather than "I know") suggests that the speaker is unsure of the veracity of her interpretation of individual attributes that lead to success; it poses her statement as a possibility rather than a fact. The use of the member checking word "okay?" suggests that the speaker is looking for confirmation of her perceptions regarding women's individual personality and style as success factors. This construction suggests that there may be other factors, structural or institutional barriers ("obstruction"), that may present as factors impeding career advancement.

Other participants commented on individual-level and institutional factors. One example of how individual-level factors interact with institutional culture came from a female senior academic administrator:

> A word that's helped me is the term resilience and [...] and you can call it pain threshold. You have to motor through [...] having resilience and what I'd rather teach young women coming back with [experiences of] bullying, is to teach resilience and to just to keep your pain threshold high.

This speaker's observations draw on the imperative ("You have to...") suggesting that the individual attributes of resilience and perseverance are essential personal

qualities for career success leading up to and staying in the upper echelons. Her comments, however, also allude to underlying institutional characteristics that are potentially problematic (for instance, "bullying") and the presence of clearly difficult and challenging organizational elements. The use of the term "pain threshold" is a particularly telling turn of phrase. In a few brief statements, the comments from this participant as well as the previous participant mentioned above have effectively acknowledged the roles of both individual attributes, in support for Hakim's perspective, and of organizational elements (not part of Hakim's framework) that influence professional success or defeat.

3.2 | Theme 2: Avoiding and Complying with Power and Politics

Previous studies have shown that ascension to leadership positions involves navigating the sociopolitical environment, building networks, creating alliances, and participating in power games (Frost, 1987; Harragan, 1977; Terjesen et al., 2009). The narratives of the participants in this study turned to political–structural issues affecting the capacity to reach leadership positions, and the suggestions that women are not only inherently poor at politics and the game of leadership but that they also avoid them. As one female senior executive noted:

> What surprised me was that I didn't know how to navigate. I did not understand that not necessarily if I put my best foot forward. I thought if I put my head down and worked very hard, I was going to get picked and I was EXTREMELY taken aback and somewhat embittered when I found out that [...] I didn't understand when we talked about politics and what it was (a social network?).

This participant's comments highlight her experience with structural and institutional barriers ("politics") above and beyond individual attributes of a strong work ethic ("put my head down and worked very hard") and positive self-presentation ("put my best foot forward"). The notion of navigation invokes images of the labyrinth metaphor discussed by Eagly and Carli (2007) and certainly counters Hakim's assertion about personal drive as a primary, if not sole, determinant of ascension to leadership positions. One leader adopted more of a conformist perspective. She noted that women must learn to play the game, including getting their male colleagues to make the power structure work for them.

Many women are just not comfortable with the power structures in organizations. They want to change them. My advice is contrary to that of the women's issues piece and don't try to change it. Get comfortable with it. Make it work for you.

It is interesting to note that while an earlier excerpt drew on a comparative structure (such as "women do...; , men do...") to illustrate the ways in which comparable factors affected women and men's success, the current excerpt used a comparative structure to illustrate why women do not succeed. This participant explicitly acknowledged the presence of both individual-level factors (individual understandings about power and politics) as well as institutional and structural factors (power structures) that combine to affect women's movement into leadership roles. While earlier narratives appear to suggest that leadership may be a skill that both men and women can be good at, ascension to leadership positions also requires skills in the game of politics and leadership.

The previous excerpt is marked by a call for compliance ("don't try to change it") with extant structures rather than a call for bringing change to power structures within organizations. The game of self-monitoring and image management at senior levels was very openly discussed by one female participant:

> No question and in the moments when you're scared shitless you realize—they're going to find out and every successful woman that I have admired when I get to know her, I find out that she too struggles and it's— it's gobsmacking that women who have been successful have that feeling. The thing that you said that resonated the most to me is the importance of self-awareness and I think that if we can, if we're in a place where we get to shape people, where we at least get to lay out opportunities because the times that I have hurt myself the most or the times that I have prevented myself from getting ahead the most have been the times where I have allowed myself to take myself off my own best game, being distracted by things that I can do nothing about.

The use of agentic language—the need to stay on your own best game suggests that the only way to be successful is to be agentic. Agency is often associated with male-dominated discourse or leadership by men. This speaker's use of the inclusive and extreme case formulation ("every successful woman that I have admired")

suggests that no one in this woman's sphere is immune to the pressures and self-doubt that accompany their journey. The use of the colloquial profanity ("scared shitless") serves to dramatically emphasize the reaction to the enormity and complexity of the situation some women experience in executive leadership but also to the central role that guidance and mentoring play for helping women achieve career success. Our analysis of the narrative suggests that these early women had not been taught how to play the game. In this regard, Rayburn et al. (2001) examined leadership in games, exercises, and sports settings, and found that men reported more leadership development opportunities, received more encouragement, and profited more from leadership development than did women. Baxter (2008) reported that the language of sport was often used by men to describe their leadership experiences. Likewise, Jack Welch (see Welch & Bryne, 2001) himself reported that he was competitive and a sports jock as were all his friends. This led Tung (2002) to conclude that because women cannot be "jocks," they are excluded from the socialization process and access to networks available to men.

The struggle against organizational issues caused one participant to query the group:

> Do people... do people ever seriously consider throwing in the towel ON AN ISSUE? I don't mean generally. NEVER SURRENDER, but on an issue, on an issue. You mention about being stubborn. Why do you still knock your head against the wall? We're stubborn. Well, everyone in this room. Do you ever seriously consider throwing in the towel on one of these big issues?

In response, another participant stated, "If you threw in the towel one issue. It's like taking your marbles and going home because, uh, I'm not talking about a pure business issue but some of the bigger issues that we're talking about here today." This comment alludes again to the notion of organizational and institutional elements impeding career success, and suggests that giving up on an issue is tantamount to withdrawing from the game—a potentially dangerous move both for the individual employee but also because it may be seen as reinforcing perceptions that women from that era who withdraw from the corporate world ("going home") are not up to the challenges of executive leadership. The metaphor of war is also evident in the phrase "never surrender"—a metaphor Baxter (2008) reported as evident in the discourse of male leaders.

One participant reframed the discussion away from the "politics" of business to the "rigours of business."

According to that participant, "it's not politics about business. It's not politics. It's the RIGOURS of business." The reframing of challenges from the domain of organizational politics to the characteristic of rigour subtly edges the framing away from an issue with a seeming association with gender issues (such as gender politics in organizations) to rigour, which reflects discipline, commitment, and hard work but is not necessarily gender-related. The firm declarative "it's not about" and the subsequent revision of "it's the..." serves to challenge the threads of discussion that tied organizational politics and gender issues with the more gender-neutral entity — rigour—that affects the career experience of both men and women.

Although women can make advancements in the careers as proposed by Hakim, they do not, not because women lacked the abilities to be good leaders, but because they encountered institutionalized structures and processes and lacked the political skills and gamesmanship necessary to ascend to leadership positions.

3.3 | Theme 3: Affirmative Action is Bad for Women

According to Hakim (2002), the equal opportunities revolution ensured that women have equal right to access all positions, occupations, and careers in the labour market. Numerous research studies conducted in various Western societies appear to support this assertion. For example, in Canada, employment equity[1] has been successful in promoting women to management positions (Jain et al., 2010). However, numerous studies (Catalyst, 2011; Jain et al., 2010) also support the notion that equal opportunities do not break the glass ceiling at the upper echelons. On this basis, the effectiveness of public policy at levelling the playing field for women is called into question.

We heard early women in very senior positions eschew affirmative action policies and plans. They felt that such policies reinforce the stereotypes that women are victims, are incapable of competing with men, and thus cannot succeed without affirmative action policies. For example, we heard:

> Affirmative action simply reinforces the stereotype that women cannot succeed unless they have protective laws. We should all be responsible for our own choices and our own successes, and we should stop shifting that responsibility to the state. It's no different shifting that responsibility for yourself to the state than the dependence women once had

on husbands and fathers. They just substituted the state for the husbands and fathers.

The women in the roundtable insisted that they themselves were responsible for their own successes and knew what it takes to get into leadership positions. One female executive commented:

And I suspect that everyone in this room has figured out what is in their toolkit that works, and they do it with passion, they do it with drive and that's the way forward. I'm not concerned about quotas either and I don't think they think of themselves as a woman doing the job.

Additionally, women from the second wave who made it to leadership positions insisted that their success were attributed to personal responsibilities, and not to equal-opportunity initiatives. Although this is consistent with Hakim's messaging that women take full responsibilities in their career outcomes, the role of equal opportunities, particularly in the need for female representation, is completely discounted. For instance, one participant stated emphatically, "I do not like tokenism. I do not want to have been a dean because I was selected because of my gender." This is a clear rejection of position based on affirmative action policies. As another participant noted:

Equality of opportunity is personal responsibility. There is too much handwringing about the number of women who are CEOS, the number of women who are chairman of the boards, and the number of women in corporations but for me the numbers game is a mug's game. The only game is the mirror and experience game.

Framing affirmative action as a "mug's game" diminishes the efficacy of the initiative. A mug's game is an activity marked by futility. Given the relatively limited impact of affirmative action on some levels of women's employment, this comment is fairly accurate. A "mirror" game is one where one mimics another individual. Framing the strategy for advancement as a mirror game, suggests that success is driven, in part, by the capacity to replicate and "mirror" —rather than change—existing behaviours and systems.

From our roundtable with the senior executives, there appears to be significant resistance among early women leaders to equal opportunities policies and programs.

These findings mirror those of Rindfleish (2000), who found resistance to affirmative action initiatives among senior women managers in Australia. Similarly, the denial of gender and resistance to affirmative action by senior executives as a factor in career success has been noted by other researchers (Jorgenson, 2002; Olsson & Walker, 2004). The female leaders from the second wave felt that such policies reinforce stereotypes about women and that women cannot succeed without help from the state. They want to be recognized on merit rather than on gender, and most commented that they had already figured out a way to the top without quotas or affirmative action policies. On this basis, we consider Hakim's proposition that affirmative action may have liberated women from discrimination and provided women with choices could be true. However, these early female leaders felt that women's ascension to the top jobs had more to do with their abilities than with affirmative action. Arguments around meritocracy peppered the comments of many participants. While we do not discount that fact that such policies may have helped women into (middle) management ranks, these women leaders were adamant that such policies simply reinforce stereotypes about women. They also firmly conveyed that they have figured out the ways into the top jobs, irrespective of equal opportunity policies for women.

3.4 | Theme 4: Women Cannot "Have it All" even with Family-Friendly Policies

In recent years, women holding senior leadership roles have spoken out about the possibility and reality of "having it all"—career success and family. Anne-Marie Slaughter, the first women director of policy planning in the United States State Department, reflected on the near impossibility of "having it all" (Slaughter, 2012). Similarly, Christine Lagarde former head of the International Monetary Fund opined that one can have it all, just not all at the same time (Lagarde, 2012, para. 5).

Hakim proposes that many senior-level management jobs require frequent and vast amounts of travel, unpredictable work hours, and extended periods away from home, which makes it difficult for women who are interested in having children to hold these positions. Although she suggested that family-friendly policies can reduce gender equality in the workplace, Hakim did not specify how such policies can cause inequality. On this basis, we explored how views on work/life balance affect the advancement into the upper echelons for these early women. According to our participants, the issue of family life can jeopardize one's career and advancement into leadership positions.

According to one participant:

> I think too many of us keep looking for that magic mix of a career that can make them financially independent and still give meaning to their lives and still bring them the love they crave. But there is no magic mix. There is no balanced life if you want to be in the fast lane.

The firm declaratives "there is no magic mix. There is no balanced life" are unequivocal in their assertion that work life balance is an unrealistic and unattainable goal for women seeking top positions. Similarly, the opening quote to this paper, "can you have it all. Absolutely not" also draws on a very clear and unequivocal dismissal of the notion of having it all with the phrase "absolutely not."

The narratives suggesting that women must choose between careers and family were consistently heard and even supported by other women leaders in our roundtable. For example, a partner at a law firm commented on the expectations of new female associates: "They cling to the idea of having a balanced life. But I do not believe that is the way to reach the top. Hard choices are required and even more so if you are a woman." The notion of "clinging" suggests a faint hope action or at least one without certainty. The speaker also escalated her position from one that reflects a personal opinion ("I do not believe...") to a statement of fact that is definitive and outside the realm of purely personal opinion ("Hard choices are required...").

The narratives provide overwhelming support for the view that family and career lives are inherently incompatible for advancement into executive leadership for these early women. Moreover, in the view of these women, men also face similar penalties when they subscribe to work/life balance. As one participant said, "very few men, very few men take advantage of parental leave because it's very damaging to their careers."

Overall, the early women leaders in our roundtable felt that women should have the freedom to choose, including sacrifices if they want to succeed in their careers like men. Men, on the other hand, do not face such decisions. These narratives provide an insight into how family-friendly practices can result in gender role stereotyping and hinder early female leaders' advancement into top jobs. On this basis, our participants' comments support Hakim's proposition that family-friendly policies indeed can be seen as detrimental to one's career both for men and women, and rarely have these policies been considered from the demands required of a senior management position. Thus, given the nature and demands of

leadership roles in organizations, many early women may very well self-select themselves out of the running for top jobs.

4 | DISCUSSION

The present paper explores the challenges that women from the second-wave feminist movement faced and the strategies they used in reaching executive leadership roles. Our analysis of the roundtable suggests that there have not been more women in executive leadership because of a confluence of multiple factors. First, women opt out of leadership positions because they lacked the resilience or personality necessary to overcome the challenges that occur at the upper echelons of management. Second, women lacked the "political skills and gamesmanship," necessary to reach the upper echelons of organizations. Third, affirmative action has been detrimental for their career advancements in a multitude of ways. Finally, women have been unable to put their careers over family in the way that is required for executive leadership. Our interpretation of these statements suggests that leadership and the path to executive leadership are gendered. Leadership has been constructed by men -- who at that time and even in the present day -- to complement their roles at home, which are usually free from family care duties.

The views expressed by these early women are contrarian to our present-day understanding on gender and leadership but also marked by contradictory perspectives from the participants themselves. These perspectives also serve to reinforce the gendered nature of executive leadership and barriers for other women. Women have the same leadership abilities as men. However, the ability to ascend to executive leadership requires a different skill set that early women were either not equipped with, trained in, or interested in participating in. The participants in our study commented that women, in general, were not taught to play the game of politics. Women acquire leadership development very differently from men (Rayburn et al., 2001), and do not have the same socialization experiences which are fostered for instance on the sports fields to carry them into the boardrooms (Archer & Cohen, 1997; Tung, 2002). The early women learned the game, made it worked for them, and they drew from their resilience and personality to push through, and got comfortable with it.

The equal opportunities revolution also did not appear helpful to these early women. In fact, the women in our study eschewed such policies and distanced themselves for fear of being stereotyped as weak and requiring protection. These women wanted to be

recognized for making it into traditionally male-dominant arena. The discourse on public policy on equal treatment is very different then than it is for the women that came after them. They resisted and distanced themselves from affirmative action programs and crafted a narrative of success based on merit. The participants felt that the strategy helped them rise to leadership by reinforcing their claim that leadership is "sex neutral," and women succeeded because of their own abilities rather than with the help from the state. Baxter (2010, p. 18), on the other hand, argues that these types of arguments for meritocracy represent a veneer of gender-neutrality but are simply a "reconstructed" version of the male-dominated organization.

Likewise, the early women leaders also resisted family-friendly policies, feeling that family-friendly policies could stigmatize them and their careers, as men were similarly chastised when supporting women's quests for work/life balance. The prevailing view at that time was that the demands of leadership and top jobs were simply inconsistent with finite amounts of resources and the quest to "have it all" —both family and career. As a result, we heard the necessity to make hard choices, including sacrificing family in favour of work to advance in executive leadership. In this regard, Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2009) interviewed 25 contemporary executive women with families and concluded that while it is possible to combine family with work, it takes a combination of forceful personality, the right work environment, a supportive spouse, and complex support systems to make it work, much akin to having the planets align. In more recent years, women holding executive leadership positions have spoken out about resource factors that influence the capacity to manage a high-profile function and family responsibilities—the "have it all" paradigm. As noted earlier, in the same year, Lagarde (2012) opined that "one cannot have it all at the same time" (para. 5) Both perspectives point to resource limitation as a factor affecting even present-day women's capacity to achieve executive leadership.

4.1 | Implications for Theory

Our study enriches theory building in several ways. First, because so few women have achieved the highest offices (as chief executive officers and corporate boards chairs, for instance), our findings provide a rare glimpse into the perceptions and lived experiences of women from the second wave who made it into the most senior rungs of management, largely on personal agency, by their own account. Our study thus provides insights on the challenges they faced at a time when there were very few or even no women at executive levels. This study aligns with Noble and Moore's (2006) suggestion that research needs to examine the "experiences and aspirations" of women who hold leadership roles in order to "help explore the ways in which they make sense of their world and the way women shape and change their own practices, which are advancing women and leadership socially and organisationally mediated by access to power" (pp. 601–602).

Second, we examine their reflections on how developments from the second-wave feminist movement such as equal opportunity and family-friendly policies are viewed, both in a supportive but also potentially problematic ways for these women. It has been long been assumed that such policies have been beneficial to the advancement of women's careers but could also have detrimental effects for women aspiring leadership roles. Examining the discourse of early women leaders provides an opportunity to surface the ways in which these policies are deemed to support but also create unintended negative consequences on the advancement of women into executive leadership.

Third, there has been a historical and present-day assumption that leadership is a traditionally "male role" and/or driven by the need to demonstrate stereotypical masculine attributes (such as, "think manager, think male") (Bosak & Sczesny, 2011; Schein & Davidson, 1993; Vinkenburg et al., 2011), both of which serve as potential barriers to women's access to executive leadership. Although men and women have equal capacity for leadership (Hakim, 2006), our study highlights the struggle to leadership for women in the early days, and builds on Coleman's (2011) work in the United Kingdom.

Finally, our study illuminates Hakim's preference theory on whether women have unfettered choices in their careers. However, unlike other studies that considered mid-level managers and professional women (see for instance Doorewaard et al., 2004; Johnstone & Lee, 2009; Kumra, 2010; McRae, 2003; Philp & Wheatley, 2011), we focused our examination on women from the second wave because this group made it to executive leadership and there are lessons that we can learn.

4.2 | Implications for Practice

Our findings from the roundtable with early women in executive leadership have broad implications on the scholarship in advancing women's careers. Contrary to literature on the effectiveness of equal opportunity (see for instance Jain et al., 2010; Ng & Wiesner, 2007) and family-friendly policies (see for instance Hoobler et al., 2014; Konrad, 2007), we found that, for early

women leaders, such policies are not seen to have been helpful in their progression to executive leadership. Thus, career development for women must go beyond simply addressing gender discrimination and enacting women friendly policies and should instead focus on rigorous leadership development for women. Ely et al. (2011) provide a good account of developing leadership identity, and we advocate for the need for early socialization into "games of leadership" even at lower levels of organizational hierarchy. Our findings suggest that the literature on the barriers and strategies (see for instance Dworkin et al., 2012) to advance women's careers may have limited generalizability to women seeking senior leadership positions in years to come.

Secondarily, our study shows that both institutional and individual challenges existed in the early days, hindering the progress of women into positions of leadership. In this regard, research must not consider these factors in isolation (see for instance Cook & Glass, 2014; Haveman & Beresford, 2012), but must instead consider the interplay between institutional and individual factors that can amplify the ongoing challenges women face. From our analyses, women may opt out of the leadership track because of a lack of resiliency and personality (individual-level factors) necessary to overcome the challenges (structural or institutional barriers) that are more likely to occur at the upper echelons of management. These challenges continue to exist for women who aspire to executive leadership present day. It is important to tackle both individual-level factors (for instance, preparing women for the boardroom), but also to consider institutional or organizational processes (for instance, culture change) simultaneously to support women's advancement to executive leadership over time. Thus, a new theoretical framework is needed to more fully capture the interplay between structural and individual barriers that hinder the development of women's careers, particularly at executive levels.

4.3 | Limitations and Directions for Future Research

A few limitations should be noted to put our findings into perspective. First, our sample is restricted to high-achieving early women who are in executive leadership. Thus, the discourse and conclusions drawn may not be generalizable to a broader population of women. The insights gathered from this study, however, can inform us of the experiences of early women who made it into executive leadership, and the legacy barriers women having aspirations to leadership may continue to face in the future. Second, most of these early women who struggled to the top started their careers during the early phase of equal opportunity and family-friendly policies, and it is likely that their views and experiences reflect the organizational realities in which they developed their careers. The idea that current managers' views are legacy views from when their careers started has also been identified by McGowan (2009). Given the nature of our study, we suggest that future research track the development of policies supporting women's careers, such as how younger leaders whose careers have emerged in the post-equal–opportunities era inform future generations of leaders. Lastly, the narratives were gathered from a research roundtable, and the comments were made in a public environment (that is, in a lecture room setting and videotaped). It is possible that some of the participants may not share the same views, or choose not to share their views in a public forum. If some of the participants held contrary views to those being expressed yet did not give voice to those opinions, that behaviour speaks to the strength of the dominant discourses eschewed by these top leadership and the reluctance to give voice to power. Nonetheless, the study gathers insights generated from the views of early women who made it to leadership roles.

5 | CONCLUSION

In closing, we make several suggestions for future research, to build upon the study here and on earlier works (see for instance Ragins et al., 1998). While we only examined the narratives of early women in executive leadership, it would also be prudent to simultaneously solicit the perspectives and experiences of men in similar roles to offer narratives from the other side, so to speak, for a more balanced view. Second, in line with our recommendation on the need for a new theoretical framework above, we suggest comparing the narratives of women who are work-centred vis-à-vis those who are family-centred, or family and work-centred (see Hakim, 2000, 2006). This knowledge is important in order to locate the appropriate career and leadership development tools for future women. Finally, in light of our conclusion that leadership is gender neutral and building on the work of Ely et al. (2011), we also suggest that future research explore how women can play a greater role in reconstructing leadership identity.

agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

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ENDNOTE

1 For the purpose of this paper, we use the term "equal opportunities," "employment equity," and "affirmative action" interchangeably. We follow Hakim's lead in using the British term "equal opportunities" when referring to her propositions throughout the paper. We also use the term "employment equity" when referring to Canadian legislation, and "affirmative action," which is popular among our participants because of its prevalent use in the US and corporate Canada.

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